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An Investigation of the Most Common Difficulties Iranian Pre-university EFL Learners Face in Their Paragraph Writings

Hamed Zarabi *[1], Nima Yamrali [2], & Nadia Gharani[3]

[1] Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of humanities, Islamic Azad University, Gonbad-e-Kavous, Iran;

[2] Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of humanities, Islamic Azad University, Gonbad-e-Kavous, Iran;

[3] Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of humanities, Islamic Azad University, Gonbad-e-Kavous, Iran;

Research Article

Abstract
Due to the fact that writing is a cognitively demanding task and as a step toward removing some of the obstacles English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners encounter when performing writing tasks, this study attempted to investigate Iranian pre-university EFL learners' perceptions toward the most typical writing difficulties. For this to be done, 20 intermediate students from two different secondary high schools in Gonbad Kavoos, Iran were selected. Based on the steps of error analysis recommended by Corder (1967), a meticulous content analysis was conducted on the paragraphs written in their final exams and it was revealed that the most common writing problems these students face were related to their 'grammatical knowledge', 'lexical knowledge', 'semantical knowledge', and 'mechanical knowledge'. All of these types of errors were fully explained and exemplified in the article. Furthermore, a semi-structured interview with students was conducted and the result of the interviews also confirmed the results of the content analysis of their paragraphs. Ten English language teachers' opinions were gathered and listed through semi-structured interviews and coding analysis in order to find solutions to their problems. There are some practical ramifications for educators, students, content creators, and curriculum designers in this regard at the article's conclusion.

بررسی رایج ترین مشکلاتی که زبان آموزان زبان انگلیسی پیش دانشگاهی ایرانی در پاراگراف نویسی خود با آن مواجه هستند

با توجه به اینکه رایتینگ از نظر شناختی کار سختی است و به عنوان گامی در جهت رفع برخی از موانع پیش روی زبان آموزان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی (EFL) در هنگام انجام تکالیف نوشتاری با آن مواجه می شوند، این پژوهش سعی بر آن داشت تا درک زبان آموزان پیش دانشگاهی زبان انگلیسی را نسبت به آن مورد بررسی قرار دهد. معمولی ترین مشکلات نوشتن برای انجام این کار، ۲۰ دانش آموز مقطع متوسطه از دو دبیرستان مختلف در گنبدکاووس انتخاب شدند. بر اساس مراحل تجزیه و تحلیل خطا که کوردر (۱۹۶۷) توصیه می کند، یک تحلیل محتوای دقیق بر روی پاراگراف های نوشته شده در امتحانات پایان ترم انجام شد و مشخص شد که رایج ترین مشکلات نوشتاری این دانش آموزان مربوط به دانش دستوری آنها است. «دانش واژگانی»، «دانش معنایی» و «دانش مکانیکی». همه این نوع خطاها به طور کامل در مقاله توضیح داده شده و نمونه‌هایی از آنها ارائه شده است. همچنین مصاحبه نیمه ساختاریافته با دانشجویان انجام شد و نتیجه مصاحبه نیز نتایج تحلیل محتوای پاراگراف های آنها را تایید کرد. نظرات ۱۰ معلم زبان انگلیسی از طریق مصاحبه های نیمه ساختاریافته و تحلیل کدگذاری گردآوری و فهرست شد تا راه حلی برای مشکلات آنها بیابند. در پایان مقاله پیامدهای عملی برای مربیان، دانش آموزان، تولیدکنندگان محتوا و طراحان برنامه درسی در این زمینه وجود دارد. کلمات کلیدی: طبقه بندی خطاها، انگلیسی به عنوان یک زبان خارجی(EFL) ، زبان آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی، مشکلات نوشتاری، مهارت نوشتاری

واژگان کلیدی: همه گیری، چالش های یادگیری مجازی، زبان آموزان

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is never simple to learn or teach, especially in places where it is not widely spoken. In this respect, it can be claimed that despite the fact that English language instruction has been used in Iran for at least 50 years, many students still find it difficult to learn the language, as shown by their results on English state-level school exams. This is true because there isn't much English used in day-to-day communication and because of the ineffective teaching methods. (Amirbakzadeh & Vakil Alroaia, 2020; Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015; Iranmehr & Davari, 2018). Another contributing factor to this propensity for ineffective English language teaching and learning may be the significant influence that testing has on what is taught in schools. Most students learn vocabulary and grammar through rote memorization in order to ace tests rather than learning them so they can use them in real-world contexts (Akbari, 2015).

Writing Skill

Writing is thought to be one of the most difficult skills for EFL students to learn because it is neglected in the educational process and is difficult. (Du, 2020; Gholaminejad et al., 2013; Jabali, 2018; Tillema, 2012). As a result, the challenges faced by L2 learner writers have been widely publicized for a long time (Al Mubarak, 2017; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Braine, 1995; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Johns, 1995). Despite the complexity of writing, most people utilize writing every day to complete a variety of chores, including expressing thoughts, attitudes, and opinions, communicating knowledge, expressing feelings and ideas, and persuading others. Additionally, individuals may write for pleasure in their diaries or journals. Writing can be used in a learning environment to capture significant information as it is learned as well as to create academic reports, theses, essays, and compositions that satisfy the requirements of the intended authorities. It is therefore advised that writing be incorporated into the EFL teaching curricula in schools because it can aid students in remembering what they have learned through other skills, allow them to use language in context, and aid them in going beyond what they have learned by putting what they have learned to use in writing tasks (Hyland, 2013). In other words, writing can be a means of learning English and a means to an end. For instance, students can use writing to reinforce their understanding of brand-new vocabulary or grammatical constructions, or they can use it to help them retain new vocabulary. Additionally, by having students write regularly,

instructors can keep tabs on their development, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and then give feedback to students (Hyland, 2019; Parr & Timperley, 2010).

Writing, One of the Biggest Challenges for Iranian Students

Of the four English language skills, writing seems to be one of the most complex and difficult skills for teaching and learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The problem is based on generating and organizing opinions along with translating them into legible text (Richards & Renandya, 2002). When you want to be a proficient writer in a second language (L2) and especially in a foreign language (FL) is a claiming task for most learners, because they involve with difficult challenges in vocabulary, grammar, and synthetic skills. (Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012), (Du, 2020; Gholaminejad et al., 2013; Jabali, 2018; Tillema, 2012). Thus, the difficulties faced by L2 students for writing tasks across a wide range of skill levels have long acquired great importance (Al Mubarak, 2017; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Braine, 1995; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Johns, 1995).

Hence, it is advisable to incorporate writing abilities into the EFL syllabus at educational institutions since writing can strengthen the knowledge acquired through other skills, endows pupils with the prospect of working with the language in a practical setting, and enables them to extend their comprehension by employing the acquired concepts in writing assignments. (Jabali, 2018). In other words, writing can be both an end in itself and a tool for learning English. For example, learners can use writing to reinforce learning of new structures or vocabulary or use it to help them remember new elements in a language. Additionally, through writing exercises, teachers can track students' progress and diagnose their weaknesses and strengths, and then provide students with feedback (Hyland, 2019; Parr & Timperley, 2010).

The inability of university students to express themselves in writing in a way that is clear, accurate, and understandable is another common complaint that is frequently heard. Numerous factors may contribute to students' writing difficulties. The complexity of writing as a skill itself may be one of the reasons for this difficulty (Gautam, 2019; Nasser, 2016; Patience, 2020). According to Byrnes' (2002) theory, most people, both speakers of their native language and those who speak it as a second language, use writing as a complex discourse medium.

It is significant to note that because writing is both significant and challenging, researchers have focused on the writing difficulties that students encounter in various EFL contexts. Numerous empirical reviews have endeavored to identify writing problems and solutions in this regard (e.g.,

Al-Khasawneh & Huwari, 2013; Chen & Wu, 2001; Jafari & Ansari, 2012). Few empirical studies have focused specifically on pre-university students' attitudes and perceptions toward problematic areas in their paragraph writing, which is the topic of the current study (e.g., Al Mubarak, 2017; Bani Younes & Salamh Albalawi, 2015; Jabali, 2018; Mwangi, 2017). As far as the researchers know, however, only a few studies have used interviews to look into students' perspectives and attitudes toward the reasons behind EFL writing challenges in the context of Iran. As a result, in order to advance and contribute to this still-evolving field of research, the current study seeks to understand how Iranian pre-university students perceive the most common challenges they face when performing paragraph writing tasks.

Paragraph Writing

Developing the skills necessary for coherent and readable paragraphs can be difficult for English language learners (ESLs), who must overcome the personal challenges associated with this type of writing, such as coming up with ideas, organizing their thoughts, and using proper mechanics. This explains why students consistently perform poorly in the English language at all levels of education in Iran. There have been put forth a number of explanations for this phenomenon. Ajayi (1996) lists a few of these, including the lack of clearly defined objectives, the scarcity of qualified language teachers, the absence of adequate and realistic syllabuses, and the lack of testing methods. The misuse of pertinent essay-teaching techniques is a problem that is added to these issues (Ohia & Adeosun 2010).

A strong piece of writing should adhere to a structure that includes a general idea in a single sentence, supporting sentences that provide clear explanations and details, and examples to support the main ideas (Ariana, 2010). To support our studies and careers, writing is a skill that must be emphasized. According to Imane (2015), proficient writing is frequently regarded as the last language skill to be learned for both native speakers of the language and for foreign/second language learners, after the four essential language skills.

Academic writing needs to have a strong paragraph. An effective paragraph is essential because it aids readers in understanding the writing's subject matter. Readers will be able to identify the main idea and supporting details of the paragraph if the paragraph is coherent and the main idea is sufficiently developed and supported by the appropriate supporting sentences. Furthermore, for

paragraphs to work together cohesively, there must be coherence between them. It demonstrates to readers how cohesive the paragraph is.

For students, understanding how to structure a paragraph is crucial, especially when writing academically. They must ensure that the language used in creating the paragraph is appropriate for academic purposes, correct, formal, and systematic. Additionally, sentences should be organized so that readers can understand them easily. To fulfill academic requirements, students must also take into account academic features like citation style and writing format.

EFL students need to work harder than L1 students when producing an academic text. EFL students may encounter more difficulties when writing a paragraph than L1 speakers (Hussen, 2015). They might both be experiencing the same problems with writing mechanics and format. However, L2 learners of English have it harder than L1 learners when it comes to writing academic text (Yakhontova, 2003). Students who speak English as a second language are likely to struggle more with vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure.

In EFL contexts, academic writing includes the use of a foreign language, adherence to proper academic standards, and additional requirements for writing paragraphs. Due to these requirements, academic writing may be more challenging to complete and may be more challenging for EFL students than for L1 students. Finding out what difficulties Iranian EFL students face when writing English paragraphs was the purpose of this study. This study additionally attempted to provide some solutions for those problems after they had been found in the paragraph writing of Iranian pre-university students.

Review of Literature

According to Ginting (2019), writing is seen as a useful skill that imports cognitive processes such as idea generation, problem-solving, and critical thinking. However, despite the significance of writing for learning, numerous studies have found that language learners struggle with their writing abilities in comparison to other language abilities (Kouhpeyma & Kashefian-Naeeini, 2020). Through the use of innovative teaching strategies, particularly those that emphasize teaching students how to write in a foreign language, Iranian language teachers have significantly improved their ability to instruct foreign languages over the past few decades. But, there is a lot to think about. The teaching of writing in EFL settings is frequently subpar, despite it being the hardest of the four skills to master. EFL students need a foundation on which to build their experience-based learning in order to advance much more quickly.

In this view, some studies examined how using various writing strategies and techniques affects students' performance (Bulqiyah, 2021; Anshu & Yesu, 2022;). Sahebkheir (2018), for instance, carried out an experimental study to investigate the impact of the self-assessment portfolio as a learner-centered method on the writing performance of Iranian EFL students in a control group. The experiment group's members exhibited consistent use of critical reasoning abilities and a strong sense of responsibility throughout their training, according to the researcher.

Self-directed learning's effects on the writing abilities of Iranian EFL students in the pre- and middle-school years were researched by Aghayani and Janfeshan (2020). The study's findings demonstrated that both preschoolers' and middle schoolers' writing abilities were significantly enhanced by the self-directed learning strategy. Additionally, the outcomes demonstrated that pre- and middle-school students who learned using a self-directed learning approach outperformed those who learned the same material using conventional writing instruction methods on the post-test.

In a different study, Kouhpeyma and Kashefian-Naeeini (2020) looked at the impact reflective writing—which includes the use of a portfolio, peer assessment, and self-assessment—has on Iranian EFL students' writing performance. As a result, learners' writing performance was not significantly impacted by reflective writing, according to the findings.

The two aspects of writing that Hailu Anshu and Yibre Yesu (2022) concentrated on were content and coherence, and they looked at how collaborative writing affected EFL students' paragraph-level writing abilities. The experiment and control groups, each made up of 44 11th graders, were created by the researchers to accomplish this. Participants in the experimental group practiced writing paragraph-level tasks collaboratively over a 12-week period, whereas participants in the control group had to carry out the same tasks independently. The findings revealed that students who completed the writing assignments collaboratively experienced a more pronounced improvement in the content and coherence of the paragraphs they produced following the training than students who worked alone on the assignments. Additionally, it was noted that the experimental group participants had a favorable attitude toward collaborative writing.

In a mixed-methods study, Thi Ngoc Hoang and Hoang (2022) looked at the effects of frequent Google Docs collaboration on Vietnamese EFL students' academic writing abilities in English. Researchers discovered that the participants' general academic writing abilities significantly improved after taking the online EFL writing course. Individual academic writing components,

task performance, and lexical resources all showed significant improvement, but cohesion and coherence, as well as grammatical range and accuracy, did not change significantly. These students had mixed feelings about how much they enjoyed working together on the Google Docs platform, despite realizing how crucial it was for improving their academic English writing skills.

Studies have uncovered the issues and challenges faced by EFL learners when it comes to writing due to the significance and difficult nature of the writing skill. This is demonstrated by research done by Baghaei and Sadighi (2015), who found prepositional mistakes in the writing of Iranian TEFL postgraduate students. The preposition "for" was allegedly used more frequently than "to" by participants when writing.

To determine how Iranian EFL students perceived the most frequent writing difficulties, Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020) also conducted a mixed-methods study. The majority of participants, according to the findings, thought that grammar and punctuation instruction should be contextualized and connected to the other four skills. Additionally, they made the case that instructors ought to model proper punctuation for their pupils while also using it themselves. Additionally, it was thought that by using mnemonics, students could remember the correct spelling of words.

Explanatory research was done by Bulqiyah (2021) to look at 21 undergraduate students' perspectives on essay writing challenges. The researchers came to the conclusion that students' issues with essay writing can be categorized into a number of different categories based on the findings of the quantitative and qualitative data. These categories include emotional problems resulting from the attitudes of lecturers and students during teaching and learning, cognitive issues with the perspective of writing, language transmission, and the writing process, and linguistic issues with lexico-grammar, vocabulary, and essay structure. They employed evaluation strategies more frequently when writing their papers than the other summary writing styles. The use of strategies, summary quality, and writing ability all showed a moderate correlation. The findings demonstrated that high-, intermediate-, and low-skilled typists' summarization abilities and writing techniques varied significantly.

Despite the fact that there have been numerous studies on the writing difficulties of language learners up to this point, the goal of this study was to address the difficulties Iranian pre-university students were having with writing paragraphs. As a result, the researchers tried to provide answers to the following study's questions.

1. What are the problems of Iranian Pre-University students in paragraph writing?

2. What are the solutions in paragraph writing for Iranian Pre-University students?

Methodology

This investigation, which was a descriptive qualitative study, focused on the content analysis method to pinpoint the most challenging aspects of Iranian pre-university students' paragraph writing by examining samples of their written work from exam papers. The teachers and students were also subjected to a semi-structured interview in order to gain a deeper understanding of the aspects of paragraph writing that the students find the most challenging and to develop some solutions based on the teachers' opinions. The problems and solutions were then divided into various categories.

Participants

For the purposes of the study and for students to be homogeneous in terms of their linguistic knowledge, 20 intermediate pre-university students from two different high schools in Gonbad Kavoos, Iran, were chosen based on the results of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). The ages of the students ranged from 17 to 19 and they were all females. Additionally, ten English language instructors with varying levels of experience, from five to more than thirty years, were interviewed to get their thoughts on the subject.

Instruments

The steps of error analysis recommended by Corder (1967) were adhered to in order to pinpoint the most challenging aspects of paragraph writing for the purpose of the content analysis approach. Twenty students and ten teachers participated in a semi-structured interview for the purpose of interview analysis.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

To determine the types and number of errors, each paragraph was first carefully read word for word and sentence for sentence. Second, they were coded into various categories and then converted into percentages to look at the frequency. The teacher participants were asked to discuss various ways students can address their writing issues, and the student participants were asked to voluntarily participate in the semi-structured interview to discuss the English writing challenges

they faced. Each interview lasted for roughly 10 to 15 minutes, and all of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using an analytical coding procedure.

Results

Content Analysis of Paragraphs

This study used Corder's (1967) taxonomy of writing errors: Structural errors, Lexical errors, Semantical errors, and Mechanical errors. According to the findings of the research, there was a substantial difference in the frequency of errors made by the students (as shown in Table / Figure 1).

Table 1

Different Categories and Types of Errors Committed by the Students in Their Paragraphs

	N	Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Grammatical Errors	20	Tense	46	14%
		Subject-verb agreement	34	10%
		Singularity/Plurality	28	8%
		Word order	14	5%
		Sentence Structure	9	2%
Lexical Errors	20	Verbs	39	11%
		Nouns	27	8%
		Pronouns	21	6%
		Adverbs	12	3%
		Prepositions	9	2%
		Articles	5	1%
Semantical Errors	20	Word selection	18	6%
Mechanical Errors	20	Dictation	56	17%
		Punctuation	26	7%
Total Number of Errors	20		344	100%

Figure 1

A Pie Chart of Different Problematic Areas with Their Percentage Occurrence
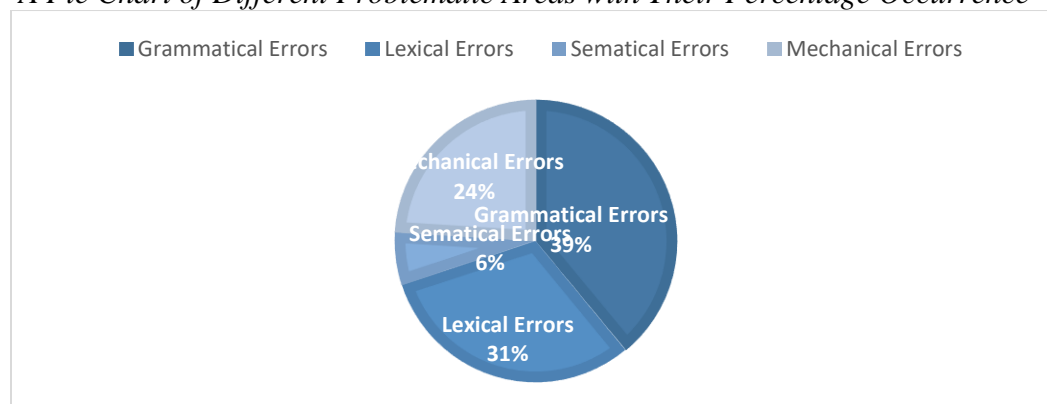
According to the findings of the research, the students made the highest number of errors in the grammatical areas of their paragraphs (39%), from which the verb tenses with 14 percent received the highest percentage and sentence structure with only 2 percent the lowest percentage. Considering the second area (Lexical Errors), the most challenging types of errors were related to verbs (11%) and the lowest were related to articles (1%). The third area with 24% of the total percentage of errors deals with the mechanical mistakes made by the students such as spelling and dictation problems (17%) and punctuation challenges with 7 percent occurrence. The last but not least, semantic errors received the lowest amount of mistakes with only 6 percent in the type of word choices.

Table 2

Some Examples of Errors Committed by the Students in Their Written Paragraphs

Error Type	Example of the Students	Correct Form
Tense	*I visit my grandmother last month.*	*I visited my grandmother last month.*
Subject-verb agreement	*He play football every day.*	*He plays football every day.*
Singularity/Plurality	*Every countries has a unique culture.*	*Every country has a unique culture.*
Word order	*My teacher is a teacher kind.*	*My teacher is a kind teacher.*
Sentence Structure	*My mother is cook lunch.*	*My mother is cooking lunch.*
Verbs	*My friend draw some beautiful pictures.*	*My friend draws some beautiful pictures.*
Nouns	*I really enjoy the dark of the night.*	*I really enjoy the darkness of the night.*
Pronouns	*My teacher is a hero. She teaches we nicely.*	*My teacher is a hero. She teaches us nicely.*
Adverbs	*He drives fastly.*	*He drives fast.*
Prepositions	*I always wake up on 7 in the morning.*	*I always wake up at 7 in the morning.*
Articles	*I ate a apple for breakfast yesterday.*	*I ate an apple for breakfast yesterday.*
Word selection	*We should eat well food.*	*We should eat healthy foods.*
Dictation	*People shoud obey the trafic rules.*	*People should obey the traffic rules.*
Punctuation	*We have a big house. It has three bedrooms two bathrooms and two garages.*	*We have a big house. It has three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and two garages.*

Interview Analysis with Students (Problems)

In an effort to better understand the writing challenges students encounter when writing their paragraphs, researchers set up some semi-structured interview questions with open-ended questions. The researchers made an effort to ask 20 Iranian pre-university students for their thoughts on the most challenging areas they deal with in their written paragraphs. All of their comments were meticulously recorded and typed out for analysis later. The interviewees also had the impression that their information would be kept confidential. The interview was conducted entirely in the participants' native tongue (i. e. Persian) to avoid any difficulties brought about by a lack of proficiency. All of the participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy and maintain anonymity.

Making grammatical sentences is the hardest part for them, according to every interviewee, which is consistent with the findings of the content analysis. They claimed that while it may seem simple to write a single sentence accurately, it can be very difficult to organize the sentences into a paragraph that flows smoothly. The interviewees also stated that dictation and punctuation are a challenge for them when they want to write sentences, and more specifically paragraphs, which is consistent with the data from the content analysis. In addition, there are lexical difficulties with verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc., as well as subject-verb agreement, tenses, sentence structure, and word choice. The other elements that contribute to the difficulty of the writing task include idiomatic expressions and collocations, unfamiliarity with topics, and rhetorical structure. The ideas were shaped into themes were thoroughly explained below (Only a few of the interviewees' statements are reported here due to the word limit, and we made an effort not to draw attention to the interviewees' frequently repeated and similar ideas):

Grammar is so complicated (Grammatical problems)

All of the students mentioned having issues with poor grammar. The majority of them claimed to lack strong grammar skills.

Student 1: Zahra

Grammar is so complicated for me. The first issue is grammar because occasionally I don't know how to construct a sentence correctly. Due to a lack of vocabulary and grammar, translating sentences from Persian into English is another challenging issue for me. I suppose I should read and write more in English to solve my problem. *

Structuring a good sentence is like a nightmare (Cohesion/Coherence problems)

Students were aware of the significance of a paragraph's coherence and cohesiveness. Coherence and cohesiveness, according to the majority of students, are still challenging to achieve. Most likely as a result of their lack of planning and brainstorming. They actually did the drafting. They struggled to maintain control over the supporting clauses and concentrated solely on providing evidence for the main ideas. Aside from that, it also rendered the connections between sentences insufficient. Another respondent claimed that she had trouble with sentence structure when writing.

Student 2: Sheyda

∗ *I believe that connecting sentences and organizing their parts are difficult for me. I believe I can learn more by writing about a variety of subjects, learning about linking verbs, coordinating conjunctions, and conjunctive adverbs, and becoming an expert writer's organizer. At this point in my life structuring a good sentence is like a nightmare to me.* ∗

Student 3: Mobina

∗ *It's difficult to write an effective paragraph. I should check to see if each sentence and each paragraph are related, as suggested by my teacher. I suppose that is my weakness and somehow hard for me to make a good sentence that contributes to the main idea.* ∗

Student 4: Diana

∗ *The fact that I have trouble concluding my writing and linking ideas coherently is probably the most difficult problem I face. I have trouble structuring my thoughts and adding supporting clauses. I suppose I can write better if I read more, expand my vocabulary, learn about structures, and brainstorm.* ∗

It is better to give us some topics that we have a background about (Unfamiliarity with the topic)

One of the issues frequently mentioned in the participants' responses was the fact that unfamiliarity with the topic is of the most challenging issues they sometimes have to deal with.

Student 5: Masoomeh

∗ *If you ask me, I think when we are given a familiar topic like the ones we have in our textbook, then we can perform better and write more and more effectively. But if we are given some unfamiliar topics, then it would be even impossible to write even a sentence let alone a paragraph.*

Student 6: Nazanin

∗ *Of course, it is better to give us some topics that we have a background about. I mean the topic in the books are good ones because we have already read about them and have some familiarity with them. I really like to write about some common and simple topics such as nature, family, sports, and the things like these.* ∗

I'm not very good at brainstorming (Brainstorming problems)

Brainstorming is critical as the first step in the paragraph development process to gather ideas. Some students expressed displeasure with the brainstorming process. The goal is to collect as many ideas as we can. The main idea is first created supporting sentences are added.

Student 7: Fatemeh

∗ *Usually, I only include information that I believe is pertinent to my paragraph. Developing the idea can be effective at times. Anything is possible. It is merely a random idea. In order to come up with numerous ideas for the paragraph, writers must brainstorm. The ideas in the paragraph are sometimes insufficient and not very rich without brainstorming. Unfortunately, I'm not very good at brainstorming.* ∗

I see periods and nothing else (Punctuation problems)

Almost all the students had great difficulty with the punctuation rules of their work.

Student 8: Soheyla

∗ *Punctuation, in general, and the requirements of a proper text are issues for me. Since teachers have not placed much emphasis on them, I believe I can solve the problem by practicing and learning more about them. I really don't know where to put colons, parentheses, or semi-colons. Sometimes I look at my paragraph and I see periods and nothing else.* ∗

I find myself at a loss for words (Word choice problems)

Some ideas could not be expressed by students because they lacked English words for them. Furthermore, they had a hard time coming up with the right words to convey their thoughts. They claimed that the reason was a lack of vocabulary.

Student 9: Sogand

⁎ *I find it challenging to communicate in English. To find the right words, I have to consult a dictionary every time. When a word has three, four, or even more synonyms that all mean the same thing, I find myself at a loss for words. Reading various English books, reports, articles, etc. helps us become more accustomed to various writing styles and word usage.* ⁎

Is it plain, plan, or plane, I don't know (Dictation problems)
Student 10: Samaneh

⁎*I occasionally struggle with spelling words like plain, plan, and plane when I'm writing. Perhaps someone should make us practice dictation because we don't spend enough time on word spelling. We can then address our orthographic issues by writing more and more from different words, especially similar ones.* ⁎

Interview Analysis with Teachers (Solutions)

A semi-structured interview with the teachers was carried out in order to find some solutions for the most common difficulties students face in their paragraph writing. The following categories were driven by a careful content analysis of the teachers' responses to the interview question. They have been put into different categories.

Solutions for the Grammatical problems

- Grammar lessons ought to be contextualized.
- Place a focus on understanding the concepts of grammar that are being studied.
- It is important to emphasize extensive grammar practice.
- Persian should not be used to break down the rules of English grammar.
- Prioritizing accuracy over fluency is a good idea.
- It is important to teach grammar rules alongside paragraph writing.

- Grammar instruction shouldn't be centered on memorization and rote rules.
- Teaching strategy of grammar instruction should be form-focused.
- English verb tenses should be practiced with students.

Solutions for the Structural problems (Cohesion/Coherence)

- Students should get familiar with different cohesive devices in context.
- Students should try linking parts of a text together by using cohesive devices such as pronouns.
- Students should be exposed to different texts that have cohesion but not coherence and vice versa to fully understand the concept of these two important notions.
- Contextual and co-textual relationships should be practiced.

Solutions for the Dictation problems

- Teachers should draw students' attention to the difference between written and spoken English.
- The origin of English words should be mentioned in class to help students understand how challenging it is to learn how to spell them.
- It's important for students to understand how Persian and English phonology differ.
- Students ought to read more.
- Books should aid students in improving their spelling skills.
- inspire students to take up spelling.
- To the extent necessary, teachers should be able to assist students in improving their spelling.
- It is appropriate to give the students written homework based on the texts.
- Extra sections should be devoted to the dictation of the words in their formative written exams.

Solutions for the Punctuation problems

- Punctuation should be introduced in the context of the sentence.
- Teachers need to consistently check for proper punctuation.

- Teachers should assist students in identifying the similarities and differences between the Persian and English punctuation systems.
- Teachers should use punctuation in their writing classes.
- In order to support their understanding, teachers should encourage students to conduct additional research on punctuation.
- Teachers should encourage their students to become enthusiastic about punctuation.
- Some blank text should be provided for the student to add punctuation to.

Additional Suggestions

- Grammar should be taught using authentic texts.
- Familiar topics should be focused on more.
- Supplementary materials should be introduced to the students to improve their academic paragraph writing.
- Students should practice writing in class.
- The four phases of writing a paragraph (brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing) should receive attention.
- Examples of acceptable paragraphs related to different topics should be given to the students and analyzed in the class by the teacher.
- Extracurricular classes for boosting writing skills can be held at schools.
- Different parts of a paragraph should be practiced and students should get familiar with the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence.
- Students should know that not all Persian sentences can be transferred positively into English.
- Different genres should be introduced to the students.
- Idiomatic expressions and collocations should receive some instruction.
- Teachers should provide students with written corrective feedback and their writing assignments should always be checked.
- In order to make writing easier and more enjoyable, an emphasis should be placed on in and out of the class writing activities.

Discussion

Writing is considered to be one of the hardest skills to learn and teach, according to Al Murshidi (2014). Numerous studies have been conducted in the past to identify major sources of writing difficulties and suggest workable solutions to get past these roadblocks in the way of successful writing performance in order to deal with these issues in the development of the writing skill in a more tangible way (e.g., Akbari, 2015; Al-Khasawneh & Huwari, 2013; Bahloul, 2007; Chen & Wu, 2001; Jafari & Ansari, 2012).

Grammatical, Lexical, Semantic, and Mechanics writing errors were classified according to Corder's (1967) taxonomy in this study. The research's findings showed a significant difference in the number of errors made in each type, and it was discovered that "grammatical errors" were the most typical problem Iranian pre-university students had with their paragraphs. The majority of errors made by study participants (131=39%), according to the study's findings, were grammatical errors.

A more recent study conducted by Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia and Napitupulu (2017) in a university setting in Indonesia also came to similar conclusions. In their study, in grammatical errors, 'verb tense' ranked the highest (10.33%) in total in all three groups. The second area of difficulty in grammar was subject-verb agreement and it scored (9.32%). The second category of errors was 'mechanics' which consisted of 29.66% of the total errors. In 'mechanics', spelling (14.23%) was the most frequently committed error which was followed by capitalization (8.14%) and punctuation (7.28%). These findings were consistent with the findings of the current investigation because, in this instance, grammatical errors also received the highest percentage of errors in general, and "tense errors" received the highest percentage of errors made by Iranian pre-university students. The category of 'subject-verb agreement' received second place. Another similarity was discovered in the area of "mechanical errors," with the same outcome as in Nuruzzaman et al.'s (2018) study, which showed that dictation and punctuation errors were the most frequently made by the participants.

The study by Almarwany, M. (2008), which focuses on the writing challenges faced by EFL secondary school students in Almunawwarh, is consistent with the current study's findings. Lexical errors ranked third, with preposition errors topping the list (7.45 percent), followed by article errors (5.59 percent), and verb errors (4.06 percent). The word choice category accounts for 41.91% of all errors overall.

The results closely match those of the Ridha, N. study. S. (2012), where the researcher looked into grammatical and mechanical mistakes made by EFL Iraqi College students who were writing essays in English. These mistakes were the most serious and common. Similar findings were found in Ruwaida's (2015) study, which found that Arab students generally have a very difficult time writing English paragraphs that are fluent, informative, well-organized, and accurate while also following the correct grammatical conventions, punctuation, and spelling.

It's also noteworthy that students' negative transfers from their first language, Persian, account for the majority of their grammatical mistakes. The lack of knowledge in L2, however, also contributed to some of the issues. The cause of this is that learners have more trouble learning English grammatical structures that are similar to but also dissimilar from grammatical structures in their native tongue. For instance, "noun" is placed before "adjective" (e.g.. "teacher kind" rather than "teacher kind"). They always turn to literal translation before creating English patterns, which is the key to this issue. Additionally, they translate phrases word-for-word, rather than phrase-for-phrase, from one language into another. These results concur with those of Abbasi, Karimian, and Sadeghi from 2011 and 2009.

Furthermore, it can be said that if L2 learners use L1 grammatical features and apply them when writing L2 structures, their use of first-language grammatical structures will occasionally result in errors and contribute to the gap between L1 and L2 lexical features. These were also made clear in Ruwaida's (2015) study, which claimed that it is difficult to assist Arab students in learning English stylistics so they can create well-written paragraphs because they carry over the style of their native tongue. They also don't have the right vocabulary to convey their ideas effectively. In accordance with some other studies of both Arab and other EFL contexts, the findings of this study also showed that Iranian pre-university EFL learners lacked proficiency in grammar rules, vocabulary, spelling, mechanics, and semantics.

According to the students' overall perceptions expressed in their interviews, it can be said that these students, like the participants in the earlier studies by Al Murshidi (2014) and Bahloul (2007), find writing paragraphs to be a difficult task.

It's interesting to note that there are currently very few studies available that inquire about the students' opinions regarding the problematic areas in their paragraph writing. Studies by Jabali (2018) and Bani Younes and Salamh Albalawi (2015) stand out as exceptions in this regard because they demonstrate how young this field of study is and how it needs to be strengthened by

additional, pertinent empirical research in the future. However, the settings in which these two studies were conducted were Turkey and Palestine, respectively. Identifying Palestinian EFL learners' attitudes toward writing and examining whether students believe there to be any significant difference between how they express their ideas in English and Arabic writing productions were the two main goals of Jabali's (2018) study, which provides more detail on the findings of the two studies previously mentioned in this area. In conclusion, his research revealed that students had favorable attitudes toward the writing process in general as well as toward the textbooks, teaching methods, and writing class strategies. In addition, Turley, Bani Younes, and Salamh Albalawi (2015) asked 40 English major participants about the writing issues they run into when writing in English. According to the findings, the participants thought that spelling issues, such as difficulty using substitution, omission, addition, disordering, segmentation, and unrecognizable words, were the three most frequent sources of writing difficulty for them. They also thought that punctuation issues and grammatical issues, such as difficulty using tenses, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and article use, were second and third. According to this study's findings, dictation and punctuation errors were among the most frequent mistakes made in the composition of paragraphs by Iranian pre-university EFL students. This finding is consistent with the findings of the two previous studies on the perceptions of writing difficulties among students.

Grammatical constructions, spelling, and punctuation are challenging to master, according to the results of the follow-up interview. The students also concurred that writing can be a difficult task made even more difficult by organization, vocabulary choice, collocations, idiomatic expressions, and rhetorical devices. According to the interview, students recognized having spelling difficulties (student 10: Samaneh). Some identified having grammar problems (student 1: Zahra). In structuring a good English sentence some students reported great difficulties (Sheyda, Diana, and Mobina). Also, Massomeh and Nazanin stated that if they are given familiar topics, they can compose much better paragraphs. In punctuation, (Student 8: Soheyla) acknowledged having difficulties in punctuation and she said that she does not know how to use punctuations like colon or semi-colon. Dictation problems were yet another challenging area for the students mentioned by Samaneh. She said that there are numerous words in English that have similar spelling systems which make dictation a Hercules task. Also, a lack of vocabulary was another issue mentioned by a participant (Sogand). She said that she could not find suitable vocabulary when she is writing a paragraph and sometimes it is inevitable to use a dictionary. One of the

interviewees in our study also reported that linking ideas coherently and cohesively is one of the challenges they usually encounter. As she said in her interview "*The fact that I have trouble concluding my writing and linking ideas coherently is probably the most difficult problem I face*" confirms that linking ideas in a paragraph is yet another issue to be considered.

The current study's findings support Al Mubarak's (2017) study, which found that students struggled to master grammar, punctuation, and spelling, all of which are crucial to the writing process. Al Mubarak discovered that irregular verb tenses, prepositional usage, weak expressions, lack of structure, consistency, and punctuation all play significant roles in writing difficulty.

Furthermore, our findings support Mahmoud's (2005) study in that EFL learners face significant challenges due to syntactic errors and student errors like a verb and prepositional errors. Additionally, Farouq (2012) asserted that grammar is the most challenging subject for L2 learners, which is consistent with our findings. The hypotheses advanced by Nyasimi (2014), who contends that in addition to encountering difficulties with the use of proper sentence structure and paragraph development, students must struggle with the creation of coherent text, also support this idea.

Additionally, Li and Zeng (2019) found that the main vocabulary, grammar, and writing resource issues in academic writing were supported by our findings. As a result, our results are consistent with their findings. Our findings run counter to those of Lee and Tajino (2008), who found that students thought language-related academic writing components were more challenging than structure/content-related ones. Our results are consistent with those of Mwangi (2017), who discovered that students struggled with spelling, proper punctuation, the use of appropriate vocabulary, the formation of verb tenses, and the pluralization of words.

Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020) conducted a recent study in Iran, and the majority of the participants concurred that teaching grammar and punctuation should be combined with the other four skills and embedded in a context. They also believed that teachers should explicitly teach students how to punctuate both their written work and their own speech. Additionally, it was believed that by employing mnemonics, students could more effectively learn word spelling. According to the findings of the interviews, other elements that make the writing task difficult include idiomatic expressions and collocations, grammar, spelling, punctuation, word choice, organization, familiarity with genres and rhetorical structures, negative transfer from Persian to English, and genre and rhetorical structure familiarity.

Conclusion

The current study is limited to determining how Iranian pre-university students construct paragraphs and what difficulties they experience when writing academic paragraphs. Additionally, it displayed a variety of student mistakes of various sizes and types, along with a variety of solutions offered by the instructor. In the grammatical category, 'verb tense' and 'subject-verb agreement' were the two areas where students committed the highest number of errors. Likewise, 'punctuation' and 'dictation' were the two error-prone areas in mechanics whereas, in the lexical category, students made the most errors in 'verbs and 'nouns. Also, 'word choice' was a challenging issue for the participants in the semantical area. The result of the interview analysis confirmed the content analysis of the paragraphs. Most of the students mentioned that they have great difficulties in their grammar, structuring and linking ideas, lack of word knowledge, unfamiliarity with the topic, punctuation, and spelling problems, unfamiliarity with different steps of paragraph writing such as brainstorming, and word-choice issues and not knowing which word to use.

The present study suggests that teachers need to put emphasis on certain aspects of writing in English. They should teach basic grammar rules, tense, subject-verb-agreement, mechanics, lexical items, word order, etc. Furthermore, they must make students aware of the differences between English and Persian structures of phrases and sentences. Thus, this study provides insight into language learning problems that occur when L2 learners internalize the rules of the target language. The errors identified in this study can serve as a useful guide for English teachers and stakeholders to design an effective curriculum for teaching and learning of English as a second language. Iranian students in EFL writing classes should be given ample opportunities for practice in and outside the classroom in order to be acquainted with the appropriate style of writing English composition.

However, there are some restrictions on the current study. First of all, none of the participants received a questionnaire looking into the students' problematic areas in paragraph writing. In this study, only female students participated, and secondly, there were a very small number of participants. Future studies should use a mixed-method design, using both qualitative and quantitative instruments. Examining the areas where men and women differ in their writing abilities in high-stakes situations is another idea.

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