

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WRITING  
COMPETENCE, LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY  
AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN THE  
WRITING OF IRANIAN TEFL SOPHOMORES**

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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WRITING COMPETENCE, LANGUAGE  
PROFICIENCY AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN THE WRITING OF IRANIAN  
TEFL SOPHOMORES**

by

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### Symbols used in this study

1	>	bigger
2	<	smaller
3	=	equal
4	E	sum

### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

No.	Abbreviations	Full form
1	Adj.	Adjective
2	Adv.	adverb
3	Art.	Article
4	Aux.	Auxiliary
5	CA	Contrastive Analysis
6	Categ.	category
7	CF	Communicative Failure
8	CLA	Communicative language ability
9	EA	Error Analysis
10	EFL	English as a foreign language
11	Er.	Error
12	ESL	English as a second language
13	ETS	Educational Testing System
14	GB	Government/Binding Theory
15	GE	Grammatical Error
16	Grad.	Graduate
17	HLL	High-level learner
18	IELTS	International English Language Testing System
19	IL	Interlanguage
20	Inf.	Infinitive
21	L1	First Language/Mother tongue
22	L2	Second language
23	LAD	Language acquisition device
24	LLL	Low-level learner
25	Mis-ord.	Mis-order
26	Mis-sel.	Mis-selection
27	MLL	Mid-level learner
28	Mod.	modal
29	N=No.	Number
30	NEE	National Entrance Examination
31	Neg.	Negative, negation
32	NL	Native language

33	NNS	Near native speaker
34	No.	Number
35	NT	Negative transfer
36	Obj.	Object
37	Omit	Omission
38	Over-in.	Over-inclusion
39	Pl.	plural
40	Poss.	possessive
41	Pr.	Pronoun
42	Prep.	preposition
43	Rel.	Relative
44	SD	Standard deviation
45	SL	Second language
46	SLA	Second Language Acquisition
47	Spp.	Speech part, part of speech
48	SPSS	Statistical package for social science
49	Ss	subjects
50	St.	student
51	Subj.	subject
52	TESOL	Teaching English to speakers of other languages
53	TEFL	Teaching English as a foreign language
54	TL	Target language
55	TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign language
56	TW	Test of writing
57	U. Grad.	Under Graduate
58	UG	Universal Grammar

**HUBUNGAN ANTARA KEBOLEHAN MENULIS, KECEPAKAN BERBAHASA  
DAN KESALAHAN TATABAHASA DALAM PENULISAN PELAJAR TEFL  
TAHUN KEDUA DI UNIVERSITI IRAN**

**ABSTRAK**

Kajian yang mengkaji hubungan antara kompetensi penulisan, kemahiran bahasa dan kesalahan tatabahasa di penulisan dalam kalangan pelajar TEFL Iran tahun dua ini dilaksanakan dalam dua fasa. Dalam fasa pertama, kajian ini bertujuan: 1) menilai kompetensi penulisan dalam kalangan pelajar TEFL Iran tahun dua; 2) mengukur kemahiran bahasa mereka, dan 3) mengkaji hubungan antara kompetensi penulisan dan kemahiran bahasa serta sub-kemahiran termasuk pendengaran, pembacaan dan kompetensi tatabahasa. Fasa kedua adalah deskriptif dan satu analisis kesalahan tentang penulisan subjek dijalankan untuk mencapai objektif-objektif berikut: 1) mengenal pasti kategori kesalahan tatabahasa yang paling kerap dilakukan, 2) menetapkan susunan peringkat kesalahan, 3) mengkaji sama ada L1 (Bahasa Parsi) merupakan sumber kesalahan tatabahasa; 4) membuktikan kemungkinan gangguan kesalahan tatabahasa terhadap tujuan komunikasi dalam penulisan mereka.

Sampel kajian terdiri daripada 97 subjek yang dipilih secara rawak daripada populasi 140 orang pelajar TEFL Iran dalam tahun dua. Data terdiri daripada 97 buah karangan tentang topik yang diberikan serta keputusan ujian bertulis kemahiran bahasa TOEFL daripada semua subjek kajian.

Pendekatan kuantitatif digunakan untuk menganalisis data yang dikutip daripada fasa pertama kajian supaya pengukuran kompetensi penulisan, kemahiran bahasa dan korelasi antara variabel dapat ditentukan dengan sah menggunakan prosedur analitikal SPSS. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa pelajar TEFL Iran tahun dua bukan merupakan penulis yang kompeten (skor 65.8 daripada skor maksimum 88) mahupun mempunyai kemahiran berbahasa Inggeris yang baik (skor 428.7 daripada skor maksimum 533). Oleh itu, mereka berada di bawah paras standard Bahasa Inggeris yang diperlukan bagi pelajar TEFL Iran di universiti. Terdapat korelasi yang signifikan antara kompetensi penulisan dengan kemahiran bahasa subjek, antara kompetensi penulisan dengan sub-kemahiran bahasa termasuk

kemahiran mendengar, membaca dan kompetensi tatabahasa. Dalam sub-kemahiran bahasa, Korelasi yang paling kuat adalah antara kompetensi penulisan dengan kompetensi tatabahasa iaitu dengan koefisien 0.721 pada tahap signifikan 0.01.

Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan dalam fasa kedua kajian sebagai analisis kesalahan bagi karangan bertulis subjek. Data analisis menunjukkan kesalahan yang terhasil daripada tersalah pilih berada paling atas dan membentuk 41.9% daripada jumlah kesalahan tatabahasa dalam penulisan pelajar TEFL Iran tahun dua.. *Over-inclusion* merupakan sebab utama kesalahan antara bahasa dalam tatabahasa. Keputusan juga menunjukkan antara modifikasi yang berbeza, dalam kesilapan membuat pilihan; kategori ‘katakerja’ dan ‘*part of speech*’; dalam *over-inclusion*, kategori *proposisi*; dan dalam *omission*, kategori “*Article*”, “*-s Plural*”, “*-s Singular*”, “*Auxiliary*”, adalah antara kesalahan tatabahasa yang paling umum dalam penulisan pelajar-pelajar Iran. Keputusan kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa kesalahan tatabahasa yang umum menjadi gangguan terhadap tujuan komunikasi di mana kesilapan membuat pilihan sebagai punca utama kegagalan komunikasi dalam penulisan mereka. Kebanyakan kesalahan tatabahasa yang berpunca dari L1 mengakibatkan kegagalan komunikasi (iaitu 66%). Walau bagaimanapun, kebanyakan kesilapan adalah inter-bahasa i.e. disebabkan oleh L2 dan bukannya kesilapan antara bahasa walaupun didapati bahawa tahap kemahiran bahasa pelajar mempunyai hubungan langsung dengan kejadian antara bahasa dan kegagalan komunikasi.

Kesimpulannya, kajian menunjukkan bahawa perhatian yang serius terhadap pedagogi perlu diberikan dalam pengajaran tatabahasa untuk meningkatkan kompetensi penulisan pelajar TEFL Iran tahun dua. Hasil kajian dapat membantu pereka silibus dengan pilihan, penggredan, dan turutan material dalam pengajaran item-item tatabahasa. Di samping itu, pihak-pihak yang terlibat dalam pembinaan ujian juga dapat memanfaatkan kesalahan tatabahasa yang paling kerap dilakukan dalam membangunkan item-item ujian.

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**ABSTRACT**

This study which investigated the relationship between writing competence, language proficiency and grammatical errors in the writing of Iranian TEFL sophomores was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, the objectives were to: 1) assess the writing competence of the Iranian TEFL sophomores; 2) measure their language proficiency, and 3) examine the relationship between their writing competence and language proficiency and its sub-skills including listening, reading, and grammatical competence. The second phase was mainly descriptive and an error analysis of the subjects' writing was done to achieve the following objectives: 1) find out the most frequently occurring categories of grammatical errors; 2) establish a rank order of these errors; 3) investigate if their L1 (Persian language) was the source of their grammatical errors; and 4) establish the probable interference of grammatical errors with communicative purposes of their writing.

The sample of this study consisted of 97 subjects who were randomly selected from the total population of 140 Iranian TEFL sophomores. The data consisted of 97 essays of a given topic and the results of a paper-based TOEFL test of language proficiency from all the subjects of the study.

A quantitative approach was used to analyze the data collected from the first phase of the study so that measures of writing competence, language proficiency and correlation between these variables could be established reliably through the SPSS analytical procedures. The findings show that Iranian TEFL sophomores are neither competent writers (the mean score being 65.8 out of a possible maximum score of 88) nor do they command a good proficiency of the English language (as the mean score was only 428.7 out of a possible maximum score of 533). As such, they generally fall short of international standards of English language proficiency required of Iranian TEFL university students. Significant



correlations were also found between the subjects' writing competence and their language proficiency, between their writing competence and the sub-skills of language proficiency including their listening, reading and grammatical competence (respectively). In sub-skills, the strongest correlation was found to be between their writing and grammatical competence with a coefficient of 0.721 at 0.01 level of significance.

A qualitative approach was employed for the second phase of the study as an error analysis of the subjects' written essays was carried out. The analysis of the data revealed that errors arising from mis-selection ranked highest, accounting for a total 42% of the total number of grammatical errors in the writing of Iranian TEFL sophomores. Over-inclusion was the major cause of inter-lingual grammatical errors. Also, it was found out that among different modifications, in mis-selection, the categories of "verb form" and "part of speech"; in over-inclusion, the category of 'preposition'; and in omission, the categories of "Article", "-s Plural", "-s Singular", "Auxiliary", were the most common grammatical errors in the writing of Iranian learners. The findings also indicated that their L1 was a source of grammatical errors and in general grammatical errors interfered with communicative purposes among which errors of mis-selection accounted for the major source of communicative failure in their writing and that the majority of grammatical errors which were rooted in their L1 (the Persian language) led to communicative failure (i.e. 66%). However, the overall majority of errors were intra-lingual, i.e., they were caused by the L2 itself rather than inter-lingual errors though it was also found that the level of language proficiency of learners directly related to the incidence of grammatical errors, inter-lingual errors, and communicative failure.

Conclusions drawn from the findings of this study imply that serious pedagogical considerations have to be given to the teaching of grammar to improve the writing competence of Iranian TEFL sophomores. The findings of this study can provide syllabus designers with the selection, gradation, and sequencing the material for teaching grammatical items. Also, test developers can take advantage of the most frequent grammatical errors for developing their test items.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Introduction

Although English is not the most widely spoken language in terms of native speakers, it is the most widely used language worldwide. The primacy of English in the global arena is attributable to the fact that it is the language through which international trade and diplomacy are conducted, scientific and technological breakthroughs are highlighted, news and information are disseminated, and as a communicative tool, English functions as a mediator between different socio-cultural and socio-economic paradigms (Crystal, 1997, 2000; Graddol, 1997). To surmise, its multi faceted role enables English to transcend cultural, social and economic barriers as the medium through which achievements and innovations in the arts, commerce and technology are highlighted.

Essentially language functions as the system of human communication which according to Richards, Platt and Platt (1992: 283), “consists of different units, such as morphemes, words, sentences, and utterances”. Crystal (1992: 212) on the other hand views language as, “an act of speaking or writing in a given situation.” This spoken or written form of language is referred to as, “parole or performance whereas the linguistic system underlying one’s use of speech or writing is referred to as competence”.

Of the four skills in English, writing is considered to be the most complex and difficult skill to master. This difficulty, according to Richards and Renandya (2002: 303),” lies not only in generating and organizing of ideas but also in translating these ideas into readable texts”.

The important role ascribed to writing is manifested in the status accorded to it in differing situations within the teaching and learning environment. For instance, writing serves as an important tool of assessing proficiency as attested by its inclusion in the form of writing tests in major examinations such as the TOEFL and IELTS writing sub-test. Beyond the realms of assessment, the skill of writing is an essential feature of materials development

(Cumming, 1997). In academia, the skill of writing is visible in conference presentations, journals and book publication through which the transmission of new ideas and concepts are effected.

As it is an important productive skill through which thoughts and ideas are disseminated, it is incumbent for instructors of writing in different educational environments to exploit the many different methods, approaches, and techniques that can serve to produce better writers. Though over the preceding decades, the process approach to teaching writing has greatly improved L1 and L2 composition pedagogy (a detailed deliberation of this is presented in chapter two) especially in terms of creativity and organization. However, these advances have been compromised through the generation of written products containing grammatical and lexical inaccuracies, which often frustrate and distract readers (James 1998: 155). Hence, grammatical accuracy in writing is an issue of concern especially among Iranian TEFL sophomores as they will be teachers of English themselves upon graduation.

A number of studies (Jonopolous, 1992; Santos, 1988; Lorenz and Met, 1988) affirm that a lack of grammatical accuracy in writing may impede progress. Therefore, it is imperative that learners be sensitized to such errors and be trained to apply the appropriate approaches to rectify them. Ferries (1994) proposes an editing approach in which learners need to edit their own work while Bates, Lane, and Lange (1993) advocate teaching students the discovery approach through which they will become independent and critical self-editors.

The lack of access to the complex cognitive processes that underpin writing has compelled most researchers to use alternative approaches to diagnose difficulties associated with language learning. One such approach is error analysis in which the output generated by learners is analyzed for errors through which the underlying causes of such errors are identified and the frequency of error is deemed proportional to the degree of learning difficulty. As defined by Ellis (2004: 296), the effort expended in “systematically collecting, analyzing and categorizing errors is known as error analysis (EA)”.

The reasons behind errors are manifold. Cooper (1977: 12) believes that, "language deviations are not random but systematic and reflect an implicit hypothesis to the nature of language being learned". Abbott (1980) opined that the reasons for making errors are many. Errors are very significant to Corder (1973: 27) as he felt that, "errors are indication of learning taking place". Moreover, he regarded "errors as a device a learner uses to learn through testing his hypothesis about the new system" (Corder, 1976: 56).

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

In order to gain a better understanding of the context of the study, it seems necessary to review briefly the following issues related to its background: a) the history of English language teaching in Iran, b) the system of education in Iran, c) the goals as well as the methodology of teaching English in Iran, and d) the function of writing in English language syllabuses in Iran.

According to Tajadini (2002), the fact that English became a subject in the school curriculum is a direct result of British and American imperialism. After the Second World War, the United States of America began to play a more active role in Iran as part of its international geo-political strategy. It extended its influence in Iran through organizations such as the US Technical Cooperative Mission. This influence continued until the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, the educational system of the country has undergone extensive changes.

The structure of the education system in Iran is basically divided into five cycles, namely, pre-school, primary, middle (or guidance), secondary and post-secondary. There are three outstanding characteristics in the Iranian education system. Firstly, elementary education is mandatory under the Iranian constitution. Secondly, due to an increasing number of applicants, admission to post-secondary institutions is through a nation-wide entrance examination and thus only the most qualified students gain admission into

universities. Finally, education is in the main free though private schools and universities authorized by law are allowed to charge tuition fees.

The responsibility for education has been mainly divided between two major ministries; 1) the Ministry of Education and Training, and 2) the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education (MCHE). The structure of the educational system under Ministry of Education and Training is divided into four components:

- 1) Pre-school Education cycle which is a one-year program for children five years old.
- 2) Primary Education cycle which covers grades 1-5 for children aged 6 to 11. At the end of grade 5, students sit for a nation-wide examination. Those who pass this exam are eligible to proceed to the next cycle.
- 3) Middle (Guidance) Cycle (Junior school) which covers grades 6 to 8 for children aged 11 to 13. At the end of the guidance cycle (Junior school), students take a regional examination under the supervision of provincial boards of education. Those who pass the examination are eligible to proceed to the next cycle i.e. the secondary cycle.
- 4) The Secondary Education cycle which is a three-year stage covers Grade 9 to Grade 11 and caters those aged between 14 and 16. Students are required to complete 96 units in order to be awarded the High School Diploma. The secondary graduates who are interested in post-secondary education must complete a one year preparatory program to be eligible to sit for the university entrance examination known as KONKUR. This nation-wide examination serves as the general National Entrance Examination (NEE) for admission to universities.

Based on their scores in the NEE (National Entrance Examination), students are allowed to pursue their courses of the study as undergraduates. For higher degrees of masters and doctoral levels, students are supposed to sit for other exams as well as pass interviews.

Teaching English in Iran formally starts in Junior-school. Two hours a week are allotted for English lessons in grade 1 while four hours are allotted for learners in grade 2 and grade 3. Students at high school and pre-university centers are exposed to the English language 3 hours a week. Based on the curriculum, students at this stage are normally expected to be able to understand and use English Language skills at the basic level of language proficiency.

Officially, the purpose of teaching English as a foreign language in Iran, as stated by the Council of Higher Education, is to make students familiar with the language so that they will be able to use it to fulfill academic needs and research requirements. Saffarzadeh (1985), who took the responsibility of revising and devising new materials for foreign language teaching in Iran after the Islamic Revolution, declared that the objectives of the program are to:

- 1) Use and take advantage of foreign scientific and technological sources so that the country could regain its own self-independence,
- 2) Foster cultural interaction with other nations so as to promote an understanding of the revolution (Saffarzadeh, 1985: 2).

Yarmohammadi (1995: 50) noted that “the ultimate goal of EFL for a student in Iran is to master a foreign language and to reach for proficiency in all four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing”.

The methodology of teaching English in Iran is theoretically based on the communicative approach. This approach is reflected in textbooks in the form of dialogues for speaking and listening comprehension, texts for reading comprehension, grammatical patterns for both oral and written tasks, and finally some writing tasks.

There is no specific focus on the skill of writing before the tertiary level. However, writing is implemented in the form of exercises at secondary level. At the university, for non-English majors, writing still doesn't have a special position other than being presented

in the form of exercises in their English textbooks emphasizing on filling in the blanks with special vocabulary related to their field of study – English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

However; writing is a compulsory task for English majors. English learners are inducted into writing classes via grammar courses preceding paragraph organization. Then, different components of the paragraph such as topic sentence, supporting sentences, and conclusion are introduced and practiced. Later, different modes of paragraph in terms of technical organizations including narration, description, explanation, and so on are practiced. Paragraph writing itself is a pre-requisite course for essay writing. The final course of writing teaches learners how to write their research papers.

## **1.2 Theoretical Background of the study**

The theoretical background of this study, as discussed below, has been derived from a search of theoretical models relevant to the study.

Having reviewed different interpretations of the relevant concepts found in this study such as language, linguistic competence, language proficiency, writing competence, grammatical competence, and grammatical errors, the researcher selected the most relevant and clear cut models for the study. Although most current descriptions of the language and its components are more comprehensive, and each one adds some complementary definition of the very complex and complicated issue of language, they are still, as Farhady, Jafarpur, and Birjandi (2006: 90) claim, “more ambiguous. There is no unanimity among scholars in the field for the definition of the same terms”.

As far as language model and language proficiency is concerned, the researcher has adopted the model proposed by Carroll (1961); on which modern tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS are mainly based. In his model, Carroll (1961) adds that “there are four chief kinds of skills ... in a language: understanding (listening), speaking, reading and writing.” Moreover; he goes on that for each skill, a learner needs to master three components: phonetics and phonology, the grammatical structure (including morphology and syntax), and the lexicon (vocabulary)” (Carroll, 1961: 3).

The role of grammar in writing is akin to the role of listening and speaking where the two are mutually synergistic. In other words, writing and grammar are inextricably intertwined as much of good writing derives its excellence from faultless grammar. This is emphasized by Frodesen and Eyring (2000: 23) who believe that, "a focus on form (grammar) in composition can help writers develop rich linguistic resources needed to express ideas effectively". Based on these views, the researcher deduced that second language writers need to pay attention to form in developing writing proficiency. Hence, the model of grammar in this study was adopted from the model of grammar as proposed by James (1998: 96), which is based on a descriptive view and "stands between the two extremes of scientific and pedagogic grammars".

In order to choose his writing model for this study, from what was reviewed in literature, the researcher chose to adopt a model of writing proposed by Raimes (1983: 6), not only for its relevance and clarity, but also for its skills coverage including higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as the low level skills of the mechanics of writing. Moreover; this model of writing provides the researcher with very common terms and concepts in the field which are unambiguous. Another advantage of this model is that it could be easily matched with the ESL composition profile proposed by Jacobs, Zinograf, Wormuth, Hartfiel and Hughey (1981: 30) which consists of approximately similar components for writing and writing assessment.

For the assessment of writing, it should be added that writing assessment like language assessment is a complex and rapidly evolving field that has seen significant changes in recent years. Due to the nature of this study, the researcher employed the ESL composition profile model as proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981: 30), which is a combination of both the holistic and analytic approaches of writing assessment.

The researcher adopted the CAH (Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis) method in this study because it has been attested by several researchers that a good proportion of errors are interference-based (Grauberg, 1971; George, 1972). Moreover; Richards (1979:18) mentions that interference from the mother tongue is clearly a major source of difficulty in second



language learning, and “contrastive analysis has proven to be a valuable tool in locating areas of interlanguage interference”. Selinker and Douglas (1989: 28) note that, “the more recent results confirm that CA is the best place to begin language transfer studies since structural congruence ... is most probably necessary though not sufficient, for most types of language transfer to occur”. Additionally, Yarmohammadi (2002: 27) adds that, “under the influence of the mother tongue the differences between L1 and L2 are transferred into the learner’s language – i.e. interlanguage – hence, interference is created and certain deviant structures are generated.”

The methodology of CA of this study has been adopted from Yarmohammadi (2002), who compared and contrasted the sentence structures of two languages- Persian and English and through contrastive analysis, showed the areas of deviation due to L1 interference. His methodology is based on a revised definition of CA (see chapter 3).

In this study, in order to answer some of the research questions, the researcher has also benefited from Error Analysis (EA), which is the study and analysis of the errors made by second or foreign language learner. According to Richards et al. (1992: 96), EA may be carried out in order to: “a) find out how well someone knows the language, b) find out how a person learns a language, and c) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning”. Although EA has been criticised, currently, Ellis (1994: 69) adds that “it is showing signs of making a come-back”. Also he approves that “both the qualitative approach, and the improved quantitative approach to error interpretations, has much to offer SLA” (Ellis, 1994: 70).

Moreover, in order to avoid any drawback, the researcher decided to classify errors by employing the descriptive profile of errors proposed by James (1998: 274). This taxonomy is a new version of Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982). In his taxonomy, James has taken advantage of Corder’s (1981: 23) algorithm for error analysis.

### **1.3 Rationale of the Study**

This section will discuss the rationale of this study. In attempting to do so the researcher will first focus on the salient features of writing. The knowledge base required for writing is both complex and variegated. According to Tribble (1996: 43), in order to write effectively, a writer requires a range of knowledge which can be summarized as:” a) content knowledge, b) context knowledge, c) language system knowledge, and d) writing process knowledge”.

Raimes (1983: 6), on the other hand, defines the process of writing as encompassing the following features ” : a) purpose, b) audience, c) the writer’s process, d) content, e) syntax, f) grammar, g) mechanics, h) organization, and i) word choice”.

Richards and Renandya (2002: 303) state that the skills involved in writing are highly complex and therefore L2 writers need to be proficient in a variety of skills in order to write effectively. In particular, they have to pay attention to the “higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as the lower level skills of spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on”. Also Richards and Renandya (2002) surmised that if their language proficiency were weak, L2 writers would encounter greater difficulty in writing.

Regarding the relationship between writing and other variables, Rivers (1981: 296) notes that “writing is dependent on progress in other skills”. Oller in Jacobs et al. (1981: 2) also expresses similar views regarding writing and its relationships with other skills. He believes that, “writing is not an isolated performance founded in some capacity cut off from the rest of human experience. Rather, writing skills have been shown to be fundamentally integrated with reading, speaking, and listening”. In a similar vein, Krashen’s “input hypothesis” (1981) stresses the close integration of writing with reading, and other skills. These views regarding the inextricable link between writing and the other language skills is echoed by Jacobs et al. (1981: 74) who note that since composing involves many of the same factors as general language proficiency; “a test of composition should correlate substantially with measures of overall English proficiency even though a composition requires a writing performance specifically”. In this regard, Cumming, Kantor, Baba,

Eouanzoui, Erdosy, and James (2005) reported important differences in the discourse characteristics of written responses that were related to proficiency levels. Greater writing proficiency was associated with longer responses, greater lexical sophistication, syntactic complexity, and grammatical accuracy. It can thus be surmised from these views that a symbiotic relationship exist between writing and the other language skills such as listening, reading and speaking as well as the various sub-skills such as phonetics and phonology, vocabulary, and grammar.

The role of grammar as an important variable, which can affect writing, has been espoused by several researchers. For instance, Frodesen and Eyring (2000: 233) emphasize that, "a focus on form in composition can help writers develop rich linguistic resources needed to express ideas effectively in addition to providing assistance in error correction". Such views regarding the role of grammar directed the researcher to examine the relationship between writing competence and grammatical competence amongst Iranian learners.

Apart from grammar, other language competencies such as reading can also have an impact on writing. Brown (2001: 347) explains the relationship between writing and reading and mentions that, "students learn to write in part by carefully observing what is already written". Similarly, Jay (2003: 131) notes that, "good writers are usually good readers and reading comprehension is positively correlated with writing ability". These observations about reading prompted the researcher to test the relationship between reading competence and writing among Iranian learners.

The content we need to use in writing usually comes from our background knowledge which we receive through different means be it in visual, aural, sensory or tactile forms. In this regard, the role of listening has been underscored by many researchers. Among them, Rivers (1981: 43) stated that, "we listen twice as much as we speak, four times as much as we read, and five times as much as we write". This view cued the researcher to examine the relationship between writing and listening competence amongst Iranian learners. While writing, learners may make errors that may sometimes even lead to communicative failure. Reid (1995) states that in learning a new language, learners may usually be influenced by the

structures of their first language (L1) which may give rise to errors due to false generalizations, transference, interference and other similar features. This view is concurred with Klein (1986) who notes that second language learners usually refer to their L1 schema when confronted with a SL learning difficulty. Other researchers, among them Selinker (1992) have postulated that errors are often systematic and reasonable output occurring in a period of 'interlanguage' and as such are positively developmental in nature. Within the Iranian context, a propensity for literal transfer of L1 structures into SL forms has generated written output that is essentially incomprehensible in nature due to negative transfer of mother tongue (Yarmohammadi, 2002). These findings served to spur the researcher to investigate whether the use of linguistic structures of Persian/Farsi affected Iranian learners' written output in English in terms of grammatical errors as well as determine the probable interference of grammatical errors with communicative purposes whilst writing in English.

All the above considerations provided the rationale for the researcher to investigate Iranian TEFL learners' grammatical errors in writing to not only detect and describe them linguistically, but also to understand the psycholinguistic reason for their occurrences as errors that learners make are a major element of what Corder (1981:35) calls "the feedback system of the process".

#### **1.4 Statement of the Problem**

As mentioned before, according to the university syllabus for TEFL, the ultimate goal of teaching English in Iran is to enable the learner to communicate effectively in both the oral as well as the written mode of the language (Yarmohammadi, 1995; Saffarzadeh, 1985). However, there is much evidence that the objectives of the syllabus are rarely attainable and Iranian students often have problems with the oral mode as well as with the written form the English language. There are a variety of factors contributing to this problem among Iranian TEFL sophomores.

Firstly, there is a distinct absence of mastery of both the macro and micro skills of writing. This is attested to Birjandi, Alavi and Salmani (2004) who note that Iranian learners

of English may have problems not only in Macro-skills (content, and organization), but also in Micro-skills (grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics) of writing. Further evidence of this deficiency in both the micro and macro skills have been gleaned via CA (Yarmohammadi, 2002; Ziahosseiny, 1994; Keshavarz, 2003; Fallahi, 1991; and Faghih, 1997).

The problem is further exacerbated by the dominant method of teaching language i.e., the Grammar-Translation Method (Hassani, 2003: 2) which is mainly grammar based and hence focuses only on teaching language through translation and neglects teaching other language skills such as listening, speaking and writing. Consequently, the translation mode is the predominant tool used in the writing process and this invariably contributes to the generation of poor quality written output containing grammatical errors and even communicative failures due to the inherent differences between the two languages (Yarmohammadi, 2002; Birjandi et al. 2004).

The researcher's own conventional wisdom gained from his teaching experience and professional dialog with his colleagues and TEFL experts over the last 25 years has provided insights that the product approach which dominates the writing teaching language scene has contributed to the deterioration in the quality of writing. Also, teachers' attitude towards correcting learners' writing is nothing but time consuming and unrewarding as learners usually repeat the same errors even after getting the feedback of error correction. All these problems may further compound the problem.

According to Hassani (2003: 4), the following problems exist in the Iranian language leaning environment:" a) unqualified teachers, b) old methods of teaching, c) differences in cultures, d) non-authentic materials, e) lack of audiovisual facilities, f) lazy pupils, g) the lack of native speakers, and h) the lack of satellite channels to watch English language programs".

It appears that all the problems cited above have affected the Iranian TEFL sophomores' English language proficiency which is defined by Richards et al. (1992: 204) as the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language. Hence, the relationship between writing and other

sub-skills of language proficiency such as listening and reading would show how the learning of each respective skill bears upon the others. Also, as grammatical competence is integral to language proficiency, the researcher is of the view that investigation into Iranian TEFL sophomores' grammatical errors in writing will provide useful insights into the learning difficulties which need to ultimately overcome through more effective pedagogical measures.

Sometimes the same grammatical errors may be found in the writing of students at different levels of language proficiency indicating fossilized errors (Selinker, 1972). Also it is possible to discover some grammatical errors pertaining to a specific level of language proficiency which may indicate the developmental errors of that level (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982). Many of the problems of Iranian TEFL learners in writing may be related to their lack of mastery of their grammatical competence (Yarmohammadi, 2002). However, many Iranian contrastive analysts attribute those problems to the differences between the two languages. Whatever the reason may be, it seemed essential to the researcher to find out the areas of difficulty of Iranian learners in grammar.

Moreover; some part of the writings of Iranian learners may appear to be a word for word translation of the Persian language structure into English. In the process of writing, learners may make errors rooted in their mother tongue (Yarmohammadi, 2002). Thus, the negative L1 interference with grammatical errors was another problem which was decided to be investigated in the Iranian context.

Also, it is possible for an Iranian learner to fail in his communicative purposes because of the grammatical errors. Therefore, the researcher decided to investigate the probable interference of grammatical errors with communicative purposes in the writing of Iranian learners in English.

In the next section, the study will outline its objectives based on the issues raised in this and in the preceding section.

## 1.5 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the first phase of the study are as follows:

1. To assess analytically the writing competence of Iranian TEFL sophomores, based on the ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981),
2. To measure their language proficiency through the TOEFL test, and
3. To examine the relationship between their writing competence and their language proficiency as well as testing that relationship with the sub-sections of proficiency including listening comprehension, reading comprehension and grammatical competence.

In the second phase of the study, based on the profile of errors proposed by James (1998), the researcher focused on the following objectives:

1. To identify, describe, classify, and make frequency counts of the learners' grammatical errors in order to compare and contrast categories of grammatical errors for each modification as well as for each level of language proficiency,
2. To find the order of relative frequency in the categories of grammatical errors for each modification as well as for each level of language proficiency in order to establish a hierarchy of frequency which may also suggest a hierarchy of learning difficulty for these grammatical categories?
3. To reconstruct plausible grammatical versions of the erroneous utterances in order to account for the number of times the native language served as the likely source of grammatical errors (inter-lingual errors in grammar), and
4. To determine whether the grammatical errors interfered with their communicative purposes.

Based on these objectives, a total of 7 research questions were constructed; 3 for phase I and 4 for phase II of the study respectively.

## **1.6 Research Questions (Phase I)**

- Q.1: What is the writing competence of Iranian TEFL sophomores based on the ESL Composition profile as proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981)?
- Q.2: What are the overall language proficiency levels of Iranian TEFL Sophomores in terms of listening, reading and grammatical competence as measured by TOEFL?
- Q.3: Is there any relationship between writing competence and language proficiency as well as the sub-skills of listening, reading, and grammatical competence of Iranian TEFL sophomores?

## **Research Questions (phase II)**

- Q.1: What are categories of grammatical errors in the writing of Iranian TEFL Sophomores in each modification i.e., omission, over-inclusion, mis-selection, mis-order as well as at each level of language proficiency namely low, mid, and high-level with reference to James' profile of error (1998)?
- Q.2: Is there any rank order (hierarchy) in terms of frequency counts indicating learning difficulty for each category of grammatical errors in the writing of Iranian TEFL Sophomores at each level of language proficiency namely low, mid, and high-level with reference to James' profile of error (1998)?
- Q.3: Is L1 (the Persian language) a source of grammatical errors in the writing of Iranian TEFL Sophomores through plausible reconstruction of erroneous utterances?
- Q.4: Do grammatical errors interfere with communicative purposes in the writing of Iranian TEFL sophomores?

## **1.7 Significance of the study**

Presently, there is a dearth of information pertaining to the actual status of writing competency, language proficiency, and grammatical errors of Iranian learners. By studying the students' performance in writing and proficiency tests, this study could reveal the actual



state of Iranian TEFL learners' level of English language proficiency and their writing competence, as well as establish the variables most correlated with writing.

Based on the standardized criteria of the TOEFL, this study aimed to find out language proficiency levels of Iranian TEFL sophomores. Moreover; the findings of this study can be used as a benchmark to compare Iranian TEFL learners' knowledge of English with other foreign language users in other contexts.

Thirdly, this study revealed the language skills and components that are most correlated with writing. This is a significant finding since the evidence of strong correlation between writing and other variables suggest that each of them can be a predictor for writing (Gay, Mills, and Airasion, 2003: 333). This means that the performance of the learner in other variables can be predicted through his performance in writing or vice versa.

This study has several pedagogical implications in its delineation of a rank order of frequency for the various categories of grammatical errors committed by Iranian TEFL sophomores. Apart from providing pedagogues and TEFL program planners with valuable information regarding Iranian TEFL learners' performance, such a hierarchy could provide syllabus designers with useful input that will allow them to select and sequence linguistic items for language learners at different levels of language proficiency. Besides this, the hierarchy can also serve to help teachers to better structure their lesson plans by providing them with data about the problem areas that affect their students. Additionally, test designers could utilise this hierarchy to draft tests items that are relevant and more accurate in assessing language proficiency amongst students.

In its pursuit of investigating second language acquisition in a foreign-learning setting, this study functions as a significant contributor of new insights especially with regard to the role of inter-lingual transfer in language acquisition. This fact has been attested to by Taylor (1975) and Jaszczolt (1995) who found that the early stages of language learning are characterized by inter-lingual transfer, but once learners have begun to acquire parts of the new system, more and more intra-lingual errors- generalization within the second language is manifested.

Finally, the significance of this research lay in its investigation of the psycholinguistic aspects of language learning in that it focussed upon elucidating a set of behaviours manifested by L2 learners that underpinned the language learning environment in Iran particularly at tertiary level.

It can be surmised from the above that the two-phased methodological approach adopted would yield different outcomes that would be of benefit to pedagogues, TEFL program planners and theorists alike.

### **1.8 Scope of the study**

This research was carried out in the north-eastern part of Iran, in two cities of Khorassan province namely, Mashhad in the centre, and Torbat-e-Heirareih 140 kilometres to the south. The population consisted of sophomore students from Islamic Azad University (IAU) who were undergoing a Teaching English as a foreign language course (TEFL). 140 male and female TEFL sophomores from the same ethnic group participated in a TOEFL test that was preceded by a writing test which asked students to write an essay on a given topic namely, ‘Why do you think people attend university?’ within a specific time frame of 30 minutes.

The written part of the instrument was designed to gauge the learners’ competence in writing while the TOEFL test was administered to measure their proficiency in English.

### **1.9 Research Methodology**

This study consisted of two phases namely a quantitative and a qualitative phase. The former was designed to measure writing competence and language proficiency of Iranian TEFL sophomores in terms of scores. Besides this, the quantitative phase also afforded the researcher the opportunity to test the relationship between writing competence and language proficiency. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of Brown (1995: 126) who opined that in order to investigate the nature and strength of functional relationships among the variables, the researcher should use correlational studies.

The sample size of the first phase of the study was decided based on the table proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). According to the table, for a population with 140 subjects, the sample size should be 97. Therefore, the data was collected from 97 randomly selected subjects out of 140.

The instruments used for data collection in the first phase of the study included a writing test and a proficiency test (TOEFL). The scoring of the essays was done out of 100 based on the ESL Composition profile- proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981: 30). This ESL composition profile comprised the following breakdowns: Content (30), Organization (20), Vocabulary (20), Language Use (25), and Mechanics (5) (See Appendix E). Subsequently, the relationship between writing competence and other variables such as: a) language proficiency, b) listening comprehension, c) reading comprehension, and d) grammatical competence were determined through the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software.

Similarly, for the second phase of the study which was qualitative and fully descriptive, data was collected from the same sample i.e., 97 subjects, and the same instruments i.e., a test of writing and the TOEFL test. However, to answer the research questions of the second phase, the researcher had to assign those 97 subjects into 3 different levels of language proficiency; namely high-level, mid-level, and low-level learners. Then he read all essays to identify the grammatically incorrect sentences before proceeding to classify, describe and quantify these errors. The methodology implemented in the second phase was based on the profile of errors proposed by James (1998: 274). A detailed elaboration of the methodology adopted for this study is provided in chapter 3.

### **1.10 Limitations of the study**

Due to its own particular features, this study has certain limitations: Firstly, this study was restricted to learners who were TEFL sophomores in order to control the internal validity of the research.

Secondly, this study was limited to the north-eastern part of Iran; and its findings cannot be generalized to apply to all Iranians, although the sample was representative of the population under the study due to its random nature.

Another limitation of this study was its one-time writing format and its administration as a test. This might have prompted learners to utilise avoidance strategy in their writing. However; to control this problem, the researcher announced that the result would not be publicly announced, but only privately to the learners themselves to let them get feedback on their performance and it had nothing to do with grading and that it was only for the sake of conducting a research.

Yet another limitation of this study was the fact that learners had no choice and had to write on a pre-assigned topic. This was done primarily for controlling the internal validity of the research.

### **1.11 Definition of terms**

#### **Avoidance strategy**

When speaking or writing a second language, a user will often try to avoid using difficult words or structures, and will use a simpler word or structure instead. For example, a student who is not sure of the use of the relative clause in English may avoid using it and use simple sentences instead. E.g.: 'that is my building. I live there' may be used instead of: 'That is the building where I live.' (Faerch and Kasper, 1983: 91)

#### **Authoritative reconstruction vs. plausible reconstruction**

The objective of EA is to describe the learner's linguistic system and to compare it with that of the target language. If the reconstruction is done by asking the learner to express his intentions in the L1, then it is an authoritative reconstruction. If the learner is not available for consultation, and the researcher has to rely on his own knowledge of the learner's system, his intentions, etc, then this is defined as plausible reconstruction (Corder, 1973: 274).

### **CA (contrastive analysis)**

This refers to the comparison of the linguistic systems of two languages, for example the sound system or the grammatical system. It was developed and practiced in the 1950s and 1960s, as an application of structural linguistics to language teaching. It is based on the following assumptions:

- a. the main difficulties in learning a new language are caused by interference from the first language,
- b. these difficulties can be predicted by CA, and
- c. teaching materials can make use of CA to reduce the effect of interference (Richards et al. 1992: 83).

### **Categories of grammatical errors**

They are features of grammar which are not used correctly from the view point of standard usage and covering both syntax and morphology. The following are the definitions of the categories found in this study:

#### **1. Preposition**

It is a category which typically combines with a noun phrase to make a larger constituent, a prepositional phrase, which in turn typically occurs inside a verb phrase (Trask, 1993: 214).

#### **2. Verb form**

In this study based on the nature of grammatical errors of Iranian learners, verb form includes categories of verbs + infinitive (+to), bare infinitive (-to), or gerund, i.e., verb (+ ing).

#### **3. Article**

It is a determiner which lacks independent meaning but serves to indicate the degree of definiteness or specificity of the noun phrase in which it occurs, e.g., the English 'definite article' *the* and 'indefinite article' *a* and *an* (Trask, 1993: 21).

#### **4. Part of Speech**

In morphology and word formation, it refers to the formation of new words by adding to or deleting from other words or morphemes (Richards et al. 1992: 103).

#### **5. -S Plural**

It is a particular bound morph (a suffix) expressing an inflectional distinction which is added to the end of a word (noun). It is an indication of plural form (Trask, 1993: 142).

#### **6. -S singular**

It is a particular bound morph (a suffix) expressing an inflectional distinction which is added to the end of a verb when the subject of the sentence is third person singular (Trask, 1993: 142).

#### **7. Auxiliary**

Auxiliary is one of a small set of grammatical items having certain properties in common with verbs but also exhibiting a number of other distinct properties (Trask, 1993: 24). They are verbs such as will, can, may, etc. which are accompanied by a main verb.

#### **8. Subject**

Subject is the most prominent of the grammatical relations which a noun phrase may bear in a clause. Most typically, it exhibits a large number of grammatical, semantic and discourse properties (Trask, 1993: 266).

#### **9. Object**

It is a generic term for any noun phrase occupying an argument position other than subject (Trask, 1993: 193).

#### **10. Tense (Verb tense)**

Verb is one of the most important grammatical categories and one which is seemingly universal. In grammar, verbs are distinguished by the fact that each verb typically requires the presence in its sentence of a specified set of Noun Phrase (NP) argument. Verbs serve as the locus of marking for tense, and often also for aspect, mood and agreement in person and number with subjects (Trask, 1993: 297).

### **11. Relative Pronoun**

It is a pronoun which serves to link a relative clause to the noun phrase of which it forms a part, such as *which* in the example 'This is the book which I was telling you about' (Trask, 1993: 238).

### **12. Voice**

The grammatical category expressing the relationship between, on the one hand, the participant roles of the NP arguments of a verb and, on the other hand, the grammatical relations borne by those same NPs. In English, the most contrast is between active and passive constructions (Trask, 1993: 299).

### **13. Possessive Adjective**

It is a determiner which functions as the possessive form of a pronoun: *my, your, their* (Trask, 1993: 212).

### **14. Comparative Adjective**

It is a construction in which some entity is characterized as possessing some property to a greater or lesser degree than some other entity (Trask, 1993: 50).

### **15. -ed**

It is a particular bound morph (a suffix) expressing an inflectional distinction which is added to the end of a verb when the action involved indicates simple past tense (Trask, 1993: 142).

### **16. Adverb**

It is a grammatical adjunct of a verb and typically expresses such semantic notions as time, manner, place etc (Trask, 1993: 9).

### **17. Conjunctions**

A category which serves to construct coordinate structures such as, *and, or and but* (Trask, 1993: 56).

### **18. Demonstrative Adjective**

It is a determiner with a clear deictic function, such as *this or that* (Trask, 1993: 76).

### **Communicative purpose**

It is the result that the writer hopes to achieve in writing a text. This may be a general purpose such as 'to entertain' or may be very specific, for example to make sure that X amount of money is transferred from my bank account to a service provider's bank account by a particular date (Tribble, 1996: 158).

### **Communicative Failure**

In this study, this term is used to mean that the writer has not been able to convey his communicative purpose because in the process of writing s/he has made (a) grammatical error(s) leading to the failure in communication.

### **Communicative Competence**

It refers to the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom. Communicative competence includes:

- a. knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language,
- b. knowledge of conversational rules,
- c. knowing how to use and respond to different types of speech acts, and
- d. knowing how to use language appropriately (Richards et al. 1992: 65-6).

### **Grammatical competence**

It refers to the knowledge of a finite system of rules that enables an ideal language user in a homogenous speech community to generate and understand an infinite variety of sentences. Chomsky sought to describe the underlying grammatical system (competence), rather than what speakers say or understand someone else to say (performance) (Chomsky, 1965). In this study this term refers to the grammatical knowledge that learners show in the proficiency test.

### **Error**

This term refers to the use of a linguistic item (a word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc.) in a way a native speaker regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning. It happens due to the incomplete knowledge of the learner (Richards et al. 1992: 127).



## **Error Analysis**

The study and analysis of the ERRORS made by L2 learner is called EA, which is carried out in order to:

- a. identify strategies learners use in LL,
- b. try to identify the cause of learner errors, and
- c. obtain information on common difficulties in LL (Richards et al. 1992: 127).

## **Grammatical Errors**

They include errors of morphology, handling word structure such as singular –s, plural –s, -ed, and –ing, and errors of syntax, handling structures larger than the word, namely phrase, clause, and sentence (James, 1998: 154-6).

## **Interlanguage**

This term refers to the type of language produced by second/foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language. Since the language that the learner produces using these processes differ from both mother tongue and the target language, it is sometimes called an interlanguage, or is said to result from the learner's interlanguage system or approximative system (Richards et al. 1992: 186). Error analysis emphasizes "the significance of errors in learners' interlanguage system" (Brown 2001: 204). The term interlanguage, coined by Selinker in 1969 claims that learner languages are different from both the L1 and TL systems in one way or another while at the same time having features in common with both. Nemser (1971) referred to it as the Approximate System, and Corder (1967) as the Idiosyncratic Dialect or Transitional Competence. However; in this study this term is used to refer to Selinker's definition.

## **Interlingual / Transfer errors**

Those errors attributed to the native language (NL) are called interlingual/transfer errors. There are interlingual errors when the learner's L1 habits (patterns, systems or rules) interfere or prevent him/her, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language (Corder, 1971).