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## Ecological Understanding of Concept Blockage in Writing Anxiety Based on Bronfenbrenner' Chronosystem

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### ABSTRACT

During this qualitative study on writing anxiety among EFL learners which was done as part of a large scale Ph.D dissertation by the authors, most learners complained about conceptual blockage. They claimed they did not know what to write or how to start. We started to ecologically study the causes of the issue from Bronfenbrenner's perspective. We realized that the learners' causes are mostly related to chronosystem than macro-system or microsystem. The participants were 8 novice EFL to-be teachers and 8 expert EFL teachers of Iranian ministry of education who voluntarily took part in a longitudinal study in three academic semesters. They were interviewed, observed and asked to keep journals; we coded all the data using Nvivo10. The finding confirmed Horwits' idea (1986) that the discrepancy between matured thought and immature language skill is one of the causes of concept blockage. Therefore, besides all the ecological elements and the chronosystem interactions, learners should improve their language skills to get rid of conceptual blockage. Finally, in order to understand and interpret the learners' complex behavior in classroom situations, it is better to study ecologically.

**Keywords:** *Expansive Learning, Conceptual Blockage, Macro-Layer, Micro-Layer, Nested Ecosystem Model*

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### 1. Introduction

All writers have writing block (Evans, 2013). Writing anxiety has got different names like: writer's block, writing block and writing apprehension which refer to the same concept (Betancourt & Phinney, 1988; Cheng, 2004; Rose and Rose, 2009; Evans, 2013). However, the term concept blockage or conceptual block is different from the writer's block. Concept block was a theme which emerged out of the qualitative data analysis of the different causes of writing anxiety which was coined through this project; it is part of the writing anxiety and not synonymous with writing block.

Foreign language anxiety can be defined as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning process" (Trang, et al., 2012, p.128).

However, writing anxiety is generally used to mean the negative and anxious feelings that disrupt part of the writing process (McLeod, 1987). It also relates to the tendency of people to avoid writing (Daly & Miller, 1975). Many language researchers reckon writing anxiety as being considered as one of the main predictors of academic performance (Sioson, 2011). Hence, the learners' feeling of stress, anxiety and nervousness might hinder their language abilities (Tanveer, 2007). One way to study the language skills is through the ecological investigation, thereby we can have more interpretive understanding of the issue (Bazely & Jackson, 2013). We also try to link the different notions and propose our own interpretation.

During ecological studies, we may encounter the ideas of Vygotsky on activity theory and the impact of collective

interactions; we can also observe the expanded form of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) by Engestrom as the third generation where elements like division of labor, rules and community are added to the Vygotsky's initial model (Vygotsky, 1978; Engestrom, 2001; Yamagata-lynch, 2010). Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory is closely related to Vygotsky and Engestrom's notion of activity theory (Engestrom, 1987). Bronfenbrenner studies the human development in a nested model taking the individual in the center (microsystem), then the individual and their immediate surroundings (exo-system), the individual and the outer society including school, neighbors and university (meso-system) and finally the individual interacting with a larger layer of society (macro-system). Later, Bronfenbrenner added the chrono-system as an interacting linkage between the different layers of the nested ecosystem model. It was as a result of much criticism on lack of interacting feature (Jarvis, 2008). Chronosystem is a forgotten element in Bronfenbrenner's model (Johnson, 2008), without this system the linkage between the layers and the causes of the conceptual blockage in writing is hard to discern.

The ecological study is a type of qualitative research with focus on the phenomenological aspect of development whether in language or psychology (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Therefore, many scholars do not expect much intervention or change to take place; they rather prefer reading the detailed descriptions on the phenomenon (van Lier, 2004; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010; Engestrom, 2017).

Although ecological linguistics takes different factors like context, relation, emergence, value, criticality and reductionism into consideration, we may not look for the transformations to take place (van Lier, 2004; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). However, this study seeks to look at the agential role of applying the ecological investigation to help learners solve conceptual blockage in writing. As mentioned, one aspect of investigation in language learning is writing anxiety. Anxiety is a debilitating factor in language learning and many learners suffer from it (Cheng, 2004; Sanders-Reio, et. al, 2014). Besides, writing is a really demanding skill which makes the learning process more complex (Smith, 2017). Writing blockage was frequently reported as one of the main causes of the learners' anxiety during the writing process (Cheng, 2004; Smith,

2017).

### *1.1 Statement of the Problem*

During a larger scale study on investigating the ecological causes of writing anxiety as a Ph.D. dissertation in Iran, most learners claimed to suffer from conceptual blockage, lack of knowledge and information. They believed they usually did not know what to write or how to start. They also said they did not possess general knowledge on specific topics.

The bulk of knowledge on learners anxiety have usually been collected through quantitative surveys and quasi-experimental measures providing little contextualized information about L2 writing anxiety (Peng, 2012). Few studies have qualitatively investigated an ecological understanding of the writing anxiety among language learners. We are not aware of the interactional effects of the conceptual blockage during writing anxiety from the ecological point of view. Conceptual blockage is not just an affective or even a cognitive issue, rather it can be a social-historical one (Bruffee, 1984; Wu, 2015).

Thus theoretically and practically, we need to get away from conducting just quantitative research and have a broader look at conceptual blockage in writing anxiety. To this end we need to redefine the Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and adopt it to the present context.

Bronfenbrenner died at the age of 88 in 2005, it seems his proposition of chrono-system has not been fully-fledged (Johnson, 2008; Lau and Ng, 2014). When we study the ecosystem model, we feel it needs further expansion. Although Bronfenbrenner himself defended the temporal-historical changes and the interactive roles in the layers (Engeström, 2014). We still feel a hollow in linking the layers. We may discover other scholarly written papers which implicitly deal with chrono-system (Jarvis, 2008); however, we notice no application of the model in language acquisition. The chronosystem is a compliment to the ecosystem model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Therefore, we study the conceptual blockage in writing from an ecological perspective in a chronosystem framework.

### *1.2 Purpose of the Study*

The conceptual blockage in writing anxiety is not related only to the microsystem or macro-system. We need to study this phenomenon from a broader standpoint taking all the features of the ecosystem into consideration. Therefore,



the inclusive system theory takes the whole ecosystem model into account (Tudge, et. al, 2009). It goes beyond Bronfenbrenner model and takes the reciprocal interactions between the individuals and the system (Jarvis, 2008, 2007). Therefore, reactions toward Bronfenbrenner's' initial model which did not address developmental change and the proximal processes led him to adapt his model and develop the concept of chrono-system which captures 'all of these interacting elements over time - the developing person, the nature of the environment, and their proximal processes of interaction' (Moen et al. 2012, p. 123). Subsequently, it expanded into micro-time and macro-time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998). Tudge et al. (2009) note that Bronfenbrenner's earlier work never committed to a view of context without individual interrelation to that context. Therefore incorporating a temporal-historical dimension to the ecological model allows for a reflexive turn which makes the exploration of system more malleable. So within the chrono-system of Bronfenbrenner, it becomes easier to study learners' interaction within the micro-time to macro-time (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). It also makes our study a case of 'inquiry as stance' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Inquiry is the constant questioning and stance is the non-stop process of seeking for knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Besides, as like the ecological studies we look for emergence to observe how factors are interacting so that the conceptual blockage has emerged (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010; van Lier, 2004, 2010, 2012).

## **2. Literature Review**

For many years the concept of anxiety has been a concern in applied linguistics. Anxiety is defined as a feeling of being very worried about something that may happen or may have happened, so that you think about it all the time or is a feeling of wanting to do something very much, but being very worried that you will not succeed (Advanced American English Longman, 2017). It is associated with feelings of nervousness, blocking, uncertainty, uneasiness, or apprehension (Scovels, 1978). Based on various studies in TESOL, anxiety has a direct link with foreign language ability. According to Field (2004) common anxiety is one of the many affective issues influencing attention and henceforth result in weakening in language proficiency.

Anxiety can show positive and negative effects on writing performance (Alpert & Haber, 1960; Lehrer, Goldman, & Strommen, 1990; Negari, et. al., 2012). Writing has constantly been the foremost concern of the four skills for EFL specialists and scholars (Ellis, 2010). The natural rationalization for this is that the ability to write in English is considered vital to prepare learners for accomplishment in college and their future professions (Tuan, 2010). In addition, the writing process backs to the development of learners cognitive skills in conquering the essential approaches in the learning process such as analysis, synthesis, inference, etc. (Bacha, 2002). However, most Iranian EFL students have been found to have an inadequate competence in L2 writing (Rezaei & Jafari, 2015; Jafari & Nejad Ansari, 2012; Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011; Zaree & Farvardin, 2009).

Writing involves social actions and is situated within the socio-cultural, political and institutional context (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Therefore both micro factors like the teacher views and student attitudes as well as macro factors like language planning, program philosophies and curriculum need to be studied (Ellis, 2010; Evans et al., 2010; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010; Ferris et al., 2012; 2013; Goldstein, 2006). Studies show that writing anxiety happens because of the nature of language complexity in general and complexity of writing process in particular (Balemir, 2009; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000; Karakaya, and Hakan, 2011). Consequently, Soleimani and Alavi (2013) have reiterated that the field of SLA research "might be redefined as a complex, dynamical, non-linear, open and adaptive system of inquiry to find probable solutions to problems" (p.128) focusing on the fluctuating nature of the SLA research.

### **2.1 Emergence of Ecological Theory**

Complexity, emergence and nonlinearity are features of ecological understanding. Historically, ecology, as a biological field of study was introduced in the 19th century by German biologist Ernst Haeckel "to refer to the totality of relationships of an organism with all other organisms with which it comes into contact" (van Lier, 2004, p. 3). In the 1960s the term "ecology" entered the language to address the relationship between human life and the biological environment (Pinnow, 2012). This focus on relations, interactions,



endangerment, and diversity pushed the ecological idea into other fields like anthropology, sociology, psychology, and linguistics (Garner, 2004)

In psychology, Bronfenbrenner (1989) and Gibson (1977, 1979) heavily shaped ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner (1989) posited a formal theory, ecological systems theory, which encompassed psychological, social, biological, cultural, and identity structures in human development. Gibson's (1979) notion of affordance is a central tenet of ecological approaches in qualitative research to an ecological approach in research which differed profoundly from traditional structuralism. Viewing humans and environment as linked, but not in a mechanistic fashion. In an effort to address the poverty of representation apparent in much linguistic research, linguist Einer Haugen (1972) provided a more direct link to language within an ecological perspective. Haugen coined the term "ecology of language" (1972, p. 328). His ideas were a powerful impetus for linguistic researchers seeking to address the interplay of language, language user, and environment.

Haugen (1972) defined language ecology as "the study of interaction between any given language and its environment" (p. 325) claiming that languages have life, purpose, and form that appear outwardly as action but "live in the mind as potential" (p. 327) and therefore the life of language should be treated as dynamic and interdisciplinary. Therefore, applied linguistics research when studied through the ecology of language is partly psychological, partly sociological and shaped by users (Haugen, 1972).

The two main trends in applied linguistics research emerging from Haugen's (1972) work are eco-linguistics and ecology of language approaches. Eco-linguistics studies language from its linguistic perspective while ecology studies language from its socio-cultural perspective (Lechevrel, 2009).

Therefore, to study writing anxiety from a socio-cultural perspective, Bronfenbrenner's nested ecosystem model (1993) can be ecologically studied. The model puts the learner within a sphere of layered environment consisting of micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and the macro-system (Ryan, 2001). The micro-system involves the functional, physical, cognitive and affective aspect of the learner (Berk, 2000) or the interaction with the

immediate environment. The *meso-system* is a layer which provides the connection between the structures of the child's micro-system (Berk, 2000) like the connection between the child's teacher and his parents, between his school and his neighborhood, etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Many researchers in the field of social psychology believe that behavior is specific to the situation in which it occurs (MacLeod & Fraser, 2010). In other words, behavior is a function of both environment and person. From an ecological point of view, which examines how each component in a context is related to other components, the notion of context in L2 learning is emphasized (Cao, 2009). Also, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective on human development, both person and environment play a part in development. The ecological approach to research in language classrooms has recently attracted the attention of L2 researchers (Cao, 2009, 2011; Peng, 2012; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). The ecological perspective in language learning considers individuals' cognitive processes related to their experiences in the physical and social world (Leather & Van Dam, 2003). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective investigates human development across a set of interrelated structures called ecosystems, and the linkage between the layers or systems is referred to as chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Peng (2012), based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, provided operational definitions of these layers with regard to L2 willingness to communicate (WTC). As examples of these ecosystems, the language classroom is considered as a microsystem (the home environment), students' past experiences outside the language classroom are considered examples of a meso-system, and curriculum design and course assessments are examples of an exo-system. The sociocultural and educational context in Iran is an example of a macro-system (Peng, 2012). However, Peng has no mention of the chronosystem, the interaction of all the systems. The relations or link between the layers has been alternatively termed 'activity' by Engestrom (2014). Therefore, the goal of ecological study within the nested ecosystem framework refers back to dynamic nature of activity systems analysis which requires constant analysis and evaluation as well as expansive learning theory (Daniels, Cole & Wertsch, 2007;



Engestrom, 2016; Roth and Lee, 2007). Expansive learning "proclaims the possibility of expansive transformations in activity systems" (Engestrom, 2001, p. 137). Expansive learning is premised, as Engestrom notes, on the idea that "people and organizations are all the time learning something that is not stable, not even defined or understood ahead of time" (p. 137). The principle of expansive learning is related to the principle of contradictions. When contradictions are identified and resolved, then transformation can be brought about (Russell and Yanez, 2003). Therefore, transformations can be productive in that they can cause change. They can help learners transform their activity, expand their learning; in other words, the role of the formative interventions in a qualitative study like writing anxiety is related to the notion of transformative agency especially during complex situations (Engeström & Sannino 2010). Besides agency is activity-based, object-related and collective, contrary to actions which are individual and outcome-oriented (Kaptelinin & Cole, 1997).

### 3. Method

This study was part of a large scale Ph.D. dissertation project on investigating the ecological causes of writing anxiety based on activity systems analysis (Vygotsky, 1978; Engestrom, 2001-2010; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010-2017) and Bronfenbrenner's nested ecosystem model (1979-1995). The whole longitudinal project lasted three semesters, almost two years (2015-2017) and we applied different methods of qualitative data analysis. We observed both teachers and EFL learners' classroom, interviewed them, and asked them to keep journals related to writing anxiety. Conceptual blockage was the most prominent cause of writing anxiety reported by learners and reiterated by teachers. Therefore, we decided to re-analyze the data and interpret the findings based on Bronfenbrenner' ecological framework and chronosystem model. We also used Nvivo version 10, as a platform to code data in text, audio and video formats.

#### 3.1 Participants

The study was done in Farhangian College of Men (Teacher training college) in Bojnourd, North Khorasan Province, Iran. The primary participants were the sophomore students of to-be teachers in different provinces of Iran including Khorasan (North, South and Razavi), Sistan, Mazendaran, and Yazd. The study

took place during the school years of 2015-2017. The participants were aged 21 to 24, and their language proficiency was intermediate to upper intermediate. The sampling started with the convenient form moving to more purposive stance (Leavy, 2014). In other words, the study began with the participants available and then based on the aim of the study and the participants' willingness to cooperate, certain individuals were selected. Finally, twelve EFL students participated who met the variation and saturation as well as the diversity (Patton, 2001). Based on their sample writings, their own introspection and report and the *writing anxiety inventory checklist* (Cheng, 2004), we divided them into 5 highly anxious and 7 low anxious language learners. Besides, we tried to select participants who were more willing, better informants, trustworthy and reliable to make the most proper qualitative design (Creswell, 2009). To observe ethicality, the participants were asked to complete the consent form for voluntary participation (Tracy, 2013). The study took three successive semesters and each participant was interviewed 4-5 hours on average, plus the observation, journal keeping and document analysis.

Table 1: Details of the participants

Sr. No.	Category	Participants	Gender	Anxiety level	Proficiency	Experience	Education	Specialisation
1	EFL Learners	Learner 1	M	High	Intermediate	0	BA	TEFL
2		Learner 2	M	Low	Upper-intermediate	1	BA	TEFL
3		Learner 3	M	Low	Upper-intermediate	1	BA	TEFL
4		Learner 4	M	High	Upper-intermediate	1	BA	TEFL
5		Learner 5	M	High	Intermediate	1	BA	TEFL
6		Learner 6	M	Low	Upper-intermediate	1	BA	TEFL
7		Learner 7	M	High	Intermediate	1	BA	TEFL
8		Learner 8	M	Low	Intermediate	0	BA	TEFL
1	EFL Teachers	Teacher 1	M	Low	Advanced	23	Ph.D.	TEFL
2		Teacher 2	M	High	Upper-intermediate	15	MA	TEFL
3		Teacher 3	F	High	Advanced	28	Ph.D.	TEFL
4		Teacher 4	F	High	Upper-intermediate	15	MA	TEFL
5		Teacher 5	F	Low	Advanced	25	MA	TEFL
6		Teacher 6	M	Low	Advanced	24	Ph.D.	TEFL
7		Teacher 7	M	Low	Advanced	18	Ph.D.	TEFL
8		Teacher 8	M	Low	Advanced	20	Ph.D.	TEFL

#### 3.2 Data Collection

As mentioned, it was a part of a more comprehensive doctoral project. It followed three stages of naturteacher 6stic inquiry methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); first we interviewed and observed the EFL learners based on Mwanza model (2002), and we followed classroom observation as a focused participant observer, or "observer as participant" or "reactive" observer (Angrosino, 2007, p. 732), attending another colleague class and recording the writing session. Besides, we did the document analysis and created social network for participants collaboration and

keeping memos. We also interviewed expert teachers and explored the issue as a focus group. However, we do not use their quotes in this study. We collected the data and through careful coding and recoding by using Nvivo10 and the qualitative procedure, we reached some high frequency themes as the main causes (See Appendixes A-F)

#### **4. Data Analysis**

In this section, writing anxiety has been discussed within Bronfenbrenner's model and later conceptual block has been interpreted based on chronosystem. To support the interpretations, the participants' opinions have been used.

##### **4.1 Nested Ecosystem Model**

The first layer in the Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem model was related to the individual. However as Bronfenbrenner raised it, the layers were nested and interconnected. Teacher 4, a qualified teacher, believed that learners become anxious due to various reasons originated from family and childhood. She also stated that some learners were totally opposite being not anxious at all. Teacher 5 focused on the role of her own family and how it influenced her writing and made her anxious. She emphasized on the crucial role of family especially the mother. She believed that the disagreement among parents might cause anxiety which consequently permeated to other layers. Teacher 8 believed that family judgment was very important. She stated that lack of knowledge could lead to low self-confidence; therefore, the source of anxiety was from within the learner himself.

Teacher 4, Teacher 5 and Teacher 8 were all married with two kids, and they were well familiar with the important role of family. They thought that parents were influential figures in reducing or producing anxiety among family members, which might consequently lead to writing anxiety.

Learner 7 was a highly anxious person. He reiterated the same comment made by Teacher 8 that the sources of WA was within the person himself, due to lack of enough practice. He believed that learners might not be cognitively and mentally ready to write, or even unwilling to write. Similar comment was raised by Learner 2 another EFL student who was not anxious and felt self-confident in his writing and speaking "*Most of the time if I'm about to write an essay, I'm majorly concerned about the ideas and vocabularies that I have to use in my writing....*" (Learner 2, July, 25, 2016). To learner 2, cognitive and emotional states

were more important than family-related or environmental conditions.

On the contrary, learner 1 thought that emotional states, or relaxed situation like home might lower anxiety. He thought that when writing for lower ability people, the person felt more secured. Teacher 3 who was an experienced teacher focused on introspection and inner motivation as two of the main exceptional elements to boost writing ability and to lower writing anxiety. She believed that some learners were by nature more self-confident. Another EFL lady teacher, Teacher 4, thought that writing anxiety was an individualistic but a general issue. Teacher 5 who was an anxious teacher stated that her mother was the cause of her anxiety which led to her writing anxiety. She believed that mothers could play vital roles in helping their kids sort out their anxiety. She regretted that her mother had compared her writing with her peers. Now she felt anxious to be compared with others; she felt insecure. However, she had found her own remedy through e-writings, where there was fewer face to face interaction or judgmental comments. Teacher 8 thought that being criticized was one cause of anxiety. Teacher 2 proposed that perfectionism hindered writing and made the writer anxious. Teacher 1 mentioned conceptual lack or blockage as one of the individualistic concerns in writing. He also referred to emotional block when people get unwilling, uninterested or tired of writing. Teacher 3 concluded that the writing problem was more emergent at the micro-layer than macro or global layers.

##### **4.1.1 Meso-Level & Exo-Level**

Learner 6 confessed the role of peer pressure and the probable misbehavior by others as the main causes of writing anxiety. He thought that friends look for a weak point in a person and try to laugh and play jokes on him. Then a learner might get anxious if others read his/her writing. It might also happen to teachers when their learners might judge their writing ability. Learner 8 went further and stated that writing showed the writers' personality trait, then consciously one might feel anxious. In fact he thought that by writing, we exposed ourselves to others' judgments. Then a writer might get completely blocked if he thought of others' evaluation. Teacher 3 focused on the role of society, she reported that "*...discursively speaking, the society and social setting for sure influences the writing process*". Again the idea of emotional block was reiterated by teachers. Similar comments related to affective block was





expressed by teacher 5 who believed that some learners were more risk-taker who tried to write better to show off; they also tried to find more mistakes with their peer writings.

Related to emotional blockage, teacher 8 thought that homogenous learning writing situation was less anxiety raising than heterogeneous contexts where those who felt lower in writing ability felt more anxious and more humiliated. Contrary to Teacher 4 who found individual writing a remedy to her writing anxiety, Teacher 8 believed that individual work was more demanding and anxiety-causing than the group work. Teacher 8 was a very sociable teacher from the South of Iran who easily made friends. Teacher 1 thought the mismatch between goals and outcomes causes anxiety. In other words he restated the idea of knowing something and applying it, competence versus performance. Therefore, if we interpret teacher 1's ideas ecologically based on van Leir (2004), we can make discrepancy between standard and quality. The learners might feel they have fulfilled the writing task, performing their agential role; however, it might not meet the standard criteria set by the teacher or the education system.

Learner 7 thought to solve WA, he needed to expand his world knowledge; as a young student, Learner 7 needed to read and gain more experience. Teacher 8, who is an anxious teacher, felt that coeducational settings caused more anxiety for both sexes. She added "...girls are more anxious than boys, they feel more idealistic than boys". She also agreed with individual work being more anxiety-raising as only one person takes the responsibility. Teacher 8 felt anxious even when he talked to male teachers or learners. Teacher 3 also confirmed group work to reduce writing anxiety and boost confidence among the members. She blamed schools as not proper places to reduce anxiety.

#### 4.1.2 Macro-System

The outer layer in the ecosystem model was the environment or the society. Teacher 6 an EFL teacher from Zanjan stated:

*"In our society, women are superficially try to look more beautiful and appealing to others, whereas if the base of the society is on thinking and mentality, the ladies might have not focused much on looking more beautiful as they do now. I mean the meta-system of the societies' thinking has given rise to such inclination. We like specially our ladies like to be*

*praised in public, to be seen and if it were somewhere else with different macro-systemic thinking, we might have observed different perspective"* (interview, July 26, 2016).

Besides Teacher 6 reiterated on the important role of policy makers saying that

*"Overall, ladies resistance to learning in public is much higher than men. Men seem to be more carefree than women. Men usually work better than ladies, and then we need to study the reasons for the case. We need to think about it, is it related to the authority given out of women in our country which causes the issue, or the more freedom and leadership assigned to men caused such problems. So that in our society men feel a sense of I can whereas women reached the "I cannot through the policy in our country"* (Teacher 6, interview, 27 July, 2016).

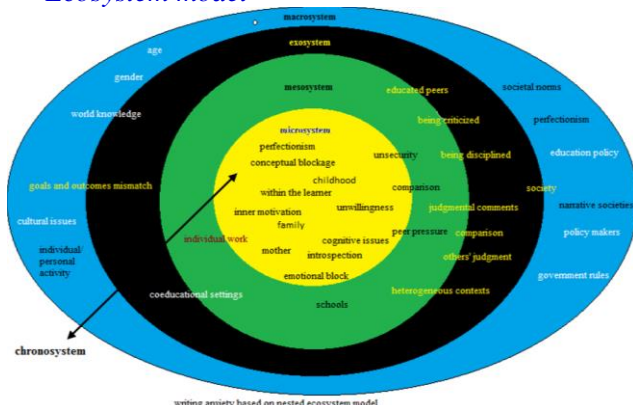
Teacher 5 referred to the government rules which banned her from choosing her thesis topic. She believed that due to political, religious and ideological reasons, learners were not allowed to select every topic. To learner 1, societal norms were among factors determining the anxiety. For Learner 8 the society determines the types of interaction and treatment. He thought the misbehavior has become a norm which leads to anxious states. Teacher 7, teacher 6, teacher 1 and most other teachers agreed that writing is considered an individual/ personal activity in Iran, whereas in other developed countries people do cooperative writing projects. They thought it is a macro-systemic phenomenon, as if the society supports the individual task more than the pair or group activity. Therefore, we also needed a cultural alteration in this respect.

Teacher 7 believed that within Iranian context, people differed in dealing with the writing task; he thought rich environment was very important in reducing the anxious states. He expressed that it related to macro and micro level. Based on macro-objectives of the Iranian ministry of education the learners should be able to read than write. Therefore their writing anxiety is an expected phenomenon.

Teacher 3 suggested that at the macro-level, the society can reduce anxiety by having coeducational classes, (In Iranian educational context, before university, no classes are coeducational). She added that the mixed, co-educational classes can sort out such problems as the girls' anxiety reduces and the boys' confidence raises. Besides at macro level, we were not taught how to write or as teacher 3 put it "... we are

born in narrative societies, meaning that we are told stories, we rarely are asked to read a story and re-write it in our own words. Or critically talk about it" (Teacher 3 interview, July 28, 2016).

Figure: 1 Writing Anxiety based on nested Ecosystem model



#### 4.2 Conceptual Block

During the focus group on writing anxiety, the expert teachers concluded that if one is not knowledgeable, it leads to their lack of confidence; in other words, conceptual blockage might result in emotional block. For most of the highly anxious learners, concept block was one of the main reasons for writing anxiety. Learner 4, an EFL learner, expressed that he got no big deal with vocabulary or grammar but his big problem was with knowledge shortage; he did not know about the topic and asked himself "what to write now", then he became anxious and agitated. The same comment was expressed by Learner 4. He said that "in my case, writing anxiety takes place when I do not know what to write about, or simply don't know where to commence the writing" (collaborative writing, June, 2017). Learner 3, who had studied a lot of books, thought that the writing problem was not with the topic or knowledge but with lexicon and words. He implicitly pointed to the role of reading and knowledge expansion and how reading could help reduce anxiety. In contrast to Learner 3, learner 4 who was a highly anxious learner reported that some learners do not know how to write in their mother tongue; their problem is with general knowledge or concept blockage. Learner 6, another EFL learner, confessed to suffer from the shortage of knowledge. However, he was eagerly looking for a remedy:

*I found out that my own problem for writing is conceptual blockage. But as you know knowing only the reason cannot solve the problem by its own. After finding out the reason we must look for a solution. Lack of knowledge is one of the most important point that has a great role at writing. Some students know the rules of writing and also know how they must write in a standard*

*framework. But they can't understand the subject that they have been given to write about it! And I also think that it is lack of knowledge that finally leads to the conceptual blockage!*

Learner 8 guessed that conceptual blockage could be one of the factors affecting him, so that he could not continue trying for finding an idea. To him it was not the main cause but one of the many factors raised by the teachers and the learners. So learner 8 was a highly anxious learner. He talked about two main causes of writing anxiety which resulted in his conceptual blockage named as lack of knowledge and environmental conditions:

*When I want to start writing I get stuck at the very first moment. I get conceptual blockage I try to plan in my mind in advance but usually I fail even I have difficulty on how to start especially in academic and formal writing I think and keep thinking in order to plan in my mind and devote much time to it but finally I may have an incomplete plan. However, I start writing. I write one or two paragraph and again I stuck. I cannot make a bridge between what are in my mind in order to jot down. I think everyone tries to do his best and write as well as possible and I am not an exception. I think conceptual blockage is one of the main causes of writing anxiety. Some factors that cause conceptual blockage are: lack of knowledge which is the most [important] factor that causes conceptual blockage. When sb [somebody] has not enough information about what he is requested to write about, he can't outline and organize what he wants to jot down well before he starts writing, so he may face conceptual blockage especially when he wants to start writing. Another factor that causes conceptual blockage is environment: for example: being in a[n] environment that a noise, image, distract you, you may face conceptual blockage" (collaborative writing, June, 2017).*

#### 4.3 Chronosystem

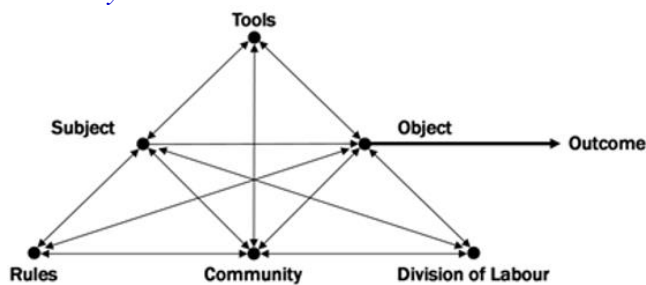
The chronosystem was carefully termed by Bronfenbrenner to fill the gap between the interrelated layers. The conceptual blockage can be related to any of the interconnected systems or layers in Bronfenbrenner's model. We started with the premise that conceptual block is one of the main causes of writing anxiety which is situated well in the macro-system layer. We initially believed that the macro-system influences the meso-system, exo-system and the micro-system. In fact we hoped to suggest another expanded socio-cultural theory. We thought Piaget had focused on the role of micro-system, and in fact, by *genetic epistemology*, Piaget intended to expand the phylogenesis of knowledge by





studying its ontogenesis and vice versa (Demetriou, Shayer & Efklides, 1994). In fact Piaget disregarded the societal role of the child's education. On the other hand, Vygotsky focused on meso-system and exo-systems. Vygotsky referred to ZPD, scaffolding and peer and parents' rapport. However, we see few cases of macro-system and global concerns in his views. Then we can wishfully state that other global issues might affect our behavior. We wanted to focus on the role of macro-system and claim that acquiring world knowledge might be a remedy to learners' writing anxiety. However, after knowing more about the complexity of the writing anxiety issue, we realized that the layers are interrelated. Lack of information might relate to the microsystem, when a person is not interested in a topic, meso-system when at school or neighboring situation a topic has been tabooed or ostracized, or even at macro-system when learners lack general knowledge about global issues and fail to write on specific topics.

*Figure 2: Engestrom cultural historical activity theory*



Besides, the chronosystem is in line with Vygotsky (1978) proposal on studying human being through a genetic approach. It looks at human being from a broader perspective of *phylogenetic*—the wholeness of the organism— *ontogenetic*, the rules and norms governing the activity and the *micro-genetics* related to the subject's cognition and affection as well the activities done for the time being. Therefore, putting the conceptual blockage within the Vygotsky's framework, we can realize that all elements are connected in a complex way. The ontogenetic relates to the rules and norms whether at localized level or globalized level or even the glocalized layer (Soleimani and Nazari, 2015).

### 5. Implication

Most of the research on apprehension before the millennium is on the interference model and not deficit model (Musch and Broder, 1999). Due to the expansion of knowledge and demand for learning and acquisition, we might need a re-definition of deficit model. It seems that learners' job in writing has become more

complex. Most learners expressed they lacked knowledge; compared to years ago, they might be more educated; however, due to more accessibility and awareness, they think they know less. One cause of writing anxiety might be related to learners' language skill; however, most writers who suffer concept blockage claim to face the same difficulty in their mother tongue. Nevertheless, Horwitz (1986) stated that self-consciousness and learner's apprehension of the language can be caused by the discrepancy between matured thought and immature language skill. It might occur at intermediate or elementary levels of language proficiency, but at advanced or upper intermediate levels that is not much probable. In this project, most learners claimed the concept blockage caused their writing anxiety, although they were mature learners. What is relevant is the influence of reading on writing.

Reading and writing skills can affect each other and share many things in common. They influence each other whether negatively or positively. People increase their reading skills in educational life followed by operational written skills. However, it is acknowledged that many pupils cannot gain actual writing proficiency (Ruhi, 1994; Karakaya, and Ulper, 2011). This is due to the complexity of the writing task and cognitive demand it requires (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Hopefully, the learners who confessed encountering concept block tried harder to cope with the situation. They searched for remedy and finally found it. They might resort to reading and acquiring more knowledge. Sometimes, the concept block is referred to as a creative moment (Evans, 2013). Evans calls the concept block a *creative rhythm* as though we are battling against our natural way of acting on things. Evans believes that the affective domain is often at the core of a writing block and so worth exploring. Although it is a belief by Evans, who studied concept block among some famous writers, it might not be accepted by other language teachers. Evans concludes that "feelings of shame (in all their complexities), fear of criticism and audience, and not being easy with the role of writer, can all underlie a halt in our writing" (2013, p.57). Nevertheless, the context of this study differed; the learners were not experienced enough, had not read many books and were still young, they thought lack of knowledge finally leads to the conceptual blockage.

We cannot simply deny the role of emotional blockage in writing anxiety; however, we can state that surely mastery brings confidence and vice versa, and that learners need to know how to write. In other words, writing does not emerge by itself. People are not necessarily inborn writers. Besides, to help learners develop conceptually, we should start with simple topics which could be a productive approach. And finally based on expert teachers' suggestions learners need to form concepts first then move to form; and initially to have background knowledge and the required experience.

### **6. Suggestions to Solve Concept Block**

To solve the concept block, learners and teachers suggested some solutions. The teachers' role was highly emphasized by both groups. Teachers suggested that learners need to receive support and supervision from the teacher's side. They should give very clear instructions. They also need to be specific about the role of each person in the group. Besides, teachers confessed that they should not compare learners' writing, feel close to the learners, teach them to develop their full potential, and make them feel happy about their performance. Teachers also reported that they must teach learners how to write; in Iranian context the learners have not been taught to write neither in English nor in Farsi. Students have to write about a topic without being provided with the general view or specific information about the topic. They are not even instructed on how to organize their writing. Learners should be helped not to get mixed up with the amount and range of words as well as the word and structural ordering so that their mind was always mingling in ambiguity. Therefore, before moving to the introduction, body and conclusion, teachers should teach concepts and meaning. Finally, all teachers agreed that to be a better writer, one needs to read more; they should encourage them to read more novels and short stories. The analogy is like a dancer on the stage, if she knows the ABCs of dancing, then she would not be anxious. Writing is similar to dancing and many other skills, if we have practiced well, then we can perform the best; however, the most crucial ingredient of writing is reading. Moreover, we need to arise learners' interest in reading more, and focus more on freer process writing.

Learners also expressed their own style on solving their concept block. For example one of the learners reported that to

solve writing anxiety for his own case, he has realized to read more and conceptually boost his own world knowledge and consequently his writing concepts. They also referred to the correction procedure which is mostly rule-based, accuracy – based and grammar-based. Meaning and process should also receive importance in writing. Students objected that they sometimes struggle with a piece of writing but all their endeavor is totally ignored due to scrutiny of the teacher. Others believed that boosting vocabulary and expanding the lexical bank can be a stopper to writing anxiety; therefore, the solution is reading more books. Besides, some learners suggested that people need to change their way of thinking. They thought that fluency should come before accuracy. The focus should be on writing flaw or process than accurate writing focusing on grammar and vocabulary. This can help develop and encourage creativity which consequently can make learners interested. Finally, the learners suggested reading more, and pre-reading and pre-writing techniques for starting the assignment, which in the long term will eradicate writing anxiety.

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### Appendix 1: Mwanza Model

**Table 4.5** Eight-step-model for translating activity systems from Mwanza (2002b)

Identify the...	Question to ask
Step 1 Activity	What sort of activity am I interested in?
Step 2 Objective	Why is this activity taking place?
Step 3 Subjects	Who is involved in carrying out this activity?
Step 4 Tools	By what means are the subjects carrying out this activity?
Step 5 Rules and regulations	Are there any cultural norms, rules, and regulating governing the performance of the activity?
Step 6 Division of labor	Who is responsible for what when carrying out this activity and how are the roles organized?
Step 7 Community	What is the environment in which the activity is carried out?
Step 8 Outcome	What is the desired outcome from this activity?

Note that Mwanza prefers to use the word "objective" in place of "object"

**Table 4.6** Questions Marken used in his study based on Mwanza (2002b)

1. What *tools* do the *subject* use to achieve their *objective* and how?
2. What *rules* affect the way the subjects achieve their *objective* and how?
3. How does the *division of labor* influence the way the *subjects* satisfy their *objective*?
4. How does the *tools* in use affect the way the *community* achieves the *objective*?
5. What *rules* affect the way the *community* satisfies their *objective* and how?
6. How does the *division of labor* affect the way the *community* achieves the *objective*?

### Appendix B: Sample Classroom Observation

Coding Summary Report			
<b>Project:</b>	writing anxiety		
<b>Generated:</b>	12/13/2016 11:34 AM		
<b>Coding By</b>			
<b>Name</b>	<b>Initials</b>		
sony	MN		
Mohsen	NZ		
<b>Total Users</b>	2		
<b>Internals\Focus group\Rohallah\Rohallah\roohallah teaching</b>	<b>Document</b>		
<b>Node Coding</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>Coverage</b>	
Cases\Focus Group\6 teachers discussing WA	1	100%	
<b>Reference 1</b>	<b>Coverage</b>	<b>Character Range</b>	<b>0 - 11025</b>
0:27..T: Hello, How are you? Did you enjoy your lunch? What did you eat? How was it? was it delicious? How much did you eat? Too much? What did you usually do after you eat lunch? Do you take any exercise after you have lunch? do we have some exercises just after lunch? How about playing some Pantomime?			
--S: Rice and Kebab...Yes, delicious...Not too much... I usually take a nap...No, of course not (drive, exercise after lunch)...No (after lunch exercise) is not recommended...(Playing Pantomime) I think that would be feasible....			
T: Ok, I need three of you, to come and help me introduce the topic. Ok, I need to ask you, the only lady in the class and two volunteer, you come here, you have three cards, you read and act out so that your friend can say what the word is...writing and anxiety...			
Aims: By the end of the session, the trainees are expected to define writing anxiety.			
--to know about the causes of writing anxiety.			
-- To find solution to writing anxiety.			
T: Do you think writing anxiety is important?			
All: without pressure, a learner can write easily.			
T: what IS writing anxiety? is there anyone in the classroom who can define it?			
Amin: the state of being anxious or actually in bad mood. Because you were supposed to do something or not being able to do what you were to do.			
T: very good, you were supposed to do something and you were not able to do it and become anxious. OK, any other comments in the class?			
Mohsen: It relates to the feeling and states of people in class when writing.			
T: So if you look at the slide here. Can you read it please.			
Mohsen: Negative and anxious feeling which disrupts the writing process...the tendency of people to withdraw from writing...			
T: I like to go specially to he second part instead of the first part. Could you please read it.			
Amin: It also relates to the tendency of people to avoid writing.			
T: Again, to the tendency of the people to avoid writing, so, what can be the reason to avoid writing?			
Shahin: Anxiety.			
T: What! What is the source of this anxiety? From where this anxiety come from? What are the causes of anxiety?			
Shahin: can i answer, [teacher: yeah], there may be different reasons, for example, SHORTAGE OF TIME, NOT HAVING ENOUGH SELF CONFIDENCE, NOT BEING KNOWLEDGEABLE ENOUGH, NOT HAVING ACCESS TO FRUITFUL SOURCES RESOURCES,			

Reference 1 Coverage 100.00% Character Range 0 - 11025

0:27...T: Hello, How are you? Did you enjoy your lunch? What did you eat? How was it? was it delicious? How much did you eat? Too much? What did you usually do after you eat lunch? Do you take any exercise after you have lunch? do we have some exercises just after lunch? How about playing some Pantomime?

--SS: Rice and Kebab...Yes, delicious...Not too much... I usually take a nap...No, of course not (drive, exercise after lunch)...No (after lunch exercise) is not recommended....(Playing Pantomime) I think that would be feasible....

T: Ok, I need three of you, to come and help me introduce the topic. Ok, I need to ask you, the only lady in the class and two volunteer, you come here, you have three cards, you read and act out so that your friend can say what the word is....writing and anxiety....

Aims: By the end of the session, the trainees are expected to define writing anxiety.  
 --to know about the causes of writing anxiety.  
 -- To find solution to writing anxiety.  
 T: Do you think writing anxiety is important?  
 Ail: without pressure, a learner can write easily.

T: what is writing anxiety? is there anyone in the classroom who can define it?  
 Amin: the state of being anxious or actually in bad mood. Because you were supposed to do something or not being able to do what you were to do.

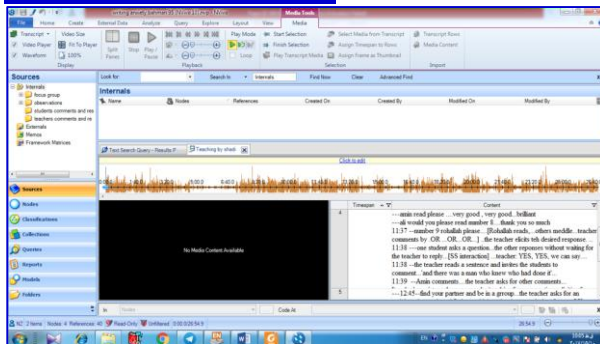
T: very good, you were supposed to do something and you were not able to do it and become anxious. OK, any other comments in the class?

Mohsen: It relates to the feeling and states of people in class when writing.

T: So if you look at the slide here. Can you read it please.  
 Mohsen: Negative and anxious feeling which disrupts the writing process...the tendency of people to withdraw from writing. . . .

T: I like to go specially to he second part instead of the first part. Could you please read it.  
 Amin: It also relates to the tendency of people to avoid writing.

**Appendix C: Coding the Classroom Observation in Nvivo 10**



**Appendix D: Social Network to Discuss Writing Anxiety**



**Appendix E: Sample Coding through Nvivo 10**

**Node Summary Report**

Project: writing anxiety  
 Generated: 12/14/2016 12:01

**Cases\Focus Group\6 teachers discussing WA**

Created On	08/17/2016 01:20	By	MN
Modified On	08/17/2016 01:22	By	MN
Users	1		
Cases	1		

Type	Sources	References	Words	Paragraphs	Region	Duration	Rows
Document	1	1	1,957	159			
Total	1	1	1957	159			0

**Cases\Interviewees\Teachers\Mary Mosehi**

Created On	08/09/2016 07:26	By	MN
Modified On	08/09/2016 07:48	By	MN
Users	1		
Cases	0		

Type	Sources	References	Words	Paragraphs	Region	Duration	Rows
Document	1	1	602	10			
Total	1	1	602	10			0

**Free Nodes\Mistakes and errors**

Created On	08/02/2016 07:39	By	MN
Modified On	09/08/2016 02:10	By	MN
Users	1		
Cases	2		

Type	Sources	References	Words	Paragraphs	Region	Duration	Rows
Document	1	1	76	1			
Video	1	1	0			00:17:00	0
Total	2	2	76	1		00:17:00	0

**Cases\Observation\Teaching by shadi**

Created On	08/17/2016 08:06	By	MN
Modified On	08/17/2016 08:06	By	MN
Users	1		
Cases	1		

Type	Sources	References	Words	Paragraphs	Region	Duration	Rows
Document	1	10	761			26:54:00	9
Video	1	10	761	0		26:54:00	9
Total	2	20	1522	0			18

**Free Nodes\Grammar and structures**

Created On	07/29/2016 04:57	By	MN
Modified On	08/17/2016 12:56	By	MN
Users	1		
Cases	5		

Type	Sources	References	Words	Paragraphs	Region	Duration	Rows
Document	5	6	91	5			
Total	5	6	91	5			0

**Node Coding**

Tree Nodes\aim or goal	References	Coverage
	2	2.36%

Reference 1 Coverage 1.51% Character Range 4609 - 4775

I had a very bad experience on this, I wanted to choose my thesis subject on how to teach songs ...because of Islamic rules the government here, I couldn't do that.

**Appendix F: Sample of search Query in the Context of Nvivo 10**

