



The Effects of Reflective Writing on EFL Learners' Writing Performance

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Abstract

The use of reflection, when it comes to teaching writing skill, is not very common. The present study investigated the impact of reflective writing on Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. The aforementioned learners were of different age and marital status. In this study, 40 participants were equally divided into a control and a treatment group. Both of the groups were taught the very same materials; however, the participants in the treatment group were taught making use of Portfolio as well as peer-assessment and self-assessment whereas the control group was taught based on the traditional teacher-centered methods. The instrument was IELTS's task two of writing module employed to test the learners' writing performance. It was illuminated that the two groups were not significantly different with regard to their writing abilities. Posttest results were also analyzed using different statistical measures such as independent samples t-test and one-way analysis of variance. It came to light that differences in means of the control and treatment groups regarding writing performance were not statistically significant. Moreover, it was illuminated that the background variables of age and marital status, did not influence the learners' writing performance. The results of the present study may greatly stimulate syllabus designers and English teachers.

Keywords: *Reflective Writing; EFL Learners; Age; Marital Status; Writing Performance*

Introduction

If the approaches which are used to teach writing to EFL learners are not improved, many learners would face problems in communicating their ideas in the written language. Reflection requires learners to analyze their experiences so as to learn from them. In the present research, reflection will be used in the form of writing, which is referred to as reflective writing. Writing is one of the useful ways for teachers to observe the use of reflection on the part of students. Reflective writing is relatively a new topic in the context of Iran and needs further research.

Writing skill has received the least attention on the part of teachers as compared to the other three skills, namely Listening, Speaking and Reading in different areas (e.g., Hamby; 2011). Writing, at the same time, is believed to be the hardest language skill. As a results, a lot of studies have indicated that language learners are weak in writing skill. For example, Salem (2007) investigated the opinions of 50 students, who were majoring in English, on writing in English at the Egyptian University of Al-Azhar. The majority of the students felt overwhelmed when they, as part of the study, were supposed to write about a topic; they did not know how to develop their ideas, how to start and how to conclude their essays. With the creation of some programs like writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing for academic purposes, writing skill managed to receive a great deal of attention. At the time, some language educators began to think about creating more new and more effective ways of teaching writing. In 1960s a new approach to teaching writing came into being; it was process writing which teachers gradually started to use it from the late 1970s. Unlike product approach which emphasizes that when it comes to teaching writing the emphasis should be on the end product, process approach stresses that the steps used to produce a piece of writing should be made use of. A lot of researches have been conducted regarding the effectiveness of process writing that we will be dealt with in the second chapter.

Process approach may be an effective strategy for enhancing the writing skills of Iranian EFL learners, as it provides learners with the opportunity of getting to know how a piece of writing is written. In the present research, process approach will be applied for teaching writing to both control and experimental groups. Accordingly, this study will investigate the effects of assignments belonging to reflective writing on Iranian EFL learners' writing performance.

The Significance of Writing

Learning encompasses several intriguing factors that are in line with maximizing learner's potentiality in acquiring a foreign language. In fact, EFL learners learn a foreign language with a lot of factors being involved and that is a probable reason why different learners learn a language unequally. One of the most contributing factors, in gaining the knowledge of English as a foreign language (EFL), that needs to be thoroughly taken into consideration is reflection. The term reflection needs to be delved into so as to find out whether or not it is made use of to facilitate learning.

Jennifer Moon defined reflection as "A form of mental processing – a form of thinking – that we use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is no obvious solution" (Moon, 1999a, 23; Moon, 1999b, 10). In other words, it is when someone looks back at an experience, thinks about the experience and learns from it. Reflection includes several subcategories such as critical reflection, reflective teaching, reflective writing, etc. The present research deals with reflective writing which as a pedagogical strategy paves the way for students to integrate their thoughts and experiences with the material they are taught to more adequately understand both the experiences and the material.

Over the past decades, with the arrival of new approaches and methods of teaching foreign languages, Iranian language instructors have optimized their teaching knowledge to a great extent, specifically with regard to teaching how to write in a foreign language. Yet, there is much to examine. In some EFL contexts, writing, which is claimed to be the hardest skill among the four skills, is not taught as efficiently as it should be. There should be a base according to which EFL learners learn from their experiences in order to make progress much faster. This can be achieved by incorporating some reflective writing assignments through portfolio, self-assessment and peer assessment in their syllabi. Accordingly, in order to for Iranian EFL students to increase their English writing proficiency, the current study aims to examine if reflective writing is perceptibly effective in improving Iranian EFL learners' writing performance.

In discussing the importance of writing to learning, Suleiman (2000, p. 155) asserts that “writing is a central element of language, any reading and language arts program must consider the multidimensional nature of writing in instructional practices, assessment procedures, and language development.” Considering this, the multidimensional nature of writing is a great deal of help in comprehending writing fundamentals. There have been numerous approaches in the history of teaching writing; product approach, process approach, English for academic purposes (Silva, 1990). Nevertheless, Writing is still a task which is difficult for Iranian EFL learners and teachers and researchers are still not satisfied with these approaches.

It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience, it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalizations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalizations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively (Gibbs 1988). Reflection, more particularly, reflective writing requires learners to reflect on their own works in order to learn from them. By documenting reflection, learners can have a useful record of their own thoughts which can be visited over and over again and the act of writing encourages a further level of depth.

Some EFL learners have received little instruction on writing reflectively which accounts for a significant proportion of success with regard to writing proficiency when it comes to Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Therefore, the present study aims to examine the impacts of reflective writing on Iranian EFL learners’ writing performance and to reveal the positive role of reflective writing in promoting these two. Thus, this research can have an effective role in helping EFL learners learn English in a more efficient way and this will contribute to the growing body of research in the field.

Research Questions

1. Does reflective writing affect the writing performance of adult EFL learners who are of different age?
2. Does reflective writing influence the writing performance of adult EFL learners who are of different marital status?

Writing Performance

Over many decades of research into Second Language Acquisition (SLA) which began from Grammar Translation up to the present time that the swing of pendulum has moved towards communicative approaches, ideas regarding the development of language proficiency have changed. At the time of Grammar Translation Method, writing served like a supporting skill for the reinforcement of grammar acquisition, and even at the beginning of communicative approaches to language teaching writing still seemed to be de-emphasized with the main priority being oral proficiency. But with the creation of movements as writing across the curriculum and writing for academic purposes, writing also received a lot of attention in language learning. Having said that, these writing programs have been implemented primarily in developed countries (e.g., the US, the UK, etc).

Writing is of great significance for communication to learners who wish to learn a foreign language. Mourtaga (2004) stated that writing is an important way of communication which is a necessity for education. Chastain (1988) also believes that “writing is a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning a second language” (p 244). Writing teaches learners the basics of a language such as how to put words together, how to spell words and so forth. By writing, learners can translate their thoughts for other people. Moreover, writing is claimed to be the hardest skill among the

four skills of language (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Considering all this, this important skill, for a long time, has been underestimated (Dempsey, Pytlikzillig & Burning, 2009) and received the least attention on the part of teachers, which is why it is a serious challenge for learners to master their target language. Nunan (1996, p. 271) believes that “producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably *the* most difficult thing there *is to do in a language*”.

Studies on the Value of Reflective Writing in Iran

In Iranian context, most of researches on Reflective writing have been carried out over the past couple of years, which means that we need to work more concerning both gathering more data and the ways of implementing it. Bagheri and Pourgharib (2013) conducted a research to see if journal writing had any effect on learners’ oral production. The participants of the research were 30 female students whose proficiency level was intermediate and were selected by a proficiency test. The learners had registered in a speaking-writing course in a language institute. The study had two noticeable outcomes; first was that the t-test found a significant difference between the control and the experiment groups in terms of their scores. The second outcome was that learners were encouraged more by dialog journal writing to communicate with their peers and teacher. According to the researchers, in journal writing the focus is not on form, rather it is on meaning and on topics that are of interest to learners, and here learners write freely without focusing on form (p. 3524).

Khodadadi and Khodabakhshzade (2012) examined the effects of portfolio and self-assessment on writing ability. They assigned sixty freshman undergraduate university students majoring in teaching English as a Foreign Language to a control and an experimental group. They had enrolled in an essay course at Tabaran University in Iran in 2010. While both groups wrote several essays during the course and took a self-regulation questionnaire and the same writing task at the beginning and end of the course as pre-and-post tests, only participants in the experiment group were required to write portfolio regularly and perform self-assessment tasks. The multivariate analysis of results showed that the two groups had no significant difference in their writing and self-regulation abilities when the course started. The experimental group, however, did not only score significantly higher than the control group on the writing task ($F = 14.390$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$) but also gained higher self-regulation ability as a result of writing portfolios and self-assessment ($F = 58.235$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$). Following the satisfying results in the study, the researchers state:

This success partly can be attributed to the teachers’ pedagogical intervention as well as the students’ self-awareness of the journey they took during the course. The students in the experimental group also increased this awareness by reflecting on their self-evaluated writing activities going through the portfolio they had prepared during the term (p. 523).

Similar to the studies in non-Iranian contexts, this study, too, points to two factors, namely self-assessment and self-evaluation which contributed to the findings. An interesting point that the researchers in this study took into consideration was the implementation of self-assessment outside the class (p. 523), in addition to that inside the class, regarding writing activities, which also was likely to have contributed to the success.

Finally, another research, carried out by Sabooni and Salehi (2015), investigated the impacts of reflective learning portfolio on the development of the writing accuracy. In the study, a proficiency test was administered to students who enrolled in a writing course in an English institute. Then they were instructed in the use of reflective portfolio. Afterwards, five students were randomly selected and interviewed at the end of the course. The finding suggested that reflective portfolio improved accurate Writing ability of the EFL learners. Furthermore, it increased motivation and self-confidence in students’ writing performance. Overall, the use of reflective writing, in the studies in this section, through peer-

assessment, self-assessment and portfolio showed promising results for further research as well as for using it in real settings.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, the impacts of reflective writing as well as variables of age and marital status on writing performance were investigated. The control group received instructions based on traditional teacher-based methods whereas the treatment group was taught using portfolio, peer-assessment and self-assessment. Considering this, the teaching materials of the two groups were the same. Then, the post-test mean scores of the two groups were compared. It is worth pointing out that the factors of age and marital status were taken into account for both of the groups.

Participants

The participants selected for this research were from a language institute in Shiraz. They were selected based on multi-stage sampling. The study tried to select participants who were homogenous in terms of their English proficiency which is why they were all intermediate English learners. They were 40 learners divided into two groups, control and experimental, each group having 20 learners. The participants aged 16 to 48 all of whom were male.

There are a few graphs summarizing some information about the variables of age and marital status. The total number of participants were 40 at the beginning of the study, but one of them did not finish the course. Therefore, the number of the participants according to which the graphs are based is 39. As for the variable age, the participants were divided into two age groups; the learners who were between 15 to 26 years old and the learners who were above 26. The data in this regard are presented in the graph below.

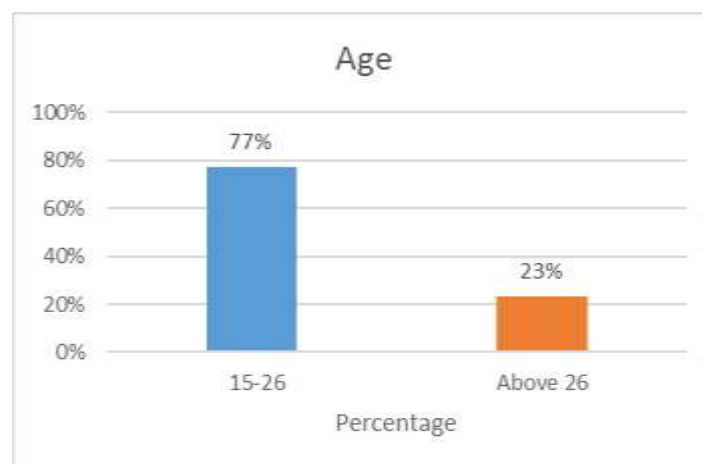


Figure 1. Participants' age divided in Two Age Groups

Another background variable considered in this study is marital status. Considering this, the participants were divided into a single and a married group. The majority of the participants, as shown in graph 2, were single.

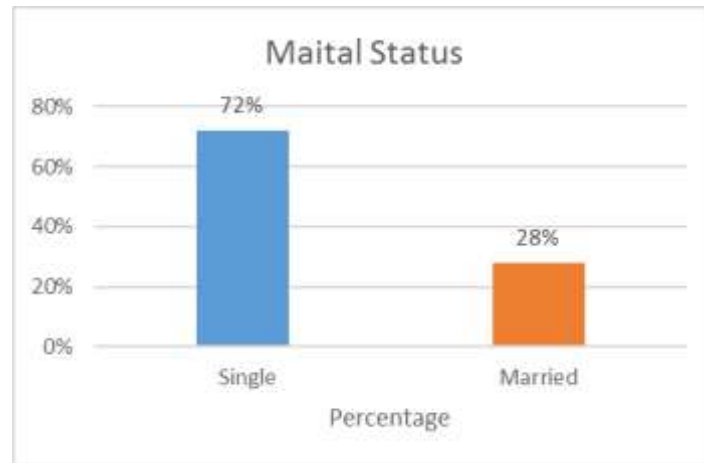


Figure 2. Percentages relating to participants' marital status

The learners, as illustrated in the graphs above, were not homogenous in terms of a couple of factors; First, there was a real diversity among them from the aspect of age as they belonged to different age groups. Second, the absolute majority of the learners were single as opposed to a few of them who were married. This was primarily due to the fact that a lot of young participants took part in the research.

Instrument

The instrument which was used in this study was IELTS's task two of writing module employed to test the learners' writing performance. To establish the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to a number of university professors and experts in the field and they were asked to mark the inappropriate items. Having done this, all the appropriate items were included in the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher administered two pre-tests for each group at the beginning of the semester, The research instrument, namely IELTS's task two of the writing module, ascertained students' ability in writing. During the semester, the participants in the traditional class did not receive any instructions regarding reflective writing assignments, while the learners in the experiment group did receive instructions related to reflective writing assignments. At the end of the semester, to find out how effective the instructions were for each group, once again the very same tests were administered for the two groups named as post-tests.

Data Analysis Procedure

To answer the second research question, which included an IELTS task two of writing module, we used Analysis of variance (ANOVA) to analyze the data as there was a dependent variable and an independent variable. For this research question also independent samples t-tests were conducted to see if the difference in the mean scores of the control and treatment groups was statistically significant. To do all the analyses, the research employed Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.

Results

The purpose of the present study was to explore the effects of reflective writing on Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. We took age and major into consideration as independent variables to establish if they are effective in improving the dependent variable, that is, writing performance.

This study encompassed a control group and a treatment group. The number of participants in each group was 20. However, one of the participants in the control group did not finish the semester, which is why his statistics were removed even from the pre-tests. During the test, most of the sessions the participants in the treatment group were asked to do assignments for writing. Then, the researcher had them both assess their peers' assignments and their own assignments. In addition, participants in the treatment group were asked to keep every single writing-related assignment they did over the semester as portfolio. The control group, on the other hand, were taught using the traditional teacher-based.

It is worth mentioning that everything in the two groups were the same except for the methods of teaching materials. The researchers administered tests for control and treatment groups for measuring their measuring their writing ability. To measure the participants' progress following the use of the teaching methods, once again the researcher, as post-test, took the same tests.

A Comparison of Pre- and Post-test Scores of the Two Groups

The present study tried to investigate the effectiveness of the traditional teacher-centered method and the learner-centered method for teaching writing. In the two groups, the materials were the same, while the way of teaching the materials for the groups was not the same. The scores of the participants were analyzed using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

In One-way ANOVA, for measuring variance homogeneity of the groups, Levene's test for Equality of Variances was looked into. According to the results of the test, there was not any statistical significance ($P = 0.542 > .05$) which can be observed in the table below. Therefore, group variances were equal in the population.

Table 1. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Pre-test of the Writing Exam

F	df1	df2	Sig.
.380	1	37	.542

As for the pre-test, the analysis showed that the participants in the treatment group ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .343$) were slightly better at writing skill than the participants in the control group ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .394$). However, the mean difference of the groups was not statistically significant.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Pre-test for Control and Treatment Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean			
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
Control	19	2.60	.394	.090	2.41	2.79	2.00	3.00
Treatment	20	2.77	.343	.076	2.61	2.93	2.00	3.50
Total	39	2.69	.373	.060	2.57	2.81	2.00	3.50

What is more, the ANOVA table also showed that there were not any statistical significant differences between the groups, $F(1, 37) = 2.066$, $p = .159$. The results are illustrated in the following table.

Table 3. Results of ANOVA for Pre-test of the Writing Exam

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.281	1	.281	2.066	.159
Within Groups	5.027	37	.136		
Total	5.308	38			

At the end of the semester, another writing exam of IELTS task two was taken to look into any possible progress following the methods used to teach writing. According to the results in table 4, the participants in treatment group ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 3.65$) surpassed those in the control group ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 3.37$).

Table 4. Descriptives for Post-test of the Writing Exam

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Control	19	3.37	.495	.114	3.13	3.61	2.50	4.50
Treatment	20	3.65	.489	.109	3.42	3.88	3.00	4.50
Total	39	3.51	.506	.081	3.35	3.68	2.50	4.50

Comparing the mean scores of the two groups, the mean difference for the control group (mean difference = .77) is a little lower than that of the treatment group (mean difference = .88). Furthermore, the difference in the means of the groups in terms of effect size was moderate (partial eta squared = .79).

What is more, to see if the mean difference of the two groups was statistically significant in the post-test, an independent samples t-test was performed. The results of the test indicated that the difference in the means (mean difference = -.28) was not statistically significant ($.082 > .05$). The statistics in this regard are presented in table 5.

Table 5. Independent Samples T-test for Post-test of the Writing Exam

	Levenes Test		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Dif	Std. Error Dif	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.187	.668	-1.785	37	.082	-.28158	.15775	.60120	.03805
Equal variances Not assumed			-1.784	36.843	.083	-.28158	.15780	.60136	.03820

Age

To measure the effects of age on writing performance of the learners of the study, first they were divided into two age groups (15 to 26 and above 26) based on their age. Then, so as to measure any possible difference in the mean scores of the age groups, an independent samples t-test was conducted. As shown in table 6, the statistics showed that the age group of 15 – 26 ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .421$) outperformed the age group above 26 ($M = 3.58$, $SD = .664$). The difference of the means (mean difference = .845) of the age groups was very small (eta squared = .005).

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Post-test for Age

	Age Groups		Std. Error		
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	
Age	15-26	14	3.68	.421	.112
	Above 26	6	3.58	.664	.271

Furthermore, the independent samples t-test showed that age did not affect writing performance of the participants significantly ($.701 > .05$). Accordingly, based on the results (table 7), it could be concluded that age did not affect the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance.

Table 7. Independent Samples T-Test for Age

Levenes Test for

t-test for equality of means

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Dif	Std. Error Dif	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal var assumed	5.381	.032	.390	18	.701	.09524	.24430	-.41801	.60849
Equal var Not assumed			.324	6.790	.756	.09524	.29371	-.60366	.79414

Marital Status

Another background variable of the participants that could be effective regarding the research question and was taken into account was marital status. To measure any possible effects of marital status on writing performance, the learners were classified as either single or married. The scores of the learners were analyzed using an independent samples t-test. Based on the results, married participants ($M = 3.71$, $SD = .699$) obtained a slightly higher mean score as compared to their single counterparts ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .362$). The difference in mean scores (mean difference = .01) was very small (eta squared = .010). The data regarding marital status are presented in table 8.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Post-test for Marital Status

Marital Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Single	13	3.61	.362	.10054
Married	7	3.71	.699	.26406

The results of t-test also indicated that marital status did not significantly influence writing performance of the participants. The results are illustrated in table 9. Based on the results, it could be claimed that marital status did not influence the writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners.

Table 9. Independent Samples T-Test for Marital Status

	Levenes Test		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Dif	Std. Error Dif	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	11.02 4	.004	-.442	18	.678	-.09890	.23455	.59167	.39386
Equal variances Not assumed			-.350	7.784	.736	-.09890	.28255	.75363	.55583

Discussion

In the previous sections of this chapter the collected data were analyzed, this section deals with writing the results and discussing them. Once again, the present research aimed to explore the effects of reflective writing on the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. Furthermore, some background factors such as age and marital status, major were also included in the study as independent variables.

To answer the research question, IELTS task two of writing module was used. To measure variance homogeneity of the two groups, first a Levene's test was conducted. The results indicated that variance homogeneity was not statistically significant. Then, a One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data concerning the participants' writing performance. It was found that the two groups made progress practically to the same extent with treatment group performing little better by .11. Therefore, the difference between the groups' mean scores is not significant. One of the possible reasons to the same result of the two groups in the face of different teaching methods is that people using reflective writing would need to wait a little longer to see the results as reflective writing seems to be used for long-term purposes.

The role of age, as one of the background variables of the study, with regard to its effects on writing performance, was also taken into account. At first, the mean scores of the two age groups were measured. Then, using independent samples t-test, the effect of age on the two groups was analyzed. Participants who were between 15 to 26 performed slightly better. However, the difference between the age groups regarding both of the dependent variable was not significant according to which it can be concluded that age did not affect the writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners. The reason why the younger participants performed better regarding writing performance may stem from their motivation which is believed to be more as compared to the participants above 26.

Another background variable that was included in this research was marital status. As for the dependent variable, first the mean scores of the participants were analyzed. Then, an independent samples t-test was carried out to see if the variable marital status influenced the participants' writing performance. Regarding writing performance, the married learners acquired a slightly higher mean score ($M = 3.71$) than the single learners ($M = 3.61$). Nevertheless, it was concluded that marital status did not affect the writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners. Married participants obtained a higher score in writing as compared to their single counterparts; it might be because of the fact that married people are more focused on what they are doing.

To recap, the data collected regarding the possible effects of reflective writing on the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance were analyzed. The results showed that reflective writing did not affect the participants' writing performance. In addition, the background variables of age and marital status did not influence the learners' writing performance.

Accordingly, this study aimed at exploring the effects of reflective writing on Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. The findings of this study led us to conclude that reflective writing did not affect the writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners significantly. Moreover, the variables of age and marital status did not affect the two dependent variables either.

Conclusion

Although the present research came to the conclusion that reflective writing did not significantly affect the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance, it created a basis according to which further research can be done. The purpose of this study was to help English learners improve their writing performance. This study aimed to see if reflective writing, along with the factors of age and marital status had any significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. One-way ANOVA and independent samples t-test were conducted the results of which showed that difference in the mean scores of the control and treatment groups was not significant. Moreover, for each of the background factors of age and marital status, the differences in the means of the groups were not statistically significant. The current study might be of interest to both syllabus designers and language teachers, primarily in terms of the goals that the study aimed to achieve as well as the methods made use of. By incorporating portfolio, peer-assessment and/or self-assessment into classes, both teachers and learners can identify their strength and weaknesses and modify their teaching/learning strategies when necessary.

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