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**An Investigating into the Differences between Advanced and Intermediate Proficiency  
Levels in EFL Writing Skill Test**

**Una investigación sobre las diferencias entre los niveles de competencia avanzados e  
intermedios en la prueba de habilidad de escritura EFL**

Behrouz Kamali<sup>1</sup>, Payman Rajabi<sup>2,\*</sup>, Hossein Ahmadi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph. D. candidate, Department of English Language, Malayer Branch, Islamic Azad University,  
Malayer, Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English Language, Malayer Branch, Islamic Azad University,  
Malayer, Iran.

\*Corresponding Author E-mail: [paymanrajabi2002@yahoo.com](mailto:paymanrajabi2002@yahoo.com)

**Abstract**

In this study, it is aimed to determine the most measured writing constructs based on confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the significant differences in the specifications of the EFL writing skills test between Iranian advanced and intermediate proficiency level learners. For this purpose, sequential combination method was performed to provide comprehensive answers to research questions. In the present study, 60 out of 114 Iranian language learners from Boroujerd Branch Azad University were selected as participants. Then, the quantitative stage was followed by the qualitative stage. The research tools included Oxford Placement Test (OPT), structured survey questionnaire, semi-structured

27 interview, and writing tasks. The participants were divided into advanced and intermediate groups  
28 based on the students' writing skills scores. Moreover, independent t-tests as well as principal  
29 component analysis (PCA), were used to compare the advanced and intermediate groups. The results  
30 showed that there is a significant difference between Iranian learners with high and medium skill level  
31 in the most measured structures in the specifications of the Iranian EFL writing skills test. Most of the  
32 measured structures included mode, evaluation and mechanics, respectively.

33 **Keywords:** Iranian EFLs, Writing skills, Advanced, Intermediate, Proficiency.

### 34 **Resumen**

35 En este estudio, el objetivo es determinar los constructos de escritura más medidos en función del  
36 análisis factorial confirmatorio y también evaluar las diferencias significativas en las  
37 especificaciones de la prueba de habilidades de escritura EFL entre los estudiantes iraníes de nivel  
38 de competencia avanzado e intermedio. Para ello, se realizó el método de combinación secuencial  
39 para dar respuestas integrales a las preguntas de investigación. De modo que a la etapa cuantitativa  
40 le siguió la etapa cualitativa. Las herramientas de investigación incluyeron la prueba de ubicación  
41 de Oxford (OPT), el cuestionario de encuesta estructurada, la entrevista semiestructurada y las  
42 tareas de escritura. Según los puntajes de las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes, se  
43 dividieron en dos grupos: avanzado e intermedio. Además del análisis de componentes principales  
44 (PCA), se utilizaron pruebas t independientes para comparar los grupos avanzado e intermedio.  
45 Los resultados mostraron que existe una diferencia significativa entre los estudiantes iraníes con  
46 un nivel de habilidad alto y medio en las estructuras más medidas en las especificaciones de la  
47 prueba de habilidades de escritura EFL iraní. La mayoría de las estructuras medidas incluyeron  
48 modo, evaluación y mecánica, respectivamente.

49 **Palabras clave:** EFL iraníes, habilidades de escritura, nivel avanzado, e intermedio.

50

## 51 **INTRODUCTION**

52 Students have difficulty learning English as a as a Foreign Language (EFL) in  
53 communicating their ideas effectively because of the lack of creativity and sufficient  
54 knowledge in English writing skills (Quvanch, 2020). EFL writing is a complex social  
55 activity that involves many capabilities like selecting the right topics for a specific audience,  
56 creating logical and clear concepts, constructing valuable, appropriate content, and showing  
57 a perfect language (Xiaoxiao and Yan, 2010).

58 Since, the ability to write skillfully becomes more and more important, and writing skills

٥٩ play an increasing role in teaching and learning a second language (Chelli, 2006). It is one  
٦٠ of the most important factors for students' academic achievement. How learners self-regulate  
٦١ the combination of texts and the strategies they use to initiate and control their writing  
٦٢ activities are the key factors in their academic success. Students use a variety of techniques  
٦٣ to manage their writing activities (Harris et al, 2010). Accordingly, effective writing skill  
٦٤ also requires some multiple skills such as researching, reading complex contexts,  
٦٥ comprehending concepts, synthesizing, analyzing, and responding critically to new and  
٦٦ related information (Al-Zubaidi, 2012).

٦٧ On the other hand, the traditional teaching of writing has been the predominant approach in  
٦٨ many schools around the world. Foreign language (L2) students' writing attempts have been  
٦٩ usually assessed by means of a single final exam as the main criterion representative of their  
٧٠ writing ability. Recently, however, there has been a shift from the dominant past paradigm  
٧١ to using portfolios as a possible means of language learning and assessment (Roohani,  
٧٢ 2015).

٧٣ Due to the indispensable role that writing as a language skill plays in foreign/second  
٧٤ language (L2) learning and teaching, the way it is taught or assessed is of utmost  
٧٥ importance. Writing used to be conceived of as a product-oriented approach; L2 teachers  
٧٦ taught their students the principles and techniques of writing in a foreign language and they  
٧٧ would focus on only the final product which was a completed piece of writing (Nunan,  
٧٨ 2003).

٧٩ However, until now less attention is paid to writing as a whole (including the process of  
٨٠ planning, generating and organizations). In schools and universities, they mainly focus on  
٨١ English vocabulary, grammar and structure. In a situation where teachers are generally  
٨٢ unaware of English writing, it has caused students to be less motivated and interested in  
٨٣ writing skills. Although they can learn a large number of new words, there are still many  
٨٤ problems in the process of transitioning from language input to output (Li, 2014).

٨٥ Complaints about poor productive writing skills of Iranian EFL learners have been heard  
٨٦ from the public, teachers and even students all over the country. The reason is claimed to be  
٨٧ either the teachers' lack of competence in L2 teaching process or the learners who are not  
٨٨ motivated to produce the language. As Sattari (2012) maintains, Iran's education system  
٨٩ should also take the responsibility for the EFL learners' deficiencies in productive skills as it  
٩٠ is perceived not to present an effective educational system for L2 pedagogy (Pouladian et al,

91 2017).

92 Undoubtedly, with this shift of thought on the nature of writing, new methods are needed to  
93 assess students' writing ability. These methods have been named as alternative or authentic  
94 methods of writing assessment (Tabatabaei & Assefi, 2012).

95 There is also a close relationship between language teachings and testing and certainly the  
96 other cannot be provided without considering one. Therefore, evaluating the progress of  
97 writing also becomes a concern for language experts (Farhadi et al, 2006).

98 The objectives of this study were to determine the most measured writing constructs based  
99 on confirmatory factor analysis and also to evaluate the significant difference (in most  
100 measurements) in the specifications of the EFL writing skills test through principal  
101 component analysis (PCA) between Iranian advanced and intermediate proficiency level  
102 learners.

### 103 **Literature Review**

104 A number of researchers have measured writing using a levels of language approach that  
105 considers writing at three levels: discourse, sentence, and word (Nelson & Van Meter,  
106 2007). Discourse level features are often scored using holistic scoring methods that  
107 emphasize the organization, ideas and content, sentence fluency, and conventions of the  
108 writing sample. Sentence level measures include sentence length, counts of connectives,  
109 number of grammatical errors, clause density, and number of T-units. Word level features  
110 include vocabulary diversity, measured as number of different words, as well as letter  
111 formation elements and spelling (Nelson & Van Meter, 2007).

112 Research on second language writing is varied not only on the issues explored but also on  
113 the methodologies used. The growth in numbers of students undertaking undergraduate and  
114 graduate level degrees in English-speaking countries has triggered researchers' interest in  
115 understanding the writing processes of second language learners and the challenges these  
116 learners face. One of the issues that tends to be the focus of attention is the identification of  
117 effective practices that impact or improve students' writing but tend to rely on single aspects  
118 of writing that do not consider holistic views of writing; but even when holistic views are  
119 considered, they become problematic as they are sometimes not specific enough (Haswell,  
120 2000). Causarano (2011) conducted a study to explore how students in an English as a  
121 Second Language (ESL) class in an American university acquire academic writing through

۱۲۲ Vygotsky's theoretical and methodological framework. Causarano particularly focused on  
۱۲۳ the learning environment, and how it impacted this acquisition. This acquisition of academic  
۱۲۴ writing was analyzed through the writers' interaction with the writing tasks, instructors,  
۱۲۵ other second language writers, and environment-writing situations because for this study L2  
۱۲۶ writers learn and use academic writing "in systematic interaction with the environment in  
۱۲۷ which different constituents played a major role" (Causarano, 2011). Samraj (2013) focused  
۱۲۸ on the discussion sections of master's theses and research articles in biology in her study of  
۱۲۹ the use of citations. Findings show that there are more rhetorical functions of the citations in  
۱۳۰ these texts than reported in previous studies. Samraj asserted that "the relationship  
۱۳۱ constructed between the text and previous ones is complex and multi-faceted" (p. 308)  
۱۳۲ where writers not only use citations with attribution or background functions but also  
۱۳۳ engage in creating higher order connections with the information from sources.

۱۳۴ Researchers of L2 writing have also used quantitative methodologies to explore the changes  
۱۳۵ of writing processes of L2 writers according to their level of writing ability by looking at  
۱۳۶ their writing fluency, complexity of their texts, pausing behaviors, and strategy use (Sasaki,  
۱۳۷ 2000).

۱۳۸ Other studies have focused on factors that influence the development of L2 writing. Chae  
۱۳۹ (2011) examined how Korean college students' knowledge, self-efficacy, strategies, and  
۱۴۰ interest impacted their writing performance while participating in a writing course in three  
۱۴۱ Korean colleges. The study gathered data during 1 semester in three different points from  
۱۴۲ 187 students with language tests, self-efficacy, interest, strategy, performance measures, and  
۱۴۳ interviews. Findings of this study pointed out that students' interest and self-efficacy do not  
۱۴۴ determine students' writing performance over time, but they relate to students' performance  
۱۴۵ at the beginning of the semester.

## ۱۴۶ **DATA AND METHODS**

۱۴۷ This study has a combined method to provide comprehensive answers to research questions.  
۱۴۸ The design of the present study was a sequential combined explanatory method that used  
۱۴۹ qualitative results to explain and interpret the findings of a quantitative study. For the  
۱۵۰ qualitative stage, the researcher designed a semi-structured interview and a structured survey  
۱۵۱ questionnaire based on the methods discussed above.

۱۵۲ This study also examined the level of language proficiency significant differences in the most  
۱۵۳ measured structures in the specifications of the Iranian EFL writing proficiency test through

154 principal component analysis (PCA). PCA is a way to identify patterns in data and express data  
155 in a way that highlights their similarities and differences. The research tools were:

#### 156 Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

157 In order to measure and determine the participants' general English language proficiency and  
158 ensure their homogeneity, they were required to take the Standard Oxford Placement Test  
159 (OPT). This test was applied primarily to measure and determine the general English language  
160 proficiency of the participants and to ensure their homogeneity.

#### 161 Structured Survey Questionnaire

162 An identified structured survey questionnaire was designed to measure latent features and  
163 relationships between writing components. The questionnaire examined writing methods,  
164 assessment methods, writing mechanics, coherence and coherence in writing, perspective,  
165 choice of words in students' writing, writing style, genre, and supporting materials in writing.  
166 To ensure its validity.

#### 167 Semi-structured Interview

168 The additional data collection tool was a special protocol designed by the researcher in the  
169 form of a semi-structured open interview with about 20 questions.

#### 170 Writing Tasks

171 The fourth instrument consisted of two writing tasks. Each task included some composition  
172 topics (e.g. friendship, family, background, education). Participants were asked to write an  
173 argumentative paragraph for each topic.

174 A homogeneous sample of participants among students were selected who scored with a  
175 standard deviation (+1SD) above and (-1SD) below the Oxford Test (OPT). As a result, by  
176 performing an OPT 60 out of 114 Iranian language learners from Boroujerd Branch Azad  
177 University were selected as participants in the present study. They were between 22 and 26  
178 years old and the learners' gender was also considered as a moderating variable in this study.  
179 Then, they were equally divided into two male and female groups. Based on their writing skill  
180 scores from OPT, they were divided also into advanced and intermediate groups. It was  
181 assumed that almost all participants had a similar foreign language learning experience.

182 According to the importance of "piloting", the researcher designed an experimental study in  
183 which participants had similar characteristics to the participants in the main study. Then, all

184 research tools were implemented and the participants were asked to answer all questions.  
185 Finally, the cases were reviewed as a pilot by expert judges. The main study was characterized  
186 by expert judgment and review of the research literature with ten writing components (mode,  
187 assessment, mechanics, coherence, cohesion, point of view, word choice, style, genre, and  
188 supporting materials) in EFL writing skills.

189 Principal component analysis was performed using orthogonal rotation method (Varimax with  
190 Kaiser Normalization) and oblique rotation method (Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization).  
191 Three methods were also considered for decision making: the Kaiser criterion, the scree test,  
192 and retaining of many factors that make up at least 70 of the variance. Moreover, conceptual  
193 considerations in addition to three criteria were considered in selecting the four-component  
194 model. Also, factor loading was used to interpret the extracted components.

## 195 RESULTS and DISCUSSION

196 Participants' responses to the structured survey questionnaire were coded. The structural survey  
197 questionnaire was also analyzed using existing principal component analysis (PCA). All data  
198 were analyzed using SPSS 22 software. In according to Table 1, the mean and standard  
199 deviation of each writing component is illustrated. In addition, the Analysis N shows the  
200 number of valid cases. Here, there are no missing values because the entire sample included  
201 100 participants.

202

203

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Participants' responses

	Mean	Std. D	Analysis N
Mode	.53	.502	100
Assessment	.62	1.071	100
Mechanics	.5200	.50212	100
Coherence	.6200	1.07101	100
Cohesion	.5300	.50161	100
Point of View	.6500	1.06719	100
Word choice	.5400	.50091	100
Style	.5000	.50252	100
Genre	.5200	.50212	100
Supporting materials	.5500	.50000	100

204

205 As seen in Table 2, based on the initial eigenvalues, the first three components are meaningful  
 206 as they have Eigenvalues > 1. Components 1, 2 and 3 explain 51.08%, 23.01%, and 16.37% of  
 207 the variance, respectively – a cumulative total of 90.46% (total acceptable).

208 Table 2. Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings <sup>a</sup>
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	4.086	51.08	20.516	1.975
2	1.841	23.010	34.539	1.308
3	1.309	16.365	90.455	1.354
4	1.160	11.603	58.817	1.368
5	0.991	9.907	68.725	
6	0.877	8.773	77.498	
7	0.831	8.310	85.808	
8	0.615	6.149	91.957	
9	0.564	5.643	97.600	
10	0.240	2.400	100.000	

209 Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

210 a. When components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.

211  
 212 In according to figure 1, the plot shows that there are three relatively high (components  
 213 1, 2, and 3) eigenvalues. Retain components that are above the 'bend', the point at  
 214 which the curve of decreasing eigenvalues changed from a steep line to a flat gradual  
 215 slope.

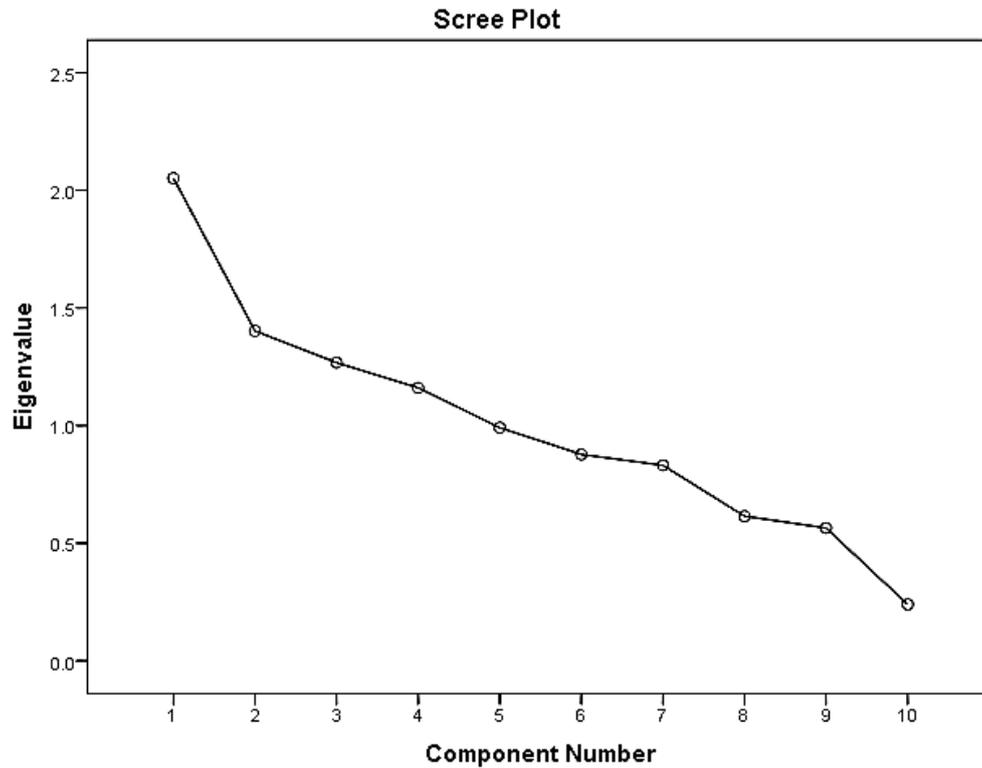


Figure 1. Screen Plot for the Writing Component

In order to achieve significance among Iranian learners at the level of advanced and intermediate skills (in the most measured structures) and based on the specifications of the Iranian EFL writing skills test, t-test of other independent samples was performed.

Table 3. Independent Samples T-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper

Equal variances assumed	1.309	0.255	-2.73	98	.007	-2.800	1.024	-4.828	-0.772
Equal variances not assumed			-2.73	117.61	.007	-2.800	1.024	-4.828	-0.772

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۲۲۶ According to Table 3, since Levene's Test is not significant, equal variances assumed is  
 ۲۲۷ examined. In t-test for Equality of Means,  $p=0.007$  is less than significance level  $\alpha=0.05$ , thus,  
 ۲۲۸ it is concluded that the mean of scores for the advanced and intermediate learners is  
 ۲۲۹ significantly different. Thus, the related null hypothesis is rejected.

۲۳۰ Advanced writing skills are one of the basic components of students' academic skills. Among  
 ۲۳۱ the four English language skills, writing seems to be the most difficult skill to master. This is  
 ۲۳۲ especially true for L2 students who are not fluent in the target language and whose only source  
 ۲۳۳ of L2 exposure is found in the ESL/EFL class.

۲۳۴ An appropriate assessment of EFL writing should be based on a thorough knowledge of its  
 ۲۳۵ scientific foundations. EFL writing skills educators who do not have sufficient assessment  
 ۲۳۶ knowledge may fall into the trap of turning this activity into a psychometric and statistical  
 ۲۳۷ process, which omits important aspects of language learning and does not provide any direct  
 ۲۳۸ feedback for teaching.

۲۳۹ In L2 writing, the process of generating ideas and using long-term memory is more complex.  
 ۲۴۰ Students are confused between long-term memory information (ideas) about the subject and  
 ۲۴۱ language of expression Scott (1996). He believes that this confusion prevents the creation of  
 ۲۴۲ ideas. Therefore, it is assumed that learners face this type of problem due to lack of L2 skills.  
 ۲۴۳ The fact that they have the lowest level of academic experience in higher education also means  
 ۲۴۴ that they do not have sufficient writing skills.

۲۴۵ Some studies to address the inadequacies in writing skills have shown that the use of a  
 ۲۴۶ contrasting lexical approach has had a significant positive effect on the writing skills of Iranian  
 ۲۴۷ EFL learners. Teaching through a contrasting lexical approach gives students the opportunity  
 ۲۴۸ to understand their skillful writing skills, which requires the proper use of different forms of  
 ۲۴۹ structures and phrases. This approach, in turn, can sensitize them to learn more about linguistic  
 ۲۵۰ features (Ebrahimi, 2021).

۲۵۱ Abedi et al. (2019) also investigated the effect of reverse classroom instruction on the writing  
۲۵۲ skills of Iranian EFL learners through the implementation of the Oxford Rapid Deployment  
۲۵۳ Test (OQPT). The results showed that there was a significant difference between the  
۲۵۴ performance of the experimental group and the control group.

۲۵۵ Itani (2021) also investigated the effect of mentor texts on EFL undergraduates' writing  
۲۵۶ proficiency. A quantitative experimental design was used to determine the effect of handbooks  
۲۵۷ on the writing skills of EFL undergraduate students. Comparing the scores of the three  
۲۵۸ components of the articles, which are word choice, sentence structure, and organization, it was  
۲۵۹ concluded that the guide texts can be an effective strategy for teaching these three writing  
۲۶۰ elements to undergraduate students studying at a private university.

۲۶۱

## ۲۶۲ **CONCLUSION**

۲۶۳ In this study, independent t-tests as well as principal component analysis (PCA) were used to  
۲۶۴ study the difference between Iranian learners with advanced and intermediate proficiency  
۲۶۵ levels. It is found that there is a significant difference between Iranian learners with high and  
۲۶۶ medium skill level in the most measured structures in the specifications of the Iranian EFL  
۲۶۷ writing skills test. The results show that the mean scores for advanced and intermediate learners  
۲۶۸ were significantly different.

۲۶۹ The specifications of the L2 writing skills test are also related to the writing performance and  
۲۷۰ should be developed according to the level of language skills of the learners in L2. The  
۲۷۱ specifications of the writing skills test alone do not appear to be sufficient to develop writing  
۲۷۲ performance. Furthermore, it is a synergy between L2 skills and writing constructs that makes  
۲۷۳ a good writer. Finally, the findings of this study show that L2 skill is an important factor in L2  
۲۷۴ writing performance and plays a mediating role in the learner's capacity to use writing skill  
۲۷۵ effectively. Although other factors may contribute to differences in writing performance, L2  
۲۷۶ skill seems to be the most predictable variable.

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