EFL Instructors and Student Writers' Perceptions on Academic Writing Reluctance

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Abstract—Students' disengagement in class activities is usually interpreted from the instructors' viewpoints, disregarding students' perceived causes of the phenomenon. This study investigated instructors and students' perceptions on writing reluctance, aiming at exploring possible convergence and divergence between the participants' ideas. Twelve instructors and thirty seven students completed a questionnaire developed by the researchers. It includes linguistic factors (e.g. task difficulty, linguistic competence and content knowledge), psychological factors (e.g. readership, self-confidence, anxiety, and motivation), methodological factors (e.g. strategy training, feedback, and L1 writing experience) and interpersonal factors (e.g. warmth, enthusiasm, and vigor). The mean scores of the participants were then calculated and compared. Results indicated that the participants' perceptions on reluctance to writing diverge to a large extent. 'Task difficulty' was reported by the instructors as the most influential factor in academic writing reluctance. From the learners' point of view, however, 'lack of readership' was considered as the most important factor in this regard.

Index Terms—writing reluctance, EFL instructors, students, academic writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one the most challenging (Reid, 2002) and difficult (Richard and Renandya, 2002) skills for EFL learners to master. This difficulty, they claim, is because the learners are involved in generating and organizing ideas. They also have to translate these ideas into readable texts. Moreover, Reid pinpoints, the difficulty may be because of the fact that L2 writing requires some elements including learning an L2, creating a text, and adapting the text to a specific discourse community.

Many techniques and methods have shown to be successful in teaching writing. Researchers (e.g. Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) state that a prerequisite knowledge needed to begin a writing course is an understanding of how learners learn to write. That is, the assumptions and perceptions instructors hold about writing development play a crucial role in planning and material development. For instance, Buis (2007) attributes writing reluctance to the fact that students are not equipped with necessary linguistic knowledge and skills to write. Howthorne (2008), too, reports related factors such as lack of grammatical and vocabulary knowledge which can otherwise lead to learners' expressiveness in writing.

Furthermore, it seems that considering students' perceptions to writing plays an important role in the whole process. As for students' perceptions on the possible causes of the phenomenon, based on Hawthorne (2008), most of the students blame the teachers. Ineffective or lack of feedback and incapability of writing teachers are among the important factors which subjects in Hawthorne's study report. If students' attitude toward writing tasks is not positive, they may lose their interest in writing gradually and became reluctant writers. Beers (1996) defines reluctant writer as someone who can write (to some extent) but chooses not to' (p.30).

Researchers in the present study adhere to this definition of the phenomenon, and seek to discover the causes of this voluntary disengagement from students and instructors' viewpoint. Also, a number of characteristics have been attributed to reluctant writers. For instance, Anderson (2009) describes reluctant writers as students who usually are reluctant readers, slow workers, have poor spelling and punctuation skills, and are easily distracted from writing tasks. Their work is frequently incomplete and messy. Such students avoid starting writing and use excuses, such as 'I can't find my pen', and are not willing to share their written work in a group. Buis (2007) identifies such students as "disillusioned" because they have "little power over what they write"(p. 6). She further argues that reluctant writers begin to feel hopeless and marginalized because they develop a sense of their limitations and become anxious or even apprehensive.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Some researchers (e.g. Buis, 2007) believe that 'writing reluctance' is in its inception in terms of construct definition and operationalization, and that there has been a lack of vigorous theoretical conceptualization of reluctant writers and their characteristics. Buis also believed that writing reluctance construct is yet 'under researched and under conceptualized'. Nonetheless, a number of scholars (e.g. Hawthorne, 2008) have attempted to meticulously define this

concept and provide a sound definition for it, and investigate the problem in order to fill in the gap. In order to be able to do this, they have started with other related constructs which are rich in terms of theoretical grounds. Among the related constructs based on which writing reluctance has been formulated was reading reluctance. Beers (1996a) identifies three types of reluctant readers: dormant readers who have a positive attitude to reading but choose not to read very often; uncommitted readers who have a negative view of reading and see it as a skill-based activity only, and unmotivated readers who have negative views about reading and people who read. The uncommitted and unmotivated readers may also have difficulty reading and have poor self-efficacy for reading. They may also hold negative views about themselves as readers (poor reading self-concept) and people who choose to read (Beers, 1996a, 1996b, cited in Hawthorne, 2008). In defining and formulating writing reluctance construct, Hawthorne (2008) introduced a circular model which emphasizes the dynamic nature of the elements involved. Based on this model, students may indicate one of the three components of behavioral, affective, and cognitive dispositions in different ways. The model encompasses social/cultural, task environment, and teacher factors influencing learners' engagement with writing. There are of course different attitudes towards writing reluctance and researchers have investigated it from different angles. For some scholars (e.g. Daly & Miller, 1975), writing reluctance phenomenon is a psychological concept and is, therefore, preferred to as 'writing apprehension'. Writing apprehension was coined by Daly and Miller. They hypothesized that different individuals experienced different levels of anxiety towards writing and that anxiety levels would correlate with levels of writing performance. This construct is similar, in some respects, to writing reluctance, but there are some differences including the fact that writing apprehension has a narrower focus than writing reluctance. In an attempt to present a broader focus and construct Kearney (1997) proposed a construct called 'writing passivity'. Central to the construct was the idea that there existed a strong relationship between 'negative affect and inappropriate cognition' (p. 8). Kearney defines her 'passive writer' as being "distinguished by a dislike of writing, a tendency to hold negative perceptions of self as a writer, and, sporadic, limited, or no use of intentional cognition, that for a writer involves the deliberate and purposeful pursuit of cognitive goals" (ibid., p. 9). Rooted in the above-mentioned theoretical background, some studies have directly investigated 'writing reluctance'. Beattie (2010) considered reluctance as a gender-based construct and studied it with boys and girls. Of findings of this study was that boys are more reluctant than girls in doing writing tasks. In another study, writing reluctance was regarded as a pedagogical phenomenon (Buis, 2007). According to this investigation, ineffective pedagogy may cause reluctance among some learners so that they are unwilling to engage themselves in writing tasks. Some studies have investigated writing reluctance among EFL learners from different levels (e.g. Hawthorn, 2008; Abo Melketo & Tessema, 2012). For instance, Pajares (2003) and Hawthorn (2008) studied reluctance towards writing among students studying at the secondary level. Also, a study was conducted by Melketo and Tessema (2012) in which 'reluctance to write' among university students taking an academic writing course was investigated. In this study twenty students and five instructors were interviewed about the causes of the phenomenon and the characteristic behaviors of reluctant writers. Based on this study, reluctance to write falls into two categories of complete and partial avoidance. Instructors believed that students' lack of requisite skills and preparedness to engage in writing are among the major causes of their reluctance. Students, on the other hand, blamed their instructors for their being unable to engage them actively during the course. Both teachers and instructors agreed, of course, that students' experience and background influence their engagement in the activity. Available literature is indicative of the fact that writing reluctance has been of interest for researchers. However, little research has been conducted specifically with college-level students and English majors. Furthermore, students and teachers' perceptions on this phenomenon have not been fully investigated hence open to research. Intending to fill the gap and explore the issue in a different context, i.e., Iranian EFL learners engaging in academic writing tasks, we conducted a study which addressed the following research questions:

1. Is writing reluctance behavior present in EFL writing classrooms?

2. What factors do English instructors and reluctant learners perceive as contributing to writing reluctance among students?

3. Do instructors and students' perceptions of reasons for writing reluctance match?

III. METHOD

A. Participants

The study was conducted with instructors who were teaching in a variety of schools -Public, private, and mostly Iranian universities- and students who were taking academic writing courses. From a total of 60 EFL learners studying at Lorestan University at the time of conducting the experiment, 37 were selected as reluctant writers. The sample included 28 (75.7%) females and 9 (24.35) males. The age range was 20-30. In addition to this, 12 EFL instructors who had been involved in teaching English as a foreign language, specifically writing, for more than 6 years completed the questionnaire on their perceptions towards the possible causes of writing reluctance among students. The teachers were mostly male so that this sample included 10 male (83.3%) and 2 female (16.7%) teachers most of whom (70%) were over 30.

B. Materials

Two questionnaires were used in this study. The first was 'Survey of Motivation to Engage with Writing (SMEW)' developed and used by Hawthorne (2008). SMEW was used in order to choose reluctant students from the whole sample. It contained 40 items. The reliability of the test was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, which was .84. This was indicative of high internal consistency for this measure. The other questionnaire, i.e. 'the Questionnaire of Perception on Writing Reluctance (QPWR)', was developed by the researchers based on a pilot study and interviews conducted with 5 instructors and 10 students, beforehand. It includes 20 items in a Likert type scale. Both groups, i.e. instructors and students were asked to choose from one of the five choices: strongly agree, somewhat agree, unsure, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree. The scores for each choice were 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. QPWR was utilized in order to discover the possible causes of reluctance toward writing among students from both instructors and students' perspective. Based on this pilot study, the factors contributing to students' writing reluctance were categorized as a) learner-related, and b) instructor (teacher)-related categories. Each of these subcategories in turn includes some other factors. It was apparent that most of the factors, i.e. 40% were methodological. Also, 35% were psychological, 20% linguistic and 5% interpersonal factors. Table 1 summarizes both instructors and students' ideas about possible causes of writing reluctance. The developed questionnaire was reported to be valid by a number of TEFL experts and university instructors who had been involved in the job of teaching writing in EFL classes. Also, the reliability for this instrument was calculated using Cronbach's alpha and it was .83. This gave the researchers enough confidence to advance for other steps. The English version of the questionnaire was given to the instructors and the Persian version to students to fill out. It seemed that it would be easier and clearer for the students to answer the questions in Persian. Also, items 1,2,3,4,7,8,9, and 12 were changed so that they became more positive, not to influence students' answers negatively. These items were scored reversely after the administration.

TABLE 1
STUDENTS AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTION ON FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WRITING RELUCTANCE

Learner-related Factors	
Linguistic factors	Complexity of writing tasks Poor general knowledge Learners' poor linguistic competence Lack of content knowledge
Psychological factors	Having no idea of what writing can be Limited readership (teacher as the only recipient) Low self confidence Anxiety, fear of writing Lack of interest in the topics Resorting to avoidance strategy Low motivation Prior negative experience with writing courses Lack of perceived need
Methodological factors	Lack of perseverance and strategic investment in drafting, editing, etc. stages Inability to transfer writing skills from L1 to L2. Lack of concentration Inability to organize their thoughts Lack of experience in the 1st language (No explicit writing courses at school)
Instructor-related Factors	
Methodological factors	Methodological (inappropriate instruction) Insufficient feedback on students' writings
Interpersonal factors	lack of warmth, enthusiasm ,and vigor

C. Procedure

A sample of 60 EFL students was randomly selected from all students studying at Lorestan state university at the time of conducting the research. The 'survey of motivation to engage with writing (SMEW)' was distributed among them during their class time in the second semester of academic year 2012-2013.students were briefed about the study, and the necessary instructions as to how to answer the questions were given. The administration took about 45 minutes. After collecting the questionnaires, the scores were added up for each participant. It was assumed that respondents with scores higher than the mean (Mean=135) would be 'engaged' writers and respondents with scores below the mean across the whole questionnaire would be 'reluctant' writers. 37 students were selected to be reluctant writers based on the data from the questionnaire. SPSS version 20 was used to conduct the various analyses performed with the data. To deal with the research questions, and in order to elicit the causes of the phenomenon, i.e. writing reluctance, from the viewpoint of instructors and students, the Questionnaire of Perception on Writing Reluctance (QPWR) was given to 'reluctant' students and EFL instructors. The scores were added up for both groups on their perceptions toward writing reluctance. The researchers were looking for any convergence, specifically, and divergence of the instructors and students' perceived causes of this kind of reluctance.

IV. RESULTS

According to the data collected from the questionnaires, it was apparent that there was, of course, some overlap between students and instructors' perceptions on factors affecting reluctance among learners in an academic context. Nonetheless, there were obvious cases indicating that students and instructors' ideas diverged. That is students do not believe, to some extent, that what the instructors claim to be the cause of writing reluctance is true about them. The first factor that all instructors (100%) agreed to be one of the causes with regard to writing reluctance   was that most of the writing tasks are difficult to do. Only 16% of the students agreed with the instructors in this regard; 54% attributed this phenomenon to factors other than task difficulty. Another similar factor that instructors definitely (100%) considered to be one of the main causes was students' lack of sufficient linguistic knowledge. One fifth (21%) of the students thought so. In the case of students' content knowledge, however, the situation was different so that students' and instructors' ideas converged to a convincing degree. In other words, 43% of the students and 60% of the instructors agreed that insufficient content knowledge was one of the causes of writing reluctance among students. Although the instructors , to a great extent, i.e. 67%, regarded students' lack of general knowledge about 'writing topics' as an influencing factor , most students (68%) believed that this was not the case so that it was not a determinant factor in writing reluctance. A large number of students (70%) believed that they were reluctant to write because their teacher was the only audience they had for their writings. 50% of the teachers believed that students' limited readership was an important factor in this regard. Another area of disagreement was students' low self-confidence. Instructors conceived of students' self-confidence as an important factor in writing reluctance. However, for more than half (52%) of the students, this was not a causing factor in their reluctance toward writing. The degree of anxiety experienced by student learners was reported by nearly half of the teachers to be among important factors whereas 65% of the students reported that anxiety was not so influencing. Students' interest in the writing topics seemed to be important for both students and teachers. It was implied that 50% of the teachers and 33% of the students believed that students' writing reluctance could be attributed to the fact that topics are not interesting to write about. Although half of the teachers reported that students' prior negative experience with writing causes a degree of reluctance in writing, most students (67%) disagreed with the instructors in this regard. Among other factors both students and instructors were asked about was students' prior negative experience with writing tasks. 50% of the teachers and 22% of the students agreed that this could be a cause of writing reluctance. A large number of instructors (75%) believed that one of the causing factors in students' writing reluctance is that they think they would not need such writing tasks in future. Students disagreed so that 65% of them found writing tasks helpful. Of other important factors from the instructors' point of view was that students are unable to transfer their writing skills from their L1 to English writing tasks. Although 67% of the instructors believed so, only 35% of students agreed with this idea. Also, teachers (92%) believed that students are reluctant to write because they cannot organize their thoughts while writing whereas nearly half of the students thought so. An interesting point was that both students (79%) and instructors (92) agreed that students do not have enough writing experience in Farsi writing tasks hence they are reluctant to do writing tasks due to unfamiliarity with similar tasks in their L1. Another area in which a great degree of overlap was seen between students (79%) and instructors' (100%) opinion with regard to writing reluctance was that students are not taught necessary writing skills ,instructions, and strategies such as pre-writing, drafting, editing etc. Moreover a large number of students (70%) and instructors (84%) believed that an important source of writing reluctance is insufficient feedback from teachers. It seems that students are reluctant toward writing because, among other reasons, their works are not corrected by teachers and they do not know if they are improving their skill. Additionally some interpersonal factors seemed to be influencing. For instance, students (54%) and instructors (84%) believed that lack of appropriate interpersonal relationship between students and teachers may cause students to lose their interest in doing writing tasks. More than half of the students and teachers agreed that students may be reluctant because they do not have set goals before they start writing. Finally students and instructors, almost equally (60%, and 65%, respectively), agreed that writing textbooks did not have adequate writing activities to encourage students to write and caused their reluctance. Students believed that lack of readership was the most effective factor in their reluctance (Mean= 27.32) and writing tasks difficulty the least effective one (Mean=19.82). For instructors, however, it was quite the reverse. Most of the teachers believed that task difficulty is the main cause of students' writing reluctance (Mean=40.75) whereas lack of readership has the least effect in this regard (Mean= 17.83). To sum up this section, although there is a great amount of convergence between students and instructors' opinions on the possible causes of writing reluctance among students, there are also cases that students and teachers misunderstand each other and attribute writing reluctance to different and/or opposing factors.

V. Discussion

The first research question was if writing reluctance existed among EFL learners and if so, to what degree. It was concluded from the results that there is a high degree of reluctance among students. In other words, if students are asked to choose from language skills, writing activities are perhaps among their last choices, or they try not to engage themselves in writing unless they have to. This inclination toward disengagement may be attributed to some of the factors mentioned earlier in this study. Part of the solution could be considering students' perceptions on what writing is and their reported areas of difficulty. As another main research question, the researchers were looking for any convergence between students and instructors' perceptions on writing reluctance. From comparing means and utilizing inferential statistics it was apparent that students and teachers' viewpoints, in spite of some degree of overlap, do not

match. Considering this discrepancy between the two groups, the decisions made as to how to solve students' problems related to their writing reluctance may not be as fruitful as expected. Most of the time, what instructors detect , as the causes of the problem, and try to solve accordingly, is based on what they experience in the classrooms. However, it happens frequently that instructors' perceptions are far from what students feel, and even the reality. In what follows, some of the areas of mismatch as well as convergence are discussed in more detail along with possible pedagogical implications and suggestions. Most students believed that their reluctance was attributed to lack of readership. It seems that using alternatives such as peer readers, hence student feedback, can help alleviate the problem to a great extent. Writing, as it may be the case, is a skill which needs systematic, and objective feedback and correction by the teacher, rather than mere spontaneous, and general feedback given to students in class. Therefore, when the students feel their works may not be thoroughly checked, they gradually lose their interest in writing hence reluctance may be the outcome. On the other hand, students may be encouraged to write if they feel that their writings will be evaluated by people other than their teachers, especially by their peers. One of the reasons why teachers may not give sufficient feedback to students' writings as Jones (2011) reports is that feedback on the final drafts is frustrating for teachers. However, there are some alternatives available for teachers. For instance, they can implement the concept of "feed-forward" by encouraging students to engage actively with final draft feedback and be more proactive in the feedback process through feedback dialogues with the teacher. Another issues related to written feedback is the difficulty students have with interpreting it and whether or not the students respond to feedback. Sometimes feedback is confusing as Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) believe. Nonetheless, many students respond to feedback when they rewrite their papers (Ferris, 1997). Similarly, Lee (2007) attempted to explore how the teacher-student relationship affects the ways a teacher comments on student writing and students respond to teacher comments. The study indicated that teachers interact in four major ways: written commentary, peer feedback, conference and online feedback. Therefore, it is the teacher's job to choose, among the available alternatives, the best possible way to interact. A point in case is that most instructors think that this lack has the least effect on students writing reluctance whereas most students believe the opposite. Another area of flagrant mismatch is that most teachers believe that students' reluctance originates in writing tasks being difficult whereas most students disagree. This may create problems in decision making unless both groups' perceptions are taken into consideration. From the results it is implied that if students' writing skill is dealt with systematically, writing in English would not be considered as an unfamiliar and difficult skill to master as some researchers believe (e.g. Reid; and Richards et al., 2002). Also, teaching students necessary strategies will, to a great extent, encourage them to write more, following those helpful strategies. Even higher level EFL students sometimes are unaware of the mechanics of writing. In other words they may have not been taught the necessary skills and strategies to know how to write, so they gradually turn into reluctant writers. They may know what to write, be interested in the topic, and have necessary related content knowledge, but do not know how to put all these things together and organize their thoughts in written form. Therefore, teaching specific writing skills and strategies in writing classes will, to a great extent, alleviate this problem. There has not been always a consensus on teaching writing strategies among researchers, though. In the past, there were debates on if writing should be taught or not, let alone to teach strategies. However, many techniques and methods have proved successful in teaching writing (Reid, 2002). For example, process and product writing are two possible and effective methods which can be applied in writing classrooms. Seow (2002) lists the steps a teacher can follow in process writing including planning, drafting, responding, revising, editing, evaluating, and post-writing. Reppen (2002) and Ferris (2002) elaborate on a genre-based approach to content writing instruction and teaching students to self-edit, respectively. It is hoped that the results of this study are beneficial for language pedagogy, specifically teaching writing.

APPENDIX. THE QUESTIONNAIRE OF PERCEPTION ON WRITING RELUCTANCE

Teacher Version

Dear Instructor,

This questionnaire includes items that might be indicative of what causes learners' reluctance toward writing tasks. Please read each question and then fill in the appropriate square.

For each question, type an * inside the corresponding square, like the one below.

Your anonymity is guaranteed and your responses are considered as confidential. Use the scale below to answer the questions. Rate the following questions as you think they are most appropriate.

		1	2	3	4	5
1	Learners find most writing tasks difficult to do.					
2	Learners do not have sufficient linguistic knowledge.					
3	Learners do not have sufficient content knowledge.					
4	Learners do not have enough general knowledge about the topics.					
5	Learners do not write because the 'teacher' is the only person who may read their works.					
6	Learners have low self-confidence toward writing tasks.					
7	Learners have great amount of anxiety when writing.					
8	Learners are not interested in the topics.					
9	Learners do not have enough motivation to write.					
10	Learners are not willing to write due to their prior negative experiences with writing tasks.					
11	Learners do not write because they think they will not need such writing in future.					
12	Learners are unable to transfer writing skills from their L1 to the foreign language.					
13	Learners are unable to organize their thoughts while writing.					
14	Learners do not have enough writing experience in their first language. (writing is not taught systematically in local schools)					
15	Learners do not know enough writing strategies such as pre-writing, drafting, editing, etc.					
16	Learners do not receive sufficient feedback from teachers.					
17	Learners do not receive enough writing instruction in class.					
18	Lack of appropriate interpersonal relationships (teacher- learner) results in learners' reluctance.					
19	Learners do not have set goals when they start to write.					
20	The textbook does not have adequate writing activities to encourage students to write.					

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