

## **Teachers' Perceptions on Teaching Writing to Elementary Students at a Private International School**

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### **Abstract**

Writing is an important element in teaching English to students and writing is the hardest skill to learn in which different competencies are required from students. Many teachers expressed their concerns that students often feel demotivated in writing, hence of the decline of their writing proficiency. This study is to find out teachers' perceptions on teaching writing to elementary students and the challenges that they face regarding the students' writing proficiency. One-to-one interviews were conducted with three elementary English teachers who have been teaching English for more than five years in a private international school. The interview transcripts were analysed used thematic analysis for an in-depth understanding of the teachers' perceptions on teaching writing. The ethical considerations were emphasised in this study too in which, the interviewees were anonymous, and consents from

the school and individual teachers were sought before conducting the interviews. Several emerging themes were found in this study: (1) Incorporating visuals in writing, (2) Encouraging collaborative learning, (3) Poor writing foundation among students, and (4) Time constraints in guiding students'. In conclusion, incorporating visuals and collaborative learning have been found to be effective in promoting writing skills among students.

**Keywords:** Writing Skills, Elementary Students

## **1. Introduction**

English is used worldwide, which consists of four basic skills namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These four skills play important roles as students need to master these skills to acquire English language efficiently. The elementary students usually develop writing skills through tasks such as writing journals, essays or worksheets in the lessons. Writing is a process of using symbols consisting of letters, punctuations, and spaces to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form. Writing is an essential skill which places great importance as it is highly emphasised in the educational system.

Students faced difficulties in writing in terms of idea expansion, contents, mechanics, and organisation of the paragraphs (Siddiqui, 2020). They have difficulties in expressing their ideas in words, as they are constantly unsure if they are

using the right words to describe their ideas, along with the correct use of grammar. Therefore, there is a need to explore the teachers' perceptions of teaching writing to elementary students.

Teachers implement different teaching strategies in teaching writing to prompt students to elicit ideas and drafts, which enables them to organise the contents in writing (Kalipa, 2014). Teachers' perceptions will influence their teaching based on their experiences in managing English lessons, as teachers are mostly teaching writing skills according to their preferences and methods, by prompting students to imagine and put ideas into words. Teachers' perceptions in teaching writing play an important role because they need to evaluate, make adjustments and focus on students' learning. To effectively scaffold elementary students in acquiring good writing skills, teachers need to become learners too, to view learning from students' perspective. It is important that both teaching and learning are able to be seen so that both teachers and students are able to help each other through the learning process for to acquire writing skills (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2017).

Understanding teachers' perceptions enable the teachers to improve on several aspects such as teachers' knowledge in terms of language and communication knowledge, instructional knowledge, culture, and community knowledge, and critical perspectives knowledge (Guerriero, n.d.). This study provides teachers a better understanding of their own teaching especially in supporting elementary students' writing competency. Since

writing is a lifelong skill in all students, thus, it is crucial to understand better how teachers perceive their teaching as well as the challenges faced in teaching writing to elementary students.

## **2. Literature Reviews**

### ***2.1 Understanding Students' Writing Proficiency***

Teachers' baseline understanding of students' writing proficiency plays an important role as it may influence students learning (Weatherwax, 2017). Teachers need to find out how their students learn writing in English lessons so that they are able to apply appropriate teaching strategies. Students learn through social interactions, such as collaborative and cooperative dialogues with individuals (Macblain, 2018). When students interact with peers, they will obtain more ideas by discussing with friends. Through sharing ideas, they have an opportunity to see how their peers are writing. Therefore, teachers need to understand the fact that students learn better from peers through collaborative tasks so that they are able to learn the writing techniques from one another.

### ***2.2 Reflecting on Own Teaching Practices***

In order for teachers to have a better perception of their teaching practices and evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching, it is crucial for teachers to have good reflective skills (Badri et al., 2016). There are some novice teachers who are not confident in demonstrating to students how writing ideas are created, shaped,

reviewed, and revised. Hence, teachers need to develop good reflections on their teaching in order to improve their own teaching strategies in guiding students in acquiring writing skills. Teachers need to be empowered to further develop expertise in subject matter content and other essential elements that lead to higher standards or quality teaching. Reflective practice enables teachers to develop personality by applying their knowledge and experience to practice (Mathew et al., 2017). It is an essential action during a teacher progresses because it gives them the opportunity to reflect on their teaching. Upon reflecting on their teaching, teachers will be able to identify the areas that need improvement and make adjustments to solve problems. Therefore, when teachers reflect, it enables them to identify changes that can be made in their teaching strategies (Mathew et al., 2017).

### ***2.3 Challenges Faced in Teaching Writing to Students***

Teaching writing to elementary students focuses on several components such as students' sentence construction, students' writing skills, and teachers' instructional delivery which may vary as each student has different learning abilities. In elementary settings, teachers are required to teach the basic writing skills repetitively so that the students are able to grasp and understand the concept of writing. When teaching writing to students, teachers encounter challenges depending on the students. One of the challenges teachers face is the lack of motivation and confidence in students to participate in writing. When students are required to write, they are often afraid to make

mistakes as they are shy or afraid to use the language; hence in most cases, students tend to avoid writing much in English. Hence, teachers need to prepare different learning activities such as individual or group activities to enhance their creativity and thinking ability to complete the writing tasks (Swandi & Shek, 2017).

Teachers also face challenges in teaching writing, due to insufficient time, resources, and materials (Metin, 2013). Students require time to grasp writing skills, which also requires teachers to indulge more time in guiding the students as they have different learning abilities. Hence, teachers have time restrictions during lessons as they have insufficient time to teach all the required components of writing. Moreover, teachers also indicate that there are limited resources such as learning materials because students require visual aids to have a better understanding of the writing components. In addition, the lack of technology resources in classroom also makes it challenging for teachers to implement different teaching strategies as it is difficult to aid students in learning writing (Abrar, 2016).

### **3. Methodology**

Qualitative research is scientific research that includes techniques such as direct observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis methods. Qualitative research is defined as a research method that focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication that had taken place in the

environment realistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is used to obtain knowledge that is related to the study, by using qualitative research methods, it would enable researchers to find out more in-depth information about the study and gather information through the collected data (Kilicoglu, 2018). The researchers had conducted the interviews to explore teachers' perceptions and investigate the challenges teachers face in teaching writing to elementary students.

A purposive sampling which is known as the selective or subjective sampling method was used in this study. The researchers had chosen three elementary English teachers from a private international school in Kuala Lumpur. The three interviewees hold a degree qualification in Education and have been teaching English for more than five years. Upon receiving approval from the school principals and management, the teachers were chosen to participate in the study. After obtaining permission from the interviewees, the interviews were then arranged based on their availability to understand their perceptions of teaching writing to the elementary students in terms of their views, knowledge and challenges they face. The English lessons are conducted in small groups in this school. Visual aids are used to assist students in learning English. Extra classes are also conducted after school hours for students who need more personalised guidance.

Interviews are conducted in a systematic manner to allow participants to share their points of view. Three sessions of

interviews were conducted separately in which each session was between 35 to 45 minutes. The interview questions were adapted from Weatherwax (2017), which has a similar research direction, titled “Elementary Teachers’ Perceptions on Writing Proficiency of Military-Connected Students”. Ten interview questions were finalised as the questions was adapted based on the context of the school. The interviews, the were transcribed and the data were coded through thematic analysis using the five phases of data analysis consisting of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting data and concluding after the interview sessions (Yin, 2011).

Member checking was adopted to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Simpson & Quigley, 2016). The interviewees were able to cross-check the transcriptions to ensure the contents reflect their perceptions and views before data analysis (Mohajan, 2017). In addition, inter-coder reliability is also evident, as another qualified expert had helped to verify the data which were coded, clarified, and re-coded as it allows to verify the data that is interpreted and highlights existing that may occur during the process, to ensure that the quality of data is positive (Connor & Joffe, 2020). The researchers and inter-coder sat together and discussed the codes and confirmed the agreeable codes for final data analysis.

#### **4. Results**

To answer the two research questions on teachers’ perceptions on

teaching writing, as well as to find out the challenges faced by teachers in teaching writing, thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data. From the thematic analysis, two emerging themes were found regarding teachers' perceptions on teaching writing to elementary students, namely, (1) Incorporating visuals in writing and (2) Encouraging collaborative learning. Regarding the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching writing, the emerging themes found were, (1) Poor writing foundation among students and (2) Time constraints in guiding students writing. The results are further discussed in the following sessions.

## **5. Discussion and Implications**

### ***5.1 Teachers' Perceptions: Incorporating Visuals in Writing***

One interviewee had shared that she conducts daily writing lessons by incorporating drawing elements to ensure the students are not feeling pressured to write. Interviewee Two highlighted, "*Drawing... so the children would not feel that they are forced to write some letters, words that were given by teacher.*" Art enables students to develop interests in writing as they describe the pictures that they have drawn in a written form. It gives them ideas of what to write by looking at their own drawing which forms a story in the drawing. Interviewee One mentioned, "*I would encourage them to write a word or two or a sentence that they wanted regarding the picture that they drew.*" The students are able to improve writing using this method as they learn to expand their usage of words in terms of vocabulary and adjectives in order to describe the drawings.

Visuals are important to encourage positive language acquisition as the majority of students are visual learners. There is notable theoretical support in the relationship between visual and cognitive learning. Incorporating a visual map helps students to see the ideas in writing clearly and further assists them to write fluently (Cole & Feng, 2015). Pictures and drawings enhance students' spatial thinking skills in which the visuals stimulate their thoughts to promote the assimilation process in their schemata.

In addition, the interviewee also shared that it is important to give students the encouragement to write after drawing the pictures so that students will be motivated to learn to construct sentences based on the drawings. To enhance their writing skills, their ability to use words to describe things will improve as they obtain more knowledge of vocabulary, adjectives, and grammar as time goes by. The teacher perceived that students tend to have a positive effect on writing when they are given the motivation as they develop creative writing skills. This is because, when students are given a free choice topic where they are able to choose according to their interests, it would enhance their motivation to generate ideas and write out content for their topic (Gocen, 2019).

### ***5.2 Teachers' Perceptions: Encouraging Collaborative Learning***

Vygotsky highlighted that students explore language

learning through interaction with people. By interacting with their peers and teachers, students learn to develop cultural thinking in terms of language, writing, arithmetic, and drawing to improve their skills in narrations (Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013). During collaborative learning, students share and exchange ideas with one another, which enables them to learn from each other during the process. They will be able to see how their peers' flow of ideas and writing skills.

Interviewees had shared that collaborative learning is effective in supporting student writing skills, where the students work together in a small group and learn from each other. The interviewee said, *"I use the collaborative writing experiences so it could be with a partner, or it could be in a small group where the children learn from each other."* Students process understanding differently and through collaborative learning, the peers are able to guide them in terms of sentence structure and the formation in which they will become each other's role models. The interviewee mentioned, *"The more capable children will be able to guide the children with lesser skills in terms of sentence structure, and formation and they could model each other."* She also shared that, when students are working together, it not only enhances their interactions with one another, it also allows them to develop more creative ideas together as it enhances their ability to learn new words that can be used in writing.

It can be said that students are able to learn more in a

positive manner through collaborative learning. It also enhances their interest where they will be participating actively in the lesson and ability to produce ideas for writing. It includes the process of students teaching each other since it focuses on learner-centeredness because there are times where learners are able to learn more effectively from a peer through different activities such as collaborative group portfolio, debate where it allows them to have the opportunity to learn on their own and to be independent. In addition, collaborative learning also allows them to stimulate their creative thinking in terms of providing opinions, giving cooperation which enhances teamwork and listening to one another (Palmer, Peters, & Streetman, n.d.).

### ***5.3 Challenges in Teaching Writing: Poor Writing Foundation***

The teachers lamented a lot when it comes to the challenges faced by them regarding students' writing proficiency. One of the challenging factors that are commonly encountered by the teachers is that the students face difficulties in constructing sentences and recognising letters along with spelling. One teacher commented, "*The students have difficulty constructing sentences even when it comes to spelling of words, not many can actually remember the accurate spelling.*" In other words, students have limited skills in writing because they do not have sufficient practice in those particular skills although they are able to speak well in English. Besides that, teachers also shared that their students face difficulties in applying punctuation and grammar rules in writing because they are always confused about when

they should do so. This has caused students to misplace punctuations and they also tend to have difficulties in applying grammar rules, leading to inappropriate grammar use in the writing process. Grammatical error is the most common issue faced by students in writing. It explains that the students have inadequate knowledge of the structure which caused them not to be able to understand nor write in the correct manner (Hasan & Marzuki, 2017). Another teacher expressed, “*My most challenging experience that I had encountered regarding my students achieving writing proficiency is being unable to expand their sentences to make more complex sentences.*”

#### ***5.4 Challenges in Teaching Writing: Time Constraint***

Another challenge mentioned by all the interviewees is that teachers lack time to guide the students in writing. The teachers shared that it is challenging to find time to guide the students one by one, even though it is in a small group setting. As there is only one teacher teaching the subject, it is difficult to pay attention to every student and identify their strengths and limitations because the teacher is not able to assist to every student individually in a whole-class setting. The teacher commented, “*The most challenging things for me as a teacher are to find time to guide the children one by one or even in a small group setting.*”

## **6. Conclusion**

Teaching writing to elementary students is not easy as it requires patience and skills in guiding students in

the process. Understanding that students have individual learning styles and abilities, has added more challenges to the teachers in guiding student. Teachers need to understand the different components in writing well to be able to guide students effectively in acquiring writing skills as different competencies are required to write effectively. In view of the challenges faced by the teachers, the school or teachers can also gather and form discussion groups to discuss the issues faced by them in teaching writing, so that suggestions and solutions can be implemented to improve students' writing skills.

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