

**A Review of the
M.A. Theses in TEFL
Completed between January 1990 and March 1999 in
the English Department
of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at
Tehran University**

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This article presents a review of the abstracts of the M.A. theses in TEFL written in the English Department of Tehran University. The majority of the projects have been about issues related to Cognitive Factors, Personality Factors, Reading, Teaching, Testing, and Writing. Theses topics related to Bilingualism, Pragmatics, Sociolinguistics, Text Analysis, and Vocabulary Learning have been quite few. This review also examines the tests, the statistical analysis, and the techniques of data collection used in these projects.

Key words:

classified theses titles , instruments , techniques of data collection , and statistical analyses .

A review of the abstracts of the M.A. theses in TEFL written in the English Department of Tehran University reveals that the department offers opportunities for research to be carried out in a wide range of areas. In these theses, M.A. students have undertaken empirical

research into the various issues in Applied Linguistics. This review provides a list of research works conducted in this department which would well represent the areas of interest and expertise of both the students and the supervisors and the major contributions they have made to higher education and their areas of study. Giving an overview of the major themes and topics most commonly chosen by students, and introducing the tools and techniques of research they have adopted will provide practical advice on what to choose as a research topic, how to collect data and how to analyze them.

The abstracts of the 101 theses written between January 1990 and March 1999 were collected and classified into the following major areas: Attitude and Motivation, Bilingualism, Cognitive Styles, Discourse Analysis, ESP, Intelligence, Material Design, Personality Factors, Phonological Errors, Pragmatics, Reading, Sociolinguistics, Speech Act Theory, Teaching, Testing, Text Analysis, and Writing.

As Figure 1 shows, the majority of these projects have investigated issues related to Reading (21/101).

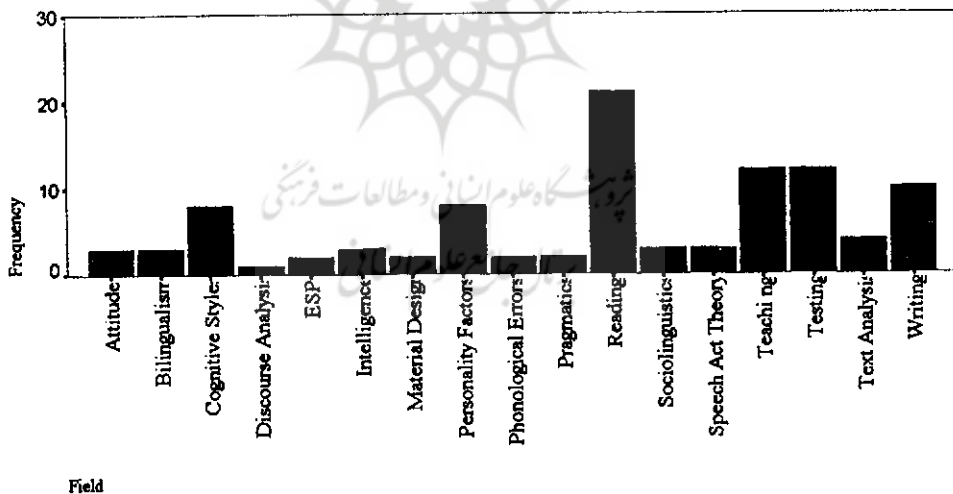


Figure 1: The number of theses written in each field

Specifically speaking, some of these projects deal with models of

reading, some of them with approaches to reading, some with the impact of variables like: content of texts, punctuation, cohesive ties, deictic expressions, culture, and structural simplification on reading, some with the role of topic and L1 explanations, and others with different techniques for improving reading ability including practice with cloze tests or extensive Vs. intensive reading and the enhancement of working memory.

The next issues, which have been most frequently investigated, include Teaching (13/101) and Testing (12/101). As far as Testing is concerned, there are several major themes which have been studied including: cloze format (innovative methods for deletion procedure), reliability and validity of the readability formulas and graphs, validation of a model of language ability, washback effect, evaluation schemes for writing, the effect of the number of options on psychometric characteristics of language proficiency tests, and the role of Error Analysis in distractor selection. The research projects in Teaching take up different issues in this field and reassess them. The typical ones include the role of explicit /implicit teaching; the effect of contextualized features and different methods of teaching on the learners' performance.

Projects dealing with Personality Factors (11/101) have looked at the impact of Personality Factors like: risk taking, anxiety, self-esteem, and extroversion-introversion on reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and also performance on cloze tests.

The next mostly studied field is Writing (10/101). Researchers look at a number of issues and areas in writing that have figured prominently in recent works. Some of these studies deal with the relationship between language proficiency and the type of errors; whether different paragraph patterns cause certain types of errors; and the impact of audience, various correction techniques and communicative features on written discourse.

Some of the theses completed in this department are about Cognitive

Styles (8/101). These studies have taken up to find the relationship between any of the cognitive styles and variables like the skills of writing, reading and listening, communicative strategies (achievement strategies and reduction strategies) and testing (whether people with different cognitive styles perform differently on Multiple Choice cloze or on fixed-ratio cloze).

The tests used in these studies for determining the subjects' cognitive styles and personality factors have been Eysencks Questionnaire, Beck Self-Concept Scale, and Group Embedded Figures Test.

The absolute majority of these theses have used the following tests as the instruments of the study: TOEFL, Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Comprehension English Language Test (CELT), Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB), Standardized Nelson Reading Skill Test, Functional Tests (developed by the researchers themselves), Eysencks Questionnaire and Beck Self-Concept Scale, and Group Embedded Figures Test.

Moreover, a great majority of these tests have taken a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis. Qualitative approaches, having much in common with work in conversation and discourse analysis and pragmatics, have not been used. Perhaps it is because this kind of research often involves longer-term, very detailed and close perusal of the data, and therefore relatively small numbers of subjects, the findings of which can be said to hold true for that particular group. However, there are other researchers in the field who hotly contest the validity of quantitative approaches, claiming that to elicit data which is suitable for counting and comparing (one of the requirements of the quantitative approach), the researcher has to use techniques which prevent truly natural data from being produced as it is often impossible to collect data without the subjects knowing that.

As far as techniques of data collection are concerned, these theses have invariably used tests, and only one has used tape-recorded data. No one has used interviews, questionnaires, observations, or case studies. The equipment used are just papers and pencils (pre-technology methods) and in rare cases tape recorders. No one has used any other

equipment like timer, computer screen, dichotic listening, nor self report techniques whereby researchers ask learners to verbalize their thinking processes as they complete a task.

The examination of the statistical tests used in these works (in a few of the abstracts no reference was made to the statistical analysis) indicates that based on the overall research designs of the projects, a variety of statistical techniques have been applied. However, the most frequently used statistical technique has been t-test. In 38 of these abstracts, the researchers have referred to the use of this technique; 27 have referred to one-way or two-way ANOVA; 12 have used chi-square, 10 have used correlation coefficient as the statistical test; and only 5 have referred to the use of Factor Analysis and Regression Analysis.

This review also reveals that there are some areas of Applied Linguistics which have not been the focus of investigation in this department. What is obviously missing in all these theses is the study of the spoken form of language, and the spontaneous speech. Perhaps the reason lies in the difficulty with dealing with the data since it is necessary to transcribe the data accurately first and then examine them. Anyhow, so many fundamental questions can be addressed in this regard.

Research into areas of second language acquisition, and psycholinguistics relevant to the teaching of languages have also been so rare. The insights research in these areas can provide would be of considerable interest. Questions Second Language Acquisition research directly addresses include theoretical ones like the Learnability Problem and Fundamental Difference Hypothesis and other practical ones like whether there is a consistent pattern in the order in which learners master language features or how successful Self-Teach courses are. Psycholinguistics, too, addresses questions about the language processing system including the way syntactic structures are computed, both during the comprehension and production of language, second language vocabulary acquisition and what the relationship between lexical and syntactic acquisition is.

Figure 2 below shows the list of scholars in this department who are

actively involved in supervising postgraduate research.

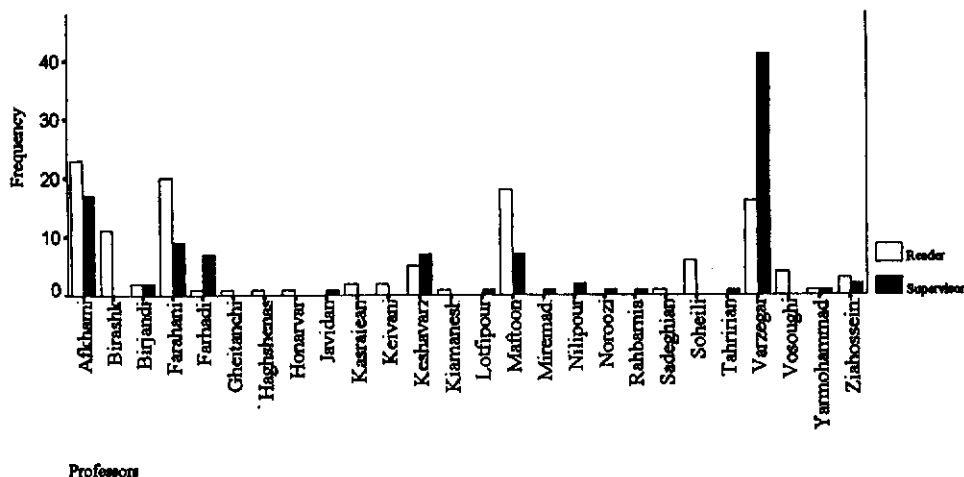


Figure 2: The number of theses supervised or read by each professor

At the end, it may be worth mentioning that a collection of these abstracts has been provided by this author (in press) which can serve as a valuable source of information for the supervisors, advisors, Ph.D. and M.A. students who need to know about the trend of research projects already run in this department. The collection can also provide a database for researchers interested in the study of the language produced by the Persian learners of English. To fulfill this purpose, an attempt has been made not to make any changes in the abstracts, except for the format, i. e., all appear in block format, though some mistakes were observed in the grammatical structure and vocabulary choice. The collection can also be a good source for those interested in Genre Analysis. The analysis of the patterns of these abstracts can reveal the Iranian M.A. students' discursial preferences, which by itself can serve as an initial step for other contrastive rhetoric studies.

What seems to be necessary now is a collection and review of the theses written in all universities in Iran holding M.A. courses.