

## **Exploring Iranian Postgraduate EFL Students' Academic Writing Experiences and Expectations: A Dynamic Narrative Approach**

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### **Rajab Esfandiari (corresponding author)**

Imam Khomeini International University, Iran  
<esfandiari@hum.ikiu.ac.ir>

### **Hussein Meihami**

Imam Khomeini International University, Iran  
<meihami@hum.ikiu.ac.ir>

### **Fatemeh Jahani**

Imam Khomeini International University, Iran  
<fatemehjahani72@yahoo.com>

### **Abstract**

In spite of the existence of writing courses for postgraduate students in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts, their academic writing proficiency remains low. Therefore, EFL students' academic experiences and expectations need to be explored to identify their needs. To this end, a dynamic narrative approach was adopted to examine the academic experiences and expectations of 21 Iranian postgraduate EFL students qualitatively. The narratives were analyzed based on their plots, values, and significance, adapted from Daiute (2014). The findings revealed that EFL students linked their challenges to insufficient and improper instructions. Furthermore, they asserted that their needs are ignored, and teachers use different criteria and expectations to evaluate their writing. On the whole, students' expectations about writing courses did not align with their actual experiences. The findings of this study about EFL students' experiences and expectations draw curriculum designers' and teachers' attention to those aspects of academic writing that need to be reconsidered. Understanding the actual requirements of writing courses can bridge the gap between teachers' and students' expectations.

**Keywords:** Academic writing, EFL students, Experiences and Expectations, Narratives

## **Student and Teacher Expectations in an Academic Writing Course**

Academic writing poses formidable challenges to EFL students in tertiary education because it differs considerably from other types of writing such as creative writing. L2 writing researchers have presented some reasons to explain the challenging nature of academic writing. For example, Fitzmaurice and O'Farrell (2015) pointed out that academic writing is highly conventionalized, follows strict rules to be fully developed, and is based on factual evidence. Similarly, Hyland (2019) noted that L2 student writers need a wide range of knowledge and experience to write academically in English, including grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Previous research (see Zotzmann & Sheldrake, 2021, for an update) has also pointed to individual learner differences, language and strategy differences, and cultural differences which make L2 academic writing hard for L2 students to master. As such, when students enter university, they experience a distinct writing genre which is conceptually, stylistically, and structurally different and, as Nesi and Gardner (2012) neatly put it, "there is considerable confusion amongst students and writing instructors regarding the kinds of writing students are required to produce across disciplines and levels of study" (p. 3).

Due to the significance attached to academic writing instruction, several L2 writing scholars have focused their attention on how it should best be taught. To Coffin et al. (2003), for instance, academic writing is an important dimension of the curriculum in which students are not explicitly taught its principles, but they are just expected to follow the established standard conventions. Such an implicit conceptualization of academic writing confirms Lea's (2004) claim that academic writing has not received the attention it deserves by curriculum designers because the assumption is that it will take care of itself in the absence of explicit instruction. Additionally, some other researchers (e.g., Giridharan, 2012; Habibie, 2015; Magyar, 2011) argue that academic writing is an academic literacy skill which requires explicit instruction and is a longitudinal process during which students need strategic, rhetorical, and linguistic support to develop it.

EFL students' writing expectations and experiences need to be considered in writing courses. For instance, in Iran, the Master of Arts (MA) academic course of writing offered for the students majoring in the English language runs only for a single semester, and the purpose is to throw light on how to deal with paragraph writing and the prerequisite skills for writing research proposals, without seeking their opinions about what they actually need. Although MA EFL students receive credit courses in writing to hone their academic writing skills, the teachers' syllabi do not necessarily meet their expectations (Ferris & Eckstein, 2021; Zotzmann & Sheldrake, 2021). It is usually argued that students are not able to determine their needs, and that only teachers can decide on the "what" and "how" of learning materials (Nunan, 1990). Similarly, Miller and Satchwell (2006) believed that because writing teachers are knowledgeable enough, they have the right to tell students what they need to study. However, much earlier, Vivian and Zamel's (1990) findings showed the significant role of students' beliefs, expectations, and perspectives in helping policy makers and curriculum developers account for their different writing needs. As Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) asserted, to select teaching materials and develop writing assignments, teachers need to consider different learner backgrounds, experiences, and expectations of their students. In this regard, Prenger and Schildkamp (2018) argued that examining students' experiences and expectations could bring about a deeper understanding of the course development in the related departments.

EFL students' actual writing needs, expectations, and experiences appear to have been neglected in writing research. Zhai (2021) noted that, in L2 settings, L2 writing teachers mainly rely on their

intuitions to determine their students' writing needs. In addition to the ignorance of students' needs, the curriculum reforms have mainly focused on some fixed and national learning standards. In the context of Iran, for instance, while a considerable part of the writing research has been carried out on academic writing (e.g., Hosseinpour et al., 2019; Jahangard et al., 2020), the students' experiences and expectations concerning their needs in academic writing have not been explored. An accurate understanding of expectation-experience alignment will help curriculum designers and teachers make decisions that conform to students' needs (Darici, 2016, Derakhshan & Karimian Shirejini, 2020; Irvin, 2010). Thus, the present study sought to understand EFL students' experiences and expectations concerning academic writing to offer insights into the content and process of teaching and learning contexts. The specific research questions that guided the present study are as follows:

1. What are the Iranian EFL students' academic writing experiences during their MA program?
2. What writing literacy practices do Iranian EFL students expect to develop during their MA program?

## **Literature Review**

In the following paragraphs, we review the related concepts concerning academic writing and approaches to teaching academic writing. We also explain the theoretical underpinnings of the present study. Finally, we examine the empirical studies, focusing on EFL students' experiences in academic writing.

### *Academic Writing*

Academic writing can be theoretically explained through the notion of community of practice (CoP). As Wenger (1998) argued, through CoP theory, learning is achieved through participation in an event in which individuals engage in the "practices of social communities to construct identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). Given the importance of CoP, Wenger et al. (2002) defined it as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). From this point of view, writing for academic purposes is the area that students who participate in it prefer to deepen their knowledge about, thereby engaging in academic phenomena, creating a new image of themselves as academic writers, and constructing and reconstructing their academic identity in writing CoP in which they tend to become academic writers. Such argumentation confirms Dudley-Evans and St John's (1998) social-constructionist approach to writing, which views writing as a social act, and the individual writers need to be aware of the setting in which they are writing. Consequently, each specific context imposes some restrictions on writers about what to write and how to express their ideas, and the writers' product reflects the community's expectations, values, and norms, as Klimova (2012) commented.

Academic writing tends to be discipline-specific. Previous research has shown considerable disciplinary writing variations in the ways writers structure academic text types (e.g., research articles) rhetorically, employ various linguistic resources, exploit discipline-specific strategies, and present arguments and counterarguments, among others (see Xiaofei et al., 2021 for an update). A staunch advocate of specificity of academic writing, Hyland (2009) asserted that "each discipline draws on different lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical resources to create specialized knowledge ... and learners are required to think their way into their disciplines by learning to craft

their writing in community-specific ways” (p. 21). Cortes (2004), for example, reported more instances of lexical bundles, recurrent word combinations, in published biology academic research articles (RA) than in history RAs. Research on discipline-specific nature of academic writing has also revealed that legal writing is characterized by “its frequent use of formal words, deliberate use of expressions with flexible meanings, attempts at extreme precision, and complex syntactic constructions” (Northcott, 2013, p. 214), while medical writing draws on Latinized vocabulary, passivization, distancing, and concessive clauses (Ferguson, 2013). Last but not least, researchers working in the Sydney school and following a genre-based approach to academic disciplinary writing (e.g., Martin, 2015; Martin et al., 2020) claim that writing in one discipline differs considerably from that in another one because text types in each discipline differ. As an example, as Robinson et al. (2008) noted, writing a lab report in chemistry is characteristically different from that of a morning report in medicine because, as two distinct genres, each has a specific purpose, an overall structure, specific linguistic features, and is shared by the members of the same disciplinary culture and the discourse community.

Academic writing does not necessarily involve adding one idea to the next one to make it coherent. Irvin (2010) is very clear when he first clarifies some misconceptions about academic writing and then argues that students need to read, interpret, summarize, synthesize, and integrate many skills to develop successful academic writing. Furthermore, academic writing also reflects the stance writers take concerning the points they address and their identity in the writing process. Therefore, as Lea and Street (1998) explained, academic writing is a kind of socialization in which writers tend to identify themselves with the members of the particular writing community, voice their concern about social phenomena, and adopt an attitude when discussing a point.

### *Approaches to Teaching Academic Writing*

Over the years, many approaches, which mostly reflect theoretical perspectives, have been proposed for teaching academic writing. One of the most widely-cited writing approaches in higher education was introduced by Lea and Street (1998), who explained that academic writing instruction is formed by one of the following three models: Study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies. As Lea and Street (1998) noted, the traditional study skills model is based on the surface language features that can be transferred from one context to another. Academic socialization is concerned with acculturation within a disciplinary context. Unlike the traditional model, academic socialization focuses on the disciplines in which writing is practiced. The primary focus of the model is on the textual conventions, or genres of the concerned discipline. However, as Lea and Street (2006) pointed out, like the study skills model, academic socialization takes no notice of the context and some other aspects influencing students’ writing competence. The third model of writing, academic literacies, posits that writing is not a single process, but it involves writers’ identities, contexts, and cultures (Neely, 2005). Lafaye and Tsuda (2002) also asserted that students’ experiences and perceptions of writing are critical in this model because this model helps to have a clear understanding of students’ struggles and problems in writing. Much earlier, Cohen (1993) cited a number of studies, the findings of which showed that the gaps between teachers’ expectations and students’ perceptions might explain students’ problems in writing. From Lillis and Scott’s (2008) point of view, one of the primary purposes of academic literacies is to explore students’ perceived problems in writing. Thus, students’ experiences and expectations play a critical role in teaching academic writing at universities.

Academic writing is a product of many facts, including audience, purpose, and style which writers need to consider before writing. As Swales and Feak (1994) claimed, for most graduate students,

the audience is an instructor. Therefore, if the student wants to be successful in the assigned writing task, he/she needs to be aware of the instructor's expectations and experiences since they affect the student's writing (Dornyei, 2001). Williams (2003), moreover, believed that many factors in second language writing pertain to teachers' attitudes and expectations. Although teaching writing improves with practice and classroom experience, teachers' decisions are always based on their beliefs and theories about the notion and process of writing (Hyland, 2003). Leki and Carson (1997) argued that most research focusing on teaching neglected students' experiences and voices in academic writing literacy. Furthermore, Asaoka and Usui (2003) suggested that teachers have a supporting role and welcome students' ideas and plans, especially when they are at advanced proficiency levels.

Although students in tertiary education participate in academic writing for various purposes, and writing teachers try to consider students' satisfaction with regard to the received education, their perceptions of needed support appear to have been ignored. As Gopee and Dean (2013) admitted, L2 writing teachers very rarely seek their students' opinions about what they need to cover in writing courses. Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) also noted that teachers need to consider the students' unique backgrounds, experiences, and expectations which they bring to the writing classroom. Among many factors affecting writing, Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020) found that professors and students' attitudes are crucial and prominent since students' expectations sometimes interfere with the professors' beliefs about what components need to be included in writing programs. Consequently, this kind of discrepancy leads to unsatisfactory written products.

#### *Theoretical Underpinning of the Present Study*

Narrating is the process of interacting between expressions and contexts in which the characters and events are the prominent issues. Accordingly, it can be stated that "the power of narrative is not so much that it is about life but that it interacts in life" (Daiute, 2014, p. 2). This interaction is the manifest of the phenomenon, such as the EFL students' narratives of experiences and expectations concerning academic writing. Thus, narrative studies help researchers obtain individuals' experiences in different contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This way, researchers can delve into the essence of the phenomenon to understand the contexts comprehensively.

As the theoretical framework of the current study, the dynamic narrative approach is based on the tenet that narrating can mediate between narrators' experience, knowledge, and learning (Daiute, 2014). Therefore, the dynamic narrative approach can help researchers to obtain the phenomenon under study by acknowledging the interactions among narrators' experience, knowledge, and learning. Moreover, using the dynamic narrative approach, researchers can go through a sense-making process to understand how an individual experiences a phenomenon. This approach is based on four principles, including use, relation, materiality, and diversity (Daiute, 2014), which are used to design a narrative study in which researchers can utilize them to collect, analyze, and interpret narratives.

The use principle suggests that discourse is an activity (Daiute, 2014). To put it simply, it means that the narratives, when authored by the individuals who do a specific action, will be much more conducive to showing researchers how they experience a phenomenon. Moreover, the relation principle asks for researchers' attention to the audience, time, and place since "recounting the same event at another time, in another place, or in another social arrangement would provoke some change in the meaning" (Daiute, 2014, p. 21). Furthermore, the materiality principle is an account for the fact that narrating is the manifest of actual life. Thus, different features of real life should

be considered when researchers conduct a narrative study through a dynamic narrative approach. Finally, as the name suggests, the diversity principle focuses on the importance of differences within and across individuals. Based on this principle, researchers should take into account “narrators’ stances—purposes, feelings, and thoughts—in relation to their audiences at the time of telling” (Daiute, 2014, p. 25). These principles were operationalized in the current study (see research design: a dynamic narrative approach) to address the purpose of this investigation.

### *Empirical Studies on Students’ Experiences and Expectations in Academic Writing*

In this section, we report on and summarize the findings of some very few studies which have explored students’ experiences and expectations in academic writing. Akcaoglu's (2011) research study was one of the first needs analysis studies that dealt with students’ expectations. In his study, the academic writing needs and self-efficacy beliefs of graduate students were examined. Two hundred and thirteen students majoring in an English-medium university in Ankara, Turkey participated in his study. Through a comprehensive survey instrument consisting of 68 items and eight sections, data were collected and analyzed. The results indicated that possessing a large number of vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions, selecting correct words, and drawing conclusions based on the written tasks were three main areas these students expected to know. Two factors were identified to account for the students’ academic writing needs: productivity-related (text organization) academic writing needs and accuracy-related (grammar-related rules) writing needs. Additionally, the graduate students’ academic status (being an MA or a PhD student) played a significant role in determining their writing needs. Although the findings of the present study were based on a relatively large number of students, the analyses of data were purely quantitative and, as a result, the results do not give us a complete picture of the reasons for those expectations.

In a mixed-methods study, Ntereke and Ramoroka (2013) included another dimension of the effectiveness of academic writing instruction from students’ points of view. Their study included 46 first-year students at the University of Botswana. They noted that most studies focused on improving pedagogy and ignored considering students’ views on writing instruction. Therefore, they aimed to explore students’ perceptions of academic writing effectiveness presented in their department courses. Thus, qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires formed the design. Although students felt that the provided activities were beneficial to writing an essay, most of them complained that more time should have been allocated to preparing them for essay writing, and they needed a lot of practice exercises, such as collecting and synthesizing information from different sources. Compared to Akcaoglu’s (2011) research study, which was based on quantitative analysis, Ntereke and Ramoroka’s study included a qualitative component, but findings in the present study have to be treated with caution because they are based on the data from a very small number of students, and external validity is an issue.

In a qualitative study, Morton et al. (2015) conducted a case study about the perceptions of three multilingual students on their academic writing. Thus, their study focused on students’ perceptions of what it meant to do academic writing at university. This research was based on the academic literacies model at one of the largest universities in Australia. It lasted over two 12-week semesters (as it was a longitudinal qualitative study), including three international students. The results from interview data identified the influence of students’ main disciplines on their beliefs and attitudes towards academic writing. Furthermore, the results pointed to socio-academic relations, which means students’ academic writing development depends on interpersonal relations in writing. Using these findings, Morton et al. (2015) suggested that writing programs need to recognize the

differences in students' past and present literacy experiences. This case study was small in scale, but the findings provide us with an in-depth analysis of what students perceive to be the salient variables in academic writing programs.

Although some studies have been done to investigate different aspects of academic writing (as the review of the literature shows), studies concerning the essence of the phenomenon of postgraduate students' experiences and expectations about academic writing are lacking. It means that the relation between the phenomenon, the academic writing, and the postgraduate students' experiences and expectations should be addressed to help researchers better understand the whole phenomenon. Such a rationale motivated us to address this gap, using a dynamic narrative approach (Daiute, 2014) to study Iranian MA EFL students' experiences and expectations. The reviewed literature in the preceding paragraphs also shows a lack of research concerning how EFL learners experience academic writing and what literacy practices they expect to be included in their academic writing programs. This may be critical to developing future academic writing programs based on EFL students' needs (Asadolahi & Nushi, 2021; Cohen, 1993; Lea & Street, 1997; Nushi & Razdar, 2021) as critical stakeholders of these programs. Last but not least, previous studies have focused on EFL learners' problems in their academic writing courses and have not addressed their experiences and expectations. Thus, the current study addressed this gap by adopting a dynamic narrative approach to delve into the Iranian MA EFL learners' experiences and expectations with their academic writing courses during their MA program.

Given the argumentation in the previous paragraph, the present study differs from previous similar studies in the following ways. The present study uses a new approach known as dynamic narrative inquiry as the qualitative research methodology and employs biographical narratives as the qualitative research techniques to help us to collect the lived experiences and expectations of Iranian MA EFL students narrated in their MA programs and interpret them in light of this dynamic framework. Therefore, methodologically, this novel qualitative research methodology and its concomitant qualitative research techniques provide us with an in-depth analysis of the writing narratives, which case studies or simple interviews cannot produce. Second, most qualitative writing studies (most specifically in Iran) have focused on writing problems students experience during the writing process and have not explored the experiences they gain during the writing process, or the expectations they may have during their writing programs, so the analyses of these lived experiences help syllabus designers and curriculum developers to incorporate students' voices in writing programs to meet their actual writing needs to operate well both during their writing programs and in their independent writing. Finally, in the present study, we have used a relatively large sample size (21 MA students), compared to other qualitative studies which have included a very small number of participants (e.g., three cases) on a single research site.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

This study was based on a dynamic narrative approach in which “narrating mediates experience, knowledge, learning, and social change” (Daiute, 2014, p. 4). The chief reason for addressing the purposes of this study through a dynamic narrative approach was that narrating is considered a “conductor of human influence on the object of activity . . . externally oriented . . . aimed at mastering and triumphing over nature . . . and . . . as a means of internal activity aimed at mastering one's self” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). Consequently, if approached dynamically, narratives can be a means to achieve the internal activities that individuals aim to do. This way, the dynamic narrative

approach can be a robust indicator of individuals' experiences of a specific phenomenon since it is directly associated with individuals' internal activities. That said, the researchers were able to delve into the experiences of EFL learners by going through the principles of the dynamic narrative approach, including use, relation, materiality, and diversity (Daiute, 2014).

The rationale behind selecting a dynamic narrative approach to conduct this study was twofold. First, using a dynamic narrative approach helped us obtain the MA students' essence of the phenomenon concerning academic writing experiences. Second, this approach helped us reach MA students' expectations about academic writing. These two reasons were explored through the nature of the dynamic narrative approach which, when done appropriately through its four principles explained below, can help researchers reach the internality of experiences and actions done by the participants (Daiute, 2014); thus, it was an appropriate design used in the current study.

The four principles (use, relation, materiality, and diversity) of the dynamic narrative approach were operationalized to conduct this study through the guidance provided by Daiute (2014). The use principle was addressed in two ways in the current study based on Daiute's (2014) guidance. First, the researchers selected the EFL learners who had experienced academic writing courses and had critical stances concerning academic writing. Second, we assured the participants that they could comfortably assert their critical stances in their written or oral narratives.

We addressed the relation principle in two ways. First, we allowed the research participants to produce more than one narrative. Second, we took into account the circumstances in which the participants experienced academic writing. The materiality principle was addressed in this study by focusing on the physical features, such as repetitions, exclamation marks, prosaic expressions, etc. Next, the researchers examined the narratives authored by the participants for their physical features. Moreover, when analyzing the narratives, we meticulously addressed the meanings associated with the elements in the narratives.

Finally, we addressed the diversity principle to design the study based on the dynamic narrative approach. According to Daiute (2014, p. 25), the diversity principle can be described as the "differences within and across individuals and groups in narrators' stances—purposes, feelings, and thoughts—in relation to their audiences at the time of telling." We selected our narrators from different universities in Iran who experienced academic writing in different contexts to address this point.

### *Participants*

To align with the research design described above, the researchers used criterion sampling (Ary et al., 2014). This selection was used because we needed to have the narratives of the EFL students who had critical stances concerning academic writing. Thus, in recruiting the participants, we selected those who had critical experiences in academic writing, including the materials, instructions, methodology, etc. The study comprised 21 Iranian MA students majoring in English Language Teaching. It is crucial to note that the participants' critical experiences in academic writing were gauged through an interview done by the researchers, so those students who experienced academic writing challenges of materials, instructions, methodologies, etc. during their MA programs were selected to participate in the study. Initially, 38 students agreed to participate in our study. However, after interviewing them, it was revealed that just 21 of the students had critical experiences concerning academic writing during their MA programs. We, therefore, used the data from these 21 students for inclusion in our study. These participants were of both genders (8 males and 13 females) aged between 23 and 35. They were from different



universities in Iran, namely Imam Khomeini International University (9 students), Islamic Azad University of Qazvin (7 students), Allameh Tabataba'i University (1 student), Alzahra University (2 students), University of Zanjan (1 student), and Kharazmi University (1 student). All of them were senior MA students and had passed academic writing in the time of doing this study.

The ethical procedures were considered to secure participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality. We informed them about the purpose of the study, and although participation in the study was voluntary, we asked them to feel free to drop out of the study during the research. Furthermore, we assured them that their identity would be kept confidential. Moreover, we used numerical pseudonyms whenever we wanted to refer to their narratives. In addition, their agreements about whether we were allowed to use the extracts of their narratives in our final report were obtained. Therefore, we took all reasonable precautions to ensure that the participants' rights would not be violated.

#### *The Data: Biographical Narratives*

The sources of data in the current study were autobiographical narratives. The primary reason for using autobiography as the source of data was that it can be instrumental in investigating the dynamic features when addressing a topic (Freeman, 2007). Moreover, when authoring autobiographical narratives about their experiences concerning a topic, the participants are the researchers of their experiences in that "they construct and analyze their data and report the findings" (Barkhuizen, 2015, p. 101) as narratives. That said, we collected autobiographical narratives from the participants in this study (1) to be in line with the dynamicity of the research design, and (2) obtain the Iranian MA EFL students' experiences and expectations about academic writing from an emic perspective.

Before asking the participants to develop their narratives, the researchers elaborated on Riessman's (2008) narrative model, according to which a narrative should include an abstract, introduction, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Moreover, the researchers explained the purpose of the study to the participants to raise their consciousness about the core topic: Their experiences and expectations about academic writing. After the researchers assured themselves that the participants were well-aware of the topic and the narrative structure, they asked them to develop their narratives. The narratives had different word lengths; the shortest was about 650 words, and the longest about 1,450 words. To collect the narratives as the data for the study, the researchers contacted the participants to attend a meeting for this purpose in person. Because the participants were from two different cities, two separate meetings were arranged due to physical distance. In the meetings, the participants were briefed on how to produce their narratives either in writing or in speech. We invited them to send their narratives to us two weeks later via an e-mail account they were provided with.

#### *Data Analysis: Values, Significance, and Plots*

To address the dynamic narrative design of this study, we analyzed the narratives for their plots, values, and significance which we adapted from Daiute (2014). It is highly important to explain that Daiute's (2014) dynamic narrative approach provides several analysis designs, including activity-meaning system, values analysis, mapping analysis, significance analysis, pattern analysis, and plot analysis, which help researchers to adapt the appropriate design among the listed design procedures based on the purpose of their studies. Thus, since our purpose in the current study was to investigate Iranian MA EFL students' experiences and expectations in their academic writing, we selected a data analysis design encompassing the analysis of values, significance, and plots.

The reason behind our selection was that through these analysis types, we were able to look into students' experiences and expectations in academic writing.

To analyze the narratives for the values, we investigated how learners stated the values concerning academic writing in their narratives. This means that we wanted to find out how EFL learners assigned values to different aspects of academic writing in their experiences and expectations. For instance, a learner pointed out that “*Unfortunately*, in our university, *teachers did not consider proper and suitable writing* tasks or activities,” which shows that the learner's real experience contradicted the learner's values. This indicates a gap between learners' experiences in academic writing and the values they thought should be involved in academic writing.

We also analyzed learners' narratives for their significance. To do so, we investigated the narratives for their expressive features, such as repetitions, emphases, and verbal and non-verbal markers. Focusing on these features through significance analysis helped us understand the significant experiences and expectations that EFL learners had in their academic writing. For example, one of the students stated that “I am *mostly open* to professors providing me with their *invaluable* feedback!!!” in which through using “mostly open” and exclamation marks “!!!”, he tried to show the critical expectation he had concerning the context in which he received feedback. To put it another way, he expected to receive feedback as a significant issue in academic writing.

Finally, we analyzed the narratives for their plots. According to Daiute (2014, p. 29), “plot analysis (e.g., setting, conflict, resolution strategies) indicates the narrator's perceptual and interpretive framing of specific narrated events, thereby shaping the meaning.” Therefore, by addressing the plots of EFL learners' narratives, we could recognize their perceptual and interpretive framing about the experiences and expectations concerning academic writing. For example, one of the learners stated, “*it depends on the topics*, but I think the most *problem is in unity, cohesion, and coherence* or sometimes applying vocabularies *in certain situations* and their correct selections” in which she drew the conflict of the plot regarding feedback provision related to the “*topics*.” To put it simply, she thought of each topic as a context that had its conflict (topics) and resolutions (correct selections). It should be stated that we tried to address the three analysis types—values, plots, and significance—to collectively obtain the critical themes about EFL learners' experiences and expectations about academic writing.

### **Rigor of the Study**

It was absolutely critical for us to address the rigor of the study in our qualitative research to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Hence, to assure the rigor of the study, we considered four rigor standards of qualitative studies, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ary et al., 2014). We addressed the credibility of the findings, equal to internal validity in quantitative research, through peer debriefing and member checking. Through peer debriefing, one of our colleagues went through the raw data (Eisner, 1998) to see whether consensus in the interpretation was made. We asked an outsider researcher, holding an MA degree in applied linguistics, to do peer debriefing for us. Moreover, we asked five of the participants for member checking to see whether our interpretations were in line with what they meant in their narratives. The results of peer debriefing and member checking were promising in that the colleague and the participants reported the same interpretations.

We examined the transferability of the findings, equal to external validity in quantitative research, through cross-case comparison (Ary et al., 2014) in which participants were selected from different universities in different cities in Iran. Moreover, by selecting the participants from different

universities, we removed the selection effects and setting effects that are detrimental to the findings' transferability. We also used inter-coder agreement strategy to enhance the dependability of the study, equal to reliability in quantitative studies. To do so, we invited the same colleague who helped us with peer debriefing and who was well-informed about the purpose and procedure of the study. She coded 25% of the data. The results showed up to 90% agreement between our coding and the outsider's. The discrepancies were discussed and resolved.

Finally, to enhance the confirmability of the study, equal to objectivity/neutrality in quantitative studies, we addressed confirmability of the findings and conclusion through the documentation criterion and the strategy of audit trail. To do so, we provided the second coder, who helped us with addressing credibility and dependability, with a complete procedure of data collection and analysis to see whether she could reach the same interpretation. The results were promising, showing us that our interpretations were free of researchers' bias, although as one of the anonymous reviewers rightly pointed out, "there is always the issue of subjectivity and context specificity in qualitative studies".

## Findings

Having applied a dynamic narrative approach to examine the Iranian MA EFL students' experiences and expectations and to analyze the values, plots, and significance of their narratives, we categorized the experiences of these EFL students about academic writing into instructional experiences, feedback experiences, and the experienced difficulties. Moreover, we obtained two main categories about EFL students' expectations: Academic writing practices and critical factors to improve academic writing. There are some themes for learners' experiences and expectations showing their critical experiences and expectations concerning each category. Figure 1 shows these categories and themes.

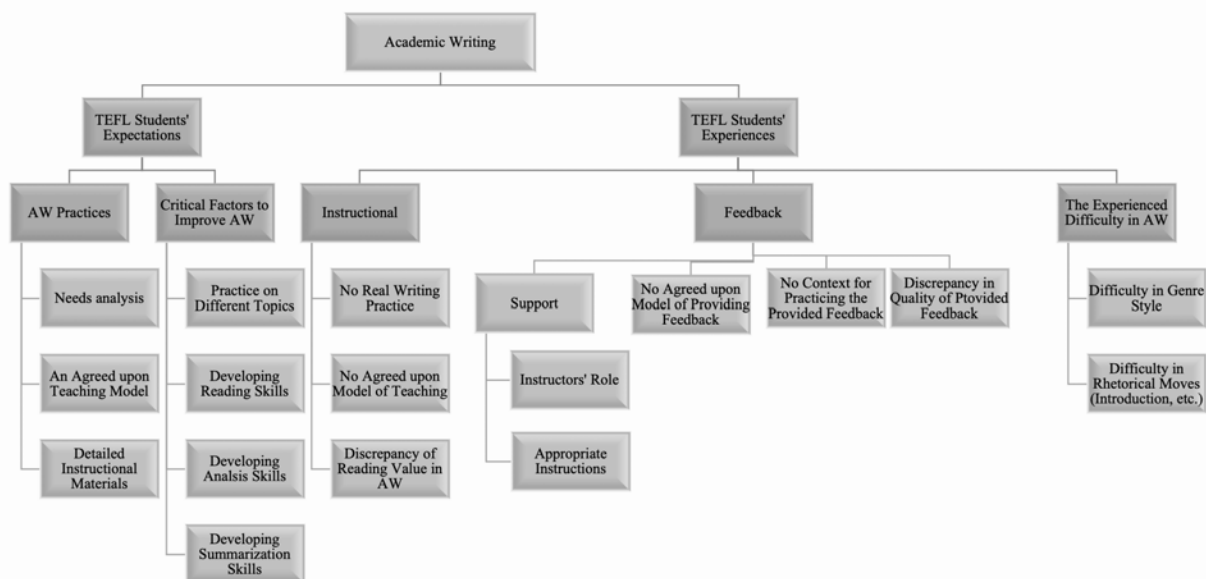
### *EFL Students' Experiences*

**EFL students' instructional experiences.** The analysis of narratives of the learners' instructional experiences showed that they experienced an academic writing context in which they did not find opportunities to practice what they were instructed. In some universities, students claimed not to have done anything in practice. They did not have any opportunity to apply the principles of academic writing. As S-11 mentioned,

*"Unfortunately, in our university, teachers did not consider proper and suitable writing tasks or activities...."*

Since the participants were from different contexts (universities of Iran), they had various experiences in their writing courses. The analysis of the narratives revealed that most students dealt with writing proposals, summarizing books, and thesis writing. Moreover, they were engaged in essay writing, including descriptive, expository, and argumentative essays. Generally, the analysis of learners' narratives showed that there was no agreed-upon instructional model to address academic writing. This leads the narratives to have different values, plots, and significance. For instance, S-5 noted that,

*"We passed the essay writing course, and we were supposed to write abstracts, introductions, etc. Each session, we attended our class, and we were assigned to write descriptive and argumentative paragraphs before we started working on article writing."*



**Figure 1. EFL Students' Experiences and Expectations about Academic Writing.**

However, in some universities, students claimed not to have done anything in practice. They did not have any opportunity to apply the principles of academic writing. As S-11 remarked,

*“Unfortunately, in our university, teachers did not consider proper and suitable writing tasks or activities. MA students repeatedly and compulsorily studied Seminar course instead of advanced writing.”*

One central theme obtained from the narratives authored by the learners about academic writing was that they put different values and significance to reading. They believed that reading is like the input without which there would be no output. Likewise, reading helped them to be familiar with writing standards, such as APA rules, range of vocabulary, and grammar. Therefore, they were able to know different texts and styles and apply them to their writing. As an example, S-5 stated that,

*“Of course, reading is important for writing. While reading material, you see all the intangible and theoretical rules put into practice. Furthermore, it becomes a part of your subconscious knowledge after a while.”*

Despite the above positive points, some students were deeply divided on the significance of reading. These differences in their experiences with reading as a source of academic writing might be due to the differences in academic writing instruction in different universities. This led to positive experiences in some of the learners about the role of reading skills in academic writing and negative experiences in some others. S-18 disagreed and said,

*“Not perfectly ... because the sequences of writing need more concentration and vocabulary abilities [rather than just reading skills].”*

**EFL students' experiences concerning academic writing difficulties.** Moreover, by analyzing the narratives, we addressed the learners' experiences concerning different kinds of difficulties in their academic writing. Generally, they referred to academic word selection, cohesion and coherence of their paragraphs, grammar, and construction (introduction, body, and conclusion).

Some participants usually felt confused about the style or genre of writing. For example, S-15 talked about her problem, arguing that

“I **lose most marks** in **how to write for a definite course**, such as IELTS, proposal, and ....”

Finally, it is essential to note that the students experienced a lack of explicit criteria in their academic writing. For example, S-21 stated that,

“I am **not familiar with the type of examination** because **we do not work some models** and samples similar to the exam content.”

Overall, the analysis of the narratives showed the importance of following a model for teaching academic writing which could be addressed as a model for academic assessment. However, most of the learners had negative experiences concerning the assessment model based on which they were assessed in academic writing.

*EFL students' experiences concerning feedback. The analysis of the learners' narratives showed that while some students did not receive any feedback in their writing courses, others got feedback experiences from their teachers. This issue again emphasized the discrepancies in the instructional model of teaching academic writing in different universities. Some students, such as S-1, did not have positive experiences in this regard, as shown in the following narrative.*

“Everything was just **theoretical**, and **we did not practice any new skills** in writing.”

In some universities, students received some feedback, and some satisfied students welcomed and considered it to be a guide for improving their skills. Parts of the narrative of S-8 clarify the point.

“I **would be happy** if my **instructors checked me** and share their opinions about my writing even though their style of feedback would be like an attack. **I would welcome it in any case.**”

Moreover, S-20 asserted that,

“**I am mostly open to professors providing me with their invaluable feedback!!!** I am mature enough to realize that **their feedback will result in better writing** in the future.”

They put forward two different viewpoints in their narratives about the feedback that they received from their teachers. First, some students found it to be critical in the way that it helped them to be aware of their weaknesses in which they needed more practice, revise their pieces of writing, and improve their writing skills. S-19 asserted in his narrative that,

“**I believe teachers' comments and feedback have a major role** in **improving my writing** ability. Moreover, it also **removes the weaknesses** of writing.”

Second, some students were dissatisfied with the provided feedback and did not find it helpful. Generally, it can be understood from the narratives that the learners put values and significance to the feedback provided by their teachers. However, the quality of the provided feedback and the inexistence of a context to practice them made a contrasting plot in which the learners experienced the provided feedback negatively. For example, S-12 expressed that the provided feedback did not have quality.

“**They are very general without a detailed explanation** and **are not provided regularly.**”

Expressing a negative view, S-15 considered the inexistence of a context to practice the provided feedback.

**“It is not useful** because of time limitation. **There is no step-by-step practice procedure,** and some students receive feedback but not the others.”

The analysis of the narratives indicated critical findings concerning the learners’ experiences about the revision process. In spite of explaining the meaning of ‘revise’ to respondents, some learners did not know its meaning at all (The same holds true about the word "strategy"). They were MA students and tackled writing processes, but their narratives were relevant to the ‘editing’ stage but not the ‘revising’ stage. For example, S-5 wrote that,

“Some **mental strategies [!!!]** that I am not very conscious about. I detect spelling errors and similar problems, and try to reread writing draft to have a better picture of the outcome.”

More unexpectedly, some students like S-14 put it like this:

“First, **I write in Persian,** then **translate it to English.** Sometimes **I use Google translate.**”

The learners’ narrative plot analysis showed us that the values and significance of the revision processes and strategies were not emphasized in academic writing. The findings confirmed the negative experiences regarding instructional experiences. Arguably, since the learners did not have revision experiences, they did not consider it valuable and significant. That said, we believe that the concept of revision is lacking in the learners’ academic writing experiences.

*Support: Role of instructors and appropriate instructions. The learners’ experiences were analyzed in their narratives to understand what kind of support they believed to be included in academic writing. Based on the narrative analysis, a strong theme that emerged among participants was related to instructors. Some students such as S-7 put it like this:*

“In my opinion, **cooperation and contribution of teachers** and professors are the **best support for all students** to be **successful in their field or aspect.**”

Some others, like S-8, referred to other aspects and noted that,

“In case of **support,** I can name adequate level in terms of the domain of vocabulary, structures, enough and update knowledge about the topic, valid references, good and valid sources, **a good instructor or guidance.**”

What can be understood from the students’ narratives is that the students expected to cooperate with experienced teachers. Many of them claimed that they needed their teachers’ feedback as a significant means of support. Moreover, they thought that more practice was required to read academic texts and go through the process of writing over and over again. This shows how valuable and significant the concept of practice is in the overall plot of academic writing for the students.

#### *EFL Students’ Expectations*

To answer the second research question of the present study, which was “What writing literacy practices do Iranian EFL students expect to develop during their MA program?”, we analyzed their narratives. The findings pointed to two major categories, including instructional expectations and writing skills expectations. Each of these expectations had some themes (see Figure 1).

#### *EFL instructional expectations*

The analysis of narratives revealed that most students were dissatisfied with their practices in writing classes. Though their reasons varied, it is worth considering each of them for improving

writing instructions. In the following two narratives, needs analysis and a teaching model were addressed as the learners' expectations.

“... our *teachers have selected some topics* for teaching *without any attention to our needs and weaknesses* in writing. Therefore, my weaknesses remained, and some new problems were added to my writing challenges.” [S-12]

“The majority of us *felt confused about writing proposals and thesis* writing because our *teachers had different ideas about the writing principles of proposals. Not being fixed* in their ideas and instructions *made students frustrated and confused ... Unfortunately, none of our teachers devote enough time to teaching or even explaining writing essays* in spite of some students' requests.” [S-8]

As mentioned by S-8, it can be understood that students' dissatisfaction stems from inadequate and insufficient instruction applied by writing teachers. Thus, their expectations put values and significance to an academic writing plot in which teachers follow a model of teaching with detailed instructional materials obtained from their needs.

The narratives showed that the learners implied some tips for eliminating their perceived needs. The students wanted their teachers to go beyond the theories and work practically the skills of writing. From their perspective, a practical academic writing course was more valuable and significant compared to a theoretical academic writing course. Moreover, they expected their instructors to teach them the basics of academic writing and provide them with some models and samples. S-6, for example, noted that,

“I say that they had better get us to put in writing what we generate orally, but *within a standard agreed framework in academic areas.*”

Similarly, S-14 agreed that,

“We *need more practical essay tasks* related to writing proposals which can be done during the class time.”

In addition, the analysis of the narratives indicated that the students expected their academic writing course to be covered during several semesters and not just intensively in a single semester. Additionally, students pointed to the required time for which writing courses should be covered in several semesters. For instance, S-21 said that,

“In our education system, *writing skills are hidden behind ignorance. We need more time* for improvement.”

We understand from the findings obtained from the students' narratives that the students thought a valuable instructional model for academic writing should highlight the point that the ability to write cohesively and coherently was regarded as one of the most important criteria. Besides, they considered a writing script to be acceptable if it followed the organization of a paragraph (topic, body, and conclusion) and specified academic writing format. Thus, for example, S-13 defined good quality writing as follows:

“It should *go through the stages of introduction, body, and conclusion.* It should be concise, coherent, and to the point.”

By the same token, S-9 explained that,

“I think *well-produced writing is both coherent and cohesive*. It does not make you feel distracted or bored. It *follows all the rules and uses, all the appropriate jargons, or structures* determined for that writing style.”

Moreover, in that model, teachers should consider more than the surface features of academic writing when assessing the learners’ writing ability. The students pointed out that a teacher must focus on the students’ progress (consider each student individually). For instance, S-5 made this comment:

“My teacher should try to *see the attempt put on writing*. It means that s/he *should not employ the same yardstick for everyone* and evaluate them respectively. Also, s/he should *clarify the aims of writing beforehand* and then see whether they have been considered and followed by them.”

*Expectations about critical factors to improve academic writing. The students had different beliefs and standpoints about the critical factors to improve academic writing. However, they generally recognized the following factors which contribute to improving academic writing: Practice and writing on different topics, reading articles, summarizing skills, analyzing the successful pieces of writing, and caring about the provided comments and feedback. Views of S-3 and S-15, shown below, represent the above themes.*

“*Analyzing the successful and nice masterpieces* of other people *inspires you*. Exemplifying is very important.” [S-3]

“*Providing some samples* on different types of writing and *asking students to follow them* are *helpful*.” [S-15]

The appropriate plot for academic writing, from the expectations of the EFL students, thus, needs to take into account the practical aspects of writing along with the reading, summarizing, and analyzing skills.

## Discussion

The present study was designed to shed light on the academic writing experiences and expectations of Iranian MA EFL students. In other words, it aimed to investigate the students’ experiences and expectations regarding their writing courses and the related instructions. The first finding of this study concerns the students’ expectations of the writing instructions and instructors. They want their teachers to go beyond the theories, practically work on the skills, use more practical and beneficial sources and course books, and allocate more time. Likewise, Adams (2008) also suggests that teachers should teach through modeling rather than teaching abstract concepts. Furthermore, experiences and expectations of these students suggest that syllabus designers dedicate more credit writing courses to postgraduate students. These findings are consistent with some of those from previous studies, which found that the students would greatly benefit from writing instruction if more time was allocated to the course (see Kalikokha et al., 2009; Ntereke & Ramoroka, 2013).

The findings also showed the students’ evaluation of good quality writing. They describe a good piece of writing as being coherent, cohesive, and well-organized. This finding supports that of Chokwe (2011), who found similar results. However, these criteria are completely different in other contexts. For instance, as Hyland (2019) notes, what matters in Western contexts is that a good piece of writing should involve the students’ creativity and critical thinking. Besides, Chris



and Zawacki (2006) argued that academic writing needs to address the readers for whom the writer provides logical reasons to support their interpretations.

Another finding is related to the provided feedback and comments by writing professors. On the one hand, they assert that they try to apply different techniques and approaches to marking students' assignments, including holistic, direct, and indirect approaches. They also attempt to consider all the aspects and elements of students' writing. On the other hand, though the students regard feedback as a critical means for improving writing skills, many students complain about not receiving any feedback type. Even if they are provided with some feedback, it is not sufficient and helpful.

Besides, students are not satisfied with their writing classes' procedures. This is due to the ignorance of students' needs, time limitations, and inadequate instruction of the required techniques to students. Additionally, the teachers also have different perceptions and expectations of academic writing. These mismatches make students confused about the conventions of academic writing. Overall, students expect their teachers to teach them the basics of academic writing and provide them with some models. This finding accords with Newfields' (2003) observation that language difficulties are only part of the students' problems. They do not often know the conventions and principles of academic writing. Similarly, Chokwe (2011) notes that, most of the time, writing teachers are not clear enough about what they expect from student writing. Therefore, providing models and showing students how to write academic essays can be very useful to them. In most cases, teachers just explain that an essay should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion without explicitly showing the students how to approach these components. This finding also concurs with the findings of Hyland and Hyland (2001) and Ferris and Roberts (2001), who claim that in addition to modeling and making students aware of writing conventions, they need to be provided with constructive feedback.

Another finding is the way Iranian MA EFL students approach a successful writing script. Most of them exactly follow the taught pattern of a five-paragraph essay. For the purpose of this study, it should be noted that some passive students even do not know how to go through paragraph writing. They use some strategies (translating as an example) not justifiable for an MA student, which some teachers consider to be plagiarism. They remark that students are confined to copying and pasting because they have a poor background in academic writing. Furthermore, in Iranian MA EFL contexts, writing courses are offered based on proposal or thesis writing in a single semester. Moreover, in some universities, it is supposed that students have already learned writing skills in their undergraduate (BA) courses. Therefore, they prefer to dedicate the class time to other components which appear to be more important to them. On the contrary, as Gürel (2010) states, graduate students need the kind of instruction that centers on writing tasks of research papers and dissertations.

Both psychological and sociocultural factors appear to account for the findings of the present study. From a psychological point of view, the findings show that individual differences such as cognitive styles need to be considered, barriers to writing performance should be removed, and the gap between students' experiences and expectations and teachers' writing practices has to be closed when a writing course is to be successfully developed and offered to students. The motivations, expectations, wants, and needs which Iranian MA EFL students follow may differ from those in other EFL contexts. As Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020) found, most of the writing problems Iranian students experience in their writing courses, and later in their independent writing, stem from the fear, anxiety, demotivating factors, and lack of confidence which they considered

to be barriers to their writing performance. When student writers are more motivated psychologically, the contents of writing classes cater for the actual needs (e.g., research proposal writing) they may have during their MA program, and their expectations of writing classes are met, they tend to produce higher writing performance, as the analyses of the narratives show.

In addition to psychological variables, sociocultural factors also play a role in MA student writing in Iran. Sociocultural theory of mind (see Lantolf et al., 2020 for an update) posits that meaning is co-constructed; the co-construction of meaning is achieved through meaningful interaction with people around us, and instead of a single fixed meaning, multiple possible meanings can be developed. Applied to writing courses, writing teachers need to interact with their MA students to scaffold them to develop a piece of writing such as a term project, helping them to be autonomous writers outside writing classes. Through the co-construction of meaning (development of writing performance) and interaction between writing teachers and students, MA students are most likely to produce several possible writing forms when the same writing prompt is given because each MA student develops his/her writing which may differ from that of his/her peer. However, as the findings of the study show, not all Iranian MA students are active and cooperative, and this may slow down the writing process, resulting in the pieces of writing which tend to be incoherent, underdeveloped, and meaningless. The writing culture of the educational setting, the quality of scaffolding, the real-life writing practices, instructional writing activities, and the breadth of the interaction between writing teachers and MA student writers are some factors to consider if Iranian MA EFL students' writing expectations (and possibly those of other language learners in other similar contexts) are to be met and their academic writing performance is to be successfully developed.

## **Conclusion**

Adopting a dynamic narrative approach, the researchers addressed the Iranian MA EFL students' academic writing experiences and expectations. MA students in Iran can easily conceptualize good academic writing features, but they cannot apply them to their writing. These students want their writing professors to focus on their progress and what they need to do, using this skill in the future. Moreover, they expect their teachers to go beyond theories and work practically and efficiently on the principles of academic writing.

The Iranian MA EFL students recognize the same difficulties and weaknesses in their academic writing. For example, they have trouble producing coherent and well-organized texts. Besides, word selection, argumentation, and orthography are other areas of students' problems. Students need some sort of support to tackle these weaknesses, including reading and summarizing articles, teachers' modeling and feedback, and teachers' scaffolding. Moreover, students are dissatisfied with the teachers' instructions and assert that the contents of the writing courses are either irrelevant to or insufficient for the academic writing demands. They also remark that teachers follow different criteria and principles for their class procedures. This makes students confused about academic writing requirements.

Another conclusion of the present study is that students' expectations are incompatible with their actual practices. What students expect is not in accordance with what they actually receive in their writing courses. The critical point is that there should be a refinement of the current curriculum, which helps curriculum developers assess the expectations and abilities of students as they enter the course.

The present study may have the following pedagogical implications. First, writing teachers in writing classes should constantly provide MA students with directive feedback on their writing scripts. One-shot feedback treatments may not work well with MA EFL students because they tend to produce lengthier pieces of writing such as research proposals, research projects, and MA dissertations. As such, because these academic genres are somewhat unknown to MA EFL students, directive feedback needs to be ongoing, systematic, sustainable, and longitudinal. The second implication is closely related to the previous one because when MA EFL students' experiences and expectations of academic writing are known, writing teachers may know which writing needs have to be given priority for treatment in writing classes, investing in only those writing areas such as summarizing and paraphrasing which MA students have trouble understanding and producing. Third, academic genre writing follows explicit strategies and certain conventions to be fully developed, so the findings of the study help MA EFL student writers to be consciously aware of those strategies through sample writing models they are familiarized with in writing classes, the academic genre writing rules and explanations, and practical solutions gained from experienced writers. Finally, as the findings of the present study show, a large gap exists between what MA EFL student writers experience and expect in their writing classes and what is actually practiced by writing teachers in those classes. To be effective and successful, writing course syllabi need to reconcile MA EFL students' writing needs and expectations with writing teachers' beliefs about teaching writing practices. Such a trade-off helps MA EFL student writers feel the MA writing courses are best suited for the purposes they have been designed.

Like other research studies, our study included some limitations which we need to recognize and suggest some ideas for further research based on these limitations. The first shortcoming of the present study was the breadth of sampling. In this study, we only analyzed the narratives of Iranian MA EFL students to understand their experiences and expectations of academic writing. Although the findings are informative and may help syllabus designers to design writing syllabi to meet students' academic writing needs in MA programs, they do not give us a complete picture of academic writing in tertiary education. Therefore, in the future, researchers should analyze experiences, expectations, and problems of academic writing of undergraduate and graduate students (across BA, MA, and PhD students) to fully understand the needs of these student groups. The second limitation of the study is to do with the research methodology we used in the study. Although the qualitative narrative inquiry helped us to collect the lived experiences of MA students in their academic writing, the results would have been much thicker if other qualitative research tools such as text-based interviews, focus group interviews, and observations would have been used to collect more qualitative data types to triangulate multiple data points. We, therefore, suggest multiple qualitative research methods be included in future studies to explore academic writing to collect more data types and to increase the reliability and validity of data, as one of the anonymous reviewers reminded us.

## About the Authors

**Rajab Esfandiari** is an associate professor of applied linguistics at Imam Khomeini International University in Qazvin, Iran. His areas of interest and specialization include teaching and assessing L2 writing, multifaceted Rasch measurement, L2 classroom assessment, and EAP teaching and testing. His most recent publications appear in *Language Testing in Asia* and the *Journal of Asia TEFL*.

**Hussein Meihami** is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran. He has published papers in various journals including *Scientometrics*, *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, *Teacher Education for Sustainability*, *Teaching Language Skills*, *Issues in Language Teaching*, etc. He has also presented papers in many conferences. His research interests are Teacher Education, Teaching L2 Writing, Discourse Analysis, and Scientometrics.

**Fatemeh Jahani** is an MA holder in English Language Teaching (ELT) from Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran.

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