# THE EFFECTS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS ON THE WRITING PERFORMANCE OF IRANIAN TERTIARY LEARNERS

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by

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# The Effects of Socio-Cultural Factors and Socio-Economic Status on the Writing Performance of Iranian Tertiary Learners

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**EFL**    English as a Foreign Language

**ESL**    English as a Second Language

**ELT**    English Language Teaching

**ESP**     English for Specific Purpose

**FL**    Foreign Language

**IL**    International Language

**ELL**    English Language Literature

**ELT**    English Language Translation

**MKO**   More Knowledgeable Other

**SES**    Socio-Economic Status

**SL**    Second Language

**SPSS**   Statistical Package for Social Sciences

**TEFL**   Teaching English as a Foreign Language

**ZCD**    Zone of Current Development

**ZPD**    Zone of Proximal Development

# KESAN FAKTOR SOSIOBUDAYA DAN STATUS SOSIOEKONOMI TERHADAP PRESTASI PENULISAN PELAJAR IJAZAH PERTAMA IRAN

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji bagaimana faktor sosiobudaya dan status sosioekonomi memberi kesan terhadap prestasi penulisan pelajar ijazah pertama Iran yang mengikuti pengkhususan dalam terjemahan dan literatur bahasa Inggeris. Perlu dicatatkan bahawa faktor sosiobudaya dalam kajian ini mencakupi gender, penglibatan ibu bapa, penglibatan adik-beradik, maklum balas guru dan juga maklum balas rakan. Sementara itu, status sosioekonomi (SES) mencakupi pendidikan ibu bapa, pekerjaan ibu bapa dan pendapatan keluarga. Bagi memenuhi objektif kajian dan persoalan penyelidikan, suatu reka bentuk penyelidikan kaedah bercampur digunakan untuk mentriangulat kedua-dua data kualitatif dan kuantitatif. Penyelidik menggunakan pensampelan bukan-kebarangkalian (jenis bertujuan) di empat buah universiti, iaitu Shahid Bahonar University, Vali-e-Asr University, Isfahan University dan Shiraz University. Seramai 400 orang pelajar daripada keempat-empat universiti tersebut yang mengikuti pengkhususan dalam bidang terjemahan dan literatur bahasa Inggeris, terlibat sama dalam kajian ini secara sukarela. Bagi fasa kuantitatif, data diperoleh daripada tugasan penulisan dan soal selidik. Sebaliknya bagi fasa kualitatif, data dikumpul daripada temu bual separa struktur. Dapatan kajian gagal menunjukkan sebarang perkaitan yang signifikan di antara gender, pengibatan ibu bapa, penglibatan adik-beradik, maklum balas rakan dengan prestasi penulisan pelajar. Satu-satunya perkaitan positif yang ditemui adalah di antara maklum balas guru dan kelas SES rendah. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini menyediakan maklumat tentang kesan faktor sosiobudaya dan status sosioekonomi terhadap prestasi penulisan pelajar ijazah pertama Iran yang mengikuti

pengkhususan dalam bidang terjemahan dan literatur bahasa Inggeris. Dapatan kajian menyediakan suatu perspektif yang baik bagi guru penulisan bahasa Inggeris dan penggubal kurikulum tentang kepentingan kemahiran penulisan dalam proses pembelajaran bahasa. Kajian ini mencadangkan agar para guru menggunakan pelbagai strategi dalam kelas penulisan (cth: maklum balas). Di samping itu, dicadangkan bahawa para guru menggabungjalinkan aktiviti semakan secara berkumpulan dalam kelas penulisan untuk memotivasikan pelajar agar berkerjasama dengan rakan dalam kerja berkumpulan. Kajian ini juga mencadangkan bahawa para guru menggalakkan para ibu bapa untuk berkomunikasi dengan pihak sekolah dan guru berhubung dengan pembelajaran bahasa pelajar secara amnya, dan proses penulisan bahasa Inggeris secara khususnya. Akhir sekali, kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa penggubal kurikulum perlu memberi penekanan kepada  tugasan penulisan bahasa Inggeris dalam kurikulum pendidikan bermula daripada sekolah tinggi hingga universiti.

# THE EFECTS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS ON THE WRITING PERFORMANCE OF IRANIAN TERTIARY LEARNERS

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent to which socio-cultural factors and socioeconomic status affect the writing performance of Iranian undergraduates majoring in English language translation and English language literature. The sociocultural factors in the present study comprise gender, parents' and siblings' involvement and feedback from teachers and peer. The aspects of socioeconomic status taken into consideration in this study include parents' education and occupation and family income. In order to fulfill the objectives of the study and the nature of research questions, a mixed-methods research design was adopted to triangulate both the qualitative and the quantitative data. The researcher used non-probability sampling (purposive type) in four universities namely Shahid Bahonar University, Vali-e-Asr University, Isfahan University and Shiraz University. Four hundred participants from these universities majoring in English language translation and English language literature participated in the present study on a voluntary basis. For the quantitative phase, data was obtained from the writing task and the questionnaire while qualitative data, was collected from the semi-structured interviews. The findings of the present study did not reveal any significant relationship between gender, parents' involvement, sibling's involvement, peer feedback and participants' writing performance. The only positive relationship was found between the teacher's feedback and the low SES class. Overall, this study provided significant information about the effects of the socio-cultural factors and the socioeconomic status on the writing performance of Iranian undergraduates majoring in English language translation and English language

literature. The findings of the present study provide excellent ideas for English writing teachers and the curriculum developers as regards to the importance of the writing skill in the students' language learning process. This study suggests that teachers use different kinds of strategies in their writing class (e.g. feedback). In addition, it is recommended that teachers incorporate revision group activity in the writing class to motivate students to work with their peers in a group scenario. This study also posits the view that teachers should encourage parents to communicate with the school authorities and the teaching staff regarding students' language learning in general with a particular and pointed emphasis on the English writing process. Finally, the present study suggests that curriculum developers should place emphasis on the writing task in the English writing process within the framework of the educational curriculum from high school till university.

# CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTION

## 1.1     Introduction

With the increasingly important role of English in the world, the need for learning English language for the new generation has been emphasised time and again in many countries, including Iran (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). In Iran, the English language has a pivotal role in the educational system and students' success in their academic studies is connected to their proficiency in English language (Khajavi & Gordani, 2010). In Iran, English is regarded as a foreign language because of political, cultural and religious reasons (Golami, Rahman & Ghazadi, 2012). Although most countries around the world have shown their willingness to the some subjects such as: globalisation, internationalisation and competition among multi-nationals by supporting bilingual and multilingual educational systems, Iran has not shown any reaction to this issue because it wants to maintain its national unity and identity among the young generation in the schools (Farhady, Hezaveh & Hedayati, 2010).

Iran is more conservative when it comes to foreign language policy. The main reason for this is the politicisation of the language issue after the Islamic Revolution. There is a fear that the English language will be a threat to the Persian language and Islamic culture (Khubchandani, 2008). Moreover, Iran is a country with one official language, Persian (Navidinia, Mousavi, Shirazizadeh, 2009) and the English language is a foreign language that students study in schools (Mojtahedzadeh & Mojtahedzadeh, 2012).

In the first and second decades of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, little attention was given to the English language, but around the beginning of the 21th

century, the government started paying more attention to English as a language of globalisation, communication and technology. No major changes were made to the content and the aims of teaching English and English textbooks remained much the same. Moreover, the curriculum was not flexible during the three decades after the Iranian Revolution. English language, teachers' language proficiency, content knowledge and pedagogical skills needed to be upgraded to meet the requirements of the curriculum.

However, the last decade in particular has seen a remarkable increase in the number of Iranians learning English (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010). As Mojtahedzadeh and Mojtahedzadeh, (2012) and Khansir, Ahrami, and Hajivandi, (2013) have mentioned, English as an international language has become important in Iran in recent years as it is in many other developing countries. In this regard, in one of Iran's Islamic Leader's important speeches on the first day of New Year (Norooz), in 1385 Hs (Iranian calendar which refers to Solar Hijri calendar) (21 March, 2006), the need for Iranians to improve their English as it is an international language was highlighted (Naeini, 2011). However, Iran's level of English proficiency still is low compared to many countries in Asia (e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore). Up to this point in time, English language teaching in Iran has not improved and Iran will be lagging behind in the competitive world of business, education, science and technology if the teaching and learning of English is not improved (Mojtahedzadeh & Mojtahedzadeh, 2012).

One of the problems that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students face in their field of study (e.g. English for specific purpose) in the Iranian context is their inability to use English after graduating from university. This problem has

arisen because of their weaknesses in English proficiency which influence their academic success, especially in the writing skill which is necessary to convey specific knowledge (Hosseini, Taghizade, Zainol Abedin & Naseri, 2013). English for specific purpose (ESP) at university taught regarding students' field of study (e.g. the fields of accounting, management, physics etc.). The aim of ESP is to make students' familiar with English specific concepts and technical words that are related to their majors (Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011).

Learning English involves mastering of the four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing (Khansir et al., 2013). Among all the skills, writing is the most complex and difficult skill to master.

The writing skill is not naturally acquired but learned through practice. Writing is not just having the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but it calls for the knowledge of organisation in the development of ideas and information. Furthermore, writing requires in-depth thinking so cognitive processes to come to the fore. Writing is considered the most complex skill because it goes through different stages (i.e. prewriting, writing and editing) to reach its final product (Khansir et al., 2013).

According to Graham (2006), writing is a skill by which students can illustrate their knowledge and it provides a good mechanism for communication, self-reflection and self-expression. Today, writing can be considered an integral part of the language learning process in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms.

As Khansir et al. (2013) have put it, since the English language is a global language and it is spoken as a first language in many countries around the globe, Iranian students like other learners around the world need to learn English

language in general and English writing in particular to communicate with other people and make progress in their real life situations.

In Iran, a great deal of research has been conducted in this area, to throw more light on writing problems faced by students who have difficulties in grammar and linguistics (Abbasi & Karimnia, 2011; Baleghizadeh & Pashaii, 2010; Birjandi, Alavi, & Salmani, 2004; Damavand, 2012; Golshan & Karbalaei, 2009; Mahnam & Nejad Ansari, 2012; Soori, Kaffipour & Soury, 2011). However, researchers have been interested in exploring variables that contribute to the performance of learners in education (Farooq, Chaudhry, Shafiq & Berhanu, 2011).These variables exist inside and outside of the schools and they affect the quality of learners' performance. Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder (cited in Farooq et al., 2011, p.2) mentioned variables which affect the quality of learners' performance namely "*students' factors, family factors, school factors and peer factor"*. Moreover, Farooq et al. (2011) highlighted these variables as pertaining to age, gender, geographical belongings, ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic status (SES), language, religion. In another classification, Pandian (1997) mentioned background factors (e.g. gender), home factors (e.g. parents' and siblings' involvement) and school factors (e.g. teachers' feedback and peer feedback) as subcategories of sociocultural factors which affect students' academic performance.

In Iran, English is taught for three years in junior high school and three years in senior high school and one year in pre-university level. The aims of the courses offered to students are to help them read simple English texts, to improve their reading comprehension and to assist them in getting to grips with some new vocabulary and grammatical points suitable for the respective levels. After high

school, students who want to register for university courses, have to pass a pre-university program for one year. In the high school scenario, little attention is given to the writing and conversational skill and more emphasis is placed on the reading skill.

Moreover, English as the language of academic and scientific communication has a fundamental role in universities so it is included in the curriculum. In Iran the English language also plays a key role in graduate studies as it is compulsory for students to have a certificate in TOEFL or IELTS or other language exams if they are interested in getting PhD degrees. Also for those who want to be accepted as a faculty member in university, having a good command of English is a privilege (Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011).

The present study attempts to explore factors (e.g. socio-cultural factors & socio-economic status factors) which have an effect on the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners based on the fact that English is important as mentioned above.

## 1.2    The Background Information about Iran

This section will provide facts on Iran such as geographical location, population and its educational system for a better understanding of the context of this study.

### 1.2.1    The Geographical Location and the Population of Iran

Iran, officially known as Islamic Republic of Iran and formally known as Persia, is located in southwest Asia and borders with the Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea. It shares its northern borders with three Post-Soviet States,

namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Iran's western borders are with Turkey in the north and Iraq in the south and from the east it borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Iran is the sixteenth largest country in the world due to the area which is evaluated at nearly 636,363 square miles. According to the latest census directed by the index mundi in July 2013, the population of Iran was 79,853,900 (www.index mundi.com).

In Iran the majority of the people (98%) are Muslims. Sunni Muslims (2%) and Shi'ite Muslims (96%) are two very distinct groups in Iran (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006). Moreover, various ethnic groups live in different parts of Iran (e.g. Azerbaijani, Baluch, Ghashghai & Turkoman) which have different types of cultures, traditions and dress styles for men and women (ibid).

### 1.2.2   The Educational System in Iran

Since 1979, when the Islamic Republic of Iran replaced the previous monarchical regime of the Pahlavi Dynasty, the structure of the educational system in Iran was transformed several times. In the 1980s, the Islamic revolution in Iran led to a complete revision of the textbooks and curriculum in the educational system. The contents and subjects of textbooks such as geography, history, literature, civics, social science, religion and language were written based on Islamic doctrine and the new social, political and economic status of Iran (Azimi, 2007).

In the context of Islamic Republic of Iran, the educational system has been divided into various levels such as: pre-primary (Pish Dabestan) consisting of one year of education for five year olds. Primary school (Dabestan) starts at the age of 6 and lasts for a period of 5 years. Guidance school (Rahnamayi), is from the sixth

to the eighth grade (from the age 11 to 14), high school (Dabirestan) is three years (from the age 15 to 17), and pre- university (Pish Daneshgahi) is one year. The last four years (i.e. Dabirestan and Pish Daneshghahi) are divided between theoretical, vocational/technical and manual programmes and each has its own specialties.

Iran has both free public schools and private schools at all levels from elementary school until university. It must be noted that K-12 education in Iran is supervised by the Ministry of Education that is in charge of educational planning, financing, administration, curriculum and textbook development. Higher education is under supervision of the Ministry of Science and Technology (Arani, Kakia & Karimi, 2012). The academic year of the educational system in Iran begins in September and ends in June with two semesters and classes are held between Saturday and Thursday.

Moreover, it must be pointed that the grading system in Iran is based on a 0-20 point scale. If students get a grade under 10, it means that they have failed the course so they must score at least 10 to be promoted to the next level. The score from 0 to 20 is equivalent to the American A, B, C, D and F scales. In this scale A= 17-20, B=14-16.9, C= 12-13.9, D= 10-11.9 and F= below 10.13 (ibid). In order to register for courses in higher education (e.g. university & college), after passing pre university cycle, students are required to pass the nation-wide entrance examination (Konkoor) which is administered once a year. Based on this examination, the most qualified participants gain admission into prestigious universities (Fatemi, 2008). This means that only students who get high score in the Konkoor examination can gain admission into universities because the seats in Iran universities are limited. Currently, Iran has 54 state operated universities, and

42 state medical schools. In all these schools, except for private universities such as Islamic Azad University system, tuition fees, accommodation costs are mostly borne by the government. The universities themselves largely operate on state budgets (ibid).

In Iran, Farsi is the national language and the centralised system of education, the curriculum is uniform throughout the country. Even though teachers are required to follow a curriculum as predetermined by the Ministry of Education, they are encouraged to choose the most suitable instructional practices (Kakia, 2009).

All schools are managed within a single system with no differences observed in the programmes of these schools. University level studies in Iran are divided into four stages, namely associate's degree (Kardani) or bachelor's degree (Karshenasi), masters' degree (Karshenasi-Arshad) and doctoral degree. A student desiring an associate's degree must complete two years of study (67 to 72 credit units) and if a student wants to continue to the graduate level, he or she must complete at least 140 credit units and pass another competitive entrance examination. A master's degree requires two more years of the study (depending on the programme). Doctoral level depends on the programmes. For example, specialised degrees (or professional doctorates) are offered in the areas of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and veterinary medicine. These programmes require six years of full time study.

Because the system of education in Iran is highly centralised, textbooks which are the main medium of instruction across the country are centrally written and used in all schools. The students are required to study and internalise the contents of the textbooks in each course. Finally, testing and evaluation are

limited as they are based on the contents of textbooks. The assessment of educational activities is the teacher's responsibility in the school and it is based on the pupil's participation in learning activities such as completion, class questions and out of class activities. In Iran, exams are conducted in written, oral and hands-on ways based on the type and nature of the subject matter. Written exams are the most common of all the three methods. Feedback is given through a report card which is sent to the parents.

### 1.3     English Language Translation Degree Programme in Iran

The duration of the programme for students majoring in English language translation is four years which lead to the Bachelor of Arts degree in English language translation. The total number of units for students is 140. All units are mandatory for the students enrolled in this programme. In order to get the B.A degree in English language, students must pass all courses and obtain 140 units for graduation. It means that students must score at least 10 to pass and take next unit based on the English language translation syllabus (www.msrt.ir).

### 1.4     English Language Literature Degree Programme in Iran

The duration of the programme for students majoring in English language literature is four years and it leads to the Bachelor of Arts degree in English language literature. It has to be pointed out that the total number of units for students is 140. Moreover, all units are compulsory for students and they must score at least 10 to pass so that they can take the next unit based on the English language literature syllabus (www.msrt.ir).

It must be noted that English language major consists of four English language degree programs namely:

1- English Language Teaching,

2- English Language Translation,

3- English Language Literature and

4- Linguistics.

In the present study, students from 4 universities were chosen:

1- Sahid Bahonar University,

2- Vali-e-Asr University,

3- Isfahan University and

4- Shiraz University.

The reason for choosing these students is that they major in courses pertaining to the English language (e.g. English language translation and English language literature). Students take English as a major subject in three fields: translation, literature and the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL). Of special importance is the fact that the English Language Departments of these universities offer English writing courses. It is vital to note that students of these four universities have passed all English writing courses which have been offered by their English Language Department. Therefore, based on the objectives of the present study, these students (students from semester 5 to semester 8) have been selected to participate in the present research.

## 1.5    English Writing Courses in Iranian Universities

In the first semester of the first academic year at the universities in Iran, the Department of English Language Translation and English Language Literature

offer Grammar and Writing 1. Grammar and Writing 1 is a prerequisite for Grammar and Writing 2. The objectives of Grammar and Writing 1 are to enable students to:

1- Use some basic grammar structures.

2- Write a simple sentence.

3- Link two or three sentences through suitable conjunction words.

4- Arrange disordered sentences.

The course Grammar and Writing 2 is introduced to the students in the second semester of the first year. The objectives of this course are as follows:

1- To enable students to use some complex grammar structures.

2- To enable students to know how to write complex sentences.

3- To enable students to use punctuation in writing.

In the first semester of the second year, the Advanced Writing course is introduced to the students. The objectives of this course are as follows:

1- To enable students to identify topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence in a paragraph.

2- To enable students to organise idea by ensuring the coherence and cohesion of text.

3- To enable students to link two or more sentences by using conjunction words.

4- To help students to organise a paragraph.

Essay Writing is the last writing course in the undergraduate English language programme. This course is offered to the students in the second semester of the second year. The fundamental purposes of this course are to enable students to:

1- Consider and analysis some famous authors' essays.

2-    Focus on expository essay.

3-    Summarise some texts.

4-    Paraphrase some texts.

5-    Write introductory paragraph, body paragraph and concluding paragraph.

6-    Write at least five paragraphs.

7-    Write correct direct and indirect speech in an essay.

8-    Use reference in an essay (www.msrt.ir).


## 1.6  Statement of the Problem

It is challenging and time consuming for both ESL and EFL teachers and students at different levels to acquire the skill of writing in English. In the Iranian context, EFL students have been found to display inadequate competence in writing in English language (Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011; Jafari & Ansari, 2012; Zaree & Farvardin, 2009). In an earlier study, Birjandi, Alavi and Salmani (2004) stated that Iranian students face macro (grammar & vocabulary) and micro (content & organisation) skills problems while writing in English. Tahvildar and Emamjomeh Zade (2013) also reported that students experienced different levels of difficulty when dealing with the writing task.

The writing performance of EFL learners in Iran might be affected by different factors. In Iranian higher education context, many studies have been conducted to investigate the effect of various factors (e.g. linguistic variables and psychological variables) in improving students' writing performance (e.g. Birjandi, Alavi, & Salmani, 2004; Gholaminejad, Moinzadeh, Youhanaee, & Ghobadirad, 2013; Golshan & Karbalaei, 2009; Javadi, Jahandar, & Khodabandelou, 2012; Sadi & Othman, 2012). However, limited studies have

explored the effect of sociocultural factors and socioeconomic status factors on the writing performance of Iranian students in higher education. Therefore, further research should be conducted to identify the effects of these factors such as parental involvement and teacher feedback that could lead to surmounting the challenges faced by Iranian undergraduates in their writing skill and improving writing performance among students in institutions of higher learning.

Although the results of previous studies (e.g. Birjandi, Alavi, & Salmani, 2004; Gholaminejad, Moinzadeh, Youhanaee, & Ghobadirad, 2013; Golshan & Karbalaei, 2009; Javadi, Jahandar, & Khodabandelou, 2012; Sadi & Othman, 2012) showed positive effect on the area of English writing, students' writing performance has not shown good improvement based on their writing scores. In terms of students' writing scores, Hosseini, Taghizadeh, Azinol Abedin, and Naseri (2013) claim that the scores in essay writing did not reflect good improvement on the students' writing skill in Iran. It must be noted that after graduating from university, Iranian EFL students are still not able to write well in English at a satisfactory level. This is attributable to their weaknesses in English proficiency which influence their academic success, especially in writing skill which plays an essential part in conveying their knowledge (ibid).

At Iranian universities, students majoring in English language translation and English language literature are exposed to writing courses (e.g. Grammar and Writing 1, Grammar and Writing 2, Advanced Writing and Essay Writing) in their four academic years.  However, the undergraduates' writing performance is still at an unsatisfactory level based on their writing scores (Hosseini et. al., 2013).

There are many variables that contribute to the performance of learners in education such as: student's factors, family factors, school factors and peer factors

Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder (cited in Farooq et al. 2011, p.2). Pandian (1997) also considered sociocultural factors (e.g. gender, parents' involvement, siblings' involvement, teachers' feedback and peer feedback) and SES as fundamental factors which improve the students' academic performance.

In the context of gender, Yazdani and Samar (2010) claimed that gender is an important variable in almost all social phenomena including language, and it can affect language learning among students. In another research, Sayadian and Lashkarian (2010), considered extra English class as an effective way for the improvement of the reading, writing and speaking performance. However, according to them, many students could not attend additional paid English language lessons as their parents' financial background does not permit it. This shows that the socioeconomic status of the family in the students' education is of utmost importance.

Feedback from teachers, peers and parents' involvement also contributes toward the improvement of the writing performance. Therefore, these sociocultural factors are worth investigating. One strategy known to assist students in the class to improve their writing performance is feedback (Shahrani, 2013; Srichanyachon, 2012). Khajehpour and Ghazvini (2011) highlighted that parental involvement is a pivotal variable that positively affects the students' educational performance.

Indeed, it is necessary to gain deep insights into sociocultural and socioeconomic factors in order to understand their effects on the students' writing performance, especially Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, the present study attempts to explore the effects of sociocultural factors and socioeconomic status on the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.

## 1.7    Objectives of the Study

The present study attempts:

i. To examine the effects of the following sociocultural factors:

    a) Gender

    b) Parents' involvement

    c) Siblings' involvement

    d) Teachers' feedback

    e) Peer feedback

on the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.

ii. To examine the effects of the different levels of socioeconomic status on the
writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.


## 1.8    Research Questions

Proceeding from the forgoing objectives, the present study is conducted to
answer the following research questions.

1) What are the relationships between sociocultural factors and the writing
    performance of Iranian tertiary learners?

    a) What is the relationship between gender and the writing performance of
        Iranian tertiary learners?

    b) What is the relationship between parents' involvement and the writing
        performance of Iranian tertiary learners?

    c) What is the relationship between siblings' involvement and the writing
        performance of Iranian tertiary learners?

d) What is the relationship between teachers' feedback and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners?

e) What is the relationship between peer feedback and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners?

2) What are the relationships between different levels of socioeconomic status and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners?

## 1.9 Research Hypotheses

All the research questions mentioned above can be translated in terms of the following research hypotheses.

H1. There is positive relationship between gender and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.

H2. There is a positive relationship between parents' involvement and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.

H3. There is a positive relationship between siblings' involvement and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.

H4. There is a positive relationship between teachers' feedback and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.

H5. There is a positive relationship between peer feedback and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.

H6. There are significant positive relationships between different levels of SES and the writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners.

## 1.10    Significance of the Study

The present study attempts to address the extent to which sociocultural factors and socioeconomic status (SES) could influence the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners. This study is therefore, significant in terms of the contributions to both English writing theories and practical applications in English writing classrooms.

In terms of contributions to English writing theories, the findings of the present study cover literature gaps regarding the significant role of parents' and siblings' involvement in the students' writing performance at university level in the Iranian context thus providing in depth input for future researchers in this area.

In addition, this study will provide meaningful and significant insights regarding the ways of improving communications between parents and teachers as well as enhancing parents' effective involvement in order to improve the students' writing performance.

Moreover, in high school and guidance school, teachers and school administrators should conduct seminars to acquaint parents with creative activities (e.g. writing workshop). These would help parents who have knowledge of English writing but lack the ability to assist students in carrying out their writing homework. Indeed, when parents take part in workshops, the number of parents-teacher contacts and interactions increases. Furthermore, parents could be equipped with the necessary techniques to help students complete their writing homework through attending workshops. In writing workshops, the teacher can

supervise in depth discussions between parents and students about their writing tasks and learning processes.

In terms of practicality, the findings of this study will be advantageous to teachers, students, parents and policymakers. The independent variables in this study are gender, parents' involvement, siblings' involvement, teachers' feedback, peer feedback and SES. Therefore, this study may be beneficial to teachers in terms of the development of teaching strategies in writing classrooms (e.g. feedback). Moreover, it has been indicated that identifying the differences in learning between males and females assists teachers in incorporating different strategies into their writing classes. For example, if the results show that females outperform males, teachers in male schools should take into consideration the strategies used by teachers in an all girls' school. The reason is that before enrolling in university, boys and girls study in separate schools in Iran. Therefore, if the results indicate that strategy used by teachers (e.g. feedback) is the reason that females are better in writing English, teachers in male schools can consider using this strategy (e.g. feedback) in the writing class. In other words, the findings of this study can provide insights for teachers in male schools in motivating them to utilise different kinds of feedback or improve their instructional methods in their writing classes.

The results of this study will also make a significant contribution to the writing instruction. In fact, the results of this study will assist teachers in designing the curriculum and it can certainly help them to plan their lessons accordingly. For instance, if teachers' or peer feedback are found to be the important predictors of the students' writing performance, it is possible for teachers to highlight of their priorities which is the improvement of the students'

writing performance. They can use different kinds of feedback in the class or integrate peer feedback as a useful activity in English writing class. It must be stated that peer feedback may be appropriately used in order to encourage students to cooperate with their classmates and improve their writing performance.

Moreover, in high school and guidance school, teachers can provide writing instructional practices for students coming from families of different levels of SES classes by investigating the relationship between socioeconomic status and the students' writing performance. Socioeconomic status correlates positively with good parenting, which improves academic achievement (DeGarmo, Forgatch, & Martinez, 1999). According to Fenty (1997), knowing students and the challenges they are facing while studying improves the retention rates and the overall success of students. Therefore, by employing different writing strategies in the classrooms, students may be motivated to learn writing and improve their writing performance.

## 1.11    Delimitations of the Study

A delimitation of the study was the decision to include only Iranian undergraduates majoring in English language translation and English language literature who had passed all their English writing courses at the university. If they were in lower semester such as $1^{st}$ semester, $2^{nd}$ semester, $3^{rd}$ semester and $4^{th}$ semester, based on the objectives of the present study, their data were not included in the present study. The reason is that students in these semesters were studying the writing courses. As mentioned above, this study included those students who had passed all the English writing courses at the university.

## 1.12    Operational Definition of Terms

As terms may mean differently in different context, the following definitions are given as the words used as intended to be understood for the purpose of this study.

Parents'/Siblings' English Writing Knowledge: Knowledge in English refers to the facts, information and skills acquired via experience or education. In the present study, parents'/siblings' English writing knowledge means that parents and siblings are required to have information, understanding and writing skill acquired to assist students to complete their writing homework. Indeed, parents and siblings need to have knowledge about language use (e.g. grammar, vocabulary & mechanics) or writing convention (e.g. spelling, capitalisation, punctuation, grammar & paragraphing).
http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/knowledge.

Family Income: family income is defined as an income or financial value which is provided as a job salary, or other financial resources such as retirement salaries, investment, selling grounds, etc. (www.amar.org.ir). In the present study, whole family income was considered.

Feedback: Pollock (2011) stated that feedback is an assessment of improvement toward a goal, which seeks more information and instruction. The information" offers the assistance of an expert, guiding the learner through the 'zone of proximal development'" (p. 207). The expert can be more knowledgeable person namely, the teacher, peers, parents and siblings. The present study examines not

only the teachers' and peers' feedback, but also the parents' and sibling's involvement in the students' writing performance. This study considers how parents and siblings assist students and provide feedback in their writing homework vis-à-vis the parents' and siblings' involvement.

Gender: Gender is the social characteristics of human beings that describe how we identify ourselves as male or female and how others choose to interact with us in the world (Meyer, 2010).

Parents' Involvement: It refers to "parents' participation in their children's education to promote their academic and social success" (Fishel & Ramirez cited in Fan & Williams, 2010, p. 55). This study adopted Epstein's model and among all six types of Epstein's model, type number four, learning at home, which refers to the helping students with homework was used. So in the present study, parents' involvement refers to the parents' contribution (e.g. giving feedback) to students' writing performance.

Professional Jobs: It relates to a job that requires special education, training or skill (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/professional).

Semi-Professional Jobs: people who have semi-professional jobs are engaged in an activity for pay but they do not do all the time as a full-time occupation (http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/semi-professional).

Siblings' Involvement: Siblings in a family are brothers and sisters (Barron-Hauwaert, 2011). In the present study, siblings' involvement refers to siblings' assistance in the students' English writing performance.

Socioeconomic Status: It consists of three variables, namely parents' education, parents' occupation and family income (Jeynes, 2002).

Semi-Skilled Jobs: It is a job requiring limited skills. It means that semi-skilled work does not need advanced training or education.
(www.thefreedictionary.com/semiskilled).

Skilled Jobs: Skilled work has specific qualifications such as educational degree training and specialised ability (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/skilled).

Unemployed: The unemployed comprises all persons who during the last 7 days before the enumeration day did not work for at last one hour, were without employment and met the below conditions: 1) were actively looking for employment during the last 30 days before the enumeration day and had taken specific steps including registration at an employment agency, or answering newspaper advertisements, seeking of assistance of friends or relatives, etc. 2) were currently available for work that is, during a period of 7 day before the interview and 7 days after it, were ready to begin work (www.amar.org.ir).

Unskilled Job: It involves easy task which does not require special training or skill. Moreover, some unskilled jobs require physical strength.
(http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/unskilled).

Writing Performance: For the purpose of this study, students are asked to write an essay and two professional assessors rate students' writing task (i.e. essay writing) using a standard 6-point rubric scale (Adopted from Thompson, 2009) to evaluate each essay both academically and holistically (see appendix F). Rankings are from 6 (outstanding) to 0 based on evaluating focus, organisation, development, style and mechanics as the major components of the analytic criteria. Score of 6 is 'outstanding'. It demonstrates a high degree of proficiency in response to the assignment but may have a few minor errors. Score of 5 is 'strong'. It explains clear proficiency in response to the assignment and may have minor errors. Score of 4 is 'competent'. It demonstrates proficiency in response to the assignment. Score of 3 is 'limited'. It describes some degree of proficiency in response to the assignment, but it is clearly flawed. Score of 2 is 'flawed'. It demonstrates limited proficiency in response to the assignment. Score of 1 is 'deficient'. It describes fundamental deficiencies in writing skills. Finally, score 0 is reported accompanied by one of the following codes to indicate a paper could not be scored for one of the following reason: 0-A: Blank, 0-B: Insufficient to score or illegible, 0-C: Off topic, and 0-D: Written predominantly in another language.

## 1.13    Organisation of the Study

Chapter One is an introduction to the study. It outlines the background of the study, the context in which the study will be conducted, the statement of the problem, research hypotheses, the objectives of the study, the research questions and the significance of the study. Furthermore, this chapter presented operational definitions of the terms used in the present study.

Chapter Two incorporates related literature review in conjunction with the present study. The basic issues to be covered in this chapter are: the importance of writing, sociocultural theory, socialisation, the effect of gender, socioeconomic status, parents' involvement, siblings' involvement, teacher's and peer feedback on the students' writing performance. Moreover, it presents the theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter Three provides an extensive description of the methodology and design utilised in the study. It also describes the procedures pertaining to sample selection, data collection and data analysis methods to answer research questions of the study.

Chapter Four offers the findings of quantitative data and presents the statistical analysis related to the quantitative data. In the present study, questionnaire and writing task are utilised to collect quantitative data.

Chapter Five presents the findings and analysis of qualitative data collected through semi-structured interview.

Lastly in Chapter Six, the key findings are summarised, interpreted and the results are discussed in relation to the related studies in the literature. The pedagogical implications and recommendations presented serve as guide to improve writing performance of Iranian tertiary learners. It concludes with presenting directions for the further research.