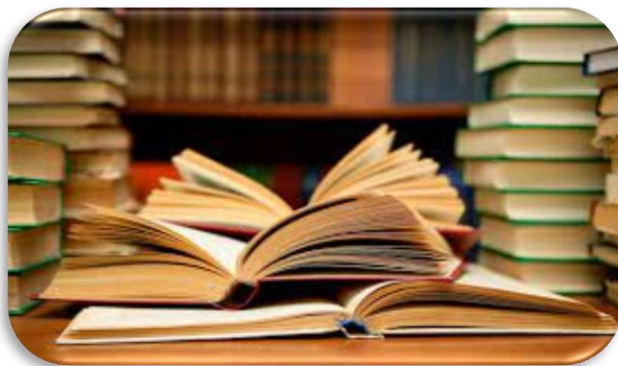




## Research Paper



## Undergraduate EFL Students' Perceptions of Essay Writing Course Effectiveness through Qualitative Content Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceptions of undergraduate (BA-level) EFL students regarding the effectiveness and possible improvement of Essay Writing as the most academically related writing course in the BA program. In doing so, the study relied on qualitative content analysis. To collect data, a researcher-made questionnaire (with three sections) was designed, which followed the conceptual findings of previous research in the literature on second language writing and education. The factors observed were arranged as four questions in the questionnaire, which dealt with “curriculum standards”, “educational objectives”, “reluctance and willingness to write”, and “linguistic competence.” Qualitative content analysis made it possible to reach a profound understanding of the students’ direct experiences. A total of 51 Iranian respondents participated in this study, out of whom, 37 ones (72.5%) belonged to the 22-24 age-group, while the majority of the students (64.7%) were females in terms of gender. The qualitative content analysis revealed 93 codes, 15 categories, and 4 themes. The most important observations suggested that the curriculum in Iran predominantly introduced Essay Writing to students on a surface level, while most students were not conceptually prepared for academic writing. Adding a course called “Academic Thinking” and using practice-oriented strategies could help to further address the shortcomings in the curricular system.

**Keywords:** *Academic Writing, BA-level Curriculum, Essay Writing, Qualitative Content Analysis, Student Perception*

## INTRODUCTION

In the curricula of almost all academic disciplines there are courses that introduce academic writing to students. Although in the same curricula there are topics that address research processes (e.g. Research Methodology), the actual writing process takes place in writing-related courses (Aleshinskaya & Kurnayev, 2021; Ghoorchaei & Tavakoli, 2020; Karimnia, 2024). However, such courses are much more significant in the case of English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum, because writing is generally regarded as one of the building-blocks of language learning (Hort, 2020; Karimnia & Safnyyat, 2021; Slovakia, 2010; White, 2002). That is to say, academic writing in the form of a course like Essay Writing is not only a general skill for research in EFL but also one of the principal abilities that an EFL learner must satisfactorily master.

One of the major issues that students experience when trying to learn writing, especially more advanced content in writing, is a sense of “reluctance” (Asadifard & Koosha, 2013) or disorientation with respect to the course in question. According to the EFL Curriculum designed for the EFL program by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of Islamic Republic of Iran (Ministry of Science, Research and Technology - EFL Curriculum, 2007, p. 42), Essay Writing must accomplish the following objectives within 34 hours of classroom training: (a) providing a comprehensive definition of various essay types; (b) providing samples of excellent English essay writers’ work; and (c) practicing essay writing based on the principles and specifications.

Upon closer scrutiny, the same Curriculum mentions Letter Writing as the prerequisite course for Essay Writing, while in reality the only thing these two courses have in common is the writing-based skill while they basically have no thematic relevance. In very simple words, EFL students at the BA level will have to initiate their studies in Essay Writing, which is the only academic writing course in the whole program, with little exposure to any preceding academic content in the previous semesters and courses. Considering this problem, many other researchers have tried to investigate students’ difficulties in writing and their experiences (see Arizena & Mayasari, 2021; Asadifard & Koosha, 2013; Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2015).

This study explores the effectiveness of Essay Writing as the most relevant course to academic writing in the Iranian BA-level EFL curriculum, and tries to find any strategies that could help improve the course. To reach a deep understanding of students’ direct experiences, the study draws on a qualitative content analysis method. A researcher-made, structured questionnaire is used to collect open-ended responses. The study specifically builds its set of questions for by focusing on four central constructs of effectiveness extracted from the literature: “curriculum standards”, “educational objectives”, “reluctance and willingness to write”, and “linguistic competence.” The questions guiding the study are: (a) What are the codes, categories and themes as expressed by the sample of the BA level EFL students in response to the questions regarding their perceptions of Essay Writing effectiveness? And (b) what are the BA level EFL students’ ideas that could help to further develop or improve the effectiveness of Essay Writing?



## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATUR

### Curricula, EFL and essay writing

Writing is one of the core skills in language acquisition (Chen et al., 2016; Karimnia, 2013; White, 2002). In most L2 learning programs, writing receives as much attention as the other skills (speaking, listening, and reading). However, in an educational setting in which academic (or even elementary academic) concerns are important for institutions, teaching essay (or article) writing must be taken seriously. In fact, "receiving scholarships and eligibility for higher education is exhibited through academic writing" (Kaivanpanah, et al., 2019, p. 341). As the background of academic writing shows, however, skills related to each academic major must be developed in line with new trends in education (Arizena & Mayasari, 2021; Tremblay et al., 2012).

Among different academic disciplines, the skill of writing is highly significant for EFL students because it does not only represent a process for writing research, but also one of the fundamental components of EFL as a discipline. Like other disciplines, EFL requires a systematic and effective "curriculum" that guides the educational process through successive semesters. As a result, the starting-point for investigating writing-related courses (e.g., Essay Writing) in EFL is to explore the notion of curriculum. A curriculum is a hierarchical set of courses that are logically associated with each other with an order of increasing difficulty.

The basic elements of a curriculum are standards, context, and orientation. The notion of "standard" involves a set of criteria that reflect institutional/organizational expectations; the World Federation for Medical Education, for instance, has relied on some standards such as (Grant, 2014, p. 33): (a) mission and outcomes; (b) the educational programme; (c) the learning and training process; (d) assessment of learning; and others. Context addresses the content to be taught in a curriculum. The notion of context, too, may be taken for granted because we may assume that each discipline includes its specific courses. Yet, context itself is a serious problem in the process of curriculum design: "[...] a contextual curriculum will not place its emphasis narrowly on educational method and the search for the most effective methods of teaching and learning, for which there is no robust differentiating evidence base" (Grant, 2014, p. 34). As a result, choosing what to be included in a curriculum represents a serious problem.

Finally orientation is a considerable factor in curriculum design; there are two general frameworks that decide how educational information should be provided in a teaching programme: the subject-centered and the learner-centered. A subject-centered curriculum mainly emphasizes the importance of knowledge and practices contained in a discipline. One of the benefits of this mode of teaching is its strong foundation and clarity of curricular relations it holds (Morrison-Saunders & Hobson, 2013, p. 212). In contrast, learner-centered teaching involves its specific principles, which are divided into four major types: (a) cognitive and metacognitive factors; (b) motivational and affective factors; (c) developmental and social factors; and (d) individual differences factors (Arceo, 2016, p. 508).

### Writing in EFL Learning Research

Numerous studies have tried to figure out how the writing skill works, although it seems to be one of the most challenging skills to teach in educative institutions (Cando-Guanoluisa et al., 2017, p. 905). There



is growing evidence that successful course results emerge from what *students* need and how they experience a learning situation. One of the new methods of teaching writing, for instance, draws on “portfolio assessment”, which emphasizes that “learning should be constructed by learners themselves rather than being imparted by teachers” (Ghoorchaei & Tavakoli, 2020, p. 23).

Such recent observations imply that a lack of student involvement could lead to problems such as the “writing reluctance construct”, which explains why some students “begin to feel hopeless and marginalized because they develop a sense of their limitations and become anxious or even apprehensive” (Asadifard & Koosha, 2013, p. 1572). One of the frequently used constructs that focuses on students and is closely related to “writing reluctance” is called *willingness to write* (WTW), which could be put into the larger context of willingness to communicate (WTC). WTC is mainly associated with motivation and can explain students’ tendencies in their attempts to learn a foreign language (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010). The notion is widely used in EFL research (see Amirianet et al. 2020; Öz et al., 2015).

Kaivanpanah et al. (2019) probed into WTW in EFL contexts. They primarily interviewed 23 university students and 6 academic writing experts within the qualitative research design of the study, although they carried out the quantitative studies on a population of 257 EFL learners from a variety of disciplines through semi-structured interviews. They found four basic factors constituting WTW: interlingua-profession, cognition, involvement, and technology. Linguistic variables have also been underscored in research into L2 writing (including grammar, semantics, genre, paragraph writing, and writing organization and structure). Sundari et al. (2018), for instance, proposed a syllabus for writing to be used in the classroom. They studied 92 students, 4 lecturers, and stakeholders of one university in Jakarta. They collected the data through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. They categorized the components of the courses into two topics: “difficulty of writing skill” (punctuation and spelling, structuring sentences, vocabulary, and grammar) and “writing activities/practices” (writing composition, diagram description, form filling, labeling).

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The participants in this study were BA-level (undergraduate) EFL students who had already passed the course Essay Writing in the progression of the curriculum chart. Given this inclusion criterion, the sampling method was purposive. Considering the fact that the course follows Letter Writing in the Iranian system, most candidates for data collection were expected to be studying in their later semesters. The population of the study included all of Islamic Azad University Shiraz Branch and Islamic Azad University Fasa Branch. Considering the restrictions imposed on coronavirus when the research was conducted, the students who met the criterion mostly attended their universities to do administrative work. To collect data, a researcher-made questionnaire was designed, as explained below. The data were collected from February 2020 to July 2020. Copies of the questionnaire were handed over to the students who met the criterion; as a result, a total of 51 respondents participated in this study out of whom, 37 ones (72.5%) belonged to the 22-24 age-group, while the majority of the students (64.7%) were females in terms of gender.



### Data Collection Method

The data were gathered through copies of an English, researcher-made questionnaire that were built through a five-step procedure to be designed (viz. background, questionnaire conceptualization, format and data analysis, establishing validity, establishing reliability, see Radhakrishna, 2007). In the questionnaire conceptualization step, the questionnaire was inspired by an in-depth exploration of the literature, by focusing on the research concerned with students' perceptions of course effectiveness. The substantial literature reviewed pointed to some central concerns in relation to writing in the EFL curriculum.

To generate the exact questions raised in the questionnaire, four issues were in focus: curriculum standards, educational objectives, reluctance and WTW, and linguistic competence. The qualitative items in the questionnaire were formed based on these issues as discovered in the literature. Following that format and data analysis were decided. The items in the questionnaire were organized as questions in a sequential order to be answered by the participants. Data analysis was based on qualitative content analysis. To verify the validity of the questions, because the questionnaire was a qualitative one, copies of it were submitted to four professors of TEFL; they went through the questions, trying to investigate the face validity and construct validity of the items against the literature. As a result of this process, they suggested some wording-related suggestions and one question was added to the original version. To verify the reliability of the items, a pilot study was conducted from February 21 2020 to March 13 2020, which included the responses of 12 students. Following that, the responses were conceptually cross-validated and were submitted once more to the same four TEFL professors. They analyzed the inter-subjective stability of the sample responses and confirmed the questionnaires reliability. The data were collected from April 30 2022 to 28 June 2022. The questionnaire was composed of two main sections: Section A recorded the information pertaining to the respondents' demographical data including age, gender and semester. Section B included the items; the items in the questionnaire and their topics are as follows:

- Curriculum standards: Do you believe that Essay Writing is well positioned in the curriculum of EFL? Were you sufficiently prepared for writing academic texts?
- Educational objectives: Do you think Essay Writing has improved your understanding of academic writing (e.g. your cognitive ability to analyze and create a piece of simple academic writing)? Do you think you can confidently sit for general academic aptitude tests (e.g. IELTS Academic, TOEFL or GRE)?
- Reluctance and WTW: Did you feel any reluctance to learn the materials in Essay Writing? What do you think was the source of your response? In what ways could your professor and university motivate you to learn more (e.g. implementing technologies, focusing on your personal status)?
- Linguistic competence: Did Essay Writing improve your understanding of linguistic aspects (e.g. syntax, text organization, pragmatics) in the formal genre of academic writing?

The copies were completed by the sample members; in some cases, upon the request of the participant, it was possible for them to submit their responses via email or WhatsApp Messenger. The participants were informed of the objectives of the research and were ensured of the confidentiality of



the whole process. The questionnaire was semi-structured and it took thirty minutes on average to be completed.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

After the data were collected through the questionnaires by focusing on the four core levels of questions, the data were organized. The method used was based on qualitative content analysis to explore student perceptions, which is a frequently used method in EFL research (see Fernández-García1 et al., 2019; Rahimi, 2010; Yoo and Kim, 2019). Initially, after the responses were received they were assigned unique numbers for each participant. Meanwhile if the data were sent via electronic devices, they were printed and put in the file. To prepare the samples collected for a corpus analysis procedure, the written scripts were transcribed and in some cases emails were copied and pasted into the analysis framework. In all of the cases, standard writing conventions were implemented to render the texts readable and analyzable. In doing so, the texts were inspected for possible spelling errors, punctuation ambiguities, or use of informal letters. Following that the information collected and enhanced was analyzed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis as used in the methodology of this study.

After that, each questionnaire was meticulously investigated by focusing on the responses to the questions raised. Each question addressed a specific concern regarding the effectiveness of Essay Writing. Each question included some subsidiary questions to elicit more specific responses. Following that, the researcher tried to find semantic relations that unified the response to a question. Next, the response had to be extracted as a condensed version. This version was then coded for each meaning unit in each answer. In the next stage, all of the codes related to each question extracted from the participants' responses were collectively analyzed and put under larger categories. Ultimately, the categories helped to shape the themes that were the final responses to the questions in the questionnaire. These stages in the analytic procedure were as follows (see Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017):

- Forming meaning units: In this step, the major concern was to find any internal relations that makes a meaning coherent as a “unit” that could be derived; for instance, in “Well, ok, where to start, that was a bad day in my life”, we learn that “having a bad day” can serve as a meaning unit for further analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017, p. 96);
- Creating condensed meaning units: After a meaning unit was decided, it had to be linguistically mentioned in a condensation table, sometimes with some minor changes for more readability;
- Coding: The condensed versions had to be coded and put under a unified code; for instance, such condensed versions as “having a bad day”, “it was a bad incidence”, and “I can still feel the pain” all fell under the code “unpleasant accident experience”, which was more governing and abstract than the other versions;
- Categorizing: To answer each question, the collective responses to each question made by all of the participants were compared substantially, and the codes fell under even more abstract categories;
- Creating themes: After categorizing the codes, the categories found would together shape a larger and more abstract entity called a “theme”, which provided the final answer to a question under investigation.



In the analysis section, some samples of the questionnaires are cited, although the content of all of the questionnaires is mentioned from the coding stage. The information is fully systematic and presented in tables.

## RESULTS

### Demographical Information

After the questionnaires were distributed among the qualified participants within the research period, the primary pieces of information related to the demographic information of the participants were collected. It must be emphasized one more time that the participants should have passed Essay Writing to be included in this study. Table 1 shows the information obtained in this regard.

**Table 1**

*The demographic information of the participants in the present study*

Age			Gender			
22-24	37	72.5%	Male		Female	
25-27	11	21.6%				
28-30	3	5.9%	18	35.3%	33	64.7%

As Table 1 reveals, out of the 51 participants in this study, the majority (72.5%) belonged to the 22-24 age-group, while the majority of the students (64.7%) were females in terms of gender. Only 5.9% of the participants were aged 28-30, which showed that most of the students were in the early or mid-twenties.

### Answering the Research Questions

#### Questionnaire question 1: Curriculum standards

In response to question 1, the participants shared their opinions, which were analyzed through the procedures mentioned about. Table 2 shows the students response to this question.

**Table 2**

*The participants' responses to Question 1 of the questionnaire*

Codes	Category
The idea of academic writing is not mentioned in the previous courses	Academic topics in Essay Writing were relatively new and students did not have a profound understanding or background of academic writing.
As I understood it, the topic academic was fairly new to our class	
We had no knowledge of writing an academic topic	



But research was briefly in some courses like Advanced Writing but its actual writing was not a concern

as we mostly passed general language courses and then the content got a bit difficult

To write was never a priority in our secondary education and university was not much different

The analysis of the collected data indicated that there were four different categories derived from organizing of the responses shared: (a) academic topics in Essay Writing were relatively new and students did not have a profound understanding or background of academic writing; (b) some of the contents addressed in Essay Writing were relatively covered in the previous courses; (c) essay Writing is a composite of writing and academic thinking; and (d) the whole curriculum is ineffective in terms of writing education. Considering the above categories about “curriculum standards”, the theme which ultimately answers question 1 based on the participants’ responses is as follows:

- Theme: Essay Writing involves relatively new academic topics and although some contents are addressed before the course in the curriculum, the “academic thinking” dimension of the course remains underdeveloped while the writing education is ineffective.

### **Questionnaire question 2: Educational objectives**

In response to question 2, the participants expressed their opinions, which were analyzed through the procedures mentioned above.

As a result, three different categories were derived from organizing of the responses shared for question 2: (a) essay Writing could enhance a student’s understanding of how academic essays are shaped; (b) producing an academic essay is not a task to be readily done; and (c) taking the writing section of international standard tests can be more challenging than Essay Writing at a university level. Considering these categories about “educational objectives”, the theme which finally provides an answer to Question 2 is as follows:

- Theme: Essay Writing surely contributes to students’ understanding of the shape of academic essays although it requires more preparation to produce an essay and sitting for international writing tests can be more challenging.

### **Questionnaire question 3: Reluctance and WTW**

The participants' responses to Question 3 were examined and organized. The ideas expressed by the participants were divided into 5 categories derived from organizing of the responses shared for question 3: (a) Essay Writing is more practically challenging than the other language skills; (b) Essay Writing cannot be readily used for everyday life situations; (c) the pleasure of writing essays may not be grounded; (d) Essay Writing needs continuous feedback that is ignored by universities; and (e) a busy learning schedule could undermine concentration on writing. Given these observed categories of codes concerning “reluctance and WTW”, the theme which ultimately responded to question 3 is as follows:





- Theme: Essay Writing is more challenging, less practical, and less pleasing than other language skills while needing continuous feedback.

#### **Questionnaire question 4: Linguistic competence**

In response to Question 4, the participants stated their opinions, which were analyzed through the procedures specified in the methodology.

The ideas expressed by the participants were broken into 3 categories derived from organizing of the responses shared for question 4: (a) the Essay Writing course addresses linguistic macro-structures (including discourse, style and text organization); (b) genre and the dynamics of formal writing were not seriously taught to the students; and (c) micro-linguistic dimensions of language (including vocabulary and syntax) were still problematic or developing in Essay Writing. Considering the above categories of codes concerning “linguistic competence”, the following theme was derived from the responses of the participants:

- Theme: Essay Writing concentrates on macro-linguistic aspects although students are not familiar with important dimensions (e.g. genre) and some still have micro-structural difficulties.

#### **Answering the second research question**

The ideas expressed by the participants about the possibilities for improving Essay Writing were broken into 4 categories.

The four categories found are as follows: (a) adding a course that addresses academic topics is helpful; (b) having a general plan for the class could improve writing; (c) digital technology could facilitate writing education; and (d) focusing on students individually could further improve writing. Given the categories of codes mentioned above concerning “improvement”, the following theme was derived from the responses of the participants:

- Theme: Essay Writing could be improved if a course is added that introduces academic thinking before the course, along with a general teaching plan, digital technology, and individual treatment.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate BA-level EFL students' perceptions of Essay Writing as a the most focused academic writing course in the Iranian undergraduate EFL curriculum. The study followed a qualitative framework governed by qualitative analysis along with some demographic information. To explore the responses shared by the 51 participants in the study, a main research question was raised that addressed curriculum standards, educational objectives, reluctance and WTW, and linguistic competence.

Because in qualitative content analysis, the final response to a question is normally viewed as a “theme”, this study tried to shape the ultimate answer to each question individually. The theme of the “curriculum standards” question was: “Essay Writing involves relatively new academic topics and although some contents are addressed before the course in the curriculum, the ‘academic thinking’ dimension of the course remains underdeveloped while the writing education is ineffective.” In most



research studies, the idea of Essay Writing is simply a matter of genre than any other element; in fact, the general idea is that a formal study, organization and structure, and sound grammar are the constituents of Essay Writing. The findings in this study, however, pointed to a rarely addressed problem, which is “academic thinking.” The responses of the students suggested that they had basic issues with understanding what makes an *academic* text, rather than its formality or style. One of the categories mentioned that “Essay Writing is a composite of writing and academic thinking.” In reality, however, BA students do not receive much emphasis during the first semesters regarding the significance and expectations of academic writing.

In this regard, what could be called a standard structure of curriculum seems to have been ill-framed in the universities under study (Sifakis, 2014). According to Grant’s (2014) observations, standard must deal with some central concerns, the most important ones of which from learners’ angle are mission and outcomes, the educational programme, the learning and training process, and assessment of learning (Grant, 2014, p. 33). In terms of mission and outcomes, the students did not express very clear goals that the system wanted them to follow. Most obviously, if Essay Writing addresses a prerequisite to professional academic writing, it must involve a more clearly defined framework for goal determination, development, and assessment.

Another highly problematic issue is the underdeveloped background of students in secondary education; one of the participants stated: “To write was never a priority in our secondary education and university was not much different.” One reason accounting for such a situation may be the exclusively subject-centered curricula practiced in Iran; although Morrison-Saunders and Hobson (2013) have reported some of the benefits of subject-centered curricula, the participants in this study expressed ideas that suggested they rarely received any purposeful guidance or treatment in this regard: “I always liked writing but I liked poetry and short stories; I had no background in non-fiction”; “I remember no one at our class was prepared for such writings.” This observation emphasizes the importance of learner-centered teaching, particularly in terms of motivational and affective factors and individual differences factors (see Arceo, 2016). Cando-Guanoluisa et al. (2017) reported a similar observation in which poor writing as a result of educational shortcomings undermined students’ ability to write. They found the problem in the “the beginning levels” (Cando-Guanoluisa et al., p. 905).

The second concern addressed in the first research question was “educational objectives”; the final theme extracted was “Essay Writing surely contributes to students’ understanding of the shape of academic essays although it requires more preparation to produce an essay and sitting for international writing tests can be more challenging.” Definitely a mere exposure to subject matter and formal dimensions of writing could partially help a student shape some ideas about writing. Yet, such a probable assumption could hardly help students develop their skills in academic writing. Many responses suggested that the students were not prepared enough to produce a writing sample. More problematically, it was observed that taking the writing section of international standard tests could be more challenging than Essay Writing at a university level. This issue may look like a “disaster” to a BA student of EFL, because each year numerous students from other majors take international tests of English (e.g., IELTS) and receive acceptable grades.

Writing is highly important for EFL students because it is one of their major “specialized skills” while being the general academic form of communicating information (as in all other disciplines)



(Kaivanpanah et al., 2019, p. 341). This study, confirming the institutional effect of writing, reveals that the students were not sufficiently prepared for the act of academic writing: "I guess I can analyze but if 'produce' means to write an original paper, I do not seem to be able to do that"; "I cannot say that I can produce a writing now." Such a situation does not seem to reflect the practical objectives of Essay Writing.

The third concern in the research questions was "reluctance and WTW." These are purely psychological tendencies associated with motivation and can explain students' tendencies in their attempts to learn a foreign language (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010). The theme extracted through the qualitative content analysis in this study suggested, "Essay Writing is more challenging, less practical, and less pleasing than other language skills while needing continuous feedback." Researchers believe that understanding WTW would depend on WTC, which is a student's readiness to enter into discussion with other people speaking a L2 (MacIntyre et al., 1997; see also Amirian, Karamifar, & Youhanaee, 2020; Öz, Demirezen, & Pourfeiz, 2015). Kaivanpanah et al. (2019) focused on found four basic factors shaping WTW: interlingua-profession, cognition, involvement, and technology.

The findings in the present study, however, revealed that the students could not set a basis for perceiving their pleasure of writing (the pleasure was not grounded): "I did not feel reluctant for I enjoyed the materials"; this statement shows that the student was actually interested in writing but "materials" is an ambiguous dimension of the course. Was it about the topics of the written examples in the book or the theory of writing? In a less enthusiastic case, the student mentioned: "The syllabus of Essay Writing may be more interesting for Research Methodology II but even then we did not do any research."

The pleasure seems to be decontextualized. This problem could affect students' involvement as a WTW factor. Involvement refers to a student's participation in the writing process in the class and preference to take part in it actively (Kaivanpanah, et al. 2019). Furthermore, this observation suggests that their interlingua-profession ability could be downgraded as a result of a low level of WTW. The reason for this is that the sense of lack of a context found in some responses would affect the underlying factors of the interlingua-profession factor, such as "writing paragraphs, proposals, articles." WTW is, therefore, directly influenced by a sense of practicality and personal pleasure, which were not very clearly mentioned by the participants in this study. This finding also confirms the idea that reluctance could make students "feel hopeless and marginalized because they develop a sense of their limitations and become anxious or even apprehensive" (Asadifard & Koosha, 2013, p. 1572). To many cases, "marginalized" is an applicable feature.

The fourth dimension of the research question was about "linguistic competence"; the theme was: "Essay Writing concentrates on macro-linguistic aspects although students are not familiar with important dimensions (e.g. genre) and some still have micro-structural difficulties." This finding represented one of the key problems that most Iranian students have even if they are motivated. Ideas such as "genre" are not very clearly taught at many universities ("but never talked about 'genre'!"). Many responses indicated that the students had some idea of macro-linguistic variables: "discourse", "style", "text organization", "coherence", "in order and logic." Although this understanding is important, it could be helpful as long as micro-structures have been skillfully developed. Language-related issues have been



pointed out in writing in many studies (Cando-Guanoluisa et al. 2017; Kaivanpanah et al. 2019; Sundari, Febriyanti, & Saragih, 2018).

Possibly, as Ghoorchaei and Tavakoli (2020) explain, portfolio assessment could serve as a way of teaching writing to students; this learner-centered method suggests that a learner must actively build the materials to be learned. In line with the findings of this study, what could contribute to the development of linguistic abilities is a technical guideline directed by the instructor based on the student's linguistic competence level. Most definitely, students are not at the same level and may have various theoretical or practical ideas of a course. For instance, this statement shows relatively good knowledge of functionalist linguistics components: "Cohesion, coherence, clarity, economy, punctuation, topic development [...] we had studied these topics in other courses though." Many other perceptions, however, remain simple and need to be constructed over time.

As result of the qualitative content analysis, 93 codes, 15 categories, and 4 themes were found. The information was most systematically reported in the form of tables for each question by separating codes and categories, while at the end of each analysis the theme was mentioned as well. The final themes, as the ultimate answers to the questions, suggested that Essay Writing required an introduction to the "academic thinking" dimension of the course, it did not effectively prepare the students for international writing tests, it was more challenging, less practical, and less pleasing than other language skills, and it addressed macro-structures although the students still faced micro-structural difficulties.

In conclusion, this study provides insights into the challenges and opportunities for improving essay writing instruction in Iranian EFL programs. By implementing a more integrated approach that incorporates academic thinking, practice-oriented activities, motivational strategies, and comprehensive linguistic instruction, educators can help students develop the skills and confidence necessary to succeed in academic writing.

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