
Psycho-dynamics of EFL Learners' Writing Skills Development: Do Dynamic Assessment Modalities Matter?

Seyed Hamed Etemadi¹, Gholam-Reza Abbasian^{2*}, Abdollah Baradaran³

¹PhD Candidate, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

^{2*}Associate Professor, Department of English, Imam Ali University, Tehran, Iran

³Associate Professor, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

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Abstract

Constructive feedback could play an essential role in writing skill development. This research study explored English as Foreign Language Learners (EFL) learners under the functions of dynamic assessment intervention modalities (i.e., facilitative vs. authoritative) to investigate their writing skills development. To this end, this qualitative study run based on semi-structured interviews and written protocols data collected from 120 Iranian advanced EFL learners was designed to elicit an in-depth understanding of the participants' thoughts during writing tasks. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data from both sources (i.e., interviews and written protocols) revealed that: 1) authoritative modality works more effectively in facilitating the processes of opinion expression and effective revision and correction, 2) facilitative modality contributes more to developing critical and reflective thinking processes in writing. In light of the facilitative modality, the learners can move from individualistic culture to a collaborative one among teachers and learners. That is why they become more self-regulated and can shift from object regulation to self-regulation. Then, EFL learners' psycho-dynamic actions are a function of DA modalities.

Keywords: Dynamic Assessment; Intervention; Psycho-dynamics; Writing Skill

INTRODUCTION

Since assessment and testing are both crucial parts of teaching and learning, they offer teachers essential information about their students' language skills and help them to make professional judgments and decisions within their classes (Bachman 1990). According to (Poehner 2008) assessment plays two fundamental roles in education. Firstly, it is used for evaluation and decision-making, and secondly, it acts as a teaching device, summative and formative, respectively. While the latter refers to that kind of assessment that provides information needed for teachers and students. Despite the significant role of the former one in educational programs, its focus

is on the product of language teaching. It creates awareness in our teachers about students' understanding and makes helpful changes in instruction. According to (Black and Wiliam 1998), formative assessment incorporates teacher observation, classroom discussion, and analysis of student work, including homework and tests that can make them do necessary adjustments like re-teaching, creating more opportunities for learner involvement, designing new tasks, and providing feedback. As another alternative assessment alongside formative assessments, Dynamic Assessment (DA) is a newly arrived tradition that has been discussed in the educational literature as a professional form of assessment for three decades or more. Highlighting what a student knows and can do

*Corresponding Author's Email:
gabbasian@gmail.com

now, DA concentrates mainly on what a student can acquire in contrast to formal assessment. It joins language teaching and assessment, which are previously thought to be separate from one another. If the teachers see how the students develop their skills, their assessment should not focus on the final achievement. Instead, it should be on students' achievement process in the classroom. Accordingly, the results change into internalization process which makes the students solve the problems independently.

Among several approaches to teaching writing, DA appears to be the greatest practical one because it underlines the importance of interaction. The teacher acts as a reader and an expert helping learners to grow.

The writing process is essential because making meaning with written language is not achievable by looking backward from finished pages (Black and Wiliam 1998). Meaning is achieved if the students learn how to focus on the process. Therefore, according to (Richards 2008), the writing courses should be designed to be aware of different stages in writing including pre-writing, actual writing, and post-writing. In other words, they should focus on procedures for resolving deficiencies, discovering/expressing ideas in writing, and revising developed texts—typically, apart from any cultural, educational, or sociopolitical contexts in which writing might take place.

In process writing, the teacher does not ask students to write and receives the product for correction without any intervention in the writing process itself. The process approach focuses more on the various classroom activities that help develop language use; brainstorming, discussion, and re-writing (Ferris and Hedgcock 2013). Therefore, providing intervention is an irresistible need for helping the process of learning (Guo, Yang et al. 2009) (Negueruela and Lantolf 2006) underlined that most EFL teachers ask students to write a composition on a particular topic but refuse to help while writing (p.45). As evident in the traditional paradigm, the product-based approach, focusing on composition or an essay plus a vital concern for overuse seemed to be the golden rule (Khwaileh

1991). Therefore, in English as Foreign Language (EFL) writing, the confusing problem in almost all writing classrooms is that teacher's feedback is not included in students' language learning process (French and Rhoder 1992). Giving feedback can take several forms, but (Saxena, El Zein et al. 2018) study on English writing has recommended that feedback and revision has a noteworthy role in writing. Because of that various typologies like (Min 2008) typology have been suggested. Based on it, revision writing types can be addition, deletion, substitution, permutation, distribution, consolidation, and re-ordering that this study focused on the first four types.

Also, to provide valid interventions, this study benefited from Heron's (1976) Six-Category Intervention Analysis (SCIA). The two main categories of SCIA include authoritative and facilitative interventions that have been mentioned here briefly.

Authoritative: The teacher plays an assertive role and takes the whole responsibility to give information, challenge the learners, and authorize what should be done in the classroom.

Facilitative: The teacher elicits ideas that can help them reach their own solutions or decisions. The teacher is seeking to enable the learner to become more autonomous.

Informed by DA's usefulness and significant contribution to writing itself, the present study would hope to discover the possible effect of DA authoritative and facilitative interventions on EFL learners' planning in pre-writing stage of a process-writing course. In other words, the focus of this study is more on the psycho-dynamics of EFL learners developing writing skills in the sense that such cognitive and mental processes may be the functions of the modalities of DA. Moreover, reviewing the related literature revealed that few studies (e.g. (Han, Nakanishi et al. 2007); (Mendonsa, Murthy et al. 2018) yet been conducted to explore the impact of authoritative/facilitative intervention dynamic assessment on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. That is why the

following questions were designed to be answered.

- *How do Iranian EFL learners proceed while developing their writing ability in the light of authoritative intervention dynamic assessment?*
- *How do Iranian EFL learners proceed while developing their writing ability in the light of facilitative intervention dynamic assessment?*

METHODS

Participants

The participants of this study included a sample of 120 advanced level Iranian EFL learners with an age range of 18 to 30. These participants were selected from DIAKO Language School; in Tehran, Iran, where one of the researchers was both a teacher and a supervisor. The participants were selected via convenient sampling and informed about the purpose of the tests. They were all Persian native speakers.

INSTRUMENTS

TOEFL descriptors & rubrics: In writing assignments, the essays were analyzed according to the TOEFL checklist considering the contextual language such as sentence construction, spelling, punctuation, and clarity (TOEFL descriptors & rubrics, 2015). Moreover, four other areas of language (response to the task, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and Vocabulary) were considered in analyzing the essays.

Semi-structured Interviews: (Negari and Rezaabadi 2012) and three other experts' judgment were used in the process treatments in order to monitor and explore the mental process of the participants while receiving each instruction to develop the dimensions of writing revision and the writing quality in general. This gave researchers/teachers insight to make thought processes as explicit as possible during task performance. The interview questions were 15 open-ended questions based on a predetermined interview schedule to elicit an in-depth understanding of the participants' thoughts.

Written Protocol: In addition to the interviews, written protocol was designed and adapted from (Safdari and Fathi 2020) to evaluate the mental process of the students while receiving each instruction as to developing the dimensions of writing performance.

Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness has become an essential concept in conducting qualitative studies (Yaghchi, Ghafouri et al. 2016). (Shenton 2004) proposed three criteria for trustworthiness including "credibility", "transferability", and 'confirmability' that were addressed for the sake of this study. To assure credibility the data collected through semi-structured interviews and written protocols were triangulated. Also, to corroborate the transferability of the investigation, 15 EFL learners with the same characteristics as the prominent participants were selected with the hope that the findings derived from them could be transferred from one setting to the other. Also, during the data analysis stages and immediately after generating the initial codes and emerging themes, these codes and themes and the raw data were compared in terms of the degree of agreement. To address the conformability of the data, the researchers made full details of data based on what they had made their statements or interpretations with the participants to confirm, modify or even reject their interpretations and findings.

Procedure

Concerning treatment sessions, the teachers and the primary researchers, went through 12 sessions of 120 minutes focusing on students' writing assignments.

In the first group, the language learners received authoritative intervention DA, whereby, the teacher provided an authoritative verbal language through the three categories of prescriptive, informative and confronting interventions throughout the instruction. The focus of the instruction was on the process of writing of the learners focusing on writing quality.

In the second group, the overriding concern was the facilitative verbal intervention including:

Conducting Interviews: 20 volunteers from among the participants were selected to take part in the interview. Before recording the interviews, the researchers told each interviewee that the interviews would not affect their grades. In addition, they were informed that there would be no right or wrong answers and that whatever answers they gave would not affect their score. The interviews were conducted individually mainly in English, but Persian for accuracy in some cases. The interview time for each respondent varied.

Performing the Written Protocols: The written protocol, for determining real writing strategies of the participants when they were writing the essays, was conducted for the participants individually. Students had to do this process for two different essays to capture their online thinking and actual use of strategies. Before the written protocols, the participants were provided with think-aloud training. In addition, students would be given sufficient time to write key words and phrases to process them not allowing for too much time to pass before they were too far removed from their immediate thoughts. During the written protocols, data were gathered. All gathered data in this phase of study were transcribed, analyzed, and coded.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were collected at one time after teacher intervention in each session. As stated, this qualitative study aimed to probe into developing the learners' writing ability during the authoritative and facilitative intervention dynamic assessments. Also, to analyze qualitative findings from interviews or written protocols of this study, collected data were used to provide meaningful findings, explanations and interpretations of the learner's writing development throughout the treatment sessions. Data analysis, as in any qualitative research, should co-occur with the data collection. Therefore, for data analysis Braun and

Clark's (2006) six phases thematic analysis was implemented.

RESULTS

This research probed into the mental process of the participants while developing their writing ability in the light of authoritative/ facilitative intervention dynamic assessment. To this end, the results of the semi-structured interviews and writing protocols were analyzed based on a theme-based approach. In an authoritative intervention dynamic assessment group, limited learners' collaboration indicated less classrooms interaction, hindering their writing development. During such intervention, students dealt with compare and contrast essays by which they could go through generating and organizing ideas; and preparing drafts. They could also modify writing at the word, sentence, and paragraph levels with the help of teachers' feedback.

Moreover, the instructor gave additional feedback to show the strengths and weaknesses in their essays that was considered as a continuous summative assessment. Most of the students argued that they planned what they would write in their minds before starting to write their writing tasks, as one of the students stated,

Sic ["After taking the treatment, first, I think about what to write. I think about the topic. I pay attention to the topic prior to write. I think about what I can write about the topic. I also dream about it, that is, I push the limits of my imagination."]

Moreover, after determining the main topic, they decided on the main character, place, and time to predict the story afterwards. Thus, in this group, most interviewed learners had a mental preparation process before beginning to write. On the contrary, students in control group spent this thinking process focusing on the story elements. For this reason, it was concluded that the authoritative intervention dynamic assessment aided the students to have a more planned thinking process in the prewriting preparation stage and put forward their opinions more effectively. This implies that such students did perform the writing process

in a systematic and controlled way. Another participant points out that

Sic [“... I check the punctuation marks to see whether I wrote them correctly. I check the paragraphs, and correct the mistakes if I see any. I mean, I spend some effort ...,” and “... I read it again. If I don't like it, I correct the parts that do not seem to work well.”]

This quotation indicates that, after the authoritative intervention dynamic assessment, most of the students re-read their stories after they finished writing and corrected the mistakes if they see any. Such students mainly evaluated their writings in terms of the content, page layout and spelling without noticing. Thus, the finding showed that they followed the revision and correction phases more effectively due to the authoritative intervention dynamic assessment. Other interviewees maintained that they would benefit more from authoritative intervention dynamic assessment since it is fairer, less stressful and provides an accurate picture of their abilities. Concerning the nature of authoritative intervention dynamic assessment, the interviewees agreed that it is an interactive and flexible assessment and immediate feedback is given to the assessed learner. The majority of the respondents believed that the experience was quite enjoyable.

Sic [“Exactly, that is an extraordinary approach, which really can help the students not only in their writing but also in their communication and communication techniques” (student 5). “Sure, I have enjoyed and learned the writing revision types that

our teacher taught us and I also understood the different parts of essay and how to write them well” (student 2). “The authoritative instruction can help students to develop their academic writing especially writing revision types” (student 3)].

When the interviewees were asked to pinpoint the positive role of authoritative instruction, they stated that the experience could facilitate the acquisition of different writing revision types.

Sic [“In my perspective, authoritative instruction or approach plays a crucial role in teaching writing revision types because it familiarizes the students with different types of revisions in writing. Therefore, it can facilitate and enhance the acquisition of various types of revisions” (student 8). “It is a fast and efficient way to facilitate the learning process and the students can learn better. So, it can build the learners' knowledge in this regard to write different types of essays well” (student 2). “This instruction is a kind of instructional approach that helps the students learn different types of genres and essays to master them in writing skills” (student 1)].

The main themes were identified for this type of instruction to capture related aspects based on the interviews and written protocols. To this end, the gathered data excerpts for each theme were refereed and organized into a coherent and detailed analysis. Figure 1 below presents a visual representation of the thematic map.

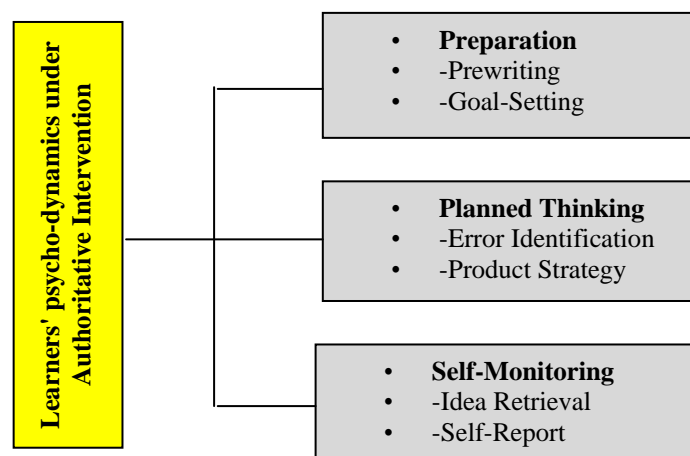


Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Thematic Map in Authoritative Intervention

The second concern of this research was to examine how Iranian EFL learners developed their writing ability in the light of facilitative.

Intervention dynamic assessment. To answer this question, the findings of the semi-structured interviews and writing protocols were analyzed to indicate that the instructor's way of marking or indicating errors in the writing drafts could definitely affect the students' progress in their writing. It was also concluded that peer review activity, which included formative assessment seemed to have significant role in the process writing intervention. The peer review activity allowed students to read and revise their work and the work of others. In fact, the developmental process was based on the learners' decision making, language competency and trust. Moreover, there had been a focus on both paragraph structure and development which could manage a critical and reflective process of writing among the EFL students. In this way, the process changed from an individualistic focus to a collaborative culture between teachers and students. Also, after being exposed to the instruction of facilitative intervention dynamic assessment students felt being self-regulated when their learning development was socially mediated. That is to say, first, students' learning was object-regulated when they were required to produce compare and contrast essays and they needed to complete the final writing draft. Then, writing development was observed particularly later on when other regulations such as instructor's feedback and peer feedback supported students' writing. A move towards self-regulation was evident when students were observed to develop confidence in using the final draft and work independently to review their essay and the work of their peers.

Regarding the facilitative instruction of different revision types to enrich their knowledge, more than half of the interviewees claimed that it was beneficial for them and improved their writing style.

Sic ["Yes, as experiencing is always good and beneficial, it was very useful for me because I learnt the new genres that I hadn't learnt before. I have gotten familiarized and can enhance our knowledge of various types

of the revisions" (student 4). "Of course, it improved my writing different types of essay in the class" (3). "Exactly, I have learned different types of the genre while studying in this writing course" (student 6)].

Almost half of the participants complained that the instructors do not often sufficiently elaborate upon the writing revision types.

Sic ["In Iran, most of EFL teachers don't concentrate on teaching various types of writing revision types and they don't employ the instruction or approach in their writing classes. Therefore, we don't have much background knowledge regarding to different types and we are not capable to write a high quality essay" (student 10). "In my point of view, teachers in Iran most try to teach English based on their own knowledge and strategies. They think that they know everything and try to teach many things to their students. They don't use different techniques to facilitate the learning of writing" (student 3). They mostly focus on the writing process rather than the instruction or other approaches to teach academic courses" (student 8)].

Finally, the interviewees highlighted some challenges and problems the students faced throughout the writing course. Less than half of the students thought that they had encountered several issues and hardship of writing.

Sic ["At first, I didn't know how to manage time while writing essays because I had difficulty in getting started but by practicing a lot in the class and at home, I tried to solve all my challenges and problems in writing course (student 7). "I faced lots of problems at the beginning of the writing course because I was not familiar with revision types to use them appropriately throughout writing essays but later on by understanding the new revisions it has been solved" (student 4). "Of course, my writing ability was not good and I had low level of diction therefore, I had lots of difficulty to complete the writing task in the class and submit it to my instructor on time" (student 2)].

In sum, the gathered for three main themes including Preparation, Planned Thinking, and Self-monitoring are orga-

nized into a coherent and detailed analysis. Figure 2 shows a visual representation of

the themes and sub-themes in Facilitative intervention.

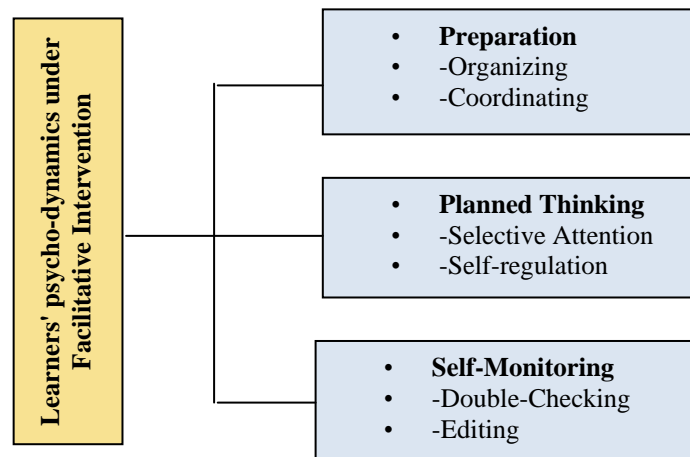


Figure 2

Visual Representation of the Thematic Map in Facilitative Intervention

DISCUSSIONS

The current study explored how Iranian EFL learners developed their writing ability in the light of the intervention dynamic assessment modalities. Concerning the effect of authoritative intervention dynamic assessment, the findings showed that students had more planned thinking process in the prewriting preparation stage, and they systematically performed the writing process. Also, the results indicated that after facilitative intervention dynamic assessment instruction the students became more self-regulated learners in a way that they moved from object-regulation and other-regulation towards self-regulation. So, following the literature on the implementation of modalities of dynamic assessment, the present study found that the dynamic assessment helped the learners develop the ability to internalize the concepts and structures and reach the point of self-regulation.

The explanations for the findings of this study seems to be related to the fact that the facilitative dynamic assessment might be a more efficient means to account for both psychological processes involved in learning and for diagnosing suitable kinds of mediation and instruction (Guba and Lincoln 1981). Facilitative dynamic assessment may assist teachers to offer students appropriate kinds of feedback and help them find sources of their linguistic

problems. Additionally, getting the whole class doing a series of one-to-one interactions, the facilitative dynamic assessment might allow learners to receive an instruction that is adjusted to their particular needs. Therefore, the results are consistent with the (Poehner 2008) findings, who confirmed the positive effect of DA on second language learning, with interactionist approaches to DA. The study's findings confirmed the results of other studies (e.g. (Safa and Jafari 2017); (Gibbons 2003); (Hidri 2019); (Lidz 2002); (Lantolf and Poehner 2004) considering the better performance of the learners in joint activities and through mediation. The results supported the argument made by (Shabani 2018) that the goal of instruction should be to bring to light the invisible and maturing abilities. Such findings, support the quality of instruction and type of mediations and feedback offered during the assessment. Also, our claim in this respect is in line with the results of studies by (Rieber and Wollock 1997), (Rahimi, Kushki et al. 2015), (Hassaskhah and Haghparast 2012) (Besharati 2018), (Nassaji and Swain 2000), (Rahimi, Kushki et al. 2015), (Shrestha and Coffin 2012), (Miao and Mian 2013), (Shrestha 2013), (Barzegar and Azarizad 2013, Malmeeer and Zoghi 2014). They realized that dynamic assessment could contribute to developing learners' writing ability and language sub-skill like grammar.

CONCLUSION

The sociocultural theory deals with social interactions which involve conversations and dialogues that make students face enormous inputs to create output to carry out the intended messages. According to (Malmeier and Zoghi 2014) this theory considers language learners not as input processors or output producers, but as speakers/hearers in developmental processes found in communication. Thus, one of the central aspects of Vygotskian perspectives is mediation. According to (Gibbons 2003) mediation is considered to utilize tools and signs and interactions for most individuals. It is also believed that people only communicate with the surrounding world through mediations. SCT highlights cognitive functioning and how it is entangled with cultural and historical events.

DA is rooted in the concept of ZPD in Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory (ST) in terms of one's abilities, which is inconsistent rather than consistent. In the dynamic assessment, the interaction between teachers/assessors and learners creates their ZPD where the potential learning of learners arises. In ST's view, Vygotsky regards tests/assessments as insufficient since the learner's problem-solving skills are inadequate, arguing instead that the learner's progress in language learning and a more competent and mature person was a much more practical way to explore abilities of the learners. He also focused on the responsibility of the more mature counterpart to provide constructive mediations or scaffolding.

One of the main criticisms of traditional assessment is that we cannot continue to assume that learners' performance is static. (Lantolf 2000) pointed out that very often L2 teachers, were frustrated by static assessments because activities were "distinct from, and perhaps even at odds with, the goals of teaching" (p. 4). (Poehner 2008) proposed the "learning test concept" which undertakes the fact that learning must occur within the test. That is test-takers should receive feedback during or after testing on their responses to the questions tested, and clues where they make errors.

The literature review showed that learning writing posed significant difficulty for EFL/ESL students, and one of the particular methods, that may assist them in coming up with this problem is DA. As mentioned earlier, DA, claims that teaching and assessment should not be separated, yet, they must be integrated. This integration embedded within the assessment procedure finds out individuals' abilities and leads them to higher practices. So, many DA proponents are more interested in assessing a learner's learning potential than the learner's final test score to collaborate to accomplish a learning task and the teacher has to be attentive to both the quality of the intellectual guidance provided and the support for individuals to adapt and change in their non-static development process (Thorndike 1913).

Elucidating participants' mental processes in authoritative and facilitative intervention, the findings displayed that the dynamic assessment of students taught through authoritative intervention could efficiently use their opinions. They also did revision and correction in more effective ways, although they had less interaction throughout the treatment sessions. Students in the traditional intervention classroom received feedback from the instructor when the essays were done, which was considered a summative assessment through product-writing.

In contrast, the results indicated that the developmental process in facilitative intervention dynamic assessment instruction was based on the learners' decision making, language competency and trust. The activities developed a critical and reflective writing process among the students, changing the individualistic focus to a collaborative culture among teachers and students. So, the students became more self-regulated learners, and moved from object-regulation through other-regulation towards self-regulation.

The pedagogical value of DA lies in the fact that its findings can be utilized for the development of students' learning plans with various demands. The goal of testing is to assess the teaching program and the improvement of the learners; the current study inspires the test designers to bring about changes in

assessment, developing tests to impact the quality of the teaching profession and enhancing the learners' ability to be creative in their test performance. Further, the utilization of the related materials should not be disregarded because the instructional materials developed are of great significance in any educational context. Based on the findings of this study, the instructional materials developers for vocabulary courses (e.g., writings) or workshops can focus on the students' needs to make language courses more appropriate to their needs.

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Biodata

Seyed Hamed Etemadi is Ph.D. candidate in TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch. He is an applied linguistics researcher and has published some articles in Dynamic Assessment. He is both supervisor and director of studies at one of the language schools in Tehran. He is also willing to develop and apply theories of language learning including assessment and feedback in his pedagogical plans.

Email: etemadi.tefl@gmail.com

Dr. Gholam-Reza Abbasian is an Associate Professor at Department of English, Imam Ali University. He currently works at Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch and has published several articles in Education and Assessment. He is also interested in Neurolinguistics and Psycholinguistics. His most recent publication is "Peer- Coaching,

EFL Teacher's Professional Identity Development and Students' Academic Achievements".

Email: *gabbasian@gmail.com*

Dr. Abdollah Baradaran is an Associate Professor at Department of Foreign Languages, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University. He was head of the English Department for PH. D and MA (1393-1398). Also, he has published several articles in linguistics, testing, and material development. He is interested in CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis), too.

Email: *a.baradaran@iauctb.ac.ir*