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## Journal of Second Language Writing

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/seclan](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/seclan)

Short communication

## English writing instruction in Iran: Implications for second language writing curriculum and pedagogy



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 15 January 2015

Received in revised form 2 May 2016

Accepted 2 May 2016

Available online 21 May 2016

## Keywords:

EFL writing

L2 writing instruction

L2 writing curriculum

Iran

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on English writing instruction and the main factors shaping the dynamics of English writing at different levels of education in Iran. The data gathered from teachers and students using semi-structured interviews and class observations revealed, despite students' need to develop competency in English writing, unsatisfactory writing skills, mainly because of the inadequacy of the English writing curriculum and pedagogy. The findings further indicated that English language education in general and writing skills in particular have fallen prey to the conflict between the post-revolutionary ideological sentiments behind the design and implementation of the English language curriculum and pragmatic forces that allure individuals to subscribe to the new multi-literate and multi-cultural world, which has come to embrace equal educational access and opportunities for its citizens. Exploring the dynamics of English writing in this under-represented context could offer insights for the similar EFL contexts where the role of writing as a means of enriching the personal and future professional life of new generation of students and language learners has yet to be recognized.

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## 1. Introduction

With the rapid growth of globalization and global connectedness, the emergence of new channels of communication, the plurality of discourse communities, and the rise of English as the major medium of international communication and scientific scholarship, the significance of developing proficiency in English language, and English writing in particular, has gained wide recognition. In addition to its conventional role in helping students and language learners develop their competency in a new language, the importance of writing has recently been emphasized for having the potential to build students' expertise in a discipline (Hyland, 2013; Manchón, 2011; Ortega, 2012). Despite this multi-functionality, credibility of writing as a game-changing language learning skill is far from being recognized in many EFL contexts, where outdated curricular policies and traditional pedagogical practices are still prevalent (Casanave, 2009; Reichelt, 2009).

To promote or improve EFL writing instruction and inform scholarship on second language writing, some scholars (e.g., Al-Jarrah & Al-Ahmad, 2013; Cimasko & Reichelt, 2011; Reichelt, 1999, 2005; Tarnopolsky, 2000; You, 2004) have described and analyzed English writing instruction in different contexts. These studies have endeavored to throw light on the contextual forces and factors that interact to affect the status of English writing in the curriculum and the quality of writing instruction in each specific context. However, while the influence of cross-contextual differences on the practice of L2 writing instruction is widely recognized, there is still little research addressing the interface between context and

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L2 writing dynamics (Ruecker, Shapiro, Johnson, & Tardy, 2014). The work reported here, which gives a contextualized account of English writing instruction in Iran, adds to our knowledge about the practice of L2 writing teaching in an under-represented context in the literature, and is relevant to similar contexts where there is a need to improve the teaching and learning of English-language writing.

Analyzing English writing instruction in Iran can also contribute to L2 writing research and practice. Given that many EFL contexts place a high premium on traditional pedagogical practices and approaches to teaching writing (Casanave, 2009; Lee & Coniam, 2013; Naghdipour & Koç, 2015), exposing the pitfalls of such practices could inform English language teachers and educators about the importance of advocating for more realistic curricula and deploying more effective instructional approaches to better accommodate the learning needs of students in writing classes. Likewise, the findings of such studies can serve as a resource (Ruecker et al., 2014) for researchers interested in investigating the contextual factors (e.g., educational policies and ideological forces) influencing the teaching and learning of L2 writing.

### 1.1. The importance of English writing in Iran

Perhaps like other EFL contexts, developing English writing skills in Iran can benefit not only students but also various groups of people and professionals. To begin with, English major undergraduate and graduate students have to develop writing skills to deal with demanding written assignments, exams, and projects during their studies. Non-English major master and Ph.D. students who publish papers in English are also privileged for admission to and graduation from different programs, though the medium of instruction in national universities is Persian. In addition, university lecturers are struggling with the “publish or perish” anxiety as they need to prepare and publish their research in international outlets or present their findings at conferences and symposiums in order to get promoted. More importantly, developing essay writing abilities, as one of the components of high-stakes English proficiency exams such as IELTS and TOEFL, to satisfy the requirements of obtaining a visa to leave the country for better social, educational, and occupational opportunities has gained momentum; this phenomenon has turned Iran into one of the top countries with “brain drain” (WIPO, 2013). Last but not least, an ability to write in English is becoming an asset in doing business with the world outside because most international correspondence, electronically or paper-based, is carried out in English.

## 2. Methodology

To describe English writing instruction in Iran and report on factors influencing its practice, this study draws on qualitative sources of data from interviews and observations. I interviewed teachers (N = 21) and students (N = 36) from four levels of education (middle school, secondary school, university, and private language school) in three parts of the country: Tehran in the north, Isfahan in the center, and Ahwaz in the south (see Table 1). An equal number of participants (seven teachers and 12 students) were randomly selected from different levels in each city, but primary school education (Grades 1–6) was excluded because teaching English starts from Grade 7. Given that education in Iran is centralized, in terms of the curricular goals and objectives, any province, however, could have been selected. The majority of private language institutes across the country are also franchised, thus adopting the same curriculum and instructional materials used by the “parent school.”

The teacher interview protocol included 10 core questions with several follow-up questions probing mainly the teachers' use of pedagogical approaches, instructional materials and activities, and feedback and assessment strategies. The teachers' opinions were also sought on the various factors shaping students' experience with English writing. Similar questions were used to interview students (see Appendix). The interviews were all semi-structured and conducted in Persian. Each interview lasted for approximately 20 min for the teachers and less than that for the students. Having realized that

**Table 1**  
The Interviewed Participants and Observed Classes by Education Level and Grade.

Level/Major	Participants	N	Data source	Grade/Degree
Middle school (Grades 7–9)	Student	6	Interview	9th Grade
	Teacher	3	Interview	Associate (2-year)
	Class	3	Observation	9th Grade
Secondary school (Grades 10–12)	Student	6	Interview	Senior
	Teacher	3	Interview	B.A.
	Class	3	Observation	Senior
University (English)	Student	9	Interview	Senior
	Lecturer	6	Interview	M.A. & Ph.D.
	Class	3	Observation	Senior
University (Non-English)	Student	6	Interview	Senior
	Lecturer	3	Interview	M.A. & Ph.D.
	Class	3	Observation	Senior
Private language school	Student	9	Interview	Upper-intermediate
	Instructor	6	Interview	M.A.
	Class	3	Observation	Upper-intermediate

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