

## The Relationship between Iranian Pre-intermediate EFL Learners' Persian Literacy Skills and English Writing

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### Abstract

Literacy is defined as the ability to read and write, to use oral and written language in all aspects, and to critically and effectively use oral and written language for different purposes. This definition involves critical thinking about what one reads as well as expanding the term to encompass oral forms of literacy. There have always been controversies on the issue as whether language learners' literacy potential in their L1 could help them progress in their L2 skills. The present study attempted to find the relationship between EFL learners' L1 literacy skills and their L2 writing performance. To this end, three tests, designed to measure three variables, were administered to a sample of 62 EFL learners selected based on convenience sampling. Then, the researchers did the data entry and analyzed the data using statistical techniques. The results revealed that there was a significant positive correlation between EFL learners' L1 literacy skills and their L2 writing performance. Further analysis of the data showed that the participants' gender made no significant difference in their L1 literacy skills and L2 writing performance.

**Keywords:** Persian literacy skills, English writing, gender

### INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to define the concept of bilingualism; some believe that it is an equal ability to communicate in two languages, whereas some others refer to it simply as the ability to communicate in two languages, with much more ability in their mother tongue. Becoming bilingual is a way of life. "Your whole person is affected as you struggle to reach beyond the confines of your first language and into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting" (Brown, 1994, p. 1). However, as a widely accepted idea, being a bilingual person means having the ability to speak two languages perfectly.

Bilingualism could start in the family environment from birth or in an educational setting some years later. It is claimed that more than half of the world's population is bilingual, and two thirds of the world's children grow up in a bilingual environment (Aitchison & Crystal, 1997). In London, for instance, in some primary schools, 80 percent of the children are bilinguals, and 41 percent of state school children use another language in addition to English (Safford & Drury, 2013). Larsen-Freeman (1991) believes that, in the interdependent world of today, second language acquisition and use are ubiquitous.

The number of languages spoken throughout the world is estimated to be 6,000 (Krauss, 1992), among which only a few number of languages are used for communication around the world. It shows how much important it is for each individual to become bilingual or multilingual. Also, that is the reason why the number of bilingual schools are increasing nowadays. Day by day, more children and adults become bilingual or multilingual everywhere in the world, and it is a fact that there are more bilingual brains on the planet than monolingual ones (Archibald, et.al., 2006).

It was believed that bilingualism was harmful for children, but there is early evidence for either neutral or even positive influence of bilingualism, but negative claims typically continue for 20 years beyond those initial findings (Barac & Bialystok, 2011). Although the belief that monolingualism is somehow preferable to bilingualism may seem narrow, quaint, and outmoded, the belief that bilingualism hinders academic achievement seems to be more widespread (Portes & Schauffler, 1994, 1996, Caldas, 2006). Thus, there have been some controversies in these studies on bilingualism. Some of them were for its negative effects, and some others argue against it. Until 1960, it was believed that students who are bilingual must have been at a disadvantage comparing to monolingual students. Many early researchers have claimed that the number of languages that children learn, whether through natural exposure or educational intervention, damage their development and have negative consequences for them (Barac & Bialystoke, 2011).

In contrast to the early pessimistic views of bilingualism, some studies reported that in spite of some delays in acquiring some formal aspects of each language such as vocabulary, bilingualism has either no effect (intelligence) or positive effects (metalinguistic awareness, cognitive development) (Bialystok, 2010, Barac & Bialystok, 2011). A number of studies since early 1960s have also reported that bilingual children perform at a significantly higher level than monolingual children on various measures of cognitive abilities (Liedke & Nelson, 1968; Balkan, 1970; Feldman & Shen, 1971; Ianco-worrall, 1972; Bain, 1975; Ben-Zeev, 1977).

One of the forces in modern society that pushed bilingualism to the center stage on the educational systems of a large number of countries is the emphasis on foreign language education. Additionally, Hulstijn (2013) claims that an L2 learner who starts to acquire an L2 as a young child will ultimately attain a much higher level of L2 proficiency than one who does so as an adolescent or adult. Therefore, language education is introduced earlier and more fully into school curricula with the goal of developing advanced levels

of proficiency in two or more languages (Brutt-Griffler, 2007). As a result, the number of bilingual primary schools is growing all around the world. Long and Larsen-Freeman (1991) regard bilingual education as a help to those students who need to maintain their native language or to grow in their native language while acquiring a second language.

One of the inseparable crucial elements in bilingual education systems, especially at the primary school level, is literacy training. Literacy is defined in a variety of ways. For example, Cameron (2001) states that literacy skills include being able to read and write different sorts of texts for different purposes. Hamers and Blanc (2000) hold that "from an educational perspective, literacy can be viewed as a communication skill which involves a written mode of verbal transmission (reading and writing) employed by literate societies for effective functioning" (p. 318). What all these definitions share is that reading and writing are seen as the basic components of literacy. Children at bilingual schools are exposed to two literacies, and literacy itself changes with languages and contexts (Bialystok, et.al. 2003). Two languages may be written in the same script or in a different script. If the two languages have different scripts (as it is the case with Persian and English), it doubles the amount the child needs to learn to decode basic text.

There are many topical literacies such as the electronic literacy, visual literacy, media literacy and so on, where the literacy seems to represent an expertise or knowledge. Therefore, it could be said that literacy is multilayered similar to an onion. One of the concepts of literacy is related to learning and knowledge development which is both conscious and unconscious (Kress, 1997). So, the acquisition of knowledge or literacy is multifaceted (oral, written, visual) and multimodal (texts in written form of paper, the computer assisted, and web-2 tools). In total, it would seem that the concept of the learning process is the literacy one acquires which is cognitive, social and knowledgeable (Heath, 1983).

The term literacy is defined as the ability to read and write, to use oral and written language in all aspects, and to critically and effectively use oral and written language for all purposes (National Institute for Literacy Council Report, 1992). This definition involves critical thinking about what one reads as well as expanding the term to encompass oral forms of literacy. Blake and Hanley (1995) claim that the attribute of literacy is generally recognized as one of the key educational objectives of compulsory schooling. It refers to the ability to read and write to an appropriate level of fluency. However, there is no commonly accepted definition of what 'an appropriate level', 'effectively' or 'well' mean; there is no universal standard of literacy (Lawton & Gordon, 1996; Inglis & Aers, 2008; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012).

The literacy activities in the classroom are crucial. Following this perspective, the four literacy resources model (Luke & Peter, 1997) specified a set of practices that children need to participate in to develop into good readers: breaking the code of written texts, participating in understanding and composing meaningful written, visual and spoken texts, using texts functionally, and critically analyzing and transforming texts. Thus,

learning is crucial at early age; earlier research showed that children who lag behind in early years of reading and writing development encounter considerable difficulties in following education later on as texts get longer and more complicated (Myrberg, 2007).

Presently, more Iranians realize the importance of bilingual education, and parents tend to enroll their children in bilingual schools where they can learn English and Persian. Bilingualism turns out to be an experience that benefits many aspects of children's development (Barac & Bialystok, 2011). Despite the growing number of bilingual schools in Iran, the effect of bilingual education on the Persian literacy of young learners is unknown. There has been a large body of research on the influence of the first language on the second language (Harley, Cummins, Swain, & Allen 1990, Ovando & Collier, 1998), with the general result that mother tongue is indeed a significant factor in second language development (Bournot-Trites & Tallowitz, 2002), and the idea that L1 serves a supportive rather than a negative role as far as L2 oral development is concerned (Ovando & Collier, 1998, Aquino, 2012), but fewer research has been done on the influence of L2 learning on L1 literacy skills.

To examine whether the student's L1 language proficiency has any impact on L2 writing, Sasaki and Hirose (1996) indicated that weak writers reported translating more from L1 to L2 during writing than good writers did. In two subsequent studies, Sasaki (2002, 2004) found that novice writers translate more often from L1 to L2 than expert writers. Similarly, Wang and Wen (2002) concluded that less proficient writers used L1 far more than more proficient writers. In line with this, several studies reported that high proficiency writers switched more between L1 and L2 than low proficiency writers (Wang, 2003). Many studies have looked in detail at the composing process and strategies of L2 writers; however, few have examined the effect of Persian composing process and strategies to the EFL writing process. One area in which we still have a little understanding is the degree to which Persian pre-intermediate writers transfer their L1 literacy skills (reading and writing) to L2 writing.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

80 participants were selected in total to make the data collection possible. Then, 62 were finally selected as the final sample of the study. Some were high school students in Sari, studying at different grades of high schools, and some others were diploma holders. They had a chance to study at English language institutes in Sari or have been learning English for about 6 or more years in the school set curriculum. All were teenagers, both male and female, with their age ranging from 15 to 18, from different socio-economic backgrounds, and were all native speakers of Persian language, but a few of them were Turkish speakers, who were excluded from the study.

The participants were selected on the condition that they were pre-intermediate learners, because learners below this level have pretty little experience in language learning, and are not able to write a paragraph. Many of the learners below pre-

intermediate level might have never practiced writing English samples though they might have been good at writing Persian essays. All the participants who were selected were Persian native speakers, or at least had some experience in writing, so that they could write a sample for their L1 and L2. The researchers tried to maintain a balance between the number of male and female students selected for the study. Although the participants' gender was not the main variable in the study, it was taken into account in further analysis of the data.

## Instruments

Three instruments were used in the study.

1) Two L1 writing topics were given to the students, and they were required to write them in two separate sessions to avoid making any mistake or having any sort of confusion. Their writing tasks were scored by two raters, and the average of their L1 writing scores in the two tests was included in the data as a measure for their L1 writing ability.

2) Two L1 reading parts consisting of some paragraphs were given to the participants to read. The reading test was administered two times to the participants who were required to read some parts each time, and their scores in the two tests were averaged by the researchers to have a final score representing their reading ability in L1.

3) The participants were asked to write two English samples preferably two paragraphs because they were not familiar with writing English essays. Then, their writing samples were collected. To score writing papers, two scorers were employed. They marked the papers based on the allocated criteria for scoring writing.

It is worth mentioning that the sample data elicited from the participants were scored based on some well-established criteria. The three aforementioned tests were scored based on the following three criteria respectively.

a) A standard criterion for scoring Persian writing developed by Mohammadi, Najafi Pazoki and Akbari (1393) was used. Based on the 10 criteria, the raters assigned 4 credits for each criteria; thus, the total score was 40. Based on marking, the raters scored the students' Persian writing samples. Each student' L1 writing tasks in two samples, scored by the raters, were averaged and their final score was considered as their L1 writing ability. The scale for scoring was based on the following criteria:

1. Expanding the use of punctuation marks
2. Having beautiful and legible writing
3. Understanding the components of topic
4. Having the ability to choose a paragraph
5. Being able to write a narrative paragraph
6. Being able to write an introductory paragraph
7. Being able to write the body paragraphs
8. Being able to write a concluding paragraph

9. Being able to write multiple paragraphs (descriptive, narrative, etc.)
10. Having the ability to produce a coherent writing and its components (essay writing)

b) A standard criterion for scoring Persian reading developed by Mohammadi, Najafi Pazoki and Akbari (1393) was used in the study. Based on the 7 criteria, the raters assigned 4 credits for each criteria; thus, the total score was 28. Based on marking, the raters scored the students' Persian reading samples. For the ease of administration, the two raters at the same session scored their reading samples. Each student's L1 reading tasks in two samples, scored by the raters, were averaged and their final score was considered as their L1 reading ability. The scale for scoring was based on the following criteria:

1. Having the ability to read a text according to its content
2. Reading prose and poetry with the proper tone
3. Interpreting text information
4. Being familiar with conjunctions as linguistic tools coherence
5. Understanding the casual connections as linguistic tools coherence
6. Recognizing conjunctions meeting apposition as linguistic tools coherence
7. Understanding the signs and symptoms of rhetorical structure

c) The third scale which was used for scoring the students' English writing samples was the composition grading scale developed by Bailey and Brown (1984; cited in Farhady, et. al. 1994). Based on the scale, the students' two writing samples were scored by two raters based on the 5 criteria. Based on the 5 criteria, the raters assigned 4 credits for each criteria according to the detailed assessment of the scale; thus, the total score was 25. Then, the raters scored the students' English writing samples separately and in two different sessions. The raters were not informed of each other's scoring results. Each student's L2 writing tasks in two samples, scored by the raters, were averaged and their final score was considered as a measure for their L2 writing ability. The scale for scoring was based on the following criteria:

1. Organization: introduction, body, and conclusion
2. Logical development of ideas: content
3. Structure (accuracy)
4. Punctuations, spelling, and mechanics
5. Style and quality of expression

## Procedure

As a result of a library study, the researchers came up with a long list of concepts, and shortlisted to the most significant ones based on the literature. Then, the researchers looked for three research instruments for measuring three variables under the study. Later on, they selected samples of data from the students' L1 and L2. After finding the appropriate scales, they accounted for scoring the students' L1 literacy skills and L2 writing ability.

Two raters were employed to score the L1 and L2 writing samples as well as scoring the students' reading tasks. The tasks were scored by the two raters, then the students' scores were averaged for each skill. The researchers considered their final score as a measure of their writing or reading ability. Since each of the three criteria was already checked for their construct validity by the scholars who introduced them, the researchers only computed the inter-rater reliability of the tests.

While the students were taking the tests, and writing L1 or L2 samples, or reading some parts in their L1, the researchers monitored the data collection process very carefully, and tried to minimize any sort of intervention which might have destroyed the naturalness of the data. Besides, they patiently answered any question the participants asked regarding the tests, the procedure, the duration of the exam, etc., and offered clarifications whenever a participant could not understand the point of a question. Finally, the collected data were entered into SPSS software for the purpose of data analysis.

## RESULTS

To detect the relationship between the variables under the study, the Pearson correlation was computed. The results are shown in a Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Correlation between the Variables under the Study

		L1 writing	L1 reading	L1 literacy skills	L2 writing
L1 writing	Pearson Correlation	1	.369**	.921**	.717**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.003	.000	.000
	N	62	62	62	62
L1 reading	Pearson Correlation	.369**	1	.655**	.316*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003		.000	.012
	N	62	62	62	62
L1 literacy skills	Pearson Correlation	.921**	.655**	1	.688**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	62	62	62	62

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

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation between EFL learners' Persian (L1) writing ability and English (L2) writing ability proved to be statistically significant. The correlation coefficient was 0.717, which was statistically significant. This strong positive correlation between these two variables under the study shows that the more EFL learners' L1 writing ability, the more their L2 writing ability.

There is a significant correlation between the EFL learners' Persian reading and L2 writing. The results showed that the correlation between these two variables was not strong (0.316), but it was statistically significant. It was shown that there was a moderate positive correlation between these two variables.

The participants showed that their literacy skills in L1 and writing ability in L2 correlated. Not only has each single L1 literacy skill shown a positive correlation with

their L2 writing ability, but also the two L1 literacy skills; that is, reading and writing together, have shown high positive correlation (0.688) with their L2 writing ability.

**Table 2.** ANOVA results for the Variables under the Study by Gender

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
L1writing	Between Groups	14.22	1	14.22	1.801	.185
	Within Groups	473.66	60	7.89		
	Total	487.88	61			
L1reading	Between Groups	1.56	1	1.56	1.145	.289
	Within Groups	81.90	60	1.36		
	Total	83.47	61			
L2writing	Between Groups	.19	1	.19	.038	.845
	Within Groups	309.39	60	5.15		
	Total	309.59	61			

In further analysis, gender did not make a significant difference in the participants' scores. That is, male and female EFL learners performed similarly in L1 literacy skills (reading and writing) as well as L2 writing.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on a Pearson-product moment correlation used, the extent of the observed correlation between L1 writing and L2 writing was higher than the critical value. That is, there was a strong positive correlation between Persian writing ability and English writing skill ( $r_{xy} = 0.717$ ). The relationship between L1 reading and L2 writing was also taken into account. The learners showed a significant correlation in their performance in these two variables. Also, it was found that the participants performed quite similarly in their L1 literacy skills and L2 writing skill. The difference between the male and female EFL learners was not statistically significant. Thus, gender did not make a difference in the EFL learners' literacy skills in L1 and L2 writing.

Evidently, L1 writing ability positively and significantly correlated with L2 writing skill ( $r_{xy} = 0.717$ ). By computing the common variance or coefficient of determination, which is 0.514, it was concluded that there is 51 percent common variance (medium to high effect size) between L1 and L2 writing skill. In other words, 51 percent of the time as L1 writing goes high, L2 writing ability goes high as well, and vice versa. The above analysis showed that L1 reading ability moderately correlated with L2 writing skill ( $r_{xy} = 0.316$ ), and by computing coefficient of determination (0.099), it was concluded that almost 9 percent of the variance between these two variables; that is, L1 reading ability and L1 writing skill was shared. The correlation between the two L1 literacy skills and L2 writing skill proved to be 0.688. So, the common variance would be 0.473, that is, almost 47 percent of the variance between L1 literacy skills and L2 writing skill was shared. In other words, 43 percent of the time L1 literacy skills go high, L2 writing skill goes high as well, and vice versa.



On the one hand, the findings of this study confirm the early research that L2 language proficiency contributes to around 30 percent of variance in L2 reading ability (Bernhardt, 2005; Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995), and L2 proficiency tends to be a stronger predictor of L2 reading than L1 reading ability, especially for learners who are not yet advanced (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Bossers, 1991; Brisbois, 1995; Carrell, 1991; Lee & Schallert, 1997; Taillefer, 1996). As previous research shows, when learners are at a lower level of proficiency, they often rely more on their L2 language knowledge to facilitate their L2 reading comprehension, so L2 proficiency tends to play a greater role than does L1 reading ability.

On the other hand, the findings of this study failed to support the previous finding - that L1 literacy contributes between 14-21 percent of the variance in L2 reading (Bernhardt, 2005; Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995). There are two possible explanations for this outcome. First, Persian orthography is very different from English orthography, and there are almost few morphological or vocabulary cognates between the two languages. It is possible that the strong difference in orthographic and lexical knowledge interfered with (or had no positive impact on) reading English. According to Brown and Haynes (1985), the automatization of the basic skills of L1 literacy can be of little or no use in L2 reading by being too specific and well established for the L1. Moreover, the automated low-level L1 processes may actually interfere with the acquisition or operation of emerging L2 skills when the writing systems of the two languages are very different. In other words, readers practiced in one writing system might experience positive transfer or negative interference from lower-level L1 reading skills when attempting to master a new system, depending on the similarities and differences between the skills fostered by each of the two systems, and also depending on L2 proficiency level (Brown & Haynes, 1985; Haynes & Carr, 1990; Koda, 2007). Second, the measure of L1 literacy used in this study included both reading and writing, but most studies of this kind have tended to look at the role of L1 reading only. For this reason, the findings might not be directly comparable with previous studies.

The findings of this study not only imply conscious L2 learning in classroom but also strengthen the multi-competence view (Cook, 1992), which postulates that “there seems to be strong links between L1 ability and L2 classroom success, even if the results do not generalize for L2 learning outside the classroom” (p. 574). The results of this study might also indicate that if L2 learning is accompanied by intensive formal instruction and adequate motivation, it can have positive effects on the writing ability and syntactic complexity of the L1 of the learners.

These results are also in congruence with those obtained by Caskey-Sirmons and Hickson (1977), who concluded that the meanings of the words in L1 can, to a large extent, be influenced by the L2 words. Similarly, the findings of Kecskes (1998), which were deduced from a longitudinal experiment, demonstrated the positive and beneficial effects of the L2 on the syntactic structures of the L1 in three groups of high school students studying the L2 Russian, French, and English in different classroom settings. It

can be further concluded that intensive and successful L2 learning can have a beneficial effect on the development and use of L1 skills.

The results of this study almost demonstrate a qualitative increase in the L1 skills of the English major senior students who are intensively exposed to the L2 instruction for, at least, four years. It can, in fact, be contended that L2 learners may transfer the meaning system they already possess on their own to a new language.

It is recommended that L2 teachers take their students' L1 into consideration while teaching the key concepts or when elaborating on grammatical points in the classroom. L2 materials designers should also bear in mind that the users of their materials are not monolinguals but people who are already thinking and using an L2. It can also be claimed that such kind of L2 planning will not come true and bring about changes in the monolingual system unless, as claimed by Kecskes (1998, p. 336), "the language learning process is intensive enough and can rely on significant learner motivation."

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