



Postgraduate TEFL Students' Performance and Perception on Research Article Writing and Their Challenges in Conducting Research

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Abstract

Conducting research and writing research articles (RAs) are great concerns of academicians; however, the obstacles are elusive and the students' challenges are not fully explored. In this study, first, to investigate the participants' (N = 30) performance, the researchers analyzed their RAs, using a scale. Second, to examine the participants' perception, the researchers used a questionnaire. Finally, to explore participants' challenges in both conducting research and writing RAs, there was a focus group interview involving 12 of them. The results of the content analysis of the RAs indicated a mediocre performance, while the data analysis of the questionnaire indicated that students know about the essential requirements in terms of L&C conventions for a RA in theory. This discrepancy was confirmed by the statistical analysis of correlation, which suggests more practical training rather than a theoretical orientation in academic writing courses. The results of the analysis of the multifaceted challenges students face have important implications for improving academic writing and research methods courses.

Keywords: Challenge, Perception, Performance, Research article

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1. Introduction

Writing a research article (RA) might place postgraduate students before a complex genre that has been called 'academic-scientific' (Castelló & Iñesta, 2012), since it is situated halfway between academic genres and specialists of any field. On one end, it involves writing a text that is going to be read and evaluated by one -or several- professors, which bestows its academic character. On the other end, it requires the student to position himself/herself as a researcher capable of producing a text that can be published and read by members of the scientific community of reference (Castelló & Iñesta, 2012; Russell & Cortes, 2012).

RA writing serves as a popular genre in academic writing (AW) where postgraduate students in some countries like Iran need to publish their RAs taken from their dissertations. RAs need to meet certain conditions to be publishable. They require knowledge of different features within academic discourse including rhetorical, linguistic, social, cultural, and knowledge of English primarily used by specific fields (Ferenz, 2005). Additionally, there are certain features for organizational structure and format section of RAs which are crucial. They include a carefully organized argument using certain techniques to achieve coherence (Parry & Sue, 1998; Swales & Feak, 2004). Students need to be competent in the structural and organizational components of their RAs (i.e., introduction, method, results, and Discussion) in English (Astafurova et al., 2017), coherent presentation of an original idea, and other publication conventions.

Moreover, issues such as novelty and sound theoretical and methodological framework are decisive in publication of a RA. Although these issues are among the top priorities among the effective factors in publication of a RA, the role of L& C conventions need not to be ignored. Especially, as Kaufhold (2015) states, language conventions (L& C) of RA writing, as a subcategory of AW, in the social sciences are not as clearly stated as in natural sciences (Kaufhold, 2015). Thus, developing competence regarding requirements of a RA, in terms of L&C conventions might be demanding for the students, especially non-native students. L&C conventions include compositional peculiarities (e.g., making a right balance of highlighting and hedging and following principles of appropriate citation). It also includes the lexical-grammatical aspects of RAs (i.e., scientific vocabularies, terminologies, and expressions) and syntactic competence (i.e., tense, voice, participle, gerund, and infinitive). Nonetheless, such perspective has not attracted much attention among curriculum developers (Tien, 2013). Therefore, curriculum developers must develop and update RA writing programs in order to satisfy academic society's expectations.

Another major concern, regarding writing publishable RAs, has to do with students' perceptions (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). It is important to make a bridge between theory and practice in AW courses so that the perception students develop to be in line with their performance. Furthermore, writing a RA is particularly challenging for most postgraduate students (Cai & Kong, 2013).

There is still a more general image to consider in order for a RA to be successfully published. To assure the quality standards at this level of education, the challenges to writing a RA need to be meticulously addressed. Only after discovering the challenges which contextualize this issue, putting several actions into practice will be possible to improve the quality of RAs.

Furthermore, despite an abundance of studies conducted on issues relevant to academic and RA writing, there is still a need for more research in non-native environments or EFL contexts, such as Iran where RAs written by Ph.D. students have to be published as a prerequisite for graduation besides successful passing of the courses. Moreover, since the academic face of the postgraduate education is conspicuously reflected by their RAs, their high quality should be assured (Hasrati, 2013). Additionally, a careful study of all previously mentioned investigations indicates that no previous research has simultaneously examined the performance and perceptions of postgraduate students and its relationship focusing on L&C conventions, along with challenges students face in not only writing their RAs but also conducting their research in an EFL context, using a mixed methods research. Thus, the researchers made an attempt to shed some light on the quality of postgraduate TEFL students' performance by analyzing their RAs and their perceptions by using a questionnaire. Moreover, in order to develop a multifaceted perspective on students' conducting research and writing their RAs, the researchers conducted a focus group interview to explore what problems and challenges are involved in this process from their point of view. Thus, making attempt to fill the gap, the present study was undertaken with four objectives: A) analyzing the content of Iranian EFL M.A. graduates and Ph.D. students' unpublished RAs, but prepared for publication (i.e., before submission), in terms of L&C conventions; B) analyzing their perceptions on the essentials of RA writing in terms of the same L& C conventions; C) relating their performance and perceptions to find any potential compatibility or discrepancy; and D) exploring challenges students have in conducting their research and in writing their RAs. Accordingly, the researchers posed the following research questions:

1. How do postgraduate TEFL students perform on writing their RAs in terms of L&C conventions?
2. What are postgraduate TEFL students' perceptions about RAs' essential L&C conventions?
3. Is there a significant relationship between postgraduate TEFL students' perceptions about RAs' essential L& C conventions and their adherence to them in their performance?
4. What challenges do postgraduate TEFL students have in conducting their research and writing their RAs?

2. Literature Review

To understand any potential problem in dissertation or article writing, studies, utilizing interviews and questionnaires, have been broadly conducted. These studies have illustrated what non-English speaking writers perceived as difficult, as well as using appropriate strategies of learning and writing in order to overcome their difficulties (e.g., Dong, 1998; Flowerdew, 1999; López-Cózar et al., 2013).

Focusing on postgraduate teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) students' AW, Castello and Iñesta (2012), conducting semi-structured interviews, explored how academics perceive authoring identity in higher education in Spain. Their findings helped directing a psychological understanding of authoring identity, informing improvement of more efficient education to help students boost their AW and keep away from plagiarism.

With more language orientation in their research, Swales and Post (2017), in an attempt to take research into practice framework, investigated the use of imperatives in AW within five disciplines taken from a journal, which started with asking whether students use imperatives in their AW and ended with students' successful editing of some tasks. Students were first provided with some rhetorical consciousness-raising activities and microanalyses. Results showed that primary text imperatives tend to be present in sections where there is any case of main argumentation, but are very unequally dispensed across fields. Moreover, authors seemed to use the imperatives for diverse strategic goals such as engaging the reader, obtaining text economy or expressing personal style in spite of their more or less face-threatening nature. There were a few cases of expectations and conventions specific to that field.

Regarding RAW, Todd et al., (2004) explored final-year social science undergraduates' experiences as well as their perceptions who had signed up on a dissertation module in UK University. Collecting data through interviews and questionnaires, the study investigated the live experience of

students' dissertation as a form of independent learning and assessment, the challenges they came across, and their perceptions of peer and teacher support. They experienced conspicuous challenges, especially concerning time. The results also indicated that students found the feelings of independence, authenticity, and ownership regarding their dissertation really worthwhile. Harrison and Whalley (2008) examined the perspectives of students towards their dissertation experience through the analysis of questionnaire analysis presented to previous students in two UK institutions. Evidence taken from the questionnaires revealed some key issues of putting theory into practice. For instance, while studying the right subject, students were to enjoy the independent fieldwork and establish a good student-staff supervisory relationship. The results also indicated some difficulties of the students such as time management and knowing what was demanded.

So far numerous quantitative and qualitative studies have focused on different aspects of students' RA writing, experiences, and perceptions (Castelló & Iñesta, 2012; Catterall et al., 2011; Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2016; Jalongo et al., 2014; McGinty et al., 2010; Todd et al., 2012). In addition, some studies have sought to examine the issue from genre-based perspective, focusing on constructing metadiscourse or use of imperatives in AW within disciplinary variation (e.g., Kawase, 2015; Swales & Post, 2017). Although these studies are more language oriented in comparison with studies concerning AW holistically, the most common language conventions, including compositional and lexical-grammatical are under investigated.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants of the study were 30 TEFL M.A. graduates and Ph.D. students, selected from among 57 (20 out of 30 Ph.D. students at their first year and 10 out of 27 M.A. recent graduates), based on purposive sampling of criterion type (Dornyei, 2007) from Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch, Iran. The including criteria for the selection of the participants were having the same teachers for AW and research methods courses at university level for M.A. graduates, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch, writing at least one RA the method of which needed to be either experimental or descriptive, as widely practiced in Iranian universities, and having the supervisor from the same university for the purpose of consistency in receiving the same type of instruction and practice in RA writing. The most important criterion was their publication status. None of the participants could publish their RAs. Some of them got rejection from the journals and some others did not dare to submit to journals, especially high-ranking ones. The participants' age range was 25- 40 with their language background of

Turkish and Persian including both genders (male=10, female=20). Regarding the participants of focus group interview, seven were Ph.D. students and five were M.A. graduates. The courses related to RA writing were research method courses (one in the M.A. and two in the Ph.D. programs) and AW courses (one in the M.A. and one in the Ph.D. programs).

3.2. Materials and Instruments

The initial instrument utilized in this study was a scale designed by researchers based on English for Writing Research Papers (Wolwark, 2011) and A Brief Guide to Writing Style of Articles and References (Saeidi, 2014) to analyze the performance of the participants in the articles they had written. After reading all essentials of RAW as the focus of the study, the researchers outlined all essential conventions in terms of compositional and lexical-grammatical aspects which contained 19 items. Compositional aspects dealt with issues such as following principles of citation and quotation, based on the chosen editorial style (i.e., APA style, 6th edition) (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 14, 15, 17, 18, and 19), while lexical-grammatical aspects highlighted issues such as using formal lexicon or appropriately using transitions to create coherence (items 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 16). The content validity of the scale was checked by two experienced university professors who determined if any of the 19 items could soundly analyze the performance of the participants in their RAs and offered some modifications concerning the statement of the items.

The analysis was conducted by two raters whose inter-rater reliability was estimated through Pearson Correlation test which was 0.98. The reliability of the scale was measured by Cronbach's Alpha which was 0.75.

To investigate the perceptions of the participants on the essentials of RA writing in terms of L&C conventions, a questionnaire, which was the same as the scale in the first stage, was utilized. That is, the researchers wanted to know how aware the participants were of the essential conventions of RA writing. Thus, the questionnaire included the same items of the scale in an statement form without differentiating them as either compositional or lexical-grammatical based on five- point Likert scale (i.e., completely Essential, Mostly Essential, Somewhat Essential, Hardly Essential, Not Essential).The internal reliability of the questionnaire calculated through Cronbach Alpha was 0.80.

To tackle the participants' problems beyond L&C conventions in RAs and extend the scope of the study to wider issues in not only RA writing but also issues involved in conducting research, the third instrument, a focus group interview, whose questions were designed by the researchers was used to find out the challenges participants confront while conducting their research and writing their RAs. Krueger's (2002) guidelines, which list the

structural characteristics of focus group interview concerning participants, environment, moderator, analysis, and reporting, were followed. The interview was a semi-structured one with four open-ended questions to allow for any additional questions and ideas mentioned during the interview (Cresswell, 2012). The questions were based on general issues of demanding aspects of conducting RAs, main weaknesses/difficulties in writing RAs, and the quality of courses related to research and AW (see Appendix B). The content validity of the interview questions was determined through expert views. The researchers consulted two university teachers teaching AW and research methods courses and supervising M.A. and Ph.D. candidates for years.

3.3. Procedure

The procedure of the study followed four stages. The first stage was related to the performance of the participants on their RAs, using a scale designed by the researchers. The content validity of the scale was checked by two experienced university professors in TEFL, teaching AW and research methods courses.

The participants' RAs had been written during their AW and research courses which were accessible to researchers since one of them was the teacher who had assigned those articles. However, the articles of the students who had never succeeded to publish any article in any journal were chosen to be analyzed. All articles were read thoroughly by two raters who were both familiar with L&C conventions. They marked observation or violation of any item mentioned in the scale by writing down the number of that item. Then, the number each item had been repeated in each article was counted. Having checked the inter-rater reliability, the reliability of the items (based on the first rater) within the scale was measured through Cronbach Alpha in all 30 articles where two items (13 and 15) were eliminated in order to achieve internal reliability.

Then, the minimum and maximum number for each item in the scale were identified. Finally, the lowest number for each item was subtracted from the highest number which was then divided into five equal parts that could be organized as Likert scale from the lowest to the highest (zero or very few cases= 0, a few cases= 1, some cases= 2, many cases= 3, and a lot of cases= 4). In order to achieve internal reliability of the scale, items 13 and 15 were eliminated.

In the second stage, the perception of the participants on the essentials L&C conventions in RAs was checked through a questionnaire. Since two items of the scale had been omitted for achieving internal reliability, the questionnaire included 17 statements.

In the third stage, the researchers applied Pearson Correlations to check how much compatibility existed between the participants' performance and their perceptions whose results had been taken through content analysis and descriptive analysis of the questionnaire, respectively.

In the last stage, a focus group interview (FGI), a qualitative data collection approach, where people can express the information about themselves in the best way (Best & Kahn, 2006), was run on 12 of the same participants to get further information on problems they face while they are conducting research and writing their RAs. FGI is considered a group interview taking the format of a question and answer (Krueger & Casey, 2000) where the researcher is actively inspiring and simultaneously attending to the group interaction (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). According to Dornyei (2007), the members in focus group interviews are usually 6-12.

The questions were all posed in one single session after an introduction about the topic of the interview and the purpose for the study. There were four open-ended questions so as to get an abundance of ideas on any potential problems the participants had already encountered. The interview lasted almost two hours and was conducted in an empty room at university. The interview session conducted in English was recorded and transcribed which compiled total words of 1120.

To make the atmosphere friendly, certain factors were helpful and could encourage the participants to be honest about their responses. The first was the shared experiences of being involved in conducting research and writing RAs between the interviewer (one of the researchers) and respondents. All the participants were also from the same university. Second, since the interviewer was not a professional English academician, the participants could freely share their ideas in a relaxed atmosphere.

3.4. Data Analysis

First, utilizing the SPSS, version 20, the data analysis regarding the participants' performances, inter-rater reliability, reliability of the items of the performance scale, perceptions, and the relationship between the performances and perceptions are presented. Second, the qualitative analysis of the focus group interview is presented.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Performance: The Results of the Performance Scale

In order to analyze the collected data concerning the performance of the participants, the content analysis of their RAs was conducted through the scale with 19 items rated by the first rater (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1*Content Analysis of the RAs Indicating Participants' Performance (Items 1 to 10)*

Item	L&C conventions	Minimum	Maximum	Range
1. Avoids wordiness (writing more words than needed and pretentious writing).		1.00	17.00	16/5=3
Score: 1 to 4.2 → 0; 4.21 to 7.4 → 1; 7.41 to 10.6 → 2; 10.61 to 13.8 → 3; 13.81 to 17 → 4				
2. Avoids extending the length of sentence over 25 words.		1.00	16	15 / 5 = 3
Score: 1 to 4 → 0; 4.1 to 7 → 1; 7.1 to 10 → 2; 10.1 to 13 → 3; 13.1 to 16 → 4				
3. Divides longer sentences into shorter ones.		3.00	11.00	8 / 5 = 1.6
Score: 3 to 4.6 → 0; 4.61 to 6.2 → 1; 6.21 to 7.8 → 2; 7.81 to 9.4 → 3; 9.41 to 11 → 4				
4. Includes a topic sentence in every paragraph, one to eight sentences supporting the idea, and a concluding sentence if needed.		4.00	14.00	10 / 5 = 2
Score: 4 to 6 → 0; 6.1 to 8 → 1; 8.1 to 10 → 2; 10.1 to 12 → 3; 12.1 to 14 → 4				
5. Places known information at the beginning of a sentence or paragraph.		1.00	6.00	5 / 5 = 1
Score: 1 to 2 → 0; 2.1 to 3 → 1; 3.1 to 4 → 2; 4.1 to 5 → 3; 5.1 to 6 → 4				
6. Links each sentence by moving from general concepts to increasingly more specific concepts, using transitions effectively to create coherence.		3.00	16.00	13 / 5 = 2.6
Score: 3 to 5.6 → 0, 5.61 to 8.2 → 1, 8.21 to 10.8 → 2, 10.81 to 13.4 → 3, 13.41 to 16 → 4				
7. Puts negations and qualifying phrases at or near the beginning of a sentence.		1.00	6.00	5 / 5 = 1
Score: 1 to 2 → 0; 2.1 to 3 → 1; 3.1 to 4 → 2; 4.1 to 5 → 3; 5.1 to 6 → 4				
8. Breaks up long paragraphs.		2.00	8.00	6 / 5 = 1.2
Score: 2 to 3.2 → 0; 3.21 to 4.4 → 1; 4.41 to 5.6 → 2; 5.61 to 6.8 → 3; 6.81 to 8 → 4				
9. Deletes any unnecessary words, expresses the same concept with fewer words, uses verbs rather than nouns, chooses the shortest words and expressions, avoids impersonal phrases, and is consistent in British/American language in editing the paper.		2.00	8.00	6 / 5 = 1.2
Score: 2 to 3.2 → 0; 3.21 to 4.4 → 1; 4.41 to 5.6 → 2; 5.61 to 6.8 → 3; 6.81 to 8 → 4				
10. Avoids synonym mania - uses synonyms for generic verbs and adjectives.		1.00	4.00	3 / 5 = 0.6

As displayed in Tables 1 and 2, the content of 30 RAs was analyzed in each item in terms of minimum, maximum, range, and assigned scores provided by the first rater. Examples for the first five items included in the 19-criterion scale taken out of content analysis of performance of participants on their RAs as follows:

Table 2*Content Analysis of the RAs Indicating Participants' Performance (Items 11 to 19)*

Item	L&C conventions	Minimum	Maximum	Range
11. Every paragraph is as precise as possible.		3.00	8.00	5 / 5 = 1
Score: 3 to 4 → 0; 5.1 to 6 → 2; 6.1 to 7 → 3; 7.1 to 8 → 4				
12. Uses all the conventions of grammar and punctuation to create cohesion.		3.00	9.00	6 / 5 = 1.2
Score: 3 to 4.2 → 0; 4.21 to 5.4 → 1; 5.41 to 6.6 → 2; 6.61 to 7.8 → 3; 7.81 to 9 → 4				
13. Uses some significant adverbs and adjectives like significantly, intriguingly...only once or twice in a paragraph in order not to lose the impact or seem arrogant.		6.00	13.00	7 / 5 = 1.4
Score: 6 to 7.4 → 0; 7.41 to 8.8 → 1; 8.81 to 10.2 → 2; 10.21 to 11.6 → 3; 11.61 to 13 → 4				
14. Uses more dynamic language- makes sure the reader immediately understands that the paragraph is to say something important.		2.00	8.00	6 / 5 = 1.2
Score: 2 to 3.2 → 0; 3.21 to 4.4 → 1; 4.41 to 5.6 → 2; 5.61 to 6.8 → 3; 6.81 to 8 → 4				
15. Talks about limitations of the study.		.00	9.00	9 / 5 = 1.8
Score: 0 to 1.8 → 0; 1.81 to 3.6 → 1; 3.61 to 5.4 → 2; 5.41 to 7.2 → 3; 7.21 to 9 → 4				
16. Uses hedges by toning down verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.		.00	11.00	11 / 5 = 2.2
Score: 0 to 2.2 → 0; 2.21 to 4.4 → 1; 4.41 to 6.6 → 2; 6.61 to 8.8 → 3; 8.81 to 11 → 4				
17. Makes a right balance of highlighting and hedging.		2.00	6.00	4 / 5 = 0.8
Score: 2 to 2.8 → 0; 2.81 to 3.6 → 1; 3.61 to 4.4 → 2; 4.41 to 5.2 → 3; 5.21 to 6 → 4				
18. Follows principles of citation and quotation, based on the chosen editorial style (i.e., APA style).		2.00	6.00	4 / 5 = 0.8
Score: 2 to 2.8 → 0; 2.81 to 3.6 → 1; 3.61 to 4.4 → 2; 4.41 to 5.2 → 3; 5.21 to 6 → 4				
19. Uses direct quotations sparingly.		2.00	6.00	4 / 5 = 0.8
Score: 2 to 2.8 → 0; 2.81 to 3.6 → 1; 3.61 to 4.4 → 2; 4.41 to 5.2 → 3; 5.21 to 6 → 4				

Referring to the first item about wordiness and pretentious writing, the following example is provided:

"Having prepared the questionnaire, it was distributed among the students at the beginning of one session when the academic term was coming to a close (in Iran, the autumn term begins in Mehr (September and finishes in Day (December)) (ID: 3).

As for the second item, "the length of each sentence is better not to extend 25 words", the following is an example:

"Moreover, Horwitz (1988) believes that it is necessary for teachers to know learners' beliefs about language learning so that they can nurture more useful learning strategies in their students on the

grounds that a mismatch between students' expectations about language learning and the realities they face in the classroom causes a severe frustration which in turn can obstruct language acquisition" (ID: 15).

Considering the third item, "longer sentences need to be divided into shorter ones". An example is provided as:

"One element of text which affects comprehension is its structure, which refers to the relationship between ideas in conveying the message to the reader (Meyer & Freedle, 1984; Meyer & Rice, 1984). It also refers to the knowledge of the structures or basic rhetorical patterns in texts (Grabe, 2002), to the way the relationships between ideas are signaled or not signaled (Alderson, 2000), and the frameworks that writers utilize to convey information in an organized and coherent way (Jiang, 2012) (ID: 19).

As for the fourth item, every paragraph needs to include a topic sentence: "Critical thinking (CT) is a conception that has been expanded through quite a few years and which demands important skills to be extended...."(ID: 7).

The fifth item focuses on placing known information at the beginning of a sentence or paragraph:

"In terms of providing feedback to learners' errors, the research addressing the issue of error treatment in second language classrooms in the past 20 years has continued to ask the questions formulated by Hendrikson in his 1978 review of feedback on errors in foreign language classrooms.... "(ID: 8).

The examples for items 6 to 19 are provided in Appendix 1.

The results of the participants' performance using the performance scale are shown in Table 3. As Table 3 indicates (M= 34.4, Std. = 7.2, Min= 14, and Max=51), the performance level of the students is 50.9. Thus, the response to the first research question regarding the performance of the participants is that their performance seems to be mediocre in terms of L& C conventions. The results are also displayed in Figure 1.

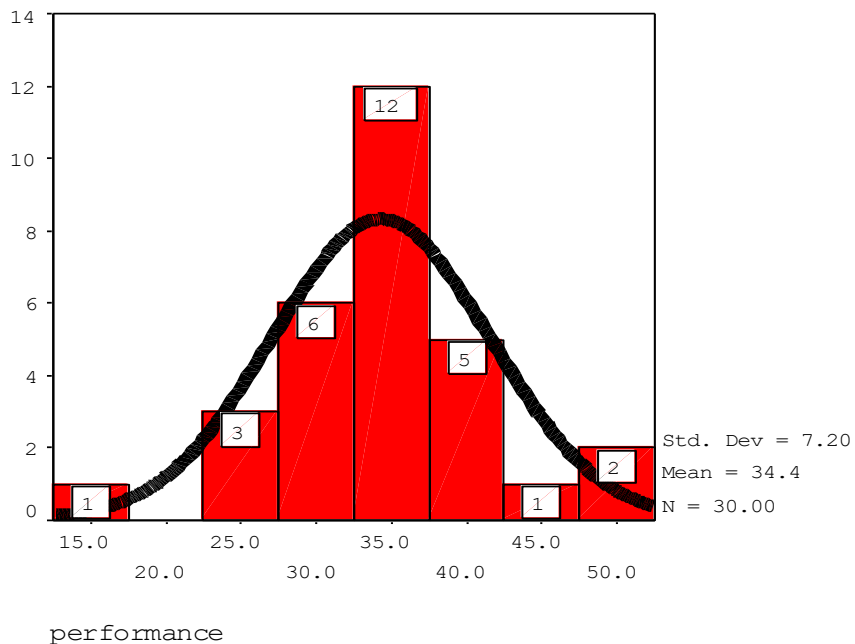
Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of the Performance of the Participants Based on the Performance Scale

N	Valid	30
	Missing	0
Mean		34.40
Std. Deviation		7.20
Minimum		14.00
Maximum		51.00
Percentage		50.9

Figure 1

The Participants' Performance on their RA Writing



4.1.2. Inter-rater Reliability: Performance-Scale

The inter-rater reliability between two raters was taken through the Pearson Correlation test. The results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4*Inter-rater Reliability of the Performance Scale*

Performance by Second Rater	
Performance-teacher Pearson Correlation	.980*
Sig. (2- Tailed)	.000
N	30
Performance-teacher Pearson Correlation	.1
Sig. (2- Tailed)	.
N	30

** . Correlation is significant at the 0. 01 level (2- tailed).

As Table 4 indicates, there was a high correlation ($r = .98$) between the ratings of the two raters and, therefore, the first rater's scoring was reliable and considered as the evaluated performance for the rest of the analysis.

4.1.3. Reliability of the Items of the Performance Scale

Having scored and measured all 30 papers through content analysis and achieving high correlation between the two raters for reliability, the researchers measured the reliability of all 19 items within the scale through Cronbach Alpha, which was not significant at first ($Alpha = .4$). Since items 15 and 13 had low reliability scores among nineteen criteria, the researchers omitted them, the *alpha became* .48 by omission of the item 15 and then .55 by omission of the item 13, to increase the reliability of the scale.

4.1.4. Perception: The Results of the Questionnaire

Having checked the reliability and validity of the performance scale made by the researchers, a questionnaire was distributed to the participants in the form of a five-point Likert scale to grasp their perception on the essentials of RA writing. The reliability was measured by Cronbach Alpha ($alpha = .75 > p = .05$).

The descriptive statistics for the students' perceptions in the questionnaire, being analyzed quantitatively, are shown in Table 5.

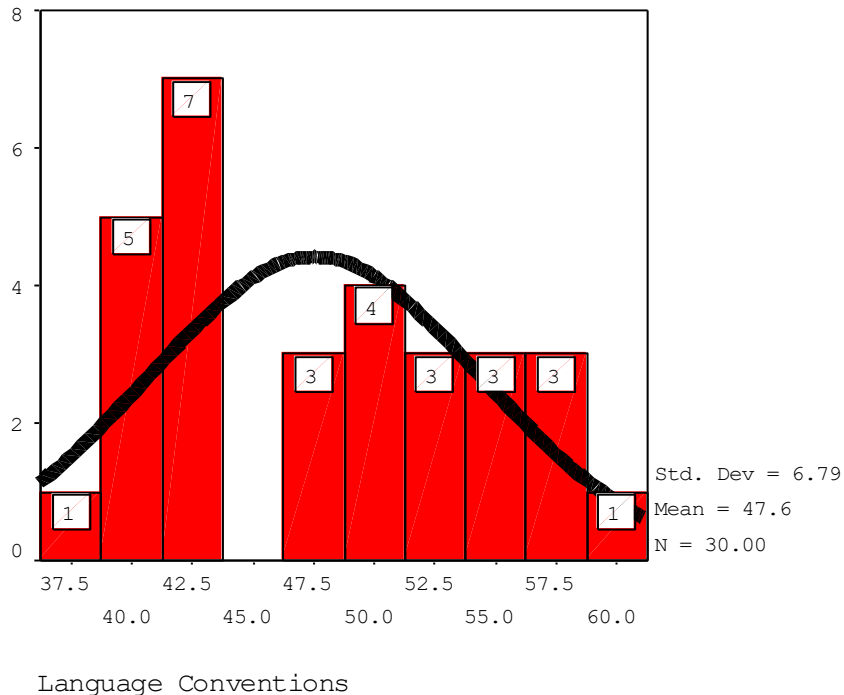
Table 5*Descriptive Statistics of the Perceptions of the Participants Based on the Questionnaire*

N	Valid	30
	Missing	0
Mean		47.60
Std. Deviation		6.790
Minimum		37.00
Maximum		59.00
Percentage		70

Taking the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire into account (M= 47.6, Std. = 6.79, Min= 37, and Max= 59) as displayed in Table 5, the students seem to have high perceptions (i.e., they know about the essential requirements in terms of L&C conventions for a RA theoretically), 70 percent. Thus, the response to the second research question is that their perceptions seem to be high. The results are also displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The Participants' Perceptions on Essentials of Writing Conventions in RAs



4.1.5. *The Relationship between Performance and Perception*

One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was used to check the normality of test distribution and therefore applying appropriate statistical test as displayed in Table 6.

Table 6

One- Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

Perception	Performance		
N		30	30
Normal Parameters	Mean	47.60	34.40
	Std. Deviation	6.79	7.20
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.184	.133
	Positive	.184	.107
	Negative	-.092	-.133
Kolmogorov-Smirnow		1.009	.729
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.260	.662

According to Table 6, the significance level was more than the set alpha level concerning both the perception ($\text{sig} = .26 > p = .05$) and their performance ($\text{sig} = .66 > p = .05$). Therefore, the assumption of normality was met in order to appropriately utilize the Pearson correlation coefficient test as a parametric test, the results of which are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

The Relationship between Performance and Perception Using the Pearson Correlations Coefficient Test

Performance		
Writing conventions	Pearson Correlation	.046
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.808
	N	30
Performance	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.
	N	30

According to the results displayed in Table 7, no significant relationship was observed between the perception and performance of the participants ($\text{Sig} = .80 > p = .05$).

Since there was not any significant correlation between perception and performance of the participants, the researchers took the next step in finding any potential challenges as well as problems in conducting research and writing RAs, especially in terms of L&C conventions by interviewing the participants through a FGI to justify the contradiction.

4.1.6. Challenges: Data Analysis of the Focus Group Interview

Having read the completed interview transcripts over and over, the researchers examined how some postgraduate Iranian TEFL students interpret the challenges and problems while writing their RAs. Through coding the transcribed data, using thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic method serving as an umbrella term for a variety of different approaches, rather than a singular method, explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), as identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data was employed. Such an analysis involves seeking to identify themes and coding categories that come out of an examination of the data rather than being already ascertained and exerted on the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In so doing, the following themes of (a) students' attitudes concerning problematic aspects of conducting and writing RAs; (b) their weaknesses while doing so; (c) usefulness of the writing courses presented at university; and (d) the supervisors' roles on postgraduate TEFL students' RA writing came out in line with data analysis through interview. All the related data are statistically shown in Tables 8 to 12.

Data taken from the analysis of the transcribed responses to the first question, which dealt with the most demanding and problematic aspects of conducting research and writing RA, are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Problems Concerning Problematic Aspects of Conducting and Writing RAs

Theme Percentage	Sub-theme	Frequency and Percentage
Students' attitudes		
	Choosing appropriate subject	1 (8.3%)
	Elaborating and writing discussion in line with results	6 (50%)
	Conducting statistical analysis on data	1 (8.3%)
	Writing introduction section	3 (25%)
	Writing Procedure (academic writing and genre of RAs)	2 (16.71%)

According to Table 8, despite the lack of knowledge in appropriate use of L& C conventions as the analysis of the performance scale in the second stage of the study indicated, other aspects of managing RAs at the macro level (such as choosing a topic, conducting statistical analysis) were mentioned by the participants. After writing the introduction, the most demanding and problematic aspect of RA writing has been elaborating and writing discussion in line with results. A participant said:

"Reporting the results and organizing them in discussion section is so hard since I can't thoroughly express them"(ID: 8).

Data taken from the analysis of the transcribed responses to the second question which dealt with the main weaknesses or/and difficulties while preparing any RA are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Weaknesses or/and Difficulties While Conducting Research and Writing RAs

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency and Percentage
Students' weaknesses		
	Limited access to some sites	1 (8.3%)
	Lack of facilities provided by universities	6 (49.92%)
	Choosing a competent advisor	2 (16%)
	Not having adequate library	4 (33.3%)
	Finding appropriate participants	4 (33.3%)
	Organizing the work, priority of ideas, and having innovation in research process	4 (33.3%)
	Collecting data, writing methodology, and designing proper questionnaire	6 (49.92%)
	Using appropriate statistical tests to analyze the data	1 (8.3%)

According to Table 9, the three main weaknesses or/and difficulties while preparing any RA, with highest percentages include not being able to download some papers and lack of access to valid journals, not having adequate library to reach good resources, and finding appropriate participants and their lack of motivation to help. A participant pointed out:

"Not being able to download some articles and lack of access to valid journals and lack of knowledge in professional search and use of internet" (ID: 5).

Data taken from the analysis of the transcribed responses to the third question which dealt with whether and how writing courses at university had been helpful in training for RAs writing are presented in Tables 10 and 11.

Table 10

Whether the Writing Courses Presented at University Were Useful

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Yes	4	33.3
No	8	66.6

According to Table 10, four participants, 33.3% of all, found the writing courses at university helpful whereas the other eight, 66.6%, did not.

Table 11*The Reasons Why the Writing Courses Presented at University Were Useful or Not*

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency and Percentage
Usefulness of the writing courses	Most writing courses are theoretical	4 (33.3%)
	Most writing courses are insufficient	2 (16.7%)
	Writing courses provide the framework for an article	3 (25.5%)
	Writing courses are introductory	2 (16.7%)
	Writing courses are practical	1 (8.3%)

According to Table 11, the main reason for the efficiency of writing courses presented at university was their complementary nature with the advisor's help. One participant said:

"Of course they were very useful. I have learned A to Z of RAs writing in university classes. Studying the instructional materials during "research method" courses and all course requirements that had to be handed in each session were very useful in learning how to write a RA" (ID: 6).

On the other hand, the most striking point mentioned by those who were dissatisfied with writing courses was that they found the courses mostly theoretical rather than being practical. One participant stated:

"I think what we have got through courses is only there in the classes and not very helpful for the areas we want to do our jobs. There is so many miles between what you have got and what you are doing in your real life situation. The courses are not suitable enough to equip the students with strong arms to smooth the way for doing the job with confidence" (ID: 4).

Data taken from the fourth question which dealt with teachers' roles in supervising students' RAs are presented in Table 12.

Table 12*The Supervisors' Roles on Postgraduate TEFL Students' RAs Writing*

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency and Percentage
Supervisors' roles	Having adequate knowledge on the Spending adequate time with students' problems	9 (74.94%)
	Assisting the students to achieve the ultimate goal	10 (83.27%)

According to Table 12, the most eye-catching role of supervisors has been their comprehensive assistance and encouragement throughout the work. One participant said:

"Teachers can guide students in choosing proper subject of research, providing some information about the ways of using library or published articles, introducing valid journals, helping students in finding the gap between the present study and previous one, linking different ideas coherently in order to produce a unified piece of information, and making some features of writing salient for students in order to develop the article" (ID: 10).

4.2. Discussion

The findings of the present study, represented mediocre performance of the participants in contrast to their high percentage of perception on the essentials of RA writing, which highlights the high quality of all the materials they studied theoretically during their studies in terms of L&C conventions, including the use of standard phrases, cohesion, coherence, consistency, and documentation in RA writing. However, the discrepancy existing between the performance and the perception of the participants can be justified based on the fact that participants did not receive adequate hands-on experience in AW courses with special focus on RA genre. Such a discrepancy also reveals that passing AW courses successfully with acceptable scores, which are mostly theory oriented, might cause most postgraduate students to take it for granted that they would be able to write RAs successfully, too.

Writing a publishable RA manifests academic capabilities of how to integrate diverse ideas, combine perspectives, and extend theory which need higher grasp of construction skills of L&C conventions (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). It is also considered a challenging piece of academic work (Huang, 2007). The findings of McGarrell and Verbeem (2007) also emphasize the linguistic difficulties in academic writings of most students. Regarding pedagogical shortfalls in AW courses, the results of the present study are in line with those of Wang and Li (2008) who found that the challenges the students encountered in their thesis writing might have originated from scant attention to academic writing instruction. As Wegner (2010) states, students need a "regimen of competence" for the successful production of publishable RAs and such regimen of competence needs to be practiced in depth in order to be soaked by all students at postgraduate levels. Hyland (2015) also encourages exposing students to the challenging processes of RA writing in order to make novice writers sure that even known authors experience barriers and rejections. The support of AW from earlier stages paves the way for publishable RA writing in higher education in EFL contexts.

In addition to AW courses, research method courses need to be focused practically, too. During the courses students need to be trained to conduct a research attending from A to Z to handle problems in different stages of

conducting research and get their teachers' professional assistance. Some of the main difficulties mentioned by participants in the present study were lack of access to resources, collecting data, writing acceptable review of literature, and robust reporting of the analysis. Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) also mentioned the lack of resources in the library and the accessibility to the authentic databases as one of the big challenges of students. Most of well documented articles offered by these data bases are monetary which individuals might not have easy access to. The results of the study by Mapolisa and Mafa (2012) also indicated that most students from under developing countries confront challenges such as lack of library and appropriate online resources. Additionally, finding the gap in the research literature is another challenging activity which needs to be practiced in research methods courses practically. Students need to be trained in these courses to search the well-known journals and find the latest trends and try to fill the gap by conducting research in those areas. Teachers should avoid offering a topic to be researched about by students in these courses; finding the gap has certain procedures to be followed by students to gain experiences and solve the problems step by step. The students need to be briefed that the knowledge and skills of research are gained through researching. As Brailsford (2010) asserted most students are not able to derive knowledge gaps out of the reviewed literature. The results of his study indicated that students lacked coherence and cohesion where most parts of the review of literature seemed descriptive and had little critical insights. In fact, as the results of the present study represented, not only is the section related to review of literature problematic to students but also they occasionally face difficulties in writing other sections like introduction, statement of the problem, and the interpretation of the results which highlight the role of L&C conventions. They try various tackling strategies in order to gain control over their RA writing to solve their problems. In fact, most TEFL students try to improve their RAs by using other articles and theses to get help, which usually leads to plagiarism which is a common phenomenon in the academic world, committed by students in their articles (Ahmadi, 2014; Erbay & Yılmaz, 2017) for some reasons including lack of knowledge of citation and referencing, lack of time, dishonesty, and the poor academic writing ability. Students, especially at higher academic levels, ought to learn about how to appropriately cite others' works and ideas, which shows the importance of this training in research methods courses.

Effective supervision practices can also assist the growth and professional development of students (Alama et al., 2013; Kimani, 2014). The power dynamics conceptualized within supervisory relationships, the lack of enough interactive skills students need to maintain the relationship with their supervisors, supervisors' lack of knowledge on the selected topic, and the personality traits of the supervisors and students themselves are very

conspicuous in the success of postgraduate students. Likewise, lack of sufficient supervisory and the number of the students being supervised all lead to an inconsistent and unsatisfactory output. Ibrahim (2017), Bowker (2012), and Bruce and Stoodley (2013) have also supported the important role of supervisory events by emphasizing that among all aspects of the research including management, procedure, and policy, research supervision has received the most attention from researchers as it can be a determining factor for any postgraduate student to succeed. However, some students might be too dependent on supervisors and lack autonomy to proceed their work after getting the basic guidance. This is in line with McGinty et al, (2010), who encountered with some expectations of postgraduate students who wanted their supervisors a lot of detailed supervision such as even timing the project.

No work can be finalized without qualifying the results in light of limitations of the study. This study focused on technical language (i.e., L & C conventions), while AW courses need to go beyond and train the students in genre of RA writing with certain moves and steps, which is beyond the scope of this research and awaits further research. Furthermore, in order to have a full picture of TEFL postgraduate students' problems in RAs writing, it would be instructive to compare how native and non-native English-speaking researchers perceive the essentials of RAs writing. Moreover, macro level considerations within a RA, including how to write different sections, what the journals expect, can be further researched. Finally, what instructional strategies need to be taken in both AW and research methods courses to cover issues such as novelty, timeliness, intellectual zeitgeist, as well as sound theoretical and methodological framework need to be the focus of further research.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Little attention to the L&C conventions of the RAW genre can cause serious problems for postgraduate students in EFL contexts. They need to develop the perception of some key components of the genre of RAW while they are involved in adequate number of practical courses of AW rather than adapting a theoretical approach by their teachers towards it by covering a relevant textbook and examining its content as a summative test. This will lead to the false idea that they can write a publishable RA, as the results of this study indicated, while they might develop the perception of the essentials of RA writing, lacking the competence to write a publishable RA. Thus, both teachers and students need to face the question of why their RAs do not usually fulfill the expectations of high-quality academic journals.

In so doing, curriculum, syllabus, and methodology need to be improved by providing more practical as well as advance courses on academic writing and inserting critical analysis in EFL curricula at all levels of BA, M.A. and Ph.D. In addition, universities need to offer workshops to postgraduate students highlighting all the essentials of RAW in detail, as well as practically dealing with their problems. Likewise, universities should have more activities in accomplishing the academic database authorizations to offer postgraduate students the ability to access valid and up-to-date journals and articles. Moreover, AW instructors need to provide support, such as hands-on research experience to postgraduate students, pay closer attention to academic writing, and motivate them to extend their knowledge on AW, APA Style, and ethics of research, so that they develop positive research experiences, which lead to publication.

Taking into account the scarcity of research in relation to RAW, this type of work can contribute to better understanding of the complexity and demand that entails the realization of a RA and influence the improvement of its teaching. The study also lends to forging new studies and future directions in practice to help all EFL postgraduate students perceive, perform, and still cope with their challenges and problems while they are writing their RAs.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Examples of Items 6 to 19 Included in Content Analysis

Checklist

Item 6: Sentences are linked to each other by moving from general concepts to more specific ones to create coherence.

Ex: "In Iran students do not usually have enough practice in high school when it comes to the components of language such as pronunciation; consequently, they may pronounce several words incorrectly in a single line while reading a passage aloud for the class....."(ID: 12).

Item 7: Negations and qualifying phrases are placed at or near the beginning of a sentence so that readers, at mid- or- end point in a sentence, should not have to change their perspective of logical progression.

Ex: "There seems to be no correlation between increased test anxiety and lower performance, which can be associated at both the high school and university level"(ID: 18).

Item 8: Long paragraphs are broken into smaller ones.

Ex: "In a different study, Salager and Meyer (1991) investigated the effect of text structure across different levels of language ability and topical knowledge, and different degrees of passage familiarity" (ID: 24).

Item 9: The concept is expressed with fewer words avoiding impersonal phrases.

Ex: "Accordingly, it is suggested that building self-efficacy and autonomy in listening comprehension is fundamental to ensure the success of Iranian EFL learners in listening comprehension" (ID:14).

Item 10: Synonyms are to be avoided for generic verbs and adjectives.

Ex: "According on Willis (1996), task-based language teaching focuses on three steps. The first stage is the '*pre-task*', the second one is '*task cycles*' which includes three sub stages: *task, planning and report*; finally, the third is *language focus*, which is composed of analysis and practice" (ID: 25).

Item 11: Every paragraph is as precise as possible, that is, everything is stated in exact number with proper and to the point explanation.

Ex: "To determine the homogeneity of the participants, the researchers administered the PET test, which examines the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, for the present study because of the problems in terms of practicality, only three sections of listening, reading, and writing were utilized. The listening and writing sections with 3 parts and 2 parts, respectively, consisted of 50 percent of the total score. The reading part consisted of 3 parts, which made the other 50 percent of the total score" (ID: 28).

Item 12: Grammar conventions are the agreed-upon ways we use language. Using correct tense, voice, gerund, participle or infinitive, agreement of pronouns and their antecedents, not ending a sentence with a preposition, or splitting an infinitive are some examples whose application indicates a level of education.

Ex: "Nunan (1991) suggests five characteristic about it as following" (ID: 20).

Ex: "The students prefer the teachers to only interrupt them whenever they make grammar mistakes" (ID: 24).

Item 13: Significant adverbs and adjectives are only used once or twice in a paragraph in order not to lose the impact or seem arrogant.

Ex: "The results of this section of the study are considerably in line with what Tabrizi and Nabifar (2013) and Sayfour (2010) found in their studies while comparing the use of grammatical metaphors in articles written by Iranians and English native speakers" (ID:22) .

Item 14: Dynamic language is used throughout the article. That is, key findings are stated in short sentences, bullets, and headings are considered, tables and figures are used.

Ex: "The first group comprised of 30 male/female intermediate level EFL learners who had the experience of learning English from 3 to 8 years in private language schools. Their age ranged from 16 to 30. Moreover, they had 3 to 7 years of experience in learning English at school level although it had never led to proficiency in the use of language whether oral or written" (ID: 16).

Item 15: Limitations of the study need to be pointed out.

Ex: "Since the present study limited its scope to specific language proficiency, age, and gender, it can also be replicated with a larger and more diverse group of subjects for more generalizable and justifiable results. In addition, the other types and modes of corrective feedback might be considered, and their effect can also be probed in the development of other language skills and components" (ID: 20).

Item 16: Hedges are used by toning down verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Ex: "Findings of the study proved that having a good knowledge of words (vocabulary size) involves knowing how to combine elements (i.e. word structure) to create novel lexical items" (ID: 17).

Item 17: A right balance should be made between highlighting and hedging.

Ex: "Although further work is required to gain a more complete understanding of the factors affecting Iranian EFL students' listening comprehension in each group, our findings mainly indicated that interaction could be a useful way to boost Iranian EFL students' listening comprehension" (ID: 4).

Item 18 and 19: Citations and quotations should be used sparingly based on any predetermined editorial style (APA style in our case).

Ex: Ellis (1991) believes that:

Learners possess sets of beliefs about such factors as the target language culture, their own culture, and in the case of classroom learning, of their teacher and the learning tasks they are given. These beliefs are referred to as 'attitudes' and affect language learning in a number of ways (p.293) (ID: 9).

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

1. Generally speaking, what aspects of conducting research and writing a RA seem more demanding and problematic to you and why?
 2. What are the main weaknesses or/and difficulties you have faced while preparing any RA?
 3. Are the writing courses, especially academic writing, at university helpful in training you for RA writing?
 4. What are supervisors' roles in assisting students for RA writing?
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