An Introspective Analysis of EAP Researchers' Perceived Academic Writing Competence: The Case of Research Articles

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Abstract

Over the last decades, there has been a plethora of interest in possible challenges encountered by researchers while publishing research articles (RAs) in various disciplines for English for academic purposes (EAP). Given this, this study aimed to examine how a sampled number of EAP Iranian researchers perceive the competence of academic RA writing, the major reasons for RA rejection, and difficulties the authors face in writing up publishable RAs. Data for this study came from an examination of rejection emails and follow-up interviews with a number of Iranian EAP researchers who have published in highly prestigious journals. Analysis of the data resulted in 545 codes, 40 subcategories, and six core categories. The main categories included the potential reasons of RA rejection; the authors' challenges in RA writing; RA linguistic features; RA stylistic features; essential elements of writing RA sections; and the features of RA citation and referencing. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Research Article, EAP, Perceived Academic Writing Competence, Rejection Emails, Interviews

1. Introduction

Research articles as one of the most extensively researched genres in academic writing is acknowledged as the most important form of scientific discourse and the leading means of distributing academic knowledge for future use. Following a standard structure in RA writing helps the authors in producing an organized and readable paper. Research articles typically have a standard structure to facilitate communication, which is known as IMRAD (Introduction, Method, Results, Analysis, and Discussion). Each part of IMRAD is characterized by particular content and organization, which can be realized by some moves and steps (Swales & Feak, 2004). Successful writing of RAs also entails the choice of appropriate academic form, content, organization, and style. As Thomas and Hawes (1994) have identified, an RA has a recognizable communicative purpose and some features like academic diction, and standardized form, function, and presentation style. Shuhui and Weicheng (2011) also speculated English RA writing competence as comprising three major components: the discourse structure of an RA; scientific thinking and reasoning; and academic language. Good scientific writing is also characterized by impersonality, objectivity, and absence of research bias (Hartley, 2008). This means that a paper must present a non-combative and balanced discussion of arguments and consider different attitudes. Besides, any discourse in academic fields shows the signs of collaboration and interaction with others by its citation practices and the ways of referring to others' works (Hyland, 2000) which is another main prerequisite for academic writing. The authors' proficiency of English language can also influence its scientific output (Victoria & Moreire, 2006). Paying attention to all these essential issues and practices of writing and structuring scientific papers enhances the chance of publishing in a scholarly journal.

2. Literature Review

Over the recent decades, the study of RAs has received much attention in the academic genre analysis. Effective RA writing ability has been revealed to be built upon an understanding of different aspects of RAs, including organization, cohesion, and coherence (e.g., Lores, 2004; Sznajder, 2005; Tan-De Ramos, 2010; Vold, 2006), lexico-grammatical features (e.g., Biber & Gray, 2016; Crosthwaite, Cheun, & Jiang, 2017), and rhetorical moves (e.g., Li & Ge, 2009; Swales, 1990, 2004).

In order to describe and analyze the schematic structure of RAs across different disciplines and academic texts, various models have been proposed for the genre analysis of different RA sections (e.g., Brett, 1994; Bunton, 2005; Cotos, Link, & Huffman, 2016; Cotos, Huffman, & Link, 2017; Nwogu, 1997; Paltridge, 1995; Peacock, 2002; Samraj, 2002; Swales, 1990). As regards the authors' expectations, perceptions, and difficulties in academic publishing, several studies have been conducted (e.g., Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Bartol, 1983; Buckingham, 2008; Cho, 2004; Hyland, 2005; 2008; Morton, Storch, & Thompson, 2015; Wette, 2017). Bartol (1983), for example, identified several chief problems for articles: unclear and insufficient introduction, research questions, methodology, statistical techniques and analysis, and discussions; discussion that goes beyond the data; poor writing style; excessive length; and inappropriate citations. Buckingham (2008) also investigated Turkish scholars' perceived difficulties in discipline-specific second language writing. The finding revealed that despite receiving a high level of exposure to formal English, the scholars perceived significant linguistic difficulties in developing their L2 scholarly writing abilities Morton, et al. (2015) also exploring multilingual students' perceptions of doing academic writing, found a diversity of student perceptions which provided insight for the

students' progress as academic writers. Hyland (2005, 2008) similarly found that different EAP disciplines value writing differently. Moreover, Wette (2017) examined students' reflective comments in a genre-based ESP writing course provided support for the view that map construction helped to raise their awareness of textual and rhetorical components and boosted their motivation and self-efficacy.

Taking all together, EAP programs focus on the skills required for a learner to perform well in an English speaking academic context across some particular subject areas. Writing, as an important means of communication, imposes a great challenge for novice EAP researchers. This difficulty is intensified when EAP academics write in English, as they not only have to gain the disciplinary discourse but also acquire the rhetorical conventions different from those of their first language. Thus, developing academic writing abilities needs to be a remarkable goal in EAP programs. In order to share research findings with the academic community and gain international recognition, a researcher should acquire the discourse competence regarding text features and structures. Furthermore, in order to pursue scholarship beyond an undergraduate education, this competence becomes a prerequisite to enter the academic discourse community (Flowerdew, 2000).

The issue becomes much more important in such EFL contexts as Iran where Iranian MA and Ph.D. candidates and holders in various EAP fields find publishing in prestigious scholarly journals a daunting task. This provided a strong impetus for us to study possible difficulties reported by EAP researchers (who have experienced publishing in prestigious journals) through examining their rejection emails (i.e., emails that show that their manuscripts are not of a quality to be published in the journal) as well as follow-up interviews. Thus, the findings of the present study can be of significance to any EAP researchers who

may find difficulty writing up scholarly RAs. To this end, the following questions are formulated and addressed:

1. What are the reasons behind the rejection of research articles by high-quality international journals?
2. What are the problems and challenges that Iranian authors encounter so as to get their manuscripts published?
3. What are the potential features of academic RAs deserving to be published in prestigious journals?

3. Methodology

Two groups of participants took part in the current study. The first group was a number of participants whose manuscripts have been rejected. For the current study, we scrutinized their rejection emails (see the 'rejection email participants' section below). The other group was interview participants (see the 'interview participants' section below) who were interviewed for their possible difficulties perceived during article publication.

3.1. Rejection Email Participants

One hundred participants were purposively recruited to take part in the study. Based on the collected information and participants' willingness to cooperate in the study, 65 participants whose manuscripts had been rejected were selected for further steps with each publishing at least five articles in prestigious journals in such disciplines as Management, Economics, Applied Linguistics, Chemistry, Medicine, Environmental Science, Psychology, Geography, and Philosophy. Accordingly, all the selected researchers had experienced conducting academic research, writing research articles, publishing research

articles, and receiving rejection letters from the editors. This group comprised38 were males (58%) and 27 females (42%), chosen from among the faculty members with different academic ranks, namely assistant professors, associate professors, and professors.

3.2. Interview Participants

Among the participants with rejection letters, nine participants were chosen for interviews (see Table 1). Efforts were made to choose the interview participants from each of the disciplines mentioned in section 3.1. To remain anonymous, each participant was given a pseudonym.

Table 1.*Background of Interview Participants*

Participant	Sex	Number of articles published	Discipline
Ali	Male	8	Management
Zahra	Female	6	Economics
Fatemeh	Female	11	Applied Linguistics
Hadi	Male	6	Chemistry
Vahid	Male	9	Medicine
Javad	Male	10	Environmental science
Amir	Male	11	Psychology
Neda	Female	7	Geography
Shabnam	Female	7	Philosophy

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the present study came from two sources. First, we studied the rejection emails of the participants to investigate why their manuscripts have been rejected or have not yet been acceptable enough to be published. The email corpus included the decision summary and full reviewers' comments with

a total size of 85100 words. Secondly, we conducted interviews to obtain deeper and more detailed insights into what is involved in writing up scholarly articles. The interview included twelve in-depth, open-ended questions inviting respondents to reflect on conscious tactics they employ in RA production, the difficulties they believe the authors face processing different RA sections, and aspects featuring well-developed RAs deserving to be published in prestigious journals, all with a view to uncovering how they perceive RA writing competence.

All the interviews were conducted in Persian, audiotaped, and transcribed. They were then translated into English. After studying the participants' rejection emails as well as transcribing the recorded files of interviews, the three steps of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were exactly followed. In the first phase of *open coding,* all the data were segmented into paragraphs, and the main ideas of each paragraph were noted as the codes. Then, during *axial coding*, the interconnected codes were regarded as being under the same subcategory. Finally, in the third phase of *selective coding*, a core category was identified based on the interlinked subcategories which guided us to write the grounded theory.

All the participants' rejection emails as well as interviews, were analyzed following the steps of grounded theory. The recurrent themes were identified by the inductive process of thematic analysis of the data derived from the rejection emails and interviews. The stages of coding and categorizing data were undertaken by one of the researchers and finalized under the supervision and agreement of the team researchers. The whole process of repetitive analysis resulted in 545 codes. The codes that contained similar properties were combined to form subcategories. The irrelevant codes to the research purpose

were eliminated, and the codes that were nearly identical in meaning were combined under one code.

4. Results and Discussion

During the whole process of repetitive analysis, 40 subcategories and six core categories emerged. As follows, the research questions are answered by reporting the results of the analysis of the participants' rejection emails and the interviews with regard to six core categories. Also, all the obtained core categories and their corresponding subcategories that emerged from the analysis are elaborated. Quotes from interviews and extracts from reviewers' comments have been randomly recruited to provide support for the obtained findings.

Research question 1: What are the reasons for the rejection of research articles by high-quality international journals?

Core category one: The potential reasons of RA rejection

Regarding this research question, 65 codes and seven subcategories were extracted. Each subcategory is explained as follows, and extracts from the data are provided to support the derived subcategories.

Weak topic: 11 codes were found to be related to *weak topic* as one of the main reasons of RA rejection. The researchers believed that the lack of correspondence between the papers' topic and the scope of the journals, lack of major contribution to the current literature and realm of science, insufficient novelty with uninteresting problems, and lack of international readership were the major causes of article rejection as is evident in the following extract:

I have experienced rejection of my articles. In one case the reviewer mentioned that the topic did not match the scope of the journal and in

the second case the paper was rejected due to insufficient novelty (Ali, January 4, 2018).

#Weak introduction: The second subcategory is associated with *weak introduction,* which includes insufficient theoretical and operational background, narrow literature review, lack of an argument for the importance of the study and its variables, lack of an over-arching theory that governs research questions and guides hypotheses and arguments, and lack of an integrated conceptual model.

The introduction is supposed to establish a research territory, state the problem, indicate a gap in the previous research, and introduce the purpose of the study at hand (Vahid, Januray 20, 2018).

Poor format and style: The subcategory of *poor format and style,* as another reason of article rejection by the editors, encompasses complete knowledge of mechanics, inappropriate graphical presentation, and incorrect presentation of statistics, headings and subheadings, references, and citations, and abbreviations and contractions.

There are many ways in which the paper is not written in accordance with APA 6th (Rejection email, February 2017).

Poor language: According to the subcategory of *Poor language*, lack of cohesion and coherence, grammatical inaccuracy, lack of clarity and readability of writing, unclear explanations and definitions, poor word choice, and lack of academic and formal structures lead to RA rejection. As one of the interviewees said:

Iranian authors should first of everything consider improving their writing skills in terms of academic vocabulary, grammar, styles, spelling, punctuation and the like (Fatemeh, January 4, 2018).

Poor method section: *Poor method section* was also revealed to be a notable problem in RA acceptance. Concerning this subcategory, lack of writing rigorous and replicable methodology, inadequate description of statistical tests, sampling procedure, and participants, and poor explanation of validity, reliability, and ethicality issues were found to be of importance for the researchers.

> *Any major fault with the methodology section can result in rejection. This is due to the fact that a faulty method would generate unreliable results. Writers usually have problems in convincing the reviewers or editors that they took the right steps in the process (Rejection email, September 2015).*

Poor results and discussions: The subcategory of *poor results and discussion* was associated with factors such as brief and inappropriate data analysis, incorrect interpretation of analyses and tables, unnecessary tables, incoherent way of writing, no attempt to link the results to the relevant studies and argue for its importance, and poor and brief discussions.

> *Discussion stays too close to the results and does not help the reader understand the value of the study and its results (Rejection email, August 2017).*

Poor referencing and citation: The last subcategory related to the researchers' perceptions of major reasons of RA rejection contributes to *poor referencing and citation*. These codes included irrelevant citations, long quotations, incorrect style of referencing and citation, dated citations, and over-referencing.

> *More latest references are supposed to be added to the paper (Rejection email, October 2018).*

Table 2 briefly shows the composing subcategories of the first core category together with the frequency of the codes. The frequency of the codes suggests a raw count of how many times the factor was referred to in all rejection letters and the number of times the interviewees referred to a factor. The percentage for each subcategory is also provided.

Table 2. *Potential Reasons of RA Rejection*

	The potential reasons of RA rejection	Frequency of codes	Percentage
1	Weak topic	11	% 16.72
2	Weak introduction	8	% 12.3
3	Poor format and style	11	% 16.72
4	Poor language	17	% 26.15
5	Poor method section	6	% 9.23
6	Poor results and discussions	7	% 10.76
7	Poor referencing and citation	5	% 7.69
	Total	65	% 100

Research question 2: What are the problems and challenges that Iranian authors encounter so as to get their manuscripts published?

Core category two: The authors' challenges in RA writing with reference to this research question, seven subcategories and 65 codes were identified.

Critical writing: Eight of the codes were related to the subcategory of '*Critical Writing*'. The participants emphasized the importance of critical writing and the presence of an established authorial self in writing effective research papers. They also identified plagiarism as one of the most frequent weak points of the papers written by Iranian authors.

> *Critical writing is very important for editors and reviewers. Having one's own voice in a paper can make the witting more effective and critical. However, the authors' critical voice is often absent in their papers(Hadi, January 20, 2018).*

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Coherent and cohesive writing: The second subcategory concerned *coherent and cohesive writing* as another noteworthy difficulty for non-native authors resulting in disjointed writing.

> *The review of the literature is not cohesive and does not provide sufficient background to the variables of interest; and the analyses do not reflect the findings as described by the authors (Rejection email, May 2017).*

Indicating topic novelty and importance: *Indicating topic novelty and importance* was obtained as another challenge for RA writers. In interviewees' idea, convincing the audience that a topic is worth researching and publishing and creatively arguing on the contribution the study can make and the gap it can actually fill is very crucial. As a respondent mentioned,

> *I think convincing the reviewers that a topic is worth researching is one of the most difficult challenges (Amir, January 14, 2018).*

Following academic language and style: They also found *following academic language and style* as another important difficulty in writing research articles. The relevant codes incorporated poor writing skills, lack of language proficiency, inaccurate word and collocation choice, lack of clarity and brevity of writing, and insufficient consideration of mechanics.

> *Wrong choice of words, unusual collocations, and inserting translations of Persian thoughts are the main problems for lexical parts and structural knowledge (Neda, January 22, 2018).*

Writing a strong introduction section: Moreover, 11 of the codes were found under the concept of *writing a strong introduction section*. Based on the rejection emails and interviews, RA writers have difficulty in appropriately addressing the research questions, indicating the overall rationale for the study, providing sufficient background to the variables of interest, choosing

appropriate sources, and writing a thorough, synthesized, and evaluative literature review.

> *The topic would be interesting, but poor coverage of the research territory and framing greatly affects the rationale for conducting this study. … The Introduction comes across as a largely ad hoc assembly of information. The information and ideas have not been carefully processed and synthesized (Rejection email, June 2017).*

Writing a rigorous methodology section: Emerged from nine codes, the subcategory of *writing a rigorous methodology section* was also reported to be of notable difficulty for RA authors.

> *The authors do not have a sufficient mastery of reporting the sampling techniques, study design, validity and reliability concerns, and statistical tests and analyses (Shabnam, January 4, 2018).*

Writing an appropriate results and discussion section: Lastly, *writing an appropriate results and discussion section* concerned the writers' difficulties in writing the analyses that do not reflect the findings and research questions, and overgeneralizing the results beyond what the evidence depicts.

I think writers usually review the literature well in the introduction but they are not able to use what they reviewed properly in their discussions (Javad, January 11, 2018). Table 3 illustrates the subcategories together with the frequency of codes related to the authors' challenges in RA writing.

Table 3. *The Authors' Challenges in RA Writing*

	The authors' challenges in RA writing	Frequency of codes	Percentage
1	Critical writing	8	% 12.3
2	Coherent and cohesive writing	9	% 13.84
3	Indicating topic novelty and importance	9	% 13.84
4	Following academic language and style	11	% 16.72
5	Writing a strong introduction section	12	% 18.46
6	Writing a rigorous methodology section	9	% 13.84
7	Writing an appropriate results and discussion section	7	% 10.76
	Total	65	% 100

Research question 3: What are the potential features of academic RAs deserving to be published in prestigious journals?

In order to answer this research question, the participants' rejection emails were examined, and several interview questions were designed to address the diverse features of academic research articles as well as the important features of different RA sections. As a result, four core categories were derived from the combination of 31 subcategories.

Core category three: RA linguistic features

Eight subcategories emerged out of 103 codes all related to the linguistic features of academic RAs. Well-written articles are always appreciated by editors and reviewers. Lexicon and grammar show to what extent the researcher is professional, and lexico-grammatical problems make the research content unreliable. However, despite the great significance of the linguistic features in RA writing, one of the interviewees commented that:

Only major problems in this area matter. Minor problems are usually tolerated by the reviewers or editors especially if the paper has merits in

other areas (e.g., its contribution to the literature) (Zahra, January 4, 2018).

Clarity: The subcategory of *clarity* was derived from the thematic combination of 25 codes. The researchers asserted that grammatical and lexical complexities and ambiguities, unclear explanations and definitions, unnecessary jargon, metaphoric language, vague use of terms, multiple ideas in a single sentence, and incomprehensible sentences should be avoided. They suggested that direct, declarative sentences should be written with simple and common words, and examples be provided where necessary in order to enhance language readability and meaningfulness. It was suggested that the authors need to articulate research topic, theoretical constructs, study focus and rationale, research gap, and research questions in a lucid fashion. The literature review also should be clearly arranged so as to offer a clear and general view of the research on the era and develop a conceptually clear paper. With regard to the methodology section, a clear view of research context, demographic information of the participants, sampling techniques, and study procedures should be provided to make it possible for future researchers to replicate the study. The respondents' comments are in line with Calfee and Valencia (2007) who described the features of a good methodology by the two "Cs": clean and clear.

More details should be provided in relation to the random sampling of students. There are far more males and females in the sample yet no explanation is provided as to why this might be. More details need to be provided in relation to what grades and ages were included in the study (Rejection email, April 2017).

Besides, in relation to the results and discussions, it was emphasized to present self-sufficient and self-explanatory tables, graphs, and figures, a sound statistical analysis, and clear discussions and conclusions.

Logical organization and orderliness: 19 codes were found to be subsumed under the theme of *logical organization and orderliness*. The interviewees mentioned that the RA authors should be able to put sentences, lines, and paragraphs in a meaningful order and organize sentences so that they can support the topic sentence through strategies of paragraph development. They should know about logical seriation of ideas in writing and their structural parallelism. They should be familiar with different approaches to data organization and organize different RA sections with a sensible structure containing appropriate headings and subheadings. They should know where to place the descriptive statistics and other analysis results in the results section and organize the study results so that the most important results are listed first, followed by results of secondary or post hoc analyses. The remaining structure and organization of the paper should also be outlined where required.

If such issues as cohesion and coherence are disregarded, the editors simply reject it and do not comment. They do not consider the content if writing includes such organizational problems (Vahid, January 20, 2018).

Reasonable brevity: The concept of reasonable brevity emerged out of the combination of 13 codes. The researchers believed that all the necessary information should be provided in as few words as possible considering the appropriate length of sentences, paragraphs, and different sections of a research article. The authors should consider the economy of expression by turning long paragraphs, sentences, and words into short ones. A synthesized summary of the past studies as well as a brief explanation of research steps and techniques should be presented. Also, repetitive information in the text as in

the tables and graphs and duplicate and unnecessary presentation of data should be avoided. Economy of expression should be considered in writing different RA sections.

The sentences should be reasonably short and easy to follow with no grammar and/or vocabulary ambiguities (Javad, January 11, 2018). #Following conventions of mechanics: The next theme concerned *following conventions of mechanics* encompassing 10 codes. These codes indicate that the authors should be familiar with conventions of standard mechanics, including typographical errors, capitalization, paragraph indentation, and punctuation. They should know about the appropriate use of acronyms, abbreviations, and contractions. As one of the reviewers commented,

> *There should be two spaces following a period but often there are not; there should be a comma following the last item in a list and before "and" but this rarely occurs in the paper (Rejection email, July 2016)*

Appropriate choice of words and collocations: The subcategory of *appropriate choice of words and collocations* suggests that the authors should know about academic and formal words, lexical bundles, academic wordlists, and words that are used in different RA sections. They should be also able to choose appropriate words which directly carry the message.

> *Ideas need their own proper words which are formal and expressive and can directly carry the message. (Hadi, January, 20, 2018).*

Unity and smoothness: *Unity and smoothness* as the next theme implies the importance of making ideas logically flow in the text and creating smoothness of expression.

> *Paragraph 1 lacks unity of content and has no clear topic sentence to guide the reader (Rejection email, May 2017).*

This subcategory implies the importance of making ideas logically flow in the text and creating smoothness of expression. This concurs well with Belt (2011) who asserted that different ideas and paragraphs in the article should flow logically and smoothly keeping the research focus and argument in the spotlight and developing it from one aspect to another.

Cohesion and coherence: Nine codes were also associated with the concept of *cohesion and coherence*. The interviewees felt that the writers' knowledge of different cohesive connectors and coherence relations and their markers can create a readable and coherent research article. For instance, they should be able to retain consistent tenses within each paragraph and appropriately apply different cohesion and coherence devices.

> *The editors comment on cohesion and coherence but maybe not in the first submission. Cohesion and coherence are of importance. Sentences and paragraphs should be connected to each other effectively (Vahid, January 20, 2018).*

Grammatical accuracy: Finally, the last subcategory indicated the importance of *grammatical accuracy* concerning voice, tense, word order, agreement, etc.

> *Tenses do not match in places, singular and plural nouns are used incorrectly (Rejection email, December 2015).*

Table 4 indicates the eight subcategories and frequency of the codes for each subcategory.

Table 4. *RA Linguistic Features*

	RA linguistic features	Frequency of codes	Percentage
1	Clarity and readability	25	% 24.27
2	Logical organization and orderliness	19	% 18.44
3	Reasonable brevity	13	% 12.62
4	Following the conventions of mechanics	10	% 9.7
5	Appropriate choice of words and collocations	10	% 9.7
6	Unity and smoothness	10	% 9.7
7	Cohesion and coherence	9	% 8.73
8	Grammaticality	7	% 6.79
	Total	103	% 100

Core category four: RA stylistic features

RA stylistic features also emerged during the thematic combination of three subcategories and 54 codes.

\# Following an academic format and style: Firstly, the interviewees recognized *following an academic format and style* as a significant element of high-quality research articles. This involves paying attention to the face validity and academic structure of different sections of any paper in order to meet the English readership standards. The research informants claimed for the importance of avoiding run-on sentences, appropriate length, font, and spacing, and correct presentation of tables, figures, captions, footnotes, headings, etc. They also suggested that the authors consider consistency and homogeneity in writing style of headings and subheadings, tables, figures, footnotes, graphs, and references and citation.

> *I think that the structure of the paper should follow a standard academic writing format so that the editors can send it out for external review(Amir, January 14, 2018).*

Formality: Secondly, the respondents emphasized the importance of *formality* and using formal structures in writing a successful research article. As some techniques to increase formality of writing, they referred to the avoidance of slang, casual language, and clichés, and choosing more formal alternatives when selecting a word or a phrase.

> *I think writing for a research paper needs formal and academic words and structures which can appropriately convey the message to the readers (Vahid, January 20, 2018).*

Writing to the journal: Thirdly, according to the concept of *writing to the journal*, the RA authors should consider the correspondence between the format of the journal and that of the paper and follow the standards of each journal in writing different RA sections. They need to follow the specific journal's author instructions carefully in terms of format, word count, number of figures and tables, and referencing style. Furthermore, the importance of following models of previous articles in a specific journal to which they submit was highlighted.

> *In order to receive an acceptance letter, preparing the manuscript the way previous articles have been prepared is very helpful (Neda, January 22, 2018).*

Table 5 shows the stylistic features together with the frequency of codes for the subcategories.

Table 5. *RA Stylistic Features and Frequency of Codes*

	RA stylistic features	Frequency of codes	Percentage
1	Following an academic format and style	31	% 57.4
2	Formality	11	% 20.37
3	Writing to the journal	12	% 22.22
	Total	54	% 100

Core category five: Essential components of writing RA sections

One hundred ninety-nine codes and seven subcategories were identified to be associated with the core category of essential factors of writing RA sections. # Convincing and reliable report: As Table 6 reveals, the most frequent number of codes contribute to the subcategory of the *convincing and reliable report*. This subcategory indicates that the authors should be able to set the scene, establish the scope, and show the instantiation of the study in the research context. Also indicating the novelty of the topic of inquiry and significance of the study can convince the readers that a topic is worth researching. Given this, the relevance and contribution of the paper to the scope, theme, and audience of the selected journal can be revealed. Almost all the interviewees highlighted the importance of a strong manifestation of the contribution of the study to the realm of science. As one of them said:

Our writing is strengthened the with the elaboration of the problematization of the constructs and discussing why the study variables would matter (Amir, January 14, 2018).

After all, the authors should be able to state the purpose of the work in the form of the research problem supported by a hypothesis or a set of carefully addressed questions. This persuasive report should continue in the other sections. The writer should convince the reviewers or editors that the right steps were taken in the process of data collection and an appropriate data analysis method has been selected related to the adopted instruments. Also,

clarifying the criteria for sampling and psychometric properties of the applied instruments can add to the dependability of the study. In respondents' views, a convincing presentation of the study findings includes: appropriately writing about different statistical techniques such as T-Test, ANOVA, MANOVA; presenting correct steps of data commentaries and graphical presentation; providing concurring and supporting evidences; giving reliable data and warranted interpretation of the data; and showing that the findings bear useful implications and research-based recommendations and suggestions for the practitioners. Moreover, the writers should attribute statements to respectable and recent sources that reinforce the validity of the information.

Sufficiency: 52 codes were found to be linked with the *sufficiency* of the RA sections. This is related to the inclusiveness of an RA title, abstract, introduction, methodology, and results and discussions. As found in the rejection emails and stated by the interview respondents, the authors need to be familiar with the constituting elements of a research article title which can convey not only the content but also the purpose and audience. Also, the abstract should be written so well that it can stand alone, and the readers can get the whole gist of the paper by reading this section. An introduction section should offer sufficient theoretical and operational background to the constructs of interest, justify the study conducted, fully state the problem and indicate the gap in the previous research, and give an extensive and deep review of the related studies. As one of the journal editors mentioned,

> *The reviewers felt the scope of the literature cited in the Introduction was narrow and incomplete (Rejection email, November 2017).*

The authors should provide all the necessary elements of a research methodology section, including the type and design of the studies conducted, procedure of sampling, number of participants, and their demographic

information, research setting and educational context, research measures and instruments and statistical analytical tests, and ethical considerations and validity and reliability issues. Generally, this section should give all the required details to enable the readers to replicate the study. Finally, based on the respondents' views, the results and discussions section should present data analysis together with the descriptives for any of the initial analyses, a detailed explanation of the tables and figures, and adequate discussions for the obtained results to show how the findings advance the current literature. Besides, the author should completely highlight the potential outcomes, research limitations and delimitations, implications, recommendations, and suggestions for further research.

Evaluation, criticality, and voice: The next subcategory was linked with the core category of essential elements of RA sections include *evaluation, criticality, and voice*. According to this subcategory, the writers should know how to instantiate their voice and arguments in an academic research paper to make it more critical. For instance, the literature review section should include not only a report of the previous and existing literature but also its evaluation and criticism. The interviewees indicated that strong argumentation is required to show voice criticality, and a critical voice plays a crucial role in RA acceptance by the journal. One of them commented that,

> *I think sufficient attention must be paid to argumentation, voice and criticality regarding academic writing. These are crucial points to consider and ignoring them would definitely affect the result of any paper submission (Javad, January 11, 2018).*

This is in good agreement with Hyland (2004) suggesting that an author's influential vantage point helps him to argue for a position and claim solidarity

with the readers, evaluate the other writers' work, and acknowledge alternative views.

Focus and relevance: With regard to the subcategory of *focus and relevance*, the necessity of following a solid over-arching theoretical foundation and an integrated conceptual model was emphasized. As a comment by a journal editor suggests,

> *One particular weakness was your lack of an integrated conceptual model of the relationships among variables that could be evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis models (Rejection email, March 2017).*

Also, the interviewees commented that the authors should focus on the goals of the study and theory to guide hypotheses, discussions, and interpretations of the results. Besides, the same idea should be focused and developed throughout one paragraph to make a convincing argument. The authors should apply proper analyses that reflect the research questions, proper interpretation of analyses and tables, and the findings and discussions that reveal the actual analyses, and suggestions and implications that do not go beyond the evidence found. The relevance and focus of writing lead to the continuity in the presentation of ideas and effective coherence and unity among sentences, paragraphs, and different RA sections.

Objectivity: *Objectivity* of writing was also emphasized by the interview respondents to help create an academic output. They emphasized the responsibility of the authors in avoiding biased information and explaining the issues affecting the reliability and validity of the data. They reported that including personal ideas, emotional language, strong claims, and value judgments lead the author into bias and endanger the academic nature of an article.

> *I think that the authors should avoid making strong claims about relations among different aspects of the study (Neda, January 22, 2018).*

Also, the knowledge of expressing probability, the imperfect data, and uncertainty of data was highlighted by the respondents. This concurs well with APA (2010) which emphasizes that whereas selectivity in the presentation is important, it is crucial to present facts objectively, both those that refute and those that support one's position. Similarly, as Sternberg (1988) puts it, without such honesty, scientific communication would collapse.

\# Following generic moves: *Following generic moves* in writing different RA sections was also of significant attention to the interview respondents. The authors should follow the appropriate moves and steps of different sections of a research article taking into account some of the well-known models of generic structures. Following the correct moves and steps in writing each RA, section helps to create an organized paper.

> *I think articles that follow the real pattern of RA writing deserve to be published in a highly ranked journal. (Hadi, January 20, 2018).*

\# Appealing and motivating writing: *Appealing and motivating writing* was found as the last subcategory. The researchers commented that to have a robust RA writing, the authors should motivate the readers to continue reading the paper and show that the authors' ideas are worth disseminating and address international readership. Strategies of appropriate title choice and variety in sentence length and arrangement, word choice, sentence types, etc. can help to attract the attention of the readers. *The authors should consider the readers' interests and concerns to improve international readership (Javad, January 11, 2018).*

Table 6. *The Essential Components of Writing RA Sections*

	Essential elements of writing RA sections	Frequency of codes	Percentage
1	Convincing and reliable report	56	% 28.14
2	Comprehensiveness and sufficiency	52	% 26.13
3	Evaluation, criticality and voice	22	% 11.01
4	Focus and relevance	21	% 10.55
5	Objectivity	18	% 9.04
6	Following the generic moves	15	% 7.53
7	Appealing and motivating writing	15	% 7.53
	Total	199	% 100

Core category six: Features of RA citation and referencing

This theme encompasses eight subcategories derived from thirty 59 codes. As was found in the rejection emails as well as in the interviews, minor problems were tolerated by the reviewers and even major problems rarely affected reviewers' decision. These issues by themselves cannot determine the outcome of a submission. Though, as Table 7 reveals, the most frequently mentioned problems regarding the citation and reference section in EAP research articles are as follows:

Following an academic style: Regarding the first subcategory, the interviewees mentioned that the APA style should be strictly followed in RA referencing and citations. They should know about the appropriate presentation of references, citations, and direct and indirect quotations. Also, they need to know about the appropriate use of *et al.* in any citations in case of multiple authors and make citations with page numbers in APA style.

Et al is not applied appropriately in case of multiple authors, and page numbers are not used in APA style (Rejection email, April 2016).

Using high-quality sources: Well-known sources of high-quality were also suggested to be applied in citation and referencing.

> *Referring to articles which have been published in highly ranked journals can make the paper more reliable (Shabnam, January 4, 2018).*

Avoiding plagiarism: Furthermore, plagiarism avoidance through appropriate referencing and citation was found to be of high significance for the interviewees. They claimed that the authors should focus on how to incorporate the ideas from other authors into their own writing and use their concepts to advance their positions.

> *In case of exact copy and paste, they need to mention the name of the researchers to whom they make references (Hadi, January 20, 2018).*

Recency and updated sources: The researchers also emphasized the use of recent references. As one of them says:

> *In case of a high profile journal, there is a serious need for updated sources; otherwise you have to wait for a big rejection (Fatemeh, January 4, 2018).*

Avoiding direct quotations: Even with citation, a manuscript should not string together direct quotes from other authors and exact verbatim of other writers' writing should be avoided as far as possible. Instead of using the long and direct quote, the author is suggested to paraphrase and give comments on it.

> *In the future, my strong advice to you is to focus on how you can incorporate the ideas from other authors into your own writing and use their concepts (Rejection email, May 2016).*

Avoiding self-citation: Self-citation was also suggested to threaten scientific nature of RA writing.

> *Remove all the references that you have made to any of the authors of the article (Rejection email, March 2017).*

Avoiding over-referencing: Moreover, in interviewees' ideas, over-referencing and frequent use of citations and quotations can endanger academic writing. As one of them said,

> *I think that having too many citations and references reduces the author's voice in the paper (Zahra, January 4, 2018).*

Making directly related citations: Several codes also indicated the importance of making directly related citations and avoiding unnecessary and unhelpful citations.

> *Some of the references in your paper seem to be unnecessary. You are recommended to use references which are more relevant (Rejection email, November 2015).*

Table 7. *The Features of RA Citation and Referencing*

	The features of RA citation and referencing	Frequency of codes	Percentage
1	Following an academic style	12	% 20.33
2	Avoiding direct quotations	8	% 13.55
3	Using high-quality sources	7	% 11.86
4	Avoiding plagiarism	7	% 11.86
5	Recency and updated sources	7	% 11.86
6	Avoiding self-citation	7	% 11.86
7	Avoiding over-referencing	6	% 10.16
8	Making directly related citations	5	% 8.47
	Total	59	% 100

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how EAP Iranian researchers perceived the reasons of research article rejection, the main challenges of EAP writers in writing and publishing research articles, and the features and

elements that characterize scholarly articles. Drawing on the stages of grounded theory, we identified six core categories and discussed them in light of their contribution to the previous research.

Related to the first research question, the analysis of rejection emails and the interviews revealed that the main reasons for RA rejection include: *weak topic, weak introduction, poor format and style, poor language, poor method section, poor results and discussions, and poor referencing and citation*. This finding supported the studies which indicated the importance of these elements in weak and unacceptable writing (e.g., Alison, et al., 1998; Bartol, 1983). The current study moved beyond the problems at linguistic level and brought to attention potential factors that have been experienced by the EAP RA writers.

Seven main factors were also obtained related to the second research question which dealt with the major challenges and difficulties in writing academic research articles: *critical writing; coherent and cohesive writing; indicating topic novelty and importance; following academic language and style; writing a strong introduction section; writing a rigorous methodology section; and writing an appropriate results and discussion section*. The Iranian EAP authors referred to the mentioned issues as the main difficulties with which the non-native authors might face. However, despite the difficulty of writing in a scientific style for the novice writers, as Davis (1997) believes, clear and sound communication and concise writing for a scientific audience is trainable. Besides, when the instruction on academic writing is required, research in EAP argues for the need to focus on discursive practice (e.g., Flowerdew, 1998; Hood, 2006). This indicates that EAP instructors and syllabus designers should pay special attention to the authors' main difficulties and incorporate them into the instructional syllabus of EAP writing courses.

Concerning the third research question, four core categories were obtained: *RA linguistic features; RA stylistic features; essential component of RA sections; RA referencing and citation features. RA linguistic features included clarity and readability, logical organization and orderliness, reasonable brevity, following the conventions of mechanics, appropriate choice of words and collocations, unity and smoothness, cohesion and coherence, and grammaticality.*

A remarkable implication to emerge is for the curriculum developers and EAP teachers to pay these linguistic elements enough attention in their classes. This study also shed more light on the researchers' perceptions of RA stylistic features, including following an academic format and style, formality, and writing to the journal. Moreover, analyses of the rejection emails and the interviews led to the emergence of seven essential components of RA sections: *convincing and reliable report, sufficiency, evaluation, criticality and voice, focus and relevance, objectivity, following the generic moves, and appealing and motivating writing.* The present study also confirmed the presence of eight features for citation and referencing in research articles: *following an academic style, avoiding direct quotations, using high-quality sources, avoiding plagiarism, recency and updated sources, avoiding self-citation, avoiding over-referencing, and making directly related citations.*

These findings lend support to previous studies in the literature (e.g., Davis, 1997; Derntl, 2014; Hartley, 2008; O'Connor, 1995) which highlighted several principles of academic writing. Our results also share a number of similarities with Jalongo (2013), and Jalango and Saracho's (2016) findings that reported the major characteristics for academic publishable writing. The features obtained in this study also correlate favorably with linguistic features of academic language suggested by Snow and Uccelli (2009).

Taken together, all these results enrich our knowledge of EAP RA writing competence from the perspective of EAP researchers having experienced writing RAs and publishing in highly ranked journals. The findings also bear useful implications for the novice RA authors and researchers to know which aspects of RA writing need more attention and practice. Furthermore, the evidence from this study indicates the areas in which Iranian EAP students lack sufficient knowledge and practice needed in writing up scholarly articles. As such, the current situation in Iranian EAP writing courses do not seem conducive to EAP researchers' competence in RA developing and publishing which is a prerequisite for their entry into the academic discourse community to pursue scholarship beyond an undergraduate education (Flowerdew, 2000).

Therefore, one of the most promising aspects of the study can be found in its potential as a helpful tool for individuals who suffer from the lack of awareness of academic RA writing. The awareness of diverse linguistic and stylistic factors of scholarly RAs can considerably assist students on courses of English for academic purposes if they want to succeed in their academic endeavors. The prospective researchers in different academic fields, being aware of the reasons of getting rejected and authors' challenges in writing RAs, can also apply the findings of the present study to produce articles which are more likely to be published in highly ranked journals. This however requires explicit instruction and practice with regard to varied components and aspects of the present study.

EAP teachers and research article supervisors are thus suggested to have a deeper understanding of the problems that novice RA authors and student writers have in order to assist them in shaping and revising manuscripts. Similarly, materials writers for English for research publication may benefit

from the results of this study in order to prepare materials that are targeted towards the elements and issues characterizing publishable research articles.

Since this study is one of the rare studies that explored the perspectives of experienced academic RA writers in EAP contexts, further research is needed in other ESP or ESL settings to reveal more details about RA writing knowledge. Finally, the present study can be replicated with EAP learners and teachers to identify their perceived writing competence across different academic genres and contexts.

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