



Drafted Writing Assignments: Why Are They Not Used in Iranian EFL Contexts?

Hooman Saeli

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

Introduction

The existing literature on L2 writing stresses the importance of the writing process, thereby the incorporation of drafted writing assignments (e.g., Lee 2013; McMartin-Miller 2014). L2 writing instructors have also been provided with a number of pedagogical recommendations with regard to their writing- and feedback-related practices. For instance, Ferris (2014) stated that error treatment should be conducted in a number of drafts. Lee (2013) also suggested that corrective feedback (CF) be provided on intermediate drafts so that learners can benefit from corrections prior to writing the final draft. On the other hand, Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) posited that selective feedback is more appropriate for earlier drafts, whereas comprehensive feedback should be given on final drafts. Overall, the literature suggests that use of drafted writing assignments, coupled with CF, can lead to students' grammatical accuracy gains.

The effectiveness of drafted writing assignments and CF on different drafts, nevertheless, is influenced by three important variables. Firstly, the use of drafted writing assignments is affected by various sociocultural and institutional variables. Secondly, teacher perceptions have been shown to have an effect on ultimate teaching practices (e.g., writing activities). Thirdly, students' perceptions/preferences can affect the use of writing assignments. What can be concluded is that, even though drafted assignments are empirically proven to have positive effects on students' accuracy gains (e.g., Ferris 2014), the ultimate efficacy of such assignments can be determined by contextual/sociocultural factors, teacher perceptions, and student preferences.

The three aforementioned variables, however, have been shown to be interrelated. In particular, a number of studies have investigated the impact of contextual factors on shaping teacher and student perceptions about language learning. Schulz (2001), for instance, concluded that different contexts influence teacher and student perceptions regarding grammatical accuracy and CF. Horwitz (1999) also concluded that contextual factors are important determinants of learner perceptions about language learning. Focusing on the skill on writing and CF, Lee, Leong, and Song (2017) pointed to the importance of context in shaping teacher perceptions about CF. Lee (2008) also suggested that teacher practices and student perceptions are affected by institutional constraints. Overall, research suggests that contextual factors can influence student and teacher perceptions about the skill of writing and error correction.

In addition, another body of research has been devoted to the exploration of teacher and student perceptions in different aspects of L2 education. For example, Kern (1995) concluded that students, as

opposed to teachers, tend to attach higher importance to grammatical accuracy. A number of studies have been conducted to uncover student and teacher perceptions about the skill of writing, CF, and grammatical accuracy. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) concluded that students prefer multiple-draft writing assignments and pay more attention to comments on later drafts. Focusing on teacher perceptions and practices, Ferris (2014) reported that ESL teachers welcome student accountability, drafted assignments, and non-conventional CF methods (e.g., conferences).

Overall, previous research has supported the incorporation of multiple-draft assignments, but contextual factors, teacher perceptions, and student preferences have been shown to be strong indicators of achieving learning outcomes. Although the literature encourages the use of multiple-draft writing, it is yet unclear whether such a recommendation is applicable in an Iranian EFL context. That is, when Iranian EFL contextual factors, teacher perceptions, and student preferences come into play, we do not know whether the incorporation of drafted writing assignments is feasible/useful. This study, therefore, sought to answer the following research questions:

What are teachers' and students' perceptions about multiple-draft writing assignments in an Iranian EFL context?

What are some factors which contribute to such perceptions?

Methodology

The data used for this study were part of a larger project on Iranian EFL teachers' and students' perceptions about CF. In particular, semi-structured qualitative interviews were utilized to collect data from 14 teachers (six women and eight men) and 15 students (12 women and three men). The students were enrolled in classes taught by the participating teachers. The teachers were teaching general-English classes of different proficiency levels; also, the students were enrolled in general-English classes, and their proficiency levels ranged from lower-intermediate to advanced. The two main criteria for recruiting the participants was experience in teaching/taking EFL classes which involved the skill of writing and prior experience in L1 (i.e., Farsi) writing. In the general-English classes at both language schools, teachers were prescribed to give equal weight to the skill of writing, similar to other major language skills, according to the respective curricula.

The interviews included a number of main questions, but, for the purpose of the current study, responses to the use of drafted writing assignments and the factors which affected it were analyzed. The participants were recruited from two language schools in Tehran, Iran. The data collection process took place over the course of one month, and occurred either in a quiet room at the language schools or a nearby coffee shop, according to the participants' preferences. Firstly, the consent forms were provided to the participants, and after some additional information about the study (i.e., purpose of the study and use of a recording device), the interviews began. After data collection and data transcription, the responses underwent two steps of analysis. Firstly, the data collected from individual participants were analyzed to identify the main thematic categories. Secondly, the responses were compared and contrasted, and larger thematic categories were, consequently, extracted.

Findings

In this section, the findings of the study are reported, along with a number of excerpts to corroborate them. In particular, the teacher perceptions are provided first, followed by the students' responses.

Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

The responses revealed that the majority of the teachers ($n = 11$) used single-draft assignments. However, when asked about their perceptions about multiple-draft assignments, all of the teachers ($N = 14$) positively evaluated the incorporation of multiple-draft writing tasks. Therefore, the teachers tended to deviate from their "ideals" (i.e., beneficial nature of multiple-draft assignments), and in practice, assigned single-draft writing tasks. Specifically, data analysis showed that the teachers had a few reasons behind using single-draft assignments but favoring multiple-draft writing tasks. For instance, in Excerpts 1 and 2, two teachers claimed that they did not use multiple-draft assignments because their students held negative perceptions about writing, in general:

Excerpt 1: "Writing a second draft is good, but we don't do it... Students don't wanna spend much time. So, I don't push them [to work a lot] in writing. For example, if we have 10 assignments each term, with a B-Draft, we'd have to do 20. Students don't wanna do that [much work]. Also, I don't wanna tell them to do something when they won't do it." [Teacher 1]

Excerpt 2: "Not a lot [of second drafts]. When I see students don't even wanna write a short essay, it's useless to force them [to write a second draft]." [Teacher 2]

In addition, the majority of the teachers ($n = 10$) stated that they kept their students satisfied through the utilization of single-draft writing assignments. Therefore, it was reportedly more important to many teachers to keep their students happy than follow their "ideal" perceptions. Excerpts 3, 4, and 5 show how the teachers prioritized their students' satisfaction over the assignment of multiple-draft assignments in writing:

Excerpt 3: "As a teacher, it's important for me to keep my students happy. If I see a student needs something, whether justified or not, I'll do it for them." [Teacher 3]

Excerpt 4: "I'll do whatever they [students] want me to do, but I wish it wasn't like this." [Teacher 4]

Excerpts 5: "When I see my students only care about [grammatical] accuracy, I neither ignore nor postpone it. Students' needs are important to me. When students don't wanna write a second draft, I won't push them. If I see they have unjustified needs, I might talk to them, but won't argue with them [students]." [Teacher 5]

In the above excerpts, the teachers stated that their students did not favor multiple-draft writing assignments. They, therefore, did not employ writing tasks which were in line with their students' needs/interests. It was interesting to notice that the teachers were aware of some "unjustified" student needs, but tended to cater for such needs, nonetheless. Additionally, a few teachers ($n = 3$) identified institutional guidelines as the main reason behind the use of single-draft assignments. Excerpts 6 and 7, for example, reveal how the teachers tended to follow institutional guidelines in assigning writing tasks:

Excerpt 6: "Institutes don't pay a lot of attention to it [writing]. They simply don't care. So, I follow those norms; it's like business, though I don't really like to [follow such institutional norms]." [Teacher 6]

Excerpt 7: "We [teachers] usually give feedback to institutes about the effectiveness of teaching practices. But institutes claim they do needs analysis and know what students want. So, we have to do what we're told to do." [Teacher 7]

Overall, the above excerpts suggest that the skill of writing was held in low regard by many Iranian

EFL students and language schools. When asked to provide further details about such a low status, a number of the teachers ($n = 7$) highlighted the importance of students' prior writing experiences. In Excerpts 8, 9, and 10, the teachers brought up the effect of students' Farsi writing experiences (e.g., in high schools), and illustrated that students transferred such experiences to English learning contexts, which resulted in holding the skill of writing in low regard:

Excerpt 8: "If you ask me, writing is a dying skill in Farsi education. [English] Students are like that, too. When they don't need [to write], they won't [write]." [Teacher 8]

Excerpt 9: "What we do [not teaching the skill of writing in the Iranian school system] is a betrayal to our students. We need to spend much time and change this mindset that language learning is all about [learning] grammar rules and vocabulary items." [Teacher 9]

Excerpt 10: "In our higher education, we don't have writing. It has no status at all. In high school, we don't have writing. Now, this student carries over all these experiences to learning English." [Teacher 10]

As the above excerpts show, the students were claimed to be affected by their Farsi writing experiences, which, in turn, caused them to hold negative perceptions about the skill of writing. Irrespective of negative perceptions about the skill of writing and multiple-draft assignments, a few teachers ($n = 3$) stated that they would attempt to change their students' mindset. Excerpt 11 shows how a teacher would try to change such negative perceptions:

Excerpt 11: "Even in class, we have to force students to write. They [students] think writing essays is a waste of time. We need to change these things and that kind of mindset. This is a huge flaw. Writing needs to be covered in and out of class." [Teacher 11]

Contrary to the majority of the participants, a few teachers ($n = 3$) incorporated multiple-draft assignments in class. Excerpt 12, for example, illustrates how a teacher held students accountable through providing different amounts of feedback on various drafts:

Excerpt 12: "Yes [I use multiple-draft assignments]! As we move forward [later drafts], I give less feedback. I want students to become more independent. I give most of the feedback on early drafts. Less on later drafts, because I know they know [correct forms]." [Teacher 12]

Overall, the teachers claimed that they frequently used single-draft assignments, but they positively viewed the incorporation of multiple-draft assignments. They, additionally, reported that student expectations and institutional constraints were important hindrances. Finally, students' prior Farsi writing experiences were identified as a strong factor which contributed to the low status of the skill of writing and multiple-draft assignments in EFL contexts.

Students' Perceptions and Preferences

Analysis of data revealed that the majority of the students ($n = 14$) claimed that multiple-draft assignments were never used in their classes, and the same majority ($n = 14$) claimed that their teachers did not perceive the incorporation of such assignments worthwhile. On the other hand, most students ($n = 13$) favored the implementation of multiple-draft writing tasks. Overall, the students who offered some rationale for their positive perceptions about multiple-draft assignments believed that writing multiple drafts could help them improve their grammatical accuracy in writing. Excerpts 13 and 14 showcase such perceptions:

Excerpt 13: “It [assigning a 2-draft assignment] has not happened. If made possible, it’d be better. We might know our [grammatical] issues. If you get some feedback [on errors], you can go correct them. You can improve [grammatical accuracy].” [Student 1]

Excerpt 14: “No [drafted assignments]! [Do you like the idea, though?] If possible, we can learn about our [grammatical] errors. If you get feedback [on earlier drafts], you can go correct them in later drafts.” [Student 2]

When asked whether the students were aware of the reasons behind the use of single-draft assignments, a few ($n = 3$) mentioned practical constraints, such as in Excerpt 15:

Excerpt 15: “It is better [to use multiple-draft writing assignments]. I once recommended using it [to my teacher], but because we didn’t have a lot of time; we never did it.” [Student 3]

As mentioned earlier, a few students ($n = 2$) did not favor the idea of incorporating multiple-draft assignments. Excerpts 16 and 17 show why those students thought writing subsequent drafts might be ineffective:

Excerpt 16: “Never happened... Not much different to me, though. But it’s not positive. It’ll get boring and repetitive. At best, you will go and fix a few [grammatical] errors.” [Student 4]

Excerpt 17: “No [drafted assignments]! [Is it a good idea, though?] No. What’s important is to know your errors [which can, apparently, be done in the first draft]. When we’re told about those, it’s good enough.” [Student 5]

As the above excerpts illustrated, two students believed that they could receive sufficient CF on their grammatical errors in a first draft; they, therefore, viewed subsequent drafts unnecessary/ineffective.

In addition, only one student recalled the use of multiple-draft assignments, and favored them because they promoted “learner autonomy.” Excerpt 18 shows this perception:

Excerpt 18: “It has happened [use of drafted assignments]. It’s good. [Why?] Because you can improve your grammatical accuracy. It’ll be up to you [to correct grammatical errors], so you learn.” [Student 6]

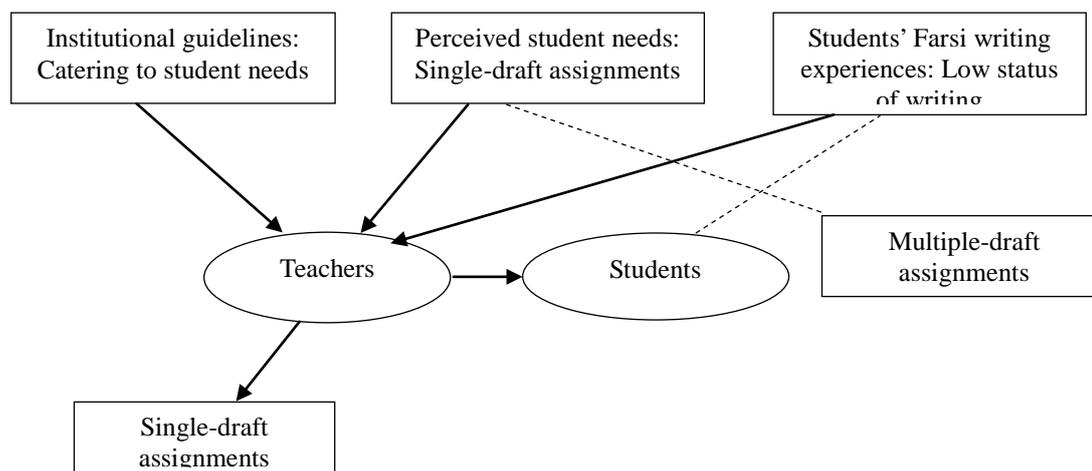
Overall, the student participants reported that multiple-draft assignments were not used in the classes they took, but they welcomed the idea of writing several drafts. In particular, they believed that multiple drafts could help them improve their grammatical accuracy.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study identified a few factors which contributed to the reported perceptions and practices. In Figure 1, the interrelated nature of these factors is depicted:

The first important finding of the study was the teachers’ appreciation for the use of multiple-draft assignments. While this perception is promising and empirically-informed, the teachers named two important reasons as to why this perception did not materialize in practice. One factor was institutional constraints. In fact, the administrators of language schools seem to be catering to students’ needs and interests. However, this decision does not sound informed by the available conceptual and empirical evidence. The administrators might be placing too much emphasis on keeping students happy for monetary gains, which might compromise the efficacy of the writing process. In this regard, change needs to be initiated at the level of language schools. The fact that both the teachers and the students favored

multiple-draft assignments suggests that language school administrators might be unaware of the benefits of such writing assignments. One suggestion to alleviate this issue is a rigorous needs analysis conducted on both teacher and student populations. The potential results can help clarify the misconceptions about the benefits of multiple-draft writing. As a result, language school administrators can provide teachers with more freedom to incorporate multiple-draft assignments. The use of needs analysis results, along with workshops on the status of the skill of writing, can keep language school administrators informed about the value of multiple-draft writing assignments.



Note: Arrows show reported practices and dotted-lines show reported preferences.

Figure 1. Contributing factors to the use of single-draft assignments

In addition, both the teachers and the students seemed to be well-aware of the advantages of multiple-draft writing assignments. They were, however, very misinformed about each other's preferences. Based on the findings, the student-teacher miscommunication looks to be the most significant impediment in the way of using multiple-draft writing assignments. This highlights the importance of conducting small-scale action research for teachers. That is, teachers can learn about their students' perceptions and preferences through using informal needs analyses. Informal needs analysis can be coupled with in-class workshops for students in order to further stress the importance of the writing process in subsequent drafts. In addition, teachers can effectively communicate with their students regarding the employed writing activities.

In addition, since the teachers identified their students' Farsi writing experiences as a major determinant of their English learning preferences, it will be useful for Iranian EFL teachers to inform their students of the drawbacks of Farsi education in schools and colleges. In general, Iranian EFL teachers need to underscore the status of the skill of writing in a variety of contexts, such as academia, since all of the student participants ($N = 15$) in the present study were either undergraduate or graduate students, who could benefit from improvements in their writing skills. As mentioned earlier, however, the most important hindrance in this regard was shown to be students' preferences (i.e., low value attached to the skill of writing, thereby multiple-draft writing assignments).

Overall, as shown in Figure 1, the teachers' writing-related practices were profoundly affected by their students' expectations. Language institutes, in addition, were shown to cater to their students' perceived needs and interests. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that, if students are well-informed about the value of multiple-draft writing assignments, language schools would probably provide teachers with more freedom in incorporating drafted writing assignments. This, again, highlights the importance of effective communication among language schools, teachers, and students.

Moreover, the teachers need to raise their students' awareness about the assessment criteria for general English proficiency. This gains more importance because all of the teachers ($N = 14$) and an overwhelming majority of the students ($n = 14$) identified taking an English proficiency test (e.g., TOEFL

or IELTS) as an ultimate goal in taking English classes. Iranian EFL teachers, therefore, need to introduce their students to the importance of the skill of writing and to the assessment criteria for this skill in English proficiency tests. Students' awareness of assessment criteria should not, however, be limited to tests of English proficiency. Excerpt 19, for instance, shows how students might pay excessive attention to obtaining higher grades in their English classes, rather than improving their writing skills:

Excerpt 19: "Students don't care about writing multiple drafts. On the contrary, they just wanna get high grades and pass the classes." [Student 7]

Therefore, rather than perceiving writing assignments as a means of obtaining higher grades, students need to prioritize the improvement of their writing skills. This can be achieved through effective communication between teachers and students, along with in-class workshops.

Finally, even though a number of important pedagogical implications are provided in this article, it is understandable that some students might prefer single-draft assignments, even after some initial engagement with such assignments and in-class workshops. Therefore, teachers can take an individual approach to providing writing assignments to their students. For instance, in a class where students are required to write six essays a semester, teachers can assign three two-draft tasks to the students who are willing to actively engage in the writing process. On the other hand, six individual tasks can be assigned to those students who lack the willingness to write multiple drafts. This approach is, however, more time-consuming for teachers and might necessitate the approval of language school administrators. Overall, it is hoped that, after engaging with multiple-draft assignments, students would realize the importance of the writing process. In turn, teachers can highlight the improvements made by students in order to showcase the advantages of multiple-draft assignments and to further motivate students.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to qualitatively investigate Iranian EFL teachers' practices and perceptions regarding the implementation of multiple-draft assignments. In addition, students' perceptions and preferences in regard to such assignments were explored. Both groups were also asked to provide their insights into the preferences of the other party. In particular, while both groups strongly preferred multiple-draft assignments, such assignments were rarely used in class. The identified reasons reported by the teachers were students' preferences, institutional constraints, and students' Farsi writing experiences. Using the findings, a number of pedagogical implications were provided to assist teachers in incorporating multiple-draft assignments.

The current study's findings need to be supplemented with measuring students' actual improvements as a result of using multiple-draft assignments; in addition, any change in students' perceptions about multiple-draft writing before and after the incorporation of such assignments can further highlight the role of informal workshops, awareness-raising strategies, and needs analysis. The findings of the current study, nevertheless, are hoped to highlight the importance of (mis)communication among administrators, teachers, and students in the implementation of writing activities in classroom.

The Author

Hooman Saeli is a lecturer in Linguistics, ESL, and Composition at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He has published and presented on written corrective feedback, oral corrective feedback, and Persian sociolinguistics.

Department of English

University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Email: hsaeli@utk.edu

References

- Ferris, D. R. (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 33-53.
- Ferris, D. R. (2014). Responding to student writing: Teachers' philosophies and practices. *Assessing Writing*, 19, 6-23.
- Ferris, D. R., & Hedgcock, J. S. (2005). *Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process, and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hedgcock, J., & Lefkowitz, N. (1994). Feedback on feedback: Assessing learner receptivity to teacher response in L2 composing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 3(2), 141-163.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1999). Cultural and situational influences on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning: A review of BALLI studies. *System*, 27(4), 557-576.
- Kaivanpanah, S., Alavi, S. M., & Sepehrinia, S. (2015). Preferences for interactional feedback: Differences between learners and teachers. *The Language Learning Journal*, 43(1), 74-93.
- Kern, R. G. (1995). Students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 28(1), 71-92.
- Lee, H. H., Leong, A. P., & Song, G. (2017). Investigating teacher perceptions of feedback. *ELT Journal*, 71(1), 60-68.
- Lee, I. (2008). Student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17(3), 144-164.
- Lee, I. (2013). Research into practice: Written corrective feedback. *Language Teaching*, 46(1), 108-119.
- McMartin-Miller, C. (2014). How much feedback is enough? Instructor practices and student attitudes toward error treatment in second language writing. *Assessing Writing*, 19, 24-35.
- Schulz, R. A. (2001). Cultural differences in student and teacher perceptions concerning the role of grammar instruction and corrective feedback: USA: Colombia. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85(2), 244-258.