

## **Toward a taxonomy of errors in Iranian EFL learners' basic-level writing**

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This study attempted at classifying common errors found in the written performance of lower- and upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. It engaged a rich corpus of EFL writing samples collected over a course of 20 years (between 1992 and 2011) from lower- and upper-intermediate EFL learners studying at various Iranian universities to provide a precise taxonomy of errors in basic-level EFL writing (i.e., single paragraphs and five paragraph essays). A total of 3157 sophomore EFL learners were included in this study, and from each of them five writing samples were collected. There was a total of 15785 texts in the corpus which contained a total of 5,150,205 words. Corder's (1981) framework for error analysis was implemented, and it was found that basic-level EFL writing errors could best be classified into three major categories: structural, discursive, and cognitive. Classroom procedures and teaching techniques that can help both teachers and learners to overcome the identified error types are discussed.

**Keywords:** Academic Writing; EFL Written Performance; Errors; Goofs; Iranian EFL Learners; Cognitive Errors

### **1. Introduction**

Second/Foreign language writing is a really hard skill to master. In Iran, a sizeable amount of curriculum time is allocated to the development of EFL writing, but the outcome is almost always disappointing. Learners graduate from university with a degree, but they are unable to write an acceptable error-free paragraph or essay in English. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the teaching of EFL writing in Iran is almost totally ad hoc. Serious attempts have been made by some university professors (e.g., the late Professor Rahbarnia, Professor Farhady, Professor Tahririan, Professor Maftoon *inter alia*) as well as text book writers (e.g., Birjandi, Alavi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2004; Salmani Nodoushan & Alavi, 2004) to alleviate this situation, but EFL writing teachers have failed to follow their lead and have been unable to live up to their academic duties. When it comes to the treatment of errors in EFL writing, teachers are faced with several questions: What are the most prevalent error types in my students' writing? Which error types are developmental and which are going to be fossilized errors? Which type of feedback should I provide? Answering each of these, and other

relevant, questions requires research. Random research studies that address various aspects of EFL writing have been conducted, but almost all of them have mainly been focused on master's and PhD levels or on university professors—e.g., Kazemi (2016), Salmani Nodoushan and Khakbaz (2011), Salmani Nodoushan and Montazeran (2012); the very few studies that were indeed focused on basic-level EFL writing at undergraduate level, and specifically lower- and upper-intermediate levels, have addressed issues other than the taxonomy of errors in EFL writing. The current study, therefore, is an attempt at closing this open circle. It engages a rich corpus of EFL writing samples collected over a course of 20 years (between 1992 and 2011) from lower- and upper-intermediate level EFL learners studying at various Iranian universities to provide a precise taxonomy of errors in basic-level EFL writing (i.e., paragraph writing and essay/composition writing).

## **2. Background**

Errors in second/foreign language learning/acquisition have stunned researchers and teachers for a long time so much so that a whole new branch of scholarly research named error analysis came to existence with the pioneering works of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and specifically in the 1960s and the 1970s—e.g., Burt and Kiparsky (1972), Corder (1967; 1981), Fisiak (1981), and James (1980), to name only a few. The burgeoning literature on FL/SL errors grew so large that Spillner (1991) dedicated a whole bibliography to error analysis.

Errors—also called goofs, albeit colloquially—have been distinguished from mistakes in that the former is always systematic in the sense that it is rule-governed, but the latter is random and is characteristic of performance not only in a second/foreign language but also in anxiety-prone pressure performance even in a mother tongue. In other words, an error testifies to the fact that a rule, be it mis-learned or developmental, is operating behind the performance scene, but a mistake only shows that the speaker's real-time performance has been affected by something from outside (e.g., anxiety, fatigue, etc.) (cf., Bussmann, 1996; Corder 1967, 1981; Ellis, 1994). In second language acquisition, error analysis is conducted with the aim of identifying the sources as well as types of language errors that learners make in the process of acquiring a new language. The process has been referred to as Interlanguage (IL); the assumption is that the learners' mother tongue is a solid system in its own right, that the target language is also a solid system in its own right, and that the learners' movement from the mother tongue to the target language is marked by an infinite number of incremental developmental phases/steps/stages/approximations that are all systematic and governed by developmental rules that are neither 100% L1-compliant nor 100% L2-compliant. The totality of such middle-of-the-road

approximative systems (or interim grammars) are called IL (Corder 1967, 1981; Ellis, 1994; James, 1980; Nemser, 1973; Selinker, 1973). It is commonly believed that the interim grammar rules which learners rely on to produce their IL performance turn up into systematic performance errors.

As Bussmann (1996) noted, error analysis has classified errors based on several classificatory principles which include:

- (1) Modality: This has to do with learners' level of language proficiency, and classifies errors found in their speaking, writing, reading, listening in accordance with their proficiency level.
- (2) Linguistic levels: This principle classifies errors according to the linguistic level (i.e., phonology, syntax, semantics, etc.) at which they occur.
- (3) Form: This principle envisages a native-language norm and classifies IL errors accordingly; it uses terms such as *substitution*, *omission*, *insertion*, etc. to classify IL errors.
- (4) Type: This principle operates on a more abstract theoretical plane and classifies IL errors in terms of their being systematic (i.e., competence-based) or ad hoc (i.e., performance-based).
- (5) Cause: This principle classifies errors based on the possible causes that trigger them in the first place. Terms such as *interference*, *interlanguage*, and the like are employed by this principle for the classification of errors.

Error analysis was indeed an alternative to the older behaviorist/structural approach to linguistic comparisons called contrastive analysis championed by Lado (1957) and supported by Sridhar (1981), Stern (1983), Filipovic (1984), and more recently—albeit in a revised form—by Connor (1996). Lado's assumption was that similarity (between languages) makes language learning an easy task and that the more a foreign language is similar to a learner's mother tongue, the easier it will be for him/her to learn it. Lado's pioneering work, *Linguistics Across Cultures*, spurred a lot of enthusiasm with contrastive analysis in the 1960s, but studies in the 1970s revealed that the notion of L1 interference which lay at the heart of Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) could not be sustained empirically (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982; Lado, 1957). Lado's approach, also known as the strong version of contrastive analysis had claimed 'predictive power', but research in the 1970s showed that, on the one hand, not all predicted errors were present in learners performance, and that, on the other hand, learners from different L1 backgrounds made some uniform errors which CAH had not predicted (Corder, 1967, 1973a; Jain, 1973; Schachter, 1974; Schachter & Celce-Murcia, 1971). In response to this, a moderate version came into existence which no longer predicted errors; rather, it adopted a retrospective *a posteriori*

perspective to explain errors. Similarity between languages was no longer a predictor of ease; rather, it was a source of confusion and perhaps many more errors. Nevertheless, the advancement of computer technology equipped contrastive analysis with the tools necessary for corpus-based multiple comparisons. This has paved the way for error analysis to thrive within contrastive analysis (James, 1980).

Indeed, error analysis was, in essence, a timely alternative to contrastive analysis. Expressed in a nutshell, error analysis works on the assumption that learners make IL errors because they make faulty and problematic inferences about the rules of the language they are learning. Nevertheless, error analysis has failed in the attainment of its original quest for a theory of learner errors; at best, it has been successful to account for some errors which pertain to productive skills (i.e., writing and speaking), but has failed to pinpoint errors in receptive skills (i.e., listening and reading) and to account for them. Even in the case of productive skills, error analysis has failed to pinpoint learners' use of communicative strategies—such as avoidance where learners refrain from using linguistic forms which they do not know well (James, 1980). In spite of this, error analysis is still used in studies that investigate learner language—i.e., interlanguage. Today, error analysis is closely tied to the study of error treatment in language teaching—cf., Gholami (2017), Nemati, Salmani Nodoushan and Ashrafzadeh (2010), and Salmani Nodoushan (2007a,b,c; 2010; 2014). According to Corder (1981), any typical EA research needs to take the following steps:

- collect samples of learner language,
- identify the errors,
- describe the errors,
- explain the errors, and
- evaluate/correct the errors.

The collection of errors is not a big challenge in studies that engage productive skills, but it is not an easy task when it comes to receptive errors. As Corder (1973b,c) rightly noted, error elicitation can involve clinical and experimental techniques. Clinical error elicitation is suitable for productive skills, but experimental error elicitation is best for receptive skills. In the former, a sample of productive performance (i.e., speech or writing) is collected and then inspected for errors. In the latter, however, specific experimental elicitation techniques (e.g., picture series) are designed to help the researcher to elicit specific features in learners' listening or reading.

The present study used the clinical approach. It engaged a rich corpus of EFL writing samples collected over a course of 20 years (between 1992 and 2011) from lower- and upper-intermediate level EFL learners studying at various

Iranian universities. The aim of the study was to identify and describe errors in Iranian EFL learners' basic-level written performance (i.e., in paragraph development and in essay/composition writing). By basic-level writing is meant two types of writing that are taught to sophomore Iranian EFL students (i.e., in semesters 3 and 4 at bachelor's level): (1) paragraph writing, and (2) five-paragraph essay/composition writing. These are obligatory courses that all Iranian EFL learners are expected to pass along with other courses to qualify for a bachelor's degree.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Corpus

The corpus consisted of both single paragraphs collected in bachelor's level 'advanced writing' courses and five-paragraph essays/compositions collected in bachelor's level 'essay writing' courses. Table 1 displays the specifications of the corpus.

Table 1  
*Specifications of the Corpus*

Year	No. of essays	No. of paragraphs	Total Samples	Total words
2011	330	275	605	200392
2010	455	400	855	279496
2009	410	385	795	255623
2008	440	370	810	267701
2007	450	405	855	277866
2006	470	375	845	282849
2005	440	360	800	266166
2004	425	390	815	263581
2003	450	350	800	269425
2002	460	370	830	277287
2001	390	335	725	238362
2000	455	395	850	278729
1999	415	355	770	253415
1998	425	300	725	249767
1997	355	425	780	235399
1996	385	370	755	241337
1995	410	405	815	258692
1994	430	410	840	269047
1993	410	340	750	248716
1992	365	400	765	236355
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,370</b>	<b>7,415</b>	<b>15,785</b>	<b>5,150,205</b>

From each EFL learner, five samples were collected over a course of 10 weeks in one semester (i.e., one sample every other week). For twenty years (i.e., during 40 university semesters and from 40 different groups of learners), a total number of 8370 five-paragraph essays and 7415 single paragraphs were collected. They were the assignments that the students had to write as their course work—not specifically meant for research purposes. As such, there was a total of 15785 texts in the corpus which contained an overall number of 5,150,205 words.

The collected corpus included texts on a range of descriptive and argumentative topics, and the texts collected included different techniques and methods of support in their rhetorical organization. The course book that the writers used in the advanced writing course was *Paragraph Development* (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1990), and the course book for the essay writing course was *The Process of Composition* (Reid, 1982). As such, the writers knew what was expected from them, but whether they were able to implement their knowledge in real practice was at stake.

The single paragraphs were collected from 3rd-semester sophomore students majoring in English who had taken the 'Advanced Writing' course. This course is offered in the third university term at bachelor's level. Freshmen take two four-credit 'Grammar and Writing' courses in their first and second terms; in the first 'Grammar and Writing' course, they become familiar with mechanics of writing and learn basic grammar and usage (i.e., tenses, concord, etc.). In other words, they learn how to write error-free simple sentences. In the second 'Grammar and Writing' course, they learn sentence combination; they learn how to combine simple sentences to form compound and complex sentences (i.e., subordination and coordination). These two 'Grammar and Writing' courses are prerequisite for the Advanced Writing course, which is taken in the third semester by sophomore students; in this course, students learn to combine sentences into unified paragraph on given topics. They learn to how to write correct topic sentences which they will then develop into unified paragraphs using appropriate techniques and methods of support. They learn how to write paragraphs of (a) exposition (i.e., enumeration, cause, effect, comparison, contrast, process, and chronology), (b) definition, and (c) argumentation. Students are expected to develop each assigned topic into a unified well-organized paragraph that includes between 150 and 200 words.

The five-paragraph essays/compositions were collected from 4th-semester sophomore students majoring in English who had taken the 'Essay Writing' course. This course follows the two 'Grammar and Writing' courses taken by freshman students and the 'Advanced Writing' course taken by third-semester sophomore students. Those courses are the prerequisites for 'Essay Writing', in which Iranian EFL students learn to combine paragraphs into five-

paragraph essays which have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The essay types that they learn to write are (a) expository (i.e., enumeration, cause, effect, comparison, contrast, process, and chronology), (b) argumentative, and (c) stipulated definition. They are expected to develop each of the assigned topics into a well-organized unified five-paragraph essay that contains between 450 and 700 words and has an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. They are expected to use appropriate cohesion and coherence techniques/devices, and to have the target readership in mind while doing the writing task.

### 3.2. Participants

Based on their semester-based grade point average (GPA) scores, the students whose written performance was sampled were assigned into either the lower-intermediate group (i.e., those whose single paragraphs were collected) or the upper-intermediate group (i.e., those whose five-paragraph essays were collected). Table 2 displays participants by group and year.

Table 2

*Description of Participants by Year and Level of Language Proficiency*

Year	Essay Group	Paragraph Group	Total People by Year
2011	66	55	121
2010	91	80	171
2009	82	77	159
2008	88	74	162
2007	90	81	171
2006	94	75	169
2005	88	72	160
2004	85	78	163
2003	90	70	160
2002	92	74	166
2001	78	67	145
2000	91	79	170
1999	83	71	154
1998	85	60	145
1997	71	85	156
1996	77	74	151
1995	82	81	163
1994	86	82	167
1993	82	68	150
1992	73	80	153
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,673</b>	<b>1,484</b>	<b>3,157</b>

The essay group consisted of upper-intermediate students and the paragraph group consisted of lower-intermediate EFL learners. All of the participants were students who studied English at a range of Iranian state and azad universities in Shiraz, Bandar Abbas, Bushehr, Tehran, Zanjan, Yazd, Kish Island, Shahr e Ghods, Shahriar, Karaj, and Takestan. The age range of over 93% of them was between 18 and 25 years, and less than 7% of them belonged in the 25-year-plus age range. All of the participants whose writing samples were collected were sophomore students studying for their bachelor's degree in English. The lower-intermediate group (i.e., the paragraph group) consisted of 1484 EFL learners, and the upper-intermediate group (i.e., the essay group) comprised 1673 EFL learners. On the whole, there were 3157 participants in this study from each of whom five writing samples were collected; each student's performance was sampled over 10 weeks in one semester. The collected texts were part of their regular course work—not specifically designed for research studies; hence, naturalistic data.

### 3.3. Procedure

The five samples collected from each EFL learner were meticulously inspected and compared for recurrent errors. Only the errors that were observed in all of the five samples written by each learner were classified as 'errors'. Those that were not consistently observed in all of the texts written by the same learner were categorized as random 'mistakes' or 'slips'. This was done in accordance with Corder's (1981) framework for error analysis (described above). The next step was to describe the errors; the errors were juxtaposed with their correct counterparts and tagged with labels that described (in a short phrase) what was wrong with the faulty item. Here is an example:

- (1) \*Last winter, my family and I travelled to the Kish Island. [article overuse]

Last winter, my family and I travelled to Kish Island.

The next step was to explain why each error did happen. This is discussed further in the discussion section below (section 5); to this end, each error was discussed with another colleague who taught the same courses (i.e., 'Advanced Writing' and 'Essay Writing'). The discussion continued until we both agreed on the causes of the errors. The final step was to evaluate the errors and to suggest classroom procedures which could help teachers and students to correct them.<sup>1</sup>

## 4. Results

The number of errors that were found in the five-paragraph essays amounted to a total of 55330 errors which indicates an average of 6.61 errors per essay.



Similarly, 34929 errors were found in the single paragraphs. This indicates an average of 4.71 errors per single paragraph. As such, a total of 90259 errors were found in the whole corpus which shows an average of 5.718 errors. Needless to say, errors found in the single-paragraph sub-corpus had been made by lower-intermediate writers, and the ones found in the five-paragraph essays had been made by the upper-intermediate writers.

The analysis of the errors revealed that they could be classified into three major classes: textual, discursive, and cognitive. Textual errors include those that have to do with the micro-structure of the text (i.e., mechanics of writing and syntax) as well the macro-structure of the text—i.e., rhetorical organization (including techniques and methods of support), paragraph unity, etc. Discursive (or meta-textual) errors are those that pertain to the discourse aspects of the text (i.e., cohesion and coherence). Cognitive errors are marked by a problem in the writers' thought processes (e.g., errors pertaining to readership, fallacies, anomalies, etc.). Nevertheless, most of the errors found in expository texts belonged in the first and second categories, but the majority of cognitive errors were found in argumentative texts. This does not mean that expository texts in the corpus were completely void of cognitive errors, but that such errors were much more frequent in argumentative texts. Table 3 displays the frequencies and percentages of error types in the corpus.

Table 3  
*Frequency and Percentage of Error Types in the Corpus*

	Textual		Discursive		Cognitive	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Essays	10232	18.49	28792	52.04	16306	29.47
Paragraphs	20104	57.56	9017	25.82	5808	16.63
Total	30336	76.05	37809	77.86	22114	46.1

As for textual errors, writers' level of language proficiency can account for the sharp difference between the lower-intermediate group (i.e., the paragraph group) and the upper-intermediate group (i.e., the essay group). The difference between the two groups in terms of discursive (or meta-textual) errors has to do with the fact that writing an essay requires mastery of many discursive features especially in essays that have an argumentative and controversial topic. After all, the majority of the paragraphs written by the lower-intermediate group had an expository structure, and their organization was therefore linear; however, essays cannot be organized linearly; rather, essay writers have to be familiar with hierarchical text organization. Finally, the difference between essays and paragraphs as it pertains to cognitive errors lies in the fact that the majority of paragraphs were expository, but a noticeable portion of the collected essays were argumentative in nature. As

such, essays are more vulnerable to cognitive errors since argumentation is a task that puts a lot of pressure of writers' thought processes and logic.

## 5. Discussion

The main kinds of textual errors that were found in the corpus included spelling or typographical errors, errors of capitalization, wrong use of the mechanics of writing (i.e., commas, semicolons, etc.), and errors of syntax. Although the writers had all passed 'Grammar and Writing' courses I and II, the occurrence of textual errors in their writing indicated that they had not achieved the goals of those courses. Once a student enters the third term of his bachelor's education, (s)he is expected to know the grammar of English and its mechanics of writing. As far as syntax is concerned, errors of concord (i.e., subject-verb agreement), faulty sub-categorization (i.e., malformed predicates), run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and article over- and under-use were the most prevalent errors—in that order.

Nevertheless, this situation could have been completely avoided; the only measure against such errors is to make sure that under-achievers do not find their way to advanced writing and essay writing classes. Before the revolution, this was the case, and underachievers had two options: (1) to live up to what was expected from them, or (2) to drop out. After the revolution, however, the situation has changed, and students do graduate from university no matter what; there is unfortunately a whole population of people with graduate degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) who are unable to obtain a pass score on standardized tests of language proficiency (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, etc.). The situation is bizarre, everyone knows this, but no one does anything. The very few odd ones who had the foresight to see what the country was gradually going through—long before it actually happened—have been laid off. As a consequence, TEFL in present day Iran is a field that has been on auto-pilot for the past four decades or so, just like a stone that wanders in empty space.

Meta-textual (or discursive errors) observed in the corpus could partly be attributed to the participants failure in their 'Grammar and Writing II' course, where they had been supposed to learn how to combine simple sentences and make compound or complex sentences. Cohesion in a paragraph or an essay requires mastery of grammar and a correct computation of logical relations between events. The meta-textual errors that the participants in this study made testify to the fact that they lacked such a mastery which, in turn, failed them to used appropriate cohesion in their written performance. The corpus was fraught with errors such as wrong topicalization, faulty dangling constructions, wrong use of link-words, wrong word order, parcellation, mixing of direct and indirect speech, and other types of logical errors. Many of

these errors can be eradicated if writing teachers use appropriate materials in their classes—e.g., *The gooficon: A repair manual for English* by Burt and Kiparsky (1972). Another classroom technique is to provide students with corrective feedback; teachers can use a variety of corrective feedback forms (cf., Salmani Nodoushan, 2007a and 2010) or resort to focus-on-form techniques (Gholami, 2017).

Perhaps the most interesting error category found in the corpus was the category of cognitive errors. Such errors are not linguistic in nature; rather, they stem from learners' thought processes and patterns but turn up into linguistic and logic errors in writing (and perhaps speech). In an essay in which student had been asked to write an expository essay in which they would describe a wonder of nature, Tahereh<sup>2</sup> (a sophomore student who had taken the Essay Writing course in a university in Shiraz in 1998) had described Behesht e Gomshodeh, a valley near Shiraz; in her essay, Tahereh had written:

- (2) \*The height of the valley was stunning. [cognitive error]  
The depth of the valley was stunning.

This error clearly shows a transfer of thought patterns from Persian to English. In other words, Tahereh had thought in Persian and had then translated her thought into English. In Persian, the speaker is the point of reference, and Persian sentences—except for scientific texts—often use this point of reference to show proximity or distance. Standing inside the valley and looking upward, Tahereh uses her own self as the point of departure and assumes that the valley has height, not depth. Teachers should draw their students' attention to the fact that different languages likely follow different thought patterns; they should help their students to develop the ability to think in English.

A similar case was observed in another text written by Mohsen, a student studying English at Zanjan University in 2006:

- (3) \*That afternoon, he was going to cinema and asked if I would come with him. [cognitive error]  
That afternoon, he was going to cinema and asked if I would go with him

Transfer of L1 thought patterns is not the only predictor of cognitive errors. Quite often, poor study skills also result in cognitive errors. In Persian, *hæ'l kærðæn* is an infinitive that means both 'to solve' and 'to dissolve'. Describing her brother's handling of a problem, Mandana—an EFL student at Bushehr Azad university in 2001—had written:

- (4) \*Finally my brother could dissolve the problem. [cognitive error]  
 Finally, my brother could solve the problem.

This error had popped up because Mandana had used a Persian-to-English dictionary to find the English equivalent of *hæɫ kærɔdæn*. However, she had used the very first equivalent that she had seen in the dictionary and had failed to also check the other equivalents. This is a wrong study skill habit. However, the outcome of such a habit is mistaken for a cognitive error. Teachers should encourage their students to cross check Persian-to-English equivalents in an English-to-English dictionary to make sure they are not using a word in the wrong co-text. An alternative technique would be to teach students how to use the *Roget's thesaurus: Synonyms and antonyms* (by Roget, 1978). This has been extremely helpful in classes where I taught my students to consult the thesaurus for appropriate words. See also the following examples:

- (5) \*This concubine does not exist in English. [cognitive error]  
 This rule does not exist in English.
- (6) \*When I saw those branded mothers, I could . . . . [cognitive error]  
 When I saw those bereaved mothers, I could . . . .

Logical fallacies comprise another set of cognitive errors. Tautology, hasty conclusions, circular definitions, post hoc ergo propter hoc, red herring, straw man fallacy, using vice and virtue words, and many other kinds of logical fallacies were observed in the corpus. Such errors—although not linguistic—signal the students' lack of writing competency. A discussion of such errors is beyond the scope of the present paper, but interested readers are invited to see Cummings (2018) and Salmani Nodoushan (2016).

The pragmatic side of the issue is also very important; writing tasks are supposed to be done with an eye on the target readership. Writing does not take place in a vacuum; it is done so that a target readership will read it. As such, writing is interactive, and like any other kind of interaction, it is bound by pragmatic principles and maxims. Students need to learn pragmatics to be able to write suitable texts for their target audience. This goal is not often met in Advanced Writing and Essay Writing courses in Iran—which are often taught in a mechanical way. The result of such an oversight is quite often texts that are pompous, bombastic, verbose, monotonous, and so forth. Teachers of writing should be encouraged to draw their students' attention to the importance of pragmatics for writing.

A last point which needs attention here is the issue of native-speaker (NS)

versus non-native-speaker (NNS) models of the English language. Preferring the NS to NNs models, as James Dean Brown puts it, implies that:

. . . Inner-circle British and/or American Englishes are better than the Outer-circle Englishes of say India, Singapore, or the Philippines; that NNSs are somehow broken and need to be fixed by turning them into NSs; and that, by extension, NNSs are somehow inferior to NSs (notice that non-native speakers are non-, implying that they lack something, and what they lack of course is nativeness).

(Brown & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015, p. 137)

Brown tacitly suggests that, since foreign language learners might never need English for communication with native speakers, it is perhaps better if such learners are “taught some relatively manageable and learnable form of English like English as an international language (EIL) or English as a lingua franca (ELF) based on their actual local needs to communicate in English” (Brown & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015, pp. 138-139). Nevertheless, the syntactic, semantic, stylistic structures and other aspects of EIL and/or ELF—as well as other kinds of English—have not been studied and documented well yet, so it is not an easy job for teachers to want to train their students in any of these types of World Englishes (WEs). By way of contrast, both British and American English have been studied by many linguists, lexicographers, etc., and there are valid trustworthy course books for the teaching of their grammar, pronunciation, morphology, and so forth.

It seems, to me at least, that Iranian EFL learners will be much safer if they are taught either British English or American English. After all, when it comes to the treatment of learners’ errors and the provision of remedial instruction and corrective feedback, both learners and teachers will find it much easier to juxtapose learners’ language with already-existing British or American standards which will help learners to acquire correct linguistic forms. A book like *Practical English Usage* (Swan, 1980), for instance, juxtaposes faulty usage forms (or typical mistakes) with their correct standard counterparts and then provides easy explanations that can help learners to internalize correct usage. In providing corrective feedback, teachers can adopt a similar approach to cope with their students’ errors. Nevertheless, some would counter-argue that the very act of exposing students to bare wrong forms is a kind of mal-teaching, but my experience as an EFL teacher for the past 26 years has proven the reverse; Iranian EFL learners ‘do’ benefit from such juxtapositions.

## 6. Conclusion

All in all, the analysis of the corpus for this study shows that the quality of EFL programs in Iran has unfortunately been deteriorating regularly since 1992 when I started teaching advanced writing and essay writing courses for the

first time. The number of textual errors that are observed in current EFL learners' basic written performance, when juxtaposed with their counterparts in 1992, reveals that grammar and writing courses that are prerequisites for advanced writing and essay writing are not receiving due attention. A huge percentage of EFL teachers are grotesquely invalid—which is unfortunately a bizarre situation. The very small percentage of teachers who are proficient and valid either have no power to change anything or have become numb after their many attempts at putting things right have all failed.

Additionally, the tolerance of British and American Englishes to the sub-standard or non-standard so-called world Englishes—or what I would call 'disfigured' Englishes—has had a dire effect on the teaching of English as a Foreign/Second Language (TEFL/TESL), and many lazy people have found it a valid pretext to shun their responsibility to learn standard grammar and diction. It seems as if the British and the American are blind to the fact that their tolerance to sub- or non-standard Englishes will, at the end of the day, result in the 'unintelligibility' of the English language—which reminds me of the fall of the Tower of Babel. It seems that the pidginization-creolization continuum is working in the opposite direction to change the English 'language' into a set of anomalous unintelligible 'pidgin' Englishes which the American and the British have embraced with joy and are happy with. Unless policy makers in the UK, the US, and other Inner-circle English-speaking countries wake up from their complacency and open their eyes to what is going on right under their noses, the English language that we once knew and cherished will soon become history.

#### **Notes:**

1. Part of the data used in this paper was available in 2004; it led to the development of the book, *Advanced Writing* (by Birjandi, Alavi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2004), which aspired to inculcate standard EFL writing in bachelor's students, but certain people's grip on power and monopoly prevented its re-publication and continued success.
2. This and other names are aliases used to make sure the participants' real identities remain confidential.

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