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Research Paper

A Pathological Perspective into the EFL Learners' Writing Skill: Challenges, Attitudes, and Strategies

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Abstract

Writing skill has always been the Achille Heel of the students when learning a foreign language. It takes so much time and energy of the learners as well as teachers to unearth the challenges of the learners and propose applicable solutions for them. This study aims to explore the EFL learners' writing difficulties, strategies, and attitudes and examine the areas of writing difficulty in their writing performance. To this end, a close-ended questionnaire and an interview were administered to 31 pre- to upper-intermediate EFL learners from two intact classes who were interested in improving their general writing abilities. A writing task was also given to identify the areas of difficulty in practice. The results of frequency analysis revealed that the students' major areas of difficulty were cohesion and coherence and topic development. Furthermore, the students' frequent strategies and behaviors are brainstorming, editing and revising, and, in terms of attitude, they unanimously consider writing a rather difficult skill. The

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implications and down-to-earth recommendations for the learners and teachers are enumerated at the end.

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1. Introduction

Writing skill is considered to be the last language skill acquired by both native speakers and EFL learners (Hamp & Heasly, 2006). Notwithstanding the proficiency level, educational level, and writing genre, learning writing skill is a painstaking process since it is *a complex cognitive activity* (Manchon, 2014, p. 35). Besides the challenging nature of the skill itself (Gautam, 2019; Nasser, 2016; Patience, 2020), the external factors both from learners and teachers may also be deemed crucial in this process. Thus, learning or teaching writing can be troublesome and most EFL learners often encounter challenges during writing practices. It, as Grami (2010) pointed out, needs "careful thought, discipline and concentration" (p. 9).

According to Al Fadda (2012), the main difficulties EFL learners usually face include: differentiating between written and spoken words and phrases, subject-verb agreement and making coherent paragraphs. Also, Al Murshidi (2014) believes that one of the barriers that causes problems for students to move on in their writing is generating ideas about different topics. Another concern based on Amin and Alamin (2012) is that students usually prefer to copy and paste other's work instead of paraphrasing and summarizing since it often leads to grammar mistakes.

Considering the importance of teaching writing skill, many researchers have investigated different ways of teaching writing (e.g., Amin & Alamin,

2012; Gautam, 2019; Grami, 2010; Nasser, 2016; Patience, 2020; Turgut & Kayaoğlu, 2015) and there have been contradictory views and various studies regarding adaption of a product approach (focusing on the final product) or a process one (the underlying process of writing) to writing and whether social and academic setting (e.g., CLIL) should be considered or not (Al Badi, 2015; Gené-Gil, et al., 2015; Gezmiş, 2020; Lahuerta, 2017; Sun & Feng, 2009).

However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is limited research about the process or the strategies EFL students follow during general writing practice (e.g., Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Soames, 2006). Moreover, few studies have focused on the areas of difficulty that EFL learners encounter while writing and their attitudes toward writing tasks in general (Paker & Erarslan, 2015). Furthermore, most studies have considered learners' academic writing challenges (Al Badi, 2015; Bacha, 2012; Chou, 2011; Leki & Carson, 1994; Setiani & Kuning, 2018) and few studies have explored the learners' general writing difficulties (e.g., Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Belkheir & Benyelles, 2017; Gezmiş, 2020).

Hence, additional research is needed to fulfil these gaps in the literature by investigating the major difficulties and strategies of the EFL learners during writing as perceived by them, focusing on their attitudes toward writing, and searching students' written essays to find out their weak points in practice. These issues are deemed worthwhile to conduct further investigation, since they may not have not hitherto been attended quite sufficiently in the context of Iran and can present some practical advantages for writing practitioners and teacher trainers through applying its results to teach writing more effectively.

2. Literature Review

The ability to write is vital both for native speakers and foreign language speakers of any language (Harmer, 2004). As Weigle (2002) points out, being able to write effectively is becoming an essential requirement globally. Difficulty in writing can even inhibit the economic opportunities for people at workplace (Katusic et al. 2009) and may further enhance the risk for behavioral problems (Berninger et al., 2006; Katusic et al., 2009). As a result, more attention is to be exerted to both learning it and presenting effective ways for teaching it. In this way, Krashen (1982) made a distinction between writing and other skills in that the former has to be learned, not acquired and it may come from the fact that writing is totally considered to be an intricate skill (Arslan & Zibande, 2010).

Besides, Silva (1997) emphasizes that native language writers write more effectively in comparison to L2 writers; that is, while writing, most English learners face great challenges. These difficulties may be because of the essence of writing that includes different aspects (e.g., content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, mechanics, …) which necessitates a balance between different aspects of writing (Paker & Erarslan, 2015).

Review of literature in the field demonstrates that myriads of studies have been conducted regarding the students' difficulties, their attitudes, and strategies used in performing writing tasks. In this respect, here a review of the main studies conducted by different scholars in Applied Linguistics (AL) has been summarized.

2.1 Writing Difficulties

Overtime, an extensive literature has been developed on either general or academic writing with recently more emphasis on the latter. Studies conducted in the realm of academic writing have indicated that it has been a

great source of challenge especially for international students. For example, to investigate academic writing difficulties of ESL students and factors that may cause them, a small-scale survey was conducted by Al Badi (2015) at a university in Australia on 20 postgraduate students of four nationalities. Two questionnaires were used for data collection procedure including closed questions in the first part, and open-ended questions in the second one which was given only to two students in order to support the quantitative data gathered from the first section (bio-data). The findings showed that students had more difficulties on writing their own perceptions, finding relevant topics, and sources, and less on referencing and citations. Besides, the main factors causing these problems were students' lack of sufficient knowledge and experience about academic writing conventions.

Moreover, in a qualitative study by Singh (2016), academic writing difficulties of 70 non-native English-speaking international graduate students in Malaysia were analyzed through an emic perspective in which students could share the experiences and challenges they faced in academic writing practices during higher education period. Results indicated that using English as a medium of instruction was the major difficulty of these students and host institutions need to help improve students' academic literacy skills by providing them with support in order to achieve academic success.

Serious writing difficulties that many EFL learners encounter led to research with the primary aim of identifying EFL students' essay writing problems and their sources, in order to provide useful remedies for decreasing these difficulties. Data was collected using questionnaire, interviews and students' final writing drafts. Results revealed that the students' main difficulties were in coherence and cohesion, L1 transfer and lack of practice in writing.

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Regarding poor quality essays of EFL students, a study was performed by Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) to explore the EFL students' difficulties and their learning needs. To this end, 33 students of English Department at a university in Indonesia completed open-ended questionnaires and their essays were examined. Besides, the writing lecturer preformed a semi-structured interview in order to investigate teaching challenges of essay writing. Results indicated that students mostly had difficulties in the grammatical, cohesion and coherence issues, and less in paragraph structure, diction, and spelling. Based on the findings, students needed step-by-step, explicit instruction, and explanations during writing processes. The results of the study also pointed out that having a longer time span with smaller number of students in a class could help improve students essay quality. Thus, new alternative teaching writing strategies were recommended to reach the desired outcome. A posttest-experimental study with the purpose of identifying students' difficulties in different stages of Process Writing Approach (PWA) was conducted by Gezmiş (2020). 50 English translation and interpretation students wrote an essay at the end of the study with the help of PWA. A checklist based on the PWA was used to assess the essays. Findings showed that students could successfully use PWA in their writing class. However, they had difficulties in the second stage, that is, drafting and revising. Thus, being well-prepared before starting writing is considered to be essential for the students.

In the study by Kao and Reynolds (2017), they collected data from 331 university students majoring in business and concluded that the biggest barrier in writing for the learners is the lack of "enough content to write about a topic" (p. 53). In order to investigate Iranian students' perceptions toward their writing difficulties, Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020), performed a study using a questionnaire and structured interviews. The

results indicated that factors such as grammar, punctuation, spelling, word choice, L1 transfer, organization, writing genre, and collocations are among the sources of students' difficulties. This study suggests English language teachers to teach some components of writing (grammar, spelling, and punctuation) in the context. In addition, a few practical implications for those involved in English teaching, learning, material developing, and curriculum planning are provided.

2.2 Students' Attitudes

Attitude, as Dornyei and Ryan (2015) assert, is viewed "as a crucial determinant of successful language learning" (p. 74) and writing is not an exception. Attitude toward writing has been studied and discussed by a large number of authors and they have generally concluded that writing skill was rather difficult for language learners. Different studies (e.g., Denny, 2012; Karahan, 2007; Mcleod, 2014; Verma, 2005) on the effect of attitudinal factors on learning have also been conducted. Underlining the incremental significance of writing, several studies (e.g., Kear et al., 2000; Klein, 1986) have explored the relationship between motivation and writing skills, suggesting that knowing students' attitudes towards writing can be beneficial in increasing students' progress. Chou (2011), in a study on students' perspectives toward academic writing, found out that students knew the importance of academic writing since it is a way that help them to show their areas of interest to other people and most importantly it is a point at which they can begin publishing their work.

Paker and Erarslan (2015) also have investigated the attitudes of 782 Turkish EFL students towards university writing course through administering questionnaires both before and after the course. To explore the relationship between the students' attitudes and their success, students' attitude scores were compared with their overall writing proficiency. Results

indicated that there was a positive relationship between the students' writing proficiency and their attitudes toward writing.

Examining the attitude and practices of EFL learners both in English and their native language writing, McCarthey and Garcia (2005) revealed that their attitudes to writing was in a continuum ranging "from somewhat positive to negative" (p. 69). Setyowati and Sukmawan (2016) investigated the attitude of the 57 EFL learners toward writing in English and concluded that nearly all of the participants adopted a moderate or positive attitude toward writing. However, they viewed writing as difficult and stressful. Tavşanlı et al., (2020) also compared the effect of Process-Based Writing Modular Instructional Program and the typical Turkish language arts curriculum on the cohesion and coherence of writing and their attitude and found no significant difference in the learners' attitude toward writing although their experimental group exceeded the control one in term of cohesion and coherence.

2.3 Writing Strategies

Recently, a number of studies with the aim of investigating the importance of writing strategy were initiated. For example, Bailey (2019) investigated the association between categories of writing strategies (i.e., problem solving, planning, and corrective feedback) with writing skill. The results indicated that problem-solving and feedback strategies were respectively the most and the least favorite ones. There was also a positive relationship between writing skill and the writing strategies. Investigating the development and transfer of writing strategies between foreign language and first language, Forbes (2019) collected data from 22 students in level 9 of a secondary school and a foreign language German class and found out that they are affected by such factors as level of proficiency, metacognitive engagement level, and the students' attitude to writing. Zhang and Qin (2019) conceptualized and developed a

questionnaire on the metacognitive awareness of the writing strategies with 400 university students. The findings were three strategies called "metacognitive planning, metacognitive monitoring and metacognitive evaluating" (p. 166).

In addition, Abdul-Rahman (2011) built on the categorization of Hsiao and Oxford's (2002) and classified writing strategies for both NNSE (none-native speakers of English) and NSE (English native speakers). A strategy questionnaire was used according to the cognitive model of L1 writing process of Flower and Hayes (1981), Patric and Czarl (2003) and Soames (2006) which emphasized the importance of recursion in writing and recognized writing as composed of reviewing, translating ideas into text, and planning. He, then, added some items relating to second language issues to the aforementioned questionnaire.

Another study was performed by Soltani and Kheirzadeh (2017) exploring Iranian EFL learners' writing strategies and attitudes towards writing-only tasks and reading-to-write in order to find any significant difference between them. The findings of this study showed that reading-to-write group of learners performed better but the strategies which were used by the two groups showed no significant difference. Besides, qualitative analysis of the data indicated that students had positive attitudes towards reading-to-write. A meta-analysis was conducted by Graham (2006), on 20 group-comparison studies including learning disabled and typically developing students. Findings indicated that teaching strategy had a positive effect on students' cohesion and coherence and this effect could continue about 4-10 weeks. Also, some useful strategies utilized by students in their writings were recognized.

These studies lead us to the subject area of this study, that is, exploring the difficulties, strategies and attitudes of the EFL learners in the process of writing. Though important, little has been stated about these issues in the context of Iran.

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3. Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the following research questions were raised in this study:

1. What are the major writing strategies and behaviors as perceived by the intermediate EFL learners?
2. What are the intermediate EFL learners' attitudes towards writing tasks? What are the reasons behind them?
3. What are the most frequent writing difficulties as perceived by EFL learners?
4. What are the most frequent areas of writing difficulties appearing in their writing?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

Thirty-one EFL learners' studying English online in a language institute in Iran were the participants of this study. Among the participants, 58% were female (18), and 41.9% of them were male (13), and their age range was 20 - 40. The students' levels of English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages were as follows:16.1% pre-intermediate level (5), 51.6% intermediate (16), and 32.2% upper-intermediate (10). The learners' last college degree was either BA or MA, and all were selected based on convenient sampling method as a result of the researchers' invitation to take part in the study. Prior to the study, the volunteers completed a letter of consent.

4.2 Instruments

A questionnaire entitled *Difficulties Encountered by EFL learners When Writing Task*, adopted and adapted from Al Badi (2015), a written structured interview, and an essay task were the instruments of this study. After piloting, the questionnaire was used to collect data on learners' writing difficulties, strategies, and also their attitudes towards writing. The questionnaire has four sections: 1) biodata, 2) participants' writing strategies and behaviour with 12 items in Likert scale from *Always* to *Never*, 3)

learners' attitude toward writing task in English with 2 items, and 4) participants' difficulties in writing with one multiple-choice item and the possibility to choose more than one response. To triangulate the data collected via the questionnaire, an interview was also conducted. The researchers sent via email the three-items interview to the participants and they were supposed to write down the answer. In addition, to check the areas of difficulty of the learners in practice, they were also asked to write an essay with the topic given to them within a time limit of 40 minutes. The task was assigned not to be fewer than 250 words and about a topic they have not already done as their homework. The essays were then assessed under the supervision of the researchers, using *Virtual Writing Tutor* software - an online grammar check website or proof reader which helps writers score essays, besides other services - which provides detailed explanations and scores on different aspects of students' writing. This could help to extract the areas of writing difficulty they actually have in their writing performance.

4.3 Data collection procedures

The participants of the study were EFL students who were volunteered to take part in the project under the supervision of the manager of an English institute. Those accepted to take part in the study signed a letter of consent. The questionnaire was, then, administered to them. 40 copies of the questionnaire were sent to them; 31 students returned the questionnaire fully completed. 11 participants either did not return or had missing data which were totally excluded from the study. As soon as they completed the questionnaire, a time was set to send their responses to the interview items. Three items were sent to those who completed the questionnaire. They were supposed to send back the response in written form. As the last stage and to examine the areas of difficulty in the participants' writing tasks, they were assigned a topic to write a task of not fewer than 250 words on a topic which was utterly new to them and had not written about as the class homework. The data collected from the questionnaire, interview, and the writing task were then analysed to answer the research questions.

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4.4 Data analysis

To analyze the data, frequency analysis was utilized in this study. There were three groups of data to be analyzed as collected by the questionnaire: participants' writing strategies and behavior, learners' attitude toward writing task in English, and participants' difficulties in writing. In addition, the students' written interviews were thoroughly examined in which learners have to answer three questions in details about the strategies they used or other difficulties they encountered during writing and also explain the reasons behind their viewpoint regarding writing. Ninteen students' essays were analyzed with respect to students' scores on different components of their writings to compare the results with their self-perceived writing difficulties in the questionnaire and the written interview.

5. Results
5.1 Writing strategies and behavior

The data collected from the second section of the questionnaire dealt with the writing strategies and behaviors as perceived by the participants.

Table 1
Students' Writing Strategies

Strategies	always	sometimes	rarely	never
1. I write for pleasure in English in my free time	3	10	6	11
2. I go back to check carefully the task requirements and instructions.	19	8	4	---
3. I ask my teacher about the points I am not sure about or I need help with.	11	15	2	3
4. I discuss what I am going to write with other participants.	3	10	6	12
5. I brainstorm and write down ideas about the topic.	16	13	2	---
6. I make an outline including the main points of my task.	13	14	3	1
7. I go back to my writing to revise the content and make my ideas clearer.	19	9	3	---
8. I go back to my writing to edit the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation.	22	7	2	---
9. In my tasks, in general, I pay more attention to the language (e.g., spelling, grammar, vocabulary) than to the content (e.g., ideas, organisation)	6	15	7	3

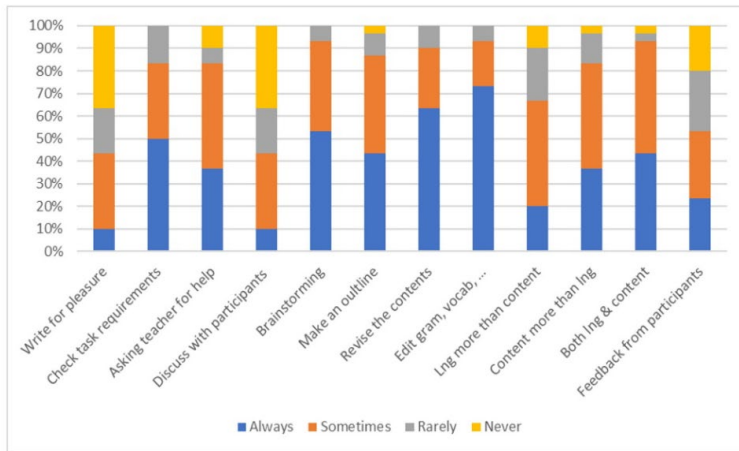|				
10. I pay more attention to the content	11	14	4	2
11. I give almost equal attention to both the language (e.g., spelling, grammar, vocabulary) and the content (e.g., ideas, organisation)	13	16	1	1
12. I discuss my work with other participants to get feedback on how I can improve it.	7	9	8	7

Figure 1. Learners' self-perceived writing strategies and behaviors

A closer look at the data in Table 1 and Figure 1 reveals that a few strategies have been claimed to be adopted by the majority of the participants. They include *going back to their writing to edit the language* (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation); *going back to their writing to revise the content and make their ideas clearer; brainstorming and writing down their ideas;* and *checking the task requirements and instruction*. The results of the qualitative content analysis of the learners' response in the written interview also confirmed that the themes such as *revising and checking both language and content errors*, *brainstorming*, and *idea development* were among the most frequent themes. On the other hand, there were some strategies and behaviors which were rarely used by them. These items included *writing for pleasure*; *discussing with other participants about what*

they are going to write; and *discussing with other participants to get feedback on how they can improve*. Moreover, the data from the written interviews reiterated that none of the above strategies were among the extracted themes except *checking the task requirements* including both structure and content which were stated by only three learners.

Other strategies and behaviors which were in between included *giving equal attention to both language and content*, *paying more attention to content than the language*; *making an outline* (the main points of the task); *asking the teacher about the points they are not sure*; and *paying more attention to language than the content*. In the learners' interviews, there were two different strategies mentioned by only few of them, i.e., *reading about the topic in advance* and *paraphrasing*.

5.2 Attitudes towards writing tasks

The third section of the questionnaire collected the participants' attitudes towards writing task. As it is summarized in Figure 2, the majority of the participants (58%) believed that writing task was either *very difficult* or *difficult* while few students (9.67%) considered it *easy*.
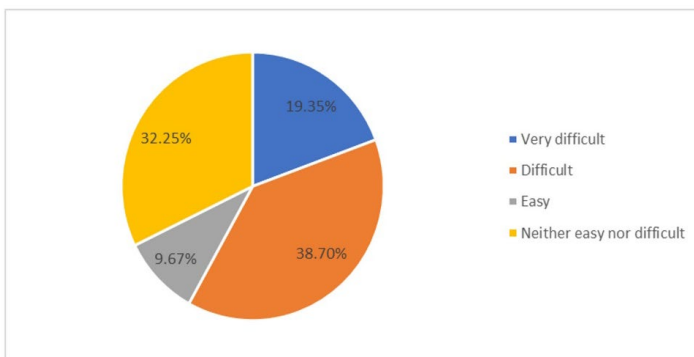

Figure 2. Learners' attitude towards writing

The content analysis of the learners' response to the question "Do you find writing tasks in English difficult? Why or why not?" in the written interview, showed similar results as well. The majority of the students (about 18) found writing skill as *difficult* or *very difficult* while ten participants said it was *neither difficult nor easy*, and only three students believed that writing is *easy* or *not difficult*.

The participants who confirmed writing was a difficult task, referred mostly to *idea generation* as a very troublesome issue. The other two factors that caused difficulty for the students were *lack of proper instruction and practice on writing rules and strategies*, *choosing proper vocabulary and collocations*, *spelling*, and *grammar*. Additionally, few students acknowledged other factors such as *being in line with task expectation*, *general knowledge of the topics*, *time management*, and *negative transfer from Persian to English.*

5.3 Writing difficulties

The data collected from the fourth section of the questionnaire described the types of difficulties they perceived in different components of the writing tasks.
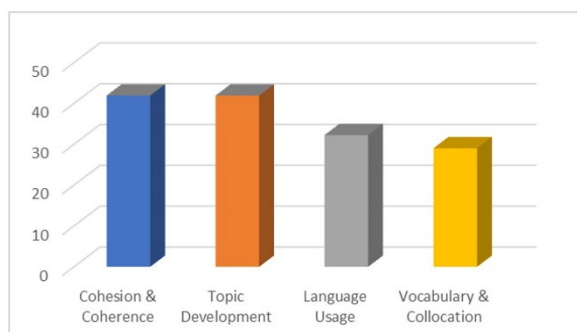

Figure 3. The most common writing difficulties

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As Figure 3 shows the most problematic components of writing for the participants have been *cohesion and coherence* and *topic development* (the degree of answering the task and developing ideas). Furthermore, *language usage* (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) and *vocabulary and collocation* were almost of the same range of difficulty after the above factors. One more writing difficulty, except the above four choices in the questionnaire, was *time management* which was mentioned by the respondents.

The results of the data collected through the interview revealed more or less similar factors in spite of the differences in degrees. That is, *topic development* and *cohesion and coherence* were the most frequent difficulties with 19 and 10 times mentioning them in the interview data corpus. Besides, *vocabulary and collocations* and *language usage* (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) were perceived to be less frequent problems with only 9 and 7 students mentioning them respectively. Other problems stated by some participants were also *managing time*, *controlling stress*, *personal carelessness*, *lack of reading* and *low writing practice* which could all be rather personal issues.

As another phase of the study, the students were requested to write a task to actually investigate the common areas of difficulty among a number of participants who completed the questionnaire and answered the interview items. 19 students wrote an essay on the same topic and after analysing and scoring, their areas of difficulties were compared with those in the questionnaire. The results were quite similar in terms of the data collected from the other two instruments, namely the questionnaire and interview.

Table 2

Mean Score of Participants in Writing Task Performance

Areas of difficulty	Cohesion and coherence	Topic development	Language usage	Vocabulary and collocations

Mean score	5.15	5.73	6.57	6.68

Table 2 clearly indicates that participants' major areas of difficulty were *cohesion and coherence* and *topic development*. This confirmed the results of data analysis of the questionnaire and interview.

6. Discussion

Looking back at the research questions raised at the beginning of the study, we aimed to investigate how the questions were answered as a result of the findings reported above.

The first research question probes into the major writing strategies and behaviours of the EFL learners. The results demonstrated that they frequently use strategies related to *editing the language* again, *revising the contents*, *brainstorming and writing down their ideas,* and *checking the task requirements and instructions*. This is to some extent in contrast with the results of Ceylan (2019), indicating that most students lacked basic writing strategies such as pre-writing, drafting and editing which may help the participants focus on a goal, brainstorming, organising ideas and writing in a unified form. However, the result is consistent with the study by Uba and Souidi (2020) who claimed that generating and organising ideas is the major writing difficulty of the students. In their study on argumentative writing, Ozfidan and Mitchell (2020) also confirmed the organisation/structure, content, and development among others as the major difficulties and recommended that teachers should teach writing strategies. Students rarely discuss with other students or they often do not tend to ask their teacher questions about the points they are not sure about. The reason can be a sense of embarrassment or lack of appropriate interpersonal relationships with their teacher (Ceylan, 2019).

In the second research question, the EFL learners' attitudes toward writing task and the reasons behind them were delved into. Quite a large

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number of students viewed writing task as either *very difficult* or *difficult* which is in line with the researchers' teaching experience and their close contact with the students of varying proficiency levels. The main reasons from students' point of view were the poor instruction by the educational system on writing strategies and the lack of pedagogically adept choice of word and structure. The novel finding is that a few reasons mentioned are personal rather than pedagogical like *time management* and *general knowledge*. This is to some extent in line with the results gained from Ceylan (2019), indicating that students usually do not have enough general knowledge about the topics and suggesting that "they lack basic research skills necessary for a university level student" (p. 154).

A few students also stated in the interview that they preferred to read about the topic before writing which is similar to Soltani and Kheirzadeh's (2017) study indicating that students have positive attitudes towards reading-to-write since they believed in the positive effects of reading on their writings.

The third research question inquired about the most common writing difficulties as perceived by EFL learners. The results of triangulating the data extracted from the questionnaire and interview demonstrates that there are similarities regarding the areas of difficulty. That is, *topic development* and *cohesion and coherence* on the one side and *language usage* and *vocabulary and collocations* on the other side are the most and least frequent difficulties respectively. In terms of the areas of difficulty this is in line with the study by Ariyanti and Fitriana's (2017) findings where it ended up with more or less the same areas such as cohesion and coherence, paragraph organisations, grammatical terms, vocabulary misspelling and dictions although they are not similar with respect to the degrees. A similar study conducted in Iran by Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020), likewise confirms that students

have serious difficulties in grammar, punctuation, spelling, word choice, negative L1 transfer, organisation, writing genre, and collocations. Moreover, findings in Al Badi (2015), similarly revealed that the most common students' difficulties are related to *cohesion and coherence* and *language use*. Besides, Belkheir and Benyelles (2017), point out that cohesion and coherence, L1 transfer, low writing practice and lack of reading are major sources of difficulties which were stated in the interview by some learners as their difficulties in this study as well.

The last question of the study tapped into the most common areas of writing difficulties appeared in their essays they wrote. It indicated that students faced problems mostly in *cohesion and coherence*, following by *topic development*, *language usage,* and *vocabulary and collocations* respectively which is expectedly identical to the one reported by the self-perceived questionnaire. In a similar study by Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) which was done to 33 students in Indonesia, approximately homogeneous results were achieved as *cohesion and coherence* was between the major areas of difficulty while *diction* and *vocabulary misspelling* were the minor errors appeared in students' essays. In addition, Belkheir and Benyelles (2017), also stated that EFL learners encounter difficulties mainly on coherence and cohesion while writing essays.

After triangulating the data from instruments, namely questionnaire and interview – on writing difficulties and having them under close scrutiny, we found out that although the areas of difficulty are the same in both instruments, they have different levels of priority. While *cohesion and coherence* and *topic development* are at the same level of difficulty in the questionnaire, the results of the essay writing show that *cohesion and coherence* is the most difficult area for the students, and *topic development* is the most frequent problem in the data gathered from the interview.

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Additionally, *vocabulary and collocation* were the least difficult areas as perceived by the students in the questionnaire as well as their task performance; however, the least troublesome area was *language usage* in the data from interview.

7. Conclusion

The study probes into the challenges, attitude, and strategies of EFL learners' writing skill as one of the thorniest issues in the process of language learning. The study concludes by arguing that while students' major areas of difficulty are *cohesion and coherence* and *topic development*, the minor areas of *language usage* (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) and *vocabulary and collocations* are troublesome as well. The frequent strategies and behaviors are *brainstorming*, *checking the task requirements*, *editing* and *revising*, but *writing for pleasure* and *discussing with other participants* are not well attended. In terms of attitude, they unanimously considered it a rather difficult skill.

One concern about the findings is that since it is performed in the EFL context of Iran by analyzing 31 intermediate students, it is essential to repeat it in other contexts with more participants of different levels to have a more generalizable result. Moreover, the present results are extracted using the questionnaire administered in the study; therefore, one can come up with different results if other instruments are used.

Thus, regarding the data gained from students' self-perceived questionnaire, interviews and analysis of their essays, teachers are suggested to provide EFL learners with more opportunity for practice and equip them in a step-by-step manner with the needed strategies and rules in a process-based approach in order to focus on various components of writing. In addition, it is highly beneficial to provide the students with enough relevant input about the topic and the related language items through assigning reading tasks before

asking them to write about a topic. Teachers are further advised to include *writing for pleasure* into the daily syllabus of the students and encourage them to collaborate and exchange ideas with other students. This can not only improve the idea development and organization but also change their attitude toward writing skill. The policy makers are also recommended to pay due attention to devoting more time to teach writing skill in the English language learning curriculum so as to encourage them to write sufficiently and efficiently. Future studies should aim to replicate the present study with larger samples, different age ranges, various proficiency levels, writing genres, and writing sections of the international examinations like IELTS and TOEFL.

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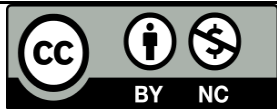
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