

EFL learners' Proficiency in English and their Writing Performance on a Letter Writing Task*

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Abstract

The investigation of the role of L2 proficiency in L2 writing ability continues to be revealing for the better understanding of the nature of L2 writing. This kind of study is also much needed in EFL settings like Iran for the better specification of the actual role of EFL writing instructors. The present article addresses the relationship between EFL proficiency and some qualitative and quantitative aspects of EFL writing performance. 140 college EFL learners, majoring in English as a foreign language in Iran, performed a letter-writing task. The quantitative and qualitative aspects of their writing performance were then quantified and studied in relation to their EFL proficiency. Correlation coefficients and analysis of variance showed that: 1) participants with higher EFL proficiency scores produced texts of significantly better quality ($R=0.42$, $P>.01$); 2) text length, measured by the total number of words written per letter, was very weakly correlated with EFL proficiency scores ($R=0.2$, $P>.05$); and 3) the correlation between the fluency or speed of writing measured by mean number of words written per minute on the one hand and EFL proficiency scores on the other hand was not found to be significant. The results of this study suggest that although higher EFL proficiency may lead to the production of L2 texts with better quality and quantity – at least in some tasks – it does not necessarily affect the fluency and the processing requirements of the complex task of EFL writing. Instead, L2 writing fluency in its limited definition in this work was shown to be a function of L2 writing ability level.

Key words: EFL writing, proficiency, letter writing, qualitative and quantitative.

INTRODUCTION

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Writing in a second language is now viewed as a very elaborate process intricately interwoven with many complicated variables such as L1 and L2 linguistic factors, cognitive factors, social factors, and individual differences. One such complicating factor in an EFL setting is the linguistic proficiency whose development is usually intermingled with the development of L2 writing ability. This still continues to be a problem for the L2 writing instructor and for the delineation of his specific roles in different teaching situations. What should the L2 writing instructor actually be focusing on when dealing with EFL learners with different levels of proficiency, English or writing or both, and in what sequence? When and how, if at all, should transitions from language skills to composing skills take place? Before determining whether or not these are relevant questions and before looking for effective solutions, more research needs to be carried out on showing different ways in which L2 proficiency and L2 writing ability are related.

Many L2 writing researchers (e.g. Raimes, 1985, 1987; Freedman, Pringle, Yalden, 1983; Mohan and Lo, 1985; Cumming, 1989; Leki, 1992; Sasaki and Hirose, 1996; Ryu, 1997; and Sasaki, 2000) have addressed the role of L2 proficiency in L2 writing. Some scholars (e.g. Widdowson, 1983 and Ryu, 1997) have emphasized the role of L2 proficiency in successful L2 writing. Others (e. g. Jones, 1985; Cumming, 1986, 1989) have emphasized the role of L2 writing processes and strategies, at least at the higher levels of L2 writing. As Cumming (1989) argues, L2 proficiency and L2 writing ability have been considered as separate abilities in previous L2 writing research. However, little is yet known about how the two interact in bringing about L2 writing outcomes and about how the processes and products of L2 writing are influenced by the development of L2 proficiency.

Background and review of the related literature

One of the major issues in the investigation of second language writing is how the quality and quantity of the L2 learner's writing performance is related to his or her level of linguistic proficiency in the second language. The problem is that learners who are linguistically proficient in L2 may not necessarily be good L2 writers,

because, to some researchers (e.g. Jacobs, 1982; Jones, 1985; Cumming, 1989), differences in L2 writing performance appear to arise mainly from procedures and strategies people use for L2 writing and not necessarily from linguistic proficiency. However, in L2 writing, linguistic proficiency is certainly a concern because it is one of the features of the interlanguage of the learner (Myles, 2002).

The language learning process and the development of L2 proficiency tend to be viewed as different from the development of composing skills which involve knowledge-transforming (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) and even knowledge-building (Wells, 2000). Researchers have tended to take these as two separate processes (see Cumming, 1989). In learning to write in a second language, learners are required to do more than developing proficiency and enhancing knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. They are required to make meanings and to manipulate their linguistic knowledge. Some research suggests that L2 proficiency comes into the stage of L2 writing only in the lower levels and that it does not play a key role in higher levels of writing ability and as Ryu (1997) argues, once the writer reaches an adequate level of language proficiency, language proficiency is no longer a decisive factor in determining writing quality.

The belief is that only at the beginning stages of writing ability development, called 'the associative writing stage' by Bereiter (1980), should the writer deal with language problems and idea generation. In higher level stages, the writer's concern is not so much with producing correct language as with creating a meaningful text. In other words, the development of L2 proficiency is a necessary but not sufficient condition for L2 writing development. Relevant to this argument is Cummins' (1979) original distinction between surface and deep levels of proficiency. In Cummins' view, Basic Inter-personal Communication Skills (BICS) include such knowledge as vocabulary and grammar, whereas, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) includes such knowledge as that of semantic and functional meaning. As Ryu (1997) explains, supposedly BICS should be the focus of L2 writing instruction only in lower levels of writing ability, since the ability to write in a second language is mainly a function of

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which should be developed in later stages.

One influential perspective related to the rôle of L2 proficiency in L2 writing which apparently stems from the emphasis on the writer and the process of writing is that L2 proficiency does not play a significant role in L2 writing, and that L2 writing processes (especially knowledge-transforming and knowledge-building skills at higher levels of writing) are not decisively influenced by it (Jones, 1985; Cumming, 1986, 1989). The underlying assumption seems to be that writing ability is a different construct and a distinct skill from general linguistic competence. For example, Raimes (1985) showed that a lack of competence in second language writing resulted from the writer's incompetence in composition rather than the lack of linguistic competence. In another study, Raimes (1987) showed that students whose proficiency was judged as insufficient for academic coursework generated language and ideas in much the same way as more proficient students. The latter study suggested that the actual processes in idea generation were not affected by L2 proficiency.

Similarly, Cumming (1989) proposed that there was a "writing expertise", independent of linguistic proficiency. He found differences in the writing quality of ESL writers with different levels of proficiency, but he also found that proficiency was not related to differences in writing processes. Confirmation for the independence of writing expertise also comes from studies of more advanced L2 learners (Zamel, 1983; Mohan and Lo, 1985), which attribute L2 writing differences mainly to the strategies people use for writing. L2 proficiency is necessary but it does not guarantee successful L2 writing (see Matsuda, 1999) and as Leki (1992) points out, after ten years of studying English in classrooms abroad, ESL students still may have trouble writing effectively in English and that those who can recite grammar rules are not always able to use those rules in producing language.

All of the above studies somehow emphasize distinct writing abilities independent of L2 proficiency. However, a broader look at the literature on the relationship between L2 writing ability and linguistic proficiency reveals that many studies have also come up

with results that are contradictory to the above claims and that calls for the further investigation of the issue in different contexts. Research has shown that L2 proficiency is indeed related to the quality and quantity of L2 learners' writing performance in different ways. (Pennington and So, 1993; Hirose and Sasaki, 1994; Zamel, 1998; Myles, 2002).

Acquiring the necessary linguistic proficiency makes the task of L2 writing development more complex and demanding. According to Widdowson (1983), the complexity of writing processes in EFL academic settings is compounded by the complexity of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language. In other words, learning EFL writing should involve not only developing proficiency, but also employing it for written communication, for creating and organizing meanings. Confirmation for the contributions of linguistic proficiency to successful L2 writing comes from Hirose and Sasaki (1994). In their study of college level EFL writing they found that EFL proficiency accounted for a considerable portion of Japanese college students' EFL writing skills, suggesting that both language skills and writing skills should be regarded as important in L2 writing instruction. In a later study, Sasaki and Hirose (1996) again found that beside L1 writing ability and meta-knowledge of writing conventions, L2 proficiency also explained variance in L2 writing ability. Similarly, In an analysis of the effects of level of proficiency on error production in Tests of Written English (TWE), Ginther and Grant (1996) found that more proficient writers wrote longer essays and that their essays were more error-free than the essays written by less proficient learners.

Studies on L2 proficiency have also shown that the L2 learner's level of linguistic proficiency might affect the way he or she transfers writing skills from his or her native language to the second language writing task. For example, Ryu (1997) showed that transfer of writing skills from a first to a second or foreign language was possible only when the writer possessed higher levels of second or foreign language skills. He showed that the level of proficiency in the second language determined whether or not L2 writers would be able to employ their

L1 writing abilities in writing the second language. Lack of adequate levels of linguistic proficiency seems to occupy the learner's mind with language problems, thus preventing him or her from concentrating on writing processes such as planning and organizing. The researcher's personal experience with some Iranian students studying for Ph.D. in different disciplines in the UK suggests the same point. These graduate students are rather well qualified in writing in their mother tongue, Persian. (Most of them are university lecturers who have published at least one article in their L1; they have also passed the IELTS test with a score of 5-6.5). However, some still have serious problems in writing English communicatively, with many of their writing skills not transferred from their L1.

More recent studies still come up with the result that linguistic proficiency does indeed affect the processes in L2 writing. In Sasaki's (2000) study of the writing processes and products of Japanese EFL learners, L2 proficiency was shown to explain part of the differences in writing strategy use between the expert and the novice writers in the study. More proficient learners, for instance, spent more time for planning and for higher level organization, while less proficient writers dealt more with surface level linguistic errors.

In short, research on the relationship between L2 proficiency and L2 writing ability has come up with contradictory results. It is not yet known whether linguistic proficiency level affects the rate and quality of L2 writing performance, the route and the processes of L2 writing, or both. In addition, the role of L2 writing teachers is not quite clear in L2 writing classes across levels of L2 proficiency. Suggestions have been made that the focus of L2 writing instruction should vary depending on the learners' English-language proficiency. Ryu (1997), for instance, argues that for lower English-language proficiency students, the focus of EFL writing instruction should be on developing their English language skills; for intermediate English-language proficiency learners, on developing both English language and writing skills; and for advanced English-language proficiency learners, on developing their writing skills rather than their English language skills. How these missions should be actually accomplished remains to be shown in further research.

Controversies over the relationship between L2 proficiency and L2 writing ability also stem from the limitations of previous research in this area. First of all, the number of participants in most of these studies is not big enough to allow statistical generalizations. Second, most of the research addressing the role of proficiency in L2 writing has been carried out in an ESL setting, thus not benefiting from what might be revealed from the study of the issue in EFL settings. And finally, the range of proficiency levels considered in most of these studies is not big enough to give a comprehensive picture of changes in L2 writing products and processes across levels of L2 proficiency. More research needs to be carried out on what in L2 writing processes and products is actually affected, before appropriate remedial techniques can be developed for teaching L2 writing at different stages of proficiency. Moreover, the study of specific genre types in such studies will enable researchers to evaluate the role of L2 proficiency in relation to genre types. This study looks at the relationship between EFL proficiency and EFL writing quality and quantity of 140 college EFL learners, with elementary to advanced EFL proficiency levels in performing a letter writing task in an academic setting. Attempts are made to answer the following main research questions:

1. *Is there any relationship between Iranian university EFL learners' proficiency and overall writing quality scores assigned to their sample application letters by EFL experts? Are there significant differences between elementary, intermediate, and advanced EFL proficiency students in the quality of their application letters?*
2. *Is there any relationship between Iranian university EFL learners' proficiency in English and their writing fluency in producing letters of application? And is the length of EFL students' letters of application different across levels of proficiency?*

METHOD

Subjects and Settings

The present study was carried out in an EFL setting, two English departments in two universities in Iran, where English is taught as a major course of study for four years to undergraduate learners. For the first two years, the learners usually take language skill courses in reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar. For the second two years, they study either translation or English literature.

Three major writing skills courses are offered for BA students of English. The writing course for the first year is "basic writing", which focuses on writing paragraphs and paragraph organization. The other two courses in EFL writing are usually offered in the third year. The essay writing course teaches students how to develop their paragraph writing skills to compose longer texts in English. And the third course, "letter writing", teaches them how to write different kinds of letters such as application letters, invitation letters, thank you letters, and the like.

The materials selected by the writing teacher for Iranian college EFL students are usually ESL textbooks produced in the USA or the UK (e. g. Chaplan, 1970). The syllabi for college EFL writing courses are prepared by a central curriculum planning body in the Iranian Ministry of Higher Education and are sent to all public universities for implementation. Teaching methods are usually product-oriented, with the teacher in writing classes presenting and focusing on different elements of English paragraphs such as topic sentences, supporting sentences, and conclusion, and evaluating students' written products. Participants in these college writing courses were students who have studied English for at least three hours a week in their junior and senior high school studies. Their EFL proficiency levels varied from elementary to advanced levels. (The range of EFL proficiency scores for the participants was 17 to 75 out of 80 on the MELAB test).

For this study, a total of 140 students (26 male and 114 female students) from the above population were selected through stratified random sampling. 81.4 percent of the participants are female students, reflecting the prominence of girls in the total population of university EFL learners in Iran. The subjects' age range was between 18 and 25 with a mean age of 21.2 (SD=1.75). These learners were studying for

a four-year BA degree in English and were in different years of their studies. The selected participants provided the writing samples (job application letters) and English proficiency measures for the analyses in this study.

Data Collection

Data on EFL proficiency

The test used for measuring the subjects' EFL proficiency was a recent version of MELAB, the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (published in Briggs, et. al. 1997). This test was selected because of its standard format, ease of administration and scoring, and the availability of its more recent versions. Different versions of this test have previously been used and validated for measuring Iranian university learners' EFL proficiency in MA and Ph.D. dissertations in the context of this study.

Three areas of language proficiency were tested using the multiple-choice format of the selected test: grammar (40 items), vocabulary (40 items), and reading comprehension (20 items). The proficiency test did not include any writing tasks and therefore the participants' proficiency score, which were studied in relation to writing ability, did not contain a writing component. This test was performed as part of classroom evaluation activities with the help of the instructors. Each subject was assigned an EFL proficiency score based on the total number of correct responses to the test items. Test results were also used to assign subjects to three levels of proficiency: elementary (test scores below %40), intermediate (test scores between %40 and %70), and advanced (test scores above %70).

Data on EFL writing performance

In order to collect data on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of EFL writing performance of the learners in this study, the researcher focused only on one task: writing formal letter of job application, mainly because of the large sample size. The subjects were instructed in their mother tongue both orally and on their writing prompt, as to the purpose of their task. All of the 140 writing samples were

produced (handwritten) in actual language classes. Some of the participants were in the researchers' own classes and others were taking different courses with other members of the department. During the writing task which took a maximum of one hour, they were given freedom to consult their dictionaries and write and rewrite, if they wished to do so. None of the subjects required extra time to complete their letters. The researchers collaborated with the class teacher to record the time spent by each individual for writing and the number of drafts produced. Students were told that they could use separate sheets of paper if they wanted to write notes, outlines, or first drafts for their letters. The final drafts were included in the data for the study.

Procedures

Following Sasaki (2000), the total amount of time spent for writing each letter of application, the total number of words written per letter, and the mean number of words written per minute by each subject were calculated for determining writing quantities of length and fluency. As the sender and receiver's address were fixed for everybody and were provided by the researcher, they were not included in the word counts. All of the words in the salutation, closing, and postscripts were included and such contractions such as *I'm* and *I'll* were also counted as one word. The total number of words written per letter was then divided by the number of minutes spent for writing to give an index of fluency or speed of writing.

In order for different aspects of the students' writing to be taken into account in assigning average writing quality scores, Jacobs et. al's (1981) EFL Composition Profile was used to assign scores to content (50 points), organization (40 points), vocabulary (40 points), language use (50 points), and mechanics (20 points), resulting in a maximum possible score of 200 for each letter. Two raters, the researcher and a native-speaking ESL writing instructor at a British university, discussed the scoring profile, standardized their marking, and cross-checked agreement on marking. Then each rater scored all of the 140 samples independently. The justification for this was that work marked independently by two different markers, with their marks being averaged, is a more reliable estimate than if it were marked by a

single marker or by different markers assigning a single score. Cronbach's Alpha for inter-rater reliability was 0.97. The average score assigned to each letter by the two scorers was finally calculated as an index for EFL writing quality considered in all later analyses.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

The participants spent an average of 11.8 minutes (SD= 3.48) writing job application letters in English. They used a minimum of 5 minutes and a maximum of 22 minutes for this task. The mean number of words written per letter was 81 words (SD= 27.8). The shortest letter was 20 words long and the longest contained 177 words. Once the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the letters were quantified, correlations and variances between the means of subgroups with varying levels of proficiency were calculated and tested for significance.

EFL writing quality and EFL proficiency:

The first research question addressed the relationship between Iranian university EFL learners' Scores on the MELAB proficiency test and overall writing quality scores assigned to their writing samples by EFL experts. Table 1 below shows the descriptive statistics of these variables:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	SD	N
English Proficiency	37.37	10.2	140
Writing quality	154.2607	16.3	140

Pearson product moment correlation showed a significant moderate positive relationship between EFL proficiency and writing ability ($R=0.415$, $p>0.01$). The ability to write English as a foreign language may well be an independent skill or construct in its own right demanding newer methods for quantification in EFL classes. Yet, as this analysis shows, it partly co-varies with EFL proficiency.

A similar question about the quality of writing performance was asked about the means of writing quality scores assigned to the participants grouped into 3 different levels of EFL proficiency. The hypothesis was that in writing letters, there would be no differences between the means of writing quality scores among learners with elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels of EFL proficiency.

Table 2: Writing quality across proficiency levels

Levels/means (80) of proficiency	Mean writing quality (200)	N	SD
Elementary/27	148	49	14.6
Intermediate/41	155	77	15.9
Advanced/56	172	14	12.8

As shown in table two, the mean writing quality scores assigned to the sample application letters written by advanced proficiency learners was greater than those in the intermediate and the elementary groups. Analysis of variance (Table 3) showed that these differences were statistically significant. The learners in the intermediate proficiency group (N=77) were also significantly better in writing quality than those in the elementary group.

Table 3: ANOVA comparing mean writing quality across levels of EFL proficiency

Variables	Groups	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Writing quality score * 3 levels of English proficiency	Between Groups	6736.288	2	3368.144	15.175	.000
	Within Groups	30407.446	137	221.952		

EFL writing quantity and EFL proficiency:

As the level of EFL proficiency increased, the participants tended to produce longer texts. The students identified as elementary here wrote an average of 76 words per letter; the intermediate group 81 words; and the advanced group 100 words. The mean number of words written per minute as shown in Table 4 also increased with the levels of proficiency. However, The noteworthy point is that participants with higher levels of proficiency also spent more time on completing the letter writing task.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for writing quantity measures

Variables	Proficiency groups	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Minutes spent for writing	Elementary (49)	11.33	2.99	5	19
	Intermediate (77)	11.95	3.72	5	20
	Advanced (14)	12.29	3.77	8	22
Total number of words written	Elementary (49)	76	28.73	20	173
	Intermediate (77)	81	26.00	37	177
	Advanced (14)	100	27.56	61	163
Writing fluency (word per minute)	Elementary (49)	7.1420	3.33	2.22	18.71
	Intermediate (77)	7.3382	2.89	3.08	14.75
	Advanced (14)	8.4925	2.37	4.95	12.50

The correlation between EFL proficiency scores and total number of words written per letter (text length) was very weak ($R=0.2$, $P>.05$). However, the differences between the length of the text across proficiency levels were significant at the 0.01 level. The mean length of the letters written by advanced EFL proficiency learners was significantly better than the other groups. Table 5 shows the analysis of variance between these means.

Table 5. ANOVA comparing words written per letter (length) across EFL proficiency levels

Groups	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6319.266	2	3159.633	4.290	.016
Within Groups	100910.305	137	736.572		
Total	107229.571	139			

Finally, there was no relationship between proficiency and the fluency of writing measured by the number of words written per minute. The analysis of variance also showed no significant differences between EFL proficiency groups in the mean number of words per minute. On the contrary, writing fluency was affected by

the level of writing ability. As shown in Table 6, EFL students whose quality of writing had been assessed as strong by the researchers wrote significantly more fluently than those assessed as weak or average. In short, students with higher EFL proficiency wrote texts, which were both longer and qualitatively better, but they did not write more fluently. Writing fluency as defined in this study seemed to be a function of writing skills rather than that of language skills.

Table 6. ANOVA comparing writing words written per minute (fluency) across 3 writing ability levels

Variable		Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Word per minute	Between Groups	111.534	2	55.767	6.641	.002
	Within Groups	1142.037	136	8.397		

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the present study suggest that EFL proficiency and EFL writing expertise contribute to different aspects of the quality and quantity of EFL writing performances. EFL proficiency was found to be related to the writing quality scores assigned by L2 writing instructors and hence supporting similar results in other settings (e.g. Ginther and Grant, 1996; Sasaki 2000; Leki, 1992). A significant positive correlation was observed to exist between the quantity and quality of writing.

Fluency in EFL writing, however, is determined not by how linguistically proficient an EFL learner is, but by how competent he or she is in his or her writing skills. For the participants in this study no correlation was found between proficiency and the fluency of writing, and the differences between the means of EFL writing fluency indices for students with elementary, intermediate, and advanced EFL proficiency were not statistically significant. On the other hand, writing fluency was significantly different among the students with weak, average, and strong EFL writing ability levels.

This study strengthens Sasaki's (2000) findings. The results are also in line with the suggestions in previous research that L2 writing expertise is somehow independent of L2 proficiency (Boshor, 1998; Cumming, 1989, Raimes, 1987) because writing fluency did not

increase across levels of proficiency, although it did improve with higher writing ability levels.

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