Teachers' Perception of EFL Students' Poor Writing Skills: The Challenges, Causes, and Remedies

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Abstract: *The present study explores the causes and factors behind high school students' academic writing challenges from teachers' perspectives. Hence, the study aims to identify the factors that hinder learners writing experiences, analyze them, and recommend solutions to bridge the gap. Also, it provides recommendations for teachers to take into account in their teaching practices.The study participants were 27 EFL graduate teachers specialized in English Language and Teaching from a private university in Istanbul. The study findings revealed that teachers faced many challenges when teaching writing to their students for various reasons. Some of these challenges were due to the lack of vocabulary, lack of motivation, weak grammar competence, coherence and cohesion, and curriculum-related problems. Other problems that teachers shared are related to the lack of clarity and focus of written assignments, demotivation of teachers, and time management among newbie teachers.*

Keywords: EFL, academic writing, motivation, feedback, teaching approaches

1. Introduction

The writing skill is a significant skill in language production and one of the most complex to learn. The reasons beyond the complexity of the language are various. For example, Kellogg (2001) suggested that writing is a cognitive skill that requires memory presence, thinking abilities, and verbal command; to be able to express their ideas and themselves successfully. Therefore, the process of writing has gained significant consideration in the last two decades for two primary reasons; first, learners tend to use it as a tool to communicate their ideas (Haider, 2012). Second, because of the extensive research carried out by L2 writers and the difficulties they face (Dar & Khan, 2015; Graham &Perin, 2007). The significant value of writing skill have led researchers to carry out many studies to investigate this skill in-depth. Researchers have varied points of view and perspectives on various aspects of students writing skills. For example, there has been an ongoing debate on the product approach and process approach utilization. For instance, Badger and White (2000) opine that the process approach is linguistics-based; however, this point of view has met much criticism (Yiu, 2009).

The writing challenges learners have gained considerable attention from several researchers (e.g., Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; Qian &Krugly-Smolska, 2008; Phakiti& Li, 2011). The literature assures that writing is not an easy skill that can be quickly learned, whether for ESL or EFL students (Bacha, 2012; Mohan & Lo, 1985). Students have poor writing skills because of two main dimensions: the teacher and the learner. Scholars propose that teachers' pedagogical absence and lack of writing teaching awareness contribute negatively to students' writing performance (Bilal et al., 2013). Bilal et al. (2013) stated that teachers fail to provide their students with formative feedback on their writing, and therefore, they do not know how to motivate their students to write. Students, however, struggle with more prime problems (e.g., Carson et al., 1990; Lo & Hyland, 2007; Cheng, 2004; Haider, 2012; Pineteh, 2014). Students tend to face two critical obstacles, which Kroll (1990) categorized as "syntactic accuracy" and "rhetorical competency**."** Kroll (1990) believes that the writer of an essay is expected to fulfill certain qualities as a) being focused on the intended topic, b) create and put paragraphs effectively, c) nourish a compatible point of view, d) ideas logically written, and e) usage of coherent and cohesion devices when due (Kroll, 1990, pa.43). Other problems addressed by Aitchison and Lee (2006) are concerned with knowledge and text production, self-formation within the text, data analysis, text structure, performance, and maintaining a good agreement (pa. 268).

2. Literature Review

Researchers tend to have different perspectives when defining academic writing. For example, Coulmas (2003) said that writing is a method to store ideas, thoughts, and messages using varied codes to transfer them to readers. However, the general agreement is it structural research written from a scholar to another (Finish institution, 2011). Regardless of the various definitions that writing has, we understand it is a significant skill that requires careful understanding so learners would practice it with no setbacks.

Therefore, the role of writing in academic settings is very distinct and significant. *Writing* is a skill that draws on using other strategies (i.e., planning, editing, revising, and proofreading). Many researchers and studies referred to these writing stages and processes and their importance (Graham, 1997; Hayes and Flower, 1986). Petrić and Czárl (2003) claimed that writing includes three stages: pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing, consequently. During the pre-writing, students plan their writing task

where teachers help students generate ideas. As a second stage, students would be expected to write the first draft, revised it, and prepared a second draft. Finally, post-writing where students focus on grammatical aspects, vocabulary, and logically putting their ideas. Other studies (e.g., Hayes and Flower, 1986) addressed the writing stages with the belief that they are interweaving for varied reasons. For example, a student might perform their writing based on specific parts. In other words, the student would plan, generate ideas, then revises the first paragraph, and so on for each.

Writing for some students is an enjoyable exercise to transfer their ideas and thoughts in written forms; however, for others, it is difficult to put their ideas and thoughts into papers (Dally, 1978). Also, such a task might make them uncomfortable and anxious (Dally, 1978). Generally, different students have different feelings about their writing experiences in terms of enjoyment and prosperity in writing; in other words, writing apprehension. Academic apprehension setbacks are not limited to agreement, punctuation, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, diction, references, parallelism, and recognition of sentence fragments (Dally, 1978; Raisman,1982). Students' academic writing performance and writing apprehension can contribute both positively and negatively to the writing quality. Other students tend to struggle with organizing knowledge from different sources, writing strategies, preparation time, length of the task, the fear of peer judgments, let alone teachers' direct and indirect feedback on their writing tasks (Pajares& Johnson, 1994).

In the literature of academic writing, Dally (1978) stated several critical issues that complicate students writing. These issues were teachers' reactions to mechanical problems, students' misunderstandings of the purpose of feedback, negative feedback, and the inadequate role models in weak classes (Dally, 1978). Moreover, the constrained education restricting the writing curriculum instructions and practices concentrating only on teaching the theoretical concepts of writing with no actual application (Borich, 2004).

While students are expected to perform well and produce well-written papers, they need to consider the different ground rules and writing components. That includes but is not limited to good grammar structure and understanding of writing mechanism (e.g., spelling, capitals, abbreviations), organization of ideas, word choice, and original content (i.e., not plagiarized writing). Moreover, there is an enormous responsibility that lies on teachers at this stage where they should explain these processes to their students. The other writing aspects that both teachers and students need to be aware of are punctuation, vocabulary, structure, and spelling and the characteristics of a well-written paper (i.e., unity, support, coherence, and cohesion). The lack of this knowledge will make students struggle in their writing.

When teachers teach their students writing, they tend to follow two different approaches. They are widely known as *writing as a product* and *writing as a process.* The first approach targets writing mechanisms and grammar structure; therefore, it is an individual approach, so students

do not work together. Also, researchers criticize this approach for being traditional that only focuses on accuracy and the consolidation of grammar rules (Nacira, 2010). While writing as a process is an approach based on the process (i.e., pre-writing, editing, re-drafting, and publication). This approach helps students boost their skills and brainstorm ideasand be autonomous learners.

The significant of the study

Anticipating the cited studies above, we understand that students struggle with various writing challenges and problems that result in wrecked final writing production, regardless of the exerted efforts and time of teachers. By recognizing the challenges, there will be a better picture of what should be done, what should be avoided, and what teachers need to pay more attention to in their teaching practices. The study results yield insightful considerations for teachers and curriculum designers. Also, the findings can be of great importance for EFL teachers to guide them with what they should equip their students, the required skills and knowledge that students need to gain for a better writing production.

Research questions

1) What are the leading causes and factors of students' poor academic writing skills?
2) What are the EFL English teachers' recommendations to aid students?

3. Methodology

Participants

The study participants were 27 graduate EFL teachers who attended a private university in Istanbul, coming from 13 different nationalities. The significant number of participants were females (77.8%) and males (22.2%). Mostparticipants' level of English was advanced (81.5%).

Instruments

The data were collected via a survey. The survey aimed to identify the factors that hinder students' writing experiences, analyze them, and recommend possible methods to help students overcome their writing obstacles and improve their skills.The survey included two main sections: teachers' demographic data such as gender, age, nationality, and English level(section one). The second section, titled teaching writing, comprises seven main questions. The features of good writing, teaching writing approaches, to which degree teachers encourage their students to write, to which degree teachers provide feedback to their students, writing outside the classroom, and the last question addressed the causes and effects behind students' writing practices. Two follow up questions aimed to inquire if teachers help their students in their writing or not, and if they do, how they do that. Finally, in the last question, the teachers were asked to share the various problems they face while teaching writing.

Procedures

The current study used an experimental method to explore the research problems and understand students' writing challenges. MAXQDA software was used to analyze the data and the researcherrelied on frequencies and

percentages. The open-ended questions in the survey were coded and then classified into themes.

4. Findings

Table 1: EFL Teachers' Perceptions Towards Teaching Writing

	% (n)
1. What are the features of good writing?	
Accurate grammar	19.2% (20)
Excellent ideas	16.3% (17)
Good usage of vocabulary	18.3% (19)
Coherence and Cohesion	19.2% (20)
Clarity and focus	14.4% (15)
Credibility or believability	5.8% (6)
Thought-provoking or emotionally inspiring	6.7% (7)
2. What approach do you follow to teach writing?	
The process approach	14.8% (4)
The product approach	00% (0)
Both	85.2% (23)
3. How often do you ask your students to write?	
Always	40.7% (11)
Sometimes	37.0% (10)
Often	22.2% (6)
Never	00% (0)
4. How often do you give your students feedback on their writing?	
Always	51.9% (14)
Sometimes	29.6% (8)
Often	18.5% (5)
Never	00% (0)
5. Do you encourage your students to write outside the classroom?	
Yes	92.6% (25)
No	7.4% (2)
6. Do you find students struggle when writing in English?	
Yes	100% (27)
No	00.0% (00)
7. If YES, these difficulties are caused by:	
Curriculum	33.3% (15)
Students	40.0% (18)
Teacher	20.0% (9)
Other	6.7% (3)

In Item 1, participants in the study gave various responses to what they consider good academic writing. The results in Table 2 show that grammar accuracy and coherence, and cohesion are the most distinguished among the characteristics of writing features with 19.2% (n=20) each. A percentage of 18.3% of teachers (n=19) believe that students' vocabulary usage is a significant feature of well-written academic writing. Learners' presence of excellent ideas, 16.3% (n=17), is another essential variable to produce a well-written academic text. However, only 14.4% of the teachers (n=15) believe that clarity and focus in writing is a significant feature in writing.

Only 6.7% of teachers (n=7) cared for thought-provoking writing or emotional inspiration in students writing. Finally, the credibility or believability of the context came last with 5.8% (n=6) as a significant writing feature.

In Item 2, inquiring the participants about the approach they do teacher writing in, 14.8% (n=4) stated they depend on the process approach alone whereas, the great majority of participants relied on 85.2 (n=23).

In Item 3, participants were asked about the frequency of asking their students to write. The majority of respondents40.7% (n=11) stated that they ask their students

to write always, 37% of the teachers (n=10) asked their students to write sometimes whereas, 22.2% of respondents (n=6) reported that they *often* ask their students to write. That shows that the majority of teachers provide students with the opportunity to write.

In Item 4, participants were asked about the frequency of providing feedback to their students on their writing. The majority of teachers, 51.9% (n=14), stated that they always provide students with feedback, 29.6% (n=8) said they sometimes give students feedback, while 18.5% (n=5) said they often provide their students with feedback.

Item 5 investigated teachers' perceptions towards their encouragement to their students to write outside the classroom. The majority of participants declared "Yes" 92.6% (n=25) where they encourage their students on writing outside the educational settings; however, 7.4% (n=2) said they do not encourage their students to write outside the classroom.

In Item 6, All participants stated that their students face problems in writing. In Item 7, the participants share the main causes their students struggle with. The majority of participants, 40.0% (n=18), believe that students are held accountable for their writing challenges whereas, 33.3% of

teachers (n=15) blamed curriculum for being an obstacle in students writing. However, 20.0% of teachers (n=9) considered themselves responsible for why students writing production is problematic. Other teachers, 6.7% (n=3), stated that the lack of practice, vocabulary, and motivation are among the challenges that their students face in writing.

As a teacher, how do you help your students improve their writing skills?
The answers to this question revealed four major themes: "writing strategies," "formative feedback," "reading to write," and "writing for writing." Most teachers preferred using writing strategies as a method to help their students improve their writing skills. For example, one of the teachers said, "I use various examples of written pieces and function effective techniques and strategies to deliver the writing skills to the students easily." Another teacher stated that she helps her students in their writing stages, "I help them step by step. For example, I teach them how to write a good paragraph, and I give them examples to show them what a good paragraph is about. Then, I would give them more lessons on topics like punctuation, spelling, etc."

Therefore, on the role of formative assessment, a teacher asserted that the more he gives corrective feedback to his students, the better they write. The other teacher said, "I try to give them positive feedback. I focus on their strengths and, I show them their mistakes and how they can make them right." Reading to write was another convenient technique to inspire students and help them step-by-step lift their wiring performance. However, the rest of the teachers stated they utilize writing for writing in their classrooms to help students "break the ice" with their fear in writing and give them the chance to write about a topic they are familiar with and about.

What kind of obstacles do you face when teaching writing?
Teachers shared various kinds of problems they encounter in their writing. Some teachers said that their students' lack of motivation affects them at some stage, and they lose their motivation and interest in teaching. Other teachers (who were newbies) to teaching declared that they neither could deal with the curriculum nor manage their time.

5. Conclusion

Through the survey, teachers confirmed that writing is not a straightforward task, and, students regardless of their educational level, can face several severe problems in their writing performance. To minimize these problems, most teachers preferred to use both process and product approaches combined when teaching writing; that it is better for their students' learning. Teachers followed up with their students and provided them with feedback when they wrote in the classroom and encouraged them to write outside the classroom to boost their writing skills. Teachers shared an interesting perspective where they encouraged their students to write outside the classroom using various methods like using journals, diaries, and writing stories about topics they are familiar with. Furthermore, teachers exhibited their perspectives on who they think plays a significant role in students' poor writing performance. The great majority of

teachers stated that students are the primary reason; however, they agreed also that the curriculum and teachers themselves should be held accountable for students' poor writing performance. Participants declared that other variables that weaken students' writing performance are anxiety, the absence of practical writing, lack of vocabulary, and having no motivation.

Many concepts should be taken into account when dealing with writing in the EFL context. Abdulkareem (2013) suggested that adequate exposure to academic writing conventions, a good understanding of vocabulary, and an awareness of grammar rules can significantly affect students' writing performance. Students, regardless of their education level, need to be well-equipped with these tools to attain their writing goals.

6. Limitations and Further Research

The present study has limitations that can be addressed for a better investigation of the research problem. Small sample size is one of the main study limitations of this research. Future studies should consider a larger sample size. The collected data are only based on teachers' responses; however, the students' perspective should be taken into account for a better understanding of students' problems. Also, teachers were from only one university, and they were selected randomly due to the lack of movement. For future studies, a mixed-methods study approach may help understand students' writing problems, their causes, and remedies of students poor writing skills.

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