

The relationship between emotional intelligence and writing ability of Iranian EFL learners

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Abstract: *Success in educational settings is an ever-present wish. For EFL learners, writing ability is a highly favored but neglected skill. As opposed to IQ, Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory is increasingly characterized as contributing to students' ability to improve their achievement. In this study, the body of female BA sophomores of TEFL in Urmia University, (N = 47), within the age range of 18-25, was given a close look in terms of their EI. The students were first given Bar-On's Emotional Quotient Inventory (a Likert scale questionnaire) and were asked to respond to its items based on the relevance of the statements to themselves. Thereafter, the students were given a writing test and the resulting scores were correlated with their EI scores. The scoring of writing tasks was done analytically following pre-specified criteria. The writings were scored once by two raters, yielding an inter-rater reliability of 0.8. Results obtained through Multiple Regression rendered a positive relationship between writing ability and emotional self-awareness, a subcategory of EI. This can create a room for highlighting emotions in one's educational life.*

Key words: *Emotional intelligence, writing ability, EFL learners*

1. Introduction

An in-depth desire to succeed is what makes academic achievement the focus of educational research. Favorable academic outcomes and their determining factors have drawn the attention of many practitioners in the field (Segal & Jaffe, 2008). More recently, burgeoning literature on the field has shown that success in education is more likely to be determined by factors that seem to negate what has long been considered to be valid. Traditionally, enjoying a high level of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) would suffice to be regarded academically successful in light of conventional wisdom (Stern, 1912). However, the role of IQ in academic success has been questioned. Apparently, not all talented people are those with high IQ scores. According to Goleman (1995), this cognitive intelligence can only account for 20 percent of individual differences in educational achievement, with the remaining 80 percent of the variance being unaccounted for by cognitive intelligence or IQ tests. As Goleman (1995) states, this deficiency can be explained by other characteristics that could be subsumed under Emotional Intelligence (EI).

Developing emotional intelligence skills helps us determine, access, and effectively communicate our emotions as well as recognize those of others. These abilities have been proven to outstrip high cognitive intelligence, IQ, and potentials in all types of relationships. Self-awareness, which gives one

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the power to identify feelings and handle emotions, is the core of EI, which also embraces self-motivation and ability to concentrate on a goal instead of demanding immediate fulfillment. An individual with a high Emotional Quotient (EQ) is endowed with common sense and is sharp-witted in social relations (Bar-On, Maree, & Elias, 2007). Bar-On's model of non-cognitive intelligence draws on five vast areas of skills and competencies, with each subdivided into specific skills (Bar-On, Maree, & Elias, 2007). These include intrapersonal skills (emotional self-awareness, assertiveness, self-regard, self-actualization, and independence), interpersonal skills (interpersonal relationships, social responsibility, and empathy), adaptability (problem solving, reality testing, and flexibility), stress management (stress tolerance and impulse control), and general mood (happiness and optimism).

Writing ability is one of the important skills that EFL/ESL learners need to gain proficiency in. Methodological approaches to the instruction of writing in English Language Teaching (ELT) underwent a change of focus in 1990s, as a result of which concerns were raised about the real merit of traditional approaches which emphasized the end product of writing, grammar, and vocabulary. The new approach, stressing writing as a process, sees it as "thinking, as discovery, employing strategies to manage the composing process and is regarded as an outcome of a set of complicated cognitive operations" (Hedge, 2000, pp. 302-303).

Being sensitive to students' emotional development and social competence has long stirred up the interests of educators and policy makers (Bar-On & Parker, 2000; Qualter, Gardner, Pope, Hutchinson, & Whiteley, 2012). The predictive validity of EI has been acknowledged to be manifest in physical and psychological health, interaction with others, school and workplace performances, self-actualization, overall subjective well-being, and success in education (Bar-On, 1997; 2003; 2004; 2005; Bar-On, Handley & Fund, 2005; Delgoshai & Delavari, 2012; Krivoy, Ben-Arush & Bar-On, 2000; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan & Majeski, 2004; Parker et al., 2004; Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke & Wood, 2006). The contributing role of emotions in academia, especially in reading and writing, has been neglected in spite of the vast majority of educational research on psychology (Armstrong, 2003). However, the written records which support the link between reading and writing and certain areas of brain that handle emotions are increasing both in size and scope.

Dardello (2007), for example, administered Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) to elementary learners at Howard Community College in order to have an insight of the students' emotions. During a period of fifteen-weeks, the candidates were taught EI skills with the hope of an improvement in their EI competencies and their success in the writing course, as a consequence. Students also kept a record of their emotions during the stages of writing process in their emotional intelligence journals. The stages included: brainstorming, developing a thesis, developing an outline, making the first draft, receiving feedback, and revision. Within this study, EI scores as determined by the MSCEIT and the students' writing success were highly correlated although the students' EI skills were not marked with a significant change.

An investigation into the possible effects of emotional and verbal intelligences on English language learning success in Iran was carried out by Pishghadam (2009). The researcher gathered both product and process samples of the students' performance. Analysis of the obtained data revealed that different skills, particularly productive ones, were differently related to emotional intelligence. As regards the process-based phase, the effects of emotional and verbal intelligences on turn-taking, amount of communication, the number of errors, and writing ability were quite noticeable.

Fallahzadeh (2011) proposed to determine any existing relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance of medical science students. Two hundred and twenty three adolescent students took part in data collection. The participants' emotional intelligence was measured by Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), and their final exam scores served as a basis for their academic performance. Following Regression Analysis, Pearson's Correlation, and *t*-test, the variables were found to be significantly ($r = 0.14$, $p = 0.039$) correlated.

Homayouni (2011) conducted a study to find out whether personality traits and emotional intelligence play any roles in learning English and math. NEO-Five-Factor Model Personality Inventory (NEO-FFM PI) and Schutte's Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) were used to obtain the required data from research participants who were 110 university students. The candidates' scores of general English and general math courses were accordingly matched with their personality trait and EI scores. Math learning and Neuroticism showed a negative relationship with each other, while math learning had a positive correlation with Extroversion and Conscientiousness. Extroversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, as constituting elements of EI showed a positive relationship with learning English.

Behjat (2012) investigated the relationship between interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences and language learning. During an interview, the EFL university students in the study were divided into groups based on interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. Reading and grammar sections of a TOEFL test provided data on the participants' language knowledge. Following a comparison of the groups' mean scores on the tests, a relationship was found between intelligences and language learning. Intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences helped males and females, respectively, outperform their peers in the language tests.

Traditionally, learning experts emphasized the immediate delivery of instruction with a fallacious belief of treating all the learners the same. A great deal of research in the domain of learning styles with an emphasis on different learning profiles is the end product of advances in education in the last decade of the 20th century (Fleetham, 2006). Writing ability, to which a lot of importance is attached in western world, seems to be sidelined in Iran, as both the teachers and the learners tend to underestimate its role in enhancing the mastery of the foreign language. Relatively little amount of time is spent on developing writing ability, and most of the work does not receive enough attention. It is actually viewed as a way of enhancing and building up their vocabulary rather than real communication. By virtue of utilizing their emotional intelligences, students will, to a great extent, be

helped to express themselves through written words. The presence of emotions in writing process has been recognized by many educational scholars. As a matter of fact, emotions are put into use by writers during different stages of writing process, such as when establishing the purpose of writing, when being interrupted at any stage for any reason, and when having trouble thinking what to write (Dardello, 2007). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to determine whether or not EI plays any role in students' writing ability. To this end, this study took the following as the research question and hypothesis:

Is there any significant relationship between Iranian university EFL learners' EI and their writing ability?

H: There is no significant relationship between the Iranian university EFL learners' EI and their writing ability.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Using a non-probability sampling procedure, the participants of this study were selected from the population of Urmia University students majoring in English Literature during winter 2010. The study included the female BA (Bachelor of Arts) sophomores as the participants. The study was conducted with a sample of 55 male and female EFL learners, ranging in age from 18 to 25. The students were administered Bar-On's EQ-i (1997) as well as a test of writing ability adopted from the IELTS. With females outnumbering their male counterparts significantly and in order to eliminate any possible misleading effect of gender on results, the male participants were excluded in the final analysis. As a result, the remaining 47 female candidates made up the ultimate sample.

2.2 Instruments

This research used Bar-On's EQ-i (1997) — with the reliability of 0.8 and the validity of 0.93 as reported by its original developer — in order to assess the participants' emotional intelligence. The results of this questionnaire were compared with the participants' scores on an Advanced Writing Course test in which the candidates were supposed to back up their own ideas in an argumentative essay of 250 words. The questionnaire included 90 items reflecting each EI domain. Instructions regarding how to answer the questionnaire were also provided. The participants were asked to rate how well the items described themselves and responded to them using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 as: "1 = strongly disagree", "2 = disagree", "3 = somewhat agree", "4 = agree", and "5 = strongly agree".

The topic of the argumentative writing test was based on the following IELTS writing topic: "A good number of people believe that it is better for children to grow up in the countryside than in a big city. To what extent do you agree or disagree?". Any argumentative topic would have been equally acceptable. The argumentative style was chosen since it was a writing style introduced during the

course and practiced by students. Two experienced raters rated the writing samples. The inter-rater reliability was calculated to be 0.8, using Spearman Rho.

2.3 Procedures

This study sought to investigate the possible relationship between Iranian EFL learners' writing ability and their emotional intelligence. For this purpose, female BA sophomores of English Literature at Urmia University took part in the study. The participants were given the EI questionnaire (Bar-On's EQ-i, 1997) as well as a test of writing ability. Having obtained the final exam writing products of the students, the researchers rated them following pre-specified criteria of: layout, organization, content, coherence, unity, completeness, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, quantity, handwriting, formality, capitalization, and overall quality. The list of criteria was adopted from the criteria against which writing papers of IELTS, TOEFL and other international tests are scored. Each criterion was given a different weight and the overall score for each writing was based on a scale of 100. (with minimum points allocated for spelling, handwriting and punctuation and higher points given to vocabulary and content). The criteria had already been brought to the attention of students during their writing course so they were familiar with these criteria and their place in writing. The scores on the questionnaire were compared with the scores of writing products in order to determine whether students with high writing scores were also the ones with high EI. Multiple Regression (Mackey & Gass, 2005) was used to analyze the data using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 19.

3. Results

As the nature of such studies entails, a correlational or associational design best suited the purpose of this research, within which Pearson r designates the value of significance as more than the p-value ($\alpha = 0.05$). Table 1 summarizes the results of the analysis based on which it can be understood that there is no significant relationship between the university EFL learners' ability in writing and their EQ in general.

Table 1
Symmetric Measures: EQ and Writing Ability

		Asymp. Std. Error ^a	Approx. T ^b	Approx. Sig.
Interval by	Pearson r	.161	-	.215 .831 ^c
N of Valid Cases		47		

- a. not assuming the null hypothesis.
- b. using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.
- c. based on normal approximation.

The next stage of analysis was to analyze this relationship for different components of EI. As is demonstrated in Table 2, which shows the first eight EQ types, the value of significance for emotional self-awareness is 0.049 which is smaller than the p-value of 0.05. This means that there is a significant relationship between the university EFL learners' ability in writing and their emotional self-awareness with a correlation of 0.286.

Table 2
Symmetric Measures: EQ Types (considered individually) and Writing Ability

N of valid cases		47			
Interval by	Pearson <i>r</i>	Value	Asymp. Std. Error ^a	Approx. T ^b	Approx. Sig.
<i>EQ1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8</i>					
Problem solving		-.118	.171	-.799	.428 ^c
Happiness		.062	.170	.419	.677 ^c
Independence		.014	.119	.092	.927 ^c
Stress tolerance		.168	.147	-1.145	.258 ^c
Self actualization		-.276	.116	-1.923	
Emotional self-awareness		.286	.132	2.002	.061 ^c
Reality testing		.062	.132	.419	*.049 ^c
Interpersonal relationship		-.075	.133	-.505	.677 ^c
					.616 ^c

As far as the rest seven EQ types are concerned, table 3 indicates that there were no significant correlations between EI components and the participants' writing ability since the significance levels for these intelligence types bear greater values when compared to the p-value ($\alpha = 0.05$). In sum, the observed correlations (see tables 1, 2, & 3) between the writing ability and EQ1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 are not statistically significant at the probability level of 0.05, so the relevant null-hypothesis is confirmed for these fourteen EQ types. However, with respect to EQ6, emotional self-awareness, the value of significance stands at a level which is smaller than the p-value ($\alpha = 0.05$),

signifying a positive and a direct relationship.

Table 3
Symmetric Measures: EQ Types (considered individually) and Writing Ability

N of valid cases					
47					
Interval by	Pearson <i>r</i>	Value	Asymp. Std. Error ^a	Approx. T ^b	Approx. Sig.
<i>EQ9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15</i>					
Optimism		.203	.133	1.393	.170 ^c
Self regard		.044	.129	.297	.768 ^c
Impulse control		.067	.149	.449	.656 ^c
Flexibility		-.173	.143	-1.180	.244 ^c
Social responsibility		.052	.125	.348	.729 ^c
Empathy		-.047	.129	-.316	.754 ^c
Assertiveness		-.045	.121	-.304	.763 ^c

Based on the data analysis presented above, the research question can be answered as follows:

There is a significant relationship between the Iranian university EFL learners' emotional self-awareness and their ability in writing. The remaining EQ types have no significant relationship with the writing ability of the Iranian university EFL learners.

4. Discussion & conclusion

The aim of this study was to empirically test if there was any relationship between EI and the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. Results obtained through Pearson Correlation indicated a positive relationship between the writing ability and the emotional self-awareness, a subcategory of EI. This is in conformity with the claim that EI plays a greater role than IQ in determining one's life outcomes, be it educational or any other momentous phases of life (Lynn, 2005; Mokhtar, Majid, & Foo, 2008). The results of the present study can be said to be, in a sense, consistent with those of Parker et al. (2004) within whose study certain EI subcategories acted as significant predictors of academic success. They investigated the relationship between EI and academic achievement in a large sample of American high school students where the academically successful group was also superior to the other

group in terms of their EI scores. Khajehpor's (2011) study, similar, took Iranian high school students as the sample to be studied. Within this research, the students with high profiles of EI were also the ones with high scores in school, indicating a positive relationship between EI and academic achievement. However, several other studies (Johnson, 2008; Suliman, 2010) stand in contrast to the works previously reported, in that they found no relationship between emotional intelligence and learning abilities or academic success.

The findings of the current study may not be generalizable since only a small scale sample of the participants' written performance was obtained; yet, our findings harbor a number of implications for learning as well as for teaching EFL, particularly in the case of writing in the Iranian context. Writing, in itself, signifies the use of emotions to put one's thoughts into words; that is, it is a way of identifying emotions and tracking down what the possible causes of those feelings might be. Brand (1990) states that, with the exception of writing fears and writer's block, very little attempt has been put to launch researches on writing with one's emotions as their core.

Students encounter numerous academic pressures at university that can put them under a lot of stress. Numerous assignments with varying expectations of their respective instructors are called for. Many adults, in addition, face the challenge of setting aside appropriate amount of time for both academic and non-academic pursuits, meanwhile acting as independent individuals in society. Rather than adhering to a prescribed teaching method, EI theory provides a way of understanding intelligence which teachers can use as a guide for developing classroom activities that address various teaching and learning methods.

The present study, however, needs to be replicated with a more diverse range of Iranian and even international participants. It would also be useful to examine the relationship between EI and achievement in different educational subjects. A more comprehensive research study would be the one which tackles all the skills of foreign language learning. That is, writing ability is only one indicator of how academically successful a student can be. It would be a good idea to include other skills of academic achievement, like listening, speaking, and reading. Emotional intelligence and its potentials need to be further investigated, especially in the field of academia. If further research ascertains the true values of EI, what must be the next stage would be seeking ways to help students perform with higher intelligence capabilities.

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