Original Article

The Effects of Instructor's Comments on Our Academic Writing: The Case of Iranian M. A. Students of TEFL

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Abstract

Academic writing is a significant component of all graduate programs, but the majority of students lack basic writing skills. This problem is especially frustrating for M.A. students of TEFL who have to write academic articles in English because it necessitates time-consuming, extracurricular work that can occasionally be infuriating. The present study was carried out in the form of an action research project to explore the impact of process-based teaching of writing on the attitudes of 10 Iranian M. A. candidates of TEFL towards writing academically. The participants were TEFL candidates in Gonbad Kavoos, Iran. A qualitative method employing a collaborative action research model was used to find out how Iranian M. A. students of TEFL viewed the process writing approach. Phases of the course's procedure included receiving and putting into practice the instructor's feedback on the texts' rationality, content, consistency, tone, and grammar and sending their finished writing assignments by deadlines. Each student had a schedule for in-person discussions about their progress. According to the results, the students believed that the teaching method helped them improve their writing abilities. The implications include creating a forum for oral feedback between teachers and students to supplement written feedback, fostering a sense of responsibility in students by helping them to self-organize, and recognizing that graduate students may require assistance with very fundamental writing abilities and knowledge.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Article Writing, Instructor's Feedback, M.A. Students, Process Model Approach, Writing Proficiency

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1. Introduction

M.A. candidates think that academic writing is very complicated. Academics across all fields of study must possess the ability to express thoughts and ideas in a consistent, precise, and sensible manner since their careers frequently depend on their ability to publish academic investigations in highly regarded periodicals. Nevertheless, only a small number of academics have sufficient knowledge in this field regardless of their familiarity with other aspects of their fields (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Çelik, 2020; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). The majority of previous scholars' respondents had serious difficulties producing effective academic writing (Alter & Adkin, 2006; Caffarela & Barnet, 2000; Can & Walker, 2011; Holmes et al., 2018; Lavele & Bushrov, 2007; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012).

Academic writing requires a variety of technical skills, which makes it a difficult task (Paltridge, 1997; Şaraplı, 2013). Trzeciak and Mackay (1994) stress that effective writing requires much more than just linguistic proficiency, general composition knowledge (Matoti & Shumba, 2011), and awareness of the intended audience and purpose. They assert that the following skills are necessary for producing appropriate writing: (1) the ability to accurately scan texts for pertinent content; (2) the ability to take notes and summarize; (3) the ability to synthesize information from a variety of sources; (4) the knowledge of written ethics and plagiarism avoidance; (5) the ability to cite and professionally refer to others; and (6) competence in arranging and presenting written material, table, graph, etc.

Given the inherent complexity of academic writing, numerous recent studies on the subject have identified several issues that may affect the ability to produce compelling academic writing (Beck, 2009; Mallahi, 2022; Mammadova, 2023; Myles, 2002; Nurlatifah & Yusuf, 2022; Ovilia et al., 2022; Sharma, 2023). Among these, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and self-awareness stand out as having major effects (Hamman, 2005; Larcombe et al., 2007; Matotti, 2005). Self-efficacy, or students' perceptions of their writing abilities, is emphasized by Hammann (2005), Matoti (2005), and Shumba (2005). They contend that while a student's level of confidence does not directly affect their ability in this area, it does have an impact on the level of dedication they are willing to give to a writing assignment. Such ideas are supported by Rueg's (2014) research, which showed that teacher feedback on writing assignments improved both university students' writing achievement and sense of self-efficacy. Additionally, self-awareness and the ability to evaluate one's own progress significantly enhance written assignment output (Zimerman & Bandura, 1994). According

to Hammann (2005), issues relating to how students schedule their writing, including the creation of content, using sources in libraries, and even the decision to plan or not, are influenced by their knowledge of writing strategies as well as their ability to self-regulate. According to Rowe (2011), students' anxiety can be greatly exacerbated by the lack of feedback following writing assignments and the perception that teachers are uninterested in their development, which can make them less motivated to take part in a given writing task.

Writing for an academic audience can be extremely difficult in any circumstances (Mišak et al., 2005). The issue is made worse for M.A. candidates taking the growing number of M.A. courses at universities in nations where English is not widely spoken and where academic papers must be written in English (Buckingham, 2008; Jenkins et al., 1993; Johns, 2008; Maliborska & You, 2016).

Predictably, learners will face some difficulties when attempting to communicate complex ideas in English as opposed to their mother tongue (Farooq, 2020). For instance, according to Flowerdew (1999), non-native English speakers frequently express significant difficulties with academic writing in English. Students' ability to effectively express themselves can be hampered by a lack of vocabulary, the length of their compositions, and their limited ability to write in complex styles. These factors can also have a detrimental effect on their sense of self-efficacy (Hammann, 2005). Similar results were found in Matoti and Shumba's (2011) survey of a group of non-native graduates, which showed a lack of confidence in the student's academic writing skills. This resulted from a deficiency in vocabulary, citation techniques, and conceptual organization abilities using the formal structure typically required by academic journals. In his reflection on these matters, Connor (2002) emphasizes the fact that while non-native speakers are typically used radically different rhetorical styles, journals' requirements for consistency, linearity, and concise language heavily rely on English standards. For instance, Arab writing is described as tending to approach a single topic from a variety of angles, in contrast to English texts, which tend to use Kaplan's (1966) linear argument diagram (Hatim, 1997). Paraphrasing and repetition can be seen as a tool by which acceptability is established in the Arabic rhetorical style, which also insists that the way a statement is made is central to its authenticity (Koch, 1983). The typical approach in English is to support a claim with actual evidence and the findings of other scholars. In addition, according to Kong (1998), writings in Chinese or even Japanese frequently exhibit a variety of social distinctions and courtesy movements,

which is why they are known to appear to lack frankness when viewed through the prism of written norms focused on in English. As a result, in addition to issues with writing mechanics and the challenges of producing complex text in a foreign language, non-native English speakers will face significant intellectual challenges due to the nature of academic writing.

In Iran, there is a huge demand from scholars of various fields to publish their papers in English journals. Those who are unable to do so may face setbacks in their professional careers and education. Some Master's and Ph.D. students are also required to conduct research and present their findings in English, both in written and spoken forms. In specific fields, students are even expected to submit their theses and dissertations in English. However, English language courses in Iran have been criticized for failing to adequately prepare students, particularly in the area of writing complex texts (Khodabandeh et al., 2014; Sharafi Nejad et al., 2016). With this issue in mind, the present study aimed to investigate the impact of the process writing approach on academic writing among Iranian TEFL Master's students, by conducting research and writing an English-language research paper for publication in an academic journal.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Case of Iranian Academic Writing

Regarding Iran, where the current study was carried out, Divsar (2018) highlights some challenges that are present there when it comes to academic writing, particularly for Ph.D. applicants who are under intense pressure to demonstrate their English proficiency while also submitting original research in their field of study. In this regard, Mansouri Nejad et al. (2020) confirmed that their issues with academic writing are largely caused by the difficulties many Iranian students have with critical thinking, a lack of fundamental research skills, poor levels of English proficiency, and a lack of familiarity with academic writing standards. All of them significantly lower Iranian higher education students' capacity to write quality dissertations and research articles. Likewise, he discovered that certain discursive obstacles have a negative impact on academic writing in the Iranian context. Vocabulary deficiencies were one such barrier, which Flowerdew (1999) also discovered in related reports. L1 intervention is linked to a limited English vocabulary (Pérez-Llantada et al., 2011). To clarify, non-native English speakers write in their L1 when writing in English. As

a result, bilingual dictionaries are sometimes used, or in other cases, students start writing around what they are trying to say, which could lead to syntactic and semantic ambiguity (Muncie, 2002). Participants in the Mansouri Nejad et al. 's (2020) study discovered that they had sufficient technical vocabulary but insufficient general English words to effectively write their dissertations.

2.2. A Model for Writing Called 'The Process-based Model'

The process-based approach to providing feedback has often been promoted due to its significant contribution to the teaching of specialized skills for academic writing. For instance, the experimental research by Karatay (2011) revealed a causal relationship between improved writing skills and process writing, as well as more favorable writing attitudes. He argued that writing should not be inherited but rather developed. The process-oriented writing model's emphasis on feedback and gradual improvement enhances students' cognitive understanding of the writing process. These findings were supported by Cakır (2013) and Lam (2005), who found that a process-writing project completed over 15 weeks with sophomores resulted in self-regulation in planning, coordination, and problem-solving skills.

Despite the lack of a standardized model for the process-oriented approach, four key stages can typically be identified, as the following graph shows:

Figure 1.

The Process-based Model of Writing
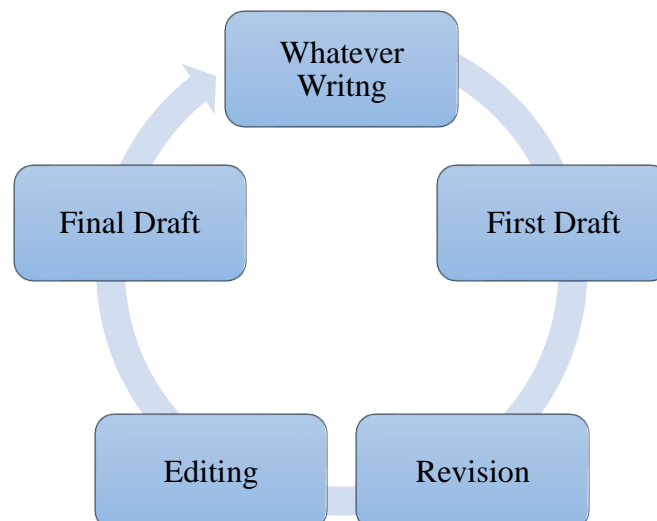
1. Whatever writing: where students develop conceptual understanding of their subjects, record ideas, and gather data.

2. First draft: involves organizing ideas and creating a unique piece of writing.

3. Revision: Check the writing again in light of comments made by instructors and peers.

4. Editing: addressing the writing's organization, style, and mechanics (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hyland, 2003).

5. Final draft: the final draft of your writing after all prior steps have been taken.

As Hyland (2003) noted, this is a non-linear model because the author can go back and correct any errors and strengthen the document. In his 2003 book Process Writing, Ferris emphasizes the value of feedback during the implementation stage. The process-based model is renowned for its continuous feedback and encouragement and is believed to satisfy instructional as well as affective requirements of the students, he noted, even though other writing systems typically consider feedback a single-phase assessment conducted by a teacher after the writing process (Rowe, 2011).

In support of this assertion, Flowerdew (1999) noted that Chinese university students "preferred one-on-one supervision, where advice could be sought on specific problems related to a given research paper" when presenting their research in English (p. 259). According to Can and Walker (2011), Ph.D. Students typically preferred simple, direct, and elaborate feedback on the content, organization, and mechanical issues with their papers as opposed to suggestive feedback that was directive. Participants in their study valued both positive and negative comments but favored the former. To sum up, according to their respondents, feedback was "a necessary first step in realizing their goal of academic recognition through the publication" (p. 527).

Hyland (2003), however, calls attention to the behavioral component of written feedback and argues that negative feedback will demoralize students by undermining their self-esteem. Therefore, it is recommended to use mitigation techniques to lessen the adverse effects of criticism (Treglia, 2008). Hyland and Hyland (2001) also advise against instructors making remarks that are difficult to understand. Furthermore, Bitchener and Knoch (2008) caution that instructors should be specific regarding students' writing aspects, which should

be emphasized throughout the process of providing feedback and what students are expected to do in response to feedback they receive.

The latest research demonstrates that process writing has a strong link to improved academic writing effectiveness, upbeat attitudes toward writing, and improved self-efficacy. The literature in the Iranian context does not provide evidence that this strategy is widely used, though. There have only been a few studies in this field carried out in Iran (e.g., Mehr, 2017; Sheikhy Behdani & Rashtchi, 2019), but these researchers primarily looked at undergraduates enrolled in EFL courses rather than graduate students who are expected to write in English for scholarly purposes. It is, therefore, necessary to place more emphasis on the impact of teacher feedback on the experiences of non-native master students in the Iranian context given the critical need for graduate students to learn advanced writing skills level pupils in terms of academic writing. The purpose of the present study is to fill this research void by examining the attitudes of M.A. students working on academic writing projects toward the process-model approach.

Iranian academics from a wide range of disciplines have a high demand for papers to be published in English-language journals; those who fall short in this area lag in both their professional careers and education. Ph.D. and Master's students must conduct research and communicate their findings orally and in writing in English. In certain fields of study, students are even supposed to deliver their master's theses and Ph.D. dissertations in this language. However, due to their failure to adequately prepare students with a sufficient level of competence, particularly with regard to writing complex writing, English language courses in Iran have always been criticized (Khodabandeh et al., 2014; Sharafi Nejad et al., 2016).

Students at the Islamic Azad University of Gonbad Kavoos were required to submit English-language research papers for peer review and publication in a scholarly journal. Regarding the topics previously discussed, the course instructor, who was also a co-author and colleague, believed that the students who had taken the course might naturally not be completely prepared for the experience, decreasing their chances of being able to perform satisfactorily on assignments given to them. Therefore, to motivate students to excel in this course, acknowledging that their academic prospects hinge on their proficiency in research and scholarly writing; having confidence in their English writing abilities, and fostering a

positive attitude towards the writing component of an academic career; the instructor, after conferring with the researchers, elected to utilize a process-based method for the execution of the research and writing assignment.

As an action research experiment, this study was also designed to address the following questions:

1. What opinions do Iranian M.A. candidates of TEFL receive after each assignment from the instructor's feedback?
2. Do Iranian M.A. candidates of TEFL think that their ability to write is influenced in any way by the way they are taught, specifically receiving feedback and making revisions?
3. How do Iranian M.A. candidates of TEFL react to the instructor's strategy of offering helpful feedback following each writing exercise?

The researchers sought to find out more about how process writing affected graduate students who weren't native English speakers in terms of their opinions of themselves as authors and their level of writing confidence. The researchers also hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the feedback components that the students found helpful and those that they did not to modify their interactions with students in subsequent classes that include a writing component.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

The researchers chose a collaborative action research model because a qualitative methodology allowed them to fully comprehend the participants' perspectives. Additionally, academic research carried out in a real-world educational setting offers significant insights into pedagogical and practical issues that are important to learning and teaching. The current study was carried out at the Islamic Azad University of Gonbad Kavoos, Iran during the academic year of 2022-2023. The researchers started their investigation at the beginning of the Fall semester and it ended in the Winter semester.

3.2. Participants

Ten M.A. students of TEFL participated in this study. A course called "Research" was being offered in Iran at the Islamic Azad University, Gonbad Kavoos Branch through the TEFL program. The participants (5 females and 5 males) in an age range of 24 to 49 partook in the study. More information on the participants is provided in the following table.

Table 1.

Demographic Information of the Participants

No. of Students	10
Gender	5 Females & 5 Males
Native Language	Persian
Major	TEFL
Universities	IAU, Gonbad Kavoos Branch
Academic Years	2022-2023

3. 3. Instrument(s)

Students were asked to respond to a variety of open-ended survey questions (see Appendix A) about the impact of process writing on their self-awareness, self-efficacy, and writing abilities. A peer with expertise in qualitative data analysis who was not personally involved in the research reread the research questions that the researchers had originally written.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The students were required to research a topic that was relevant to discourse analysis, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, language learning, language teaching, etc., and offer appropriate academic research paper sections like an introduction, a literature review, etc. in their presentation of a research paper in English. Following that, the students were required to present their findings to the class and submit their articles to an English journal. The researchers were also aware of the challenges students might face during the writing and research processes, and the participants gained experience with academic writing. To

scaffold the participants' writing abilities based on the process-based model, the project was then framed as a process writing task. The assignment was completed in stages, with each section being submitted by a specific deadline to the course instructor. The instructor read the early drafts and provided thorough feedback at every stage of the project offering suggestions and criticism on the articles' logic, content, consistency, tone, and any potential lexical and syntactic issues that required revisions. Following the reviews, the students updated their work three to four times, making the necessary changes and incorporating the updated content as they continued to work on the project. In addition to receiving feedback, the students frequently met with the teacher to talk face-to-face about the status of the research project.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

To ensure the accuracy of the results, the data collection procedures, the presentation, and the determination of the grades were carried out at the end of the semester. The purpose of the study was explained to the students, and they were then voluntarily invited to participate in the surveys. They were informed that participation in the research was entirely voluntary and that they could end it at any time. Because it was thought that recording their responses while speaking in Persian would relieve some of the pressure associated with speaking or writing their responses in English, the students did so. The files were sent to the course instructor after the responding tasks had been completed.

Transcribing the interview recordings into texts allowed for the conversion of the data, which was then subjected to content analysis. An initial reading of the transcripts was done to gain an understanding of the data and identify the themes that appeared. The researchers then created a coding scheme to characterize the data in accordance with the themes. Following the coding of the student responses, an expert qualitative researcher conducted an unbiased analysis of the data using the same coding structure (Stemler, 2001).

4. Results

To classify the students' opinions of the feedback they received from their instructors, the content analysis results have been presented in a narrative format.

I FIXED MY MISTAKES

Participants in this study mainly indicated that the repetitive process of drafting, receiving feedback, and returning written responses to the suggestions and advice of the instructor was a significant beneficial tool that enabled them to analyze their writing critically and implement significant revisions as needed. One of the participants gave the following explanation of how she felt about the method of receiving course instructor feedback:

> *"Since the instructor's suggestions on his in-depth advice because I wanted to improve my papers, and the experience was very beneficial. Since I wrote and edited my papers, I honestly don't think I would have been as effective because, in that served as a roadmap for us, his point of view was very instructive. I fixed my mistakes based case, I suppose I would have tried to defend my writing rather than working to make my article better".*

I LEARNED HOW TO IMPROVE MY WRITING

The respondents reported that process writing had enhanced certain facets of their comprehension of grammar, academic writing norms, and language usage, which are frequently seen as impeding non-native learners' capacity to write successfully. This improvement was in addition to the students' writings' increased self-awareness. As one of the students declared:

> *"I suppose I should say that using this method helped me learn how to improve my writing. You see, I now understand that I should use straightforward language whenever possible. It has to be comprehensible for the target audience, you know. I also need to be mindful of APA formatting and watch out for research ethics".*

SOMETIMES I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO DO

However, sometimes, a degree of dissatisfaction was reported. As one of the students stated:

> *"Sometimes I didn't know how to follow the feedback instructions, and it took me some time to realize what I needed to do. For instance, I was unable to write an in-text citation when the teacher asked me to. To improve the value of the feedback, we*

should have received training in academic writing before we started writing in the sessions".

LET'S PUT IT OFF UNTIL TOMORROW

Aside from the challenges unique to writing skills, some participants also brought up the effects of receiving and responding to feedback on their capacity for time management.

"Getting regular feedback helps you learn new things. If the instructor had required us to finish a paper and turn it in at the end of the semester, for example, I would undoubtedly claim that they would be entirely different. Because we were constantly telling ourselves, "Oh, we have the time we need, let's put it off until tomorrow, the day after that, or even the following week".

THE PROCESS WRITING MODEL, HOWEVER, WILL BE USED IN THE CLASSES I TEACH

All of the participants discussed their plans to implement the process writing model in the classes they instructed; in fact, a few of the candidates had already begun implementing the method. One of the experienced participants explained:

"To be completely honest, I have never given my students such feedback in any of my courses. Simply highlighting the mistakes in their writing allowed me to return the papers to the students, who would then have been responsible for fixing their errors. The process writing model, however, will be used in the classes I teach because it is quicker and more effective".

Also, another participant mentioned:

"The instructor is pleased to see how much his students' writing abilities have improved. Additionally, it inspires pride in the students, who can see the enormous

improvement between their initial draft and final product. They express their happiness and say things like, "Cool, I have improved; I'll use this method in my classes, too."

5. Discussion

The possibility of in-depth conversation between the instructor and student, according to Beaumont et al. (2009), is specifically beneficial to the development of writing skills. Because self-regulation has a significant impact on academic writing (Hamman, 2005; Zimmerman & Bandaru, 1994), it is safe to say that process writing would be an effective way to help students with their writing in this situation.

However, one of the participants conveyed a degree of dissatisfaction about the quality of the feedback in favor of Bitchener and Knock's (2009) focus concerning the significance of keeping objectives transparent to the Ph.D. candidates at the outset of the writing course, emphasizing that he frequently failed to grasp what they were required to exactly do.

Some of the participants declared a lack of knowledge of different sections of an article which was in line with Matotti and Shumba (2011) who stated that a lack of awareness concerning the fundamental standards of academic writing hindered both their capacity to successfully articulate their (the students') opinions and their comprehension of the teacher's remarks.

Regarding their capacity for time management, the students perceived feedback as having an impact on their capacity for self-regulation, which was consistent with earlier studies (Hamman, 2005; Matotti & Shumba, 2011; Zimmerman & Bandaru, 1994). Moreover, as pointed out by one of the participants, the requirement to meet with the instructor beyond the designated class time was somewhat undesirable. It impeded her schedule, which was supported by Keh's (1990) findings that learners frequently regarded conferencing as a time-consuming activity.

Instead of providing feedback or a forum for discussion, finding flaws and demanding that the students fix them is a problem that, according to Nicol (2010), is making students less motivated to write. The process writing approach, however, had a positive impact on the

candidates' writing standards, and they realized they were becoming more conscious of their accomplishments. In light of this, they stated that they planned to incorporate process writing as a key process into their future writing instruction.

6. Conclusion

The practice of providing thorough feedback while a text is being planned, written, and edited is known as the process writing approach. Although there has been little research on this subject, this technique is underutilized in the Iranian higher education system. Thus, in addition to discussing related academic contexts, it is still crucial to discuss the issues of its use in Iran. The small sample size and restricted scope of this study limit the conclusions it can draw. It's possible that, in part, the participants' responses were influenced by the subject's discourse. In other words, students reflected on the feedback they had received about the idea of process writing rather than expressing their own opinions in part of their responses or in the teacher-student relationship, where participants may have tended to show favor to the teacher in the interviews rather than expressing criticism or dissatisfaction.

Nevertheless, it can be deduced from the notions exchanged among the participants that process-oriented writing was generally perceived as beneficial and as having a constructive influence on students' understanding of the conventions inherent in scholarly writing. The participants, who felt that it improved their understanding of academic writing, generally had positive opinions of the experience. The students also claimed that they had seen improvements in their writing skills and that they were happier with their writing than they would have been if they had been required to finish the same papers without receiving as much feedback from the teacher. In addition, a few of the participants thought the writing process of the course was so beneficial that they wanted to use it in the future with their students.

The study's results largely support the way the subject is currently perceived, but they also highlight the ongoing issue of Iranian M.A. students who are qualified but lack the writing abilities needed to advance academically. Providing a structure for enhancing this skill by pointing out flaws or errors and giving students regular feedback on how to revise to help them become better at evaluating what they write can be one of the implications of this research. Face-to-face meetings can be especially beneficial as a supplement to written

feedback by offering a place for discussion and clarity. Setting goals, following deadlines, and scheduling personal meetings to keep a sense of accountability in their minds can all be helpful suggestions for teaching students how to manage their time effectively. Understanding that students might require assistance with the English-language writing system, such as syntax, punctuation, spelling, etc., is crucial when discussing writing abilities. In this sense, it is necessary to include specific corrections in addition to fault identification and general guidance. Along with making references to other works and following academic ethics, learners may also require assistance with very basic academic text components.

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Appendices

Interview Questions

1. Do you think that receiving and addressing feedback regularly helped you to develop your writing skills efficiently, or do you feel that you could have achieved greater success if you had worked on your paper independently, without any external input?

2. What was the most valuable aspect of the written feedback you received on your paper? Which comment was the least helpful? How do you think the quality of the feedback could have been enhanced?

3. Explain your emotions towards having a conference, which involves a face-to-face meeting with the instructor to review your written work.

4. What are the benefits/drawbacks of having personal interactions with the instructor regarding your research paper?

5. What insights did you acquire regarding academic writing as a consequence of this process? Do you possess any competencies that you think will enhance your writing skills in the future?

6. How did you feel about the process writing approach in general?

7. Would you consider incorporating process writing into your own classroom?