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Research Article**IELTS Writing Skills Training and EFL Learners' Identity Construction: Link to Selves-Theory**Sanaz Farnia¹

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ABSTRACT

Writing academically which has recently attracted much attention in the field of applied linguistics, is a complex process for many candidates. Among the four language skills, writing is more tied to selves-theory since it needs ideology transfer, the main element of the theory. This paper made an effort to examine the effect of training on IELTS writing skill on Iranian EFL students' construction of the possible selves in the future. In doing so, an experimental study was employed and 90 candidates of both genders were chosen to participate based on cluster sampling method. The instrument of the study was a related questionnaire (Zadshir et al., 2020) which was used to check the expected possible selves of the participants. Descriptive statistics and Multi-Variate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were run to analyze data. Findings of the study indicated that expected and responsible selves were stronger than feared selves among the participants after treatment. That is to say, training on IELTS writing skills had a remarkable effect on Iranian EFL students' construction of the possible selves and the dimensions of the possible selves in the future. Implications of the results for EFL curriculum planners, teachers and learners have been discussed.

Keywords: IELTS Writing Skills, Identity Construction, EFL Context, Selves-theory

1. INTRODUCTION

A concept which is of importance in such domains as learning in general, and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning in particular is identity (Nazari & Seyri, 2021). However, no general and exclusive definition has been put forth for the identity concept. This concept has generally been defined in terms of the pioneers' views. For instance, Erikson (1950) emphasizes the role of childhood in identity formation. He defines identity as a life-span developmental phenomenon. Accordingly, "identity is not something one has, but something that develops during one's whole life" (Beijaard et al., 2004, p.107). Simon-Maeda (2004) believes that identity is fashionable and is something that everybody wants. In sum, the term 'identity' is a concept that remains poorly defined (Beijaard et al., 2004), lacking universal definition or an analytical framework that satisfactorily serves scholars in varying disciplines (Abdelal et al., 2006; Leary & Tangney, 2012; Parsi & Ashraf, 2020).

The concept of possible selves as a domain of identity development pertains to how individuals think about their potential and about their future (Hamman et al., 2010). In justifying this, Hamman et al. (2010) argue that learners consist of individuals at varying points during the important phase of transition from a novice person to an experienced one, and "as such, possible-selves theory provides a theoretical framework for examining future-oriented, identity-relevant, goal-directed thinking in the present, and the salience of that thinking for regulating behaviour to reach a future state" (Hamman et al., 2010, p. 1349). Possible selves have been defined as the representations of "individuals' ideas about what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming. The possible selves that are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self, whereas the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Mahendra, 2020).

An individual's repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats. Possible selves provide the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. As such, they provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation (Hamman et al., 2010). This shift in the view of selves construction suggests that rather than being subjective, selves are constructed through a reflexive learning process, through which individuals accumulate their values, attitudes and behaviors. However, these initial and developmental views of selves do not make the distinction and the relation between the identity and selves clear. What these views actually suggest is that both constructs can be used interchangeably.

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has been one of the most widely used English language testing systems which is administered in numerous countries, it is a standardized language proficiency test for those who want to pursue their graduate studies (O'Sullivan, 2018). It should be noted that assessing writing skill is a compulsory part of a full test system. To enhance students' writing ability that is one of the four essential language skills measured in IELTS, a universal view containing convenience of learning, higher exposure,



learner's development, encouragement, authentic materials and improvement in writing needs to be regarded. Writing skill in IELTS exam consists of two tasks. The first one is report writing which is according to the information given on a chart or graph, and the second task which is argumentative essay requires participants to answer a question, give reasons, and if possible, include their personal experiences as well. These features make this task the material suitable for analyzing argumentation in writing skill as the participants are expected to voice their ideas and support them with convincing enough arguments. Considering the relationship between ideology transfer in argumentative writing and selves construction, Iranian EFL students' weakness in such writing skill may have negative results on selves construction. However, this can be proposed just at the level of hypothesis and proving it needs more empirical evaluation.

It seems that research in the field of possible selves suffers from scarcity, specifically in the cause-and-effect studies wherein possible selves formation have been influenced by different factors such as training on IELTS writing skills. Considering this gap in identity research, the present study aimed to explore Iranian EFL learners' possible selves construction as influenced by teaching IELTS writing skills. Thus, to fill the gap, this study was conducted to answer the following research question:

1. What is the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Design

Regarding the research objective which is investigating the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future, a quasi-experimental design was used.

2.2. Participants

From among IELTS candidates taking part in five IELTS preparation centres in Kerman, 90 candidates of both genders (45 males & 45 females) were selected through cluster sampling method. They were homogenized by just selecting those candidates whose sample IELTS Writing Task 2 received IELTS band score 18 (as the cut-off score) and above. Since IELTS Writing Task 2 is scored in a range from 0 to 36, 18 was a reasonable cut-off score. The participants' ages varied from 20 to 40. They were from different cities of Kerman and different socio-economic background levels. They were native speakers of Persian. Research ethics was observed in the sampling procedure by informing the participants of the research objectives. They were also ensured about anonymity and confidentiality of their personal information.

2.3. Instruments

The Possible Selves in Students Questionnaire developed and validated by Zadshir et al. (2020) was used to check the expected possible selves of the students. The questionnaire consists of 36 Likert-type five-point items in 3 sub-scales labelled as expectations, sense of responsibility and fears. The reliability of the scale reported by Zadshir et al. (2020) as .90. Moreover, they confirmed its validity through factor analysis. It should be mentioned that due to constraints imposed by Covid-19 outbreak, the Google Form of this questionnaire was used.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection started with selecting the sample, taking research ethics into account. After that, the objectives of the study were explained to the participants. Next, the Google Form of the Possible Selves in Students Questionnaire was distributed among them to be filled. Then, the participants took part in eight 60-minute training sessions on IELTS writing once a week. During the sessions which were held in Adobe Connect due to the constraints imposed by the prevalence of Covid-19 Pandemic, one of the researchers as an IELTS instructor taught the criteria of IELTS Writing Scoring Rubric. That is, in the first two training sessions, the primacy was given to task achievement, wherein the participants were taught how a fully developed response to a writing task in IELTS should be given. Thus, a number of samples were given to them in each of which some of the textual and contextual features were highlighted, as a way to invite learners' attention to them. Here, the emphasis was on the thoroughness of the writing requiring the learners to include as much of the details in the given task as they can. In the next two sessions, cohesion and coherence were the focal point of instruction. Within these sessions, the students were taught how cohesion should be brought to a text in such a way that it looks natural without attracting the reader's attention unduly. For this purpose, two sets of texts were used and compared in the class, with the former being coherent and the latter being jumbled. Moreover, the participants received some instruction on paragraphing, learning how each paragraph should stand independent while still in a logical relation with other paragraphs. Here, too, some samples were employed and comparatively analyzed. In the next two sessions, the participants received all their instructions on lexical resources. They were given a list of relevant words along with some sample sentences to demonstrate how those words should be naturally used. Then, they were asked to produce their own sentences right after having learned them. This, the researchers believe, could transform their passively learned words into an active state, thereby fostering their vocabulary retention. Finally, in the last two sessions, grammatical range as well as grammatical accuracy were of utmost importance. A number of complex structures were taught, exemplified, and practiced to the participants. For a better grasp, some IELTS samples taken from British Council website were also distributed among the students. They were then asked to sit in pairs and pinpoint all the structures already taught to them. Besides, the importance of accuracy in using grammatical structures was highlighted. For this purpose, some intentionally incorrect sentences were given to them to spot the error and then produce the correct form. After the end of the training sessions, the Google Form of the Possible Selves in Students Questionnaire was re-distributed to be filled. Finally, descriptive statistics and Multi-Variate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were run to analyze the data.



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the following table the result of possible selves before training is shown.

Table 1:

Descriptive Statistics for Possible Selves before Training on IELTS Writing Skills

Variable	Expected selves (Expectations)	Responsible selves (Sense of Responsibility)	Feared selves (Fears)
Possible selves			
Mean	20.33	23.15	27.10
SD	.48	.70	.60

As shown in the Table 1, before training on IELTS writing skills, the highest mean was observed for fears sub-scale (M=27.10). This shows that the participants’ fears were more dominant than their expectations and sense of responsibility. The lowest mean was related to expectations (M=20.33). According to this, the participants’ expectations were weaker than their sense of responsibility and fears. The results, all in all, show that feared selves were stronger than expected and responsible selves among the participants before training on IELTS writing skills.

In order to answer the research question ‘What is the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners’ construction of the possible selves in the future?’, MANOVA was performed with status as the grouping variable and possible selves dimensions (expected selves, responsible selves and feared selves) as the dependent variables. The results are shown in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2:

The Result of Multivariate Analysis of the Effect of Training on Possible Selves

	Effect	Value	F	Error df	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Possible selves	Pillai's Trace	0.88	28.76	87	0.008	0.73
	Wilks' Lambda	0.47	11.81	85	0.005	0.61

As it can be seen in the Table 2, the analysis of the Pillai’s Trace and Wilks’ Lambda shows that totally, training on IELTS writing skills has a significant effect on the participants’ construction of the possible selves in the future. Then, the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on the dimensions of possible selves was checked. The results are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3:

The Result of Univariate Analysis of the Effect of Training on Possible Selves Dimensions

Variable	F	Sig	Effect size	Partial eta squared
Expected selves				
M	102.00	.000	.68	.044
SD				
Responsible selves				
M	130.00	.000	.70	.057
SD				
Feared selves				
M	90.00	.001	.42	.013
SD				

As presented in the Table 3, there was a statistically significant difference between expected selves dimensions on all the three dimensions including expected selves dimension ($F(1,87)=102.00$, $p<.05$, partial eta squared = .044), responsible selves dimension ($F(1,87) = 130.00$, $p<.05$, partial eta squared = .057) and feared selves dimension ($F(1,87) = 90.00$, $p<.05$, partial eta squared = .013). The results are convincing enough to conclude that training on IELTS writing skills has a significant effect on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future. More specifically, it is concluded that training on IELTS writing skills enhances expected and responsible selves and weakens feared possible selves.

The mission of the present study was to answer research question concerning EFL learners' construction of the possible selves as well as the dimensions of the possible selves in the future. More particularly, it was shown that training on IELTS writing skills enhances expected and responsible selves and weakens feared possible selves. In comparing the findings with the results of the previous studies, it is worth noting that no similar study was found wherein training on IELTS writing skills has been implemented to explore its effectiveness on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves. However, implicitly consistent with this study, in the studies by Conway and Clark (2003) and Hamman et al. (2010), EFL teachers showed more dominant feared possible selves at the beginning. This is while in the passage of time, their expected selves proved to be more prominent. Moreover, in the study by Harrison (2018), higher education was found to be significantly influential on the possible selves formation. Similarly, in the studies by Hardgrove et al. (2015), Landau et al. (2017), Oyserman et al. (2011), and Riahipour et al. (2020), educational interventions proved to be effective on re-orientation of individuals in their possible selves.

To justify the results, it can be argued that different forms of academic writing education influence the identity (re)construction (Anderson, 2017). That is, when individuals are educated on academic writing, various dimensions of their identity are transformed. Similarly, it can be proposed that writing skill sets new forms of identity in students (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This is exactly what was meant by Berlin (1988) when he argued that identity negotiation and writing



instruction have always been interplayed and interrelated. These all show that writing instruction and identity (re)construction are strongly tied. Accordingly, it seems reasonable that as a result of being exposed to teaching writing skills, students' possible selves as well as their dimensions are reconstructed. The other justification which can be put forth for the findings is that IELTS writing skills training, like any other training type, has the potential to empower the learners, enhance their self-confidence and self-efficacy, and make them more autonomous. Such changes in turn can help the learners reconstruct their possible selves in specific ways. To elaborate on this, possible selves are associated with affective factors (Mahmoudi-Gahreuei, Tavakoli, & Hamman, 2016) and this is why enhanced empowerment, self-confidence, self-efficacy and autonomy cannot contribute to transformations in possible selves formation.

Further, as put forth by Crawford and Greaves (2015), training and instruction cause new coping strategies to rejuvenate and this may contribute to transformations in possible selves (re)construction. Additionally, as elaborated by Motallebzadeh and Kazemi (2018), possible selves construction or negotiation is exposed to change as a consequence of changes in knowledge, practice and experience. Obviously, IELTS writing skills training is considered a new experience with its own kind of knowledge building potential. Therefore, it can impact the learners' construction of the possible selves in the future. Finally, due to being exposed to training of IELTS writing skills, their motivation to learn may have been corroborated and this is associated with transformations in the possible selves construction (Zadshir et al., 2020).

Based on the results, it is worthy to mention some points. First, since EFL learners' identity and selves experiences are the core of their learning practice and their academic success, exploration of this issue has great implications for curriculum reform, classroom teaching, and student learning (Burns, 2007). Second, given that possible selves are prone to change and can be impacted by intervention to enhance and lead to positive changes in academic behavior, in better academic performance and lower risk of depression (Oyserman et al., 2006), any interventionist research on possible selves can be associated with positive outcomes in the realm of academic achievement of EFL learners. Third, the study, by revealing a clear idea of past, current, and prospective selves of EFL learners assists them construct their beliefs of how to be and how to act in English learning process. Fourth, this study fills a missing link in identity research. Fifth, it gives useful insights to English Language Teaching (ELT) administrators on EFL learners' selves which can be positively used in planning future EFL teaching programs. Last but not least, this study might open new research doors to ELT researchers.

From another perspective, a general justification for conducting this area of research is that this study might help EFL learners understand that English writing is far more than putting words together and using grammar rules randomly. Unfortunately, even those focusing on the process of writing rarely pay attention to the discursive features of a text. Familiarity with these features and applying them in text production can help learners show their genuine attitudes toward a topic and their standpoints regarding it. This can ease the pressure of text production and text comprehension fallen on both sides, the writer and the readers. Thus, a contribution of this study can be enabling EFL learners to express their ideas more clearly. Therefore, teaching academic writing, especially

argumentative writing which is required not only in almost all English tests, but also in all varieties of academic atmospheres, would be more practical as teachers would realize how they could help learners to express their beliefs, and learners would learn which aspects of the language they would need to pay more attention to.

4. CONCLUSION

Taking the important role of identity and possible selves in education and EFL learning, the findings show the necessity to use IELTS writing skills training in EFL classes so that students' possible selves are reconstructed in a way that they experience less fears, have a higher sense of responsibility, and wish more expectations. In this way, their identity is also formed, transformed, constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed. With a view to the association between identity of learners and their EFL achievement, this in turn can contribute to more improvements in EFL learning in general. All in all, based on the findings, it can be concluded that teaching IELTS writing skills has a significant effect on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves and their dimensions. It can also be concluded that the possible selves (re)construction is not taken place in vacuum but it is changeable as affected by teaching IELTS writing skills. That is, the viewpoint that the possible selves are genetically fixed and static in nature is frayed in favour of the view that the possible selves are susceptible to educational interventions. Therefore, different groups of EFL stakeholders including curriculum planners and teachers are suggested to inject IELTS writing skills training in EFL curricula in an attempt to help EFL learners reconstruct their possible selves. Besides, EFL learners should be encouraged to improve their knowledge of IELTS writing skills so that they can experience positive changes in their possible selves (re)construction. Future researchers are recommended to re-conduct the present study in the longitudinal format to see the possible long-term effects of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners' possible selves (re)construction.

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