Proposing a Socioculturally-informed Syllabus to Teach Paragraph Writing to Iranian Undergraduate EFL learners: Materials, Methods and Assessment

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Abstract

Due to the importance of humanistic and learner-centered views of language teaching, many instructors and curriculum planners are sensitive of the learners' needs in creating tailor-made instructional programs and designing effective syllabus for their courses. Accordingly, the present study used a needs analysis procedure to inspect a group of Iranian undergraduate EFL learners' problems and needs in writing. In fact, the primary stakeholders' (i.e., 58 learners and 3 writing instructors) views regarding the students' difficulties in writing and their expectations and suggestions regarding the roles and effects of the writing course, instructors and the materials on resolving their problems and, thus, improving their writing ability were explored by using two sets of open-ended surveys. Subsequently, in light of the findings of the study a socioculturally-informed syllabus, which can guide the selection of materials, teaching methods and assessment techniques in a writing course, was proposed and elaborated upon. Insights provided by the present study can be useful for writing teachers, researchers, and possibly syllabus designers and curriculum planners, to design an appropriate and accountable writing course for their learners, to identify and resolve their problems and to enhance their writing quality.

1. Introduction

The expansion of English as the lingua franca of academic and professional communication has made the need for second and foreign language writing more apparent and this skill has occupied a more central position in language instruction in order to enable the students to communicate their ideas and information more effectively (Hyland, 2003; Matsuda, Ortmeier-Hooper, & Matsuda, 2009). Since writing is a highly complex activity which requires the orchestration of a variety of linguistic, cognitive and metacognitive processes and is affected by a variety of factors such as the students' previous experience and proficiency level, the effective teaching and learning of L2 writing is a highly demanding and challenging endeavor as well. Due to the importance and applications of L2 writing to individuals from different instructional or disciplinary backgrounds, more attention has been directed towards exploring the effects of cognitive, affective and contextual processes and, more importantly, instructional methods in facilitating the learning and teaching of writing.

Approaches to writing instruction or designing a curriculum/syllabus for this purpose are mostly adopted based on the dominant writing theories of the time in terms of how writing is learned, factors affecting this process and the needs of the learners in a specific instructional context. Ivanič (2004) provides broad categories for describing various conceptualizations and instructional practices associated with the learning and teaching of writing. These categories are termed as six discourses of writing and learning to write (namely, *skill discourse, creativity discourse, process discourse, genre discourse, social practices discourse* and *sociopolitical discourse*) based on which textual aspects of writing, individuals' mental processes and social contexts within which written communication takes place inform and influence each other and must be taken into account in designing or evaluating any curriculum or instructional practices. In other words, it is believed that "because writing is a complex social practice, writing curricula should take into account writers' use of textual and rhetorical tools/information, writers' thinking processes, their social/communicative intentions and purposes and the values ascribed to particular intentions, texts, and ways of communicating" (Peterson, 2012, p. 261).

These conceptualizations for the nature of writing and its learning and teaching are in line with the sociocultural theory (SCT) of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) which considers literacy as a social practice that is affected by both the individuals' mental processes and the resources in their social context. In the same regard, SCT can be used to design and inform a syllabus for teaching writing in EFL contexts like Iran in which the learners do not have adequate exposure to the real and authentic written texts and do not have enough opportunity to communicate for actual purposes in writing.

Therefore, in order to get the required knowledge to be considered as competent writers of English, the learners must receive an effective instruction which can offer a balanced attention to the textual aspects of writing, the learners' thinking processes and their context-specific needs and intentions. SCT can provide a framework for designing and implementing programs in which the materials, instructional practices and assessment methods can enable the learners acquire the required expertise and competence in writing.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of this review is threefold: at first, some methods of teaching writing are presented, then a sociocultural theory of writing, which can inform the selection of materials and methods of teaching and testing writing as a syllabus for teaching paragraph writing in the EFL contexts, is elaborated upon, and finally, some studies which have used sociocultural theory in their design and implementation are briefly sketched upon.

2.1. Methods of Teaching L2 Writing

Teaching L2 writing mostly concerns the pedagogic concerns of the time. Between 1900 and about 1970, the explicit teaching of writing skills and adherence to the writing conventions such as grammar, spelling and punctuation were emphasized (Peterson, 2012). In this period, the students were required to replicate the model texts written by the exemplary writers (Nystrand, 2006). The most traditional approach, i.e., the *controlled approach,* has grown out of the audio-lingual method and focuses upon the accuracy and correct behavior. It is based on practice exercises, descriptive grammar and error analysis by the teacher to give learners more confidence in presenting their error-free texts but ignores the role of audience, the purpose of writing and the students' desire to practice free writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). In fact, building accurate grammatical sentences is not sufficient for L2 writing and the learners must be aware of the organizational and rhetorical aspects of writing; consequently, the *current-traditional approach* to writing was proposed to enable the learners to freely produce a series of sentences in larger stretches of discourses and focused on features like topic sentence, supporting sentences, transitions and concluding sentence (Silva, 1990). However, this approach again was limited to the consideration of products and forms of language and the learners' thinking and composing process were not taken into consideration (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

Dissatisfaction with these approaches to writing instruction led to the emergence of the *writing-process approach* based on which writing was seen as a "non-linear exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (Zamel,

1983, p. 165). This approach emphasizes the creation of meaningful discourse by engaging in generating ideas, planning, drafting, revising and editing processes (Flower & Hayes, 1981). In fact, the writers' thinking and decision-making processes are emphasized and it is maintained that "teachers should provide time and opportunity for students to carry out the thinking processes associated with composing" (Peterson, 2012, p. 263). There must also be an opportunity for peer and group work and the students must receive (ongoing) assistance and feedback while composing their texts.

The four stages of writing research and practice associated with the writing-process approach are: *the expressive stage, the cognitive process, the genre approach* and *the social process.* In the expressive approach to writing, the writers can be creative and freely write what they think (Elbow, 1990). The cognitive approach considers the mental processes involved in the activities incorporated in goal setting, problem solving and consideration of the readers and writing situation (Flower & Hayes, 1981). The genre approach to teaching L2 writing "emphasizes the use of form to achieve a particular purpose within a particular context" (Peterson, 2012, p. 267). In this approach, the students must be explicitly taught the grammatical and discoursal features of different genres associated with real-communication purposes. Finally, the social approach considers the use of writing for real and functional purposes and the writers engage in a set of social practices. More specifically, this approach must take into account:

> patterns of participation, gender preferences, networks of support and collaboration, patterns of use of time, space, tools, technology and resources, the interaction of writing with reading and of written language with other semiotic modes, the symbolic meanings of literacy, and the broader social goals which literacy serves in the lives of people and institutions. (Ivanič, 2004, p. 234)

This view aligns writing practice with sociocultural theory of learning, which is further explicated below.

2.2. Sociocultural Theory of Writing

Sociocultural theory (SCT) is based on Vygotsky's (1978) notion that human mental activity and learning is a mediated activity and develops in social and material environment through interaction with more capable individuals. Mediation is at the heart of SCT and provides an opportunity for learners' development. From Vygotskian SCT perspective, "any human activity (i.e., higher mental functions) is mediated by objects (e.g., computers), psychological tools (e.g., texts) or another human being" (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012, p. 57). The central notion within this framework is the facilitating role of scaffolding or mediation which can reveal information about the learners' current abilities in order to help them overcome any performance problems and, thus, realize their potential abilities through some

guidance or collaborative objects which can be offered through means like computers and other symbolic tools (see e.g., Poehner & Lantolf, 2010; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012; van Compernolle & Williams, 2013). In fact, this approach attempts to provide learners with appropriate and timely feedback in a supportive and interactive environment to enhance the quality of their learning (Poehner & Lantolf, 2013). The main concern in SCT is enabling the learners to reach the level of independent performance and self-regulation and in this paradigm learning reflects an internalization process, i.e., "the process of making what was once external assistance a resource that is internally available to the individual" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 200). In fact, the learners based on their zone of proximal development (ZPD) level, which is defined as the distance between the level of potential and actual developments, benefit from mediated assistance and scaffolding to complete the learning tasks and reach the intended level of development.

As Prior (2006) has asserted, "sociocultural theories represent the dominant paradigm for writing research today" (p. 54) and many constructs in SCT can be applied in writing research and instruction in classroom settings. Contrary to the traditional cognitive theory which views writing as an individualized activity, the SCT considers writing as a literate activity which involves dialogic processes and is contextualized in the social, cultural and historical milieu (Prior, 2006). Prior argues that, in the sociocultural paradigm, text is considered as "an artefact in activity, and the inscription of linguistic signs in some media are part of a stream of mediated, distributed and multimodal activity" (p. 59). It is also maintained that classroom learning should be based on interaction and collaboration activities occurring within a group of students and teaching is needed if the writers intend to learn new genres and textual practices (Prior, 2006).

2.3. Related Studies on Sociocultural Theory in L2/FL Writing

There are some studies which have used the insights of sociocultural theory in L2 writing. For example, using sociocultural theory as their main theoretical framework, Villamil and de Guerrero (1996) examined what actually happens when two L2 students are involved in peer revision of written texts by analyzing the students' interactions while engaged in revision activities, strategies they adopt to facilitate the revision process and significant aspects of social behavior in dyadic peer revision. This analysis revealed a complex array of activities in intereactive processes including seven types of social-cognitive activities the students engaged in (reading, assessing, dealing with troublesources, composing, writing comments, copying, and discussing task procedures), five different mediating strategies used to facilitate the revision process (employing symbols and external resources, using the Ll, providing scaffolding, resorting to interlanguage

knowledge, and vocalizing private speech), and four significant aspects of social behavior (management of authorial control, affectivity, collaboration, and adopting reader/writer roles).

Nassaji and Swain (2000), using the insights provided by sociocultural theory of learning, carried out a formal study on two adult Korean learners of English and attempted to investigate and compare the efficacy of two forms of feedback-related assistance: ZPD and non-ZPD help. In fact, the researchers wanted to test the hypothesis that feedback calibrated along an implicit to explicit continuum, and that is interactionally negotiated so that it aligns with a learner's ZPD, is more developmentally beneficial in comparison to formulaic or random types of feedback. The findings revealed that ZPD-sensitive and negotiated help had been more effective than randomly provided help on the usage of English articles. Also, the results pointed to the superiority of explicit help compared to the implicit one when the assistance was offered in a random and non-collaborative manner.

Applying the insights of sociocultural theory in the assessment domain, Shrestha and Coffin (2012) explored the value of supporting students and tutor mediation in the context of academic writing development among undergraduate Business Studies students in open and distance learning. In this qualitative study, the researchers followed the principles of Dynamic Assessment approach as the offspring of sociocultural theory of learning. The findings suggest that socioculturally informed assessment approach (i.e., dynamic assessment) can "contribute to the students' writing development by responding to their individual needs … and the focused tutor mediation is an effective way of providing the kind of reflective, dynamic mediation that is able to effectively support students' academic writing development" (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012, p. 55).

Lee (2014), revisiting teacher feedback in writing from sociocultural perspective and more specifically drawing on mediated learning experience (MLE) theory, suggested that providing MLE as a new object of the feedback system and introducing other innovations can lead to more effective feedback and can improve students' learning. In another study, Mak and Lee (2014) implemented assessment for learning (AfL) in L2 writing form an activity theory perspective and its notion of contradiction to investigate how four elementary teachers in Hong Kong attempted to foster change in assessment by implementing AfL in the L2 writing classroom dominated by the examination culture. The results of study indicated that the learning from and uptake of AfL innovation in writing could be inhibited unless the contradictions in the activity systems can be resolved through dialogic problem solving and negotiation, development of a common vision and new

goals on classroom writing assessment, implementation of effective training and inclusion of lasting support for innovation.

In addition, Fujioka (2014) in a semilongitudinal study examined L2 student–U.S. professor interactions through disciplinary writing assignments from an activity theory perspective. The concept of interacting activity system network "offered a useful perspective to understand concurrent and multi-directional learning between the student and the professor, who mutually shaped and influenced each other's writing and teaching practices in the L2 disciplinary communities they are working and socializing" (p.40). Worden (2015) also made use of a teacher knowledge framework and Vygotskyan sociocultural theory analytical to trace the changes in teachers' understanding of parallelism concept as they move through the various stages of a team microteaching assignment in a TESL methodology course assignment and explored how the teachers' interactions with instructional materials and the teacher educator mediated their developing understanding. The findings indicated that novice teachers engage in an extended process of learning even for teaching simple concepts such as parallelism and due to having different underlying conceptions about writing, their interactions with the available mediation differed with each other, which had some implications for their learning and ongoing endeavor for reaching professional development.

Finally, Lei (2016) claiming that despite the recent popularity of including sociocultural perspectives in L2 writing research few studies have examined the learners' strategic use of mediating resources while writing, made use of activity theory and concept of internalization (i.e., the transformative process from externally formed mediating resources to psychological artefacts that mediate the mental activity) to examine and compare four skilled and four less skilled student writers' mediation strategy use by analyzing the data collected through interviews, process logs, stimulated recalls and students' essays. the findings of the study revealed that although the two groups of students have used rather similar types of mediational resources, their internalizations in three aspects of noticing, imitating and goal setting differs significantly, which call for raising the language awareness of the learners, making persistent imitations and integrating learning-to-write with writing-to-learn approaches for more effective strategy use.

On the whole, the insights and implications of SCT have been applied in various domains of writing such as the role of scaffolding and negotiated feedback (e.g., Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Nassaji & Swain, 2000), dynamic assessment (e.g., Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; Poehner, 2005, 2009; Shresta & Coffin, 2012; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002), mediational strategies (e.g., Lei, 2008, 2016) and so on. However, to the present researchers' knowledge, no study has been reported in the

literature which has used the insights of SCT in developing a syllabus for teaching L2 writing in EFL contexts in which FL writing differs from ESL writing in terms of students' and instructors' needs, contexts, and purposes (Riazi, 2018). In fact, compared to other skills involved in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, writing has received the least attention. This is true of foreign language contexts like Iran in which the instruction and research on the practical needs of the learners in writing are very limited. Looking at foreign language curriculum and textbooks used to teach English in Iran reveals that writing skill has been rather ignored. In fact, ELT programs in Iran are reading-based and they "aimed primarily at developing students' reading abilities and skills, since the latest scientific knowledge and technological information resided in printed materials and a good level of reading ability could save the nation from dependence" (High Council of Cultural Revolution [HCCR] 2002, as cited in Atai & Mazlum, 2013, p. 391). Most of the Universities offering ELT-related majors (e.g., English Language and Literature, Teaching English as Foreign Language and Translation) in Iran dedicate part of their curriculum in teaching the conventions and principles of EFL writing. However, in most of the cases, the instructional approach adopted is not effective enough and most of the learners do not become competent enough in this complex language skill. In fact, teachers mostly use traditional methods for teaching writing and ask their students to just write a text based on the specific methods of paragraph development and support (and conventions of essay writing) without considering the processes and strategies the students must learn and use in various stages of writing. In other words, writing is taught as a product and due to the workload of the teachers, the learners receive limited feedback on the quality of their written work and, therefore, their problems are rather hidden and do not receive any instructional concern.

Consequently, learning to write effectively in foreign language contexts had become a highly complex activity and a challenging endeavor for the learners and in order to resolve this problem, learners can be offered variety of mediational resources and assistance of their teachers (by offering systematic intervention) and their more capable peers in creating a better and more unified written text. Despite the importance of SCT in learning, few studies have theorized and explored its implications in writing instruction. Therefore, the present study attempts to integrate the findings of research on SCT in writing and to propose a syllabus for teaching paragraph writing in EFL contexts because of the insights it provides into the social, cultural and historical roots of human cognition and the crucial role that social relationships and culturally constructed artefacts play in the development of cognition and human learning (Lei, 2016; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Oxford et al., 2014). In this type of syllabus, the materials and methods of teaching and assessment are determined by the needs of the learners and the resources and

constraints of the classroom in which the teaching and learning experiences occur. More specifically, the main objective of the present study is doing a kind of needs analysis and exploring the problems of Iranian EFL learners in writing since few studies have explored the problems and needs of Iranian EFL learners in writing from the viewpoints of primary stakeholders, i.e., teachers and learners. Accordingly, the problems of the learners in various aspects and features of writing and learners' expectations and teachers' suggestions regarding the importance of writing course and roles of teachers and textbooks in resolving the students' problems, responding to their needs and, thus, improving their writing competence are explored by using two sets of open-ended surveys. Subsequently, in light of the findings of the study, the insights provided by the sociocultural theory of writing are used to inform the choice of materials and selection of teaching and assessment methods. More specifically, the researchers, attempted to provide the answer for the following research questions:

1. What are the students' and their instructors' views regarding the Iranian EFL learners' problems in writing?
2. What are the students' expectations and the instructors' suggestions regarding the roles and effects of the writing course, instructors and materials used in resolving the problems and improving the students' writing ability?
3. What are the implications of sociocultural theory of learning for designing a course for teaching paragraph writing to Iranian EFL learners?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 58 sophomore students (46 female and 12 male) of English Language and Literature from two writing classes taught by the same instructor in a state university in Iran. They were passing a two-credit course on the principles and methods of paragraph development and their fresh experiences with writing could have provided us with more reliable and valid data regarding their problems and needs in writing. In addition, three university instructors with different years of experience in teaching writing participated in the study. The following table presents some demographic (i.e., name, gender, academic degree, years of experience in teaching writing) and instructional (i.e., the syllabus type adopted, materials, methods of teaching and assessment and the manner of providing feedback) information about these instructors.

Table 1

Demographic and Instructional Information about the Writing Instructors

Name	Degree	Teaching Experience	Syllabus type	Material	Teaching method	Assessment method	Feedback
Mohammad	PhD in TEFL	10.5 years	Product-process oriented	Textbook & free writing	Task-based	Dynamic assessment	Comment on portfolios
Saeed	PhD in TEFL	15 years	Flexible & based on the students' needs	Textbooks and web-based materials	Mostly Top-down	Holistic	General comments on selected papers
Hamid	PhD candidate in TEFL	2 years	Product-oriented-formal/structural syllabus	Textbooks & analysis of model texts	Top-down and teacher-centered	Formative assessment	Explicit & analytical comments & error correction

As it is observed in the above table, all the writing instructors in the university are highly qualified in terms of their academic degrees and their teaching experience. Moreover, they have used ELT-informed syllabus types, materials and methods of teaching, testing and provision of feedback on the students' writing. They have also implicitly paid attention to the needs of the learners in their classroom-specific decisions. However, due to their workloads or any other affective and contextual factors, they may not have been able to deliver a high quality instruction to their learners.

3.2. Instruments

Two sets of open-ended surveys (or open question questionnaires) for the students and their instructors were developed to inspect their views regarding the perceived problems and needs of the learners in writing. The students' survey, containing five questions, was intended to find out their problems in different aspects of writing and their expectations regarding the importance of the writing course, instructors and materials in resolving their problems in writing. The instructors' survey, containing seven questions, intended to explore their teaching experience, use of materials, teaching methods, assessment techniques and manner of provision of feedback on the

students' performance in writing. In addition, their views regarding the difficulties of learners in different aspects of writing were inspected and their suggestions regarding the importance and effects of the writing course, instructors and materials to improve the students' writing ability were sought.

3.3. Procedure

The present study adopts a descriptive approach which is generally used to reach an accurate description of a phenomenon such as attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and demographics (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Accordingly, the students' and teachers' responses to the open-ended surveys were qualitatively analyzed using the content analysis procedures, which is the process of summarizing and reporting data in a way that "the essential contents are preserved but a short, manageable text is produced" (Mayring, 2004, p. 268). In fact, the shortcomings and assets of teaching paragraph writing in Iranian EFL context are identified and, finally, the sociocultural theory of writing is used to propose a syllabus which can inform the use of materials and adoption of teaching and assessment methods by the instructors to resolve the students' problems and, thus, improve their writing ability.

4. Results and Discussion

Learning the second language writing process is strategically, rhetorically and linguistically different from first language writing process (Mu & Carrington, 2007); therefore, novice second language writers must receive explicit instruction in L2 writing and their problems must be sought and resolved. As was stated, few studies have explored Iranian EFL learners' difficulties and needs in writing from their own and their instructors' perspectives. In an era when humanistic and learner-centered views of language teaching provide the guiding principle for most instructional decisions (Nunan, 1990), determining learners' needs seem to play an increasingly greater role in designing and implementing instructional programs. This study is a kind of needs analysis- which plays a fundamental role in creating tailor-made programs- and the following section presents and discusses some of the findings of the study.

4.1. The students' and Instructors' Views regarding the Students' Problems and Needs in EFL Writing

EFL writing is a "multi-dimensional process composed of a cognitive activity affected by a number of linguistic and contextual factors; EFL linguistic proficiency, instructional, psychological, socio-cultural, and socio-political issues" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 2012). Consequently, it is natural to see many problems in the texts produced by Iranian EFL learners who are rather deprived of enough authentic exposure and practice in writing. Accordingly,

the students' and their instructors' written responses with regard to the students' problems were reviewed, coded, and organized into five main categories including: lack of linguistic competence, lack of content knowledge, lack of discourse competence, lack of strategic competence, and lack of instructors' feedback.

As for lack of linguistics competence, most of the students believed that their dominant problem in writing refers to the structure and vocabularies of English language which are not well-developed. This view is also confirmed by their instructors who believed that most of the errors committed by the students are related to these aspects of writing. The students attributed this problem to the ineffective teaching of grammar and the teachers asserted that most students learn grammar as a set of rules to be memorized rather than for communicative purposes, that is, their use for speaking and writing.

A student: *When I write a paragraph, at first, I write the text in Persian and then I translate it into English. In this translation, the meanings, vocabularies, structures, punctuations and the organization of the text do not match and I face many problems….*

A student: *When I write a text, I think I have written an error-free text, but when my instructor corrects my paper, there are many mistakes in the structure of sentences; even he says some of the words are not used appropriately……*

Instructor 3: *The most serious errors in the students' texts are related to the structures. There are few error-free structures in the texts. Most of the students only use simple sentence structures possibly to avoid making mistakes by using complex structures. In fact, these sentences had no variety, there are few compound and complex structures in the students' texts and they are rather monotonous. In addition, most students use very simple words and expressions and sometimes they are not conscious about the appropriate usage and connotations of the words used ………*

Similarly, some researchers have indicated that problems in EFL grammar and vocabulary highly affect the students' performance in writing (e.g., Abdellatif, 2007; Hammad, 2014; Mojica, 2010). They attributed this problem to lack of conscious reading practice or exposure to the authentic input since it is believed that reading and writing are complimentary to each other and must not be separated from each other (Bear & Smith, 2009). In SLA literature, it is also believed that "in order to acquire the ability to use the language effectively, the learners need a lot of experience of the language being used in a variety of different ways for a variety of purposes" (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 87). Lack of writing practice has also impeded the operationalization and correct use of the linguistic aspects of writing. It is generally maintained that practice of some form of writing under guidance

and encouragement can enhance FL/L2 writing quality (Mourtaga, 2010; Scholes & Comley, 1989). The contextualized teaching of writing in which grammar, vocabulary and cohesive ties are taught for meaningful and communicative purposes can help learners remove some of the problems they face in writing (Hammad, 2014).

The second problem, i.e., lack of content knowledge, is related to the deficient vocabulary and inadequate background knowledge about the topic which somehow blocks the learners' attempt in creating an academic text and supporting their ideas. In fact, writing is a reflective activity which requires enough time for the learners to think about the specific topic and to collect, analyze and synthesize any background knowledge (Chakraverty & Gautum, 2000). The problem in inability to generate adequate and relevant ideas can be resolved by either asking the learners to write in familiar and interesting topics to them (Hammad, 2014; Stapa & Abdul Majid, 2006; Wei, Shang, & Briody, 2012) or teaching the learners effective strategies like brainstorming, group discussion, etc. For example, it is maintained that brainstorming can be used at any level and at any situation to motivate the students' writing by increasing their creativity in certain tasks, enable the students to express their thoughts, improve their knowledge before writing and overcome their problems in organizing their thoughts and skills (Scane, Guy, & Wenstrom, 1991).

A student: *Sometimes we do not have enough general knowledge about a topic to elaborate upon the idea and provide enough explanations and examples…. We may be limited in thinking in English.*

A student: *Lack of ideas and opinions about a topic makes me forget everything…I don't know how to start, which ideas to use …..Lack of adequate vocabulary about a specific topic adds to this difficulty…*

Instructor 3: *In most of the texts written by my students, the ideas were rather mixed and they sometimes repeated the same idea using different structures and lexical items. They were also some cases of unsupported ideas. In fact, the ideas were presented as in a list without any further elaboration ....*

Lack of discourse competence, which refers to problems in rhetorical organization, cohesion and coherence, etc., is another important problem based on the students' and their instructors' views. Likewise, Ahmed (2010), Dastjerdi and Samian (2011) and Hammad (2014) reported that Egyptian, Iranian and Palestinian EFL students had problems with cohesion and accurate organization of ideas in their texts. These problems are related to the lack of linguistic competence as well and the students must do a kind of guided conscious reading and writing practice to learn and apply these features in writing. In fact, learners must be explicitly taught the cross-

linguistic differences in organizing their texts, practice writing correct and various sentence types and use appropriate connectors/conjunctive adverbs to connect their ideas.

A student: *Although I can express the ideas well in Persian, translating and putting them in an English structure and text is difficult for me…The order of presenting the ideas and showing their importance is also difficult …*

A student: *How to start is difficult, I cannot write an effective topic sentence. I don't know how to connect the ideas to each other by using appropriate connectors and conjunctions. Sometimes I feel the sentences are disorganized….*

Instructor 2: *The students in my class could not follow English rhetorical organization and had problems in writing an effective topic sentence as the foundation for the development end expression of further ideas…..The ideas are presented as in a list and few transitional terms are used to introduce and connect the ideas. Sometimes the students have problems in using correct and appropriate transitional terms especially when trying to show contrast or cause and effect relationships….*

The next important problem is related to lack of strategic competence (i.e., use of cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies) in writing. In fact, this problem is rather inherent in all other problems and parts of the students' inability to write effectively refer to this issue. It is believed that dominant approach to teaching writing in Iran is product-oriented and the processes and strategies that the learners must engage in the planning, generating ideas, drafting and organizing ideas and revising them are not explicitly attended and taught in the classrooms.

A student: *When I encounter a problem in writing, I cannot continue and the chain of thought will be disrupted….It is difficult for me to manage different aspects of my performance…*

Instructor 3: *The students do not know effective writing strategies. Sometimes they feel anxious about writing and do not know how to overcome this feeling; some students cannot organize their thinking process and come up with fresh ideas; other students have difficulty in linguistic aspects of their texts and cannot write an error-free and polished text and so on. All these problems can be resolved to some extent by teaching learners effective strategies. Unfortunately, the students do not receive any instruction on these strategies and in few cases that these strategies are introduced by some consciousness teachers, they are only presented in a list without any explicit training and modelling on the part of instructors.*

In recent years, many L2 writing scholars have extensively explored the writers' composing processes and the particular strategies they use for this purpose (e.g., Bosher, 1998; Cumming, 1989; Raimes, 1987; Roca de Larios, Manchón, Murphy, & Marín, 2008; Sasaki, 2007; Wong, 2005; Zamel, 1982, 1983). This body of research has indicated that the effective use of writing strategies can enhance the quality of learners' performance and possibly can result in better writing competence. It has also been identified that learners who have problems in writing and mostly struggle with this skill lack the knowledge of writing strategies and as a result cannot perform effectively in planning, generating and organizing their ideas or proofreading and revising their written texts (e.g., Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008). The solution is that the learners must receive explicit training and modelling in order to be able to effectively use these strategies. Sturm and Rankin-Erickson (2002) stated that strategy instruction is a teaching approach that assists students in developing strategies for all phases of the writing process by breaking down writing tasks and making the subprocesses and skills much more explicit. However, due to a variety of pedagogical and contextual factors, strategy training is nonexistent or very limited in most EFL contexts (Lei, 2016; Riazi, 2018).

Lack of explicit strategy training can mainly be attributed to the limited time dedicated to teaching writing. In fact, the final problem, i.e., lack of instructors' feedback, can be related to the shortage of time (and also instructors' workload) as well. In most EFL contexts, writing is taught as a two-credit course and there are over thirty students in the classes. As was stated, writing is the most complex language skill and has various dimensions and features to be attended to. The instructors must try their best to cover these issues and there would be little time left for teaching and modelling writing strategies.

A student: *Teachers do not have time to correct the students' texts and we are not able to know our problems and mistakes….*

A student: *…classes are crowded and the teachers cannot attend to all the students' problems and give them feedback.*

The shortage of time, large number of students in the classroom, and heavy personal, social and institutional workloads of the instructors hinder them from paying attention to the needs of individual learners, analyzing their texts, identifying and correcting their problems or providing them with effective feedback. EFL instructors must be aware of the importance of feedback and dedicate a time for attending to the students' works and providing them with feedback since it is believed that feedback has a vital role in making the learners familiar with the features of good writing and it can act as a scaffolding tool which helps learners become more self-regulated

and improve their writing (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Frees, 2002; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 2003; Myles, 2002). The respondents have also pointed to some other problems in their texts and the writing course: problems in mechanics of writing especially the incorrect use of punctuation marks, word-for-word translation from Persian to English, lack of exposure to enough samples, inadequate reading and writing practice, ineffective teaching of grammar and vocabulary in previous courses as constructing the building blocks for writing and ineffective textbooks.

4.2. The Students' Expectations and the Instructors' Suggestions for Improving Writing Instruction

The respondents believed that in order to have an effective and accountable instructional program, some changes must be made in the nature of writing course, the practices of instructors and the materials adopted for teaching writing. As for the writing course, it is generally maintained that the time for teaching writing must be increased to enable the instructors to cover the essential materials. The instruction must also focus on the teaching of effective writing strategies and engage the learners in regular writing practice. The prerequisite knowledge for writing especially with regard to grammar and vocabulary must be effectively established. The writing course must also target the learners' needs and teach them how to write. It is also maintained that the writing course must be rather blended and enable the learners to use the assets of the computer and internet to improve the students' writing quality. In sum, classroom can be structured in a way that can provide positive intervention and support for the development of writing skills (McDonough & Shaw, 2003).

Instructor 3: *Writing course must target the students' specific needs. I think the most immediate need of the students refers to the grammar and structure of sentences they use. Although they have received grammar instruction, they have mostly thought about grammar as a set of rules to be memorized rather than for communicative purposes such as speaking and writing.*

Instructor 1: *Teaching and learning of writing must not be limited to the classroom. The students must extensively engage in the writing practices outside of the classroom. The availability of web-based resources can give an opportunity for multimodal practice and can provide enough exposure to writing samples….*

With respect to the role of instructors in improving the students' writing, it is highlighted that they must be experienced enough, know their students' problems and needs and teach them effective writing strategies. They must also create an effective and interesting learning environment, choose effective and appropriate teaching methods, motivate and encourage

the learners to do independent learning and reach self-regulation. Almost all the students expected that their instructors give more time for the writing course, put more efforts in their teaching, analyze their written texts and, more importantly, provide them with feedback on their problems and errors. Similarly, Pour-Mohammadi, Abedin and Fong (2012) maintain that in L2 classroom contexts, "the teacher's role in process writing practice is to help students develop strategies, getting them started by generating ideas and information, encouraging multiple drafting, revising drafts (adding, deleting, modifying and rearranging ideas) and editing" (p. 90).

A student: *Teacher must use further ideas and introduce the useful books and resources for writing, use new and effective methods in presenting the ideas and encourage and motivate the students….*

A student: *teachers must explain more and give more time for the learners to practice.*

A student: *Sometimes our instructors teach us a specific method of paragraph development, but they do not give us adequate examples…. Sometimes I need more modeling on the part of teachers…*

Instructor 2: *Instructors must highlighting the importance of writing in their courses and provide focused instruction and feedback to remove the students' problems and make them familiar with different web-based resources…..*

Instructor 3: *Teachers must be more sensitive to their students' needs, be aware of and target their problems in writing and design and use appropriate methods and classroom practices to resolve their needs and enhance their writing competence.*

The respondents also commented that the materials and textbooks adopted for teaching writing muse be comprehensive to cover essential points about writing and be easy to understand. They must provide enough models and examples for the learners and embody some effective writing strategies. Most students have also suggested that the textbooks must be based on their level of writing competence and respond to their needs in terms of teaching essential grammatical points, sentence structures and essential words and expressions. In general, ELT materials including the materials for teaching writing must be humanized and acceptable, offer a balance of authentic and contrived exemplar texts, consider the learning theories and "stress the need to help learners to personalize, localize and make meaningful their experience of the target language, as well as the need for materials to be affectively engaging and cater for all learning style preferences" (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 168).

A student: *The book must express the ideas in a simple and comprehensible manner to enable the learners to be engaged with them. They must teach some essential grammar and vocabularies…..*

Instructor 2: *Textbooks and materials must be rather localized. In other words, they must be based on the students' needs with regard to grammar, vocabularies and expressions, teach them basics of paragraph writing and English rhetorical organization. They must also provide some examples and models about each specific development method and these models must explicitly be analyzed to make the learners conscious of the structure and organization of the ideas in the paragraphs ….*

4.3. The Sociocultural Syllabus for Teaching Writing in EFL Contexts: Materials, Methods and Assessment

The teaching methods, content and materials of any course must be "consistent with the objectives of the course and should meet the needs and wants of the learners" (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 95). In fact, research and theory in L2 teaching have moved towards "post-method pedagogy" in which principles and dynamics of the specific contexts must guide language teaching decisions (Kumaravadivelue, 1994, 2006). In fact, teaching is not based on the principles of a specific method or predetermined syllabus but draws on the teacher's individual conceptualizations of language, language learning and teaching, the practical knowledge and skills teachers develop from training and experience, the teacher's knowledge of the learners' needs, interests and learning styles, as well as the teacher's understanding of the teaching context (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Accordingly, teaching of writing in EFL contexts must be contextualized. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides a suitable framework for the choice of materials, teaching approaches and methods of assessment as a syllabus for writing.

Materials used for the purpose of language teaching (including writing) must be informative, instructional, experiential and exploratory (Tomlinson, 2012). They are highly essential in any teaching and learning practice and affect all the factors and processes in *classroom ecology*, i.e., "the totality of participants, relationships, structures, objects, and processes that together constitute the shared experience of classroom language teaching and learning" (Tudor, 2001; van Lier, 1996, as cited in Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013, p. 779). Due to the importance of adequate exposure to the real and authentic written and exemplar texts and writing practice in the improvement of learners' writing competence, materials must serve the basis for much of the language input that learners receive and stimulate writing practice in the classroom (Richards, 2001, 2013). Similarly, learners can benefit from a set of artifact-mediated strategies like reading English written materials, surfing the net, practicing writing and using a variety of L1 and L2 resources present in the context to improve their writing (Lei, 2008, 2009). In

addition, in order for learners to be able to internalize the mediation resources offered, "learners need to consciously and continuously notice the various aspects of others' language use, particularly professional writers and the more privileged members in the community, and their own L2 use, and persistently imitate others in writing, like the skilled participants" (Lei, 2016, p.113).

Based on the comments offered by the participants of the study, materials must be localized, produced (or adapted) by the local stakeholders (i.e., teachers and learners) based on the priorities of specific contexts to serve the learners' needs. Moreover, CALL materials (i.e. ELT materials available from websites, computer software, courseware and online courses) can also facilitate writing by "modelling the genre, demonstrating the process, facilitating brainstorming and research, helping to draft and providing the potential for conferencing, editing and revision" (Derewianka, 2003, as cited in Tomlinson, 2012, p. 166). This platform can provide an ample opportunity for scaffolding and mediation which writing instructors might not have the adequate chance to provide in their classrooms.

Since sociocultural theory emphasizes "the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking" (Lantolf, 2004, pp. 30-31), its implications such as the use of sociocultural resources and collaboration among the participants (i.e., mediation) can be applied in teaching writing. In the same regard, the facilitating roles of mediation and considerations of the learners' ZPD level can assist the teachers in diagnosing the leaners' problems and improving their writing quality (Lantolf & Poehner, 2011; van Compernolle & Williams, 2013). As was stated, designing and implementing writing courses in a blended way, i.e., face-to-face and via computers, can somehow provide a solution for time constraints in most writing classes. In fact, use of technology in foreign language classrooms has a variety of advantages: "organizational advantages such as easy access, convenient storage and retrieval, easy sharing and recycling and cost efficiency; pedagogical advantages such as authenticity, interaction and situated learning; learner advantages such as instant feedback, choice of route and sequence, monitoring of progress, control and empowerment (Reinders &White, 2010, as cited in Tomlinson, 2012, p. 166).

In addition, writing strategies can be reformulated and taught based on the principles of sociocultural theory. In fact, Lei (2008, 2009, 2016) has proposed and elaborated upon a sociocultural approach to writing strategy research (including artifact-mediated, community-mediated, rule-mediated, and role mediated strategies) which considers writing as a literate activity which involves dialogic processes and is contextualized in the social, cultural and historical milieu. Raising the awareness of EFL students about these

resources in writing process can help them apply these resources while writing, enjoy the act of writing and gradually improve their writing ability.

Concept-based instruction (CBI) which emphasizes "systematic, explicit knowledge of the relevant features of the L2" (Lantolf, 2011, p. 38) can be another socioculturally-informed approach for teaching writing. One of its specific instructional procedures implemented in most recent L2 studies, known as Systemic Theoretical Instruction, is stipulated by Gal'perin and follows a specific sequence of instructional phases: "systematic verbal explanation of the concept in the target language, including comparison with the L1 whenever feasible —> materialization of the concept —> communicative activities —> verbalization —> internalization" (Lantolf, 2011, p. 38). Leaners' group work and their collaborations are highly appreciated in the practices informed by sociocultural theory of writing.

The assessment and provision of feedback on writing can be conducted by using socioculturally-informed approaches such as Dynamic Assessment (DA) in which assessment and instruction are totally integrated and learner development is the goal of all educational practices (Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). In fact, DA is an approach that "takes into account the results of an intervention [in which] the examiner teaches the examinee how to perform better on individual items or on the test as a whole" (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002, as cited in Poehner, 2009, p. 13). In this approach, teaching and testing are conducted simultaneously to inform and influence each other. The mediator works individually with the learners to diagnose their problems and provide them with appropriate and ZPD sensitive mediation to resolve their problems, assist them in internalizing learning and being able to transfer the acquired knowledge and skills to perform well on the future and more complex tasks (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In order to conduct dynamic assessment and more specifically mediation in classroom while working with the group of learners, Poehner (2009) introduced the notion of Group-dynamic assessment (G-DA) which similar to the one-to-one DA uses mediational strategies to co-construct a learner's ZPD, but it must also consider the group's ZPD and simultaneously negotiate with a group of learners to resolve their problems and assist them in promoting their writing. It is believed that the diagnostic and developmental potentials of DA can assist learners in internalizing and transferring the acquired knowledge and skills to more challenging assessment contexts (Rahimi, Kushki, & Nassaji, 2015). In addition, use of portfolios, (dialogue) journals, conference and interviews, observations, self- and peer-assessment as alternatives in assessment approaches (Brown, 2004) are more in line with sociocultural principles and enable the writing instructors to diagnose the learners' problems and by designing appropriate and responsive instructional programs improve their writing ability.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Writing is considered as the most complex language skill and at the same time a unique asset for learners to acquire. Due to lack of enough authentic exposure and writing practice in EFL contexts, most learners face difficulties in writing. The present study employed a needs analysis procedure to identify a group of Iranian EFL learners' problems and needs in paragraph writing. Based on the participants' responses, five main categories of writing problems were identified: lack of linguistic competence, lack of content knowledge, lack of discourse competence, lack of strategic competence, and lack of instructors' feedback. In addition, the respondents' views with regard to the roles and effects of writing course, teachers and instructional materials on resolving the students' problems and improving their writing were sought. In light of the findings of the study, the sociocultural theory was used to suggest a syllabus for teaching paragraph writing in EFL contexts. In this syllabus, materials must be selected based on the needs of the learners and provide adequate authentic exposure and writing practice for them. The writing course can be implemented in a blended form using the assets of new technologies. In addition, the role of mediation and teacher guidance and assistance must be emphasized. Finally, a socioculturally-informed type of assessment, i.e., dynamic assessment, and some alternative approaches to assessment such as portfolios, journals and conferences can be used to diagnose the students' problems and improve their writing competence.

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