

***IN HIS NAME***



**SHEIKHBAHAE UNIVERSITY**

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**WRITING PROBLEMS OF IRANIAN  
POSTGRADUATE EFL LEARNERS IN THEIR  
M.A. THESIS PROPOSALS**

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

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.

*Dedicated to my beloved parents*

*For all of their support*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although Iranian EFL learners pass different courses in writing at university and are expected to be able to express their ideas in various forms of writing, their texts are different from standard academic texts. In fact, certain types of writing problems can be observed even in Iranian postgraduate EFL learners' thesis proposals. Considering the writing problems of M.A. students, the current study intended to investigate the types and frequency of problems that Iranian EFL postgraduate learners had in their written thesis proposals. Moreover, the learners' attitudes and opinions toward their problems in writing their thesis proposals were compared with the real problems observed in their proposals. To this end, 32 thesis proposals written by EFL postgraduate students studying TEFL and Translation at Sheikhabaee University of Isfahan, Iran, were carefully examined to identify and classify various types of problems occurred in proposals. To compare the findings of students' writing problems with their perceptions about their problems, a questionnaire was sent to students' e-mail addresses whose less open-ended questions were generally based on the items presented by Chun Yeh (2009). Subsequently, their responses were analyzed based on Dornyei's (2003) view about analyzing qualitative data and then were compared with their real problems. The findings revealed that discorsal problems followed by linguistic and stylistic ones were the highest frequent problems. The analysis of the questionnaires also indicated that EFL postgraduate learners had mostly a negative attitude towards proposal writing, and they believed that discorsal problems were the most frequent ones. Therefore, there was much consistency between their ideas and the real problems they had in their proposals. Finally, the findings of this study offered some pedagogical implications for English language teachers, EFL learners, and material designers.

Key words: thesis proposal, writing problems, discourse in writing

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Students participate in writing classes with the expectation of becoming more proficient writers in English language and want to produce error-free texts (Hashemi, 2013). Despite the fact that EFL learners pass different courses in writing at university and are expected to express their thoughts in various forms of writing, their texts are different from standard pieces of writing produced in academic genre. Silva (1993) notes that “L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically and linguistically different in important ways from L1 writing” (p. 669). Therefore, many EFL learners believe that writing is the most challenging skill among other skills, i.e. speaking, listening, and reading (Fallahzadeh & Shokrpour, 2007).

This difficulty may be due to the fact that written discourse is always required to be more accurate, appropriate, explicit, and effective than spoken discourse since it needs a higher level of productive language control than speaking (Cai, 2011). Indeed, writing is a multidimensional communicative process involving “the generation, analysis, and synthesis of ideas; the organization of discourse; the control of sentence structure; the vocabulary, spelling, and mechanics” (Williams, 2007, p. 12). Thus, there are diverse areas in writing where EFL learners may commit errors such as content, linguistic structures, style, punctuation, and so forth. However, EFL students' writing tasks, even when they are without grammatical errors, would still seem very strange and anomalous to read, especially for native speakers of English (Cai, 2011).

One of the factors which can make Iranian postgraduate EFL learners' writing different from standard academic texts is related to the way EFL learners utilize

cohesive markers or the way they employ coherence in their texts. In fact, producing a coherent piece of writing is an enormous challenge for ESL students (Nunan, 1999). The concept of coherence is defined as “the organization of discourse with all elements present and fitting together logically” (Hinkel, 2004). In addition, in written texts coherence refers to the way a text makes sense to the readers through the organization of its content and the relevance and clarity of its concepts and ideas (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Cohesion is considered as an important property of making texture in writing and refers to the relation of meaning existing within the text which can be manifested through cohesive devices that, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976), have been classified into reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Among these, reference, substitution, and ellipsis are grammatical, i.e., they are expressed through grammar, while lexical cohesion is considered semantic since it is presented through lexis; however, conjunction is in borderline, i.e. lexicogrammatical (as cited in Danaee & Sadeghi, 2012).

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

As teaching experience of most Iranian EFL teachers indicates, a common problem of Persian students while writing English academic texts is that they just put simple sentences with similar contents together. They also tend to transfer their Persian thoughts and opinions to English writing via the Persian writing strategies. EFL learners lean to use the same word repeatedly among the whole text due to having a small vocabulary domain (Cai, 2011). In fact, they do not really care whether those sentences are connected together or whether their written text is a coherent one.

As a matter of fact, writing contains different forms and genres (Williams, 2012), such as stories, book reviews, editorials, essays, fables, letters, magazines, articles, pamphlets, etc. Indeed, each genre or form of writing has its own rules, i.e. the form a letter takes is different from the form a short story takes (Williams, 2012). For that reason, a writer should be able to choose his intention, situation, potential reader and employ his own specific style (Yu, 2012). A very significant form of writing about which postgraduate learners must have adequate knowledge is their *thesis proposal*. Consequently, writing an M.A. thesis proposal, which is similar to an article, has its own specific rules, steps, and organizations.

Due to the fact that writing a proposal normally takes time and requires EFL postgraduates to write about their oncoming thesis concisely and precisely, it is a crucially important issue for them to deliver at least a well-formed grammatical piece of writing to their supervisors. However, their problems in academic genre of writing at this level are beyond grammatical problems and are more related to discursal ones. According to Hyland (2008), syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy are not the only features of good writing. Furthermore, most students can write accurate sentences and yet are not able to produce appropriate written texts (Hyland, 2008).

An important issue, in this relation, is that although Iranian EFL students' writing tasks at postgraduate level may be correct grammatically, the above-mentioned problems are also visible in their written proposals. In fact, most of their problems are beyond the sentential level and have their stems in discursal problems. One reason may be the lack or wrong use of cohesive ties, among which are *substitution and ellipsis* as the two linguistic mechanisms, which help specific linguistic structures to be expressed more economically, at the same time maintaining their clarity and comprehensiveness (Vujevic, 2012).

Another significant concern is related to the impacts of EFL learners' perceptions and beliefs about their writing problems on their writing products. As Graham (2006) states, EFL learners' beliefs and attitudes guide their choices, efforts, and persistence. Therefore, Iranian EFL postgraduate learners' beliefs about their difficulties in writing their proposals also influence the quality of their M.A. thesis proposals.

Considering the inadequacy of Iranian EFL M.A. students in writing their thesis proposals, as a specific writing genre, the current study intends to investigate the types and frequency of different problems that Iranian postgraduate EFL learners encounter in writing their proposals; meanwhile, the learners' attitudes and opinions toward the most difficult parts and their problems in writing their thesis proposals are compared with the real problems found in their written proposals.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The present study aims to address the following questions:

1. What types of writing problems do Iranian EFL postgraduate learners have in their thesis proposals?
2. To what extent do the viewpoints of Iranian EFL postgraduate learners about their problems in writing their proposals match the real problems found in their proposals?

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Since the present study intends to specify the problems of EFL postgraduate students in their written proposals, its findings can be insightful for pedagogical issues in educational settings. Generally speaking, Iranian EFL learners at postgraduate level are not provided with any particular course as *proposal writing* to teach them how to produce a well-organized thesis proposal. Therefore, this study can give insights to

the university professors to use the findings of this study in different writing classes as well as to teach EFL learners what to write and how to write a thesis proposal in these classes.

As Hyland (2008) notes, grammatical accuracy may not be the best measure of good writing. Therefore, few L2 writing instructors now view writing only as surface linguistic forms, and most teachers not only include formal elements in their courses, but also look beyond linguistic structures in order to ensure that students know how to apply a grammatically correct text for particular purposes and contexts (Hyland, 2008). Therefore, the results of this study will inform EFL instructors of the common discursal, grammatical, and stylistic problems that Iranian EFL postgraduate learners face in their proposals; in fact, the findings can help the instructors to teach their students how to avoid such problems when writing their proposals. Moreover, the students can be familiar with different sections, stages, and processes involved in writing a good proposal.

It is quite obvious that planning a new course requires designing appropriate materials like a book to present sufficient information about the ways and characteristics of writing an M.A. proposal. Thus, the findings of this study will also shed some light on developing particular materials which are beneficial to teach EFL learners how to write well-formed and acceptable proposals.

Besides, many Iranian EFL students have serious areas of difficulty in both language skills and writing skills; hence, there are very few writing courses designed for the Iranian university students to help such learners write their articles, proposals, and other notes to an acceptable standard (Fallahzadeh & Shokrpour, 2007). Therefore, the findings of the current research on the Iranian EFL postgraduate



learners' problems in their written thesis proposals will help EFL M.A. students notice their serious problems in this regard and assist professors not only to recognize these problems but also to inform their students to avoid such problems in the process of writing their theses; thus, the students can write their ongoing theses with a higher amount of awareness to make cohesion and coherence in texts. Accordingly, they will be able to create a more native-like text through an appropriate use of cohesive devices.

What is more, students' beliefs are considerable since they are 'value-related' (Wenden, 1999). According to Paris and Winograd (1990), EFL learners' beliefs have a strong impact on their learning behaviors. In fact, investigation of Iranian EFL M.A. students' beliefs and attitudes toward their problems in writing their thesis proposals is significant due to the fact that EFL learners will be aware of what they perceive to be difficult in the process of proposal writing rather than what they know as a fact. Additionally, EFL teachers are responsible to be aware of their students' perceptions of what helps them progress in academic writing and somehow to incorporate these perceptions and beliefs into their teaching methods in writing classes.

## **1.5 Definition of Key Terms**

### **1.5.1 Thesis Proposal**

Thesis proposal is a detailed summary of the thesis that informs the committee on whether the subject and the topic are appropriate to the field of study. The most important factors of each thesis proposal are the topic, the thesis statement, the main question, the introduction, Literature Review, Methodology and References. The goal of thesis proposal writing is to convince the committee that topic should be approved and it helps the student to write the whole dissertation (<http://www.bestessays.com>).

### **1.5.2 Writing Problems**

In the writing of a second or foreign language learner, the use of a linguistic item (e.g. a word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc.) in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning is considered as a writing problem (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

### **1.5.3 Discourse in Writing**

Discourse in writing refers to the use of words to exchange thoughts and ideas; it is defined as a long piece of writing about a subject (<http://www.merriam-webster.com>). As McCarthy (2005) notes, we usually expect the written texts to be "coherent, meaningful communications in which the words and/or sentences are linked to one another in a fashion that corresponds to conventional formulae, just as we do with speech; therefore discourse analysts are equally interested in the organization of written interaction" (p. 12).

## **1.6 Outline of the Thesis**

The present study is organized in five chapters:

In chapter one, Introduction, the general area of the study, the problem under investigation, significance of the study, research questions, and the definition of key terms will be presented as well. In chapter two, review of the related literature will be discussed. In chapter three, the methodology of the study including the materials and the procedures of data collection and data analysis will be indicated. In chapter four, findings of the research and consequently in chapter five, discussion and conclusion, implications of the study, limitations, and suggestions for further research will be presented.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Overview**

In this chapter, initially different ideas about writing and the complexity of academic writing for EFL learners will be discussed in Section 2.2. Then, writing a thesis proposal will be explained as a particular writing genre in Section 2.3. In Section 2.4, the process-oriented and product-oriented approaches to writing will be compared and contrasted. In Section 2.5, the term ‘texture’, and then in Section 2.6 the concept of ‘cohesion’ will be defined on the basis of previous researchers’ viewpoints. Afterwards, the differences between the two concepts of cohesion and coherence will be presented in Section 2.7, and the basic terminology for cohesive ties, with a focus on Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) view of cohesion, will be elaborated on, i.e., reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion in the following sections. Next, the findings of previous research on the quality of cohesion in writing will be discussed in Section 2.9. Finally, some concluding remarks regarding the related literature will be presented in Section 2.10.

### **2.2 Academic Writing**

Writing is a complex skill since learning to write, even in one’s native language, is not just a matter of “writing things down” (Hadley, 2003). Hadley (2003) believes that most people who have tried to put pen to paper in order to communicate ideas would agree that expressing oneself clearly in writing can be a slow and painful process; therefore, writing is more than the mere transcription of speech. According to Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (2004), good writing in any discipline is supposed to ‘make

difficult subjects easier for us to understand', suggesting that writers must have a deep understanding of the content about which they are writing in order to make it clear to readers (Beck, 2009).

Writing, in general, is not simply a matter of putting a series of simple words and sentences together in order to convey an idea or to be understandable for a group of readers. In fact, it is a difficult task which requires linguistic abilities as well as discursal knowledge as the students are expected to demonstrate a conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas (Myles, 2002).

Students studying English as a foreign Language, in their tertiary level of education, have to attend various writing classes in different semesters including writing 1 and 2, letter writing, paragraph writing, composition writing, essay writing (advanced writing), academic writing, etc. In all of these courses EFL Learners are expected to show both their linguistic and discursal abilities in writing in English as a foreign language. Therefore, academic writing necessitates EFL writers to demonstrate a variety of structural forms and to be able to use specific rhetorical structures or explicit cohesive ties; these sets of linguistic and discursal features have to serve different functions in academic genres (Ameli, 2011).

Grabe and Kaplan (1998) explain the nature of writing in terms of the rhetorical triangle including textual structure, cognitive processing, and social contexts. They believe that writing is a synthesis of cognitive, social, and textual factors. Thus, writing is described as an interaction between writer, reader, subject matter and text. Likewise, Beck (2009) considers a theoretical framework for learning the activity of writing in academic contexts comprising cognitive, textual and social dimensions. In her framework, the cognitive dimension involves the thought processes that lead to the production of written text including the retrieval of information from long-term