Development of a Questionnaire for the Assessment of Writing Problems

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Abstract—Due to the importance of publishing and its advantages for professors at the present time, this article intends to develop a questionnaire based on Bachman's model (1990) to seek Iranian professors' attitude toward major problematic areas of writing Iranian scholars encounter trying to create a scientific paper so as to diminish rejection upon submission. The findings of the questionnaire demonstrated that regarding organizational competence, rhetorical organization, vocabulary, morphology and syntax were taken much more essential in this regard. On the subject of pragmatic competence, ideational functions and sensitivity to naturalness received greater importance. Concerning lower level skills of writing, professors declared the importance of spelling and punctuation in writing. General publishing problems asked from the professors exhibited the importance of all the items, but with greater emphasis on quality in writing. As a final point, professors' comments were described.

Index Terms—writing, academic publishing, scientific paper, Iranian scholars, Iranian professors

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the prominence of English writing is properly established to the degree that by writing effectively, one can make a good impression on others and be in the position of authority. So, an effectively written scholarly paper, which investigates a research field and finds out the results, can be published by a journal. Besides, article publishing, along with a lot of advantages, can bring about the promotion of professors. Not every paper can be published as an article, though. The paper must be based on the requirements of the journal to which it has been sent. Good English must also be taken into account. If one of these elements is overlooked, a paper is apt to be rejected. On the one hand, many scholars attempt not to go against journal requirements; on the other hand, they are aware of the research activities proposed by Wong (2008) such as reading journals and E-journals, surfing the internet for information, attending conferences and taking courses; therefore, this is the use of English that must be competent. The criteria for writing well in English, however, are controversial. Zinsser (2010), for example, states four main principles for writing good English, i.e. to write simply, clearly, briefly, and humanly. The problems of this skill can also go beyond lower level skills, to be exact, sentence-level such as grammar, vocabulary, misspelling and etc and can deal with higher level skills as well. Besides, problems can stem from lack of writing voice including the audience and the format, absence of style and so forth.

A lot of research has been done on NN writers' problems. Bahrami and Riazi (n.d.), for instance, bring together a number of these difficulties that are found out by others in this issue. The writers declare while having simple language and style and lacking sufficient knowledge of words and appropriate amount of force to make claims for their research and interfering of first language, it takes longer for NN scholars to write qualitatively. Research in this respect is not restricted, and in the same way, Adams-Smith (1984), Bazerman (1988), Dudley-Evans (1994), Johns (1993), Mauranen (1993), St. John (1987), and Swales (1990) state other areas of difficulty that are summarized by Flowerdew (1999, p. 127). They rely on not having the ability of linking the text to the audience, making reference to the published literature, revealing and concealing the point of view of the author and applying hedges to indicate caution expected by the academic community as other writing problems of NN writers. These writers mention that NN speakers cannot write grammatically and coherently whilst they affect their own cultural views regarding the nature of academic processes.

Similar to publication growth among scholars in many countries, causing a widespread movement, Iran as a developing country is in the process of scientific advancement and its publications in international journals have been increased. As a result, as far as Professors' promotion, research grants, sabbatical leave and other rewards intended for publications (Bahrami & Riazi, ibid.) are all associated with publishing articles; Iranian scholars pay more attention to publish their articles in indexed journals while they also receive frequent direct and indirect instructions to publish their articles. A high fee paid for publishing articles in ISI journals is not negligent accordingly. Article's publishing as a requirement for Ph.D. students is another reason, emphasizing the importance of producing better academic articles in English.

Altogether, even though, causes of rejection are not confined to English writing deficiencies mentioned above and some reasons might be wholly research based, that is to say, absence of originality, appropriate message and statistical analysis, etc., this article, with regard to the importance of academic publication in English for the Iranian scholars, in line with previous studies regarding NN deficiencies in writing for publishing confirms some of these prominent

problems. Unlike earlier studies, this article is not going to analyze one problem in detail. However, the originality of the current study in relation to former studies is that it reflects these problems from the point of view of Iranian professors through a comprehensive original questionnaire given to them. It is hoped that the results help Iranian scholars know the current problems hence improve their publications.

II. METHOD

Participants

A questionnaire was used for elicitation of Iranian professors' opinion about publishing problems of Iranian scholars. 50 professors to whom it was handed were selected from Semnan Azad and Payamnoor University among engineering, management, accounting fields. The professors were almost equally males and females.

Instrumentation and Data collection procedures

The questionnaire was prepared in six different sections on likert scale of *not at all important, slightly important, important, very important* and *of utmost importance* (Likert, 1932). For the purpose of assessing Iranian professors' ideas regarding publishing problems in Iran, a general model of communicative language ability as a standard classification proposed by Bachman (1990) was employed; therefore, four sections of this questionnaire including fifteen items were made according to that model (see appendix A).

Higher level skills of writing were included in the first four sections, so another section was devoted to lower lever skills of writing (mechanics) and the problems related to them. The items in this section including five items were chosen according to Richards and Schmidt (2002)'s book, dictionary of applied linguistics.

The last section entitled "general academic publishing problems" was mainly based on what Flowerdew (op. cit.) discovers as NN scholars' difficulty in writing as well as other areas of difficulty distinguished by Adams-Smith et al. (1984), and summarized by Flowerdew (ibid.). 9 items were also assigned for this section. Therefore a questionnaire was made in 6 sections with 29 items. Moreover, any comments could be added by Iranian professors.

Before given to actual subjects, it was translated into Persian (see appendix B) and handed to two professors who were experts at the content of the questionnaire. These experts verified the relevance and relation of each question with its considered definition by a four choice scale of *irrelevant, a little relevant, almost relevant and of great relevance*. Then, obtained data from each professor's referee were entered into a table. The extent of agreement between the experts was gained through Spearman coefficient of correlation. At the 0.01 level the correlation is significant, in this way the questionnaire was validated. To establish its reliability, a pretest was arranged, so the questionnaire was handed to five Iranian professors. Then, Cronbach's alpha equals 0.512, indicating the reliability of this questionnaire. Then a sample of 50 Iranian professors was selected and the questionnaire was handed to them. In all the stages of the questionnaire, correlation coefficient was used. For example, it was used in validating the questionnaire with two people, piloting the questionnaire with five persons and handing it to the actual subjects to evaluate the relation between the answers of these people.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In reporting the results, the number of those whose frequency number of selecting a particular item was less than 10 among 50 professors was neglected.

Grammatical Competence Problems

According to the results, a piece of writing can be created only if a combination of skills is present all together. Lexical knowledge, for example, as stated by Henry and Roseberry (2007) plays a greater role than grammar in the genre based writing of advanced academic ESL students. This study substantiates this matter in a way that among the fifty professors, 40.0 percent as a minimum supposed that *academic vocabulary* is very important, and 30.0 percent believed it is important while 24.0 percent of them considered the choice of utmost importance. The results of *technical vocabulary* was not very different from academic vocabulary to the degree that 30.0 percent equally considered it to be important and of utmost importance. 34.0 percent knew it very important. *Morphology* was assumed to be very important (38.0 percent) and important (34.0 percent). *Syntax* was very important (34.0 percent). 32.0 percent claimed that it is important and 26.0 percent very important. Based on the majority of the opinions, all these items were very important and in the case of academic and technical vocabulary of utmost importance. Although the results of the two elements were the same, students of different fields of study know their specific or technical words; therefore, these are semi academic or general words that they need to learn. Until now regarding professors' opinions, knowing words and morphology do not suffice for constructing an article thus the role of syntax is complementary. *Phonology* by 46.0 percent was mentioned to be slightly important and 40.0 percent to be not at all important. The reason for this result is possibly due to the primary impression that this term had on the professors, grouping sounds and symbols together. Even though it looks as if this item is related to speaking in the in the first place, this factor seems to be necessary in the first stages of learning to write.

Textual Competence Problems

42.0 percent deemed that *cohesion* or grammatical and/or lexical relationships are very important. In addition, based on 40.0 percent, it was important while *the rhetorical organization* or underlying structure was deemed to be of utmost importance by 34.0 percent, very important by 42.0 percent and important by 22.0 percent.

Illocutionary Competence Problems

On the subject of *illocutionary competence problems* or inability in conveying a message, *ideational functions* were selected by 36.0 percent to be important and very important in the same way. 18.0 percent claimed of utmost importance for this item. Ideational function according to Bachman (ibid.) is the use of language to exchange information and feelings about that information. The answers exhibit the significance of organization of experience and expression of meanings in terms of the world experience as part of a writer. 42.0 percent believed that *manipulative functions* are important. However, 28.0 percent considered it to be slightly important. The primary purpose of utterances with a *manipulative function* is to affect the world around us (Bachman, ibid.) and in this way they control the behavior of others and build up relationships. Based on the opinions, these functions are not of that significance in writing a research article. *Heuristic functions* were considered slightly important by 40.0 percent and important by 36.0 percent. A writer utilizes this function in exploring the world when he tries to teach others about the world (littlemore & Low, 2006). The answers for this item cannot reveal the great importance of these functions in writing a research paper. The last item of this section is *imaginative function* that refers to one's ability to create and extend his environment for humorous or aesthetic purposes (Backman, ibid.).This item was stated, by 46%, to be slightly important. 22% stated it was not important and 22% stated that it was. In general, as stated earlier, ideational functions reflect the greater importance in comparison with other functions in writing for publication. However, this sentence does not indicate that their importance in other writing genres is disregarded.

Sociolinguistic Competence Problems

44.0 percent stated that *sensitivity to dialect* or *variety* is slightly important. 26.0 percent supposed it not at all important and important correspondingly. *Sensitivity to dialect or variety* recognizes differences and conventions in language use in different regions or by different social groups in various social contexts (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2002). The results were not significant; that may be due to language of academic articles which is a standard language among the members of the academic community and does not differ from one social group to another. *Sensitivity to register* was expected to be important by 46.0 percent and very important by 20.0 percent, while 22.0 percent indicated that it is slightly important. The item is related to academic words or special words of a field of study in some way, indicating that a certain subject matter needs its own language with a style applicable to that domain that according to the sample was important in writing a research article. 42.0 percent uttered *sensitivity to naturalness* as an important and very important issue (32.0 percent), on the other hand, 22.0 percent stated its slightly importance. According to Bachman (ibid.), *sensitivity to naturalness* refers to the way our language sounds natural not a strange, "foreign," archaic or bookish language. The findings represent that natural spontaneity has an absolute position in writing. 46.0 percent expressed that *cultural references & figures of speech* to be slightly important, but then again 36.0 percent declared the importance of these items. Generally speaking, interpretation of figures of speech such as simile, hyperbole, metaphor and so on requires knowledge more than knowing words and grammar. People typically do not have any trouble in interpreting the figures of speech of their own language but the use of them requires knowing conventions that are deeply rooted in the culture of a given society or speech community (Bachman, op.cit.). Concerning professors' answers, the role of this item in writing an article for publication is insignificant in spite of the fact that some knew it an important factor.

Problems with Lower Level Skills of Writing

46.0 percent declared *spelling* importance; in addition, 30.0 percent knew it to be very important. The *Use of apostrophes* by 42.0 percent was considered to be slightly important in contrast 24.0 percent reckoned its importance. *Punctuations* were important by 28.0 percent, very important by 34.0 percent and of utmost importance by 26.0 percent. 40.0 percent expressed *capitalization* slight unimportance while 22.0 percent explained its importance. *Abbreviations & numbers* were perceived to be slightly important by 42.0 percent conversely 28.0 percent declared their importance. The findings represented among lower level skills used mainly in editing and revision stages of writing and compared with higher level skills, spelling and punctuation are more essential than others.

General Academic Publishing Problems

In the last section, 46.0 percent proved the importance of *Article translation* and 30.0 percent confirmed it to be very important. The results indicate the necessity of skill in this item. Iranian scholars often have difficulty in this matter, so they give their articles to be translated. In fact, as far as writing skill matters, writers should write their articles simultaneously in English but because of weakness in English writing, they write their articles in Persian and then change the language. Translating an article equal to writing an article needs proficiency at all the levels of writing, except generating the ideas that this case will be done by the writer himself. 44.0 percent declared that *L1 interference* is important and 36.0 percent declared that it is very important. By the same token, the problems caused by *L1 interference* were confirmed to be significant. Conversely, Brown (2000) claimed that research indicated that the saliency of interference from the first language does not imply that interference is the most crucial factor in adult language learning. Similarly, 44.0 percent believed that *taking longer to write* is an important problem and 30.0 percent expressed that it is very important. This problem is simply caused by a lot of factors joint together and mentioned

directly above such as lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, experience, and so forth. *Making reference to a published literature* by 44.0 percent was considered to be important and 26.0 percent to be very important. Contrariwise, 22.0 percent explained that it is slightly important. The citation is a significant matter in literature review too, so scholars must learn to use paraphrasing or exact quoting to maintain their articles' quality. 36.0 percent revealed that *relating text to audience* is important and 24.0 percent expressed that it is very important while 32.0 percent uncovered that it is slightly important. This item was somehow equally important and slightly important. As apparently known, writing is a demanding skill for a writer because he must talk indirectly to an audience that receives his message without being able to give him any feedback. Consequently, this is writers' art to relate their text to the audience and to be able to convey their experience as in ideational functions, influence their readers as in manipulative functions, and the like. 44.0 percent professors exhibited that *revealing or concealing the point of view of the author* is slightly important, on the other hand, 28.0 percent pointed to its importance. The results hint at the use of third person point of view instead of first person point of view in writing an academic paper due to the fact that an academic article must be objective. As a whole, the issue of voice, authorial identity, or authorial presence in L2 writing has recently received considerable attention from second language researchers. *Use of "Hedges" to indicate caution expected by the academic community* by 46.0 percent was proved to be important and by 34.0 percent to be very important.

According to Richards and Schmidt (op. cit.), hedges are linguistic devices that writers use either to indicate the writer's lack of commitment to the truth of a statement or a desire not to express that commitment categorically. Since every writer is a member of an academic community aforementioned statements are sufficient to prove the significance of hedges in writing a research article. Also, 42.0 percent mentioned that if Iranian scholars' writing follows a *formulaic language & style*, it is not perhaps important, that is why they selected slightly important for this item. Of course, there was 32.0 percent who considered it as an important problem. Hartely (2008) declared that anything that has structure is easy for NN writers to follow and he pointed toward IMRAD as an example of this. *Paying attention to the quality of articles* by 46.0 % was decided on being of utmost importance. 36.0 % individuals substantiated it as a very important problem in publishing academic articles. The problem is equally not so much with the quantity of the scholarship, but rather with the quality (Dawson, 2010).

Professors' Comments

In the end, a few professors reflected on this section that their opinions are explained. One of them stated that the greatest problems of article publishing out of Iran is usually due to editing problems, writing methods and the use of literature review. Another claimed that despite having a high scientific status, Iranian researchers' lack of ability in a proper presentation of articles in English has caused their output decline that learning can be a useful help for them. One emphasized on the originality of the topic in the first place. One professor declared that writers should pay more attention to the applicability of the articles and new methods rather than imitating the previous studies. Another professor explained that Iranian scholars usually consider bulky literature review and they are good at writing literature review, but their articles do not have a rich discussion section. One declared that Iranian researchers should consult with a well-informed expert and apply their feedbacks. It is worth mentioning here that Bachman (op. cit.) added strategic competence, as an entirely separate element of communicative language ability, which can repair the competence underlying one's ability. Therefore, even if Iranians might be weak at all the other abilities, this competence can help them do up their drawbacks in part.

IV. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article attempts to examine Iranian writing for publishing problems from the point of view of Iranian professors. The findings of the questionnaire demonstrate that regarding organizational competence, rhetorical organization, vocabulary, morphology and syntax were much more essential. On the subject of pragmatic competence, ideational functions and sensitivity to naturalness receive greater importance. Concerning lower level skills of writing, professors declare the importance of spelling and punctuation in writing. General publishing problems declare the importance of all the items, but with greater emphasis on quality in writing.

In accordance with the results, some remedies are proposed for the improvement of scholarly writing. For example, writing for academic publishing course can be included among other subjects at universities in Iran. As a result, the role of a teacher as a writing advisor to help students expand their step by step writing procedures should not be ignored.

Teachers are advised to take into account the background of the students in writing, equip themselves with the latest knowledge and become familiar with the culture and the use of English so as to provide students with the rich input. Before writing, opinion- gap problem can be sorted out by planning prediscusions. Students can be encouraged to revise their own papers and their peers' papers in class.

There can also be email correspondence between Iranian article writers and advisors. The mutual interaction through email encourages students to improve their writing style. Novice English language teachers and novice non-major English researchers can work together to create articles. Teachers can suggest their students to work with native speaker to develop their writing.

Models of accepted articles can be read in class. While reading, they develop an awareness of English language prose style, stylistic choices, grammatical features, methods of development, markers of cohesion and coherence, and so on. The articles in the form of a collection CDs or DVDs can be given to students so that they use as a self-study reference.

The most challenging words, according to the results are academic words, so efficient methods must be applied with the intention of students' better retention. Another way is to suggest a list of the most frequent words to them. Along with what was remarked on, morphosyntax or the interface between syntax and morphology (Richards & Schmidt, op.cit.) is advised to Iranian scholars.

APPENDIX A

English version of the questionnaire given to Iranian professors

How do you consider each of the following problems is in writing academic article for Iranians? Please tick.

Grammatical competence problems		Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Very important	Of utmost importance
Vocabulary	academic	1	2	3	4	5
	technical	1	2	3	4	5
Morphology		1	2	3	4	5
Syntax		1	2	3	4	5
Phonology		1	2	3	4	5

Textual competence problems	Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Very important	Of utmost importance
Cohesion	1	2	3	4	5
Rhetorical organization	1	2	3	4	5

Illocutionary competence problems	Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Very important	Of utmost importance
Ideational functions	1	2	3	4	5
Manipulative functions	1	2	3	4	5
Heuristic functions	1	2	3	4	5
Imaginative functions	1	2	3	4	5

Sociolinguistic competence problems	Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Very important	Of utmost importance
Sensitivity to Dialect or Variety	1	2	3	4	5
Sensitivity to Register	1	2	3	4	5
Sensitivity to Naturalness	1	2	3	4	5
Cultural References & Figures of speech	1	2	3	4	5

Problems with lower level skills of writing	Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Very important	Of utmost importance
Spelling	1	2	3	4	5
Use of apostrophes	1	2	3	4	5
Punctuations	1	2	3	4	5
Capitalizations	1	2	3	4	5
Abbreviations & numbers	1	2	3	4	5

General academic publishing problems	Not at all important	Slightly important	Important	Very important	Of utmost importance
Article translation	1	2	3	4	5
L1 interference	1	2	3	4	5
Taking longer to write	1	2	3	4	5
Making reference to a published literature	1	2	3	4	5
Relating text to audience	1	2	3	4	5
Revealing or concealing the point of view of author	1	2	3	4	5
Use of "Hedges" to indicate caution expected by the academic community	1	2	3	4	5
Limited by formulaic language & style	1	2	3	4	5
Paying attention to the quality of articles	1	2	3	4	5

Please write your comments (if any) on academic article publishing in Iran

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

APPENDIX B

Persian version of the questionnaire given to Iranian professors

هدف این پرسشنامه بررسی مشکلاتی می باشد که نویسندگان ایرانی بعضا" در چاپ مقالات و نگارش مقالات خود با آن مواجه می باشند و همین امر منجر به عدم پذیرش مقالات آنان می گردد. اهمیت هر یک از موارد زیر را در نگارش مقالات علمی نویسندگان ایرانی چگو نه می بینید؟ لطفا" گزینه مورد نظر خود را انتخاب نمایید.

بیشترین اهمیت را دارا است	بسیار مهم است	اهمیت دارد	کم اهمیت است	اهمیت ندارد	مشکلات صلاحیت گرامری	
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	علمی	لغات
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	تخصصی	
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	نحوه ترکیب کلمات	
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	نحو	
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	آوا شناسی	

بیشترین اهمیت را دارا است	بسیار مهم است	اهمیت دارد	کم اهمیت است	اهمیت ندارد	مشکلات صلاحیت متنی
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	تجانس متنی
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	پیوستگی معانی

بیشترین اهمیت را دارا است	بسیار مهم است	اهمیت دارد	کم اهمیت است	اهمیت ندارد	مشکلات صلاحیت انتقال اهداف
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	اهداف سازمان دهنده تجارب نویسنده
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	اهداف تحت نفوذ قرار دادن خواننده توسط نویسنده
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	اهداف بر انگیزنده حس جستجو گرانه خواننده
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	اهداف ایجاد کننده تخیل در خواننده

بیشترین اهمیت را دارا است	بسیار مهم است	اهمیت دارد	کم اهمیت است	اهمیت ندارد	مشکلات صلاحیت زبانی- اجتماعی
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	حساسیت بروی گویش یا گونه زبانی
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	حساسیت بروی گونه کاربردی
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	حساسیت بر روی طبیعی بودن کلام
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	منابع فرهنگی و صنایع ادبی

بیشترین اهمیت را دارا است	بسیار مهم است	اهمیت دارد	کم اهمیت است	اهمیت ندارد	مشکلات مهارات سطح پایین نوشتار
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	دیکته
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	کاربرد اپوستروف (٬)
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	علامت گذاری
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	بزرگ نوشتن حرف اول کلمات

بیشترین اهمیت را دارا است	بسیار مهم است	اهمیت دارد	کم اهمیت است	اهمیت ندارد	مشکلات معمول چاپ علمی
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	ترجمه مقاله
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	دخالت زبان اول
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	صرف زمان طولانی تر برای نوشتن
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	اشاره به ادبیات گذشته
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	ارتباط دادن متن به مخاطب
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	آشکار یا پنهان سازی زاویه دید نویسنده
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	استفاده از ابزار زبانی به منظور ایجاد احتیاط در نوشتار
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	محدود بودن به سبک و زبان فرمول دار
٥	٤	٣	٢	١	توجه به کیفیت مقالات

در صورت نیاز نظر خود را در مورد چاپ مقالات علمی در ایران بنویسید

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از شما به خاطر وقتی که درکامل نمودن این پرسشنامه گذاشتید متشکرم.

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