

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL BACKGROUND  
KNOWLEDGE ON THE WRITING PERFORMANCE OF  
IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS**

BY:

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To:

**MY PARENTS FOR THEIR SELF- SACRIFICE**

**AND MY SISTER FOR HER HELP**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The effect of cultural background knowledge on the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners**

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Writing in a second / foreign language is influenced by one's language proficiency as well as the writer's background knowledge. Background knowledge includes cultural knowledge of the target society.

This thesis aimed at investigating the role of religious cultural knowledge of the target society, sex and proficiency level on Iranian EFL students' writing ability.

To this end, a proficiency test was administered to 120 English BA students. Based on their scores and according to ACTFL proficiency scale cited in Chastain (1988), the participants were divided into 3 groups, namely, Intermediate high, Intermediate and Intermediate low. From each level, ten students were chosen, thus forming three groups including sixteen male and fourteen female students.

Next, two knowledge tests on Resurrection and Easter in Persian were given to the students to measure their knowledge on these two topics.

In the next phase, two topics were given to the students to write an essay on each of them. One topic was about the Resurrection belief in Islam and the other one about Easter, the same belief in christianity. The two essays were blindly rated by two raters independently according to Jacobs et al. (1981) scoring scheme.

The data gathered on the knowledge tests were subjected to the statistical procedure of paired t-test. The results suggest that the students did better on the Resurrection knowledge test since it was culturally familiar to them.

The same procedure was applied to their composition scores on Resurrection and Easter. The results suggest that cultural background knowledge of the students helps them write better as they did better on the culturally familiar topic.

The results of the application of multiple regression Enter method to the composition scores showed that proficiency level was influential in writing in the first essay but not in the second one and sex didn't have any effect on writing in either of the two topics.

The results of the application of factorial Anova showed no significant interaction between the above factors with regard to participants' writing on either of the two topics.

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# ***CHAPTER ONE***

## ***INTRODUCTION***

### **1.1. Preliminaries**

Writing is a very important and useful language skill which plays a crucial role in today's world. While writing, one is carrying out a kind of information processing. In fact, according to Chastain (1988), writing is a process of encoding messages or pairing meaning with letters of alphabet.

Writing is also an active process in the sense that when a person writes on a topic, he or she uses his or her prior knowledge (both linguistic and world knowledge) and language proficiency including knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and writing mechanics. What is composed is the result of the interaction of this background knowledge and linguistic proficiency. Therefore, in order for the writers to communicate their ideas and fulfil their goals in a second language, they need to possess background knowledge of the topic about which they are going to write. This background knowledge includes cultural knowledge of the target society as well.

As a consequence of using background knowledge, second language writers need to possess cultural background knowledge of the target society if they want to communicate appropriately when writing in that language.

Rivers (1968) stated that language and culture are inseparable. Language has its roots in culture. She maintained that language is used to transfer meaning and meaning is determined by culture. Therefore,

in order to have full comprehension of any type of second language behavior, one should be familiar with the cultural roots of the words and expressions used.

Thus, cultural knowledge of a language plays a crucial role in learning and communicating in that language. Rivers (1968) claimed that lack of cultural knowledge of a foreign language prevents learners of that language to communicate properly with the speakers of that language, that is, it prevents them to receive (comprehend) and send (produce) messages in that language effectively.

Rivers (1968) believed that learning another language would pave the way for gaining access to a new literature, history, philosophy and religion, and the new culture. Familiarity with the target culture is, therefore, part of learning a foreign language.

## **1.2. Objectives of the study**

The present study intended to clarify the need for cultural knowledge and its role in the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners. That is, this study tried to find out the relationship between the degree of cultural knowledge of an English society and the EFL students' ability to write well on a culture-bound topic.

This study aimed at shedding more light on the role played by cultural schemata in second language writing performance by Iranian EFL students who were proficient writers in their native language.

The main objective of this study was to find out if Iranian EFL students' cultural background knowledge had any effect on their writing performance on a culture-bound topic.

The second objective of this study was to see if the proficiency level and sex of the participants had any effects on their writing performance on the culturally familiar and unfamiliar topics.

In particular, this study intended to test the following null hypotheses:

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant difference between Iranian college students' writing performance on culturally familiar and unfamiliar topics.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant difference between different levels of students' proficiency and their writing performance on familiar and unfamiliar topics.

**H<sub>03</sub>:** There is no significant difference between students' sex and their writing performance on familiar and unfamiliar topics.

The study also intended to find out if there was any interaction between different variables of the study and students' performance on familiar and unfamiliar topics.

### **1.3. Significance of the study**

According to Terrell (1977 cited in Chastain, 1988), the best way of learning a second language is learning it naturally so that learners can communicate properly in that language.

This study is going to prove the role of cultural background knowledge of the target society in writing in a second language. Therefore, its findings can be useful for teachers and all those who play a role in language education.

These findings can make the teachers, publishers and curriculum developers more aware of the role of cultural background knowledge in learning and communicating in a second language. They can motivate curriculum developers and publishers to include culturally rich materials in the syllabus and familiarize the teachers with the techniques of presenting a foreign culture in class and teachers to teach aspects of the target culture to the students. This leads to more natural language acquisition and hence more successful communication.

#### **1.4. Organization of the study**

This study is organized into a thesis with the following chapters:

**1. Introduction:** In this chapter, the importance of the writing skill, the role of background knowledge and cultural background knowledge in the process of writing, the importance of culture and cultural understanding in the whole process of learning and communicating in a second language and the relationship between culture and language are discussed in the preliminaries section. In addition to the preliminaries section, this chapter also contains sections dealing with the objectives, the significance and the design of the study.

**2. A review of the related literature:** In this chapter, some ideas and empirical studies related to the topic of the study are presented according to a chronological order and discussed.

**3. Methods:** In this chapter, some information about the participants, the way data required for the research would be collected and analyzed and also reliability and validity indices are presented.

**4. Results and Discussion:** In this chapter, the collected data are subjected to statistical analyses, the results obtained are presented in tabular form, the factors influential in obtaining them are discussed, comparisons are made between the findings of the present study and those obtained in other studies presented in the literature review section to see whether they are the same or different and some new aspects of this study are introduced.

**5. Summary and Conclusions:** In this chapter, first a summary of the whole thesis is given. Next, the results reported in Chapter Four are concluded with respect to the null and positive directional hypotheses of the study serving as guidelines. After that, some pedagogical implications and recommendations for teachers, publishers, curriculum developers and writers are presented and finally some suggestions for further research in this area of study are offered.

# ***CHAPTER TWO***

## ***Review of the Related Literature***

### **2.0. Introduction**

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part presents some views on the relationship between culture and language, a definition of culture, culture and cultural background knowledge and its influence in writing performance.

The second part reviews some observations and studies carried out on the effect of culture and cultural background knowledge on writing in general and writing in a second language, in particular. Also, the factors which affect writing performance and hence deserve attention on the part of teachers, students and curriculum developers are presented in this part.

### **2.1. Theoretical perspectives**

Wierzbicka (forthcoming) claimed that a specific set of cultural norms exists in every society and these norms can be expressed in some cultural writings. He also believed that cultural writings which are about ideas, expectations, thoughts, assumptions and norms are not inevitably conscious.

In other words, culture is related to mind (according to Hall 1976 cited in Wierzbicka, forthcoming). A writer's culture can appear in his scripts unconsciously. If we accept that "people from different cultural backgrounds communicate differently" (Berlo, 1960: 49), we can assume that "social and cultural systems partly determine the word choices which people make, the purposes they have for

communicating, and the meanings they attach to certain words.” (Berlo, 1960: 49).

Chastain (1988) stated that culture is divided into two types: one type refers to the system of beliefs, values, the way people live, their likes and dislikes. This is called small c culture. The other type refers to the literature, history, contributions, and great men of a society. This is called large c culture.

Chastain (1988) also believed that culture and language are interdependent so meaning is expressed through language and language is under the influence of culture. He also declared: “The writer’s goal is to activate background and linguistic knowledge to create meaning. Now the reader’s task is to activate background and linguistic knowledge to create the writer’s intended meaning” (P.222).

Hoskin (1993) declared that the invisible technologies of learning, not the visible technologies of writing, play a constitutive role in the power of writing. Invisible technologies must be at the center of efforts to understand how the culture of the logos has been disseminated within selves and across societies. So he recommended a move from attention to the mechanics of writing and teaching form to teaching content, giving priority to culture and background knowledge.

Purcell (1995) noted the difficulty of teaching writing without indoctrinating the students in a particular world view or culture and also the difficulty of assessing the writings of ESL students by the same standards used for native speakers.