

# A Critical Review on the Second Language Academic Literacy Development in Iranian Higher Education System

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## Abstract

This critical review provides a thorough examination of the development of English academic literacy among graduate students in Iranian higher education institutions. It delves into how the students' sociocultural and educational backgrounds, combined with the dynamics of institutional factors, shape their academic literacy competencies. The study also assesses the potential of academic literacy as an alternative approach to enhance academic writing in the given academic landscape. To this aim, it explores the critical factors that mold English writing and its pedagogy. An analysis of existing literature, encompassing both international research and local studies, reveals the existing challenges Iranian students encounter in English writing. Key issues include gaps in the curriculum, the absence of a comprehensive academic literacy framework, and the inadequacy of effective teaching methodologies. Given the global emphasis on multiliteracy and multiculturalism, with a drive towards equal educational opportunities, this study promotes the implementation of genre-based writing and targeted strategies to advance academic writing in Iran, regarded as “English as a Foreign Language” (EFL) context. This proposed strategy is aimed at addressing the substantial difficulties students face in achieving proficiency in English academic literacy.

**Keywords:** academic literacy, EFL, Iranian higher education, critical review, second language writing

## 1. Introduction

As globalization and universal connectedness have grown rapidly, new channels of communication have emerged, communities of discourse are becoming more plural, and English is increasingly used for both academic excellence and international communication, the importance of developing academic literacies through proficiency in the English language have become even more paramount. Additionally, to its conventional role in helping language learners acquire proficiency in a second language, writing has recently been emphasized as an opportunity to develop students' expertise in each discipline (Bitchener, 2019; Hyland, 2013; Manchón, 2011; Ortega, 2012). The credibility of writing as a game-changing language learning skill is far from being recognized in many EFL contexts where outdated curricular policies and traditional pedagogical practices still prevail (Casanave, 2009; Reichelt, 2009). Some scholars (Al-Jarrah & Al-Ahmad, 2013; Cimasko & Reichelt, 2011; Jafary, 2014; Reichelt, 2005; Silva et al., 1999; Tarnopolsky, 2000) have analyzed, examined and critiqued English writing instruction across various contexts, aiming to improve the quality of writing instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Although cross-contextual differences have been widely recognized as influencing L2 writing instruction, little research has been conducted on how context affects L2 writing dynamics (Bitchener, 2017; Ruecker et al., 2014).

### *1.1 Rationale for the Study*

The principal aim of this critical literature review is to investigate second language academic literacy development in Iranian higher education. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of Iranian students entering higher education due to young people's aspirations to become graduates, particularly female students. This growth has led to an increase in the number of higher education institutions. Hasrati (2005), argues that this development, however, has been quantitative rather than qualitative. There is no exception to this rule when it

comes to the teaching and learning of English in Iranian educational institutions, especially when there is evidence that students leaving these institutions have difficulties using English (Dehghan & Sahragard, 2012; Karimi & Nejadghanbar, 2016). Students have been criticized for not being able to communicate effectively through English writing, which is an essential component of academic literacy (Zare-ee & Hejazi, 2017).

New literary studies (Barton et al., 2000; Gee & Gee, 2007; Street, 1997) focus on language and literacy as natural phenomena with consideration given to 'their context and their different meanings for different cultural groups (Street, 1997). According to this view, literacy is more clearly understood when viewed as a device for people's societal interactions than as a separate skill (Barton et al., 2000; Barton, 1994; Street, 1997).

## 2. Literature Review

The theoretical framework of the study is in line with literacy in general and academic literacy as well as accredited approaches to teaching L2 writing.

### 2.1 Various Definitions of Literacy

Research has begun to consider literacy considering its use in contemporary societies rather than limiting it to reading and writing. Literacy concepts have evolved out of this emerging trend in research and education. Therefore, sociocultural literacy practices include more than reading and writing and include color, gesture, signs, and other semiotic resources (Galante, 2022; Kalan 2022; Kusters et al., 2017). In addition, functional literacy addresses the growing demand for English as a medium of communication and instruction for different communicative purposes. English for Specific Purposes has emerged in response to this trend, focusing on the ability of educators to integrate the knowledge from their discipline into their language instruction. There is also the concept of critical literacy which states that texts are usually influenced by social, economic, or political factors. These concepts each have their own theoretical principles with different perspectives on teaching writing, such as the product approach, which focuses on accuracy over fluency, or the process approach, which ignores text types and the importance of providing language input to students, especially those who are non-native English speakers. Teaching L2 writing through genres emphasizes the context and purpose of text production as primary elements.

### 2.2 Literacy vs. Academic Literacy

Researchers and educators have identified literacy by its practices because of the flexibility of the concept of literacy and how it can be applied. Nutbeam cites the National Association of Adult Literacy in defining these two components as "task-based literacy" and "skill-based literacy," with task-based literacy focusing on a person's ability to read basic texts and to write simple statements. 'Skill-based literacy is defined by the knowledge and skills that an adult need to be able to perform these tasks" (Nutbeam, 2009). Therefore, the development of literacy has been influenced by its practices and the ways in which people perform and learn them. Popular literacy perspectives represent people's social practices, and semiotic resources as reflected in various indications of media literacy,

### 2.3 Definition of Literacy within Iranian Context

Within the Iranian context, the concept of literacy has yet to gain currency. However, when literature on literacy is reviewed, it appears that, even in the west, defining this term is still a topic of debate amongst educators, scholars, and researchers in the field of education. Some researchers argue that literacy is difficult to define as any attempt to encompass its complexity will be inadequate (Baynham, 1995; Graff, 1987; Kalman, 2008). Roberts agrees with this view and argues that if our goal is to find a single definition of 'literacy' that will satisfy all specific legitimate applications of the term, we will remain dissatisfied" (Roberts et al., 2005). Literacy is, as Gee has aptly described, "a socially contested term." Sociocultural studies of literacy have problematized the tendency to define literacy as a singular knowledge or developmentally ordered skill set; as unvarying across contexts and situations; and as primarily cognitive. Academic literacy has been narrowly defined as "the ability to read and write the various texts assigned in university (Gee & Gee, 2007; Spack, 1997). The complexity of academic literacies highlights the limitations of the use of study skills and socialization methods. Using the academic literacy model, the tutor demonstrates the change of genre and mode as students move from speaking and taking notes to more formal writing. It also emphasizes the importance of feedback, the relationship between cultural practices and genres, and how tutors and students can discover meaning and identity together (Lea & Street, 2006). The present study also aims to describe English writing instruction in Iran and report on factors influencing its practice based mostly on qualitative data such as interviews and observations encompassing four levels of education (middle school, secondary school, university, and private language school) in three parts of the country. In the Iranian educational system, however, primary school education (Grades 1–6) was excluded

since English teaching begins with Grade 7. It is noteworthy that Iranian education is centralized, in terms of its curricular goals and objectives. To have a first-hand account of classroom-based activities, in most studies students and teachers were involved in providing information about the most emphasized genres of writing, instructional techniques, assignments and tests, and feedback strategies. The outcomes of carried out interviewees and observed classes were mostly obtained from Iranian local studies focused on last grade/year of each school and from third-year university classes when students are offered their last writing or ESP course to ensure that participants had sufficient experience with English language or writing (Dehghan & Sahragard, 2012; Karimi & Nejadghanbar, 2016).

#### *2.4 The Importance of Academic Literacy and English Writing in Iran*

As in other EFL contexts, mastering English writing skills in Iran might be beneficial not only to pupils but also to a range of groups and professionals. Students pursuing an English major at the undergraduate or graduate level must initially develop writing skills so they can deal with exams, projects, and demanding assignments. Students who publish papers in English but major in a subject other than English are also given precedence in applying for admission to and graduating from various programs, though Farsi is the usual medium of instruction in national universities. Also, university lecturers suffer from the "publish or perish" anxiety, since they need to present their findings at conferences and symposia to be promoted. It has become increasingly significant to develop essay writing abilities, as part of high-stakes English proficiency exams such as TOEFL and IELTS, to obtain a visa to leave the country for a more desirable educational, social, and occupational opportunities; this phenomenon has projected Iran as one of the top countries with an unfortunate phenomenon referred as "brain drain" (WIPO, 2013). In addition to this, being able to write in English has become a necessary skill to be able to do business internationally since most international correspondence is conducted in English, whether electronically or on paper.

The body of literacy research emanating from the Iranian academic milieu has yielded conclusive insights, particularly regarding the familiarity of Iranian educators with pedagogical methodologies in teaching writing. Research indicates that there exists a notable unfamiliarity among Iranian academic professionals with the genre approach to writing instruction. This approach, characterized by its emphasis on providing explicit models for various writing styles, has been identified as markedly advantageous for students who are in the process of enhancing their second language (L2) writing competencies. In comparison to the process-based approach, which focuses on the individual stages of writing development, the genre approach offers a structured framework that not only facilitates a more guided learning experience but also significantly (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998) is more useful for developing students' L2 writing skills than the process-based approach. "Genre analysis attempts to reveal the similarity between texts written for the same purpose, and so it is likely that these awareness activities will rely on a corpus of relevant genre texts" (Badger & White, 2000). Thus, this approach provides disciplinary-specific discourses and genres for students to learn (Lea & Street, 2006), and a framework for literacy which is realized in an organizational setting (Hodgson & Harris, 2012).

The academic literacies model views academic institutions as sites of discourse and power and literary practices as social practices (Lea & Street, 1998). It examines meaning-making and identity and puts the institutional nature of knowledge in the foreground. It differs from the academic socialization model in that it views literacy learning processes as more complex, situated, and dynamic, and it includes epistemological as well as social aspects. Besides social identities, it also involves power relationships between institutions and people (Lea & Street, 2006). Therefore, "It is important to recognize the cultural and linguistic complexity and explore how institutions interpret the larger social discourses at the local level, specifically in institutional policy documents about language education. Examining policy documents is of great relevance as they produce and circulate views about language, writing, and assessment that shape how multilingual students are appraised and categorized in educational and classroom contexts, having serious implications on academic success" (Chiras & Galante, 2021).

### **3. English L2 Writing in Iran**

#### *3.1 Middle and Secondary Schools*

Students in grades 7 and 8 learn English for three to four hours per week, and in grades 9 through 12, they study it for two to four hours per week. The local textbooks emphasize grammar and vocabulary over oral and written skills. Among the interviewees, teachers indicated that the traditional grammar-translation method is used for teaching these language-learning areas. Iranian student writers generally at the phrase- or sentence-level while completing grammatical exercises and responding to "right there" or "in the text" questions following reading passages. A university entrance test (Konkour), which is a gate-keeping test for public and private universities, does not test students' English writing skills. As part of the exam, students will be tested on grammar, vocabulary,

reading comprehension, and vocabulary related to various subjects they study in secondary school. There may be 25 to 70 questions (depending on whether they want to join English or non-English major programs) pertaining to English. Thus, pre-university English language education in Iran is truncated in the sense that it ignores productive language skills such as speaking and writing.

### *3.2 Universities & Higher Education Institutions*

#### *3.2.1 English Majors*

The English department offers three 90-minute writing courses in the second year: paragraph development in the third semester, letter writing in the fourth semester, and essay writing (four to five paragraphs) in the fifth semester. Even though the order varies from one university to another, and from one program to another (such as English literature to English translation), the contents of the curriculum remain the same. In most Iranian writing courses, the lecturers do not introduce process- and genre-based activities, including pre-writing and brainstorming activities, multiple drafting and revising, and writing-to-read tasks, such as paraphrasing and summarizing, nor do they introduce new genres, such as memos, reports, application letters, and cover letters. As reasons for not incorporating these writing activities or genres into their classes, lecturers cited inadequate time, heavy workloads, students' relatively low proficiency in English, and their lack of experience in English writing. The lecturers, however, stated that they primarily focus on students' writing accuracy given that grammatical errors are prevalent in their writing and that students also expect more feedback on grammar, probably due to extensive experience with grammar instruction at the pre-university level (Rajabi & Dezhkam, 2014).

#### *3.2.2 Non-English Majors*

Many non-English major undergraduates in the country take one General English course during their first year and two ESP courses during or after the second year. ESP courses, however, aim to develop students' knowledge of technical terms and their ability to read and comprehend academic texts in their field of study by reviewing or continuing the lessons they covered during high school (see <http://www.en.samt.ac.ir/>).

A significant majority of instructors in Iran tasked with teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses hold advanced academic credentials, such as Master's and Doctoral degrees in English. Despite these qualifications, they often lack a comparable level of expertise in the specific disciplinary fields relevant to their students. These ESP courses primarily involve the use of locally developed textbooks, with a notable focus on translation tasks. These educational resources are crafted by The Organization for Researching and Writing, an affiliate of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. This instructional approach in ESP teaching emphasizes language translation over a more integrated application of language skills within distinct academic disciplines (<http://www.en.samt.ac.ir/>).

### *3.3 Private Language Academies & Institutes*

Most Iranians attend private language schools to improve their English for immigration, business, or personal purposes. Many of these language learners enroll in these schools to enhance their oral skills, an area that is often overlooked in school and university curriculums. Many enrollees are children whose parents send them to learn English for social prestige or for future study. These private language schools use imported commercial textbooks that typically contain one or two writing exercises at the end of each unit. Except for IELTS and TOEFL preparation classes, which teach four main skills using both commercial and locally compiled texts, private language schools rarely emphasize writing. In addition, they lack the necessary resources, such as trained teachers and customized teaching materials, to allow them to succeed. Teaching writing in IELTS and TOEFL preparation classes, however, is usually based on traditional product-based approaches and rote learning.

## **4. Academic Literacies and their Influences on English L2 Writing in Iran**

Academic literacies have played an important role in shaping the dynamics of EFL writing in Iran through several push-and-pull factors. There are several alluring factors cited by the interviewed teachers: the global rise of English as a language of written communication, the emergence of new online forums, the growth of mobile technology, as well as the increasing demand for English writing for immigration, professional, and academic purposes. Despite this, the teachers indicated that instruction in English writing has been overlooked in the country because of insufficient support from the government. This lack of leverage to teach English has been a consequence of the Cultural Revolution, which followed the Islamic Revolution in 1979. This movement divided leftists, who supported teaching English to accommodate the needs of those who aspired to communicate in English, from fundamentalists, who advocated a culturally and religiously localized version of the language. To guard against the spread of secularism and the cultural hegemony of the West, they did not support global or international English. Education policies have long been formulated and implemented by the latter group to push

for the late introduction of English to school education even though Iranians are very motivated to learn English (Riazi, 2005), especially the youth who are aware of the educational and social advantages associated with academic literacy and English proficiency. Apart from these cultural and ideological concerns, the teaching of English writing has also been hindered by logistical, institutional, and practical concerns. In the studies carried out by (Zand-Moghadam & Adeh, 2020), in the poll of university lecturers, many expressed reluctances to teach writing because they are involved in overtime work and private tutoring and, therefore, do not want to spend more time after school giving feedback and commenting on students' papers. According to the lecturers, local English language teaching programs lack rigor to produce writing teachers. "Academic English programs are too general to train student teachers to teach writing, and teachers generally teach the way they were taught as students." (Riazi, 2005). Observations carried out by (Adel et al., 2014; Badjadi, 2019) indicate that private language schools give more importance to enhancing language learners' oral communicative abilities.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

English academic writing in the Iranian context requires more effective teaching methods and purposeful learning strategies. In such a context, the traditional pedagogical approach to teaching writing does not seem to be effective in enhancing students' English writing competence or developing their academic literacy. Most previous studies found that the genre approach helped students improve their writing and critical thinking (Kalan, 2014; Jafary, 2023) supporting their ability to engage with and contest other people's views, and to present their own ideas comprehensively and coherently. It also helped them recognize reading and writing as a symbiotic activity rather than separate tasks. Furthermore, the students' longer-term evaluations suggested that the genre approach familiarized them with academic writing conventions to the point that they were able to perform similar writing tasks for other English courses. Incorporating formative assessment tools, collaborative tasks, portfolio writing, and other process- and genre-based strategies were among activities absent from most writing classes. Also, most of the teachers' feedback practices were retrospective and corrective, addressing mainly grammatical errors without offering students a road map for their future learning. consistent with previous findings in similar EFL contexts (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011; Riazi, 2005), many respondents stated that they offered little feedback on the content of student papers because they were unaware of how to evaluate it and offer constructive comments, given their discipline-specific knowledge and the different expertise required for grading and giving feedback. The findings of this study highlight the necessity of formulating an academic literacy theory, implementing context-specific pedagogical strategies, and adopting practices aimed at improving writing instruction in Iran, with potential applicability to other countries where English is learned as a foreign language. Students, teachers, and institutions need to understand the literacy demands of their subjects and the values that underpin them.

## 6. Implications for L2 Writing Curriculum and Pedagogy

### 6.1 *Developing an Academic Literacy Theory*

At the forefront of educational advancement, the development of a customized academic literacy theory in Iran is paramount. Such a personalized theoretical framework would serve as a navigational aid, directing the pedagogical strategies of language educators and shaping the focus of local researchers' endeavors (Shomoossi & Tavakoli, 2010). This indigenous theory would facilitate an in-depth exploration of disciplinary writing practices and the requisite knowledge therein (Hyland, 2007). It aims to elucidate the underlying assumptions of academic writing, thereby assisting educators in crafting effective literacy instruction, and providing valuable insights into assessment practices and standards. The formulation of this local academic literacy theory should be rooted in the synthesis of indigenous practices and global literacy paradigms, mirroring the approaches adopted in other non-native English-speaking contexts. Drawing inspiration from university environments, this theory could offer a holistic view of writing and reading practices within local academic communities (Hyland, 2013). The goal is to create a theory that not only aligns with global standards but also resonates with the unique cultural and educational nuances of the Iranian academic landscape.

### 6.2 *Embracing Genre Writing*

The new theory can also draw from the genre-based pedagogy, as previous studies found it helpful in enhancing students' EFL writing and critical thinking (Basturkmen, 2009; Corbett, 2010; Hyland, 2007). This pedagogy can make visible the specific demands of writing in different disciplines. It can also help explore the influence of the institutional context and the learners' socio-cultural background on their writing. As part of the genre-based approach, a range of activities can be adapted for teaching writing in Iran.

### 6.3 Using Formative Assessment Tools

Formative assessment tools, such as peer assessment and self-assessment, can be integrated into writing classes to develop learners' autonomy and to reduce the workload of teachers. Also, the importance of content evaluation, which was previously ignored in Iranian writing classrooms (Tayyebi et al., 2022), can be highlighted in teacher education and training. "Teachers' own proficiency in English, their pedagogical training and knowledge, their previous and current teaching experience and feedback, and their perceptions of the roles of various stakeholders in the teaching process including themselves, students, administrators, parents, and policy makers (Perrodin, 2022) also need to be taken into consideration for teacher development programs. Additionally, the genre-based approach, when adapted for EFL teaching, should not be confined to the university, as teachers and students from other academic levels can benefit from its instruction.

### 6.4 Providing Quality Feedback

Feedback can be both summative and formative. The feedback offered to students, whether summative or formative, needs to be more informative and constructive, and directed toward achieving the intended learning objectives. Also, both the content and language of feedback need to be improved. Consistent with Riazi (2005), teacher education needs to make sure that new teachers are prepared to provide constructive feedback on different aspects of writing, not just on the concepts relating to the grammatical range and accuracy (Rezai, Azizi, et al., 2022; Rezai, Namaziandost, et al., 2022).

### 6.5 Curriculum Design and Materials Development

Teacher educators should help teachers develop new pedagogical practices and design new curricula. These curricula need to incorporate insights from the recent studies on teaching writing in the Iranian context and elsewhere. Moreover, materials development needs to draw on the new academic literacy theory, the genre-based approach, and the insights of previous EFL writing instruction research.

## 7. Conclusion

In the realm of teaching English writing in Iran, an intricate tapestry of challenges, both intrinsic and extrinsic, has emerged. From deeply rooted cultural and ideological considerations to the scarcity of adequately trained writing instructors, logistical hurdles, institutional constraints, and practical limitations, the landscape presents formidable obstacles. However, within these challenges also lie substantial opportunities for transformation and advancement. This critical review has elucidated the pressing need for an indigenous academic literacy theory firmly rooted in local practices. Such a theory would be uniquely tailored to meet the nuanced demands of writing across various academic disciplines, thereby bridging the gap between global standards and local needs.

One of the pivotal insights gleaned from this exploration is the imperative to wholeheartedly embrace genre-based pedagogy. By adopting this pedagogical approach, educators can effectively steer students toward a deeper understanding of the contextual and purpose-driven nature of academic writing. This, in turn, empowers students to engage more authentically with their respective fields of study and contribute meaningfully to scholarly discourse.

Furthermore, the study accentuates the critical role of formative assessment tools. These tools, when thoughtfully integrated into pedagogical practices, offer students a dynamic feedback loop that fosters continuous growth in their writing skills. This process-oriented approach challenges the traditional focus on product-based writing instruction, ushering in a paradigm shift that prioritizes student development over mere linguistic error correction.

In the quest to enhance English writing instruction, curriculum design and materials development emerge as pivotal focal points. In such an EFL context educational planners need to revamp the existing curricula to align with modern pedagogical principles, educators can better equip students for the multifaceted demands of academic writing. Likewise, the creation of contextually relevant and engaging teaching materials can breathe new life into classrooms, cultivating an environment where writing becomes a vibrant and integral aspect of the learning process.

Through focused efforts to address these multifaceted challenges and leverage the inherent opportunities, the landscape of English writing instruction in Iran can be reshaped. Ultimately, the aspiration is to empower students with the academic literacy skills that are indispensable not only for navigating the complex terrain of higher education but also for thriving in a rapidly evolving global landscape. The journey toward enhancing English writing instruction in the mentioned context beckons, and with each challenge surmounted and opportunity seized, it promises to bring about transformative changes that resonate far beyond the confines of the classroom.

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