



**SHEIKHBAHAE UNIVERSITY**

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE USE OF  
LEXICAL DEVICES AND THE QUALITY OF  
IRANIAN EFL WRITING AT TWO  
PROFICIENCY LEVELS**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN THE PARTIAL FULLFILMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTERS OF ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By  
KOMLA YOUNESI HERAVI

Supervisor  
DR. A. AFGHARI

SEPTEMBER 2012

*In The Name Of God*



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## Sheikhbahaee University

School of Foreign Languages

Department of English

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE CONTENT, FORMAT AND QUALITY OF  
PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS SUBMITTED BY

**KOMLA YOUNESI HERAVI**

ENTITLED:

**The Relationship Between The Use Of Lexical Devices And The  
Quality Of Iranian EFL Writing At Two Proficiency Levels**

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
M.A. IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IS ACCEPTED AND APPROVED BY  
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## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Kamla Yamesi

*To My Mother*

*&*

*To My Grandparents*

*For Their Faithful Love and Support*

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## Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the relationship between lexical devices and writing quality of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. The analysis of lexical devices was done on written samples produced by sixty students (30 intermediate, 30 advanced) of Sadr Language Institute. The analysis prompted the identification of the lexical devices in learners' pieces of writing and the computation of their frequencies. The analysis revealed that hedges had the highest frequency and particularizers had the lowest frequency in learners' written samples. The findings of the study illustrate that there exists a statistically significant correlation between the use of lexical devices and the quality of learners' writing ( $r = .473$  for intermediate level,  $r = .576$  for advanced level). They also reveal that the appropriate use of hedges and the quality of learners' writing are also meaningfully correlated at both levels of proficiency ( $r = .396$  for intermediate level and  $r = .480$  for advanced level). In addition, the study highlights some of the problems, including the misuse of lexical devices, in students' writing.

**Key terms:** Lexical devices, Expository writing, Holistic scoring.

## **List of abbreviations**

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

VLS: Vocabulary Learning Strategy

# **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

Today, technological advances, evolving working dynamics and cultural shifts all mean that writing carries much more weight than the past and undoubtedly influences different aspects of our daily life. Because of the arguable fact that the way we write reveals our background knowledge, predicts academic success, affects our relationships, creates new opportunities in our lives and enhances critical thinking capabilities(NCTE, 2008), it can be stated that writing deserves to be taken more seriously not only by teachers and students, but also by researchers, educationalists, psychologists and those involved in language assessment. In addition, poor writing can lead to many communication problems specially different levels of misunderstanding in cross-lingual, cross-cultural settings.

Writing is one of the vitally important language skills with a prominent status in language education. This skill calls for both conscious efforts and a good deal of practice in composing, developing and analyzing ideas (Myles, 2002). The ability to write well, which is of tremendous importance for success in a wide variety of situations and professions, is a particularly daunting and difficult thing to develop by many EFL learners and students (Crossley, McCarthy & McNamara, 2010).

In fact, it is quite arguable that, in general, producing a piece of coherent and cohesive writing is a laborious task, especially for those learning a second/foreign language (Ismail, 2011). As a matter of fact, students/learners have to wrestle not only with the content, but also with a wide range of other things including organization, finding suitable vocabulary items, grammar, audience, punctuation,

spelling, and capitalization. It is often believed that students' final written products demonstrate their mastery of all the above-mentioned areas (Rass, 2001, cited in Golshan, 2009).

Among the numerous factors involved in the development of writing, lexical devices are believed to have a particularly prominent role to play.

Moreover, the crucial role of lexis in second/foreign language learning and teaching has been acknowledged in theoretical and empirical vocabulary-learning research. Singleton (1999) says that: "The major challenge of learning and using a language- whether as L1 or as L2- lies not in the area of broad syntactic principles but in the 'nitty-gritty' of the lexicon" (cited in Manchon & Sanchez, 2007, p. 7). According to Wilkins (cited in Grauberg, 1997, p. 5) "The fact is that without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing at all can be conveyed." Also, a number of other studies illustrate that what makes writing the most difficult skill to develop is the inadequacy of learners'/students' vocabulary knowledge (Uzawa and Cummings, 1989, Raimes 1985, Leki and Carson 1994). Further, there is evidence in the literature indicating that vocabulary proficiency can be utilized as an indicator of writing quality (e.g. Santos, 1988; Astika, 1993).

Although some research on the effects of lexical devices on the writing quality has already been conducted in some countries, this area of research is still more or less unexplored in Iranian EFL contexts. Hence, conducting more studies aimed at gaining a better and deeper understanding of this area seems necessary and justifiable.



## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Writing is a complex and demanding activity and serves a wide variety of communication purposes in the 21th century. It is not produced in a linear way and many factors influence its quality including language proficiency, cohesive devices, writing strategies, and personal characteristics (Mu, 2005). Therefore, tackling writing is still seen as one of the most challenging areas in second/foreign language learning (Ismail, 2011).

Vocabulary, which is an influential factor in writing, has received scant attention in Iran EFL contexts (Kafipour, Shokrpour & Yazdani, 2011). According to Fan (2003), many teachers and scholars believe that the poor performance of students on exams is related to the insufficiency of their vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, the inadequacy of lexis prevents students from developing their proficiency (cited in Kafipour, et al, 2011). This problem deepens when undue emphasis on grammar marginalizes vocabulary-teaching in English classes (Hassani, 2003, cited in Fatemi, 2008).

Since the importance of vocabulary has been largely neglected in Iranian EFL contexts, the present study intends to determine the extent to which the use of lexical devices influences writing quality in Iranian EFL settings. Additionally, the researcher aims to examine the differences in the use of lexical devices related to *intensifiers*, *demonstratives*, *additives*, *exclusives*, *particularisers*, *hedges*, and *conjuncts* at the two proficiency levels.

### **1.3 Research Question**

Is there any relationship between use of lexical devices and writing quality of the Iranian EFL learners at two proficiency levels?

### **1.4 Significance of the study**

The importance of vocabulary in writing has been pointed out in a number of recent studies (Leki & Carson, 1994 as cited in Engber, 1995). According to Santos (1988), the use of inappropriate words often results in the production of ambiguous and obscure texts which don't successfully transfer the writers' intended meaning (cited in Engber, 1995). What is more, Grobe (1981) has suggested that "what teachers currently perceive as 'good' writing is closely associated with vocabulary diversity" (cited in Engber, 1995, p. 141).

As the above-mentioned research findings suggest, one cannot afford to ignore or underestimate the importance of lexical devices in learners'/students' writing. However, the crucial role of lexical proficiency has not attracted enough attention by teachers and scholars, specifically those in Iran EFL contexts, and it is still commonplace that Iranian EFL teachers focus almost exclusively on syntax, grammatical accuracy and punctuation to evaluate their learners'/students' writing.

Bearing that in mind, this research seeks to identify prominent characteristics as well as deficiencies associated with the use of lexical devices in Iranian EFL students' writing. In addition, the upshot of possible relationship between writing quality and lexical devices can benefit material-designing and enhance teachers', students' and raters' awareness of the value of lexical devices.

This study can also pave the way for having a deeper look at the relationship between vocabulary and writing quality.

## **1.5 Definition of terms**

### **1.5.1 Lexical devices**

Lexical devices are also known as lexical features. They are words-based features. A number of typical lexical features are vocabulary richness, word usage, word length distribution, etc (Chen, 2009).

The lexical devices which this research has focused on are as follows: intensifiers, demonstratives, additives, particularizers, hedges, and conjuncts.

### **1.5.2 Expository Writing**

Expository writing is a type of writing that is used to give information, explain why and how, describe, and clarify a process (Sanchez, 2006).

### **1.5.3 Holistic Scoring**

Holistic scoring is a method of assessment which evaluates a piece of writing for its overall quality. The reader usually analyzes the work as a whole, while considering the elements of content, organization, word choice, structure, and convention.

## **1.5 Outline of the Thesis**

The study is organized in five chapters. Following the introduction, review of literature will be given in chapter two. The methodology used in the study as participants, materials, and procedures is described in chapter three. Report on the results obtained and data analysis is presented in chapter four. And finally, chapter five provides discussion of findings, conclusion, and some pedagogical implications.