# Evaluation of Writing Skills and the Levels of Difficulty

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### Abstract

To develop writing competence necessitates developing its sub-skills and its constituents concurrently. The present study endeavored to find **a)** the levels of difficulty of various writing skills for Iranian EFL students, and **b)** the possibility of any difference between males' and females' performances as far as their writing skills are concerned. Randomly selected 106 students from Tabriz Islamic Azad University and Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University (53 males, 53 females) were given two TEOFL topics to write. Statistical analysis of the participants' performance indicated that **a)** the five writing skills pose different levels of difficulty for Iranian EFL learners; the ability to address the writing task the easiest and the ability to display facility in language use the most difficult one, and **b)** female students support the thesis with more appropriate details while male students organize and develop their essays more appropriately.

**Key words: writing competence, writing task, facility in language use**

## 1.    Introduction

This paper is an enquiry into the practical credentials of writing among EFL students. Although there is a good deal of impressive efforts and studies in the field, it does not always seem to be directed by a clear understanding of the aims of the enterprise and the most effective means of achieving them. Practical work on writing skills, for some, seems to be contingent modifications of general principles made by reference to administrative necessities and the requirement of direct liability, but not demanding any new conceptualization of language teaching pedagogy as such. Others take a contrary view, insisting that writing necessitates a reformulation of principles of approach for special enterprise in specific language description and in course preparation and teaching. But in the absence of any actual and clear status quo of the EFL students' language ability, it is very difficult to assess the clarity and logic of the opposing arguments. This is what the present paper endeavors to achieve.

Writing is a very complex process. We write differently at different times, depending on whom our readers are and what conditions are. That is, we write about a definite topic, to a particular reader, with a specific purpose in mind, using appropriate language we prefer for that occasion. Alsamadani (2010) stipulates EFL/ESL writing as a difficult, complex and challenging process. Langan (2005), too, reiterates this complexity and states that writing contains different stages and sub-processes including discovering and developing a thesis,

organizing, revising, and editing what is written to have an effective, error-free piece of writing. What makes this multifaceted process more challenging in practice, as Lee (2003, p. 112) affirms, is that "it is likely that most business and technical writing in the world is done in a second language." It is so because ESL/EFL writing is one of the most important aspects of language teaching. In fact good ESL/EFL writing probably, as Lee, (2003) states, is the key concern for teachers, researchers, textbook writers and program designers in the domain of Foreign Language Teaching.

The ability to write a text for most ESL/EFL students, then, is actually a difficult task for the reason that the writing process necessitates a wide range of cognitive, interpersonal, and linguistic strategies of which ESL/EFL students are mostly unaware (Luchini, 2010). At the same time, as research on EFL/ESL writing has grown considerably over the last 40 years chiefly between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, writing has become an interdisciplinary field of inquiry now (Matsuda, 2003). Reviewing the related literature, we may identify three major types of ESL/EFL writing approaches. Product approach (Brown, 2001; Harmer, 2007; Hyland, 2002; Silva; 1990), process approach (Brown, 2001; Raimes, 1985; Silva, 1993; Wang, 2004; You, 2004) and genre-based approach (Casanave, 2004; www.ccsenet.org/elt English Language Teaching Vol. 5, No. 5; May 2012 108 *ISSN 1916-4742 E-ISSN 1916-4750* Deng, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Hyland, 2003a; Hyland, 2003b;Leki, 2003).

In the product approach, students should produce an acceptable textual form that conforms to the model presented to them by their teacher. In this approach, the final result is the first priority. Students, in this approach, have to "develop competence in particular modes of written communication by deconstructing and reconstructing model texts" (Christmas, 2011, p.1). Many ESL/EFL teachers have used this approach all around the world. Robertson (2008) for instance, emphasizes that, "teacher-centeredness is often amplified if instructors organize their curriculum by means of a 'product approach' where instructors teach to and evaluate from sample, 'ideal" texts'" (p.53). Brown (2001) reiterates, too, that in product approach, successful learning is evaluated by how well-structured and grammatically correct a composition is. Anyhow, we have to recognize that in product-based approach, students hardly ever obtain the required skills necessary for creating and shaping their work because of the overemphasis on linguistic forms (Robertson, 2008).

On the other hand, the process approach centers typically on the stages of writing; such as planning, drafting, revisiting and editing (Harmer, 2007). The process approach has a constructivist view of the writer; it considers the writer as a communal learner and communicator (Murray, 1980). The constructivist theory focuses on the significance of social interaction on learning. Lev Vygotsky (1978) introduced this social effect. He actually, used Piaget's (1969) cognitive-constructivists view of learners to develop his own theory. Moffett (1992), in order to present his own discourse genre theory, combined Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories. This theory focuses on the act of writing from the perspective of writer (and reader) in relationship to experience, measuring the rhetorical distance at which a writer describes, reports, generalizes and/or theorizes about a specified situation or event" (Robertson, 2008). In the process approach, learning is regarded as non-linear and discursive.

The genre-based approach focuses on social contexts (Widodo, 2006). Writing is not merely a linguistic and social activity in this approach; it is actually a social act (Santoso, 2010). Students, in this approach, should present their work to a specific audience in a specific context, and with a specific purpose (Santoso, 2010). In this approach, success or failure in communication is evaluated by the degree to which a type of written structure and design is recognized by the members of a discourse community (Paltridge, 2006). It is so because the community members have the same language conventions, principles, and norms (Harmer, 2007).

Writing can be seen from two different perspectives. Firstly, writing can be divided into discrete levels, e.g., grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation, and these elements can be taught and assessed separately. Secondly, more direct extended writing tasks of various types could be adopted which, naturally, would have more construct, content, face validity. In this approach, we can incorporate items which show the learner's ability to perform certain of the functional tasks required in the performance duties in the target situation. For doctors in hospital this might involve writing to a local GP about a patient. On the other hand, for a student in an academic context, it might involve search reading of an academic textbook or paper to extract particular information for use in a written summary.

One of the analytical approaches to writing is the NWREL Model–a writing instruction and assessment model constructed by the researchers of the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory–which assesses a variety of performance across six+1 'traits' of writing, namely 'ideas', 'organization', 'voice', 'word choice', 'fluency', 'conventions', and finally 'presentation' (see the appendix).

These six traits of writing ability have been specified in NWREL (2001). Following is a summary of them:

a. **Ideas** (including details, development, and focus) are the most important part of the message, the subject matter of the piece, the central theme, plus all the details that supplement and develop that theme.

b. **Organization** is the internal arrangement and pattern of a piece of writing so long as it fits the central idea.

c. **Voice** (including tone, style, purpose, and audience) is the writer's personal engagement with the topic, the way he communicates and what makes him different from others.

d. **Word choice** (specific language and phrasing) is the use of affluent, vivid, accurate language that communicates not just in a functional way, but also in a way that moves and informs the reader. Strong word choice is typified not so much by a special vocabulary that impresses the reader, but more by the skill to use everyday words well.

e. **Sentence fluency** (accuracy, rhythm, and tempo) is the flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear, not just to the eye. How does it echo when read aloud? That's the test. Smooth and flowing writing has power, rhythm, and movement. It is free of awkward word patterns that illustrate the reader's advancement.

Sentences fluctuate in length and style, and are so well manipulated that the writer moves through the piece with ease.

f.   **Conventions** are the mechanical accuracy of the piece–spelling, grammar and usage, paragraphing, use of capitals, and punctuation. Writing that is strong in principles has been proofread and edited with care. Handwriting and orderliness are not part of this trait. As this trait has so many pieces to it, it's almost an integrative trait within an analytic system. As you evaluate a piece for convention or principle, ask yourself. Conventions and principles are the only trait where we make specific grade level accommodations.

## 2.   The present study

The aim of the current study is to utilize analytic techniques to learn more about EFL teaching/assessing of writing and to develop a contour for an effective writing teacher in an EFL setting.

### Research questions
   1.   Are the various writing skills equally difficult for Iranian EFL students?
   2.   Is there any difference between Iranian males' and females; performances as far as their writing skills are concerned?

### Method

### Participants

The current research was administered in two universities, i.e. Tabriz Islamic Azad University and Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University. The participants majored in English TEFL, English translation, and English literature for their bachelor's degree. Half of the participants were females and half of them were males. The learners fell within the age range of 20 to 27. 59 of the participants were TEFL students, 25 English translation students, and 22 English literature students. All students were native speakers of Turkish and all were in their final year of study.

### Instrumentations

A TOEFL Essay test was used in this study. Students' performances were evaluated according to their ability in a) addressing the writing task, b) organizing and developing their essay, c) supporting their theses with appropriate details or illustrating their ideas, d) displaying consistent facility in the use of language, and e) demonstrating syntactic variety and appropriate word choice. The rating scale ranged from zero to six.

## Discussion

Lack of access to graduate students made us rely on undergraduate students. Statistical analyses of the participants' performances are illustrated in the following tables.

| Table 1: Descriptive Statistics | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
| Writing Task | 106 | 4.93 | .397 | 3 | 6 |
| Organization of Ideas | 106 | 3.45 | .852 | 2 | 6 |
| Appropriate Details | 106 | 3.43 | .862 | 2 | 5 |
| Appropriate Language Use | 106 | 1.00 | .676 | 0 | 3 |
| Syntactic Variety and Appropriate Word Choice | 106 | 3.97 | .639 | 3 | 6 |
| Gender | 106 | 1.50 | .502 | 1 | 2 |

The means of various writing skills for Iranian EFL students, as shown in Table one, are different. In order to have a valid comparison of the results, we conducted the t-test analysis.

**Paired Samples Statistics**

| | | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Writing Task | 4.93 | 106 | .397 | .039 |
| | Organization of Ideas | 3.45 | 106 | .852 | .083 |

**Paired Samples Correlations**

| | | N | Correlation | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Writing Task & Organization of Ideas | 106 | .117 | .231 |

**Paired Samples Statistics**

| | | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Appropriate Details | 3.43 | 106 | .862 | .084 |
| | Facility in Language Use | 1.00 | 106 | .676 | .066 |

**Paired Samples Correlations**

| | | N | Correlation | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Appropriate Details & Facility in Language Use | 106 | .768 | .000 |

**Paired Samples Test**

| | | Paired Differences | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| Pair 1 | Appropriate Details - Facility in Language Use | 2.434 | .552 | .054 |

**Paired Samples Test**

| | | Paired Differences | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | |
| | | Lower | Upper | t | df |
| Pair 1 | Appropriate Details - Facility in Language Use | 2.328 | 2.540 | 45.366 | 105 |

**Paired Samples Test**

| | | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Appropriate Details - Facility in Language Use | .000 |

Table 2 and 3 indicate that males' and females' performances differ from each other. Female students provided more appropriate details to support the theses while male students provided more general ideas and showed better ability to organize their essays.

| Table 2: Test Statistics | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Writing Task | Organization of Ideas | Appropriate Details | Appropriate Language Use | Syntactic Variety and Appropriate Word Choice |
| Mann-Whitney U | 1273.500 | 703.000 | 807.000 | 1261.000 | 1274.500 |
| Wilcoxon W | 2704.500 | 2134.000 | 2238.000 | 2692.000 | 2705.500 |
| Z | -1.564 | -4.875 | -4.018 | -1.056 | -.951 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .118 | .000 | .000 | .291 | .341 |
| a. Grouping Variable: gender | | | | | |

| | | Table 3: Ranks | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | gender | N | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks |
| Writing Task | dimension1 | male | 53 | 55.97 | 2966.50 |
| | | female | 53 | 51.03 | 2704.50 |
| | | Total | 106 | | |
| Organization of Ideas | dimension1 | male | 53 | 66.74 | 3537.00 |
| | | female | 53 | 40.26 | 2134.00 |
| | | Total | 106 | | |
| Appropriate Details | dimension1 | male | 53 | 42.23 | 2238.00 |
| | | female | 53 | 64.77 | 3433.00 |
| | | Total | 106 | | |
| Appropriate Language Use | dimension1 | male | 53 | 50.79 | 2692.00 |
| | | female | 53 | 56.21 | 2979.00 |
| | | Total | 106 | | |
| Syntactic Variety and Appropriate Word Choice | dimension1 | male | 53 | 51.05 | 2705.50 |
| | | female | 53 | 55.95 | 2965.50 |
| | | Total | 106 | | |

## Conclusion

The results of present study (1. writing skills pose different levels of difficulty for Iranian undergraduate students, and 2. females provide more details in comparison with males while males organize their theses and ideas better than females) bring about changes in our conception of writing competence. Writing skills seem to function at two distinct levels. They, therefore, should be divided into two sub-categories; systemic knowledge and schematic knowledge– how information is ordered and communication is managed. These two categories are not necessarily interrelated. Writing is, in its actual form, a mixture of these two. None of these issues can alone guarantee the accomplishment of a successful writing. Learners need, from the very beginning, to develop these two diverse

competences concurrently. And since schematic knowledge seems to be a culture-dependent construct, which may vary from one group or gender to another, course designers, teachers, and teacher trainers need to adapt the specifications of writing objectives and program to the learner's personal characteristics, socio-cultural circumstances and perspectives in order to have an effective and efficient writing class.

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## APPENDIX

### SIX-TRAIT SCORING RUBRICS (1)

| CATEGORY | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sources (Content) | All sources used for quotes and facts are credible and cited correctly. | All sources used for quotes and facts are credible and most are cited correctly. | Most sources used for quotes and facts are credible and cited correctly. | Many sources used for quotes and facts are less than credible (suspect) and/or are not cited correctly. |
| Conclusion (Organization) | The conclusion is strong and leaves the reader with a feeling that they understand what the writer is "getting at." | The conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all the loose ends. | The conclusion is recognizable, but does not tie up several loose ends. | There is no clear conclusion, the paper just ends. |
| Sequencing (Organization) | Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the interest of the reader. | Details are placed in a logical order, but the way in which they are presented/introduced sometimes makes the writing less interesting. | Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader. | Many details are not in a logical or expected order. There is little sense that the writing is organized. |
| Introduction (Organization) | The introduction is inviting, states the main topic and previews the structure of the paper. | The introduction clearly states the main topic and previews the structure of the paper, but is not particularly inviting to the reader. | The introduction states the main topic, but does not adequately preview the structure of the paper nor is it particularly inviting to the reader. | There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper. |
| Support for Topic (Content) | Relevant, telling, quality details give the reader important information that goes beyond the obvious or predictable. | Supporting details and information are relevant, but one key issue or portion of the storyline is unsupported. | Supporting details and information are relevant, but several key issues or portions of the storyline are unsupported. | Supporting details and information are typically unclear or not related to the topic. |
| Focus on Topic (Content) | There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea stands out and is supported by detailed information. | Main idea is clear but the supporting information is general. | Main idea is somewhat clear but there is a need for more supporting information. | The main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conclusion (Organization) | The conclusion is strong and leaves the reader with a feeling that they understand what the writer is "getting at." | The conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all the loose ends. | The conclusion is recognizable, but does not tie up several loose ends. | There is no clear conclusion, the paper just ends. |
| Sentence Length (Sentence Fluency) | Every paragraph has sentences that vary in length. | Almost all paragraphs have sentences that vary in length. | Some sentences vary in length. | Sentences rarely vary in length. |
| CATEGORY | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Grammar & Spelling (Conventions) | Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content. | Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content. | Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content. | Writer makes more than 4 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content. |
| Penmanship (Conventions) | Paper is neatly written or typed with no distracting corrections. | Paper is neatly written or typed with 1 or 2 distracting corrections (e.g.,dark cross-outs; bumpy white-out, words written over). | The writing is generally readable, but the reader has to exert quite a bit of effort to figure out some of the words. | Many words are unreadable OR there are several distracting corrections. |
| Commitment (Voice) | The writer successfully uses several reasons/appeals to try to show why the reader should care or want to know more about the topic. | The writer successfully uses one or two reasons/appeals to try to show why the reader should care or want to know more about the topic. | The writer attempts to make the reader care about the topic, but is not really successful. | The writer made no attempt to make the reader care about the topic. |
| Capitalization & Punctuation (Conventions) | Writer makes no errors in capitalization or punctuation, so the paper is exceptionally easy to read. | Writer makes 1 or 2 errors in capitalization or punctuation, but the paper is still easy to read. | Writer makes a few errors in capitalization and/or punctuation that catch the reader's attention and interrupt the flow. | Writer makes several errors in capitalization and/or punctuation that catch the reader's attention and greatly interrupt the flow. |
| Flow & Rhythm (Sentence Fluency) | All sentences sound natural and are easy-on-the-ear when read aloud. Each sentence is clear and has an obvious emphasis. | Almost all sentences sound natural and are easy-on-the-ear when read aloud, but 1 or 2 are stiff and awkward or difficult to understand. | Most sentences sound natural and are easy-on-the-ear when read aloud, but several are stiff and awkward or are difficult to understand. | The sentences are difficult to read aloud because they sound awkward, are distractingly repetitive, or difficult to understand. |
| Sentence Structure (Sentence Fluency) | All sentences are well-constructed with varied structure. | Most sentences are well-constructed with varied structure. | Most sentences are well-constructed but have a similar structure. | Sentences lack structure and appear incomplete or rambling. |