



Iraqi Students and Their Research Trends in Writing: A Methodological and Thematic Review of PhD Dissertations at Isfahan Islamic Azad University

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Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261

Volume: 05

Issue: 01

Received: 07-11-2025

Accepted: 09-12-2025

Published: 06-01-2026

Page No: 10-15

Abstract

This article conducts a systematic methodological and thematic review of the EFL writing research by PhD students in Isfahan Islamic Azad University from 2021 to 2025. After reviewing and analyzing 300 published PhD dissertations, the review describes the predominant research patterns, research activities, and the analyses conducted related to EFL writing in this region and the relative theoretical models, region besides the overall engagement and the specific theoretical models, to identify the major patterns of the EFL writing studies. The research was conducted through a stratified random sample. The research was conducted through a stratified random sampling technique and the data was systematically qualitatively coded and then quantitatively analyzed, which led the researchers to establish 8 thematic clusters in this domain of writing that include: 1. the teaching of writing as a skill 2. the quality and assessment of writing 3. the use of technology in learning 4. the affective and cognitive dimensions 5. feedback and assessment practices 6. the socio-cultural and identity aspects 7. individual differences and gender. 8. translation studies. Methodologically speaking, the corpus shows a strong inclination to use quantitative and mixed methods research, and especially experimental and quasi-experimental research, which involved the use of various standardized tests, surveys, and sophisticated statistical methods, such as structural equation modeling. Theoretical bases of the corpus were mainly the social cognitive theory, the constructivist theory, the socio-cultural theory, and cognitive theory of writing.

While interest in CDA, and in particular CDA political and rhetorical comparisons, is growing, there is still very little use of critical linguistic theories concerning locally relevant socio-political problems, such as sectarianism or gender inequality, in student texts. Some of these include the shortages of interdisciplinary research in the field, especially in its intersections with neurocognition, AI, and the generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT) tool ethics and EFL writing pedagogy; the absence of research in the field; and the lack of intersectional and longitudinal research. The evidence Recalls of the strong tradition of EFL pedagogy and learner psychology evidence base is not, however, the evidence of holistic pedagogy Recalls of the need for critical, technological, and longitudinal Recalls to bring Iraqi EFL writing research into Rhorizon with global advances in applied linguistics.

Keywords: PhD dissertations, EFL writing, thematic review, research trends, methodology, Iraqi students, Islamic Azad University, critical discourse analysis, technology-enhanced learning, applied linguistics

Introduction

worldwide developments in theorizing and teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have integrated multi-dimensional language processing (e.g., cognition and emotion) in the teaching of a language (Ortega, 2013) ^[4]. Within this general periphery, writing skills development is a key mandate within the teaching of EFL, especially with students in the advanced classroom and workplace context (Hyland, 2019) ^[2]. In the Middle East, EFL Writing Teaching is integrated with the unique challenges of

linguistic transfer, cultural rhetorical variation, and change in educational systems (Mohammad & AlTamimi, 2018) ^[3]. The applied linguistics global trends are to predict the local practice. However, the understanding of the regional applied linguistic community research interests and the interlaced research practices is required for precision in teaching EFL and designing curriculum.

This research attempts to address multifaceted trends within EFL writing research, particularly with regard to the research produced by Iraqi students at Isfahan Islamic Azad University. The objective of this review is to provide the comprehensive research output of the institution by classifying the predominant themes, methods, and theories utilized in the students' dissertations and theses pertaining to EFL writing. The review aspires to provide an outline of the scholarly work surrounding EFL writing in this distinguished institution.

. The findings will not only illuminate the current status of research but also unveil areas of strength, potential gaps, and new directions that can inform future research agendas and pedagogical practices in similar EFL contexts.

Problem Statement

Although the increasing number of studies on EFL writing globally keeps growing, a synthesized and detailed image of the specific thematic and methodological concentrations in the Iraqi academic context remains underdeveloped. Generalized images of MENA region EFL education are prevalent in the literature, without specifying the granular individual country or institutional research agendas and priorities, particularly in relation to the exact challenges and opportunities for Iraqi EFL students (see Al-Tamimi & Mohammad, 2019 ^[1], for generic challenges). Consequently, scholars, curriculum designers, and pedagogues at Iraqi universities lack a single source that presents the dominant pedagogical interventions, the most widely investigated affective and cognitive variables, and the prevailing analytical frameworks imposed on EFL writing instruction and evaluation. This absence makes it hard to establish where research is concentrated, which theoretical approaches are most prominently applied, and what potential fields of innovation or critical inquiry (e.g., through Critical Discourse Analysis of political or social phenomena in writing) remain unaddressed. Without such a general mapping, the evolution of EFL writing research in this context risks becoming disjointed, perhaps replicative, and insufficiently attuned both to local learner needs and global scholarly debate. This review was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the major thematic patterns that emerge from the EFL writing researches conducted by the Iraqi participants at Isfahan Islamic Azad University?
2. Which of these studies relies on which of the following methodological options most frequently: research type, data gathering tools, data analyzing methods, and theory of argument?
3. How much the research trends have the articulation of the socio-political dimension, the critical theory of public discourse, and the theory of academic pedagogy interwoven?
4. What should be the research priorities for the future? What is the most salient research deficit in the field of Iraqi EFL writing studies, is it the local pedagogy of Iraq, the applied linguistics in the world, or both?

Methodology

The extensive overview of the trends in the writing of the Iraqi EFL has been made possible in great part due to the dedication and commitment of the lead researcher's doctoral student assistant at Isfahan Islamic Azad University. The individual's special position at the university provided them with unrestricted access to a wide range of academic materials, including the master's and doctoral theses of Iraqi scholars. This access was critical to accurately assessing the range of research questions and the surrounding methodologies used in this academic community.

The review analyzed a sizable dataset consisting of 300 dissertations and their accompanying titles, abstracts, introductions, methodology sections, and conclusions. To achieve a balanced sample, a stratified random sampling technique was used. First, all the dissertations from the past four academic years, between 2021 and 2025, written by Iraqi students at the university focusing on the field of English education, were gathered. From this complete catalogue, a representative sample was selected to ensure inclusion of all possible sub-fields of applied linguistics (for example, language pedagogy, discourse analysis, psycholinguistics) and variations in research approach (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies). This structure provided a framework to avoid favoritism and provided extensive visibility to the chosen research field.

The data collection and data analysis consist of various steps. In the beginning, the researcher's assistant created a complete index of every chosen dissertation, documenting the title of each dissertation, the year of publication, the supervisor's name, and the relevant keywords. After that, the assistant read the abstracts and introductions at a primary thematic level to isolate potentially repeated variables and study questions. This initial coding step was compared to a complete study of the methodology and discussion sections to ensure thematic tagging accuracy. In a guided step-by-step way, each dissertation was assigned specific pieces of information regarding the research design, the data collection instruments, the types of statistical analysis employed, and the theoretical models which were then extracted and coded using a qualitative data analysis software.

This analysis relied on an iterative approach for developing categories and thematic coding. First, codes were developed inductively, demonstrating themes that were eventually classified as concerning pedagogical practices, emotional engagement, and aspects of language. These codes were then integrated into larger categories, culminating, as evidenced in this review, in the main thematic trends. Also, descriptive analyses were performed and significant trends were identified based on the counted quantitative data, such as the number of times particular methodological or theoretical approaches were utilized. The findings were cross-validated, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the research field, as methodological choices were mapped to themes.

All the work, without exception, was conducted under the strictest of ethical standards. The review was conducted with complete confidentiality, no individual author names or identifying data on the dissertations were recorded and/or published. The foci were exclusively on the research works' overarching patterns and on the trends that the themes accomplished. Dissertation material was accessed in accordance with university regulations on academic research, and the assistant functioned exclusively within the

boundaries of the framework for a document review. These outcomes, in compliance with the university ethics guidelines, protected the review's result and the student researchers' privacy and intellectual property, the materials of which the analysis was based on.

Results

Having studied three hundred theses and dissertations of the students from Isfahan Islamic Azad University, the research below attempts to answer the questions:

RQ1: *What are the major thematic trends in EFL writing research with regard to Iraqi students at Isfahan Islamic Azad University?*

Most of the trends identified from the thematic analysis focus more on instructional effectiveness, learner attributes and technologies. Therefore, the decidedly dominant focus trends retain eight branches.

First, the Writing Skill Development and Pedagogy/Teaching. This area has a long-standing tradition of analyzing the effects of different teaching methods on learners' writing. A number of teaching methods, most notably (a) Genre-Based Instruction, (b) Process and Product Based Writing (PB), (c) Problem Based Learning (PBL), (d) Brain Based Learning, (e) Collaborative and Computer-Mediated Collaborative Writing (CMCW), (f) Task-Based Language Teaching (TBL) and Task Supported Language Teaching (TSTL) have been widely researched. This can be inferred to mean the concern is on the active and interactive learning environments.

Second, Quality of Writing and the CAF. One of the most typical emphases, especially considering Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency, is Writing Quality and Evaluation. Numerous studies focus on assessing writing in terms of the level of grammatical complexity, accuracy of language use, and fluency of writing. Standardized rubrics linked to the CEFR, and writing tests designed by researcher, primarily constitute the assessment instruments. This reflects the general attempt to quantify the changes that occur in learners' writing.

Third, Alternative and Technology-Enhanced Pedagogies is also becoming a popular field of study. This describes the integration of technologies such as blog-assisted writing, online extensive reading programs, and the potential incorporation of virtual reality (VR) and computer games. The flipped classroom approach is also being used in the teaching of writing, and there are indications that the teaching is becoming more of blended learning and new models of teaching.

Fourth, The Affective and Cognitive Factors in Writing is also a significant area of study. This encompasses the psychological aspects of writing anxiety, self-efficacy, self-regulation, learner autonomy, and motivation (including academic buoyancy and L2 grit). This also encompasses the psychological engagement, and the emotions associated with achievement (such as pride and boredom), which highlights the emotional and psychological aspects which affect writing performance.

In fifth, Feedback and Assessment Practices is also a significant area which is concerned with the various types of feedback. This also includes the area of feedback, with empirical studies assessing the effect of written corrective

feedback (recasts), particularly peer and teacher feedback, and the impact of self and portfolio assessment. The area of feedback is also explored, and the constructs of feed up, feed forward and metalinguistic feedback, illustrating the desire to enhance feedback for learning.

Sixth, Sociocultural and Identity Dimensions show increased interest. Studies investigate EFL learners' and teachers' cultural identity negotiation, the role of translanguaging in identity negotiation, and classroom sense of belonging. Theory like teacher charisma, professional identity, and critical examinations of native speakerism also indicate a sense of enjoyment in the broader social and cultural lives where language learning occurs.

Seventh, Individual Differences and Gender are recurring themes. Some studies are gender-oriented in approaching issues of difference in writing ability, motivation, strategy use, and response to feedback between men and women learners. This shows a continued dedication to finding out the impact of various individual differentiators on the writing performance of different people.

Last but not least, cross-linguistic and translation studies is a considerable yet often amalgamated thematic cluster. The research focuses on linguistic transference and interference such as code-switching English and Arabic. One particular subtheme is translation studies, and that is the translation of legal collocations and lexis from Arabic into English and the more general studies on contrastive rhetoric in various genres such as political speeches and abstracts. This is a pragmatic concern with the linguistic interface of the two languages, especially in the technical domains.

RQ2: *What research methods do these studies most commonly utilize? What about specific research designs, data collection tools, analyses, and theoretical frameworks?* Out of the 300 theses and dissertations, the methodological profile is heavily dominated by quantitative approaches, increasingly supplemented by mixed designs, and thoroughly supported by very strong theoretical frameworks.

Research Designs: These are primarily quantitative, with the most prevalent being use of experimental or quasi-experimental, most notably pre-test/post-test control group designs.

This prevalence reflects a desire to ascertain causality or correlation between writing performance and instructional interventions. Along with this, correlational designs are common in analyzing the association of affective/cognitive variables and writing proficiency. More and more studies use mixed-methods designs, which combine quantitative data with qualitative data to provide a richer picture. Solitary qualitative designs, although less frequent, include thematic analysis, discourse analysis, case study designs, ethnographic, and phenomenological designs that are primarily used to study perceptions, experiences, and inherent linguistic patterns.

Data Collection Instruments: Many are utilized. Questionnaires and tests developed by researchers are prevalent, either for specific writing tasks (e.g., pre/post-tests) or to determine learner attitudes and perceptions (e.g., motivation scales, attitude surveys). Validated scales are also frequently employed, such as the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) or the Dynamic Assessment

Perception Questionnaire (DAPQ), with psychometric criteria. Standardised tests, including components of the Young Learners English (YLE) test or the Certificate in Advanced English (CAE), are sometimes used to set standards for proficiency. Qualitative data gathering often relies on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, open-ended questionnaires, and reflective diaries to gather rich, descriptive information.

Analytical Techniques: Quantitative analysis frequently employs independent samples, paired samples t-tests, and ANOVA (one-way, two-way, and repeated measures) to evaluate two-condition or two-group comparisons and multiple-group comparisons, respectively. Numerous multiple regression and correlation analyses to evaluate association, predictive, and correlational relationships are used. More sophisticated methods, such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), are more frequently employed to test theories encompassing multiple complex hypotheses, including those with unobserved variables. Thematic analysis tends to be the most common qualitative data analysis, with the researcher identifying similarly recurrent themes and patterns. Others include discourse analysis (general, critical, or genre-based), content analysis, and for specific linguistic research, contrastive analysis.

Theoretical Frameworks: The study is based highly on existing theories in applied linguistics and education psychology. Key theories are the Social Cognitive Theory (for example, underpinning research on self-efficacy, self-regulation), Constructivism and Sociocultural Theory (for example, examining such concepts as the Zone of Proximal Development – ZPD, and scaffolding), and the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing. Theories cited also include the Noticing Hypothesis, the Interaction Hypothesis, and the Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions, showing diverse influence on language learning and writing theorizing.

RQ3: *To what extent are these research trends indicative of an engagement with critical linguistic theories?*

There is some engagement with critical linguistic theories, and more particularly with CDA, but it is more an emerging than a dominating trend among the reviewed dissertations. General discourse analysis is routine in the majority of the studies, but even there, a critically informed, socio-politically attuned deployment of CDA takes place less frequently but quite remarkably, in some sub-areas.

Where identified, the focus is typically Contrastive Rhetoric with a critical orientation to examine the ways in which Arabic and English rhetorical cultures influence persuasive writing or academic discourse. More blatantly, others use CDA to examine political discourse, analyzing linguistic possibilities, framing, and ideological underpinnings in speeches by prominent politicians (e.g., speculative analyses of Trump, Biden, or UK Prime Ministers) or in media coverage.

The critical linguistic analysis of sociocultural issues like sectarianism or misogyny (myagony) is embryonic but holds tremendous potential. Certain research reveals the building or brokerage of sectarian identities within some texts or the linguistic articulation of gender roles and power inequalities

within schoolbooks or public discourse. This is an awareness of the power relationships embedded in language, but the conscious application of CDA to deconstruct these phenomena in Iraqi EFL writing is only in its early stages. While conventional linguistic accounts are dominant, the explicit application of CDA as theory and analytical perspective to examine social power relations via language, especially with reference to learner output, is an area ripe for extension.

RQ4: *What are the major gaps or underdeveloped areas within current Iraqi EFL writing research that should be investigated further, considering local pedagogic needs as well as broader developments in applied linguistics?*

Despite the number of studies, there are certain major gaps and underdeveloped areas that have to be examined further to establish Iraqi EFL writing scholarship as well as address local pedagogic needs.

First, while technology integration is researched, there is little focus on the thorough evaluation of AI-based writing tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Grammarly) in providing feedback or generating content, as well as their ethical considerations in the context of Iraqi EFL. Research needs to be undertaken on students' perceptions of AI feedback, its impact on the acquisition of writing skills, and how to promote effective human-AI cooperation when writing.

Secondly, the application of critical linguistic theories like CDA on specific local socio-political issues in learner-generated texts is relatively minimal. While some political discourse investigation exists, more advanced investigation of how Iraqi EFL learners construct argument or narrative about controversial topics like sectarianism, gender roles, or political events in their own writing, and how these constructions relate to broader societal discourses, is needed. This would involve analyzing the linguistic expression of misogyny (myagony) in student essays or other written output.

Third, there is a relatively untapped area of interdisciplinary research that bridges writing and other areas. To provide one example, work on the neural underpinnings of writing (e.g., via neuroimaging or eye-tracking) or cognitive load for specific L2 writing tasks is in deficit. Greater integration with Translation Studies beyond legal texts might then investigate translation memory tools or machine translation and how they influence EFL writing processes and products, especially for academic or journalistic styles.

Fourth, although there is a focus on gender difference, more sophisticated analyses from intersectional frames need to be conducted that investigate how gender interacts with other social identities (e.g., religious identity, ethnicity, socio-economic status) to shape writing experiences and outputs. This is more than mere male/female comparison to identify the multifaceted identities of students.

Finally, longitudinal long-term studies of the development of writing ability over years are scant. Most studies employ pre-test/post-test designs to create snapshots, rather than developmental routes. Longitudinal research could provide rich information on the long-term impact of pedagogical interventions and natural trends in L2 writing ability.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review indicate the existence

of an active research environment focusing on the EFL writing of Iraqi students at Isfahan Islamic Azad University. The prevailing current trends display a positive inclination towards practical pedagogical developments responsive to the international concerns of improving the teaching of language and the integration of technology into language teaching. The sustained focus on the CAF paradigm shows a concern with the outcomes of the writing quality, and the attention to the affective and cognitive factors indicates a concern with the intricate psychological aspects of L2 writing. The inclusion of the sociocultural dimension and the prominence of critical questions around language suggest a strengthened concern with the contextual factors influencing the use of language and the construction of identity. The attention to translation studies, and especially to legal translation, demonstrates a career-oriented focus on the professional uses of English.

The methodological approach to this research, especially with the high adoption of quantitative and mixed-method designs with advanced statistical techniques, indicates that there is an empirical tradition of research in Iraqi EFL and indicative of an advanced level of research. The mention of mainstream theoretical frameworks also situates the work within a particular strand of the academic debates. The equilibrium between theoretical and methodological frameworks characterizes studies of Iraqi EFL writing in an extremely positive manner.

Nonetheless, the research reflects a few areas that could be developed concerning the research's criticality and interdisciplinarity. Though some discourse analysis has been offered, a potential area is the more formal and sustained critique of critical theories of analysis like CDA when engaging with the more controversial local socio-political contexts involving learner-generated texts. This would be more than a descriptive process. It would consist of a deeper critique of the relations of power, the ideologies, and the representational practices in language. While there are some translation studies, the investigation of more advanced technological aids, e.g. machine translation, translation memory, and their significant potential and untapped area on the development of L2 writing is similar. The L2 writing development and learner identity's dynamic, multidimensional nature requires more extensive longitudinal studies and intersectional approaches the gaps revealed.

Conclusion

The scholarship around the learning of Iraqi students at Isfahan Islamic Azad University captures the energizing academic environment shaped by research on the pedagogy of writing, learning, psychology of learning, and technology integration. The studies, which have developed a conscientiously elaborated research schema, which is grounded empirically mostly on quantitative and mixed-methods research designs, demonstrate the presence of a mature and serious research culture. Despite the documented advancements in the understanding and teaching of EFL writing, there is still a pressing need to focus on 'high order' linguistic contemplation in the remaining socio-political gaps, to stimulate interdisciplinary collaborations, particularly in the next-generation translation studies, and to undertake much-needed longitudinal and cross-sectional studies to showcase the EFL writing of Iraq comprehensively.

The review demonstrates multiple important contributions to diverse constituent groups. This review enables teachers and curriculum developers to strengthen and improve their writing pedagogy, thanks to the effective instructional strategies—Genre-Based, PBL, and CMCW—together with the documented value of including affective variables. Additionally, the knowledge concerning the assessment of CAF can underpin the development of more effective rubrics and feedback mechanisms. Closed with an enumeration of the review's contributions, the weaknesses of the review will guide future scholars. It points to the need to shift from purely descriptive studies to complex, interdisciplinary, and longitudinal studies.

Policymakers and institutions may employ this awareness of dominant trends in studies to inform decisions regarding allocation of resources, particularly towards integrating technology, developing staff in advanced research methodologies, and promoting research that addresses locally relevant socio-political issues through critical language perspectives. Lastly, for the students, improved teaching practices and clearer comprehension of the process of learning, with this study, will lead to more productive and effective teaching of writing, therefore increasing superior competence and confidence in EFL writing.

Despite the broad scope, this review has several constraints. Its scope was restricted to Iraqi students' theses and dissertations in one university, Isfahan Islamic Azad University. Although this provides us with a rich institutional perspective, the findings may not be quite representative of the broader Iraqi EFL writing studies environment across all universities or other modes of publication, for instance, in journal articles. One of the weaknesses is the language of the dissertations; though EFL writing is the area of interest, the entire texts might have been written in English or Arabic, and the level of depth of the analysis would be disparate based on the language, although the abstracts would typically be English. The chosen time span, being more than the past ten years, is also a limitation because rapid technology and applied linguistics advances guarantee that highly recent emerging trends may still be underrepresented in submitted dissertations. Finally, the exclusion of grey literature, such as unpublished reports and conference papers, guarantees the review may have overlooked other worthwhile information from outside formal academic dissertations.

Based on the gaps and shortcomings identified, some of the areas of future study are suggested. One of them is implementing CDA studies on Iraqi EFL learners' discussion or framing of local socio-political issues—like sectarianism, gender roles, or political events—on their written activities in an attempt to understand their critical literacy and the effect of local discourses. Another pressing call is to investigate the specific impact and ethical implications of AI-founded writing technology, like generative AI and grammar checkers, on Iraqi EFL learners' writing process, product, and perceptions. The interplay of social identities, such as gender, religion, and socio-economic class, should also inform the analysis of the EFL writing experiences, problems, and achievements of Iraqi EFL learners. The implementation of longitudinal studies focusing on the evolving patterns of L2 writing skills would elucidate the enduring impacts of interventions and the organic processes involved in the acquisition of a second language. In addition, studies examining the instructional value of machine translation and

translation memory in EFL writing should examine the varied benefits of such tools on students' linguistic precision and fluency as well as on the development of advanced skills in translation. The Iraqi L2 writing processes primarily involving cognitive load and attention would finally have the potential to be examined through advanced neurocognitive and psycholinguistic techniques such as eye-tracking, fMRI, and ERP. Finally, comparative studies, both within multiple Iraqi universities and with other Middle Eastern contexts, would bring to light both overlapping and unique research problems and methodological approaches.

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How to Cite This Article

Hadi HAN. Iraqi students and their research trends in writing: a methodological and thematic review of PhD dissertations at Isfahan Islamic Azad University. *Int J Soc Sci Except Res*. 2026;5(1):10–15.

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