Does English Proficiency Level Predict Writing Speed, Length, and Quality?

Dr. Abbas Zare-ee

English Department, Faculty of Humanities,
University of Kashan, Iran

Abstract
The investigation of the role of L2 (second language) proficiency in L2 writing ability continues to be revealing for the better understanding of the nature of L2 writing. This kind of study is also much needed in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings like Iran for the better specification of the actual role of EFL writing instructors. The present article addresses the relationship between EFL proficiency and some qualitative and quantitative aspects of EFL writing performance. One hundred and forty college EFL learners, majoring in English as a foreign language in Iran, performed a letter-writing task. The quantitative and qualitative aspects of their writing performance were then quantified and studied in relation to their EFL proficiency. Correlation coefficients and analyses of variance showed the following: 1) Participants with higher EFL proficiency scores produced texts of significantly better quality (R=0.42, P>.01); 2) Text length, measured by the total number of words per text, was very weakly correlated with EFL proficiency scores (R=0.2, P>.05); 3) The correlation between the fluency or speed of writing measured by mean number of words written per minute on the one hand and EFL proficiency scores on the other hand was not found to be significant. The results suggest that although higher EFL proficiency may lead to the production of L2 texts with better
quality and quantity, it does not necessarily affect the fluency and the processing requirements of the complex task of EFL writing. Instead, L2 writing fluency in its limited definition in this work was shown to be a function of L2 writing ability level.

Keywords: EFL Proficiency, EFL Writing, Writing Quality, Writing Quantity

1. Introduction and Background

Many questions have been raised in the literature on second language (L2) writing about the role of proficiency. How the quality and quantity of L2 writing is related to levels of proficiency in the second language is one such research question. Some researchers have tried to find out whether or not writing ability in a second language is correlated with proficiency (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). Others have tried to show how varying levels of proficiency can affect the learner’s deployment of L2 writing strategies and the transfer of L1 writing habits to L2 writing contexts (Ryu, 1997). Still other researchers have gone so far as to propose that there is a “writing expertise” which is independent of linguistic proficiency (Cumming, 1998).

A broad look at the literature on the relationship between L2 writing ability and linguistic proficiency reveals contradictory results on the role of language proficiency in writing in a second language and calls for further investigation of the issue. What has been suggested by researchers is that there are different kinds of knowledge that can lead to success in writing in a second language. In other words, even a perfect knowledge of the system of language with very high EFL proficiency will not necessarily mean successful writing in English as a foreign language (EFL). Knowledge of genre, knowledge of situations and contexts, knowledge of the content about which one is supposed to write, and knowledge of the processes that one can employ while writing are also parts of the repertoire of a successful L2 writer. This implies that L2 writing teachers should not consider the development of linguistic proficiency as a final goal to achieve.

One of the major assumptions in teaching and learning writing in English as a foreign language is that EFL proficiency does indeed affect the quality and quantity of EFL learners’ writing performance even though it may not actually be all that contributes to the success of writing. According to Widdowson (1983), the complexity of writing processes in EFL academic settings is compounded by the complexity of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language. Leki (1992) observed that after ten years of studying English in classrooms abroad, some ESL students might still have trouble writing effectively in English and that those who could recite grammar rules were not always able to use those rules in producing language. Hirose and Sasaki (1994) suggested that both language skills and writing skills should be regarded as important in EFL writing instruction. In their study of college level EFL writing, they found that EFL proficiency accounted for a considerable portion of Japanese college students’ EFL writing skills. In a later study, Sasaki and Hirose (1996) found that besides L1 writing ability and meta-knowledge of writing conventions, L2 proficiency also explained variance in L2 writing ability.
Some studies have examined the relationship between linguistic proficiency and errors in EFL learners’ written production. In an analysis of the effects of level of proficiency on error production in Tests of Written English (TWE), Ginther and Grant (1996) found that more proficient writers wrote longer essays and that their essays were more error-free than the essays written by less proficient learners. Moreover, in their study, less proficient learners produced more errors of word form and word choice; whereas, more proficient learners produced more errors of spelling.

Research on L2 writing indicates that L2 proficiency might affect the transfer of writing skills from the native language to the second language writing task. Ryu (1997) showed that this transfer of writing skills from a first to a second or foreign language was possible only when the writer possessed an adequate level of second or foreign language skills. In other words, he showed that the level of proficiency in the second language determined whether or not the second language writer would be able to employ his L1 writing abilities in writing the second language. Based on his research on the relationship between English proficiency and writing ability in English, Ryu (1997) suggested that the focus of EFL writing instruction vary depending on the learners’ English-language proficiency. He argued that for lower English-language proficiency students, the focus of instruction should be on developing their English language skills. For intermediate English-language proficiency learners, he believed the focus of instruction should be on developing both English language and writing skills. For advanced English-language proficiency learners, the focus of instruction should be on developing their writing skills rather than their English language skills.

Research on L2 writing has also come up with the result that linguistic proficiency does indeed affect the processes in L2 writing. In Sasaki’s (2000) study of the writing processes and products of Japanese EFL learners, L2 proficiency was shown to explain part of the differences in writing strategy use between the expert and the novice writers in the study. It is important to reiterate that EFL proficiency is responsible for part but not all of the variation in students writing processes and products.

A radically different theoretical perspective in relation to the role of L2 proficiency in L2 writing is that proficiency does not play a significant role in writing, and that L2 writing processes are not decisively influenced by it. In other words, many studies (Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1985) have shown that a lack of competence in second language writing results from the writer’s incompetence in composition rather than the lack of linguistic competence. Raimes (1987) has shown that students whose proficiency is judged as insufficient for academic coursework generate language and ideas in much the same way as more proficient students.

Some research suggests that L2 proficiency comes into the stage of L2 writing only in the lower levels and that it does not play a key role in higher levels of writing ability. According to (Ryu, 1997, p. 3), “Once the writer reaches an adequate level of language proficiency, language proficiency is no longer a decisive factor in determining writing quality”. The belief is that only at the beginning stages of writing ability development, called the associative writing stage by Berieter (1980), should the writer deal with language problems and idea generation. In higher-level stages, the writer’s
concern is not so much with producing correct language as with creating a meaningful text. Ryu (1997) considers Cumming’s distinction between surface and deep levels of proficiency (CALP and BICS) relevant to L2 writing instruction. BICS, or Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), include such knowledge as vocabulary and grammar; whereas, CALP, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, includes such knowledge as that of semantic and functional meaning. Therefore, one suggestion in the literature is that BICS should be the focus of L2 writing instruction only in lower levels of writing ability.

The fact that some researchers have argued for the independence of L2 writing ability from L2 proficiency and the fact that there are so many contradictory findings about the role of proficiency in L2 writing call for more research on the relationships between proficiency and writing ability. This study investigated the relationships between EFL proficiency and the quantitative and qualitative aspects of EFL writing performance.

2. The context of the study

This study was carried out in an EFL setting where university students enrolled in English departments study English for four years at the undergraduate level. For their first two years, they usually take language skill courses such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and grammar. For the second two years, they study either translation to and from Persian or English literature. Three major writing skills courses are offered for all BA students of English. The first is “Basic Writing”, which focuses on writing paragraphs and paragraph organization. The second course, “Essay Writing”, teaches student how to develop their paragraph writing skills to compose longer texts in English. And the third course, “Letter Writing” teaches them how to write different kinds of letters in English. The materials used for teaching writing to Iranian EFL students are usually ESL textbooks selected by the teacher or recommended in the syllabus. Such syllabuses are usually prepared by a central curriculum planning body and are sent to all universities for implementation. Teaching methods are usually product-oriented, with the teacher presenting and focusing on different elements of English paragraphs such as topic sentences, supporting sentences, and conclusion, and evaluating students’ written products. Participants in these college writing courses are usually heterogeneous English ability students who have studied English for at least three hours a week in their junior and senior high school studies.

3. Participants

The population in this study included the students studying for a BA degree in English at the English Department of Kashan University in Iran. These learners had been admitted to EFL programmes through a nation-wide university entrance exam and were in their first, second, third, and fourth years of studies for BA in English. Subjects were selected randomly from among students in all of the four years of university study to allow investigating EFL writing behaviours across different levels of EFL writing ability and EFL proficiency (29 freshman, 68 sophomore, 23 junior, and 20 senior students were
selected). These 140 students (26 male and 114 female students) were selected through stratified random sampling, and 81.4 percent of the subjects were female students because, nowadays, girls constitute roughly the same ratio of the total population of university EFL learners in Iran. The subjects’ age range was between 18 and 25.

4. The Research Instruments

The instruments used to collect data on the variables considered in this study included The MELAB test of English proficiency and a writing prompt. The test used for measuring the subjects’ EFL proficiency was MELAB, the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (Briggs, et. al. 1997). This test was selected because of its standard format, ease of administration and scoring, its availability, and its being unseen for the participants. Different versions of this test have previously been used for measuring Iranian university EFL learners’ proficiency in different research projects with high measures of reliability. Three areas of language proficiency were tested using the multiple-choice format of the selected test: grammar (40 items), vocabulary (40 items), and reading comprehension (20 items). This test was performed as part of classroom evaluation activities with the help of the instructors. Each subject was assigned an EFL proficiency score based on the total number of correct responses to the test items. Test results were also used to assign subjects to three levels of proficiency: elementary (test scores below 40%), intermediate (test scores between 40% and 70%), and advanced (test scores above 70%).

In order to collect data on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of EFL writing performance of the learners in this study, the researcher focused only on one task: writing a formal letter of job application. Because a large number of students participated in this research, only this one specific writing task was used to collect data on EFL writing quality and EFL writing quantity. The letter of application genre was selected for investigation assuming that, as a type of EFL writing, letters of application could present a reasonable indication of the general writing performance of the participants involved in the study.

Students were given the following writing prompt to write an application letter:

Dear Student: Write a job application letter in English. You think that you have enough time during your studies to get a part-time job in order to make some money. You learn from a friend or in an advertisement that the ELI English Language Institute has a vacancy for a part-time job relevant to your field of study and interest (a secretary, an assistant, a teacher, etc). You decide to write a letter to Mr Muhammad, the head of ELI, to apply for the job. You try to convince him in your letter that you are a good candidate to take the job.

This writing prompt was read to the subjects in their mother tongue as well and further clarifying explanations were given whenever required.
5. Data Collection Procedures

Once the participants were selected (N=140), the researcher cooperated with the EFL teachers in charge of their classes to collect data on EFL proficiency using the selected version of the MELAB test. Only one group of the students were in the researcher’s own class. The MELAB test was administered in a classroom situation with the presence of the researcher and the classroom teacher. Students were informed that the results of the test were both part of their class requirements and a measure used in this research. This was done to make sure that the students would take the test seriously and attempt their best in answering the 100-item test. They were also notified that they could come to the researcher or their teacher to see the result of their test if they wished. The majority of them had not taken a proficiency test before and were eager to know their score. The test results were used to classify the subjects into three groups of proficiency: weak, average, and strong. The three levels identified here may not conform to the ones described in the ACTEFL proficiency guidelines. Students with scores of less than 40 percent, those with scores between 40% and 70%, and those with scores of more than 70 percent were assigned to the weak, average, and strong groups, respectively.

The writing prompt referred to in the section on instruments was administered for collecting EFL writing samples. The significant performance conditions in collecting data on writing tasks include purpose, text type, specificity of the topic, addressee, time, size of the output, place and setting for data collection, and the amount of support given to the learners such as use of dictionary (Wier, 1993). In the case of the data used for this study, the subjects were given clear instructions, both orally and on their writing prompt, as to the purpose of the task. They were told that they should write their application letters in such a way as to be able to get the job referred to in the advertisement. They were also told that their writing samples would be used to evaluate their writing ability, and they were encouraged by their class teachers to do the task as carefully as they could. There was no limit to the number of words they could include in their letter and they had enough time to complete the task at their own pace. They were given these instructions, because what was finally significant for the purposes of the study was the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the letters they produced.

All of the 140 writing samples were collected in the learners’ language classes and the subjects did not convene for the data collection sessions. Some of the subjects were in the researcher’s own classes (learning advanced grammar or writing) and others were taking different courses (such as literature, translation or reading) with other colleagues. They were given freedom to consult their dictionaries and write and rewrite, if they wished to do so. The researcher collaborated with the class teacher or another assistant to record the time spent by each individual for writing and the number of drafts produced by each individual. Only the final drafts were included in the data for the study. Data on the learners’ levels of EFL writing ability and EFL proficiency, application letters written in English, and the amount of time spent for writing each application letter were collected using the procedures described above.

For determining writing quantity, the total amount of time spent for writing each letter of application, the total number of words written per letter, and the mean number of
words written per minute by each subject were calculated. The samples were not word-processed; therefore, the number of words was counted manually. Since the sender and receiver’s address were fixed for everybody, they were not included in the world counts. All the words in the salutation, closing, and postscripts were included. Prepositions, articles, and contractions were also counted as words. However, different signs produced by these learners for signatures were not included in the word counts. The total number of words written per letter was then divided by the number of minutes spent for writing to calculate writing speed.

Once the sample texts written by the EFL learners (the 140 application letters) were collected and quantity measures were assigned, a scoring procedure was also selected for assigning a quality score to each of them. Jacobs et. al’s (1981) EFL Composition Profile was used to assign scores to content (50 points), organization (40 points), vocabulary (40 points), language use (50 points), and mechanics (20 points), resulting in a maximum possible score of 200 for each letter. Two raters, the researcher and another EFL writing instructor, discussed the scoring profile and a few writing samples to agree on a consistent method of scoring. Then each rater scored all of the 140 samples independently. The justification for this was that “it is often argued that work marked independently by two different markers, with their marks being averaged, is a more reliable estimate than if it were marked by a single marker” or by different markers assigning a single score (Wier, 1993, p. 165). The average of the total scores assigned to each letter was the final index for EFL writing quality considered in all later analyses. The inter-rater reliability measured by Pearson Correlation was 0.97.

6. Data Analysis

The hypotheses tested in this study were quantitative and were, therefore, analysed statistically. Descriptive analyses were used to summarize data on writing ability, EFL proficiency, EFL writing quality, and EFL writing quantity. Correlation analyses and the Analysis of Variance were used to answer the research questions.

6.1. Descriptive Statistics

Based on the collected demographic information, the participants had attended private language schools from zero to five years in addition to their study of English at the university. This and other similar factors contributed significantly to their level of EFL proficiency. With these differences the 140 subjects were assigned to three levels of EFL proficiency based on the results of the MELAB test. The majority of the students (%55) fell into the intermediate level. Table 1 shows the number of subjects in each level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of English Proficiency</th>
<th>Score on the MELAB Test (0-80)</th>
<th>Number of subjects</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0-32 (below 40%)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Does English Proficiency Level Predict Writing Quality?

The range of writing quality scores (the average of the two raters’ evaluations) was between 100 and 194 points out of 200 with a mean of 154.25. Students were also grouped into three different levels of writing ability based on these scores. Table 2 shows the number of subjects in each level. Most of the participants (more than 76 percent) showed an average writing ability within the norms of their peer EFL writers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Score out of 200) level of EFL writing ability</th>
<th>Number of subjects</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-134 poor</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>135-170 Average</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>75.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>171-200 Strong</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.2. The relationship between EFL proficiency and EFL writing quality

The first hypothesis that was considered in the study stated that “there was no relationship between EFL learners’ Scores on the MELAB proficiency test and overall writing quality scores assigned to their writing samples by EFL experts”. Pearson correlation analyses showed a significant moderate positive relationship between EFL proficiency and writing ability (R=0.415). The ability to write creatively in a foreign language with high quality may be an independent language skill or a construct in its own right demanding newer methods for quantification, but in the context of this study it moderately co-varied with proficiency. Table 3 summarizes the analysis and shows that the two variables of writing ability and language proficiency were related.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>10.191</td>
<td>140</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing quality</td>
<td>154.3</td>
<td>16.34690</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>.415</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A similar question about the quality of writing performance was asked about the mean of writing quality scores assigned to students with different levels of EFL proficiency. The research hypothesis was “there are no differences between the means of writing quality scores among EFL learners with elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels of EFL proficiency”. The mean quality scores for the sample application letters...
written by advanced proficiency learners was significantly better than that in the intermediate and the elementary group. (The means were 148, 155, and 172 for the elementary, the intermediate, and the advanced group, respectively). Analysis of variance (Table 4) showed that these differences between the means were statistically significant.

Table 4. ANOVA comparing writing quality across levels of EFL proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Writing quality score * 3 levels of English proficiency</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>6736.288</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3368.144</td>
<td>15.175</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>30407.446</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>221.952</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37143.734</td>
<td>139</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3. The relationship between EFL proficiency and EFL writing quantity

Because the quantity of what EFL writers produce does not depend only on their proficiency level but on many other contributing factors, such as the type of text and discursive requirements, it was hypothesized that there will be no relationship between EFL learners’ scores on the MELAB proficiency test and writing quantity (text length and writing speed). Text length, measured by the total number of words per letter, was very weakly correlated with EFL proficiency scores (R=0.2, P>.05). No strong relationships were found between EFL proficiency scores and total number of words written per letter even though higher proficiency was associated with longer texts. There was also no relationship between proficiency and the speed of writing measured by the number of words written per minute. Students with higher levels of EFL proficiency produced relatively longer texts. The participants identified as elementary here wrote an average of 76 words per letter of application; the intermediate group wrote 81 words; and the advanced group wrote an average of 100 words per letter. The difference between the mean total numbers of words written per letter was not great. However, it was significant at the 0.01 level. Moreover, there was no difference in the speed of writing measured by the number of words written per minute in students with different levels of proficiency. The following table (Table 5) shows the analysis of variance between the means:

Table 5: ANOVA between mean number of words written per letter across different levels of EFL proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>6319.266</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3159.633</td>
<td>4.290</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>100910.305</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>736.572</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>107229.5</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In sum, EFL proficiency was correlated with the quality of EFL writing but not with its quantity. The results of the analyses in the present study indicate that although higher EFL proficiency may lead to the production of L2 texts with better quality and quantity, it does not necessarily affect the fluency with which EFL written texts are produced. In other words, L2 writing fluency in its limited definition in this work (number of words that people can write per minute) was shown to be a function of L2 writing ability level not L2 proficiency level. More proficient EFL learners are not necessarily more able EFL writers and may require gaining other types of knowledge that they need to draw upon while writing such as the knowledge of content, genre, strategies, and discourse conventions.

7. Summary of the Findings

In this study, EFL proficiency was found to be related to the quality of writing in both correlation studies and the study of mean differences. However, proficiency was not related to the quantity indices defined in the study, the mean number of words per text for text length and the mean number of words per minute for writing speed. The findings showed that the quality and quantity of EFL learners' text is not a function only of EFL proficiency and that many other constraints affect how learners write. Pearson correlation showed a significant moderate positive relationship between EFL proficiency and writing quality (R=0.415). Similarly, the mean quality scores for the sample application letters written by advanced proficiency learners were significantly better than those in the intermediate and the elementary group. Even though students with advanced EFL proficiency produced relatively longer texts, no associations were found between EFL proficiency scores and total number of words written per letter for the whole population. There was also no relationship between proficiency and the speed of writing measured by the number of words written per minute.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

This study suggests that the quality of EFL writing is at least partly determined by the level of linguistic proficiency, but its speed is apparently determined by other factors in the context of writing. Such factors may include different amounts of processing time spent by different individuals, the nature of the task, the availability of ideas to include in the text, etc. The study also suggests that EFL writers’ level of linguistic proficiency and writing ability determine the types of their writing strategies.

The findings of this study showed that EFL writing quality is determined by EFL writing skills more than it is by EFL proficiency. The findings also indicate that the types of strategies used for writing vary with the level of writing ability. These findings support the idea that limited competence in writing in English results from limited composing skills (Krapels, 1990). The study also confirms Cumming’s (1998) proposal for the existence of a writing expertise independent of language ability. The findings show writing quality to be associated more with the skill in writing than with the knowledge of language strengthening the proposal for the existence of writing skills independent of language proficiency.
For the development of writing as a communicative activity, the findings of this study suggest that EFL learners need to be helped to go beyond the microscopic levels of handling grammatical and lexical problems. For the better understanding of EFL learners and their profiles as writers, the study implies that EFL learners with varying degrees of linguistic proficiency and EFL writing ability deploy writing strategies differently and handle their writing tasks in different ways. Better knowledge of the writing behaviours of learners with different ability levels can help teachers to approach their pedagogical needs accordingly. Finally, the findings of the study suggest that the learning needs of EFL writers vary with the level of their linguistic proficiency. EFL learners with lower EFL proficiency tend also to resort to strategies that may not lead to the successful communication of written messages. As EFL learners proficiency increases, writing instructions should also involve a shift of emphasis from products to processes and finally to genre properties.
References


**About the author**

**Dr Abbas Zare-ee** received his Ph.D. in English Language Teaching in Iran and completed research attachments with the University of Reading, University of Malaya, and Sheffield University. He is now a full-time assistant professor at the English Department of the University of Kashan, Iran. His research interests include language teaching methodology, Language learning, and second language writing. He has presented in different international conferences and published various books and papers in these areas.