

In the Name of God

The Merciful

And

The Compassionate

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Faculty of Language and Literature
English language and literature Department

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Of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

Title:

Developing a Profile of the Writing Needs and Problems of
Iranian Doctoral Candidates

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To my Mother;

For her love and patience

And, in the memory of my father;

For his love and affection

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Abstract

The writing difficulties and requirements of doctoral candidates have not been targeted in EFL writing survey research, in spite of the importance of writing in the lives of these candidates. Publishing research papers in English journals is now a requirement for many doctoral candidates in Iran. This research study is concerned with EFL writing problems and needs at the tertiary level, trying to point out the major difficulties with which Iranian doctoral candidates face while performing different writing tasks. In this study, multiple methods such as questionnaires and interviews were used. Data were collected in the spring semester of the academic year 2011-2012 from three universities of, Isfahan Yazd and Kerman. A 35-item questionnaire was administered to 106 doctoral candidates and 32 content instructors. In addition, an interview was conducted with doctoral candidates and their content instructors. The results of questionnaires and interviews revealed that the majority of doctoral candidates and almost all content instructors reported that doctoral candidates have difficulties in writing due to their lack of proficiency in both writing and language skills. Content instructors tended to be more critical of doctoral candidates' problems in writing than the doctoral candidates themselves. The findings of data analysis revealed that Iranian doctoral programs conducted nationwide have not sufficiently taken into consideration the doctoral candidates' objective and subjective needs as far as writing is concerned. It can be inferred that all doctoral candidates have problems in the six components of language skills (grammar, vocabulary, and spelling) and writing skills (cohesion, coherence, and punctuation) and their writing will improve not only by providing them with instruction concerning grammar and vocabulary but also by developing their proficiency in writing skill.

Keywords: Writing skills, Language skills, Needs analysis, Doctoral candidates

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Preliminaries

ESP is a major activity around the world today. It is an enterprise involving education, training and practice, and drawing upon three major realms of knowledge: language, pedagogy and the students'/practitioners' specialist areas of interest. According to Robinson (1991), a number of features are often thought of as criterial to ESP course. First, ESP is normally goal oriented. That is, students study English not because they are interested in the English language (or English-language culture) as such but because they need English for study or work purposes. Second, ESP courses may be written about as though they consist of identical students, that is, all the students in a class are involved in the same kind of work or specialist studies. It may often be thought that a characteristic, or even a criterial feature, of ESP is that the course should involve specialist language and content. Finally, an ESP course is based on a needs analysis, which aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English.

There are various approaches to needs analysis. Whereas needs analysis formerly focused rather exclusively on target or end-of-course requirements, now it is usual to take account of students' initial needs, including learning needs. Dudley-Evans (1995) emphasizes needs analysis as the key defining feature of ESP. Quoting Chamber (1980:299), he says that the initial needs analysis provides information about the target situation, what learners will do in English, and the skills and language needed-target situation analysis.

With the expansion of EFL all around the world, where students have got familiar with the communicative ways of learning, the result has been the use of the

four major skills productively. Perhaps the main purpose of language learning is language use. Students should have the opportunity to use the content and the language they have learned during the course and also their existing knowledge. The most recent methodology discussed by teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and teaching English as a second language (TESL) scholars is the communicative approach, which emphasizes the rules of language use rather than usage. So the productive skills receive a special emphasis in language learning classrooms (Peyton, 2000 and Stoller, 1997).

Among language skills, writing has a long history with respect to the importance of its role in language learning and teaching. Especially since the inception of the audio-lingual movement, the oral skills received major attention and writing has been considered less important. Chastain (1988:244) states that "writing is a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning a second language; however, writing has been commonly the last- last to be taught in the sequence of skills – and last to receive much emphasis". At approximately the same time the Writing Across the Curriculum became prominent in L1 writing instruction, the ESP movement had taken hold in the field of L2 acquisition.

Language learners need to communicate through writing as much as they communicate by speaking in second language. Moreover, writing is a complex activity both from the viewpoints of teaching and learning. The most difficult job for language learners is expressing themselves through writing in a second language.

In Iran, most of the students who come to university carry with them the problems they had when they were at high school. Unless they have attended English classes at institutes, they are basically poor at almost all aspects of language,

especially at the productive skills. The idea that even for most of native speakers it is difficult to produce a coherent, fluent and extended piece of written text (Nunan, 1999) is not doubtful. This problem continues and leads to some obstacles for doctoral candidates in writing English papers and articles. It is undoubtedly the act of composing, which can create problems for students, especially for those writing in a second language (L2) in academic contexts. Generating new ideas can be difficult because it involves transforming or reproducing information in second language composing context.

According to Dong (1998), writing English papers is a most formidable task for many students. This is not only because of the daunting size of the document but also because of the high standards to which the papers are held. The writing challenge is not only demonstrating knowledge related to the research but also using that knowledge to "argue logically and coherently the meaning of the research results" (council of Graduate schools in the U.S; 1991 cited in Dong:371).The situation becomes more complicated with the fast growing number of non-native graduate students in the fields of science and technology. What is needed in EAP courses is a shift of focus from the grammatical to the communicative properties of the language. We take the view that the difficulties students encounter in EAP courses arise not so much from their defective knowledge of the system of English, but from unfamiliarity with the use of the language and that consequently their needs cannot be met by a course which simply provides further practice in the composition of sentences, but by one which makes them learn how sentences are used in the performance of the different communicative acts.

One might usefully distinguish two kinds of ability which an English course at this level should aim at developing: (1) the ability to recognize how sentences are used in the performance of acts of communication, and the ability to recognize the rhetorical functioning of the language in use, and (2) the ability to recognize and manipulate the formal devices used to combine sentences to create continuous discourse and the second with the grammatical cohesion of text.

The field of second or foreign language teaching has undergone many fluctuations and dramatic shifts over years. As a result of the rise and fall of methods, language skills have been treated variably. The tendency to view writing as the least useful of the four language skills may lead to the conclusion that writing is less important and that it can be sacrificed to spend more time on the other three skills. However, such is not the case, and teachers should consider the role of writing before deciding how much emphasis to place on it in elementary language courses. The importance of writing in the lives of doctoral students increases over time. Writing needs of doctoral students include writing of paragraphs, essays, exam answers, reports and term papers.

Some define writing as a thinking process. According to Flower and Hayes (1981:127) "writing is a straightforward act of saying what the writers go through, and the interpretation readers make". The view of writing as an act of communication suggests an interactive process which takes place between the writer and the reader via text (Olshtain 1986 cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991:235).

According to Cumming (1990:61), "the word writing refers not only to text in written script but also to the acts of thinking, composing and encoding language into such texts. Writing has been described as technology and a set of skills to be

practiced and learned through experience (Kaplan, 1983), as the act of composing (Jordan,1997), as the product of composing in product-oriented research (Robinson 1991), and as social activity in the constructivist tradition of research. (West 1994)

Writing is a production process in which the writer encodes messages for communication (Chastain, 1988). It tends to be learned initially with the aid of formal instruction. Writing is the act of originating and creating ideas and then giving them a graphic representation. It is also a process of cognitive problem solving of discovering meanings. Writing has unique characteristics making it different from speech. In L1 as well as in L2, every one can learn to speak under normal circumstances; whereas, everyone has to be taught to write. Writing is also different from speech in its medium, its permanence, and its spacio-temporal limitations. Writers write to people who are not present most of the time. Moreover, the degree of monitoring by the sender of the message differs in speech and writing. And finally, the language of writing is usually more complex and more explicit than that of speech.

Writing is viewed as an instrument through which people communicate with one another in time and space. They transmit their culture from one generation to another by writing. Such communication is extremely important in modern world, and this interaction may take the form of transitional paper and pencil writing or the most advanced electronic mail. Murray (1980:36) says "the art of writing, in addition to reflecting thoughts can itself serve as facilitator of thoughts and it may, in fact even help the writer in the process of writing to shape and refine ideas which are not fully formed. Writing is a dynamic creative process of giving and taking between context and form".