Rhetorical Transfer among Young EFL Learners: The First Experience of Paragraph Writing Investigated

Mehrnoush Hosseini

Department of Foreign Languages, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract—**The process of language production among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is a multifaceted phenomenon which has engaged EFL researchers and practitioners' interest for a long time. For many EFL learners, producing language through writing is considered a difficult and challenging task, making it a favoured research area. However, there seems to be a dire need to investigate the way writing is mastered among young EFL learners. The present study attempted to investigate language transfer from L1 to L2 or vice versa among young EFL learners when experiencing paragraph writing for the first time. In addition, the researchers attempted to see whether the preliminary paragraph writing instruction can affect young EFL learners' paragraph writing. A further goal was to find out whether the type of writing task can influence the paragraph organization among young EFL learners. In order to address these concerns, 34young EFL learners participated in this study. The data were gathered through full-term observation, collecting L1 and L2 writing samples, and conducting written interviews. The results revealed a negative transfer from L1 in rhetoric and paragraph development which was weakened after teaching L2 paragraph structure. It was also uncovered that the type of writing task and its topic affected the paragraph development. The study concludes with a discussion on the findings followed by suggesting some avenues for further research.**

Index Terms—**language transfer, paragraph writing, rhetorical transfer, young foreign language learners**

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing in a second/foreign language has been always a complex task for language learners and a favoured research area for researchers. There have been plenty of studies that have taken the possibility of uni/bi-directional transfer of L1 and L2 writing skills, strategies and patterns into account (e.g. Connor, 1987, 1996; Hinkel, 2002; Hirose, 2003; Kaplan, 1966; Matsuda, 1997; Mauranen, 1993; Uysal, 2008; Valero-Garces, 1996). Most of those studies have been conducted on proficient Second Language (L2) learners and university, college, and high school students. Although it has been surveyed by Leki, Cumming, and Silva (as cited in Uysal, 2008) that just about 3% of articles in *Journal of Second Language Writing* have investigated secondary school L2 writers, there is no trace of research done on young L2 learners' very first experiences of writing in a foreign/second language. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap and explore young EFL learners' first experiences of paragraph writing to uncover concepts which affect L2 writing, learners' ideas towards it and the ways to construct writing skills from the first practices of learning foreign language writing.To fulfill the objectives of the study, the following research questions were posed:

Q_1: Is there any transfer from L1 to L2 or vice versa in young EFL learners' first experiences of paragraph writing?

Q_2: Does the preliminary paragraph writing instruction significantly affect the paragraph writing of young EFL learners?

Q_3: Does the type of writing task influence the paragraph organization of young EFL learners?

Foreign/Second Language (L2) Writing

Throughout the history of foreign/second language learning, foreign/second language writing has been a complicated task for L2 learners and a favored research topic for foreign/second language scholars. L2 writing is different from L1 writing, since L2 writers have the knowledge of two languages (Wang & Wen, 2002). This difference results in using different strategies, patterns and skills while writing in L1 or L2 and accounts for the transfer of rules and strategies from L1 to L2, vice versa or both. Thus, this has lead second/foreign language scholars to conducting research focusing on the role of L1 in L2 writing and diverse writing strategies (e.g. Connor, 1987, 1996; Hinkel, 2002; Hirose, 2003; Kaplan, 1966; Matsuda, 1997; Mauranen, 1993; Uysal, 2008; Valero-Garces, 1996).

The Relationship of L1/L2 Writing

Most of the studies on foreign/second language writing have documented a positive relationship between L1 and L2 and have claimed that literacy skills are transferable across languages (e.g. Brooks, 1985; Cumming, 1989, 1990; Krapels, 1991; Lay, 1982, 1988; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989). Lay (1988) stated, using L1 to think about what to write and taking advantage of L1 writing strategies is useful for less proficient learners. Also, in 1991, Krapels mentioned that the use of L1 in L2 writing was "a fairly common strategy among L2 writers" (p. 49).

Thus, the research done on the relationship of L1 and L2 suggested that writers with low L2 proficiency mostly rely on their L1 throughout the process of L2 writing (Arndt, 1987; Cumming, 1989; Raimes, 1985; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wolfersberger, 2003). This accounts for the existence of transfer mostly among less proficient learners. In addition, Akyel and Kamisli (1997), and Atakent (1999), suggest that, after writing instruction in L2, the learners' also transfer their L2 awareness of rhetoric to their L1.On the other hand, there have been a few studies which reported the existence of a negative or no/weak relationship between L1 and L2 writing(such asAliakbari, 2002; Carson & Kuehn, 1992).

Rhetoric

"Rhetoric is a cultural social event" and "a social invention," (Berlin, 1984, p.1) and when a person masters a specific writing structure in a culture, this schema has an influence on his L2 writing (Hirose, 2003; Kadar-Fulop, 1988; Purves, 1988). Every language has its own unique rhetorical conventions and which affects the way of thinking and writing in those cultures that interferes with L2 writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1966, 2000).

Contrastive Rhetoric (CR)

Contrastive Rhetoric is a method of studying transfer in writing which is pioneered by Kaplan's study (1966) through analyzing the paragraph organization of ESL student essays and categorizing them into five paragraph development types ranging from linear and sequential to indirect, spiral and digressional. CR research has focused on the effect of L1 rhetoric on L2 and has reported the use of specific L1 rhetoric patterns in L2 writing. Zhang (2008) has summarized them mentioning paragraph organization in Kaplan's study (1966); reader-versus-writer responsibility in the work of Hinds (1987); linear organization structure in a study conducted by Connor (1987); the use of coordinating conjunctions by Söter (1988); indirectness devices in Hinkel's research (1997, 2002); rhetorical appeals and reasoning strategies reported by Kamimura & Oi (1998); and the use of metatext in Mauranen's (1993) and Valero-Garces's (1996) studies.

Methods of Studying CR

Qualitative research methods that "investigate both L1 and L2 writing, observe and interview L1 and L2 writers, and study influences on L1 writing developments" (Connor, 1996, p. 162) are used for studying CR. Many studies have utilized this method; however, they have generated different outcomes. Some studies (e.g. Kaplan, 1966; Matalene, 1985; Wang & Li, 1993; Wu; 2003; Yin; 1999) have supported Kaplan's (1966) implementation of L1 rhetoric organization patterns in L2 while others (e.g.Becker, 1995; Hirose, 2003; Kubota, 1998; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Taylor & Chen, 1991; Zhang, 1997) have claimed that there is no significant difference between L1 and L2 rhetoric, thus, L1 rhetoric cannot affect L2 writing.

CR Criticism

Despite the advantages of CR in studying transfer in writing, it has been criticized by some scholars. For instance, Mohan and Lo (1985) believe that CR ignores L2 progress and difficulties while Martin (1992) and Matsuda (1997) argue that CR research methodology and CR concept is taken too simplistically. Leki (1991, 1997) claims that CR takes a broad view of rhetorical conventions, and Kubota (1998) asserts that it regards L1transfer as negative. In addition, (Uysal, 2008) states that CR does not present a "direct evidence for any transfer from L1 to L2" and it has "just inferred existence of transfer" (p. 3). He adds that most of the studies which has used CR, has neglected to examine the texts in relation to "the cultural context that may have played a role in their production" (Uysal, 2008, p. 3).

II. METHOD

Participants

The participants of this study are thirty-four junior school girls aging between eleven and fourteen. They have studied English in the same institute for about two years and are spending their last year in this department before going to adults' department. They have passed a unified placement test and they are all in the same level in this institute; thus, their language proficiency level is closely equal.

Setting

The study has been conducted in two "English Time 5" classes of the young adults department of a renowned institute located in the northern district of the capital city of Iran (Table 1).

TABLE 1:
COURSE CONTEXT

Course	Division of the term	Teacher	Number of students	Gender	Course duration			Total hours
					Semester	Per week	Per session	
English Time 5a	July-September 2013	30 year old Male	17	Female	One semester	Two sessions (Saturdays & Wednesdays)	1.5 hours/ 90 minutes	31.5 hours/ 1890 minutes
English Time 5b	July-September 2013	30 year old Female	17	Female	One semester	Two sessions (Saturdays & Wednesdays)	1.5 hours/ 90 minutes	31.5 hours/ 1890 minutes

Instrumentation

For collecting the data of the present study triangulation or the use of multiple methods is used to "reduce the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method" (Maxwell, 2005, p.112). The data was gathered

through a full-term participant observation of two classes by two class teachers, 136 pages of L1 and L2 writing samples and 34 pages of written interviews (Table 2).

TABLE 2:
INSTRUMENTS OF DATA COLLECTION

Instruments of Data Collection	Amount and Duration
Full-time Participant Observation, class discussions, student-teacher talks	Two classes One institute semester 41 sessions= 63 hours
Students' L1/L2 Writing samples	68 pages of English (L2)Writing 68 pages of Persian (L1)Writing
Written interviews	34 pages

Procedure

In the first sessions of the classes, both teachers asked the students to write a paragraph in Persian (L1). Some sessions after that, the teachers assigned the students to write an English paragraph on a topic different from the Persian paragraph to prevent mere translation from L1. By this time, the participants had not received any previous instruction on how to write a paragraph in English (L2) since it was the first term they had to write paragraphs in English. Moreover, in order to make sure that the students had not received any writing instruction in English, either at school or by their previous teachers or family members, a written interview with some questions focusing on the participants' previous writing knowledge was conducted. In this written interview, the existence or amount of the participants' writing instruction in L1 was also surveyed. The written interview was handed in to them in class and the answers were collected on the same day. Besides some questions on the participants' previous writing instruction in both L1 and L2, the written interview included some questions on the participants' opinions on writing in both languages.

Some sessions later, some preliminary paragraph writing instructions such as capitalization, punctuation, topic sentence, supporting the topic sentence and conclusion and use of conjunctions and transition signals were given to the students of the both classes. The session after the instruction, the participants were asked to write another English paragraph.With the aim of comparing L1 and L2 writings, and investigating the effect of writing instruction on the writings, the participants were asked to write another paragraph in their L1, in the last session of their class. The writing topics and the written interview are followed in the appendices (Appendix A and B respectively).

Coding and Categorizing

All the L1 and L2 paragraphs were read and coded. Since it was the participants' first experience of paragraph writing, the coding was based on the preliminary writing rules such as starting the paragraph with a topic sentence, supporting the topic sentence, concluding the paragraph and the use of transition signals to connect the sentences. The results of coding were categorized in four groups of the first L1 writing, the first L2 writing, the second L2 writing after writing instruction and the second L1 writing. Also, the written interviews were read and some themes were generated from the data. The themes were categorized in order of frequency and L1 or L2 writing.

Data Analysis

For the qualitative analysis of the writings, the organization and coherence of the paragraphs was the framework of the analysis. All the 136 pages of L1 and L2 writings were read and coded in four different categories based on presence of a topic sentence, supporting sentences, conclusion and transitional signals which linked the sentences in each paragraph. The results of the coding were accumulated in a table consisting four columns of first and second L1 and L2 writing for each participant. Each column was also subdivided in the four above mentioned categories. In the end, a frequency count (Appendix C) was conducted separately for each of the four writing tasks of all the participants. The results are summarized in table 2 in the appendices. Moreover, the 34 pages of the participants' written interviews and their class talks and discussions which were gathered by both of the class teachers were analyzed. After the initial analysis, some themes were generated. The detailed analysis was done focusing on the generated themes. After color coding the themes and summarizing them on a separate page, the most frequent themes were explored.

In addition, all the writings of the participants were scored using the scoring criteria of PET exams to reduce the amount of subjectivity and to have a standardized universal framework. The scoring focused on the "organization and cohesion" mark scheme of PET for the reason that this criterion was instructed to the participants and was the focus of this study. All the four sets of score for each participant were gathered in a Microsoft Excel file and were analyzed using SPSS software. The descriptive statistics, histogram (Appendices D & E), Spearman's Rank Correlation, and Paired-Samples t-test were conducted. The results are illustrated and clarified below.

III. RESULTS

The First Research Question

The following question was posed as the first research question of this study:

Q_1: *Is there any transfer from L1 to L2 or vice versa in young EFL learners' first experiences of paragraph writing?*

The existence of transfer from L1 to L2 was investigated both through frequency counts (Appendix C) of the rhetorical structure of the paragraphs in terms of organization and transition signals and the Spearman's Rank

Correlation between the First Persian and English Writings. The result of the frequency count is summarized in the following table (Table 3).

TABLE 3:
FREQUENCY COUNT

	first Persian (L1) paragraph writing	first English (L2) paragraph writing
Topic sentence	24%	38%
Supporting sentences	47%	76%
Conclusion	15%	29%
Transition signals	50%	29%

The scores of the first Persian and English writings were accumulated separately for each participant. The relationship between the scores of the first Persian and English writing scores was investigated using Spearman's rho. It was observed that there is a strong, positive correlation between the two variables, $r= .61$, $n = 34$, $p< .05$, with high levels of Persian writing associated with high levels of English writing (Table 4).

TABLE 4:
SPEARMAN'S RANK CORRELATION BETWEEN THE FIRST PERSIAN AND ENGLISH WRITINGS

			Persian Writing 1	English Writing 1
Spearman's rho	Persian Writing 1	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.613[**]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	34	34
	English Writing 1	Correlation Coefficient	.613[**]	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	34	34

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The analysis of all the written interviews with a focus on the participants' previous writing instruction in Persian revealed a difference between writing instruction in Persian and English. The main writing instructions in Persian which were reported by the participants included *avoiding repetition, focusing on the writing topic, and following the grammatical rules.* Other instructions were *having a first draft and revising the writing, trying to avoid lengthy writings, trying to fill all the lines on a page, using literary devices, paying attention to the words' spelling, writing in good handwritings, using linkers, using synonymous words and starting the writing in the name of God.* There was no report of any instruction on organizational structure of paragraphs, having a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a conclusion.

In addition, the analysis of the written interviews revealed the possibility of transfer of L1 rules to L2. Near half of the participants reported that they wrote their writings in Persian and then translate them to English. Also, half of them mentioned while writing in English, they thought about what to write in Persian. Although this compensation strategy is useful for low proficiency writers like the participants of this study, the resume of using this strategy may have an effect on transferring L1 writing rules to L2 especially when the rules are different. (Refer to the appendices for the related excerpts.)

The Second Research Question

The following question was posed as the second research question of this study:

Q_2: *Does the preliminary paragraph writing instruction significantly affect the paragraph writing of young EFL learners?*

A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the preliminary paragraph writing instruction on participants' score on the English writing. There was a statistically significant increase in English writing scores from Time 1 ($M= 1.94$, $SD = 1.34$) to Time 2 ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.29$), $t (33) = -6.89$, $p< .0005$ (two-tailed). The increase in English writing was 1.88 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.2.43 to -1.32. The eta squared statistic (.59) indicated a large effect size. It was revealed that the paragraph writing instruction significantly affected the learners' paragraph writing in L2 (Table 5).

TABLE 5:
PAIRED- SAMPLES T-TEST ON ENGLISH WRITING

		Paired Differences							
				Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation		Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	English Writing 1 - English Writing 2	-1.882	1.591	.273	-2.437	-1.327	-6.899	33	.000

Moreover, a paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the intervention on participants' score on the Persian writing test. There was a statistically significant increase in Persian writing scores from Time 1 ($M= 1.44$,

SD = .86) to Time 2 (M = 3.32, SD = 1.47), t (33) = -9.14, $p<$ .0005 (two-tailed). The increase in Persian writing was 1.88 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.2.30 to -1.46. The eta squared statistic (.71) indicated a large effect size. It was investigated that the paragraph writing instruction significantly affected the learners' paragraph writing in L1 as well as in L2 (Table 6).

TABLE 6:
PAIRED- SAMPLES T-TEST ON PERSIAN WRITING

| | | Paired Differences | | | | | | | |
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Persian Writing 1 – Persian Writing 2	-1.882	1.200	.206	-2.301	-1.464	-9.146	33	.000

The Third Research Question

The following question was posed as the third research question of this study:

Q_3: *Does the type of writing task influence the paragraph organization of young EFL learners?*

During the preliminary analysis of data, it was uncovered that the participants whose writing topic was argumentative outperformed in devising structured paragraphs. Thus the significance of the effect of writing task type on paragraph organization was investigated through conducting two t-tests on L1 and L2 writings of the two groups.

An independent-samples *t*-test on L2 writings was conducted to compare the scores on the second English writing test of group 1 (descriptive writing topic) and group 2 (argumentative writing topic). There was no significant difference in scores for group 1 (M = 3.59, SD = 1.27) and group 2 (M= 4.06, SD = 5.71; t (32) = -1.06, p= .30, two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference = .47, CI: -1.37 to .429) was very small (eta squared = .03; Table 7).

TABLE 7:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST ON SECOND ENGLISH WRITING

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Dif. | Std. Error Dif. | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
									Lower	Upper
English Writing 2	Equal variances assumed	.032	.858	-1.065	32	.295	-.471	.442	-1.370	.429
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.065	31.992	.295	-.471	.442	-1.370	.429

Another independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the scores on the second Persian writing test of group 1 (descriptive treatment) and group 2 (argumentative treatment). There was a significant difference in scores for group 1 (M = 2.53, SD = 1.41) and group 2 (M= 4.12, SD = 1.05; t (32) = -3.70, p = .001, two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference = 2.41, CI: -2.46 to -.71) was very large (eta squared = .3; Table 8).

TABLE 8:
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST ON THE SECOND PERSIAN WRITING

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Dif. | Std. Error Dif. | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
									Lower	Upper
Persian Writing 2	Equal variances assumed	.984	.329	-3.704	32	.001	-1.588	.429	-2.462	-.715
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.704	29.527	.001	-1.588	.429	-2.464	-.712

Thus, after the preliminary paragraph writing instruction, the participants' English paragraph organization did not depend on the topic of the writing task. The participants tried to follow the topic, body, conclusion structure they were taught during this study. However, it was not the case for Persian writings. The participants' writing in Persian on an argumentative topic were more structured and organized than a descriptive or expository topic. This shows that the topic of the writing in Persian determines the organization of the paragraphs. Persian writers tend to write descriptive paragraph more freely, escaping a topic, body and conclusion structure and using literary devices and lots of descriptions instead.

Moreover, analyzing the participants' written interviews, their writings on their opinions of writing in Persian and English, and their class talks and discussions with their teachers in the whole term, it was emerged that some of the participants viewed writing in Persian like writing a poem, which focuses on the beauty and use of literary devices and

not on the organizational structure of the paragraphs. For instance, *Haniyeh* wrote that she could make a poem in her Persian writing (refer to appendix E for the excerpt).

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The literature on EFL writing abounds with different studies which highlight the existence of uni/bi-directional transfer of L1 and L2 writing skills, strategies, and patterns (Hinkel, 2002; Hirose, 2003; Uysal, 2008). However, there seems to be an essential need for inspecting the abovementioned phenomena among young L2 learners (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, as cited in Uysal, 2008). In order to address this concern, the present study investigated the L1 and L2 writing among thirty-four homogeneous female EFL learners, aging between eleven and fourteen.

Based on the qualitative and quantitative data analysis of all the participants' L1 and L2 writings, their writing scores and the written interviews, the findings revealed a slight negative transfer from L1 in rhetoric and paragraph development which was weakened after teaching L2 paragraph structure. In addition, the results presented the effect of preliminary writing instruction in L2 on both L1 and L2 writings. It was also uncovered that the type of writing task and its topic affected the learners' Persian (L1) paragraph development.

The results of this study can shed light on the organizational differences of Persian and English and help foreign language instructors, especially teachers of young learners, to focus on the L1/L2 differences in their instruction and build up the learners' writings from their first experiences of paragraph writing. Building up the writing ability from learners' early exposures to writing tasks may lead to more structured writing pieces in other levels of education, from high school to university.

Future research should resume investigating transfer related issues in the pedagogical practices of teaching L2 writing and compare other L1/ L2 languages with each other and apply suitable writing instruction according to the similarities and differences of L1 and L2. There is also a need for focusing on young and not proficient learners besides adults and proficient learners. In addition, future studies may investigate the writings of male young learners in similar situations to this study to take in to account possible differences.
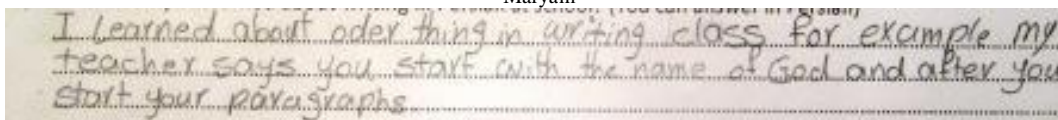
APPENDIX A WRITING TOPICS

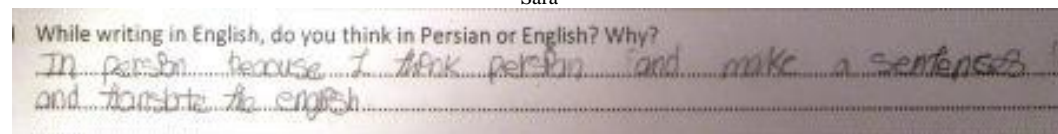| Course	Type of Writing Task	The First Persian Writing Topic	The First English Writing Topic	The Second English Writing Topic	The Second Persian Writing Topic
English Time 5a Class	Expository/Argumentative	Do you like writing? Why/why not?	Do you like the first vacation you have ever had? Why/ why not?	Do you think teachers should be serious or not? Why?	Do you think teachers should be serious or not? Why?
English Time 5b Class	Expository	What do you think about writing?	How do you spend your holidays?	What do you think about Your School?	What do you think about Your School?

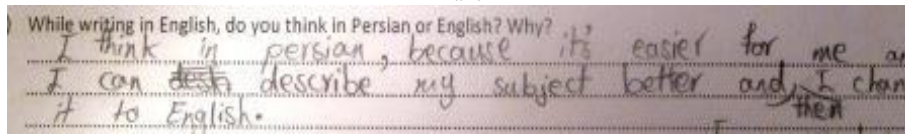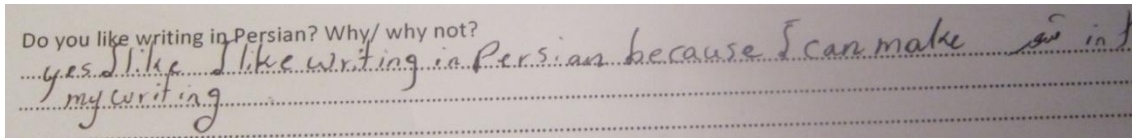## APPENDIX B EXCERPTS OF THE WRITTEN INTERVIEWS

Niousha
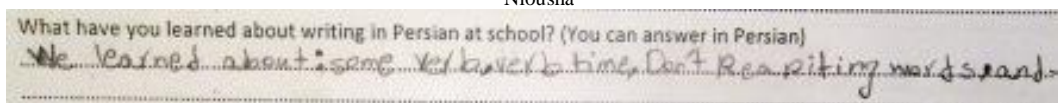
Maryam

Sara

Erfaneh

Hanieh

APPENDIX C FREQUENCY COUNT

Writing Task	The First Persian Writing		The Second Persian Writing		The First English Writing		The Second English Writing	
Course Frequency of Occurrence	English Time 5a	English Time 5b	English Time 5a	English Time 5b	English Time 5a	English Time 5b	English Time 5a	English Time 5b
Topic Sentence	41%	6%	88%	37%	77%	30%	82%	88%
Supporting the Topic Sentence (body)	53%	41%	94%	68%	88%	60%	94%	94%
Concluding Sentence	29%	0%	61%	26%	50%	40%	82%	59%
Transition Signals	47%	53%	88%	74%	50%	30%	88%	53%
Mean of Scores out of 5	1.59	1.29	4.18	2.53	2.41	1.47	4.06	3.59

APPENDIX D DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

|	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Persian Writing 1	34	0	4	1.44	.860	.801	.403
English Writing 1	34	0	5	1.94	1.347	.824	.403
Persian Writing 2	34	0	5	3.32	1.471	-.359	.403
English Writing 2	34	1	5	3.82	1.290	-.550	.403
Valid N (listwise)	34						

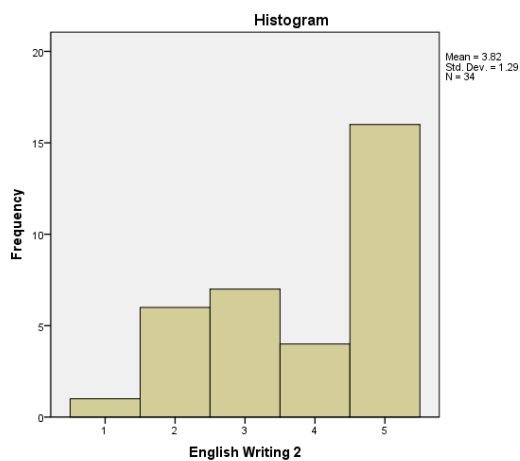APPENDIX E DISTRIBUTION HISTOGRAMS
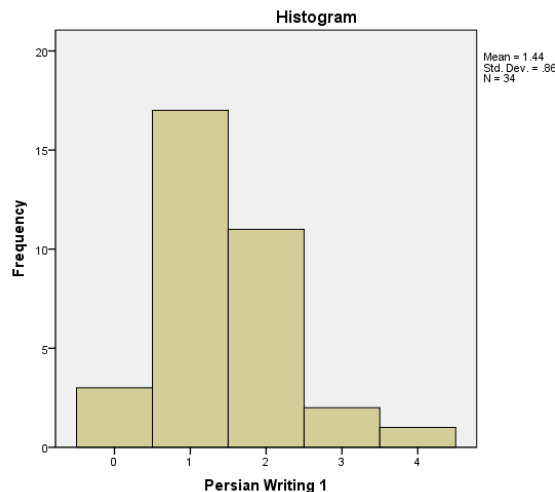
Appendix E1: Histogram of the distribution of scores on the first Persian writing
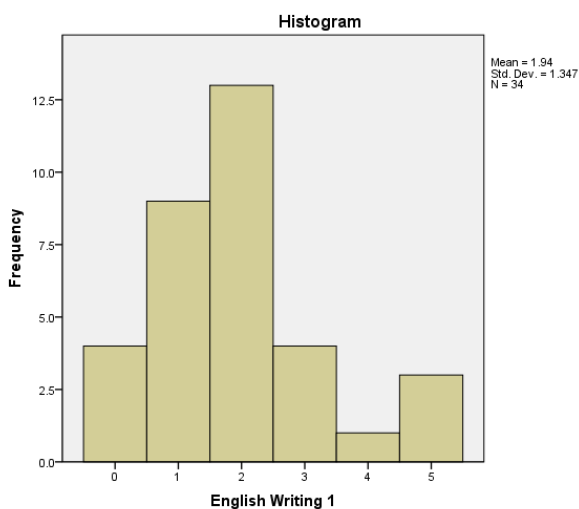
Appendix E2: Histogram of the distribution of scores on the first English writing
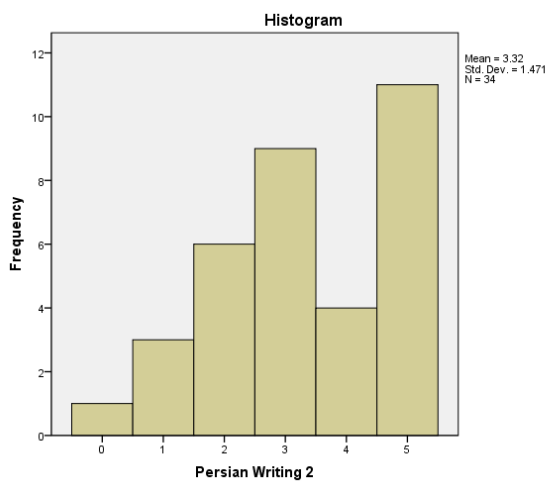
Appendix E3: Histogram of the distribution of scores on the second Persian writing

Appendix E4: Histogram of the distribution of scores on the second English writing

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Mehrnoush Hosseini holds an M.A.in TEFL, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran. She has been teaching general English courses since 2002. She has presented in several international ELT seminars. Her main areas of research interest include qualitative research, critical reading, EFL writing, and vocabulary learning and teaching.