
Analysis of MA Thesis Writing Problems and Perceptions of Postgraduate EFL Learners towards them

Bita Keyvandarian

*MA in TEFL, Department of Foreign Languages, Sheikhbahae University, Isfahan,
Iran keyvandarian@shbu.ac.ir*

Katayoon Afzali*

*Assistant Professor in Applied Linguistics, Department of Foreign Languages,
Sheikhbahae University, Isfahan, Iran k.afzali@shbu.ac.ir*

Abstract

Although EFL learners pass different courses in writing at university and are expected to be able to express their thoughts in various forms of writing, their texts suffer from many problems. Therefore, the current study aimed to identify the type of problems that postgraduate EFL learners encounter in writing their thesis proposals. To this end, first, the problems marked by supervisors in thirty-two proposals written by TEFL and Translation Studies students were classified into two general categories: macro and micro problems. Then, these problems were classified based on Halliday and Hassan's (1976) and Tardy's (2009) models of academic genre. After that, a questionnaire about writing problems was administered to participants to elicit their perceptions towards writing MA proposals. The responses were then analyzed according to Dornyei's (2003) suggestions for analyzing qualitative data. The findings revealed that discursal and linguistic problems were among the highest frequent problems. The analysis of the questionnaires also indicated that EFL postgraduate learners hold negative attitude towards proposal writing, and considered discursal problems as their major challenge in writing. There was consistency between their ideas and the real problems.

Keywords: Thesis proposal, Academic writing, Writing problems

Introduction

Despite the fact that EFL learners pass different writing courses at university and are expected to be able to express their thoughts in various forms of writing, their written texts still suffer from a multitude number of problems. As Silva (1993) notes, there are strategic, rhetorical and linguistic differences between writing in L1 and L2. Therefore, many EFL learners believe that writing is the most challenging skill among other skills, i.e. speaking, listening, and reading (Fallahzadeh and Shokrpour, 2007). This difficulty may be due to the fact that written discourse is always required to be more accurate, appropriate, explicit, and effective than spoken discourse since it needs a higher level of productivelanguage control than speaking (Cai, 2011). In other words, writing is a multidimensional communicative process involving “the generation, analysis, and synthesis of ideas; the organization of discourse; the control of sentence structure; the vocabulary, spelling, and mechanics” (Williams, 2007, p.12). Thus, there are diverse areas in writing where EFL learners may commit errors such as content, linguistic structures, style, and punctuation. However, EFL students' writing tasks, even when they are without grammatical errors, would still seem very strange and anomalous to read, especially for native speakers of English (Cai, 2011).

One of the factors which can make postgraduate EFL learners' writing different from those of native speakers is related to the way EFL learners utilize cohesive markers. In other words, producing a coherent piece of writing is considered as an enormous challenge for ESL students (Nunan, 1999). The concept of coherence is defined as “the organization of discourse with all elements present and fitting together logically” (Hinkel, 2004; p.16). Another factor which is neglected while writing a text is cohesion which is concerned with texture in writing and refers to the relation of meaning existing within the text which can be manifested through cohesive devices that, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976), have been classified into reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. These devices play important roles in writing thesis proposals.

Since writing proposals normally takes time and requires EFL postgraduates to write about their thesis concisely and precisely, it is a crucial issue for them to deliver at least a well-formed grammatical piece of writing to their supervisors. However, their problems in writing at this level are beyond grammatical problems and are more related to discorsal ones. As Hyland (2008) asserts, syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy are not the only features of good writing. Therefore, most students are able to write accurate sentences, but are not able to produce coherent written texts (Hyland, 2008). In fact, most of their problems are beyond sentential level and have their stems in discorsal ones such as wrong use of cohesive ties such as substitution and ellipsis (Vujevic, 2012).

Considering the problems of EFL postgraduate students in writing their thesis proposals, the current study aims to identify the types of problems these students encounter in writing their proposals. Furthermore, the participants' perceptions toward problems in writing their thesis proposals were analysed. Perceptions of EFL learners matter because they are ‘value-related’ and have a strong impact on

their learning behaviours (Wenden, 1999). Accordingly, identifying EFL postgraduate students' perceptions toward their problems in writing their thesis proposals matter since revealing them will make them aware of what is in reality problematic for them in the process of proposal writing than what they consider difficult as a fact. Furthermore, the findings of this study will make EFL teachers aware of their students' perceptions as they are supposed to be aware of them.

Considering the above-mentioned problems, the present study aimed to address the following questions:

1. What types of problems do Iranian EFL postgraduate learners have in their written proposals?
2. What are the perceptions of EFL postgraduate learners about their writing problems in their written proposals?

Review of Literature

A multitude number of researches has been conducted in relation to EFL learners' writing problems some of which were contrastive ones. In this relation, Danaee and Sadeghi (2010) conducted a descriptive study analysing ten English linguistic articles written by Iranian students and ten articles written by Iranian ones according to five general categories of textual cohesion proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976). The findings of their study indicated that Iranian writers' use of endophoric reference, verbal and clausal substitution were significantly less frequent than native ones. Other studies in this relation are concerned with examining the frequency, distribution, complexity, the types, features, and the reasons for committing mistakes in using cohesive devices. In this respect, Cai (2011), employing the coding system suggested by Halliday and Hasan (1976), analyzed the use of cohesive ties. The findings of his study indicated that students were able to use a variety of cohesive markers in their compositions among which reference devices formed the largest percentage of the total number of cohesive devices, followed by lexical and conjunctive cohesive markers.

Other studies of cohesive relationships focused on comparing the types, distribution and variability of cohesive ties used across different genres. For instance, Buitkiene (2005) analyzed the frequency, distribution, and variability of cohesive ties across legal, short stories, and newspaper article registers. To this end, three texts from these registers were analyzed: a legal text (restricted register), a short story (open-ended register), and a newspaper article (something in between). The findings demonstrated that the distribution and frequency of cohesive devices depend directly on the degree of 'openness' of a register. Lexical cohesive ties were the most extensively used ties in texts belonging to different registers. Then, reference items were the second major group of cohesive devices and were register-dependent. Substitution and ellipsis tended to occur in open registers more often than restricted ones. Finally, discourse markers were used more or less equally in all registers.

As the literature demonstrates, most of the previously conducted research on the quality and quantity of cohesive devices in writing has focused on graduate or undergraduate EFL/ ESL learners. Additionally, most of these studies have concentrated on all types of cohesion markers proposed by Halliday and Hasan

(1976) at the same time. Scant research has focused on one or two categories of cohesive markers. For instance, Gonzalez (2010) examined lexical cohesion, Mohamed-Sayidina (2010) considered transition words, Li (2009) dealt with conjunctions and adverbs as specific categories among all cohesion types. As the review of literature indicates, the majority of previous studies have worked on diverse forms of writing such as compositions, paragraph writing, academic writing, research articles, but no study has been conducted on proposal writing.

Therefore, the current research aims to investigate the types and frequency of errors that postgraduate EFL learners encounter in writing proposals for their thesis. Additionally, the current study aims to analyze the students' perceptions about their frequent problems in writing their proposals and those problems truly occurring in their proposals.

Method

Corpus

Thirty two thesis proposals written by EFL postgraduate students studying English Language Teaching (ELT) and English Language Translation formed the corpus of this study.

Instruments

The only instrument used in this study was a questionnaire sent to the participants via their e-mail addresses, and they were requested to answer the questions and send them back to the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of seven less open-ended questions which are called so because the respondents could write about their ideas freely as well as in a restricted number of lines, e.g. two or three lines (Dornyei, 2003). The questions were generally based on the items presented by Yeh (2009). This questionnaire was selected as a tool for gathering data since the respondents could write about their ideas freely as well as in a restricted number of lines. The questionnaire elicited some attitudinal information the learners had toward the problems they encountered while writing their proposals. Consequently, the students' perceptions were qualitatively analyzed, classified, and then compared with the real problems found in their proposals. It was to find out whether or not the learners' perceptions toward their problems in writing matched their common difficulties recognized in the written proposal texts. Therefore, the questionnaire included the following general questions:

- 1) How do you interpret writing a thesis proposal? Is it difficult, simple, or something in between? Why?
- 2) What difficulties do you encounter in writing your proposal?
- 3) Give your opinions about the following cases:
 - a) Time and Resource Constraints
 - b) Choosing a Topic
 - c) Ability to read for research
 - d) Synthesizing information from multiple sources
 - e) Paraphrasing without plagiarizing

Procedures

To address the first research question, i.e. to identify types of problems Iranian EFL postgraduate learners have in their written proposals, the students' thesis proposals were collected immediately after the supervisors had corrected the learners' drafts. Then, different sections of each anonymous proposal, except the reference section, were read and examined carefully in order to identify all types of writing problems that were marked by the supervisors.

The problems found in the proposals were classified into two general categories: macro problems and micro ones. Macro problems refer to discursal problems that are beyond the text and are the main focus of this study. In fact, the discursal problems were labeled as macro problems since "a discourse is organized by thought pattern, and has a macro-structure. In other words, a discourse must possess a theme (thesis sentence), correct grammar, structure (cohesion and coherence), a purpose and genre" (Yu, 2012; p.200). However, micro problems consist of a) linguistic (grammatical) problems, b) stylistic problems which are concerned with observing the rules of APA style, as well as, problems related to mechanics of writing, i.e, problems pertaining to use of punctuation marks, spelling, capitalization, contraction, and abbreviations. Figures 1 and 2 display the diagrammatic representation of macro and micro aspects of writing.

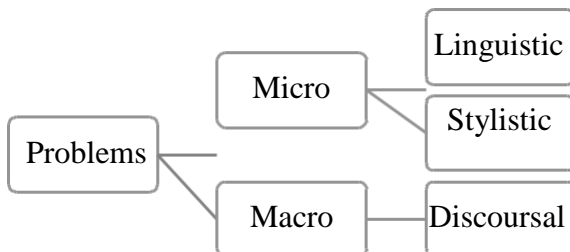


Figure 1: General Classification of Problems

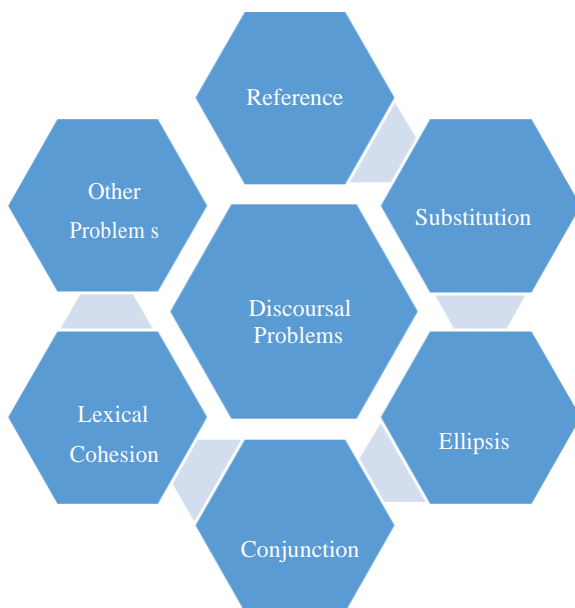


Figure 2: General Classification of Discursal Problems

To identify the students' problems in written thesis proposals, the comments of supervisors written on students' proposals were analysed and classified. First, the texts' discursal (macro) problems were classified according to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model of cohesion markers. Then, the main categories of the micro problems, i.e., linguistic and stylistic problems were classified based on sub-categories of formal dimension of the coding scheme suggested by Tardy (2009) for building genre knowledge. Next, the sub-categories of linguistic problems were chosen on the basis of Chen's (2006) taxonomy. Finally, the sub-categories of mechanics problems were classified according to Tardy's (2009) model as well as APA style (6th edition) guidelines. After specifying the types of problems and categorizing them based on the above-mentioned models, the frequency and percentage of each type was computed.

Right after collecting and examining the proposals, the participants received a questionnaire through their e-mail addresses in which it had been explained that the answers to the questions would provide part of the data for this study, and the students were requested to reply them in at most three lines, and then send them back to the researcher. The responses were analyzed according to Dornyei's (2003) suggestions for analyzing qualitative data. Following Dornyei (2003), any distinct content elements or key points were marked in each response. Then, based on the key points and ideas drawn from the answers, broader categories were formed to describe, compare and contrast responses with the problems found in students' proposals. Before comparing and contrasting the proposals with the questionnaires, the frequency of occurrence of each category and sub-category, as well as their percentage were calculated in order to identify the most problematic aspects in writing a thesis proposal from students' viewpoints.

Data analysis

The first research question was concerned with identifying discursal problems that EFL postgraduate learners faced in writing their thesis proposals. To address this question, each thesis proposal written by TEFL and Translation students was carefully read, examined, and their problems were categorized into two major groups of macro and micro problems.

Tables 1, and 2, indicate the distribution of various sub-categories of macro problems (discursal problems), i.e., their frequencies and percentages found in thirty-two thesis proposals written by M.A. students. In fact, the total number of discursal problems was 246.

Table 1. *Frequency and percentage of macro (Discursal) problems based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) model*

Number	Discursal Problems	Frequency (out of 246)	Percentage
1	Reference	21	8.53 %
2	Substitution	1	0.40 %
3	Ellipsis	0	0
4	Lexical Cohesion	17	6.91 %
5	Conjunctions	3	1.21 %

As Table 1 indicates, postgraduate students' problems in the use of reference category is the highest frequent discursal problem with the frequency of 21 and the percentage of 8.53 %. The second most frequent problem observed in this taxonomy is related to the problems in the use of lexical cohesion with the frequency of 17 and the percentage of 6.91 %. Table 1 shows that only one problem was found regarding the use of substitution. In addition, no problem was found in the use of ellipsis. In the conjunction category, too, three types of problems were found with the frequency of 1.21%. Table 2 displays the frequency and percentage of other macro problems which were found.

Table 2. *Frequency and percentage of other discursal problems*

Number	Other Discursal Problems	Frequency(out of 246)	Percentage
6	Lack of coherence	19	7.72 %
7	Lack of cohesion	18	7.31 %
8	Using inappropriate words in context	68	27.64 %

9	Circumlocution: redundant words, phrases, expressions, sentences, and Paragraphs	27	10.97 %
10	Paragraph segmentation: too long paragraphs	28	11.38 %
<i>Other discursal problems</i>			
11	Vague sentences that do not show the author's real intention: they need to be paraphrased.	16	6.50 %
12	Too short paragraphs that do not express the writer's purpose	2	0.81 %
13	Inability to mention the real purpose of the study	1	0.40 %
14	Introducing the participants in <i>statement of the problem</i>	1	0.40 %
15	Incomplete information about the participants (age, background, level, etc.)	6	2.43 %
16	Incomplete information about the instruments	3	1.21 %
17	Talking with certainty when the text should be uncertain	1	0.40 %
18	Talking with uncertainty in the <i>statement of the problem</i>	9	3.65 %

19	Incomplete information in research questions	1	0.40 %
20	Writing data analysis in Instrument section	1	0.40 %
21	Difference between the content of research questions and that of the title	2	0.81 %
22	Dividing Literature Review into unnecessary subsections	1	0.40 %

As Table 2 indicates, the most frequent problem among the discursal problems found in the students' proposals consists of using inappropriate words in context with the highest frequency of 68 and the percentage of 27.64 %. One example of this kind of problem was using the word 'apply' instead of 'employ'. The second type of highly frequent discursal problems is related to paragraph segmentation or writing too long paragraphs with 11.38 %. Finally, the third most frequent kind of macro problems learners encountered in writing their proposals is circumlocution or using too much redundancy with the frequency of 27 and the percentage of 10.97.

Table 3 displays the frequency and percentage of linguistic problems observed in written proposals of M.A. students. The total number of linguistic problems was 233.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of linguistic problems based on Tardy's (2009) and Chen's (2006) classifications

Number	Linguistic (Grammatical) Problems	Frequency (out of 233)	Percentage
1	Verbs	98	42.06 %
2	Possessives	13	5.57 %
3	Plurals	53	22.74%
4	(Relative) Pronouns	7	3.00 %
5	Prepositions	20	8.58 %
6	Conjunctions (coordination, subordination)	3	1.28 %
7	Nouns	8	3.43 %
8	Articles	27	11.58 %
9	Adjectives	2	0.85 %
	Other Problems		
9	Double negation	1	0.42 %
10	Putting adverbs in wrong places	1	0.42 %

Table 3 indicates that the most common linguistic or grammatical problem that postgraduate EFL learners face in writing their proposals is related to the category of verbs, like using inappropriate verb tense, with the frequency of 98 and the percentage of 42.06 %.

Table 4 demonstrates the items subsumed under the category of micro problems, i.e., stylistic problems. These types of problems are related to not obeying the rules of APA style.

Table 4. *Frequency and percentage of stylistic problems based on Tardy's (2009) and APA Style (6th ed.)*

Number	Stylistic Problems	Frequency (out of 233)	Percentage
1	Using 'and' instead of '&' in parenthesis (for in-text citations)	19	8.15 %
2	Using '&' instead of 'and' out of parenthesis (for in-text citations)	12	5.15 %
3	Writing in-text references incorrectly	2	0.85 %
4	Lack of document to prove or support the writer's ideas	4	1.71 %
5	Using numerals for numbers below 10	1	0.42 %
6	Using too old references (1970, 1961, etc.)	3	1.28 %
7	Giving wrong in-text references	4	1.71 %
8	Not writing the year of a citation	4	1.71 %
9	Plagiarism	5	2.14 %
10	Not indenting the first line of each paragraph	3	1.28 %

Table 5. *Frequency and percentage of problems found in titles*

Number	Problems of Writing the Title	Frequency (out of 22)	Percentage
1	Redundant words (discoursal)	5	22.72 %
2	Word order (linguistic)	1	4.54 %
3	Using inappropriate words in context (discoursal)	3	13.63 %

4	Not capitalizing major words in the title (stylistic-mechanics)	2	9.09 %
5	Too long title (discoursal)	1	4.54 %
6	The title needed sub-titles (specification) (discoursal)	1	4.54 %
7	Being too broad and ambiguous (discoursal)	1	4.54 %
8	Other problems	8	36.36 %

Table 5 shows that most of the problems observed in the titles of thesis proposals are discoursal ones. These problems include using redundant words, too long titles and ambiguous sentences.

Table 6. *Total frequency and percentage of problems found in thesis proposals*

<i>Problems</i>	<i>Total Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Discoursal</i>	246	34.55 %
<i>Linguistic</i>	233	32.72 %
<i>Stylistic</i>	233	32.72 %
	Total : 712	

Analysis of the participants' Responses to the Questionnaire

The second research question was concerned with the extent that postgraduate students' ideas about difficulties in writing their thesis proposals matched with various problems found in their proposals. According to Dornyei 's (2003) suggestions for analyzing qualitative data. First, the key point of each response to every question was elicited, and then the frequency and percentage of them were calculated. Table 9 and 10 demonstrate the results of the analysis of the first question: 1) How do you interpret writing a thesis proposal? Is it difficult, simple, or something in between? Why?

Table 7. *M.A. Students' Attitudes toward the Difficulty of Writing a Proposal*
Writing a Thesis Proposal is... **Frequency (out of 30)** **Percentage**

Difficult	13	43.33%
Simple	8	26.66%
Something in between	9	30%

As Table 7 indicates, 43.33% of students consider writing their thesis proposals as a difficult task and have a negative attitude towards the process of writing their proposals. Table 8 shows the frequency and percentage of the beliefs of the respondents about the main reasons that may cause a proposal to be difficult.

Table 8. *Subjects' Reasons for Considering Proposal Writing as a Difficult Process*

Reasons	Frequency (out of 22)	Percentage
A thesis proposal is hard to plan and conduct.	2	9.09%
It must fulfill the requirements imposed by the supervisor or the reading committee.	1	4.54%
It is perplexing.	1	4.54%
It must be error-free in all levels of language.	4	18.18%
The students didn't know how to do it.	2	9.09%
The students didn't have any sample of a proposal as well as they didn't have any experience in writing it.	3	13.63%
The students just learned the rules and not linking theory to practice.	2	9.09%
It is a miniature of the thesis.	1	4.54%
The problems result in the difference between the supervisor's frameworks in mind compared with that of the student.	1	4.54%
We have to know everything before doing the research.	1	4.54%
It is full of stress.	1	4.54%
It is very time-consuming.	3	13.63%

As the students' attitudes demonstrate, most of their ideas have their roots in psychological factors such as stress, being under the pressure of time and lack of experience.

Table 9, shows the frequency and percentage of the reasons mentioned by students who consider proposal writing an easy process.

Table 9. *Subjects' reasons for considering writing Proposals as a simple process*

Reasons	Frequency (out of 8)	Percentage
Being familiar with the organization and writing theses and articles; and having a sample proposal.	5	62.50%
Practicing to write in writing courses.	1	12.50%
Choosing an interesting topic.	1	12.50%
Receiving help from supervisors.	1	12.50%

As Table 9 demonstrates, the most important reason which makes the process of proposal writing simple for MA students is their familiarity with writing articles and theses with which 62.50% of students agree. Table 10 shows the findings for the second question, i.e., the difficulties that postgraduate students encounter in writing their proposals.

Table 10. *The difficulties students faced in writing their proposals*

Problems	Frequency (out of 30)	Percentage
Grammatical	7	23.33%
Discoursal	14	46.66%
Stylistic	7	23.33%
Other Problems	6	20 %

As Table 10 indicates, 46.66% of students believe that they faced discoursal problems when writing their proposals. Table 11 shows the frequency and percentage of sub-categories of part 'a' of the third question: 3) Give your opinions about the following cases:

a) Time and resource constraints.

Table 11. *MA. students' beliefs about time and resource constraints*

Beliefs	Frequency (out of 30)	Percentage	
<i>Time</i>	Time is not enough.	7	23.33%
	Time is appropriate.	5	16.66%
<i>Resources</i>	There are some problems with downloading articles.	8	26.66%

	Finding related resources to our topic from our own and other universities is difficult.	5	16.66%
<i>Other Ideas</i>	Both time and resources directly influence the quality of the proposal.	3	10%
	It doesn't matter at all.	1	3.33%
	Not answered	1	3.33%

Table 11 demonstrates that 26.66% of MA students believe that downloading articles was really problematic. In addition, 23.33% of students believe that the given time for writing their proposals was not enough. Table 12 shows the frequency and percentage of students' attitudes toward the next section: b) Choosing a topic.

Table 12. *MA students' beliefs about choosing a topic*

Beliefs	Frequency (out of Percentage 30)	
It is the most challenging and difficult aspect of proposal writing.	13	43.33%
It is as important as the whole proposal.	3	10%
It can be easy if we are broad-minded and independent readers.	5	16.66%
It is not a difficult task.	4	13.33%
It requires the supervisor's help.	5	16.66%

As Table 12 indicates, 43.33% of students believe that choosing a topic is the most difficult aspect of writing a thesis proposal. Table 12 illustrates the frequency and percentage of students' attitudes about the next part: c) Ability to read for research.

Table 12. *MA students' beliefs about their ability to read for research*

Beliefs	Frequency (out of Percentage 30)	
<i>Easy:</i> Students involving in writing a thesis are professional readers and have no problem with this part.	5	16.66%
The more articles one reads, the easier he follows the research.	6	20%

	It is hard and time-consuming at first, but it'll become easy by practice.	2	6.66%
	It is ok because of being familiar with the format of research.	6	20%
		Total: 19	63.33%
Difficult:	It is boring and time-consuming because many articles are the copy-paste of others.	1	3.33%
	It is the most difficult part of proposal writing.	1	3.33%
		Total: 2	6.66%
Other Ideas:	It should be developed.	3	10%
	Neither difficult nor easy.	2	6.66%
	I have no idea.	2	6.66%
	Not answered.	2	6.66%

According to Table 12, 63.33% of students believe that reading for research is an easy process since the more articles they read, the easier the process of conducting research will be. Moreover, students have no problem with this part since they are familiar with the format of research articles, and also they are proficient readers. The following table indicates the frequency of students' ideas about the next part: d) Synthesizing information from multiple sources.

Table 13. *MA students' beliefs about synthesizing information from multiple sources*

	Beliefs	Frequency (out of 30)	Percentage
Difficult:	Synthesizing as harmonizing and integrating the collected data into a cohesive and coherent whole is a time-consuming task.	3	10%
	It is a difficult task, especially without the supervisor's help.	9	30%
	It is hard because finding the related resources to your topic is hard.	3	10%
	It is hard because of the difficulty of finding the same trend or direction among the sources.	1	3.33%

		Total: 16	53.33%
Easy:	It'll become easy by practice.	1	3.33%
	It is easy.	1	3.33%
		Total: 2	6.66%
Other Ideas:	We synthesize the information based on their topic or time.	3	10%
	It refers to paraphrasing information and keeping the text coherent.	1	3.33%
	It needs high proficiency.	3	10%
	It is neither difficult nor easy.	2	6.66%
	Consulting with the supervisor is important in this case.	2	6.66%
	Not answered.	1	3.33%

Table 13 shows that 53.33% of students' beliefs devoted to the idea that synthesizing information from multiple resources is difficult, specifically without the supervisor's help. At last, the following table demonstrates the frequency and percentage of the last sub-section of the third question: e) Paraphrasing without plagiarizing.

Table 14. *MA students' beliefs about paraphrasing without plagiarizing*

	Beliefs	Frequency (out of Percentage 30)	
Difficult:	It is problematic and needs special attention.	3	10%
	Even proficient students may commit plagiarism since they feel paraphrasing the sentence may not convey the intended meaning quite well.	3	10%
	It is difficult not to plagiarize, but the students don't know how to reword without plagiarizing.	5	16.66%
	It is difficult since we should mention what others have said without changing the sense.	3	10%
		Total: 14	46.66%
Easy:	It is an easy job.	6	20%

	It is not difficult if we mention the references correctly.	2	6.66%
		Total: 8	26.66%
Other Ideas:	It is an essential part of each proposal.	2	6.66%
	Plagiarism sounds kind of relief, yet we are expected to put our own words.	2	6.66%
	Knowing the rules of APA style will help us in this matter.	2	6.66%
	It makes the research more valid and acceptable.	2	6.66%

According to Table 14, 46.66% of students believe that paraphrasing without plagiarizing is a difficult and problematic job. Finally, Table 15 shows the highly frequent attitudes of postgraduate learners toward their difficulties in writing thesis proposals.

Table 15. *The most frequent problems in writing thesis proposals from MA students' viewpoints*

Problems	Frequency (out of 30)	Percentage
Proposal writing must be error-free in all levels of language.	4	18.18%
Discoursal problems are more frequent.	14	46.66%
There are some problems with downloading articles.	8	26.66%
The given time for writing a proposal is not enough.	7	23.33%
Choosing a topic is the most challenging and difficult aspect of proposal writing.	13	43.33%
Reading for research is an easy job since the more articles one reads, the easier he follows the research.	6	20%
The ability to read for research is ok because of being familiar with the format of research.	6	20%

Synthesizing information from multiple sources is a difficult task, especially without the supervisor's help.	9	30%
Paraphrasing without plagiarizing is a difficult job since the students don't know how to reword without plagiarizing.	6	20%

According to Table 15, among the most important problems elicited from EFL postgraduate learners' attitudes, discursal problems were the highest frequent and most challenging ones in the process of writing their thesis proposals. This finding matches the results obtained from the analysis of the students' problems in their written proposals.

Discussion and Conclusion

As the analysis of the data indicates, macro or discursal problem is the most frequent problem observed in M.A. students' written proposals. In this respect, the findings revealed that problems related to the reference category, e.g., repetition of personal references such as you, your, and yours were observed more frequently than other types of cohesive ties. According to Cai (2011), the main reason behind such problems might be the EFL learners' carelessness in using personal reference items which may result in ambiguity and may make it difficult for the readers to follow the writer smoothly.

It was also found out that there is only one case of wrong use of substitution. Moreover, no problem was found in the use of ellipsis in written proposals. In fact, finding few number of problems in using substitution and no problem in applying ellipsis does not imply that EFL students are competent in using these two cohesive ties. By contrast, since they have little training on using these two cohesive devices, they prefer to avoid using them to have fewer problems regarding the text cohesion and coherence. This idea is supported by Cai (2011) who believes that it is a writing strategy that EFL learners tend to avoid using substitution and ellipsis as they have received little instruction about these cohesive links. Therefore, more attention should be paid to teaching substitution and ellipsis in writing classes. Another justification for lack of using substitution and ellipsis can be related to the form of discourse. According to Bae (2001), the two subcategories of cohesion, i.e. substitution and ellipsis are most commonly used in spoken discourse than in written discourse. In this respect, he states that substitution and ellipsis typically occur in spontaneous conversations but are seldom employed in formal writing.

As the findings of this study revealed, lexical cohesion problems were the second highly frequent ones in Halliday and Hasan's taxonomy, especially unnecessary repetition of a phrase as well as repetition of the same word were the most frequent problem in using lexical cohesion. In fact, no specific problem has been found regarding use of synonyms, antonyms, superordinates and general words. In this relation, EFL learners have strong tendency to repeat words in their writings which is consistent with the findings of Ong (2011). One reason for the

overuse of simple repetition in proposals might be EFL learners' limited vocabulary repertoire. Because of their restricted lexicon, EFL students were not able to elaborate and extend their opinions using synonyms and other sub-categories of lexical cohesion.

Another frequent discursal problem found in M.A. proposals was related to their paragraph segmentation, and the third highly frequent problem was related to circumlocution. Both types of these problems have their roots in EFL learners' negative transfer of their mother tongue. Thus, they transfer the Persian writing strategies to English writing contexts. For that reason, EFL learners, even at postgraduate level, write too and redundant long paragraphs. This, therefore, will make their proposals incoherent (Cai, 2011). The most frequent linguistic problem that EFL learners faced was concerned with the use of verb tenses. These problems seem to originate from the differences between the rules of their mother tongue verb tenses and English ones. The second highly frequent linguistic problem found in M.A. proposals was related to plural nouns where the plural s had been dropped. This finding is also consistent with the findings of the research conducted by Ho (2003) and Najafi and Nezami (2012). The third highly frequent linguistic problem in thesis proposals was concerned with inappropriate use of articles or the elimination of them. The misuse of articles, especially 'the' may be due to the fact that the definite article 'the' has no meaning on its own (Cai, 2011). As the quantitative results indicated, most postgraduate EFL learners had negative attitude toward writing a thesis proposal. In other words, they considered writing proposals a difficult job to accomplish. They believed that proposals are expected to be error-free, and this will impose psychological pressure on them. Since they do not have any experience in writing proposal, they feel stressful; they have time constraint.

According to Yeh (2009), In writing classes just general skills such as logical organization of text, audience expectations, cultural and disciplinary assumptions, rules of mechanics such as spelling, and punctuation are taught. Nevertheless, 'analysis, synthesis and interpretation of information' are significant items which are neglected in academic writing classrooms (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; p.334). This negligence along with students' paucity of research knowledge and experience cause students encounter numerous difficulties in writing their M.A. thesis proposals.

The second question of the questionnaire required students to express their ideas about the difficulties they encountered in writing their proposals. In order to match the responses with the real problems found in thesis proposals, participants' answers were classified into grammatical, discursal, stylistic, and other problems. From students' viewpoints, discursal problems were frequently observed in their proposals. Among the discursal problems mentioned by subjects, i.e., using conjunctions, connecting paragraphs together, paragraph segmentation, redundancy, and maintaining cohesion and coherence of the text were among the most frequent ones. However, the most frequent problem was using inappropriate words in context.

The third question posed in the questionnaire required learners to express their beliefs about some particular factors that might cause problems during the writing process. Some of these problems contain learner-external factors such as time and resource constraints, and some others include learner-internal factors, such as choosing a topic, ability to read for research, as well as research writing skills including synthesizing information from multiple sources and paraphrasing without plagiarizing.

Regarding time and resource constraints, Iranian EFL postgraduate students were expected to collect data, select and read materials, organize and compose their thesis proposals in a short time span. In the present study, most M.A. students reported that the given time for writing proposals was not enough. They believe that time constraint can affect the quality of their proposals.

Another external constraint is related to the accessibility of electronic resources such as online journals and books. The most important problem that most students confronted when writing their proposals was with downloading articles from Internet databases.

Considering choosing a topic, Hyland (2008) notes that EFL students should have some personal knowledge of their topics of interest and be able to write meaningfully about them. In fact, selection of an interesting topic is the first important step in proposal writing project. Specificity and feasibility are considered as two most important criteria for evaluating a research topic, i.e., the students must narrow down their research questions and also consider the availability of resources (Yeh, 2009). The findings indicated that choosing a topic was the most challenging and difficult aspect of proposal writing.

Ability to read for research can also affect the quality of proposal writing. The students must be able to search for related papers, books, and articles on the net and libraries. Furthermore, they are expected to be able to read some sources carefully and scan some others quickly to obtain required information. In this relation, most of the students believed that it was an easy job for them since the more articles they read, the easier the process of conducting research will be. Likewise, the same number of learners stated that they had no special problem with this step as they were already familiar with the format of research papers. As Krashen (1993) points out, second language writing skills cannot be acquired successfully by practice in writing alone but also need to be supported with extensive reading. Thus, reading has a positive influence on composing skills at various levels of proficiency (Hyland, 2008).

Synthesizing information from multiple resources is another important element in writing an academic paper including an M.A. thesis proposal. Actually, the task of text synthesis is concerned with organizing, selecting, and connecting the content related to a particular topic (Spivey, 1990). Respondents' beliefs, in this study, indicated that synthesizing information from several diverse resources was a very difficult job, particularly without their supervisors' assistance. It is a complex task since it deals not only with the previous author's words or ideas in one's own paper, but also requires one's own argument,

reflection, and judgment on the existing discourse of the subject matter (Chun Yeh, 2009).

Regarding paraphrasing without plagiarizing, according to the APA style (6th ed.), whether paraphrasing, quoting an author directly, or describing an idea that influenced your work, you must credit the source (p.170). If not, you are committing plagiarism. Indeed, plagiarism might have various reasons, including students' lack of explicit instruction on plagiarism and its detrimental effects (Deckert, 1993), their inability to paraphrase properly, i.e., the inability to retell the essence of another's ideas in one's own words (Yeh, 2009), or their lack of confidence in the adequacy and legitimacy of their own words in writing (Angelil-Carter, 2000). As an example, Pecorari (2008) found that Asian EFL/ESL students start their academic writing from 'copying' which implies a lack of training in academic writing and results in plagiarism. The findings of this study revealed different attitudes toward this case; however, most of EFL M.A. students stated that they had no problems with paraphrasing without plagiarizing.

To sum up, the findings of the present study demonstrated that macro problems, i.e., discursal problems were the most highly frequent problem in M.A. thesis proposals followed by micro, i.e. linguistic ones. In fact, the findings was consistent with the belief of students who viewed discursal problems as insurmountable problems in writing their thesis proposals. Thus, EFL learners and instructors are required to pay more attention to these types of problems in writing classes.

The results of the present research, however, indicate a number of recommendations for practice. The findings can be insightful for EFL instructors to use them in their classrooms and material designers to use these findings in developing their materials. The findings demonstrated that discursal problems should be put into the spotlight. For instance, in introducing cohesion and coherence to students, EFL teachers should remind students that employing too many cohesive devices in a piece of writing does not make it more coherent. Furthermore, the importance and function of cohesive devices and their use in avoiding redundancy in spoken and written discourses should be explained. As Hyland (2008) asserts, a significant role of materials in learning process is to provide a foundation for students' understandings of language use. Therefore, using the findings of the current research, syllabus designers and material developers can develop writing books including exercises regarding the use of cohesive and linguistic devices.

References

- Angelil-Carter, S. (2000). *Stolen language? Plagiarism in writing*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Bae, J. (2001). Cohesion and coherence in children's written English: Immersion and English-only classes. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 12 (1), 51-88.
- Buitkiene, J. (2005). Variability of cohesive devices across registers. *Studies About Languages (Kalbu Studijos)*, 7, 17-20.
- Cai, Y. (2011). The use of cohesive devices in the compositions of Chinese college students.
- Chen, L. (2006). The effect of the use of L1 in multimedia tutorial on grammar learning: An error analysis of Taiwanese beginning EFL learners' English essays. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 8 (2), 76-110.
- Chun, Yen, Ch. (2009). Student perceptions of an EFL undergraduate research writing project. *RELC Journal*, 40(3), 314-332.
- Danaee, A., & Sadeghi, A. R. (2012). A comparative study of academic articles written by Iranian scholars and English native scholars based on textual cohesion. *Iranian EFL Journal*, 8(4), 154-175.
- Deckert, G. D. (1993). Perspectives on plagiarism from ESL students in Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2 (2), 131-148.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2003). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing*. USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fallahzade, H. & Shokrpour, N. (2007). A survey of the students and interns' EFL writing problems in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9 (1).
- Gonzalez, M.A.G. (2010). Evaluating lexical cohesion in telephone conversations. *Discourse Studies*, 12 (5), 599-623.
- Grabe, W., & Kaplan, R. B. (1998). *Theory and practice of writing: An applied linguistics perspective*. London: Longman.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. New York: Longman.
- Hinkel, E. (2004). *Teaching academic ESL writing: Practical techniques in vocabulary and grammar*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Publishers.
- Ho, C. (2003). Empowering English teachers to grapple with errors in grammar. *Internet TESL Journal*, 15(3), 10-22.
- Hyland, K. (2008). *Second language writing*. USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading: Insights from the research*. Englewood, Co: Libraries Unlimited.
- Li, M. (2009). College-level L2 English writing competence: Conjunctions and errors. *Polyglossia*, 16, 13-21.
- Mohamed-Sayidina, A. (2010). Transfer of L1 cohesive devices and transitive words into L2 academic texts: The case of Arab students. *RELC Journal*, 41(3), 253-266.
- Najafi, S. M., & Nezami, A. (2012). Common error types of Iranian learners of English. *English Language Teaching*, 5 (3), 160-170.

- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching and learning*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Ong, J. (2011). Investigating the use of cohesive devices by Chinese EFL learners. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 13 (3).
- Pecorari, D. (2008). *Academic writing and plagiarism: A linguistic analysis*. London: Continuum.
- Silva, T. (1993). Toward an understanding of the distinct nature of L2 writing: The ESL research and its implications. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27, 665-77.
- Spivey, N. N. (1990). Transforming texts: Constructive processes in reading and writing. *Written Communication*, 7, 256-87.
- Tardy, C. M. (2009). *Building genre knowledge*. West Lafayette, India: Parlor Press.
- Vujevic, V. M. (2012). Ellipsis and substitution as cohesive devices.
- Wenden, A.L. (1999). An introduction to metacognitive knowledge and beliefs in language learning: beyond the basics. *System*, 27(4), 435-441.
- Williams, J. (2007). *Teaching writing in second and foreign language classrooms*. Beijing: World Publishing Corporation.
- Yu, A. (2012). Analysis of the problems of the Chinese college students' EFL classroom writings. *International Education Studies*, 5 (5), 199-203.