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*Research Paper*

## The Effect of Instructor Feedback on Developing Iranian ELT Graduate Students' Critical Academic Writing Skills

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### Abstract

A major part of any graduate program concerns academic writing, but most students do not have sufficient skills pertaining to it. For non-native Ph.D. students who need to write English language dissertations, this issue is particularly troublesome since it causes time-consuming extracurricular efforts, which can, at times, be frustrating. The present study was carried out in the form of an action research project to explore the impact of a process-based teaching of writing on the attitudes of 8 Iranian Ph.D. candidates of TEFL towards writing academically. The course procedure included phases requiring students to send their completed writing assignments by specified dates and receive and apply teacher guidance on the texts' logic, content, consistency, tone, and grammar. In-person discussions about the progress were also programmed for each student. The findings indicate that the students felt that the teaching process had a constructive effect on developing their writing skills. Implications include providing space for dialogue between teachers and students to complement written feedback, keeping the sense of accountability active in student minds by assisting them to self-organize, and realizing that graduate students may need assistance in very basic writing skills and knowledge.

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Academic writing is largely viewed as among the most troubling of the many challenges faced by Ph.D. candidates. An essential skill for academics across all fields of study is the ability to express thoughts and ideas in a consistent, precise, and sensible way since their professions often depend on how they can publish academic investigations in globally renowned periodicals. Nevertheless, fairly few academics, irrespective of their knowledge of other areas of their fields, have sufficient expertise in this area (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Can & Walker, 2011; Holmes, Waterbury, Baltrinic, & Davis, 2018; Lavele & Bushrov, 2007). In their evaluation of graduate-level students in social sciences, Alter and Adkin (2006) address this issue, indicating that most of their respondents encountered severe problems delivering productive academic writings.

### **Elements Influencing Academic Writing Competence**

The ability to write academically is a challenging task requiring a range of technical abilities. Trzeciak and Mackay (1994) emphasize that successful writing requires much more than linguistic skills, general composition knowledge (Matoti & Shumba, 2011), and knowledge of the intent of writing and of the target audience. They believe that for appropriate writing to be produced, the following are necessary: (1) the skill of accurately scanning texts for finding relevant content; (2) the ability to take notes and summarize; (3) being able to synthesize information from a wide range of sources; (4) the knowledge of written ethics and plagiarism avoidance; (5) the

ability to cite and professionally refer to others; and (6) competence in arranging and presenting written material, tables, statistics, etc.

Various studies on academic writing have reported some issues which can impact the potential to deliver strong academic writing, given its inherent complexity (Beck, 2009). Self-regulation, self-efficacy, and self-awareness stand out among these as having key effects (Hamman, 2005; Larcombe, McCosker, & O'Loughlin, 2007; Matotti & Shumba, 2011; Rueg, 2014; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). For example, Hammann (2005) and Matoti & Shumba (2005) emphasize the importance self-efficacy has, or the views of students about their own abilities in writing effectively. What they believe is that even though the degree of student self-confidence in this respect does not directly affect their ability, it affects the commitment they are prepared to offer to a writing assignment. Rueg (2014), who discovered that teacher feedback after writing tasks strengthened university students' self-efficacy as well as their writing achievement, supports such views. In addition, self-awareness as well as the competence to critically assess a person's own progression success (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994), improve the output of a written assignment to a great extent. Hammann (2005) claims that the knowledge of strategies for writing and also self-regulation (such as deciding to start and continue writing, goal setting, etc.) are influencing issues regarding how learners schedule their writing, which includes the production of content, using sources in libraries, and even the option to plan or not. As Rowe (2011) puts it, the absence of feedback after writing tasks, along with the sense that teachers do not show much interest in their advancement, can significantly contribute to student anxiety, leading to a loss of ambition to participate in a specified writing task.

**Academic Writing Challenges for Non-Native English Speakers**

Whilst writing in the academic context can cause a major challenge in any situation. The problem is exacerbated for Ph.D. candidates attending the increasing number of Ph.D. courses of universities in countries where English is not a spoken language and where doctoral dissertations are required to be prepared in the English language (Buckingham, 2008; Jenkin, Jordan, & O'Weiland, 1993; Johns & Swales, 2002; Paltrige, 1997). In addition, scholars are usually under considerable pressure at graduate levels and above to publish their research in English journals which have moved toward only adopting English publishing systems (Misak, Marusić, & Marusić, 2005).

Several challenges encountered by learners are predictable when trying to express multifaceted concepts in English rather than doing so in their mother tongue. For example, Flowerdew (1999) claims that regarding academic writing English writing, non-natives frequently express significant difficulties. Not having enough vocabulary, taking longer for them to compose, and only being able to write in a simple style can hinder the ability of students to properly express themselves and can negatively impact self-efficacy. Similarly, the survey of a group of non-native graduates by Matoti and Shumba (2011) showed a lack of confidence in the students' academic writing skills. This was because of limited knowledge of vocabulary, referencing, and knowing how to organize concepts based on the formal structure usually expected by academic journals. Connor (2002) reflects on these issues, stressing that while journals' requirements usually heavily rely on English standards in terms of consistency, linearity, and concise language, non-natives are mostly used to radically different rhetoric styles. For example, Arab writing is defined

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as showing a propensity to approach a single item from many angles, in opposition to Kaplan's (1966) linear argument diagram in texts of English (Hatim, 1997). In addition, the Arabic rhetorical style insists that the way a statement is made is central to its authenticity, and paraphrasing and repetition can be viewed as a tool by which acceptability is established (Koch, 1983). This is in opposition to the common method in English, where they use actual evidence and other scholars' findings to support an assertion. Moreover, Kong (1998) observed that Chinese or even Japanese writings tend to show a range of social niceties and politeness gestures, and therefore are known to have the impression of lack of frankness when perceived using a prism of written norms focused on in English. As such, non-native English learners will face major intellectual obstacles due to the nature of writing academically, apart from problems with writing mechanics and the problems of creating a complicated text in a foreign language.

As for Iran, that was the place the current study was conducted, Divsar (2018) stresses several difficulties found here with regard to writing in the academic genre, especially for Ph.D. applicants who are required by an immense force to promote their English competence while at the same time, they are required to produce original papers in their field of study. In this regard, Mansouri Nejad et al. (2019) associate the problems many Iranian students have with academic writing with the difficulties they have with critical thinking, absence of fundamental skills in research, low levels of proficiency in English, and an absence of familiarity with the norms of academic writing. All of which greatly decrease the ability of Iranian higher education students' ability to produce acceptable texts for their dissertations and research articles. Similarly, he found that some discursive hurdles negatively affect academic writing in the Iranian context. One such hurdle was

weakness in vocabulary, which was also found in similar reports by Flowerdew (1999). A limited English vocabulary is linked to intervention by L1 (Pérez-Llantada et al. 2011). To elaborate, English users who are not native rely on L1 for English writing. As a result, there is a degree of dependence on bilingual dictionaries or, in other cases, students start writing around what they are trying to say, the result of which would be syntactic and semantic confusion (Muncie 2002). Participants in Mansouri Nejad et al. 's (2019) study had possessed sufficient technical vocabulary items but did not gain enough general English words to be able to write their dissertations properly.

#### ***Graduate Student Academic Writing Assistance***

A number of interventions can be used to support postgraduate learners in boosting their abilities to write successfully. These include the establishment of writing clinics, advanced classes on academic writing, peer writing groups, and seminars for teachers and students (Maliborska & You, 2016). Can and Walker (2011) believe that most such writing support systems highlight offering learners feedback concerning their writings. Several forms of feedback from teachers may be provided, such as written remarks and adjustments or even the teacher and student's conferencing (Hyland, 2003; Keh, 1990). Typically, feedback involves the instructor's attempts to add written suggestions or corrections as comments to a text; audio-recorded suggestions; and electronic kinds of commenting (Hyland, 2003).

Furthermore, the conferencing between teachers and students entails a sort of communication whereby students and teachers can discuss a text written by the learners in detail (Hyland, 2003). This give-and-take context encourages clarity of interpretation and prevention of confusion, in addition to helping the instructor meet the learners with diverse educational, cultural

and composition-based needs. Accordingly, Rowe (2011) lists seven facets of instructor feedback that learners consider significant:

- 1- As a guide: Feedback from teachers helps guide learners in their growth, letting them know about the areas they are doing well in and need help with.
- 2- As a tool for learning: Feedback from the instructor makes students appreciate the instructional content.
- 3- As a form of academic interaction: Students use feedback as a conduit between teachers and themselves, promoting contact and eventually boosting the involvement and learning of students.
- 4- As a means of motivation: Learners find that instructor responses improve their confidence and inspire them to do better, especially when student strengths are stressed.
- 5- With its emotional mechanism: Learners show that input from teachers helps to increase self-efficacy and self-esteem, in addition, to decreasing negative emotions like distress, confusion, apprehension, and insecurity.
- 6- With its function of expressing appreciation: Learners view their instructors' reactions as a sign of appreciation for their performance.
- 7- When it expresses caring: Learners interpret their teachers' answers as an indication that they care for their success. (p. 349)

A general consideration of these factors shows that educational progress is nurtured by the motivation, direction, anxiety decline, and intellectual engagement generated by feedback from teachers. When applied effectively, feedback improves learners' social and cognitive development (Row, 2011) and leads to self-efficacy and a positive attitude towards writing

academically. Van de Poel and Gasiorek (2012) point out that these variables greatly influence students' opinions of themselves as professional writers and develop consistency in writing.

### **Process-based Considerations and Instructor Feedback for Writing Academically**

Because of its significant role in teaching specialized skills for writing academically, the process-based method to feedback provision has frequently been advocated. For example, the experimental research by Karatay (2011) showed a causal association between enhanced writing abilities and process writing, along with more positive writing attitudes. He argued that writing needs to be improved rather than inherited. The emphasis on feedback and step-by-step improvement of the process-oriented writing model increases students' cognitive knowledge in the process of writing. These observations were endorsed by Cakır (2013) and Lam (2005), who discovered that a project based on process-writing, which was done with sophomores over 15 weeks, led to self-regulation in preparation, coordination, and problem-solving ability.

Even though the process-oriented approach has no standardized model, four essential stages can usually be defined, namely:

1. **Prewriting**, wherein learners form concepts of their subjects, write down points and gather information,
2. **Drafting**, involving the arranging of notions and producing an original piece of writing,
3. **Revising**, re-checking what has been written according to the feedback received from instructors and peers,



4. **Editing**, touching upon the writing in terms of layout, form and writing mechanics (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hyland, 2003).

This is a non-linear model, as Hyland (2003) pointed out, since the writer can revisit each of these stages to make corrections and strengthen the document. Ferris (2003) focuses on the importance of feedback during the implementation phase of process writing. He observed that though other writing systems usually consider feedback a single-phase assessment conducted by a teacher after the writing process, the process-based model is known for its continuous feedback and encouragement, and is believed to satisfy instructional as well as affective requirements of the students (Rowe, 2011).

#### ***Learner opinions on process writing***

Many scholars have concentrated on the perspectives of learners in investigating the usefulness of process writing in higher education, taking into account their opinions on teacher feedback (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shanon, 2011; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Can & Walker, 2011; Rowe, 2001). For example, Caffarella and Barnett (2000) showed that gaining feedback produced better results in academic writing assignments. Face-to-face, personalized, and iterative/constant feedback, in particular, had a vital role to play in making participants feel more positive about their academic efforts. Beaumont, O'Doherty, and Shannon (2011) reiterated the significance attributed to one-on-one feedback, finding that university undergraduate students appreciated the feedback that was prompt, informative, open to debate, and enabled teacher engagement. As with Nicol (2010), they also

appeared to believe in quality feedback as an ongoing conversation rather than a single occurrence.

This view was further emphasized by Flowerdew (1999), observing that, when presenting their research in English, Chinese university students "preferred one-on-one supervision, where advice could be sought on specific problems related to a given research paper" (p. 259). Can and Walker (2011) found that Ph.D. students typically favored suggestive feedback to the directive kind and preferred simple, direct, and elaborate feedback on their papers' content, organization, and mechanical issues. Participants in their study attributed value to both positive and negative remarks while preferring the former. To sum up, their respondents regarded feedback as "a preliminary step in achieving their objective of academic recognition through publication" (p. 527).

Hyland (2003) and Hyland and Hyland (2001) propose that teachers incorporate encouragement, critique, and recommendation in the implementation of feedback, as praise helps to maximize the motivation of learners, while criticism and recommendations offer guidance for change. This theory is endorsed by Dweck (2007), saying that encouragement may inspire students to wish to do better, whereas criticizing may encourage students to improve. Hyland (2003), however, points to the behavioral component of feedback in the written form, suggesting that negatively-provided criticizing will weaken the confidence of learners and become a demotivating force. Therefore, it is recommended to use mitigation techniques to minimize criticism's side effects (Treglia, 2008). Furthermore, Hyland and Hyland (2001) warn that instructors ought to critically view the comments they themselves make, ensuring that their remarks are explicit enough for being accurately comprehended. Moreover, Bitchener and Knoch (2009)

caution that instructors ought to be specific on students' writing facets, which ought to be stressed during the process of providing feedback and what students are required to do in response to feedback they receive.

Current research shows that process writing has been well-backed up as contributing to better academic writing efficiency, more optimistic writing attitudes, and better self-efficacy. However, there is no support in the literature in the Iranian context to show that such an approach is commonly applied. In this regard, a limited number of studies have been carried out in Iran (e.g., Mehr, 2017; Sheikhy Behdani & Rashtchi, 2019) but these researchers concentrated on undergraduate students participating in EFL courses rather than graduate students who are expected to produce English scholarly writing. Therefore, given the strong need for graduate students to learn advanced writing skills, more emphasis is required in the Iranian context on the influence of feedback from teachers on the experiences of non-native masters or Ph.D. level students with regard to academic writing. By analyzing the attitudes of doctoral students engaging in an academic writing project towards a process-writing approach, the present study aims to address this gap in research.

There is tremendous demand in Iran from scholars of many fields of study to publish papers in English periodical; those who are underperforming in this regard thus fall behind in their professional career and education. Some students at Master's and Ph.D. levels are also required to do research and present their results in written and spoken English. In certain fields of study, students are even supposed to deliver their master's theses and Ph.D. dissertations in this language. However, English language courses in Iran have always been censured because of their failure to adequately prepare students with an acceptable degree of competence, particularly with regard to

writing complicated writings (Khodabandeh et al., 2014; Sharafi Nejad et al., 2016). The present study included a Ph.D. course at an Iranian university that mandated the Ph.D. candidates to conduct a research study and write an English-language research paper for peer review and publication in an academic journal. With regard to the issues discussed previously, the course instructor, who was also a co-author and colleague, believed that the students who had taken the course might naturally not be completely prepared for the experience, decreasing their chances of being able to perform satisfactorily on assignments given to them. Thus, as a way of encouraging students to perform well during the course, and believing that the academic futures of these students will rely on their mastery over the skills and expertise concerning research and academic writing; feeling secure in their abilities to write in English, and maintaining a good outlook towards an academic career's writing aspect; the instructor, following consultations with the researcher, opted for applying an approach that was process-oriented for implementation during the writing project and research. In addition, the present study was planned to become a collaborative action research experiment that could address the questions below in order to decide whether the students find this strategy to be successful:

1. What views do the Iranian Ph.D. candidates have on the instructor feedback received after each assignment?
2. Do the Ph.D. candidates consider the teaching method of receiving feedback and revisions as influencing their ability in writing? And if they do, how?
3. How do the Ph.D. candidates respond to the approach of the teacher in providing instructive feedback after each writing practice?

In so doing, the researchers sought to gain a deeper understanding of the effect of process writing on non-native graduate students concerning student views of themselves as authors and their confidence in writing skills. In addition, the researchers hoped to understand better the feedback elements that were beneficial and those that the students did not receive well, as a way to tailor their approach to interacting with students in future classes containing a portion of writing.

## Method

### Design

Since this research focused on how many Iranian Ph.D. students viewed the different facets of a process writing approach, a qualitative method helped achieve a detailed understanding of the participants' opinions (Leech & Onwuegbouzie, 2007). Therefore, the researchers applied a collaborative action research model since academic research in an authentic educational setting will offer critical insight into pedagogical and practical issues relevant to learning and teaching (Stremel, 2007).

The study participants included eight graduate students (5 females and 3 males in an age range of 35 to 44) enrolled in a course named 'Second Language Acquisition,' being offered in Iran at the Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch through a Ph.D. program in TEFL.

### Procedure

The course was structured to encourage the Ph.D. students to discuss a number of highly relevant contemporary concerns in language learning and give them the ability to recognize and deeply examine problems that were of special interest to them in the area. Thus, besides weekly classroom discussions on the topics of the course, participants of the study

were expected to conduct research on a common issue relating to language learning and present a research paper in English, offering a proper introduction, a literature review, a summary of the methods used for analyzing the problem, as well as a discussion and conclusion in accordance to what had been found. Afterward, the students were expected to report their results to the class and send a finalized article to an English journal. To preserve their identities and ensure anonymity, all the names of the participants were converted to pseudonyms. In line with what Misak, Marusić, and Marusić (2005) believe, the researchers understood that students learn more effectively when they consciously engage in their own knowledge building, with the teacher acting as a guide and facilitator. In addition, while in the context of their undergraduate and graduate studies, the participants had already gotten familiar with academic writing, and the researchers were aware of the difficulties the students could encounter in the writing and research process. The project was then framed to be a process writing task with the aim of scaffolding the participants' writing skills based on an open model. The assignment was done in phases, with students sending every section completed by a specified due date to the course teacher. Throughout each step of the project, the teacher read the drafts and gave thorough guidance, providing advice and criticism on the articles' logic and content, the writings' consistency and tone, and possible grammatical and syntactic problems that required revisions. Based on the reviews, the learners then updated their work 2-3 times, applying the changes to be checked with the updated content they inserted as they further completed the project. The feedback was given to the students through the Comments function in Microsoft Word. Apart from feedback, as indicated by Hyland (2003), the students met the teacher frequently for in-person discussions about the research project's progress.

### **Instruments**

Interviews are considered to be among the most valuable methods in qualitative analysis for data collection, as they enable the investigator to explore the participants' experiences in depth. On the other hand, since one of the researchers was also the course instructor in this situation, it was possible that during a one-on-one interview, the participants would sense constraint when wanting to change their answers in favor of the teacher. The researchers thus thought that surveys with open-ended questions, by which participants had the chance to develop their responses with no teacher sitting in front of them, could lead to more direct answers and offer an all-inclusive, thorough view of their viewpoints (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Therefore, a range of open-ended survey questions was presented to the respondents intended to evoke student opinions on the effects of process writing on students' self-awareness, self-efficacy, and writing skills. The researchers developed the research questions, after which they were reread by a peer specialized in qualitatively analyzing data but not personally engaged in the research. It should be mentioned that the preliminary draft of the interview questions was designed based on the ideas of Keh (1990), Hyland (1990), and Myles (2002). Then the questions were reviewed and piloted, as a result, the ambiguous items were revised for the final draft.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection procedures were administered when the semester was finished, following the presentation and finalization of the grades, to ensure the results' accuracy. Students were told of the intent of the study and invited, on a voluntary basis, to complete the surveys. They were told that attendance was purely voluntary and that they might withdraw from the research at any

moment. In addition, since the Ph.D. candidates were from a separate academic department in the university than the researcher, their presence or reactions were not supposed to change their academic status. Six out of the eight participants who had taken part in the course decided to take part. Their permission was received on paper within the framework of the project for use of the interview results. The students recorded audio files of their responses while answering in English since doing so was believed to produce less pressure than presenting replies through writing. After completing the responding tasks, the files were transmitted to the course teacher.

The interview recordings were turned into texts through transcriptions, after which the data went through a process of content analysis. In order to develop an understanding of the data and recognize the themes that emerged, an initial reading of the transcripts was performed, and the researchers developed a scheme for coding to characterize the data in accordance with the themes. Subsequently, the student responses were coded, and an experienced qualitative researcher objectively analyzed the data based on the unchanged scheme of coding (Stemler, 2001). The inter-rater reliability was found to be 95 percent.

### **Results and Discussion**

Results emerging from the content analysis have been provided in a narrative style so as to present a classification of the student's thoughts regarding the feedback they received from their instructors.

#### **Perceptions on Developing Writing Skills**

The findings of the interview indicated that, according to the students, significant contributions were made to their skills in writing as a result of the drafting, reading of teacher feedback, and revision of the writings, confirming



the claims of scholars like Caffarella and Barnett (2000), Karattay (2011) and Cakır (2003) who have asserted that the practice of process writing positively affects the cognitive performance of learners as well as their writing skills.

**Growth of the capacity of learners to assess their own work.**

Participants in this study predominantly mentioned that the cyclic procedure of writing, getting comments, and sending written answers back to the feedback and recommendations from teachers was an influential constructive instrument allowing them to see what they wrote with a critical point of view and make major changes accordingly. Diba explained her feelings about the process of getting feedback from the teacher of the course:

*The instructor's point of view taught us a lot since his suggestions acted as a guide for us. I corrected my errors according to his thorough suggestions, I wanted to improve my papers, and the experience was very helpful... to be frank, I don't believe I would have been as good if I had written and edited my papers myself, because if I did, I suppose I would have attempted to defend my writing instead of improving my article.*

The other students primarily repeated this impression. For example, Edward said that although he often felt intimidated by the teacher's reading his work, "the teacher feedback I received helped my academic composition... Thus, even though it seems demotivating, what I mean is being corrected a lot, the feedback that includes corrections and clarification is a great way to build a roadmap for students," an answer that parallels Ruegg's findings (2014).

Moreover, Kamran noted that, apart from the written feedback, he felt that the teacher's one-on-one sessions were especially helpful for the

development of his writing. According to Kamran, “it is very hard for students to determine if their path is in the correct direction unless you have someone in a higher position to negotiate your viewpoints with.” Beaumont, O’Doherty, and Shannon (2009) reiterate this view, pointing to the potential for comprehensive dialogue between the teacher and student as something specifically helpful to the growth of skills in writing. Since self-regulation has significant influences on academic writing (Hamman, 2005; Zimmerman & Bandaru, 1994); it is safe to say that through process writing, we could efficiently improve students’ writing skills in this case.

**Developing Specific Skills of Writing.** Apart from improving their self-awareness in the case of the students’ writings, the respondents described process writing as having improved particular facets of their understanding of grammar, academic writing norms, and language usage, which are often seen as detracting from non-native learners’ ability to write successfully (Hamman, 2005; Matoti & Shumba, 2011; Saraphi, 2013; Trzeciack & Mackay, 1994). Accordingly, their beliefs align with those of Can and Walker (2011) which said Ph.D. students typically value clear and formative feedback. For example, in his writing, Kamran became more mindful of grammatical errors, stating that “I discovered that when I write, I have simple grammatical mistakes, like I always forget the 3rd person singular -s, and I also make mistakes with articles. Thus, I must search one by one for each point after writing.” Moreover, according to Diba:

*I guess I must say that not only my writing but also my learning were certainly promoted by this method. You know, I now know better that I ought to use simple words as far as possible. For the intended audience, you know, it must be understandable. I also have to be aware of the style of APA, and I have to be careful about research ethics.*

However, Hamed conveyed a degree of dissatisfaction about the quality of the feedback in favor of Bitchener and Knock's (2009) focus with regard to the significance of keeping objectives transparent to the Ph.D. candidates at the outset of the writing course, emphasizing that he frequently failed to grasp what they were required to exactly do:

*I sometimes didn't know how to carry out what I was told to by the feedback, and I needed a long time to realize what I had to. You [the teacher] asked me, for instance, to write transition sentences between quotations, but I did not know how to do so. In order to make the feedback more helpful, we should have been taught on academic writing before the writing process during the sessions.*

In this case, Hamed was referring to the literature of his article, where he had given references to a number of research papers relevant to his subject in a listing style, without examination of the study he was referring to or explanation on how it related to his main study. The teacher replied to such a problem by proposing that, through the application of transitional vocabulary which could lead to a sound flow of concepts, he could add some examination of the implications. In addition, as Hamed also pointed out, "I had no idea about the logic of a methodology, citation, and background of the study." Simply put, his lack of awareness concerning the fundamental standards of academic writing hindered both his capacity to successfully articulate his opinions (Matotti & Shumba, 2011) and his comprehension of the teacher's remarks.

#### *The Effect of Feedback on Time Management*

Apart from the difficulties specifically related to writing abilities, some participants mentioned the consequences of getting and reacting to feedback

in relation to their ability in controlling time, suggesting that they viewed the feedback to be affecting their ability to self-regulate (Hamman, 2005; Matotti and Shumba, 2011; Zimmerman & Bandaru, 1994). The students' opinions somehow diverged in this case. On one side of the issue, Tina believed that:

*When someone sends you feedback regularly, it offers you a chance to do catch something. Otherwise, for instance, if the instructor had required us to complete a paper and deliver it at the end of the semester, I would certainly say that they would be completely different... since we would always believe that "ohhh, we have the time we need, let's leave it for tomorrow, the day after, or even the next week."*

Diba also suggested that "the process helped me manage my time in terms of written feedback." I would have delayed my writing if there had not been an outside authority. On the other hand, in her opinion, the need to visit the teacher after the specified class duration was somehow unwanted; it was a strain on her programs, as confirmed by Keh (1990), who stated that students often considered conferencing as something that took too much of their time. As she further expanded, "In fact, in our situation, I didn't like the conferencing, not because of the teacher, but mainly because of the physical situations [sessions were often held in the classroom of another instructor] and a number of time constraints." Hamed had the same idea, emphasizing that "the major downside of face-to-face meetings is that you'll need more time. Instead of losing time, the same time could have been used more efficiently in the form of written feedback."

#### *Students' Decisions to Apply Process Writing in their Own Classes*

Although most of the comments of the participants were related to the affective and academic concerns pertaining to feedback and process writing,

all of them talked about the plans they had to use process writing in the classes they taught; in fact, a few of the Ph.D. candidates had already started using the procedure in their teaching. Hamed, for example, stated that:

*To be honest, in my courses [up until now], I have never provided my students with such feedback. I just underlined their errors on their writings, sent the papers back to the students after which they would have had to correct their own mistakes. But because it's quicker and more efficient, I'm going to have it [process writing] in the classes I teach.*

Edward agreed, saying that "if I have enough time to implement it, I will try to make use of this type of process writing from now on," while Kamran shared the idea that "this method could be applicable to all learners if the teachers can organize the process properly." Diba also talked about her plans to keep utilizing process writing whenever she had writing courses like she already had acted in two previous courses. Her explanation for it was that:

*You can clearly see the improvement of your students' writing skills, and this makes you proud. Furthermore, it makes the students proud as well, and they can see the immense gap between their first draft, and their final draft and they really become happy and say "Cool, I have improved a lot."*

Accordingly, the students reported that, for them, a more conservative approach was preferred when they taught in their own classes, finding faults and requiring the learners to fix them, instead of offering feedback or space for discussion, a problem that Nicol (2010) believes to be decreasing the writing motivation of the learners. When the Ph.D. candidates experienced the

approach of process writing in the classes they taught, however, they observed promising effects on their students' writing standards and realized that the students were becoming more aware of their successes. Accordingly, they mentioned that they intended to use process writing as a major process in their teaching of writing in the future.

### Conclusion

The process writing approach, which entails the provision of comprehensive feedback during the planning, writing, and editing stages of preparing a text, is not new. However, in the Iranian higher education system, this technique is underused and little research has been done in this regard. Therefore, it is still important to discuss the subjects pertaining to the use of it in Iran, in addition to related academic contexts. The findings of this study are somehow limited, due to the sample population size, which was small, and the narrow scope. To some extent, it is possible that the discourse of the subject influenced the participants' responses. That is, students, mirrored the input they had received regarding the concept of process writing, instead of referring to their personal perceptions, in voicing part of their responses or in the teacher-student relationship, where participants may have tended to demonstrate favor to the teacher in the interviews, rather than giving critique or discontent.

However, it can be inferred on the basis of the ideas shared by the participants that process writing was commonly viewed in this case as advantageous and as having a positive impact on students' understanding of the norms that exist in academic writing. All in all, the participants saw the experience as something encouraging that helped strengthen their understanding of what academic writing is. Furthermore, the students claimed

to have observed improvements in their writing abilities and said that they were more pleased with their writings compared to the case in which they would have had to finish the same papers without that much feedback from the teacher. In addition, some of the participants appreciated the writing process of the course to the degree that they wanted to use it in the future for their own learners.

While the findings of this study significantly affirm the current perception of the topic, they also support the continuing problem that qualified Iranian graduate students still do not have the sufficient writing skills necessary for improvements in their academic life. Accordingly, the following recommendations for teachers are due in environments where students lack a clear experience of academic writing norms that teach them the elements of process writing considered to be reasonably beneficial by the respondents:

1. In terms of the ability of students to assess what they write, offer a structure for improving such an ability both by identifying weaknesses or errors and by providing consistent supervision to revise. In order to complement written feedback by providing space for dialog and clarity, face-to-face meetings can be particularly helpful.
2. As for time management, assist them to self-organize through goal setting, meeting deadlines, and conducting pre-arranged personal meetings to keep the sense of accountability active in the students' minds.
3. With regard to writing skills, realize that graduate-level students can need assistance in English-language writing mechanics, like grammar, punctuation, spelling, transitional language, word choice , and so on. Specific corrections must be included in this sense, instead of merely

identifying faults or providing general advice (e.g., "Describe how these two concepts are linked," instead of "make use of transitional language."). Learners might also need guidance in very rudimentary components of academic texts (introductions, reviews of literature, methods, etc.), along with referencing to other works and academic ethics.

Last but not least, while it may be of some value to conduct individual programs containing process writing, like what was done in the present study, many students probably require more assistance than can be given within a single course. Consequently, further studies are required to find areas where Ph.D. students are not served sufficiently in terms of what courses offer and the supplementary writing resources which exist in such programs. In addition, although this paper concentrated on the responses of the Ph.D. candidates regarding the facets considered skill-based in process writing, the affective responses of students to the dialog between instructors and students, their motivation levels, and other emotional factors are important, too. Therefore, there is a need for further research to concentrate on these considerations.

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## Appendix

### *Survey Questions*

1. Do you believe that getting and responding to comments on a frequent basis aided you in effectively developing your writing, or do you think you would have been more successful if you had written and revised your paper on your own? Please elaborate on your response.
2. What did you find the most useful in the written comments you received on your paper? Which one was the least beneficial to you? What do you believe might have been done to improve the quality of the feedback?
3. Describe how you feel about conferencing, which is when you meet with the teacher to discuss your paper in person.
4. What advantages/disadvantages do you believe face-to-face interactions with the teacher has in relation to your concern paper? Please be as specific as possible.
5. Was this part of the process more or less beneficial than obtaining textual feedback on your paper? How is it so?
6. As a result of this procedure, what did you learn about academic writing? Have you gained any abilities that you believe will help you write better in the future? If that's the case, please describe them.
7. How did you feel about process writing approach in general? What influence did it have on your learning experience? Would you consider incorporating process writing into your own classroom? Please expand.