



## Research Paper

### Developing a Model of the Possible Selves Construction before and after Training on IELTS Writing Skills

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#### ABSTRACT

Selves-theory has some implications for EFL learning. Among different English skills, writing is more tied to selves-theory since it requires ideology transfer as a main element of selves-theory. However, writing academically in a foreign language is a complex struggle for many undergraduate and graduate students and it has attracted much attention in the field of applied linguistics since the last decades of the twentieth century. The present study aimed to explore Iranian EFL learners' possible selves construction as influenced by teaching IELTS writing skills. To this end, a quasi-experimental design was used. From among IELTS candidates taking part in five IELTS preparation centers in Kerman, 90 (45 males and 45 females) candidates were selected as the participants of the present study through cluster sampling. The Possible Selves in Students Questionnaire developed and validated by Zadshir et al. (2020) was used to identify the expected possible selves of the participants. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics and Multi-Variate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were run. According to the results, feared selves were stronger than expected and responsible selves among the participants before training on IELTS writing skills. Further, it was revealed that expected and responsible selves were stronger than feared selves among the participants after training on IELTS writing skills. Finally, it was proved that training on IELTS writing skills had a significant effect on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves as well as the dimensions of the possible selves in the future. Implications of the results for EFL curriculum planners, teachers and learners have been discussed.

**Keywords:** *Expected Possible Selves, Feared Possible Selves, Identity, IELTS Writing Skills, Possible Selves, Responsible Possible Selves*

## INTRODUCTION

English as a foreign language (EFL) learning has been turned into a must in the global village. A concept which is of importance in such domains as EFL learning is identity (Nazari & Seyri, 2021) that has generally been defined in terms of the pioneers' point of view. For instance, Erikson (1950) defines identity as a life-span developmental phenomenon. Accordingly, "identity is not something one has, but something that develops during one's whole life" (Beijaard et al., 2004, p.107). Marcia (1980) conceptualizes identity in terms of personal choices. As a result, identity is formulated based on the realities perceived by people in general and adolescences in particular.

Identity is a multi-faceted concept whose formation has several domains. The concept of possible selves as a domain of identity development pertains to how individuals think about their potential and about their future (Hamman et al., 2010). In fact, both 'self' and 'identity' are complex constructs because they draw on major and diverse theoretical and research areas, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology and psychotherapy (Day et al., 2006). According to Day et al. (2006), the early writers tended to view self as an essence which is singular, unified and stable and which can be little affected by people's contexts and biographies.

Selves-theory has some implications for EFL learning. Among different English skills, writing is more tied to selves-theory since it requires ideology transfer as a main element of selves-theory. However, writing academically in a foreign language is a complex struggle for many undergraduate and graduate students and it has attracted much attention in the field of applied linguistics since the last decades of the twentieth century (Matsuda, 2003). Among different contexts in which writing academically and ideology transfer are a necessity, international exams as a stage for students to pass to receive admission to overseas universities could be mentioned. IELTS is one of those international language tests through which students need to demonstrate their four skills in English, namely listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Writing skill in this exam, IELTS academic, consists of two tasks, the second of which is argumentative essay writing. Unlike the first task, report writing, which is merely based on the information given on a chart or graph, the second task requires candidates to answer a question, give reasons, and if possible, include their personal experiences as well. These features make this task the material suitable for analyzing argumentation in writing skill as the candidates are expected to voice their views and support them with convincing enough arguments.

The above discussions support the argument that IELTS writing training and possible selves construction are worth investigation as possible candidates of related notions. That is, the role of ideology in both can be a mediatory and connective one. This study is an attempt, taking this into account.

In sum, it can be argued that EFL learning is intermingled with the role of different human factors without which it is hard to imagine this phenomenon. Among different factors, the role of possible selves in the success of EFL learning cannot be denied. EFL learners have their own selves which are brought by themselves to EFL learning task. Therefore, exploring EFL learners' possible selves formation and changes have been the subject of debate in recent years (Nazari & Molana, 2020; Sadeghi & Sahragard, 2016). Moreover, as evidenced in the previous research (e.g., Sancar et al., 2021), EFL learning and selves construction contributions to each other. A domain of EFL learning which has interface with selves construction is IELTS writing. As argued above, the common point in selves construction and IELTS writing is ideology. More specifically, IELTS Writing Task 2 as an argumentative writing task lends



itself well to ideology transfer. However, learning to write argumentatively is considered as a difficult and challenging task for EFL learners (Ofte, 2014). Apparently IELTS writing is a difficult language skill for EFL learners for different reasons: Acquiring it requires much time and effort; it is considered as a reflective activity requiring ample time to think about the topic; and it involves analysis and classification of background knowledge (Rassouli & Abbasandi, 2013). This is partially rooted in the fact that writing instructors mostly devote writing class time to teaching grammatical, syntactic and surface issues rather than teaching ideology negotiation at higher levels than syntax and grammar (Gray, 1988). In response, Gray (1988) argues that writing instructors are recommended to stick more to discursive aspects of writing rather than on the details, such as grammar and spelling. He believes that by paying more heed to the ideological content of students' writings, students learn how to convey and share ideologies through writing. However, such writing approaches are more time-consuming and difficult to implement than traditional approaches of teaching writing whose main emphasis is on grammar, spelling, syntax, etc. In general, the bottom line is that writing argumentatively in a foreign language is a complex struggle for many undergraduate and graduate students and it has attracted much attention in the field of applied linguistics since the last decades of the twentieth century (Matsuda, 2003).

Given the association between ideology transfer in argumentative writing and selves construction, EFL learners' weakness in the former may have negative consequences for the latter. However, this can be proposed just at the level of hypothesis and proving it requires more empirical investigations. This is while reviewing the extant literature shows that little attention has been paid to the process of selves construction as related to EFL argumentative writing. In other words, selves formation as connected to argumentative writing have not been probed as they deserve. But it cannot be missed that some recent efforts have been conducted by Iranian researchers in investigating identity of EFL learners from different viewpoints (Abbasian & Karbalaee Esmalee, 2018; Aghaei et al., 2021; Golzar, 2020; Moeinvaziri et al., 2020; Shahvand & Rezvani, 2016; Zamani & Ahangari, 2016). But there is still research paucity concerning EFL learners' selves formation, taking the role of argumentative writing training into account in Iran as an EFL context. To be more specific, apparently, as revealed by reviewing the existing literature, little (if any) research has been conducted on the effectiveness of teaching IELTS writing skills on Iranian EFL learners' possible selves construction. Considering this gap in identity research, the present study aimed to explore Iranian EFL learners' possible selves construction as influenced by teaching IELTS writing skills. To fill this gap, this study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. *How do EFL learners define their possible selves in the future before training on IELTS writing skills?*
2. *How do EFL learners define their possible selves in the future after training on IELTS writing skills?*
3. *What is the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future?*

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

Chen et al. (2016) aimed at gaining a better picture of nonnative EFL/ESL teachers' selves in teaching contexts (i.e., the teachers' intercultural identities). They reviewed 21 studies on the intercultural



identities of nonnative EFL/ESL teachers to explore the contributing factors to the formation of teachers' intercultural identities, and to suggest directions for further research in this area. They found three interrelated groups of factors that are involved in formation of teachers' intercultural identities. (a) Factors that were associated with personality characteristics; for example, ideas towards language and culture; actual and perceived linguistic, intercultural, and teaching competence; and teachers' own language learning experiences. (b) Factors that were associated with the teaching context, such as relationships with their parents, colleagues, nonnative English-speaking students, and teaching curricula. (c) Factors that were associated with the more general sociocultural context, including influences from society and family, and points of view toward the dominant culture and their own culture. Mahmoudi-Gahrouei et al. (2016) tackled identity development in English teachers in regard with expected and feared possible selves. The findings showed that teachers' possible selves are different as affected by teaching experience. That is, experienced teachers were more quality-focused than novice teachers. Their findings also reveal a potential transition path in professional identity development. Nazari and Molana (2020) looked into the trajectory of identity development of a novice TESOL teacher during the first year of teaching. The findings of the study showed that various interdependent factors and participants contributed to the teacher's identity development, from policy-makers to learners and their parents, to colleagues, and the teacher herself. Parsi and Ashraf (2020) investigated the connections among pedagogical experience, professional identity, and critical thinking in EFL teachers. Based on measures of Pearson correlations, EFL teachers' critical thinking and teaching experience were significantly related. A similar association was reported between their teaching experience and professional identity as well as between their critical thinking and professional identity. Furthermore, the findings from multiple regression analysis specified that teaching experience could predict the professional identity of the participants. In another recent study on identity formation of teachers in online settings, Nazari and Seyri (2021) addressed this issue through their exploration of changes in the identity formation of teachers from face-to-face to distance learning classroom settings during the COVID-19 outbreak. The researchers finally provided policy-makers and teachers with suggestions for promoting awareness among different groups on using technological instruments to accelerate the adjustment to online teaching practices.

It seems that research in the field of possible selves suffers from scarcity, specifically as influenced by different factors such as training on IELTS writing skills. To fill this gap, the present study was conducted.

## METHOD

### Design of the Study

To investigate the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future, a quasi-experimental design was used wherein EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future was compared with each other before and after being exposed to training on IELTS writing skills.

### Participants

From among IELTS candidates taking part in five IELTS preparation centers in Kerman, 90 (45 males and 45 females) candidates were selected as the participants of the present study through cluster



sampling. They were homogenized by just selecting those candidates whose sample IELTS Writing Task 2 received IELTS band score 18 (as the cut-off score) and above. Since IELTS Writing Task 2 is scored in a range from 0 to 36, 18 was a reasonable cut-off score. The participants were in 25-40 age range. The mother tongue of all of the participants was Persian. Research ethics was observed in the sampling procedure by informing the participants of the aims of the present study. Moreover, they were ensured about anonymity and confidentiality of their personal information.

### **Instrument**

The Possible Selves in Students Questionnaire developed and validated by Zadshir et al. (2020) was used to identify the expected possible selves of the participants. It consists of 36 Likert-type five-point items in three sub-scales including expectations, sense of responsibility and fears. The reliability of the scale was calculated by Zadshir et al. (2020) as .90 using internal consistency reliability index. Moreover, they confirmed its validity through factor analysis. It should be mentioned that due to constraints imposed by Covid-19 outbreak, the Google Form of this questionnaire was used.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedure**

Data collection of this study started with selecting the sample, taking research ethics into account. Then, the objectives of the study were explained to the participants at length. Next, the Google Form of the Possible Selves in Students Questionnaire was distributed among the participants to be filled. Then, the participants participated in eight 60-minute training sessions on IELTS writing once a week. During the sessions which were held in Adobe Connect due to the constraints imposed on the study by the prevalence of Covid-19 Pandemic, the researcher as an IELTS instructor taught the criteria of IELTS Writing Scoring Rubric. That is, in the first two training sessions, the primacy was given to task achievement, wherein the participants were taught how a fully developed response to a writing task in IELTS should be given.

For this purpose, a number of samples were given to them in each of which some of the textual and contextual features were highlighted, as a way to invite learners' attention to them. Here, the emphasis was on the thoroughness of the writing requiring the learners to include as much of the details in the given task as they can. In the next two sessions, cohesion and coherence were the focal point of instruction. Within these sessions, the participants were taught how cohesion should be brought to a text in such a way that it looks natural without attracting the reader's attention unduly. For this purpose, two sets of texts were used and compared in the class, with the former being coherent and the latter being jumbled. In this way, the teacher could raise the participants' awareness as to how cohesive devices can be used to produce a well-strung writing.

Moreover, the participants received some instruction on paragraphing, learning how each paragraph should stand independent while still in a logical relation with other paragraphs. Here, too, some samples were employed and comparatively analyzed. In the next two sessions, the participants received all their instructions on lexical resources. The participants were given a list of relevant words along with some sample sentences to demonstrate how those words should be naturally used. The words were of wide range, for the participants to reach a more reliable level of vocabulary proficiency. To this end, the



participants were asked to produce their own sentences right after having learned them. This, the researcher believes, could transform their passively learned words into an active state, thereby fostering their vocabulary retention.

And finally, in the last two sessions, grammatical range as well as grammatical accuracy were of utmost importance. A number of complex structures were taught, exemplified, and practiced to the participants. For a better grasp, some IELTS samples taken from British Council website were also distributed among the learners. They were then asked to sit in pairs and pinpoint all the structures already taught to them. Furthermore, the importance of accuracy in using grammatical structures was highlighted to them. For this purpose, some intentionally incorrect sentences were given to them to spot the error and then produce the correct form.

After the end of the training sessions, the Google Form of the Possible Selves in Students Questionnaire was re-distributed among the participants to be filled. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics and Multi-Variate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were run.

## RESULTS

### Results of the first research question

To answer the first research question ‘How do EFL learners define their possible selves in the future before training on IELTS writing skills?’, descriptive statistics were run for possible selves before training on IELTS writing skills whose results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Possible Selves before Training on IELTS Writing Skills*

Variable	Expected selves (Expectations)	Responsible selves (Sense of Responsibility)	Feared selves (Fears)
<b>Possible selves</b>			
<b>Mean</b>	20.33	23.15	27.10
<b>SD</b>	.48	.70	.60

As shown in the Table 1, before training on IELTS writing skills, the highest mean was observed for fears sub-scale (M=27.10). This shows that the participants’ fears were more dominant than their expectations and sense of responsibility. The lowest mean was related to expectations (M=20.33). According to this, the participants’ expectations were weaker than their sense of responsibility and fears. The results, all in all, show that feared selves were stronger than expected and responsible selves among the participants before training on IELTS writing skills.

### Results of the second research question

To answer the second research question ‘How do EFL learners define their possible selves in the future before training on IELTS writing skills?’, descriptive statistics were run for possible selves after training on IELTS writing skills. The results are shown in Table 2.



**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics for Possible Selves after Training on IELTS Writing Skills*

Variable	Expected selves (Expectations)	Responsible selves (Sense of Responsibility)	Feared selves (Fears)
Possible selves	55.00	53.88	19.10
Mean	.33	.42	.64
SD			

As shown in the Table 2, after training on IELTS writing skills, the highest means were obtained for expectations (M=55.00) and sense of responsibility (M=53.88). Accordingly, the lowest mean belonged to fears (M=19.10). This confirms that the participants' expectations and sense of responsibility were more dominant than their fears. Therefore, it can be conceived that expected and responsible selves were stronger than feared selves among the participants after training on IELTS writing skills.

### Results of the third research question

In order to answer the third research question 'What is the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future?', MANOVA was performed with status (before or after training on IELTS writing skills) as the grouping variable and possible selves dimensions (expected selves, responsible selves and feared selves) as the dependent variables. The results are shown in tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3***The Result of Multivariate Analysis of the Effect of Training on Possible Selves*

	Effect	Value	F	Error df	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Possible selves	Pillai's Trace	0.88	28.76	87	0.008	0.73
	Wilks' Lambda	0.47	11.81	85	0.005	0.61

As it can be seen in the Table 3, the analysis of the Pillai's Trace and Wilks' Lambda shows that totally, training on IELTS writing skills has a significant effect on the participants' construction of the possible selves in the future. Then, the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on the dimensions of possible selves was checked. The results are indicated in Table 4.

**Table 4***The Result of Univariate Analysis of the Effect of Training on Possible Selves Dimensions*

Variable	F	Sig	Effect size	Partial eta squared
<b>Expected selves</b>				
M	102.00	.000	.68	.044
SD				
<b>Responsible selves</b>				
M	130.00	.000	.70	.057
SD				
<b>Feared selves</b>				
M	90.00	.001	.42	.013
SD				



As presented in the Table 4, there was a statistically significant difference between expected selves dimensions on all the three dimensions including expected selves dimension ( $F(1,87) = 102.00$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial eta squared = .044), responsible selves dimension ( $F(1,87) = 130.00$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial eta squared = .057) and feared selves dimension ( $F(1,87) = 90.00$ ,  $p < .05$ , partial eta squared = .013). The results are convincing enough to conclude that training on IELTS writing skills has a significant effect on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future. More specifically, it is concluded that training on IELTS writing skills enhances expected and responsible selves and weakens feared possible selves.

## DISCUSSION

The mission of the present study was to answer three research questions. On the first research question 'How do EFL learners define their possible selves in the future before training on IELTS writing skills?', it was shown that feared selves were stronger than expected and responsible selves among the participants before training on IELTS writing skills. About the second research question 'How do EFL learners define their possible selves in the future before training on IELTS writing skills?', it was revealed that expected and responsible selves were stronger than feared selves among the participants after training on IELTS writing skills. Concerning the third research question 'What is the effect of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves in the future?', it was proved that training on IELTS writing skills had a significant effect on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves as well as the dimensions of the possible selves in the future. More particularly, it was shown that training on IELTS writing skills enhances expected and responsible selves and weakens feared possible selves. In comparing the findings with the results of the previous studies, it is worth noting that no similar study was found wherein training on IELTS writing skills has been implemented to explore its effectiveness on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves. However, implicitly consistent with this study, in the studies by Conway and Clark (2003) and Hamman et al. (2010), EFL teachers showed more dominant feared possible selves at the beginning. This while in the passage of time, their expected selves proved to be more prominent. Moreover, in the study by Harrison (2018), higher education was found to be significantly influential on the possible selves formation. Similarly, in the studies by Hardgrove et al. (2015), Landau et al. (2017), Oyserman et al. (2011), and Riahipour et al. (2020), educational interventions proved to be effective on re-orientation of individuals in their possible selves.

To justify the results, it can be argued that different forms of academic writing influence the identity (re)construction (Anderson, 2017). Similarly, it can be proposed that writing skill sets new forms of identity in students (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This is exactly what was meant by Berlin (1988) when he argued that identity negotiation and writing instruction have always been interplayed. These all show that writing instruction and identity (re)construction are strongly tied. Accordingly, it seems reasonable that as a result of being exposed to teaching writing skills, students' possible selves as well as their dimensions are reconstructed. The other justification which can be put forth is that IELTS writing skills training, like any other training type, has the potential to empower the learners, enhance their self-confidence and self-efficacy, and make them more autonomous. This in turn can help them reconstruct their possible selves in specific ways. Further, as put forth by Crawford and Greaves (2015), training and instruction cause new coping strategies to rejuvenate and this may contribute to transformations in possible selves (re)construction. Additionally, as elaborated by Motallebzadeh and Kazemi (2018),



possible selves construction or negotiation is exposed to change as a consequence of changes in knowledge, practice and experience. Obviously, IELTS writing skills training is considered a new experience with its own kind of knowledge building potential. Therefore, it can impact the learners' construction of the possible selves in the future. Finally, due to being exposed to training of IELTS writing skills, their motivation to learn may have been corroborated and this is associated with transformations in the possible selves construction (Zadshir et al., 2020).

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Taking the important role of identity and possible selves in education and EFL learning, the findings show the necessity to use IELTS writing skills training in EFL classes so that students' possible selves are reconstructed in a way that they experience less fears, have a higher sense of responsibility, and wish more expectations. In this way, their identity is also formed, transformed, constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed. With a view to the association between identity of learners and their EFL achievement, this in turn can contribute to more improvements in EFL learning in general.

All in all, based on the findings, it can be concluded that teaching IELTS writing skills has a significant effect on EFL learners' construction of the possible selves and their dimensions. It can also be concluded that the possible selves (re)construction is not taken place in vacuum but it is changeable as affected by teaching IELTS writing skills. That is, the viewpoint that the possible selves are genetically fixed and static in nature is frayed in favor of the view that the possible selves are susceptible to educational interventions.

Therefore, different groups of EFL stakeholders including curriculum planners and teachers are suggested to inject IELTS writing skills training in EFL curricula in an attempt to help EFL learners reconstruct their possible selves. Besides, EFL learners should be encouraged to improve their knowledge of IELTS writing skills so that they can experience positive changes in their possible selves (re)construction. Future researchers are recommended to re-conduct the present study in the longitudinal format to see the possible long-term effects of training on IELTS writing skills on EFL learners' possible selves (re)construction.

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### Biodata

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