

IDENTIFICATION OF CHALLENGES IN TEACHING WRITING TO ECUADORIAN EFL STUDENTS

Mónica Raquel Tamayo Maggi^{1*}, Diego Christian Cajas Quishpe²

¹ Universidad de las Fuerzas Armadas ESPE, Sangolquí - Ecuador.

² Universidad Nacional de Educación UNAE, Azogues-Ecuador.

*Autor para correspondencia: mrtamayo@espe.edu.ec

Recibido: 2020/08/31

Aprobado: 2020/10/19

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26621/XVI23.2020.12.A01.PUCESI.2550.6684>

RESUMEN

La enseñanza de la escritura a estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) gira en torno al desarrollo de una competencia lingüística y comunicativa. Al hacerlo, los profesores de inglés en general se enfrentan a dificultades pedagógicas que han resultado en desafíos de enseñanza. Este estudio exploratorio busca identificar los desafíos que enfrentan los profesores ecuatorianos al enseñar escritura a estudiantes universitarios. Mediante entrevistas estructuradas, se recopilaron datos de diez profesores de inglés que trabajan en diferentes universidades públicas de Ecuador. A través de un análisis descriptivo, los investigadores pudieron identificar los factores relacionados con los estudiantes y los profesores que hacen que la enseñanza de la escritura sea un desafío para los maestros. Los factores relacionados con los estudiantes incluyen la competencia en el idioma inglés, la interferencia del idioma español y la falta de motivación de los estudiantes para escribir en inglés; mientras que los factores relacionados con el profesor incluyen las prácticas de enseñanza. Además, los resultados de esta investigación pueden ser útiles para que los profesores y administradores mejoren la enseñanza de la escritura en sus respectivas instituciones.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de la escritura; factores internos; factores externos

ABSTRACT

Teaching writing to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students revolves around developing a linguistic and communicative competence. Resultantly, English teachers generally face pedagogical difficulties, which have resulted in teaching challenges. This exploratory study seeks to identify the obstacles that Ecuadorian teachers face when teaching Writing to university students. Using structured interviews, data was collected from ten English teachers working in different public universities in Ecuador. Through a descriptive analysis, the researchers were able to identify students and teachers-related factors that make teaching writing challenging for teachers. The students-related factors include English language competency, Spanish language interference, and students' lack of motivation to write in English, whereas the teacher-related factors include the teaching practices. Furthermore, this research results can help teachers and administrators improve the teaching of writing in their respective institutions.

Keywords: teaching writing; internal factors; external factors



INTRODUCTION

Writing in English is becoming increasingly important in today's world, particularly in education and business areas. We are in an era where due to the influence of the internet and social media, people, especially the new generations, expand their horizons and are more interconnected despite physical distance. Communicating with people from different countries has never been as easy as it is now. Due to technology's advantages, any person can express their ideas and beliefs through blogs, posts in social media, websites, or online forums. In this context, writing plays a fundamental role since it is through letters that people can express themselves. Unfortunately, most people do not take enough time to reflect on the type of texts they compose and immediately upload their writings online without an adequate revision resulting in texts which do not consider the writing conventions and are difficult to understand.

It is important to consider that Writing is a productive skill aimed at expressing the writer's ideas in a written manner. Through writing, people can provide meaning to their ideas and abstract ways of thinking via selected words which are presented to different audiences in online or printed forms (Liu & Kunnan, 2016). A proper piece of writing requires a coordination between content, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, organization and mechanics (Jahin & Idrees, 2012). Hence, grammar presents a set of rules that support the development of well-constructed sentences with an appropriate meaning (Manolescu, 2019). Vocabulary, on the other hand, plays an important role by providing the learners with the English words to express and organize their thoughts logically, coherently, and cohesively in a paragraph (Hundarenko, 2019).

However, learning how to write is not an easy task, not only for those learning English as foreign language but also for native speakers (Esmeralda, 2013). Brown (2014) highlights that the teaching of writing skills involves more than providing general explanations and instructions about how to write correct grammatical sentences; it consists of the formulation and manipulation of ideas and concepts to express them in the most appropriate language. Sumarsih, & Sanjaya, D. (2013) add that it is essential for EFL students to "create written products that manifest mastery over contextually appropriate formats to present ideas rhetorically as well as mastery in all language areas".

Considering the importance of writing in English, many EFL teachers have made great efforts to teach this skill. Regrettably, this task has become very challenging because it involves developing the learners' linguistic and communicative competence (Bilal, Tariq, Din, Latif, & Anjum, 2013). To understand the challenges presented when teaching Writing, researchers in different parts of the globe have carried out studies in this area. For instance, the research results that focused on teachers' methods in teaching writing conducted in Palestine showed that the methods used were monotonous and affected the students' learning outcomes. To improve writing teaching, the researchers proposed blended writing activities (Abas & Bakir, 2013). Another study investigated teachers' problems in teaching writing to students at an intermediate level and the findings suggested that WLA (Writing Learning Approach) proposed by Jeremy Harmer is an effective method to teach writing (Bilal et al., 2013).

The above studies concentrate mostly on the methodology used to teach Writing, leaving apart other equally important aspects. For example, lack of motivation, limited reading activities and the influence of the mother tongue (Ngoc Anh, 2019). The mother tongue, in turn, is considered a very influential factor in the success of a learner's Writing in EFL (Lightbown & Spada 2013). Hence Spanish interferences are usually presented in the

morphology, semantics and syntax of the target language. Consequently, due to the Spanish language influence, learners start to confront serious limitations in using the target language (Afrin, 2016). In a similar vein, Brown (2014) mentions that language competence, which deals with learners' ability to use grammar, vocabulary, and organization of a good paragraph, can also affect the development of students' writing skills.

It is important that studies in the area of Writing go beyond the teaching methodology and start considering other aspects which may be why teaching writing has become challenging for teachers in language centers in Ecuadorian universities. Focusing only on the teaching methodology may not be enough to understand the intricate nuances that prevents teachers from teaching writing at the tertiary level. This study therefore, aims to address the difficulties and challenges that EFL teachers encounter when they teach writing to university students.

METHODOLOGY

Among the existing studies carried out in ELT in Ecuadorian universities, there is a lack of research aiming to describe or identify the difficulties teachers have when teaching Writing to university students. Most of the studies in teaching writing in the country focus more on teaching techniques and strategies rather than what teachers confront when teaching this skill. Not considering the factors that may cause difficulties in teaching writing can hinder the advantages of any intervention to improve instruction.

In this regard, this study aims to identify the difficulties and challenges that Ecuadorian EFL teachers encounter when they teach writing to university students. Thus, an exploratory research methodology was used since "it permits the researcher to have a better understanding of the existing problem" (Guerring, 2012). Also, due to the limited local literature in this area, through this methodology, the researchers aim to bring into discussion the influence that other aspects that are different from teaching methodology can have in developing students' writing skills.

To achieve this study's objective, the researchers sent an invitation to participate in this research to EFL teachers working in three different public university language centers. The invitation contained the study description of the study and the criteria for the selection, namely, more than five (years) of teaching writing to EFL students in higher education. After receiving the invitation, ten (10) teachers (4 male and 6 female) confirmed their willingness to participate. Due to the distance among universities, the researchers interviewed the participants online.

The participant's teaching experience ranged from six (6) to fifteen (15) years. The data was collected through a structured interview whose main objective was to identify the challenges of teaching writing to university students. The researchers also used a thematic analysis to analyze the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What was commonly voiced by all participants is that teaching writing is challenging. Thus, to systematically present the challenges that teachers confront when teaching Writing to university students, the data results are organized and presented in four main categories. Namely, a) students' English language competency, b) Spanish language interference, c) students' lack of motivation to write in English, and d) teaching practices.

Students' English language competency

Out of the ten (10) participants, nine (9) manifested that generally, the students' level of English is, most of the times, lower than the one expected for the EFL course that teachers are currently teaching. The most problematic areas are grammar and vocabulary. For example, students cannot write complex sentences and the register they use in their texts is basic and repetitive. This, according to the teachers, hinders the development of students' writing skills since they must use the time planned to teach Writing to explain to their student's grammar structures and vocabulary.

Spanish language interference

Seven (7) teachers pointed out that another factor that hampered writing skills development is the marked influence of L1 which in this case is the Spanish language. According to the participants, the Spanish interference results in inaccurate and incoherent written texts. Teachers also emphasized that literal translation from Spanish to English is common among their students and this practice has been intensified due to the accessibility to online translators. One example provided by a teacher refers to "false cognates". In one task, a student chose one English word with similar spelling in Spanish but with a different meaning in English and used it in her text, affecting the sentence's semantics. Teachers suggested that the students' penchant for translating is the result of a poor vocabulary.

Students' lack of motivation to write in English

The majority of the participants mentioned that their students feel forced to write in English, and a few students who are willing to do so are afraid of committing mistakes in their writings. Students are also unwilling to show their written works to their classmates since they want to hide their writing limitations. The fear of failure or rejection of written tasks seems to be a common feeling among students.

Although writing skills often require students to spend a certain amount of time exploring and organizing their ideas, they do not seem willing to devote their time and energies to developing their writing tasks. Consequently, it is important to identify the mechanisms that provide students with different motivational writing experiences.

Teaching practices

It is essential to mention that the number of hours allocated per week to teaching and learning EFL in language centers is not divided per language skill, such as listening, speaking, writing, and reading. It is instead a fixed amount of time, and it is the teacher's prerogative to use this time to develop the four language skills. The participants mentioned that, on average, they have 300 minutes per week to teach EFL. Out of this time, three (3) teachers use from 25 to 30 minutes and two (2) teachers 15 minutes per day to practice Writing. One teacher uses 40 minutes per week and the four (4) remaining teachers do not use any time to focus only on teaching writing.

All participants considered that the time they have to teach EFL to their students is minimal, which is not enough for achieving English learning outcomes planned for each EFL course. Thus, it is difficult to focus only on teaching writing due to time concerns. They also added that they have large classes and providing detailed feedback to their students is very difficult.

Regarding the teaching methodology, participants mentioned that they use brainstorming and mind-mapping as the leading techniques. They also ask students to complete the activities presented in the textbook to practice their Writing. Apart from the textbooks, some participants mentioned that in their institutions, they have some additional audio and video teaching materials available to use in their classes, but they hardly use them since they prefer the activities included in the textbook.

Following the description of the four categories that make writing challenging, they were grouped and classified as internal and external factors. Student – related factors revolve around the learners, namely, students' English language competency, Spanish language interference and Students' lack of motivation to write in English as presented in figure 1. Teacher – related factors, on the other hand, refer to teaching practices as presented in figure 2.

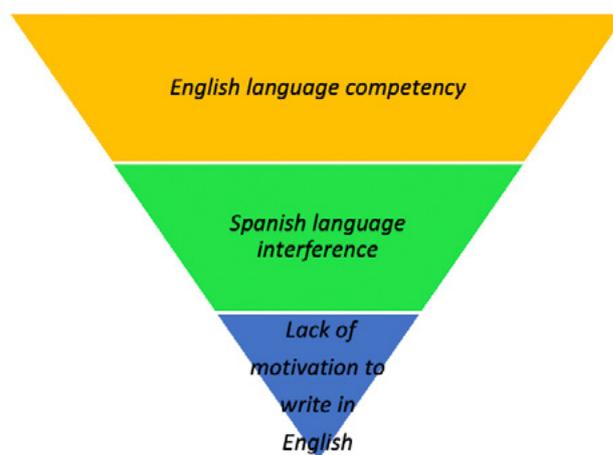


Figure 1. Internal Factors that contribute to teachers' challenges in teaching Writing

Figure 1 shows that, according to the participants, the English language competency that students have acquired during their formation, has never been in accordance with the learning outcomes designed for each class. For example, a student who is expected to have a B1 level to be enrolled in a B2 level class does not usually have a B1 level. Instead, their English level is lower than A2. This mismatch between the student's expected level of English and their actual level is the main challenge that participants have to confront in their classes. The second challenge, though not as intense as the first, is the Spanish language interference. According to the participants, students have not been able to adapt to the English writing conventions and continue using the Spanish conventions in their English writings. The lack of student's motivation to write in English is the lowest challenge that teachers face, this because, according to the participants, the lack of motivation to write is the result of the other two aspects. They added that, if students can improve their level of English and understand the English writing conventions, their motivation will increase.

According to Brown (2014) the English language competence, in the area of Writing, includes learners' grammatical competence, vocabulary mastery, and a proper paragraph organization. The combination of these abilities helps students produce well written texts. On the other hand, the lack of one of them, particularly grammar or vocabulary can impede learners to write a proper and coherent paragraph. Harmer (2007) explains that students "can become very frustrated when they are engaged in a productive task without the knowledge of grammar and the vocabulary they need to express themselves" affecting negatively the students' motivation to write.

Grammar provides the structure of the language and helps learners to construct sentences that make sense and are within the acceptable conventions of English (Manolescu 2019). Jaramillo & Medina (2011) explored the role of grammar in writing short descriptive texts in English. Their results confirmed that most of the difficulties students had were related to the construction of sentences, grammatical errors, vocabulary and difficulties in reading comprehension. They concluded that learners may have better writing results when they have time to develop their tasks, their ideas and when the writing topic is clear. Time plays a fundamental factor since students can reflect on their works and identify their own grammar lapses.

Regarding the Spanish interference, Alabere (2011) suggests that if L2 students have difficulties in phonology, vocabulary and grammar of the second language are due to the interference of habits from mother tongue. Aisa (2015) further suggests that regular practice and error analysis can help teachers find out how far the interference affects the learners' performance in the target language they are learning. Although teachers may always emphasize the need to think and write in English as much as possible, it is difficult for them to completely devoid from native language and culture.

Native language influence is not always negative, in fact, it can also be a factor that scaffolds the success of writing of EFL students (Harmer, 2015). It is in the teachers' hands to use it to their benefit and plan activities to enhance their student's Writing. EFL students tend to transfer the meaning, culture, and forms of their first language to the second language and culture they are learning. Ultimately, it has a positive impact on the learning of the target language. It is, then, important for the teachers to start exploring the principles and advantages of translanguaging.

Regarding the students' motivation, Jabali (2018) identified in his study with Palestinian EFL students that they showed willingness to do well in writing but they were not as interested in learning as they were with the other language skills, leaving Writing apart from their interests. This shows the need to find appropriate mechanisms to develop all language skills at the same time. In this line, Lucas (2010) states that making students aware of the importance of language will urge students to improve their motivation to learn even if they do not have enough intrinsic motivation.

Regarding the teacher-related factors, participants mentioned that this revolves around the teaching practices, and within this, they identified class conditions, time availability and teaching aids as the aspects that make a writing class challenging as presented in figure 2.

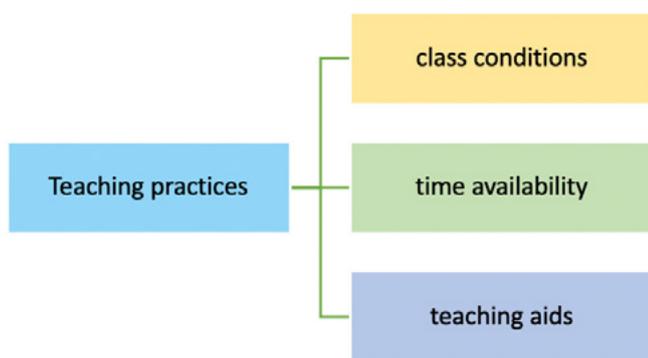


Figure 2. External Factors that contribute to teachers' challenges in teaching Writing

Figure 2 shows that participants consider the current class conditions as the main factor to make the writing classes challenging, followed by time availability and teaching aids.

Class conditions revolves around the class environment and refers to large classes and reduced physical space, which, according to the participants limits personalized attention to students and reduces students' English practice. Large classes is not a phenomenon that occurs only in Ecuadorian educational institutions. Instead, it happens in different parts of the world. Emery (2012) highlights that large classes is one of the most mentioned problems encountered by English teachers. Likewise, Khajloo (2013) also points out that one of the challenges in teaching English is the size of the classroom.

Regarding the effects of having large classes, Zhang (2010) identified three issues: discipline problems, students' and teachers' weary and inefficient learning. Furthermore, Aoumeur (2017) states that problems such as anonymity and passivity among students, poor engagement with course content, and low motivation are the consequences of being taught in large classes. Opposite to the existing literature that suggests classes with a limited number of students as a premise to successfully achieve the expected language outcomes, there are studies that emphasize the positive role of the teachers' methodology and techniques to work with large classes effectively.

The second factor that makes writing classes challenging is the inadequacy of allocated time to teach Writing. All participants mentioned that their institutions do not have an official distribution of hours for the development of different language skills. It depends on the teacher. There are certain constraints for time allocation. For example, teachers have a textbook to finish and, in most cases, the allotted time is directed proportionally to the textbook advancement. This results in teachers having limited time to plan and conduct other activities since they may not be able to finish all activities presented in the textbook.

Furthermore, ten (10) teachers emphasized that the students need a longer time to practice Writing and, in many cases, they cannot cover all language skills due to time constraints. This is also because teachers have to explain the topic to the learners, have them practice writing, and assess their production. According to Ajibola (2010), although English learners start to learn this language from the very first year of school, most of them fail to gain an adequate competence in English due to time constraints.

It is important to mention that students attending EFL classes in their university language centers are, at the same time, studying their undergraduate programs and they have to juggle between English and their academic subjects. Thus, increasing the time allotted for learning English may affect their performance in their academic courses. Teachers, then, need to look for creative ways to infuse writing activities along with their EFL class activities. For example, Lin et al. (2014) found out that blogs in EFL writing through process-based approach have a positive effect on writing achievement.

The last aspect that participants believe makes teaching writing challenging is teaching aids.

It may be the result of the sole use of a single textbook in EFL classes. Participants mentioned that they use the textbooks as the main teaching resource and some added that despite existing extra resources to teach English in their language centers, they prefer to use the textbook as the main resource and limit the use of the writing activity suggested in the textbook

CONCLUSIONS

This study was based on the analysis of structured interviews of ten Ecuadorian EFL teachers at the tertiary level of education. The value of this exploratory study is the provision of insights on the challenges that EFL teachers face when teaching Writing. The findings of the study suggested that challenges in teaching writing were related to the student-related factors that include English language competency, Spanish language interference and students' lack of motivation to write in English; whereas the teacher-related factors include the teaching practices. Based on the results above, it is important that teachers know how to improve their condition in particular not only by implementing tools and strategies to address the subject matter, but also using data they themselves gather to draw conclusions that will lead them to develop new proposals regarding policies and instructional approaches in their own institutions. In addition, Ecuadorian teachers should participate in professional development that places them in the driver's seat so as to actively participate in creating educational mandates that validate English teachers' significant role in student academic achievement.

REFERENCES

- Aissa, H. (2015). The Second Language Influence on Foreign Language Learners' Errors: the Case of the French Language for Algerian Students learning English as a Foreign Language. *The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education*, 126-127.
- Abas, D., & Bakir, A. (2013). Writing Difficulties and New Solutions: Blended Learning as an Approach to Improve Writing Abilities. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3 (9), 254-266.
- Afrin, S. (2016). Writing Problems of Non-English Major Undergraduate Students in Bangladesh: An Observation. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 104-115.
- Ajibola, M. A. (2010). Confronting the challenges of teaching English language as a second language in Nigeria. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching & Learning* Vol.2 No.2 July 2017. *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association (JNESA)*, 95-105
- Alabere, R. A. (2011). Mother tongue interference in the teaching and learning of English as a second language. *Journal of Religions, Education, Languages and General Studies; V (1)*
- Aoumeur, H. (2017). The Impact of Class Size on Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language: The Case of the Department of English at Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (2).
- Bilal, H. A., Tariq, A. R., Din, N. u., Latif, H., & Anjum, M. N. (2013). Investigating the Problems Faced by the Teachers in Developing English Writing Skills. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2 (3), 238-244.
- Brown, H. D. (2014). *Principles for Language Learning and Teaching* (6th Edition). San Francisco: Pearson. ISBN 0133041948.
- Emery, H. (2012). A global study of primary English teachers' qualifications, training and career development. *ELT Research Papers*, 1-32.
- Esmeralda, C. (2013). An Analysis of the Writing Skill Difficulties of the English Composition I Students. *Arts and Sciences Journal*, 1-14.
- Guerring, J (2012). *Social Science Methodology: A unified perspective*. 2nd ed. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press Ltd.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *How to teach English: An introduction to the practice of English language teaching*. 6th Ed. Harlow: Longman.
- Harmer, J. (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (5th Edition ed.). Pearson Education. Harlow, United Kingdom.
- Hundarenko, O. (2019). Challenges of Teaching Academic Writing Skills in ESL Classroom (Based on International Teaching Experience). *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 11(4), 70-83. doi:10.18662/rrem/158
- Jabali, O. (2018). Students' attitudes towards EFL university writing: A case study at An-Najah National University, Palestine. *Heliyon*, 4(11), e00896.
- Jahin, H., & Idrees, W. (2012). EFL Major Student Teachers' Writing Proficiency and Attitudes towards Learning English; *Journal of Taibah University; KSA*. pp. 9-72.
- Jaramillo, L. & Medina, A. (2011). *Adolescents' Awareness of Environmental Care: Experiences when Writing Short Descriptive Texts in English*. PROFILE Vol. 13, No. 1, April 2011. ISSN 1657-0790. Bogotá, Colombia. Pages 11-30
- Khajloo, A. I. (2013). Problems in teaching and learning English for students. *International Journal of Engineering Research and Development Vol, 7*, 56-58
- Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. M. (2013). *How languages are learned*. 4th Edition. Oxford University Press.
- Lin, M.H., Li, J.J., Hung, P.Y., & Huang, H.W. (2014). Blogging a journal: Changing students' writing skills and perceptions. *ELT Journal*, 68(4), 422-431.
- Liu, S., & Kunnan, A. J. (2016). Investigating the application of automated writing evaluation to Chinese undergraduate English majors: A case study of WriteToLearn. *Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium*, 33, 71-91.
- Lucas, R. I. (2010). A Study on Intrinsic Motivation Factors in Second Language Learning among Selected Freshman Students. *The Philippine ESL Journal*, 4, 6-23.
- Manolescu, D. (2019). *TIPS: A Guidebook for Teaching Excellence in ESL*. Gatekeeper Press. E-ISBN 9781642374032. Columbus, OH. USA.
- Ngoc Anh, D. (2019). EFL Student's Writing Skills: Challenges and Remedies. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)* e-ISSN: 2320-1959.p- ISSN: 2320-1940 Volume 9, Issue 6 Ser. I. (Nov. - Dec .2019), pp 74-84
- Sumarsih, & Sanjaya, D. (2013). TPS as an Effective Technique to Enhance the Students' Achievement on Writing Descriptive Text. *English Language Teaching*, 6 (12), 106-113.
- Zhang, L. (2010). Problems of teaching English in primary large classes in rural areas and application of group study. *Journal of Guangxi Normal University for Nationalities*, 27(1), 129-131.