

## On Shifting the Narrative Point of View and Critical Thinking in Written Narratives by Iranian EAP Learners: A Step towards Critical EAP

Vol. 13, No. 1, Tome 67  
pp. 459-492  
March & April 2022

Somayyeh Sabah<sup>1\*</sup>  & Mojgan Rashtchi<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

This study investigated the quantitative and qualitative impacts of shifting the narrative point of view on the representation of critical thinking (CT) in Iranian EAP learners' written narratives. Sixty (30 women and 30 men) students of psychology who were selected based on convenience sampling were randomly divided into two equal experimental groups of the first-person group (FPG) and third-person summary group (TPSG). The researchers initially administered Watson-Glaser critical thinking appraisal-form A questionnaire (Watson & Glaser, 1980). The independent samples t-test showed no statistically significant difference between the CT of the groups. Then the participants were given the short story of Butterflies (Grace, 1987). The TPSG participants inscribed their reflections on the story in narratives from the third-person perspective, whereas the FPG participants shifted the point of view and wrote first-person stories. The content analysis of the first- and third-person data based on Hatton and Smith's (1995) taxonomy of writing types illustrated a statistically significant difference between the length and the number of descriptive writing and dialogical reflection clauses in first-person stories versus the number of the same clauses in third-person narratives. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the groups' mean ranks of descriptive reflection and critical reflection clauses. The dialogicality principle of both first- and third-person storylines was shown to be more descriptive, less descriptive reflective, less and less dialogic reflective, and still less critical reflective. The qualitative analysis confirmed that the writings demonstrated a heteroglossia of different writing types.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, EAP, First-person narrative, Point of view, Third-person narrative

1. Corresponding author: Assistant Professor, Department of English Language, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Khorramabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Khorramabad, Iran; Email: [s.sabah@khoiau.ac.ir](mailto:s.sabah@khoiau.ac.ir), ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7729-4762>

2. Associate Professor, Department of English Language, Islamic Azad University, Tehran North Branch, Tehran, Iran.

## 1. Introduction

ESP aims to help learners use the L2 as a tool to communicate effectively in their professional workplaces or fields of study (Basturkmen, 2010). EAP is a text-based approach that identifies different types of discourses related to education in the university and encourages EAP learners to analyze the intended discourses and their contexts (Hyland, 2018). However, as a combination of critical pedagogy and EAP, critical EAP has expanded the scope of EAP and taken into account the socio-historical context of teaching and learning. This view does not mean that the field of critical EAP ignores the prerequisites of genre-based practice types and classroom interactions. However, it examines them from the complex and intertwined social identities of EAP teachers' and EAP learners' viewpoints (Benesch, 2009, 2012).

Despite the current emphasis on the role of critical thinking (CT) in EAP, teaching and practicing critical writing in EAP classes have been rarely considered (Williams, 2019). According to Bakhtin (1981, 1986), since every word, phrase, term, or narrative is polyphonic, its meaning is revealed in its intertextuality and context of use. The text-oriented tendencies to CT rely on overt representations of reflection in written passages and define it in terms of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and composition of words in the text (Tang, 2009).

The research literature on CT in the writing of EAP students has shown the effectiveness of using the activity of inscribing narratives of personal experience and autobiography in the early stages of EAP courses (Ong, 2017). Thus, this study explored the quantitative and qualitative impacts of shifting the narrative point of view on the reflectivity of first- and third-person stories written by Iranian EAP learners. Sixty EAP learners of psychology who participated in this research were equally divided into the third-person summary group (TPSG) and the first-person group (FPG). The CT ability of the TPSG and FPG participants was pre-tested using the Watson-Glaser critical thinking appraisal-form A (Watson & Glaser, 1980)

through the independent samples t-test procedure. Then they were given the short story of Butterflies (Grace, 1987). The TPSG participants wrote their reflections on the story in narratives from the third-person perspective, whereas the FPG participants shifted the point of view and inscribed first-person stories. The content of the first- and third-person narratives were analyzed based on Hutton and Smith's (1995) classification of reflective writing types. The analysis and comparison of the number of reflective clause types found in the narratives written by the FPG and TPSG were performed via the Mann-Whitney U test procedure. Excerpts from the stories of both groups were analyzed qualitatively to discover the heteroglossia of various reflective writing types in both the first- and third-person narratives.

#### Research Questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between the length and number of descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection, and critical reflection of first- and third-person narratives written by Iranian EAP learners according to Hutton and Smith's classification of writing type?
2. What is the dialogicality principle of the first- and third-person narratives written by Iranian EAP learners?
3. How is heteroglossia represented in the first- and third-person narratives written in English by Iranian EAP learners?

## 2. Literature Review

The growth and development of English as the primary language of academic knowledge dissemination has affected the educational experiences of many university students because they have to master English language contracts in the academic discourse to understand not only their fields of study but also their learning process (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). Given that EAP learners are intellectually mature enough when entering EAP

courses and familiar with the problem-solving activities, this area may be a good platform for teaching the CT skills to them. Nevertheless, EAP education in Asia has been seriously criticized due to its lack of focus on teaching CT, as little research has been conducted on the instruction of CT and its relevance to EAP in Asia (Gunawardena & Petraki, 2014). There is no one right way to teach CT, and thus EAP teachers and educational institutions take a variety of approaches to design a CT-based curriculum. However, by supporting and engaging EAP learners, they can be helped to become more critical readers and thinkers in the process of achieving their study goals (Wilson, 2016). Thus, critical reviews of EAP courses should go beyond merely criticizing the theoretical foundations of the field and provide opportunities for change at the applied level and its implementation (Pearson, 2017).

The study by Catterall and Ireland (2010) examined the effects of a CT-based approach on improving international students' reflective writing at Huddersfield University's School of Business during a critical EAP course. The EAP students participating in this experiment were introduced to design and justify a claim in English writing during several sessions. The EAP student participants explored various topics in the related academic discourses. The results of this study, while specifying the lack of CT in student participants' writings, confirmed the positive effects of this approach on improving their critical writing skills.

The study by Eastman and Maguire (2016) explored the positive effects of writing autobiographies on strengthening the reflective writing of 300 Ph.D. students in the UK during several workshops. To increase the critical voice of these EAP student participants, they were provided with a number of texts representing the genre of autobiography as role models. Eastman and Maguire acknowledged that vocational training is not limited to learning specialized knowledge in the relevant field of science and includes skills and concerns related to talking about oneself and one's experiences and

interactions with others. Writing first-person narratives improved the EAP student participants' writing skills and deepened their ability to think critically.

Xu and Li's (2018) study examined the impacts of taking a genre- and process-based approach to the writing skills of Ph.D. students in a two-year course of EAP in China. Their study showed the lack of criticality in the English writings of these student participants as they had never been educated to master reflective writing. Thus, they merely made unsubstantiated claims; their writings were full of borrowed ideas and lacked any personal views or voices.

### **2.1. Critical EAP in Iran**

Very limited research studies have examined the issue of critical EAP in Iran (Atai, Babaii, & Nili-Ahmadabadi, 2018). The main problems of EAP courses in Iran are the students' low level of English language skills, the weak link between the policy and practice areas, the scattered and discrete goals, and the uninteresting activities that make students tired. Iranian university students do not learn English to the fullest in schools. Regardless of their fields of study, they enter universities with little L2 proficiency. Instead of being empowered to articulate their concerns about the goals of EAP courses, they are forced to do a series of exhausting tasks. Thus, significant issues such as critical EAP education, distribution of power and freedom in expression and practice in the classroom, polyphony, and the like have been neglected in EAP teaching in Iran (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). Also, the role and agency of Iranian students in EAP courses have been very trivial, and due to their low level of English language skills, L2 skills are to be taught as the content of the EAP course (Vosoughi, Ghahremani Ghajar, & Navarchi, 2019). Zand-Moghadam and Khanlarzadeh's (2020) study indicated the EAP teachers' call for the need to improve the Iranian students' CT skills. However, no study has explored which activity types cultivate and improve the CT ability and reflective writing skills of EAP students in Iran.

Thus, considering the positive effects of writing narratives of personal experience on enhancing the CT and critical writing of EAP learners, the present study, for the first time, investigated the quantitative and qualitative impacts of shifting the point of view in the narrative on the CT and reflective writing skills of Iranian EAP students.

### 3. Methodology

Sixty participants (30 females and 30 males) who were randomly divided into two equal experimental groups took part in the study. They were selected from a range of students of psychology who entered the Islamic Azad University, Khorramabad Branch in the 97-98 academic year. The sampling was carried out based on the availability (convenience) procedure. The research was performed in October 2017. The participants' age was between 19 and 25 years.

The FPG and TPSG participants were given Butterflies (Grace, 1987) short story. First- and third-person stories written by the participants were collected and used to determine the CT level reflected in the writings of Iranian EAP students. The FPG participants identified themselves with the protagonist of the story and retold the events from their own point of view, looking at their personal experiences. The TPGS participants narrated a summary of the same story from the third-person perspective. In order to analyze the content of first- and third-person stories in terms of the EAP participants' use of reflective writing types, the well-known Hutton and Smith's (1995) classification of reflective writing types was used because it clearly defines the four essential levels of critical thinking in writing. The first type of writing is descriptive, non-critical and provides only a report of the course of events. The second type is called descriptive reflection, which describes the author's personal judgments of events. The third type is dialogic reflection, which expresses the author's current assessment of past events and their views on the story. Critical reflection is the fourth type of

critical writing, which shows the highest CT level and indicates the author's historical and socio-cultural analysis of past events.

The narratives obtained from this study were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis of the data was based on calculating and comparing the number of different reflective writing clause types in the participants' written stories via the independent t-test sampling procedure. Also, the mean scores obtained for each writing type were compared to determine the dialogicality principle of the first- and third-person stories. The qualitative analysis of the participants' written stories was based on revealing their transitions between the different types of reflective writing clause types to express their feelings and thoughts. For this purpose, excerpts from first- and third-person stories were selected to indicate the heteroglossia in the written narratives.

#### 4. Results

This study analyzed and compared the impacts of shifting the narrative point of view on the quantity and quality of reflective writing of Iranian EAP students. The related past research on inscribing personal narratives and autobiographies has confirmed the positive effects of using these tasks on developing the EAP learners' CT skills and reflective writing. However, the results of the quantitative analysis showed that writing the first-person narrative by shifting the point of view of the original short story from the third-person to the first-person augmented the length of the stories written in English by the FPG participants. Also, the task of shifting the point of view significantly increased the number of descriptive writing and dialogic reflective writing clause types in the first-person stories compared to the number of clauses of descriptive writing and dialogic reflective writing in the third-person stories. Thus, the results of the present study that confirmed the greater degree of the effectiveness of using the task of shifting the point of view in the narrative and rewriting the storyline from the perspectives of and

based on the EAP learners' personal experiences are consistent with the findings of previous relevant research (Rashtchi, 2019; Sabah & Rashtchi, 2017). However, the statistical results showed that shifting the point of view did not make a statistically significant difference between the number of descriptive and critical reflective writing clause types in the stories written by both FPG and TPSG participants. Thus, the study indicated the effectiveness of both first- and third-person narrative writing activities in strengthening the Iranian EAP learners' willingness to express their thoughts, emotions, and perspectives in the L2 and their CT ability. Also, despite the heteroglossia of the obtained written narratives, the dialogicality principle of both first- and third-person stories was more descriptive, less descriptive reflective, less and less dialogic reflective, and much less critical reflective. This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Shokouhi, Daram, & Sabah, 2011; Sabah & Rashtchi, 2016), which indicates that the promotion of CT and critical EAP in Iran has been rather neglected, and appropriate tasks and activities for achieving this goal have not been designed in EAP textbooks. This result confirmed the statement of Kiyani, Momenian, and Navidinia (2011) that there is a contradiction and lack of communication and needs assessment in the goals set in the national program for teaching foreign languages in Iran. Atai, Iranmehr, and Babaii (2018) have also stated that there is a serious gap in the EAP policies in Iran, and thus the set goals need critical evaluation, meticulous analysis, and review.

The qualitative analysis of the data revealed the heteroglossia in first- and third-person stories in English by Iranian EAP students participating in this research. The following excerpts selected from the stories of both groups serve as examples of the claim that the collected written narratives were not monolithic and enjoyed dialogicity. In order to differentiate different writing types, descriptive writing clauses are not marked in a particular way. Descriptive reflective clauses are underlined, dialogic reflective clauses are italicized, and critical reflective clauses are typed in bold, respectively.



Excerpt (1) is an excerpt from the first-person story of one of the participants. It shows a transition from critical reflective writing to dialogic reflective writing. The subsequent two descriptive reflective clauses ultimately lead to critical reflective writing. Thus, the EAP student participant has put different types of writing and different levels of reflection in dialogue with each other to express the character's thoughts and feelings.

... **I was always told to listen to the teacher.** *Now my teacher's opinion is different from my grandfather's.* And I do not know which opinion is correct. The difference of opinion causes a person to suffer. **Something that has been experienced for years is different from something that has been taught to his.** (1)

Passage (2) is taken from a third-person story written by one of the EAP student participants in the TPSG. In this piece of writing, various types of reflective writing are evident. Five descriptive writing clauses follow each other, and a critical reflective phrase is used to connect the chain of descriptions to express the EAP student author's point of view.

... **She opened her book. She read: "I killed all the butterflies." Her grandparents enjoyed her story, but her teacher did not like it. External factors can affect our perceptions.** ... (4)

