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Research Paper

## Epistemological and Ecological Perception of the Roots of EFL Writing Problems: A Phenomenology and a Path Analysis

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### Abstract

Delving into the sources of foreign language writing problems is usually neglected. This necessitates more scrutiny of finding out where these problems originate from. To this end, the present study sought to follow a two-fold aim: finding the roots of the Iranian EFL learners' writing problems, and discovering how these roots are interconnected with each other and come up with a corresponding model. In the qualitative part of the study, a phenomenological research tradition was adopted and 20 EFL learners were selected through purposive sampling. In the quantitative part, through convenience sampling 120 language learners from an English language school in Gorgan, Iran, were selected to be the participants of the study. A semi-structured interview and a researcher-developed questionnaire were used as the instruments for data collection. The results obtained from the analysis of data revealed that writing problems originate from various sources, mainly linguistic, personal, epistemological and ecological, and enjoy a model in which epistemological, linguistic and ecological sources have direct effects and personal source has indirect effect on writing problems. Recognition of epistemological and ecological sources as a novel finding can make teachers revisit their view of these less-approached issues.

**Keywords:** *Writing problems, epistemology, ecology, EFL writing*

### نگاه بوم‌شناسی و شناخت‌شناسی به ریشه مشکلات مهارت نوشتاری زبان آموزان ایرانی روش تحقیق پدیده‌شناسی به روش

**Path Analysis** بطور معمول نسبت به ریشه مشکلات مربوط به مهارت‌های نوشتاری زبان آموزان خارجی کمتر اهمیت داده می‌شود. این ضرورت باعث کنکاش بیشتر برای یافتن منشأ اینگونه مسائل می‌شود. این مقاله دو هدف اصلی را با خود دنبال دارد. پیدا کردن ریشه‌های مسائل مهارت نوشتاری زبان آموزان انگلیسی ایرانی و اینکه چگونه این مسائل به همدیگر مرتبط هستند که بصورت یک مدل در رابطه با این ریشه‌ها طراحی شده است. در قسمت روش تحقیق کیفی، روش تحقیق پدیده‌شناسی در نظر گرفته شده که 20 زبان آموز انتخاب شده و از طرف دیگر در قسمت روش تحقیق کمی 120 زبان آموز از موسسات زبان‌گرا انتخاب شده است. به همراه مصاحبه محقق خود پرسشنامه‌ای را بعنوان ابزار تحقیق در این مقاله طرح کرده است. نتایج حاصل نشان می‌دهد که مشکلات مرتبط به مهارت نوشتاری زبان آموزان از چندین منبع که اساساً میتواند مشکلات مربوط به زبان‌شناسی، شناخت‌شناسی و بوم‌شناسی باشد ناشی می‌گردد که یک مدل چهارمنبعی مربوط به مسائل و مشکلات مهارت نوشتاری می‌باشد را بوجود می‌آورد که در آن مدل نشان می‌دهد که منابع مربوط به زبان‌شناسی، بوم‌شناسی و شناخت‌شناسی تأثیرات مستقیمی را در مهارت نوشتاری دارند اما منبع مرتبط با شخص‌شناسی تأثیر غیرمستقیمی را داشته است. با تشخیص منابع مربوط به بوم‌شناسی و شناخت‌شناسی بعنوان یک یافته جدید میتواند نگرش معلمان زبان آموز را نسبت به این موضوعات بیشتر کرد.

**واژگان کلیدی:** مشکلات نوشتاری، شناخت‌شناسی، بوم‌شناسی، مهارت نوشتاری زبان آموزان انگلیسی

## Introduction

There has been a steady rise in the amount of attention and focus allocated to writing over the last two decades in English language teaching. This illustrates both its complex nature and its practical use in today's academic communication. Regarding the former, against the multiplicity of conceptualizations, no consensus has been obtained on presenting a certain definition of writing or the factors influencing writing. Given the latter, this trend can be a function of unlimited reasons including the increasing spread of English writing needs all around the world. Nevertheless, writing is still the most challenging skill for EFL learners whether in their small-scale exams such as final exams of language schools or large-scale tests including IELTS or TOEFL. It is noteworthy to remind that a substantial number of EFL learners take writing into account as a difficult task to do and get anxious when exposed to a writing task and thus, often avoid spending time on it (Rankin-Brown, 2006). The problems of writing may get more serious at higher education levels in which the learners need to acquire mastery over writing with more sophistication in order to gain certain academic achievements. This has made a large number of researchers conduct studies on various aspects of this demanding skill. Yet, with its most facets having been investigated, writing has still remained less approached in terms of the roots of learners' problems.

There is ample evidence that writing is a function of linguistic competence such as grammar and vocabulary, discourse competence such as cohesion and coherence, and personal issues such as language aptitude, motivation and anxiety (Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Hyland, 2003; Harmer, 2007). Thus, it is not illogical to maintain that learners' problems can originate from these issues. However, we are not sure whether these are the only sources. In addition, in today's agenda of education, it is discussed that ecology and environmental factors including educational system, socio-economic level of learner, and even ethnic norms and cultural values play their important roles. These issues can be explored under the term of ecological and epistemological facets of education. Since it is unclear whether these facets can be the sources of writing problems, they were addressed in the present study. Thus, the significance of the study lies mainly in its focus on these less-approached angles of writing problems. In fact, probing the ecological and epistemological aspects of writing problems is the novel feature of the study which can be appealing to other researchers. As a result, the findings thereof can be of great importance and make contributions to the body of literature.

## Research Questions

Regarding what was discussed above, the present study sought to answer the following research questions.

RQ1. What are the main sources of Iranian EFL learners' writing problems?

RQ2. How are these sources interconnected to make a corresponding model?

## Literature Review

EFL learners encounter a wide range of problems while writing. These problems can generally be categorized into several groups such as linguistic, psychological, cognitive and pedagogical categories (Haider, 2012). In other words, not only must they cope with linguistic aspects of writing, but also the issues such as cohesion, coherence, accuracy, content, personal factors and methodological issues can cause some obstacles on their way to write properly (Hyland, 2003). Accordingly, if a piece of writing benefits from accepted level of grammar and lexicon, and fails to be coherent and accurate, its audience will have troubles understanding it (Quintero, 2008; Nik, Hamzah, and Rafidee, 2010). On the other hand, personal factors such as writer's self-confidence, anxiety, motivation and language aptitude can cause problems in writing. In addition,

learner's style of learning and cognitive strategies are taken into account too (Ahmad, Khan and Munir, 2013). It is also discussed that problematic writing skills derives from two sources: teacher and learner. On the one hand, teachers fail to have enough pedagogic ability to instruct learner including lack of linguistic knowledge, failing to provide good rapport with learner, not providing appropriate prompt and feedback and lack of enough motivation and passion to his career. On the other hand, learners are sometimes reluctant to go through the process of writing, and some of the writing principles are not clear for them to make sense (Bilal, Tariq, Din, Latif, and Anjum, 2013; Dar and Khan, 2015; Haider, 2012).

Some other factors influencing writing skill have been recognized in the related literature. Some of these factors were concerned with learners' inability to comprehend aim and importance of writing in their future academic accomplishment (Mahboob and Talaat, 2008). In other words, it was believed by learners that writing is an unnecessary skill of language compared to other skills. Besides, there is ample evidence which proves learners' negative attitude toward the methods adopted by their teacher to teach writing. These methods were usually perceived by learners as inefficient and boring (Pineteh, 2013). Furthermore, some other learners maintained that the guided and controlled tasks of writing in which some information on the topic was provided were less problematic than the tasks where they should use from their own knowledge (Gonye, Mareva, Dudu and Sib, 2012; Kalikokha, 2008). This shows that producing content is one of the challenges of writing skill.

Various variables influencing learners' writing skills have been recognized in the previous studies (Bilal, Tariq, Din, Latif and Anjum, 2013; Gonye, Mareva, Dudu, and Sib, 2012; Kalikokha, 2008; Mansoor, 2005; Pineteh, 2013; Rahman, 2002; Siddiqui, 2007). These are related to the incentive of students who are totally ignorant about the aim and importance of their writing in their L2 acquisition. Accordingly, social media, wrong feedback from instructors, students' inability to analyze and evaluate properly, and the big number of students in a class has negative influences on learners' writing ability (Pineteh, 2013). Majority of the learners consider it very problematic to gain enough and useful information, re-structure or retell information, and use a proper formal writing style (Gonye, Mareva, Dudu, and Sib, 2012; Kalikokha, 2008). It is produced by wrong essay writing pedagogy, populated classes, students' bad view towards their academic English class, L1 transfer, and lack of interaction between learners and instructors about the useful stages that require to be followed to cope with these challenges. Shortage of time for instructing writing, insufficient multimedia, large classrooms, wrong pedagogy and learners' weak academic potentialities have been proved to be some of the variables influencing learners' writing ability (Bilal et al., 2013; Butt & Rasul, 2012). Likewise, old course books that neither improve the significance of a writing ability, nor provide any chances, and as a result cannot trigger them (Haider, 2012). Further research criticizes inexperienced instructors motivate learners to follow traditional learning instead of developing useful skills (Mansoor, 2005; Rahman, 2002; Siddiqui, 2007).

Learners' writing skill can be promoted by following their interest, motivation and passion for writing using technology (Graham and Perin, 2007). Likewise, some metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective techniques could also be implemented for making the students know and practically exercise the writing process (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). In addition, the instructors can change their educational methods and can mutually plan such works that could trigger and motivate learners by providing them with freedom of selecting topics of their interest (Pineteh, 2013; Quintero, 2008). It can change their writing plans, apparently, by progressed practice and by adopting physical and cognitive abilities which provide the writer with control over the production of linguistic and domain-specific knowledge (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007). In addition, it can be comfortable for language and content teachers to supervisor their learners from wrong views (Nik, Sani, Kamaruzaman, Hasbollah and Hasbollah, 2010). Most

significantly, it is vital that views towards writing and concerned with its issues are modified. Instructors should hire techniques to exert concepts from learners to spend time on a piece of paper to develop their verbal ability. Furthermore, evaluative reaction should be produced on their output to enhance their self-esteem (Haider, 2012).

The difficulty of writing is not limited to EFL learners. According to Raimes (1991), even native speakers view writing as a problem-making skill. It provides some insight on the conceptualization that part of writing process is not dealt with linguistic, personal and pedagogical aspects, and some other issues should be involved in this process. As mentioned earlier, most of the studies on writing problems in the literature focused on linguistic, cognitive, psychological and pedagogical factors. However, few studies revealed any new aspects of writing which can be the source of writing problems.

In another investigation conducted on 200 university students, the students' writing was evaluated and the students were interviewed to find out their problems. It was revealed that language was not the only area in which students had problems. They also had difficulty creating meaningful and related content (Noriah, Sumarni and NorHaniza, 2008). As a result, Noriah et al. (2008) concluded that learners are in need of some instruction on how to come up with related ideas and to develop those ideas into a coherent paragraph. As can be seen, the general understanding drawn from the related literature is that writing problems can be caused by linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical aspects of writing. However, some missing sources of writing problems were reported too which requires further exploration.

Al-Khsawneh (2010) revealed that the learners recognized that the educational approach and the settings are the main reasons of their problems in English. A) Their problematic mastery over English is either concerned with the lack of student willingness, or the teacher's passion. A large number of instructors implement their mother tongue due to the isolated culture. However, approaches of teaching English contained the medium of pedagogy, through Arabic in English classes, writing done in Arabic, teachers' low proficiency in English, and lack of writing practice in pedagogical institutions. B) English language students have small box of words. Therefore, learners have to repeating the same words; this impedes innovation.

Vahid Dastjerdi and Samian (2011, p. 65) reported that "Iranian EFL learners have frequent cohesion anomalies which they attributed to the learners' poor linguistic (especially syntactic and semantic) awareness as well as inaccurate knowledge of English cohesion rules". Likewise, Shokrpour and Fallahzadeh (2007) revealed that students of English as a foreign language are faced with many problems and challenges such as vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, organization, among others. Furthermore, Hosseini, Taghizadeh, Abedin and Naseri, (2013, p.2) confirmed that the failure of EFL student to interact in English and "their weaknesses in English proficiency influence their academic success, especially in writing skill which is necessary to convey their knowledge".

## Method

### Participants

For the purposes of this mixed-methods study, 20 EFL learners from an English language school in Gorgan, Iran, were selected through purposive sampling as the participants of the qualitative phase. The inclusion criteria were as follows: willingness to become respondents and having experience of English language learning for at least 2 years. The number of the sample was set when it met saturation. For the quantitative phase, 120 language learners from various English language schools were selected through convenience sampling as the participants. Their demographic information is presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1***The participants' Demographic Information*

Gender	Male: 45	Female: 75	
Proficiency level	Intermediate: 84	Advanced: 36	
Age	20s: 71	30s: 28	40s: 21

**Instruments**

A semi-structured interview and a researcher-developed questionnaire were used as the instruments in this study. The semi-structured interview was used to elicit data on writing problems from the participants. The questions of the interview were developed based on the related theoretical models in the related literature (Hyland, 2003; Harmer, 2007) which are thought to best elicit information on the difficulties they experience while writing.

Drawing on themes, meaning units and categories obtained from the participants' ideas in the interviews, a questionnaire was developed in order to find out how the main sources of writing difficulty are inter-related. In this questionnaire, 24 items were developed based on the four factors of ecological, epistemological, linguistic and personal aspects of writing problems. This is a five-point Likert scale questionnaire with 1 being "strongly agree" to 5 "strongly disagree". To check its validity, it was reviewed by five experts in English language teaching who confirmed the appropriateness and usefulness of the scale. To check its reliability, it was piloted to 100 Iranian EFL learners. The data were analyzed in SPSS (version 24) through running a Cronbach alpha. It was reported to be .82 which is an acceptable index of reliability.

**Procedures**

In order to collect data, first some appointments were arranged with the participants at the language school where they learnt English. They were then interviewed and the transcripts of the interviews were formatted using the software NVIVO 11 Pro®. With the help of this software, the textual data were reduced into some statements which could reflect the main ideas of the participants' lived experiences without any intervention of the researcher. According to the guidelines provided by Creswell (2013 p. 83), these sentences or statements were clustered into pivotal concepts which is termed as "meaning units", which was then reported as "textual descriptions" or "general themes" (in this study, the lived experiences of participants' on writing difficulty in verbatim quotes). Besides, structural description, as an interpretation of the setting or circumstances in which writing problems arise, was added to the textual descriptions by referring to the related literature and theoretical foundations. These two descriptions were linked together to constitute the main findings of the study. This process is termed as "horizontalization" or "phenomenological reduction" (Creswell, 2013).

The data trustworthiness was measured according to Lincoln and Guba's four-point standard including credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. To check the data credibility, any statement which was confusing or not clearly comprehended, was removed or modified through consulting with the participants. Dependability and confirmability were checked through the way the data were collected regarding the fact that researcher as an external viewer confirmed the accuracy of the data collection and also confirmed the analysis of data. Transferability was checked through the obtained themes from EFL learners and relating them to all EFL learners in the population.

**Data Analysis procedure**

As mentioned earlier, this is a phenomenological study which attempts to "reduce" how people understand the world into a detailed account of the global essence (Creswell, 2013). In order to skip bias in data analysis, bracketing was used which paves the way for the participants



to grasp all prior personal knowledge and elicit the data from their lived experiences (Lopez and Willis, 2004). Bracketing was adopted since it functions as a link between reflexive and objective processes since there were many personal events which the author did not know (Ahern, 1999). To assure that no inaccuracies occur throughout the various stages of research design, research instruments, sampling strategy, data analysis procedures and conclusions, the researcher's assumptions were bracketed (Kumar, 2011). Lopez and Willis (2004) and van Manen (2017) maintain that researchers should be explicit about the kind of phenomenology implemented in a study depending on its certain circumstances and aims. Thus, interpretive phenomenology was used since this study sought to make sense of what exists in the participants' minds on writing difficulties drawing on their prior and lived experiences. Accordingly, interpretive phenomenological analysis contains a two-stage interpretation process where the "participants are trying to make sense of their world" and the "researchers are trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith and Osborn, 2007, p. 53; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012, p. 362).

In the quantitative phase of the study, regarding the statements from the participants' ideas on writing problems obtained from the qualitative part, a questionnaire, including 24 items and 4 factors, was developed to find out how these four sources of writing problems are related. The questionnaires were given to the participants, and they were informed about the aim of the research and required to allocate sufficient time to answer the questions precisely and patiently. 94% of the questionnaires were responded, but among these returned questionnaires, some had missing information which were excluded from the final data in a pair-wise fashion. After inserting the data into SPSS (version 24), some participants were found not to have answered carefully. In order to remove this problem, the data were screened to delete carelessly-filled responses from the final dataset. Then, Path Analysis (PA) was run using AMOS with Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) to evaluate the proposed model developed on the basis of the related literature and theories (Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Hyland, 2003; Harmer, 2007).

## Results

### Qualitative Phase

As seen in Table 2 below, from interviewing the 20 participants, 179 Persian statements were obtained, which were translated into English. These categories shaped 24 meaning units. See the following to examples:

#### Example 1:

Mina expressed: *"I personally have difficulty making sense of what the topic exactly asks me to write."*

This expression was reduced to the statement, "inability to understand topics"

#### Example 2:

Ali said: *"cohesion and coherence are my main problems and I don't get what they exactly mean and how I can do it in practice while writing."*

This was reduced to the statement, "confused understanding of cohesion and coherence" which was seen in 18 other participants' expressions.

### Table 2

#### *The Meaning Units Obtained from Statements*

No	The frequency of the statement occurrence	Meaning unit
----	---	--------------

1	14	confused understanding of cohesion and coherence
2	3	inability to understand topics
3	19	Lack of grammatical mastery
4	19	Failing to know enough number of words
5	4	Misusing words in their correct places
6	2	Spelling problems
7	1	Punctuation problems
8	7	The negative effect of mother tongue structures and words
9	4	Confusion over formality and informality
10	8	Writing anxiety
11	1	Lack of practice and endeavor
12	1	Lack of concentration
13	14	Problems with producing content
14	4	Insufficient time for practicing writing in the class
15	4	inefficiency of teaching methods
16	7	Incompetent teachers
17	8	Boring essence of writing
18	7	Insignificance of writing compared to other skills
19	14	Not motivated enough
20	12	Not asking us to write from primary education
21	11	Failing how to develop a paragraph
22	6	Problems with connecting ideas coming to mind
23	5	Boring topics
24	4	Repetitive topics

Through the process of horizontalization or phenomenological reduction, these 24 meaning units were interpreted through structural descriptions and five categories termed as five main sources of writing problems were produced (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*The Main Sources of Writing Problems*



The detailed account of the process of phenomenological reduction is as follows:

### **Linguistic Factors**

Six meaning units (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) refer to the issues related to linguistic aspect of writing such as grammar, vocabulary, etc, and are thus considered as one of the main sources of writing problems.

### **Personal Factors**

Four meaning units (19, 12, 11, 10) demonstrate the role of personal factors such as anxiety, motivation, hardworking, ... etc, as writing difficulties from the participants' viewpoint.

### **Epistemological Factors**

Eight meaning units (1, 2, 9, 13, 17, 18, 21, 22) apparently refer to discourse competence and strategic competence (Bachman and Palmer, 1996); however, we relate them to the epistemological mismatch between the western education which has determined the principles of academic writing, and the eastern education wherein the participants of the present study have grown. To prove it theoretically, some of these meaning units are discussed. For example, meaning unit number 1 indicates confusion over understanding cohesion and coherence. This was a concurrent theme with a high frequency of occurrence in the collected data. Cohesion and coherence are theoretically characterized as existing consistency alongside a paragraph (Thoreau, 2005) which is mainly dealing with connecting some discourse functions such as contrast, addition, example, result, or reason through placing the related linguistic linking devices before each transition (Hyland and Tse, 2004). Learners' inability to make sense of these functions and transitions is a common problem that Iranian EFL students usually encounter while learning writing (Khodabandeh, Jafarigohar, Soleimani, and Hemmati, 2014; Sharafi-Nejad, Raftari, Mohamed Ismail and Eng, 2010).

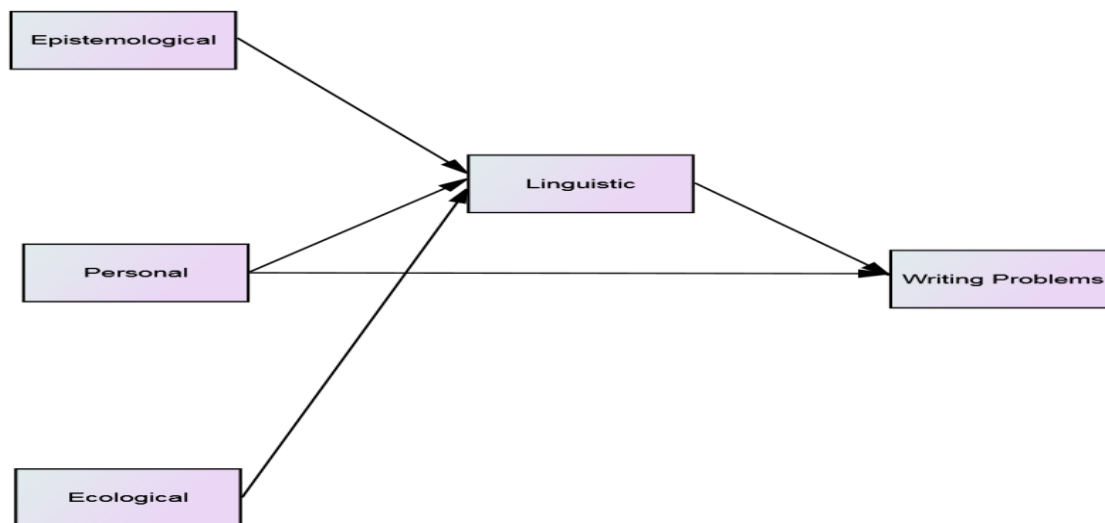
### **Ecological Factors**

Six meaning units (14, 15, 16, 20, 23, 24) directly or indirectly refer to the environmental factors which are here termed as ecological factors since ecology takes a wider range of issues into account such as socio-economic levels of learners and teachers, the social structure, cultural norms and values, political structure, religious beliefs, and generally whatsoever factor which can affect learners' performance from outside (Kramsch and Whiteside, 2008). To prove it theoretically, a meaning unit is discussed here. For example, meaning unit number 14 referring to "Insufficient time for practicing writing in the class" at the first glance, is related to the syllabus planned by teacher or educational administrator. However, in a deeper look, it can be highly influenced by mental schemata of what hardworking is and how much importance should be assigned to it. These schemata are indirectly shaped by the social and cultural norms of the society where they have grown (Cilliers, 1998; Pennycook, 2007). As a result, it can be deduced that even the time allocated to writing in an EFL class syllabus can be influenced by ecology. Likewise, other meaning units which apparently refer to teaching method and syllabus, are theoretically interwoven to ecological factors.

According to the frequency of occurrence of the statements related to each source of writing, based on the participants' views, and the related theories and previous studies done in this area, the following model (Figure 2) is proposed on how the above four categories can be interconnected with each other.



**Figure 2**  
*The Proposed Theoretical Model*

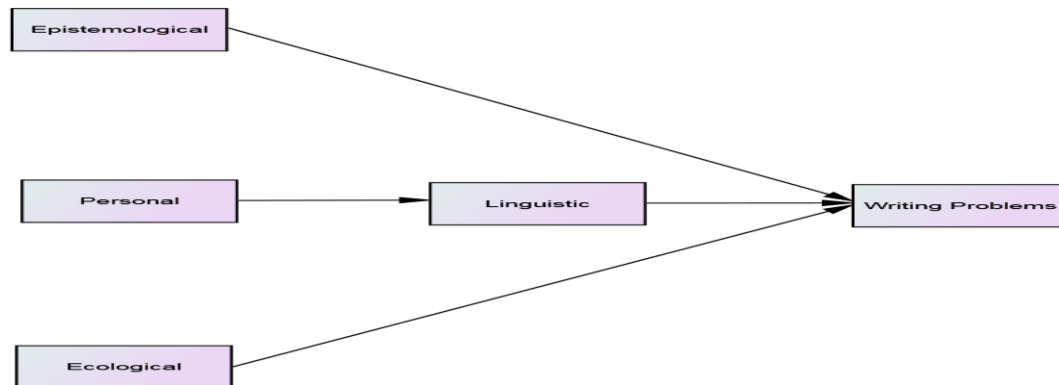


### Quantitative Phase

After checking the data normality and running PA on the proposed model, the regression weights of the paths were obtained. It was revealed that some paths had small regression weights which may not be needed to remain in the model. Running MLE revealed some model fit indices. The most recognized indices to measure model fit are GFI, CFI, NFI and RMSEA (Kline, 2015). In the present study, GFI was .450 which should be over .8 (Kline, 2015), so this model did not enjoy acceptable amount of Goodness Fitness Index. In addition, CFI and NFI were not acceptable since they were .450 and .480 respectively, which should be over .8 too. Furthermore, RMSEA was .380 which should be less than .05. So, it did not enjoy good RMSEA either. As a result, this proposed model was revised to identify the best possible model fit. To do so, the paths with lower regression weights were removed. The path going from personal aspect to writing (.38), the path going from epistemological aspect to linguistic aspect (.11) and the path from ecological aspect to linguistic aspect were relatively low, and thus removed. Regarding the modification indices table in PA output suggesting relatively strong paths from epistemological aspect and ecological aspect to writing which were not provided in the proposed model, these paths were added to the revised model to gain a model with better model fit. The revised model was tested with MLE too. Figure 3 below presents the revised model.

The revised model relatively enjoys better fit model indices. GFI, CFI and NFI are .842, .890, and .851 respectively, which are over .8 and considered to be acceptable. Moreover, RMSEA (.024) is lower than .05 which is acceptable. All in all, since all four model fit indices are in the acceptable range, the revised model can be considered to have acceptable fit. It contains 4 paths among the 4 variables.

**Figure 3**  
*The Revised Model*



As Table 3 below shows, these 4 paths are statistically significant. Table 4 displays their regression weight. As it is observed, personal aspect has a significant effect on linguistic aspect ( $p < 0.05$ ); likewise, three variables of epistemological, ecological and linguistic aspects have a significant effect on writing ( $p < 0.05$ ). All in all, according to revision of the suggested model, the epistemological and ecological aspects of writing have a more prominent role than what is commonly thought in the related literature.

**Table 3**  
*The Significance of the Paths*

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Writing	<---	Linguistic	.762	.068	- 11.278	***
Writing	<---	Epistemological	1.134	.053	-21.463	***
Writing	<---	Ecological	.410	.149	2.753	***
Linguistic	<---	Personal	1.415	.144	9.810	***

**Table 4**  
*Regression Weights of the Paths*

			Estimate
Writing	<---	Linguistic	.910
Writing	<---	Epistemological	.612
Writing	<---	Ecological	.518
Linguistic	<---	Personal	.110

As seen in Table 4, the paths have various regression weights. The largest one (.910) belongs to the path from linguistic aspect to writing; the second largest is the path from epistemological aspect to writing (-.612), and the third largest is the path from ecological aspect to writing (-.518). The smallest path is from personal aspect to linguistic aspect (.110). The

strongest indicator of writing problems is linguistic aspect which is obviously expected to be so. Generally, the most eye-catching result of the present study lies in the second and third strongest indicators, the epistemological and ecological aspects of writing, which rejects the dominant thought on the theoretical considerations of writing and puts forth the idea that the epistemological and ecological aspects of writing are as important as its linguistic aspects.

### Discussion

On the basis of the results of the study, it was revealed that writing problems derive from various sources which are mainly linguistic, personal, epistemological and ecological in type. So, the main findings are first explained here in terms of these types, and then, other related studies are discussed to see whether they are in line with or opposed to them.

The prominent finding of the current study is the role of epistemological and ecological sources in creating writing errors, which have not been pointed to in the related literature. Thus, it can be said that this finding is relatively novel and can be debated in further research in order to elaborate on its details more precisely. Nevertheless, the effect of epistemological aspects on the participants' writing errors can be explained by the recent paradigm shift towards socio-cultural issues of learning as reflected in the socio-cultural theory of second language acquisition (Thorne, 2005) which puts emphasis on social and cultural roots of learners and their effects on their performance in language learning and achievement. In these theoretical models, learner's social and cultural backgrounds can be as important as their linguistic attempts. Ecology too has found its own way into theoretical issues of education in general and ELT in particular. In fact, due to the problematic and inconsistent components of ecology among the present study participants; that is, syllabus, writing teaching methods, teachers and learners' mental concepts and approaches towards writing which make them underestimate the significance of writing (Mahboob and Talaat, 2008), ecological factors can be considered as another important source of writing errors.

As for the model developed in the current study, it should be stated that writing is not per se a function of linguistic aspects, but of other aspects too (i.e. personal, ecological and epistemological aspects) which play key roles in learners' writing problems. This finding is in line with that of Ashraf, Rubab and Ajmal (2020) who investigated vocabulary and organizational issues in English academic writing (AW) faced by Pakistani students. They analyzed issues students face while writing academically on postgraduate level. Their findings revealed that Pakistani students consider AW as an important subject. However, they face a number of issues in their writing such as weak writing expressions, grammatical and syntactical issues and seek to overcome their writing deficiencies. According to their findings, there are also a number of other factors that cause these issues in students' writing. As seen, Ashraf et al. (2020) found just linguistic roots of problems, though they pointed to some unknown roots of factors influencing learners' writing.

The findings of the present study are also in line with and, at the same time, slightly different from those of Toba, Noviana Noor and Sanu (2019) who examined the roots of writing problems and revealed some of the main sources of writing problems which can be all categorized under linguistic and personal areas of writing. Like other studies, Toba et al. (2019) did not mention epistemological and ecological facets of writing which highlights the importance of the present study.

### Conclusions

Regarding the main objective of the present study which was finding the roots of writing problems and how they related to each other, the result showed that four main areas shape the roots of writing problems. The remarkable point of this finding is presentation of ecological and

epistemological factors of writing as the two new areas of writing problems, which have rarely been recognized previously. Albeit the problems categorized under these areas have been reported in the previous studies (Bilal et al., 2013; Butt and Rasul, 2012; Gonye, Mareva, Dudu and Sib, 2012; Pineteh, 2013; Quintero, 2008), relating these writing problems to epistemology and ecology of language teaching seems quite novel and unprecedented. In other words, it can be concluded that the present study could view the writing problems from a different angle. In fact, although these issues have been studied in education, they have rarely been approached in ELT. According to the model presented in this study, epistemological and ecological issues are as influential as personal differences. This finding puts emphasis on the significance of these issues and the effects they can have on EFL learners' writing. As mentioned earlier, the issues categorized under ecological and epistemological facets have partly been reported in the previous studies under such terminology as methodological, logistic, political, cultural and social problems (Kellogg and Raulerson, 2007; Nik et al. 2010; Pineteh, 2013; Quintero, 2008). As a result, reformulation of the main areas which may cause writing problems is viewed as the main conclusion of the present study. As for pedagogical implications, the grand educational policy makers in the field of ELT are advised to pave the ground for teachers to remove ecological issues. Also, educational theoreticians are recommended to reexamine the existing educational approaches and make them more updated and more compatible with the existing realities of the Iranian society. Furthermore, due to the fact that speaking is another productive skill of language learning, it can be prone to the same roots of problems which require supplementary research to be more clarified. Finally, the findings of this study indicate that teachers should perceive writing skill as a multi-faceted skill, and thus localize the large-scale, international writing syllabus in order to settle the learners' personal, ecological and epistemological needs. This requires more awareness and knowledge of the mentioned issues.

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