



Paper Type: Original Article



## Exploring TEFL Professors' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Academic Writing Courses in MA-Level TEFL Curricula

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Received: 04 January, 2024

Revised: 26 February, 2024

Accepted: 26 April, 2024

### Abstract

This research explored the perceptions of TEFL professors regarding the effectiveness, current status, and possible improvement of the Academic Writing course as the most relevant advanced writing course in the MA-level TEFL program. To collect the data, primarily, 10 TEFL professors were selected from different universities in Fars Province, Iran, through the purposive sampling method. Next, interviews were conducted with the participants based on a researcher-made list of interview questions which followed the conceptual findings of previous research in the literature on second language (L2) writing and education and the perceptions of three members in a panel of experts. The factors observed were arranged as five questions in the interview checklist, which dealt with the consistency of the course from a curricular perspective, its ability to meet linguistic expectations, students' responses to it, the most relevant method of teaching Academic Writing, and the ways that could help to improve the course under investigation. To analyze the data, qualitative content analysis was used, which made it possible to reach a profound understanding of the students' direct experiences. The content analysis showed 66 codes, 17 categories, and 5 themes (which were the ultimate responses to the five questions). Among others, the study suggested that Academic Writing was an institute-centered course, which involved inconsistencies, failed to achieve its practical goals, and mostly relied on prefabricated formats and outdated resources. To overcome these issues, universities are recommended to follow a learner-centered approach, use writing technologies, make students aware of the benefits of writing, and encourage academic writing from the outset of the MA program.

**Keywords:** Academic writing, Curriculum design, Professors' perceptions, Qualitative content analysis, Teaching English as a foreign language.

## I | INTRODUCTION



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In an educational setting where academic concerns are important for institutions, students must be sufficiently prepared to perform research-related activities as effectively as possible (Abas & Abd Aziz, 2016; Karimnia, 2013; Rahimi et al., 2023). At the Master's Degree (MA) level, most academic institutions require students to conduct research as a final project called "Thesis". Unlike BA-level writing courses, which are mostly guided by instructors, MA-level writing requires more complex competencies (Keyvandarian & Afzali, 2019; Karimnia & Saafnyyat, 2021). Although many undergraduate students have lost their interest in writing due to factors such as teacher failure (Cando-



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10.22034/jsllt.2024.21071.1032



Guanoluisa et al., 2017) and low levels of motivation (Asadifard & Koosha, 2013; Ismail, 2011), academic writing at the MA TEFL level involves more serious functions as it can have major impacts on students' academic success and possibly future career opportunities (Jalilifar & Shahvali, 2013).

Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) is a discipline of language studies with associations with the humanities. In Iran, TEFL is an area absorbing numerous research projects each year as a highly flexible and versatile field of language studies. According to the curriculum suggested by the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (SRT-Ministry) - TEFL Curriculum (2017), the most research-related courses at the MA TEFL level in Iran are Writing Academic Texts (*Academic Writing* in short), Research Methodology, and Seminar. In practice, however, the only course that directly addresses the writing procedure in forming a research study is Academic Writing, which can even be an elective course depending on the decision of the faculty members in each academic institution.

However, given the possibly limited writing experience of most MA TEFL students in Iran, a major problem is that they may face serious issues in preparing academic writing tasks, finalizing their theses, or engaging in academic research (Divsar, 2018; Harjanto, 2014). Skillful academic writing is not limited to formulaic patterns that students learn in BA-level writing courses. Another issue is that gaining insights into such determining factors at the MA TEFL level requires in-depth and open-ended talks with professors who have rich experience in issues related to academic writing (Beiki et al., 2020). Quantitative studies cannot reveal the depth of such problems. In contrast, qualitative investigations that focus on teacher perceptions are frequently used when difficulties and solutions are explored in studies (Elo et al., 2007; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Similarly, the views of TEFL professors are highly relevant and telling in terms of the difficulties that Iranian MA-level students experience when dealing with Academic Writing.

This study explores the perceptions of a sample of TEFL professors about the effectiveness of the Academic Writing course at the MA TEFL level. The study is mainly qualitative and relies on qualitative content analysis to condense, categorize and thematize the expert opinions related to the topic. The study uses a set of questions to give directions to the interviews with the selected TEFL professors. Despite the significance of Academic Writing as the only course that directly addresses academic research *writing* at the MA level, no study has explored the course from the perspective of TEFL professors in Iran. To fill the gap, this research focuses on two central questions including a) what are the codes, categories and themes as mentioned by the sample of the TEFL professors in terms of the effectiveness of the Academic Writing course? and b) what are the TEFL professors' expert opinions that could help to further develop or improve the effectiveness of Advanced Writing?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Research on Academic Writing

Numerous researchers have emphasized the challenging nature of writing at an academic level (Harjanto, 2014; Jalilifar & Shahvali, 2013; Singh, 2015; Wilmot & Lotz-Sisitka, 2015). The factors constituting or affecting academic writing can be viewed from various perspectives. Such approaches may focus on language competence, institutional standards, or psychological factors (perceptions). One of the dominant concerns addressed in the literature is *language competence* in academic writing. Such competence may reveal the knowledge of micro- and macro-linguistic aspects, as well as writing composition (Jalilifar & Shahvali, 2013). For instance, one of the most serious problems that students encounter in academic writing is the general body of an academic text. Some models have tried to explore the process of academic writing. One of the models is called the "I-Search approach", which involves several stages (e.g., *selecting a topic, finding information*) (Harjanto, 2014, pp. 151-152). The rationale behind using I-Search is the solution that it provides to handle the experienced difficulty of writing academic topics in English.



Along with linguistic aspects, there are issues related to curriculum design and structure. For instance, is a curriculum designed based on the needs and perceptions of students or on hierarchical, institutional expectations? As a result of such a division, there are two types of curricula, learner-centered and discipline-centered curricula (Díaz-Barriga Arceo, 2016). There is definitely a tension between these two types, while novel approaches underscore the importance of learner-centered curricula. Given the highly diversified and complicated nature of academic writing, treating learners individually should be viewed as a priority in higher education (Patel-Junankar, 2017).

Many studies have tried to explore students' *perceptions* in both academic writing and other areas. Perceptions may be associated with instructors'/students' ideas about reluctance to write (Asadifard & Koosha, 2013), reactions to writing instruction methodology (Cando-Guanoluisa et al., 2017), preferences about corrective feedback (Chen et al., 2016), teaching effectiveness (Fernández-García et al., 2019), writing assessment (Ghoorchaei & Tavakoli, 2020), peer correction in academic writing performance (Tsuroyya, 2020), efficacy of classroom activities (Saghaieh Bolghari et al., 2017), and academic writing proficiency (Sağlamel & Kayaoglu, 2015). Investigating students' perceptions of their frequent problems in writing thesis proposals, Keyvandarian and Afzali (2019) used open-ended questions (e.g., *how do you interpret writing a thesis proposal?*) to identify the difficulties that such students encountered in the process. The next section more objectively focuses on academic writing in an actual curriculum system.

## 2. Research Writing in the Iranian MA TEFL Curriculum

Writing has a basic function in preparing students for systematically producing and organizing information (Jeyaraj, 2020). Writing is also the very foundation of research production. From the perspective of academic institutions, students in research-based postgraduate programs must be able to defend a thesis (Wilmot & Lotz-Sisitka, 2015). Like all other academic disciplines, TEFL has its specific curriculum. The curriculum suggested by the Iranian SRT-Ministry - TEFL MA Curriculum (2017, p. 40) mentions Writing Academic Texts (Academic Writing) as a two-credit course without any prerequisites to prepare MA students for gaining academic writing skills and preparing their theses. The curriculum proposes six books, the latest one of which was published in 2011 (the rest were published from 1987 to 2006).

The syllabus of the Academic Writing course mostly focuses on several specific objectives including a) writing or analyzing various types of advanced papers according to different genres, b) gaining familiarity with review articles, description, explanation, and argumentation, c) writing a proposal, and d) providing an introduction to thesis writing (SRT-Ministry - TEFL MA Curriculum, 2017, p. 40). The central role of faculty members and professors in the success of the course is evident. This is because Academic Writing can be either a mandatory or an elective course in Iran. This implies that the education system at each university is the main decision-maker about whether Academic Writing should be offered to students or not. What can be inferred is that professors may better know the functions/impacts of the course. They are responsible for choosing which sources to teach, selecting the skills to focus on (e.g., description, explanation, and argumentation), and deciding the criteria for assessing students.

Given the background of academic writing (as reviewed above), there are many questions about the effectiveness of the Academic Writing course in the MA TEFL curriculum in Iran. Can the objectives mentioned above encompass all of the requirements of academic writing? Are students prepared for complex writing tasks? Do they have a sufficiently strong background in advanced research writing? To answer these questions, the perceptions of professors in TEFL seem to be the most valid source for exploration. This is because professors have a deep experience of interacting with students and have worked in the academic system for several years.

## 3. Teacher Perceptions and Qualitative Content Analysis

Perceptions are commonly explored in qualitative analysis. Such a method mainly focuses on the way a population of people (as participants) conceptualize a particular phenomenon or experience (Elo et al.,



2007). Perceptions are usually collected through semi-structured or open-ended questioners, or through recorded interviews. In language-related investigations, as in TEFL research, perception has been extensively used in the literature to explore various topics and language skills. In the literature, of course, both student perceptions and teacher perceptions can be investigated (see for instance [Asadifard & Koosha, 2013](#); [Tsuroyya, 2020](#); [Keyvandarian & Afzali, 2019](#)). Teachers' perceptions of a teaching-related notion may involve various reactions, such as negative/positive ideas and strategies for improvement. For instance, [Beiki et al. \(2020\)](#) investigated the effectiveness of cooperative learning by exploring teachers' perceptions of this type of L2 teaching.

Perceptions are best explored through content analysis. This method of research focuses on the ways a group of people understand a phenomenon. The views that they share are richly explored through various techniques. Qualitative content analysis has been approached differently in different studies. [Sándorová \(2014\)](#) has provided a review of qualitative approaches, reporting some stages in its completion. These stages include a) breaking down the text into units of analysis, b) undertaking the statistical analysis of the units, and c) presenting the analysis in as economical a form as possible ([Sándorová, 2014, p. 94](#)). Any variation of qualitative content analysis will have to ultimately analyze the data and break them into some smaller units. The final large units shape the total understanding reached as the result of the whole content analysis.

### III. METHOD

#### 1. Research Design

This is a qualitative study conducted by the qualitative content analysis method. It seeks to investigate expert perceptions and discover new facts about the effectiveness of a course in actual practice.

#### 2. Participants

The participants were 10 TEFL professors from various universities in Fars Province, Iran. They were selected from Shiraz University, Shiraz Branch of Islamic Azad University, Fasa Branch of Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch of Payame Noor University, and Fasa Branch of Payame Noor University. The participants were selected according to the purposive sampling method. Some inclusion criteria were also considered for selecting a professor interested in participating in this study. They included a) having experience of teaching Advanced Writing at the TEFL MA level, b) having worked as a thesis advisor in at least 20 thesis projects, and (c) having a background in research publication. The principles of confidentiality were all observed in terms of the participants' identity. To select a participant, after his/her formal page was visited, the visible details related to his/her qualification as a participant were inspected. Next, an email was sent to the professors, explaining the purposes of the study along with the inclusion criteria. In cases they expressed their interest in the study and met the criteria, they were contacted for further communication.

#### 3. Instrument

Exploring the literature on academic writing problems, the researcher devised interview questions that focused on the effectiveness of Academic Writing at the Iranian MA TEFL level and ways that could help to enhance the course. The validity and reliability of the questions were examined by three TEFL professors as members of the panel of experts. To minimize bias in the structure of the interview questions, these three professors were not among the 10 professors participating in the interview process. The questions were extracted from the conceptions reviewed in the literature, and they relied on the professors' expert opinions. They were as follows:



- **Interview question 1:** How do you evaluate the importance of the Academic Writing course in the MA TEFL curriculum in terms of its consistency with the other courses and students' undergraduate writing knowledge? Should the course be mandatory or elective? Is it mostly learner-centered or institute-centered?
- **Interview question 2:** How much does the Academic Writing course manage to meet the linguistic expectations of Ministry of SRT in terms of the objectives of the course? How practical are these objectives for students?
- **Interview question 3:** How do students usually respond to the structure and tasks in Academic Writing course? What is the most relevant way of teaching Academic Writing and assessing students' writing ability for their final examination?
- **Interview question 4:** What are the specifications of relevant and effective methods of academic writing teaching at the MA-level TEFL?
- **Interview question 5:** What are your suggestions for improving the curricular content, linguistic expectations, teaching methodology, and assessment method for Academic Writing course?

#### 4. Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected through five interview questions. After the participants were finally found and selected, they were asked to participate in interview sessions. The questions were open-ended and could be expanded by follow-up questions. Depending on the preferences of the participants, the time for each interview was determined in advance, and all of the interviews were conducted online. Each interview was voice-recorded first. Next, it was transcribed into a digitally editable format. The interview questions were submitted to the participants in advance via email.

#### 5. Data Analysis Procedure

After the collected data were transcribed, they were put to a deep analytical procedure. Initially, as the responses were received, unique numbers were assigned to the responses of each participant. After that, each item of the questionnaire was meticulously investigated with a focus on the responses to the questions raised. Each question addressed a specific concern regarding the effectiveness of Advanced Writing. Following that, the researchers tried to find the semantic relations that unified the response to a question. The specific stages of the content analysis were based on Erlingsson and Brysiewicz's (2017) method. Primarily, units of meaning were formed. The purpose of this step was to detect any internal relations that made a meaning coherent as a "unit". Next, the meaning units were condensed. After a meaning unit was detected, it was stored in a condensation table, sometimes with some minor changes for more readability.

Following that, the condensed versions were coded and categorized into unified codes. A unified package included several ideas that could fall under the same conceptual category. As such, to answer each question, the collective responses that all of the participants provided to each question were meticulously compared, and the codes were further put under more abstract categories. In this step, the themes were created. More specifically, after the codes were categorized, the categories found together shaped a larger and more abstract entity called a *theme*, which was the final answer to a question under investigation. The tables mentioned in the next section report the findings following the condensation stage.

Because frequency was not a concern in this qualitative content analysis, in cases where the information was considerably similar in terms of ideas, only one instance was considered. Such an instance alone would point to the existence of an opinion and repeating similar ideas would overcomplicate the process and the tables. Furthermore, given the constraints of space, a maximum of two codes are mentioned in the tables for each category. To prepare the samples collected for a corpus analysis procedure, the audio files were transcribed. In all of the cases, standard writing conventions were implemented to render the texts readable and analyzable. 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.



## IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section presents the results of the analysis separately for each item in the collected data.

### 1. Analyzing the Responses to The Interview Questions

#### 1.1. Interview Question 1

In response to interview question 1, the participants shared their opinions, which were analyzed through the procedures mentioned above. It must be noted that “Research Methodology”, mentioned in some cases, is a shortened form of “Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods in Language Teaching”, which appeared in the Ministry’s curriculum. Table 1 lists the responses to interview question 1. There were 17 codes and three different categories derived through organizing all of the responses shared.

**Table 1. The participants’ responses to interview question 1.**

- (a) The importance of the course is decided by each department.
- (b) Academic Writing should be a mandatory course due to its importance.
- (c) The consistency between the BA curriculum and Academic Writing and the interrelationships between Academic Writing and other courses in the MA curriculum remain vague and problematic.

Considering these categories, the theme that ultimately answers interview question 1 based on the participants’ responses is as follows:

- **Theme:** Academic Writing is usually an institute-centered course that, although important to most MA TEFL students, shows some inconsistencies in terms of its association with the BA curriculum and even with the MA curriculum.

#### 1.2. Interview Question 2

Table 2 lists the responses to interview question 2. As a result of analyzing the codes and categories, there were 16 codes and five different categories in response to question 2:

**Table 2. The participants’ responses to interview question 2.**

- (a) The expectations, even if relevant, do not seem to be realistic in terms of MA students’ writing level.
- (b) Most students still face problems in terms of language microstructures.
- (c) Students experience confusion and distress in orienting themselves to the expectations of the course.
- (d) The resources are relatively outdated and do not consider new methods of academic teaching.
- (e) Professors must ultimately make vital decisions about contextualizing the course.

Considering the above categories about “curriculum standards”, the theme that ultimately answers interview question 2 based on the participants’ responses is as follows:

- **Theme:** The Ministry’s expectations are not compatible with the writing level of most students who face problems with language microstructures and confusion/distress, while the resources are relatively outdated and professors must actively contextualize the course.

#### 1.3. Interview Question 3

Table 3 lists the codes and categories shared in response to interview question 3. The analysis of the responses to question 3 revealed 10 codes and three different categories.



**Table 3. The participants' responses to interview question 3.**

- |   |
|---|
| <p>(a) The wide-ranging and multifaceted scope of academic writing makes it difficult for students to have a clear understanding of it.</p> <p>(b) A mere introduction to the structure of academic writing does not help students gain profound insights about it.</p> <p>(c) Students tend to avoid getting engaged in the task of writing.</p> |
|---|

Given the above categories, the theme that ultimately answers interview question 3 based on the participants' responses is as follows:

- **Theme:** Academic writing is an inherently complex scope, which cannot be simply learned through a mere introduction to its structure, especially when students themselves avoid practicing writing.

#### 1.4. Interview Question 4

Table 4 lists the codes and categories shared in response to interview question 4. The analysis of question 4 revealed 18 codes and three different categories extracted from the responses shared:

**Table 4. The participants' responses to interview question 4.**

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|--|
| <p>(a) Prefabricated formats will not strongly contribute to students' perception of how writing exactly works.</p> <p>(b) Analyzing good samples of academic writing through theories/templates or technological devices can represent effective methodological options for teaching writing.</p> <p>(c) Academic writing is a long-term process that should be practically addressed and requires concentration.</p> |
|--|

Considering the above categories, the theme which ultimately answers Question 4 based on the participants' responses is as follows:

- **Theme:** Students cannot perceive the depth of academic writing through prefabricated formats, and they must dynamically analyze samples through theories/templates or technological devices for a relatively long and concentrated period of time.

#### 1.5. Interview Question 5

Following interview questions 1-4, which addressed the concerns in the first research question, question 5 focused on the second research question. The topic of this question was the ways/strategies that could help to improve the teaching process of Academic Writing (Table 5). The responses to question 5 were divided into 15 codes and six different categories.

**Table 5. The participants' responses to interview question 5.**

- |  |
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| <p>(a) Institutional and educational changes can help students view academic writing as a regular process.</p> <p>(b) Professors should consider the developmental, gradual, and individual nature of academic writing in their teaching practice.</p> <p>(c) Promoting writing technologies can help students practice academic writing in a more controlled and organized fashion.</p> <p>(d) Academic writing must emphasize effective writing skills, authentic materials, and various methods of research.</p> <p>(e) Students must be provided with necessary and updated resources to improve their academic writing skills.</p> <p>(f) Making students aware of the benefits of academic writing can motivate them to engage in the process.</p> |
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Considering the above categories about improvement, the theme which ultimately answers question 5 is as follows:

- **Theme:** Institutional/educational regularities, along with writing technologies and awareness of benefits of writing, can help students expand their writing skills through a developmental, gradual, and individual process guided by effective writing skills, authentic materials, and updated resources.

## V. DISCUSSION

Using qualitative content analysis, this study investigated TEFL professors' perceptions of Academic Writing as the most focused academic writing course in the Iranian MA TEFL curriculum. After a meticulous analysis of the content by categorizing the codes and eliminating all the repetitive ideas, 66 unique codes, 17 categories, and five themes were found in the transcripts of the interviews. The first research question (containing interview questions 1-4) addressed the importance and consistency of the curriculum, linguistic expectations, students' responses to the course, and the most relevant way of teaching the course. The second research question, however, focused on the improvements that the professors suggested, which was answered by their responses to interview question 5.

The responses to interview question 1 showed the general observation of professors, indicating that, in most Iranian universities, Academic Writing was an institute-centered course, which must be passed by MA TEFL students. As both [Díaz-Barriga \(2016\)](#) and [Sifakis \(2014\)](#) suggest, there is a tension between discipline-centered and learner-centered curricula. Academic institutions usually try to set their policies around their perceived benefits, despite the growing emphasis on learner-centered curricula ([Patel-Junankar, 2017](#)). In the MA TEFL curriculum ([SRT-Ministry - TEFL Curriculum, 2017](#)), learners, their prior levels, and their abilities are not mentioned in any of the course objectives. The participants, of course, underscored the importance of the course. Yet, the problem is that an institute-oriented approach may still not effectively help learners. A learner-centered approach, on the other hand, would demand professors to prepare students and build on what they already know, instead of setting subjective goals that are very difficult to realize. Meanwhile, as the professors reported, there was no concern on a curricular level to connect Essay Writing (as an undergraduate course) and Academic Writing.

The second interview question addressed the linguistic competence that the SRT-Ministry expected MA-level TEFL students to achieve. The theme extracted from the responses emphasized micro-linguistic problems including difficulties experienced with syntax, lexical choice, punctuation, and the mechanics of writing frequently observed in academic writing ([Keyvandarian & Afzali, 2019](#)). According to the findings of this study, many students still face problems with such linguistic dimensions, as a result of which it would be very difficult for them to meet the expectations of academic writing. Limited experience in writing cannot be simply compensated in a couple of sessions of Academic Writing ([Ghoorchaei & Tavakoli, 2020](#)). The lack of emphasis in the BA curriculum on writing is one of the reasons as why most students may find academic writing very linguistically demanding.

Faced with challenging expectations, many students may experience psychological distress. [Asadifard and Koosha \(2013\)](#) explored psychological concerns about writing. They observed that students experienced reluctance because they had insufficient reading experience. Reading, as another foundational skill, could be associated with a student's linguistic knowledge. As such, one of the categories of interview question 2 (i.e., Students experience confusion and distress in orienting themselves to the expectations of the course) could stem from their limited reading experience.





Interview question 3 inquired about students' responses to tasks and the structure of academic writing. One issue that must be acknowledged in this regard is the inherent complexity of academic writing (Harjanto, 2014; Jalilifar & Shahvali, 2013; Singh, 2015; Wilmot & Lotz-Sisitka, 2015). This mode of writing involves many different aspects. For instance, one of the professors stated, "... real writing requires numerous non-linear maneuvers." Another described academic writing as being "so notoriously complicated." In most cases, textbooks and classroom content are concerned with prefabricated materials that are taught in class through lectures.

Many students may feel confused regarding the purposes of each section in an academic written construction (e.g., a proposal or paper). Some scholars have tried to address section writing problems; for instance, Jalilifar and Shahvali (2013) investigated how Iranian applied linguistics students shaped "suggestions for further research" sections in their theses. A lack of clear understanding of the balance between sections seems to be the reason for many students' confusion. Meanwhile, the participants somehow blamed the students too by arguing that "students tend to avoid getting engaged in the task of writing". This issue, which can be associated with reluctance (Asadifard & Koosha, 2013), is another barrier to MA-level TEFL students' mastery of advanced writing.

Interview question 4 sought to gain information about the most relevant way of teaching and Academic Writing. The central idea in the theme here addressed the process-based nature of academic writing, a quality that is not currently emphasized by the SRT-Ministry (2017). Closely related to the procedural aspect of academic writing was the notion of *gradual development* underscored by some participants. The process-oriented approach can benefit from models that view academic writing as stages that gradually take shape. In this regard, the I-Search approach may be helpful. It involves several stages including a) selecting a topic, b) finding information, c) using information through searching, and d) developing a final product (Harjanto, 2014). Equally important, professors should rely on authentic samples of academic writing. Using such samples can contribute to students' faster development of their writing abilities.

Knowledge of discourse, style, rhetorical functions, genre, and meta-discoursal aspects of writing is highly recommended for teaching academic writing. Meanwhile, the importance of technological tools was underscored by some of the participants. Finally, the long-term nature of academic writing was another issue raised by the participants in the interviews. The important topics in this relation were feedback responses and practical experiments (Chen et al., 2016), step-by-step teaching, closely supervised projects and proficiency (Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2015), more concentrated writing production, and classroom performance (Saghaieh Bolghari et al., 2017). This category highlighted the association between actual writing practice over time and success in academic writing. This concern, too, was missed in the SRT-Ministry's (2017) guideline, which seemed to be mostly product-oriented.

The second question of the study was answered based on the codes, categories, and ultimately the theme extracted from the responses to interview question 5. This question inquired about improving the curricular content, linguistic expectations, teaching methodology, and assessment method for the Academic Writing course. The participants tried to foreground the significance of the gradual and developmental "process" of academic writing, as emphasized by process-based approaches such as I-Search (Harjanto, 2014) and portfolio writing (Ghoorchaei & Tavakoli, 2020). One of the suggestions was to regulate writing activities from the very first semester at the MA level.

As such, professors must emphasize written communication in the courses they teach. Classroom reports, journaling, sharing information in forums, and similar tasks can encourage students to practice writing before they start working on their proposals. The importance of exposing students to various methods of research was also raised in the responses. This is an important issue because the majority of TEFL studies rely on quantitative approaches. Practicing methods of learning (e.g., collaborative learning) can also prove to be very effective.



## VI. CONCLUSION

This research investigated Academic Writing as the most relevant MA-level TEFL course in the Iran Curriculum, by exploring the perceptions of some professors who had rich experiences of teaching Academic Writing at different universities. The study sought to primarily find the major factors that could affect Academic Writing and devised a researcher-made set of questions that arranged the factors into five questions. To reach a profound understanding of the professors' direct experiences, the study drew on the qualitative content analysis method. As a result of the qualitative content analysis, 66 codes, 17 categories and 5 themes were identified.

The final themes as the ultimate answers to the interview questions revealed that a) Academic Writing is usually an institute-centered course that involves some inconsistencies in terms of its association to the BA curriculum and even the MA curriculum, b) the ministry's expectations are not compatible with the writing level of most students who face problems with language microstructures and confusion and distress, while the resources are relatively outdated, c) Academic Writing is an inherently complex domain, which cannot be simply learned through a mere introduction to its structure, d) students cannot perceive the depth of academic writing through prefabricated formats; rather, they must dynamically analyze samples through theories/templates or technological devices, and e) institutional/educational regularities, along with writing technologies and awareness of benefits of writing, can help students expand their writing skills through a developmental, gradual and individual process guided by effective writing skills, authentic materials, and updated resources.

As such, the study suggested that academic writing, despite its strong institutional basis, seems to be a highly personal skill or language activity, at least in the context under investigation. The findings revealed a conflict in the MA education system. On the one hand, the curriculum emphasizes institutional expectations, formats and goals; on the other, research departments in Iran underscore novel ideas and abundant research publication. Instead, the curriculum must emphasize individual writing development, personal experiments with writing, and a learner-centered approach. The MA curriculum, as the professors reported, could not make academic writing simpler in practice. In contrast, students face major difficulties throughout the process of writing a proposal or a thesis. This implies that exposure to writing and actual practice may be more important than gaining theoretical knowledge about what writing is.

There are several interesting possibilities for further research as inspired by this study. The same interview questions could be applied to a larger population size in other branches of Islamic Azad University, state universities, and Payam Noor branches across Iran. Although the factors were selected through in-depth investigations of the literature, more factors could be added to the interview question samples on the condition that they can justifiably contribute to the analysis. Although qualitative content analysis is the best way of realizing professors' perceptions of a problem, one could draw upon quantitative frameworks as well. Regression tests, for instance, could help to find any possible causal relationships between the variables; of course, such frameworks would require numerical justifications to be developed. The study also involved some limitations. It drew upon the perceptions of a group of university professors in Fars Province, Iran. The ideas of this group reflect their personal experiences, and a larger or different group could propose different ideas.

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

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