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Research Paper

Trapped Between Textbook and Test: Iranian EFL Teachers' Insights into Vision 3 Paragraph Writing Challenges and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives on the challenges 12th-grade learners face in paragraph writing tasks on the final national English examination and their recommendations for addressing these difficulties. Employing a phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 10 experienced EFL teachers from Golestan Province, Iran. Findings revealed three primary challenges: curricular and material shortcomings in the Vision 3 textbook, such as limited emphasis on writing and lack of diverse activities; pedagogical and instructional limitations, including insufficient feedback and time limitations; and foundational skill deficiencies, exacerbated by weak prior instruction and L1-L2 interference. Next, the same teachers were asked to propose actionable solutions for these challenges. The suggestions fell into two major areas: curricular and instructional reforms and classroom-based pedagogical strategies. These findings highlight the need for an integrated approach to improve writing instruction in Iranian EFL contexts. Implications include teacher training in systematic writing instruction and collaborative strategies, curriculum revisions for

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writing, Pedagogical solutions, Vision 3 textbook	engaging tasks, and exam alignment to enhance performance. Policy-level investment in these reforms can empower educators and learners to achieve examination success and lifelong writing proficiency.
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1. Introduction

Among the four English language skills, writing is considered to be one of the most complex skills to learn (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), and learners encounter challenges in mastering it, which is a pivotal component of learning the English language (Rashtchi, 2019). English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners need writing skills ranging from simple paragraphs to essay writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Paragraph writing is of crucial importance in EFL education, as it connects sentence-level competence with coherent discourse structures.

To teach English language skills, using authentic tools, such as textbooks, as the primary instructional resource plays a significant role in many educational contexts (Abbasi et al., 2021). As Tomlinson (2012) pointed out, language teaching relies heavily on textbooks. However, despite their advantages, textbooks often fall short in effectively supporting English instruction in EFL contexts such as Iran (Abbasi et al., 2021).

In 2018, Vision 3, the nationally prescribed textbook for 12th-grade Iranian high school students, replaced the older English book, focusing on all four main language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking). One of the new areas that was added to the Vision series is the writing section, with a focus on paragraph writing in two out of the three units in Vision 3. Moreover, in the final national English examination, 12th-grade students are expected to write a complete, cohesive, and coherent paragraph in English on a topic imposed by the test developers. Even though the Vision 3 textbook allocates space to writing instruction, student performance on the writing tasks in high-stakes exams remains weak.

Recently, few studies have analyzed the Vision 3 textbook with a focus on writing activities (e.g., Abbasi, 2021; Khandaghi Khameneh & Hashamdar, 2021; Saidi, 2021; Saidi & Mokhtarpour, 2020). Yet, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, none have examined EFL teachers' perspectives on the challenges 12th-grade learners encounter in paragraph writing tasks on the final national English examination, or their recommendations for addressing these difficulties.

What is more significant than a textbook is what teachers can do with it (Ansary & Babaii, 2002). Therefore, to address this gap, the present study explores Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives on the challenges 12th-grade learners face in paragraph writing tasks on the final national English examination and their recommendations for overcoming these difficulties. In

other words, it seeks to identify whether the textbook's content and instructional design are responsible for these difficulties or if there are additional underlying factors influencing learner performance. By understanding EFL teachers' perspectives, this research offers pedagogical implications for curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers seeking to enhance writing instruction in Iranian EFL senior high schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Textbook: A Critical Part of the Curriculum

Textbooks are one of the fundamental resources teachers utilize in the teaching and learning process and have a significant role in learning a foreign language (Dallasheh, 2024). They are considered the core of English language education programs, and their development should be based on learners' needs to ensure educational success (Sheldon, 1988).

Textbooks play a vital role in EFL education by supporting learning, guiding instruction, and contributing to students' mastery of the subject matter (Dallasheh, 2024). They help students in knowing and obtaining teaching materials easily, and, according to Çakit (2006), provide a basis upon which teaching and learning are founded.

As Harmer (1996) states, good textbooks support both student progress and teacher workload by providing structured content and helping identify learning goals and achievements. Moreover, they offer a clear layout, engaging and diverse tasks, and authentic language input (Richards, 2001; Ur, 1996). According to Tomlinson (2008), textbooks provide structure for teaching and serve as essential tools for guiding classroom instruction, which makes their evaluation critical for shaping effective language programs.

Several scholars have contributed to this area of research. Garinger (2002) highlighted teachers' preference for well-organized, visually appealing textbooks, while Pouranshirvani (2017b) explored teachers' satisfaction and criticisms regarding textbook quality. McDonough and Shaw (2013) emphasized the role of authentic tasks in enhancing learner motivation, and Asadi and Kiany (2014) highlighted the importance of incorporating cultural elements from English-speaking contexts. Salehi and Amini (2016) also suggested the need for balanced attention to all four language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

Relevant studies have also been conducted on the Vision textbook series. In the Iranian EFL context, where textbooks serve as the primary instructional resource, evaluating their effectiveness has become increasingly necessary. The evaluation of the Vision series in the Iranian high school context reveals recurring concerns alongside differing emphases across

studies. Khodabandeh and Mombini (2018) reported generally positive teacher and student perceptions of Vision 1, especially in terms of layout, content, and language, while noting concerns about inadequate cultural representation. Similarly, Pourshirvani (2017a) found that teachers were satisfied with the physical and utilitarian attributes of the book, including its layout, logical organization, and alignment with Bloom's Taxonomy. Teachers also appreciated the book's general objectives and its inductive, communicative approach that promotes learner autonomy. However, they criticized the lack of supplementary materials such as CDs, posters, and flashcards, and pointed to the absence of a proper glossary and occasional inaccuracies in content. In contrast, Pirzad and Abdikhah (2022) offered a more critical view of Vision 1 through the lens of task-based language teaching, arguing that the textbook fails to sufficiently integrate the four language skills, especially in terms of communicative and interactive tasks. While earlier studies emphasized structural and visual improvements, this study focused on pedagogical shortcomings that could hinder the development of fluency and accuracy. Evaluations of Vision 2 (Mallahi & Afraz, 2018) yielded similar concerns, citing issues such as a lack of vocabulary recycling and insufficient time to meet lesson objectives. Despite these critiques, Barzan and Sayyadi's (2023) review of 24 studies found that teachers generally viewed the Vision series as an improvement over previous textbooks and aligned with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, though cultural limitations remained a consistent critique.

Taken together, these studies suggest that while Vision 1 and 2 may be perceived as an improvement in terms of general design and adherence to CLT principles, it remains limited in two critical areas: cultural representation and balanced integration of language skills. This affirms the importance of ongoing need for comprehensive textbook evaluation that considers both instructional effectiveness and learner outcomes.

2.2. Empirical Studies Evaluating Vision 3 with a Focus on its Writing Component

Given the central role of textbooks in Iran's public education system, several studies have evaluated the newly implemented Vision series, particularly Vision 3, which serves as the core material for 12th-grade students. Despite the positive reception of some components, especially speaking and listening, researchers have highlighted several concerns related to writing instruction and supplementary materials.

Saidi (2021) and Saidi and Mokhtarpour (2020) conducted comparative evaluations of Vision 3 and its predecessor. While both studies reported general teacher satisfaction with

Vision 3, especially regarding speaking and listening sections, the writing component and supplementary materials received lower ratings. Teachers consistently emphasized the need for significant revision in order to better support students' communicative competence in writing. Similarly, Khandaghi Khameneh and Hashamdar (2021) evaluated Vision 3 through the lens of CLT. While teachers generally approved of the textbook's alignment with CLT principles, concerns were raised about its lack of meaningful writing opportunities. These limitations were particularly significant given that CLT frameworks emphasize free and purposeful writing as a means of real communication, an area where Vision 3 reportedly underperforms. The most detailed critique of the Vision series' writing component comes from Abbasi et al. (2021), applying models of writing instruction to analyse writing activities across Vision 1, 2, and 3. Their findings revealed a heavy reliance on controlled writing and copying tasks, with very limited attention to guided or free writing, which are essential in communicative approaches. This imbalance suggests that although Vision 3 may present itself as aligned with CLT principles, its writing activities fall short in practice, thereby limiting learners' opportunities to develop autonomous and expressive writing skills.

Taken together, these studies point to a recurring gap between the intended communicative goals of Iran's English language curriculum and the actual writing practices encouraged by textbooks and implemented by teachers. While Vision 3 introduces positive reforms in certain areas (e.g., oral skills), its writing instruction remains underdeveloped, favoring structural control over creative expression and form-focused tasks over socio-culturally situated assessment.

2.3. The Current Study

Although previous research has acknowledged that Vision 3 does not fully address the writing development needs of Iranian EFL learners, limited attention has been given to its specific role in the challenges students face in paragraph writing tasks on the 12th-grade final national English examination. These critiques raise important questions about the alignment between textbook content and high-stakes assessment. In this context, understanding how EFL teachers perceive and respond to these challenges is essential for informing future curriculum revisions, textbook development, and teacher training programs.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore EFL teachers' critical reflections on the extent to which the paragraph writing sections of Vision 3 account for students' difficulties

in meeting the demands of high-stakes exams, as well as their pedagogical recommendations for improvement. The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of the difficulties 12th-grade students face in paragraph writing tasks on the final national English examination?

RQ2: What pedagogical suggestions do Iranian EFL teachers propose to improve students' performance in paragraph writing tasks on the final national English examination?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the shared lived experiences of individuals to reveal the underlying essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It emphasizes how participants perceive and interpret specific experiences, in this study, the perceived reasons behind 12th-grade EFL students' failure in paragraph writing and the recommendations for addressing this issue. The purpose of phenomenological inquiry is to capture and articulate the meaning and structure of these experiences as understood by those who have lived through them (Donalek, 2004).

3.2. Participants

The participants were 10 experienced EFL teachers recruited from public senior high schools in Golestan Province, Iran. To ensure representativeness, both male and female teachers were included (Female = 6, Male = 4). Demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select information-rich participants who could best inform the research questions (Patton, 2002). The selection criteria required participants to have at least 10 years of experience teaching Grade 12 and a minimum of 5 years of experience in assessing students for the national English examination.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Factor	Category	N
Gender	Male	4
	Female	6
Age Range	32-38	7
	39-45	3
Teaching Experience (12th Grade)	10-19	8

	20-30	2
Testing Experience (National English Examination)	5-12	9
	13-20	1
Academic Degree	B.A.	3
	M.A.	5
	Ph.D.	2

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Semi-structured Interviews

Among the various types of interviews (i.e., structured, semi-structured, and unstructured), this study employed semi-structured interviews due to their flexibility, which allows interviewers to adapt the questions and probe for more in-depth responses (Gass & Mackey, 2016). In this format, although a predefined set of questions guides the discussion, the sequence may be adjusted, and participants are encouraged to elaborate on their thoughts rather than providing yes/no or short answers to interview questions (Dörnyei, 2007). Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and was audio-recorded for transcription and subsequent thematic and content analyses. Prior to the interviews, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information, and their anonymity was guaranteed both during and after the sessions. Their responses were treated as confidential and used exclusively for research purposes, and informed consent was obtained to record the sessions. The study adhered to ethical guidelines by fully informing participants about the purpose and procedures of the research and by emphasizing their right to participate voluntarily or withdraw at any stage without any obligation or compensation (Mackey & Gass, 2015). All interviews were conducted in English. It is worthy noting that the interviewers of the current research study were the researchers themselves as they were thoroughly aware of the objectives and rationale of the study. To ensure the trustworthiness of the interview prompts (Nassaji, 2020), five experts in the field, three postdoctoral researchers and two PhD graduates with expertise in educational research reviewed them for linguistic clarity and content relevance. Based on their feedback, the prompts were revised to strengthen content validity. Following the approach outlined by Gao and Zhang (2020), the interview data were systematically analyzed through steps that included data cleaning, coding, theme identification and categorization, and the interpretation and reporting of the findings.

3.3.2. Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions aim to have methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation can afford a richer insight into the object of investigation, impossible by a single methodological study (Denzin, 1973). It also enhances the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2013). The participants of this study were invited to have group discussions on Google Meet (i.e., a video communication service), in order to triangulate the process of data collection. Two focus group discussion sessions were conducted. The discussion sessions were all in English. The discussions took as much time as needed until no new further comments were solicited. They were recorded and later their verbatims were transcribed by the researchers. Finally, they were analyzed through content and thematic analysis.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection spanned a period of one month. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 EFL teachers to gather insights into their experiences with paragraph writing instruction, the perceived effectiveness of the Vision 3 textbook, and the challenges they faced. Two weeks after the interviews, participants were invited to participate in focus group discussions to validate and elaborate on the preliminary themes extracted from the interview data. This step contributed to the credibility and confirmability of the findings.

3.5. Data Analysis

All interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analysed using content and thematic analyses to identify the teachers' perceptions of the factors contributing to 12th-grade EFL learners' difficulties with paragraph writing. To ensure consistency and inter-coder reliability, two independent coders analysed 30% of the data. The inter-coder agreement coefficient was calculated to be 0.82, indicating high reliability in the coding process.

3.6. Establishing Trustworthiness

In qualitative studies, as in the current research, some principles should be observed and ensured. Trustworthiness is defined as the credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Specifically, in this study, credibility was established through data triangulation, for instance, data came from two independent resources, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Additionally, the final conceptualization was verified

through member checking. That is, the emerged categories that were inductively driven were shared with the participants for their verification and potential modifications.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

“Ethics begins and ends with you, the researcher” (Neuman, 2011, p. 143). Ethical issues are important in both qualitative and quantitative studies; however, they hold particular significance in qualitative research due to the closer interaction with participants’ lives (Punch, 1998). In this study, ethical considerations were treated with utmost seriousness. During data collection, the researchers carefully weighed all potential benefits and risks affecting the participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants were fully informed about every aspect of the study. They were also made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the interviews. Prior to starting the interviews, the researcher obtained the participants’ confidence, consent, and approval. Throughout and following data collection, all data were securely stored, and participant anonymity was strictly maintained.

4. Findings

4.1. Iranian EFL Teachers’ Views on the Difficulties Students Face in Paragraph Writing Tasks on the 12th-Grade Final National English Exam

This section presents Iranian EFL teachers’ perspectives on the factors contributing to 12th-grade learners’ difficulties in paragraph writing tasks on the final national English examinations. Drawing on their classroom experiences and familiarity with the Vision 3 textbook, teachers identified a range of interconnected challenges. These challenges were organized into three overarching categories: (1) curricular and material-related shortcomings, (2) pedagogical and instructional limitations, and (3) foundational skill deficiencies. Each category is elaborated below with corresponding themes and representative excerpts from participants.

4.1.1. Curricular and Material-Related Shortcomings

Several participants attributed students’ writing challenges to limitations inherent in the design and structure of Vision 3, particularly its insufficient support for developing paragraph writing skills.

Lack of emphasis on writing skills

Teachers observed that the textbook prioritizes grammar and vocabulary over writing. As a result, students receive minimal exposure to the writing process and insufficient opportunities to practice paragraph development. T6, T1, and T2 expressed this concern as:

T6: “One of the primary issues observed in Vision 3, used in Iranian schools, is the inadequate emphasis placed on writing skills. The textbook appears to prioritize grammar and vocabulary exercises over paragraph development and composition, resulting in students receiving insufficient practice and guidance in producing coherent and well-structured paragraphs.” (Focus Group Discussion)

T1: “Vision 3 lacks adequate coverage of the writing process, including prewriting strategies, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. The absence of guidance in this area hinders students’ ability to develop effective writing habits and improve the quality of their compositions. In contrast, each unit provides a specific reading strategy alongside the reading comprehension section to support students in developing better reading skills.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T2: “The inclusion of the writing section at the end of each lesson reflects the lack of emphasis on writing skills in Vision 3. It seems that writing is not treated as a core skill, and other language components such as grammar and reading are more prioritized.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

Absence of diverse writing activities

Participants opined that students do not have the opportunity to engage in a variety of writing exercises or to experiment with different writing styles. This limitation restricts their creativity and reduces their chances of practicing writing effectively. T5 and T3 referred to this issue as:

T5: “Another significant challenge is the absence of diverse writing prompts. Students are often limited to a narrow range of topics for practice, which restricts their creativity and hinders their ability to explore different genres and styles of writing. This lack of variety may obstruct the development of a diverse and expressive writing repertoire.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T3: “In the activities presented in the book, students are typically asked to write a paragraph on a predetermined topic. This constrains them within a rigid framework, which can dampen their motivation to engage in the writing process.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Absence of adequate exemplification, illustrative, and visual support

Participants believed that paragraph writing explanations in Vision 3 rely solely on written text, lacking visual aids and engaging examples, which discourages participation and causes confusion instead of supporting effective learning. T2, T4, and T5 elaborated on this subject in this way:

T2: “In the ‘Writing’ section of this book, paragraph writing and identifying the different parts of a paragraph are mentioned briefly. However, this explanation is solely based on written text, with no other teaching methods used to engage the reader. This makes the section monotonous, as the lack of images and engaging examples, and exercises discourages the audience from participating.” (Focus Group Discussion)

T4: “The main issue is that before presenting the paragraph, no simple explanation with examples of the concepts of words, phrases, and sentences is provided. The incorrect paragraph formats are unhelpful because they teach students a wrong model. In the writing section of lesson two, a brief explanation of paragraphs is given, but the paragraph format is not presented visually.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T5: “In the section on supporting and concluding sentences, no correct pattern or strong examples are provided. Additionally, due to the complex vocabulary used in the paragraphs, students get stuck on the meaning of words rather than considering them as examples of paragraph writing.” (Focus Group Discussion)

4.1.2. Pedagogical and Instructional Limitations

Several concerns were raised about instructional constraints, including the lack of feedback mechanisms, time limitations, and insufficient scaffolding practices.

Lack of written corrective feedback

Teachers emphasized that students rarely receive written corrective feedback from both teachers and peers, which limits students’ ability to identify and correct their paragraph writing errors. T10 and T3 articulated their opinions about this:

T10: “Vision 3 falls short in providing opportunities for students to receive constructive feedback on their writing assignments or engage in peer review activities. The lack of feedback and evaluation mechanisms impedes students’ ability to identify and address areas for improvement in their writing, thus limiting their growth as writers.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T3: “Students often remain unaware of their mistakes and continue to repeat them, which limits their progress in developing effective writing skills. This is largely because providing corrective feedback on each piece of student writing is time-consuming, especially in the context of overcrowded public high school classrooms.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Insufficient scaffolding for paragraph development

Teachers stated that there is a lack of structured guidance for students on how to build coherent, cohesive paragraphs, which affects their ability to communicate effectively in writing. T7 and T5 stated their beliefs about this sub-theme as:

T7: “Vision 3 does not offer adequate scaffolding for paragraph development. Students may lack clear and structured guidance on how to develop paragraphs cohesively, including organizing ideas logically, using appropriate transitions, and maintaining a consistent focus throughout the paragraph. This deficiency in scaffolding may hinder students' ability to effectively communicate their ideas in written form.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T5: “Without scaffolding like clear models, structured steps, and guided practice, students are left confused about how to actually build a paragraph from start to finish.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

Limited time for paragraph writing instruction

The 12th-grade EFL curriculum does not allocate sufficient time for teachers to teach writing skills or for students to practice paragraph writing effectively, due to the pressures of exam preparation and covering numerous other topics. T9 and T2 emphasized this concern in the following way:

T9: “Starting the paragraph writing topic from the second lesson is not very interesting because most of the discussion is placed at the end of the book, leaving no time for practice and repetition of this important section.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T2: “Due to the time constraints in the 12th grade, the heavy workload, and the stress students face, there will not be enough time for extensive paragraph writing, and effective learning will not take place, leading to unsatisfactory results.” (Focus Group Discussion)

4.1.3. Foundational Skill Deficiencies

Some teachers pointed to students' weak linguistic foundations and limited earlier exposure to writing as critical factors influencing their current struggles.

Overload of content in a limited number of units

Teachers expressed concern that too much paragraph writing content is packed into just a few lessons, causing superficial learning and confusion rather than effective mastery. T8 and T4 stated this challenge as:

T8: “Since paragraph writing starts in lesson 2 and finishes in lesson 3 in the 12th grade textbook, learning too much information in this short time is not ideal considering its importance and practical application. Paragraph writing requires practice and special attention.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T4: “Exposing students to a lot of information on paragraph writing in just two units is cruel. The worst is the rushed summary in lesson 3 that has led students to learn it superficially.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

Insufficient instruction at earlier stages

Participants observed that many students enter 12th grade without adequate training in grammar, vocabulary, and the writing process, which exacerbates their difficulties with paragraph writing tasks. T9 and T7 expressed their views on this as:

T9: “Most students struggle significantly with paragraph writing, particularly in areas such as grammar, organizing and linking ideas, limited vocabulary knowledge, unfamiliarity with the topic, punctuation, and spelling. They also lack understanding of key stages in the writing process, such as brainstorming, and often face challenges with word choice, unsure of which words to use in their writing tasks. This suggests that the foundational instruction they received in earlier grades was neither adequate nor effective.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T7: “In final exam paragraph writing tasks, students make the most errors in verb tense, subject-verb agreement, and word choice. This reflects a weak foundational understanding of English language structures.” (Focus Group Discussion)

4.2. The Pedagogical Suggestions Provided by Iranian EFL Teachers to Enhance Students' Performance in Paragraph Writing Tasks

This section presents the pedagogical suggestions provided by Iranian EFL teachers for improving learners' performance in paragraph writing tasks on the national English exams. Drawing on their classroom experience and insights into the curriculum, participants recommended a range of reforms and strategies. Their recommendations were grouped into two overarching categories: (1) curricular and instructional reforms and (2) classroom-based pedagogical strategies.

4.2.1. Curricular and Instructional Reforms

Several teachers highlighted the need for systemic changes in the national curriculum and instructional materials to better support students' writing development across all grades.

Introducing writing instruction from Vision 1

Participants emphasized that the curriculum should allocate more time for writing practice, particularly in the earlier grades. This allows students to build their writing skills gradually and reduces the pressure in the final year when university entrance exam preparation becomes a priority. T8, T10, and T4 stated their opinions as:

T8: "The 10th grade is a great starting point, and there should be great care in learning writing in this grade. Through sentence writing exercises in Vision 1, this skill can gradually improve, and students' strengths and weaknesses can be identified. The more writing exercises are practiced, the easier it will be for students to learn paragraph writing, and they will show more enthusiasm for writing on various topics." (Semi-Structured Interview)

T10: "It would have been better to start paragraph writing from Vision 1, so that both the teacher and students would have more time for practice." (Focus Group Discussion)

T4: "Paragraph writing skills need to be integrated into the curriculum from the early stages of language learning. By including it in Vision 1, students will develop more robust writing habits." (Semi-Structured Interview)

Reforming the writing sections in the Vision series

Teachers believed that the way the data is presented in the writing sections of the Vision series should change. More structured guidance should be provided to help students understand how

to organize their paragraphs. Adding visual examples and engaging activities should be included in order to improve these sections so they can be efficiently taught and learned. T1, T3, and T6 pointed out to some practical solutions:

T1: “It is recommended that the Vision textbooks incorporate a stronger focus on writing skills. This important section of English language, which is one of the key skills for the student, should be placed earlier in the book.” (Focus Group Discussion)

T3: “Practical images should be used for teaching such valuable content. Then, for each part of a paragraph's details, related images could be used. Finally, better exercises could have been included to capture the audience's attention and make the section more engaging.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T6: “Before presenting the paragraph, a brief explanation of the concepts of words, phrases, and sentences should have been provided so that students could create a logical connection between them, making it easier to understand the paragraph.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

Designing fair paragraph writing tasks on the final national English examinations

Sometimes, it is not about teaching, the issue also lies in assessment design. Teachers reported that designing standardized, textbook-based test tasks may result in better performance in paragraph writing. Tasks should use familiar vocabulary and topics covered in the book to reflect what students have actually practiced. T5 and T9 elaborated on this solution as:

T5: “In the final exam, the student could be asked to write a paragraph on a topic they are passionate about, which would make the learning experience less dry and help them feel that their emotions are acknowledged.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T9: “It would have been better to assess the student’s paragraph writing ability by using relevant topics (e.g., the ones in the book's lessons) and with more familiar vocabulary.” (Focus Group Discussion)

4.2.2. Classroom-Based Pedagogical Strategies

Teachers also suggested some practical instructional strategies that can be implemented in classrooms to foster students’ writing abilities.

Applying a systematic approach to teaching writing

Participants argued that a more systematic approach to teaching paragraph development will help students produce coherent and logically structured writing. This will not only help them develop writing skills but also improve their ability to produce high-quality work. T8 and T7 placed more emphasis on this approach:

T8: “Different parts of a paragraph should be practiced, and students should get familiar with the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence.” (Focus Group Discussion)

T7: “After explaining the supporting and concluding sentences, it is essential to provide an example in which these concepts are clearly demonstrated.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T7: “A comprehensive approach to teaching writing must include all phases of the writing process. To teach writing, the four phases of writing a paragraph (i.e., brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing) should receive attention.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Incorporating team-based writing activities

Students learn best from their peers. It was reported by the participants that collaborative tasks should be designed for practicing writing in the classroom. Working in teams can reduce anxiety and promote peer support and feedback. T2 and T1 proposed this strategy and its benefits in this way:

T2: “At the beginning of the training, the writing activities should ideally be done as a collaborative, team-based project. Grouping students and group activities will significantly impact their success during the writing process. Students will face less anxiety and stress, and the teacher, in their role as an observer and guide, will help them correct their writing mistakes.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T1: “For the exercises in this section, students could be asked to write a paragraph on a subject of their choice and then analyse it with a classmate. This would empower students to analyse and break down their own and their peers’ writing. So, they learn more.” (Focus Group Discussion)

Emphasizing prerequisite language skills for writing

Before teaching paragraph writing, teachers should ensure that students have a solid grasp of basic language skills such as grammar, verb tenses, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Awareness of L1–L2 structural differences is also essential. T3 and T2 put more emphasis on this point:

T3: “I, as a teacher, suggest that teachers need to put emphasis on certain aspects of writing in English. They should teach basic grammar rules, tense, subject-verb-agreement, mechanics, lexical items, word order, etc.” (Focus Group Discussion)

T2: “Teachers must make students aware of the differences between English and Persian structures of phrases and sentences. I think it is a must before teaching writing.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

Providing written corrective feedback on student writing

Feedback is a crucial part of the learning process. Teachers opined that they should provide constructive feedback on students' writing to help them recognize areas for improvement. Additionally, peer review activities can encourage collaboration and provide different perspectives. T9 and T1 supported this strategy and view in this way:

T9: “Teachers should provide students with written corrective feedback, and their writing assignments should always be checked. This will help them recognize and rectify their writing errors and thus develop their writing skills.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

T1: “Sometimes, asking students to give each other corrective feedback on their pieces of writing makes them aware of the writing structure and organization and boosts their writing skills.” (Semi-Structured Interview)

Figure 1 provides a comprehensive summary of the study’s findings on both challenges and suggestions offered by the teachers. It categorizes the sub-themes under each major category.

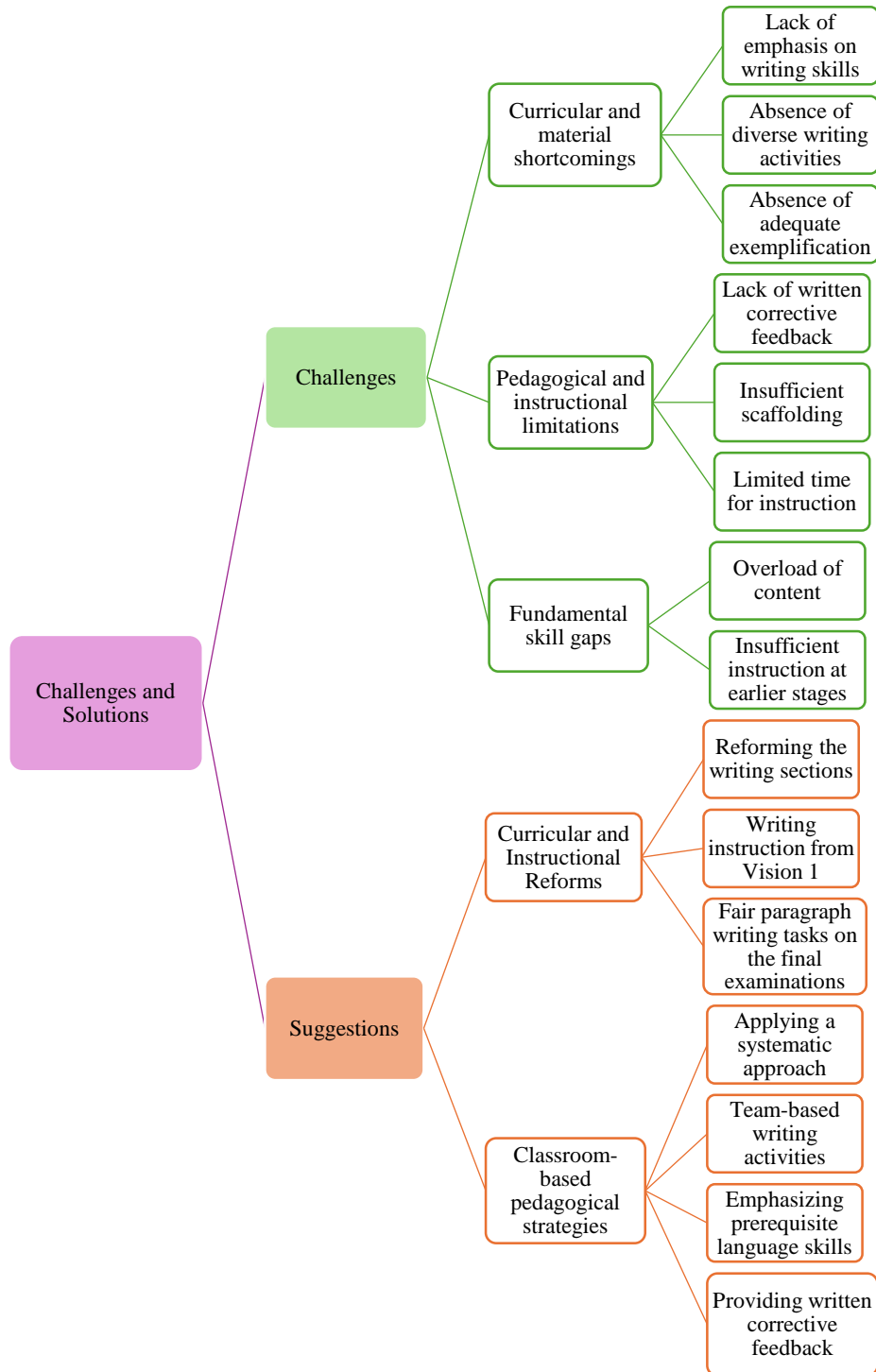


Figure 1. Summary of the Findings

5. Discussion

This qualitative research focused on two key issues. First, it explored Iranian EFL teachers' views on the difficulties students encounter in paragraph writing tasks for the 12th-grade final national English exam. The study identified three primary themes: curricular and material shortcomings, pedagogical and instructional limitations, and fundamental skill gaps. It also examined the pedagogical suggestions provided by teachers to enhance students' performance in these writing tasks. The findings revealed two main areas for improvement: curricular and instructional reforms and classroom-based pedagogical strategies.

The findings highlight that the Vision 3 textbook's design puts insufficient emphasis on writing skills, prioritizing grammar and vocabulary over paragraph development. This imbalance limits students' exposure to the writing process, hindering their ability to produce coherent, exam-ready paragraphs. The lack of diverse writing activities and insufficient exemplification can further limit students' creative engagement and conceptual understanding, leaving them ill-prepared for high-stakes exams (Quílez, 2021). This is also consistent with the study by Abbasi et al. (2021), who found that Vision 3's writing activities heavily favor controlled tasks over guided or free writing, limiting opportunities for autonomous expression. To address these issues, teachers recommended systemic reforms, such as introducing writing instruction from Vision 1. This approach aligns with second language acquisition theories, such as Vygotsky's scaffolding framework (1978), which emphasizes incremental skill development through guided practice. Early integration of sentence-level writing, as suggested, would allow students to build foundational skills gradually, reducing cognitive overload in 12th grade. Moreover, revising the Vision series to include structured templates, infographics, and diverse prompts (e.g., narrative, descriptive, or argumentative tasks) can make paragraph writing more accessible and motivating. Such enhancements, as proposed by teachers, would address the monotony of text-heavy explanations and foster creativity, aligning with process writing approaches that prioritize iterative practice and engagement (Tan, 2023). Tomlinson (2008) suggests the importance of well-structured textbooks in guiding effective instruction, suggesting that these revisions could enhance Vision 3's role as a pedagogical tool.

Teachers also identified significant instructional constraints, including the lack of written corrective feedback, insufficient scaffolding, and limited instructional time. These factors impede students' ability to self-correct errors, organize ideas cohesively, and develop writing fluency. The absence of feedback mechanisms particularly restricts self-regulated learning, as students remain unaware of recurring mistakes. To overcome these limitations,

teachers proposed a systematic approach to teaching paragraph writing, covering all phases: brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. This method, rooted in cognitive theories of writing development (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), breaks down complex tasks into manageable steps, providing clear scaffolding for students. For instance, using graphic organizers to teach paragraph structure could enhance cohesion and clarity. Additionally, incorporating team-based writing activities, such as peer-editing workshops, leverages peer collaboration to reduce anxiety and promote constructive feedback, aligning with sociocultural learning principles that emphasize social interaction in skill development (Vygotsky, 1978). Given time constraints, such collaborative tasks maximize practice efficiency by allowing students to learn from peers while teachers facilitate targeted interventions (Shafiee Rad, 2025). Providing consistent written corrective feedback, both from teachers and peers, fosters critical thinking and self-assessment, enhancing students' ability to refine their writing iteratively.

Furthermore, the study revealed that many students enter 12th grade with weak foundational skills in grammar, vocabulary, and the writing process, which amplifies their struggles with paragraph writing. Overloading content into a few lessons leads to superficial learning, preventing mastery of complex writing tasks. This finding is also supported by Chen (2025). Moreover, L1-L2 structural differences, such as Persian's flexible word order versus English's rigid syntax, contribute to errors in sentence construction and cohesion, as noted by teachers. To address these deficiencies, teachers emphasized reinforcing prerequisite skills including grammar, verb tenses, sentence structure, and L1-L2 awareness before introducing paragraph writing. Targeted instruction on common errors, like subject-verb agreement or word choice, could strengthen linguistic foundations, enabling focus on higher-order skills like coherence. Integrating these elements throughout earlier grades, as suggested, ensures a cumulative learning trajectory for long-term writing development. Spreading writing instruction across more units would allow repeated practice and deeper mastery, addressing rushed pacing.

Teachers also highlighted a critical misalignment between exam tasks and textbook content, where unfamiliar topics and vocabulary increase cognitive demands and undermine performance. Khandaghi Khameneh and Hashamdar (2021) similarly noted Vision 3's limited support for meaningful writing opportunities, which exacerbates this misalignment under CLT frameworks that prioritize authentic communication. Designing paragraph writing tasks that reflect Vision 3's themes and vocabulary, as recommended, would create a fairer assessment environment, allowing students to demonstrate their practiced skills effectively. This

recommendation affirms the importance of curriculum-assessment alignment, a key principle in educational design (Biggs, 1996). Relevant tasks reduce test anxiety and provide valid data for refining instructional practices. For example, prompts based on familiar topics, like cultural or environmental themes from Vision 3, could boost engagement and performance.

Taken together, the findings emphasize the need for a coherent, multi-level intervention, one that addresses systemic curricular misalignments, empowers teachers with professional autonomy and resources, and nurtures students' confidence and competence through sustained writing practice. While teachers in this study demonstrated awareness of both problems and solutions, their narratives also reveal the constraints they face in translating insights into action, echoing Tomlinson's (2008) call for textbook designs that empower educators. These constraints highlight the broader challenge of educational reform in exam-oriented systems: without policy-level support, even the most well-intentioned pedagogical innovations risk being marginalized.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This qualitative study explored Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives on the challenges 12th-grade learners face in paragraph writing tasks on the final national English examination and their recommendations for addressing these issues. The findings revealed three primary challenges: curricular and material-related shortcomings in the Vision 3 textbook, such as its limited emphasis on writing skills and lack of diverse activities; pedagogical and instructional limitations, including insufficient feedback and time constraints; and foundational skill deficiencies, exacerbated by weak prior instruction and L1-L2 interference. Teachers proposed a range of solutions, including introducing writing instruction from earlier grades, revising Vision 3 to include structured and engaging writing tasks, implementing systematic teaching approaches, and aligning exam tasks with textbook content. These findings illustrate that students' difficulties stem from a combination of textbook limitations, instructional constraints, and foundational skill gaps, requiring an integrated, comprehensive strategy for improvement. The actionable implications of this research extend to EFL teachers, learners, curriculum developers, and Iran's educational system. For teachers, adopting systematic writing instruction, namely covering brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing, can enhance students' ability to produce coherent paragraphs. Incorporating peer-editing workshops and digital feedback tools can reduce learner anxiety and foster constructive feedback, optimizing classroom efficiency. Teachers would benefit from professional development focused on

designing scaffolded writing tasks and addressing L1-L2 structural differences through contrastive analysis activities. For learners, early and sustained writing practice, starting from Vision 1, can build confidence and competence, enabling them to tackle high-stakes exam tasks. Curriculum developers should revise the Vision series to balance language skills, integrating diverse prompts, visual aids like paragraph diagrams, and clear models to make writing instruction more engaging and accessible. For the educational system, aligning national exam tasks with Vision 3's content, using familiar topics and vocabulary, would create a fairer assessment environment, reducing cognitive demands and improving performance. These reforms require policy-level investment, such as funding for teacher training programs and curriculum redesign, to empower educators and learners to meet examination demands and develop lifelong writing skills.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that suggest directions for future research. The sample was limited to 10 teachers from Golestan Province, which may not fully represent the diverse contexts of Iranian EFL education. Additionally, the study relied on teacher perspectives without directly incorporating student or examiner viewpoints, potentially limiting its scope. Future research could address these gaps by including larger, more diverse samples and triangulating data with student and examiner insights. Quasi-experimental studies could evaluate the impact of recommended strategies, such as revised textbooks or collaborative writing tasks, on writing proficiency and exam performance. Longitudinal studies could investigate how early writing instruction influences long-term EFL achievement, providing insights into sustainable curriculum design. Comparative studies with other EFL contexts, such as Turkey or Saudi Arabia, could contextualize these findings, highlighting universal versus context-specific challenges. Mixed-methods studies combining qualitative teacher insights with quantitative exam performance data could further validate these recommendations. By addressing these limitations, future research can build on this study's foundation to inform evidence-based reforms in Iranian EFL education.

Bio-data

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Alireza Maleki: Conceptualization-writing-methodology-revision

Yara Mirfendereski: Writing-methodology-revision

Yasaman Mirfendereski: Writing-methodology-revision

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