

ALIGNING PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES: INVESTIGATING EFL TEACHERS' VIEWS ON STUDENTS' WRITING DIFFICULTIES

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' perceptions of their students' writing difficulties, emphasizing the alignment between these perceptions and observed writing challenges. Using EFL students' written texts and teacher interviews, the study analyzes four components which are vocabulary, grammar, organization, and mechanics. The findings reveal a strong alignment between teachers' perceptions and students' performance in vocabulary and grammar components. However, notable discrepancies emerge in organization and mechanics. This misalignment underscores the importance of pedagogic competence—the ability to identify and address nuanced writing issues. The implications of these findings are significant for students' learning processes. Accurate teacher perceptions and interventions in vocabulary and grammar components can facilitate language development. Conversely, misalignment in recognizing organization and mechanics issues may hinder students' progress in these vital components of writing proficiency. Enhancing teachers' pedagogic competence becomes imperative to bridge this gap. Professional development opportunities should equip instructors with the skills and strategies necessary to support students effectively in areas such as generic text structures and mechanics. These efforts can lead to more effective and student-centered EFL instruction, enriching the learning experience for EFL students.

Keywords: effective instruction; EFL education; teacher's perception; teacher-student alignment; writing difficulties

INTRODUCTION

The act of writing carries considerable significance within academic and professional spheres, as it serves as a fundamental means of expressing oneself, facilitating communication, and engaging in introspection (Hosseini et al., 2013). It is

very important for improving other language skills, like grammar, vocabulary, and speech (Suastra & Menggo, 2020). In addition, the skill of writing is intricately connected to the utilization of metaphorical language (Hoang & Boers, 2018). The acquisition of proficient writing skills holds significant significance for university students, as it serves as an essential component in attaining academic accomplishments (Al-Ahdal & Abduh, 2021).

The current investigation centers its attention on four primary constituents of written expression, as delineated in prior scholarly inquiries (Cahyono & Rosyida, 2016; Jacobs et al., 1981; Weigle, 2002). The aforementioned components span the areas of content and organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. The examination of content and organization pertains to the manner in which a specific essay topic is arranged and elaborated upon within the standard framework of the text. In contrast, grammar encompasses the correct application of verb tenses, concord between subjects and verbs, and agreement in plurality. The area of vocabulary encompasses the proficient employment of pertinent terminology and transitional signals. Finally, the mechanics component comprises elements such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

The concept of teacher-student alignment pertains to the extent to which teachers and students possess a mutual comprehension of learning objectives, anticipations, and pedagogical approaches (Alfalag, 2020). The presence of alignment between teachers and students has the potential to yield enhanced student learning outcomes, encompassing heightened academic success, engagement, and motivation. In contrast, the absence of alignment can result in student confusion, dissatisfaction, and disengagement (Cui et al., 2021; Tu & Phung, 2023). Consequently, the alignment between teachers and students has emerged as a significant research focus within the field of education, namely in the realm of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. The reason for this is because EFL students frequently encounter distinct obstacles when acquiring a new language. Consequently, the attainment of efficient communication and mutual comprehension between educators and learners becomes crucial for their achievement.

The importance of teachers' perceptions of their teaching tactics and their impact on assessing students' learning progress has been highlighted in recent studies (Sibomana et al., 2021). Moreover, teachers' self-perceptions regarding their role in fostering student learning and their utilization of effective teaching methods have shown a positive correlation with student achievement (Anagün, 2018). Teachers' willingness to continue using good teaching tactics can be strongly influenced by their opinions about their students' learning development (Avidov-Ungar, 2016).

It is imperative to acknowledge that the evaluation of students' learning progress by teachers is influenced by their individual ideas and attitudes towards the pedagogical process (Borg, 2018). The aforementioned complexity highlights the prevailing tendency in educational research to investigate the detailed correlation between teachers' perceptions of their instructional methods and students' academic development, while concurrently exploring approaches to improve student accomplishment.

The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) argued that it should ideally integrate instructors' Technological Knowledge (TK), Pedagogical Knowledge (PK), and Content Knowledge (CK) in a cohesive manner (Mishra &

Koehler, 2006). That TPACK needs to recognize how Technological Pedagogical Knowledge (TPK), Technological Content Knowledge (TCK), and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) all work together is just as important. Moreover, the TPACK framework has been selected as the fundamental framework for discerning the indispensable attributes of educators for the forthcoming era (Reyes et al., 2017). Upon conducting an in-depth analysis of the current body of work on Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), it becomes evident that seven fundamental constructs have continuously emerged as crucial elements in the intricate interaction between technology, pedagogy, and content. One of the notable constructions within this context is Pedagogical Knowledge, which denotes a comprehension of the methodologies and strategies utilized in the process of teaching and learning (Reyes et al., 2017).

In essence, the predominant emphasis of educational research revolves around the investigation of the correlation between teachers' perceptions of their instructional approaches and the academic advancement of their pupils. Research has provided evidence that these attitudes have a substantial impact on the ability of instructors to accurately evaluate students' development. Furthermore, it has been found that teachers' beliefs regarding their role and their implementation of successful tactics have a favorable correlation with student achievement. But a crucial point comes up when it comes to how teachers change their views and attitudes. While a significant number of individuals have a desire for self-improvement, their contemplation of their teaching methodologies often remains at a superficial level. This means that critical thought isn't used as much as it could be when evaluating oneself. Furthermore, educators frequently give precedence to evaluations conducted by students or peers, however they may have difficulties in determining the significance of the comments they get. Many individuals may be unaware of strategies to improve their teaching methods, which could have an impact on their perception of themselves as educators. Certain educators utilize their personal experiences as a means to foster enhancement; nevertheless, the efficacy of their implementation of this approach remains debatable. The aforementioned findings suggest a potential deficiency in confidence or diminished self-efficacy among educators in regard to their ability to engage in reflective teaching practices (Wahyuni & Putra, 2021).

The implementation of efficacious strategies by educators to enhance the acquisition of EFL can yield substantial advancements in students' linguistic proficiencies. An essential element of successful interventions involves accurately perceiving pupils' performance. Educators possessing a comprehensive comprehension of their students' aptitudes and limitations are capable of customizing their interventions to effectively target particular areas requiring attention. Teachers have the ability to employ collaborative learning strategies and implement team-building interventions as effective means to foster the development of critical thinking abilities in students (Chen & Preston, 2021). Electronic intervention tactics can be utilized in dynamic assessment to enhance students' language skills (Mathew et al., 2017). Furthermore, educators have the ability to employ foreign language learning methodologies in order to cultivate learner autonomy and facilitate the achievement of favorable learning outcomes (Butt et al., 2019). The implementation of explicit teaching in pre-writing procedures has the potential

to enhance the writing skills of EFL students (Arju, 2017). The utilization of cooperative learning approaches can prove to be beneficial in the cultivation of crucial skills such as oral fluency (Namaziandost et al., 2020). Basically, teachers who know how their students are doing can use a number of different strategies to help their students learn English as a foreign language.

This study examines the alignment between EFL teachers' perception and their students' writing difficulties. The study examines whether EFL teachers' assessments of their students' writing skills match their students' writing obstacles. Qualitative research methods like teacher interviews and EFL student writing analysis are used to achieve this. Teacher thoughts and students' writing difficulties can be investigated using this method. By comparing teacher perceptions to students' writing abilities, EFL instruction's effectiveness and effects on language development can be assessed.

These studies are expected to make contributions to both theory and practice. By utilizing the TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), the current study explicitly adds theoretically to the ongoing scholarly discussion on writing education, especially highlighting the value of pedagogical knowledge (Reyes et al., 2017). This study will yield insights that can be used to design inventive EFL teaching and learning strategies. To help language development, it's important to fully understand the relationship between how teachers perceive things and the problems that learners encounter with writing.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the alignment between EFL instructors' perceptions of their students' writing difficulties and the observed writing challenges.

Five EFL teachers and twenty-eight students from a public junior high school in Palangka Raya participated in the investigation. Purposive sampling was used to select research participants in order to make the most efficient use of the limited resources available for the study.

Five EFL instructors participated in semi-structured interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight into how instructors perceive their students' writing difficulties and their overall experiences teaching writing in an EFL context. Then, EFL students were asked to submit samples of their written work voluntarily. The purpose of collecting student texts was to acquire an in-depth understanding of the writing difficulties students face.

Before conducting interviews, informed consent was obtained from each teacher participant. Individual interviews were conducted. Teachers were encouraged to communicate their perceptions and experiences regarding student writing difficulties using open-ended questions. Following the instructor interviews, the collection of student texts ensued. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their submissions would be kept confidential.

Using qualitative content analysis, the teacher interview transcripts were analyzed to identify recurring themes and insights regarding teacher perceptions of student writing

difficulties. Simultaneously, a comprehensive qualitative analysis was conducted on student texts, examining vocabulary, grammar, organization, and mechanics in order to classify writing issues and obtain a nuanced understanding of student challenges.

FINDINGS

In this section, we present the key findings of our study, shedding light on the alignment between EFL teachers' perceptions and student performance in specific components of writing. The results highlight both areas of congruence, particularly in vocabulary and grammar, and notable discrepancies observed in organization and mechanics. These findings provide valuable insights into the accuracy of teacher perceptions and their implications for EFL instruction.

Alignment between Teachers' Perceptions and Student Performance

The analysis of teacher perceptions and student writing performance reveals a strong alignment in two essential components: vocabulary and grammar. Teachers of EFL demonstrated an acute understanding of their students' difficulties with vocabulary usage and grammatical structures, and this perception was consistently reflected in the students' written work. In particular, teachers accurately identified vocabulary and grammar issues, as evidenced by their students' writing.

Teachers were able to determine that students' vocabulary size was extremely limited, and they anticipated that students would tend to overuse common words in the vocabulary component. For example, students tended to use "use" to describe a variety of actions, including "wear," "apply," and "utilize." In another instance, they frequently used the word "take" to refer to actions that could have been more precisely described as "use," "get," "have," etc. This overreliance on common words diminished their vocabulary's depth and precision. In addition, the teachers anticipated that students would disregard grammatical features, such as the use of articles, likely because they do not exist in the students' native language (L1). Additionally, they occasionally disregarded the use of plural forms. Students' sentences were typically brief and lacked variety.

Equally accurate alignment existed between teachers' perceptions and students' performance in grammar. Teachers who identified issues with tenses, plural forms that led to subject-verb agreement, and plural agreement were on target, as these issues dominated the written assignments of students. Moreover, according to the teachers, the influence of the students' native language, Indonesian, played a significant role in the students' grammatical mistakes and errors. For instance, students frequently retained Indonesian sentence structures and word order, which differ from English. This resulted in problems with subject-verb agreement, tense usage, and article placement. In Indonesian, for example, verb tenses are frequently used differently than in English, causing confusion among students who attempted to use English verb tenses correctly.

Strong alignment between vocabulary and grammar components demonstrates EFL teachers' ability to accurately identify specific language-related difficulties among

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their students. Accurate instructor perceptions in these areas are crucial because they facilitate targeted language development and proficiency improvement.

Discrepancies between Teachers' Perceptions and Student Performance

When it came to the components of organization and mechanics, however, significant discrepancies were observed. Teachers of EFL reported believing that their students would perform adequately with regard to the organization of written work and the mechanics of writing; however, the reality revealed otherwise.

Teachers frequently expressed confidence in their students' capacity to use generic text structures, maintain idea coherence, and establish logical sequencing in their writing. When the written texts of students were analyzed, however, the majority of students struggled to adhere to the generic structure of the texts, resulting in incoherent writing. These specific issues were not always apparent, as the students' texts exhibited diverse organizational patterns and coherence levels, indicating a misalignment between teacher perceptions and student performance in this component.

Similarly, teachers generally anticipated that their students would demonstrate proficiency in areas such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. However, the discrepancies between instructor perceptions and student performance were glaring. Students who were deemed competent of using capital letters at the beginning of sentences and correct comma and punctuation usage frequently disregarded these conventions, resulting in run-on sentences and mechanical errors. The mechanical proficiency of some students fell short of teachers' expectations.

In the domains of organization and mechanics, these findings highlight the existence of misalignments between teacher perceptions and student performance. It becomes clear that the teachers in these specific components underestimated the challenges their students confronted, resulting in a misalignment between their expectations and the student performance. The observed disparities in these components highlight the need for additional research into the factors that contribute to these misalignments. To better comprehend the underlying causes of these discrepancies, it is crucial to investigate factors such as pedagogical competence and the efficacy of current teaching strategies.

These findings have substantial implications for EFL instruction and student support. While accurate teacher perceptions and interventions in vocabulary and grammar can significantly facilitate language development, misalignment in recognizing organization and mechanics issues may impede students' progress in these essential components of writing proficiency. To close this disparity, enhancing teachers' pedagogical competence becomes essential. Opportunities for professional development should equip instructors with the skills and strategies required to effectively assist students in areas such as generic text structures and mechanics. These initiatives have the potential to result in more effective and student-centered EFL instruction, ultimately enhancing the learning experience of EFL students and enhancing their writing proficiency in all essential components.

DISCUSSION

The alignment between teacher perceptions and student writing

It is clearly evident from the results of the previous part that aligning EFL teachers' perceptions with student writing performance has significant ramifications for the learning experience of students. When teacher perceptions align with students' challenges, it paves the way for the development of more successful teaching tactics and the provision of increased learning methodologies to our enthusiastic learners. When this alignment occurs, there is a noticeable improvement in the learning process, particularly in the areas of vocabulary and grammar. As a result, our students receive more precise feedback and benefit from tailored treatments, resulting in significant growth in language development.

The importance of teacher-student alignment on student learning and performance has been extensively established. Several studies in the field have provided light on the benefits of such alignment. For example, in one study, systemic teacher observations combined with linked professional development resulted in considerably enhanced student accomplishment on standardized tests in reading and math (Shaha et al., 2015). A different study also discovered that writing conferences between teachers and students had a statistically significant effect on how well students wrote, especially on how often and correctly they used unified devices (Buttrey, 2014). A study was also done to see how well EFL high school students could write paragraphs when they got feedback from a teacher using Google Docs or when they got feedback from both teachers and peers using Google Docs (Tayag, 2020). The findings revealed that participants in the control group who got teacher input outperformed those who received both peer and teacher criticism. The study did discover, however, that students in the experimental group had more positive sentiments toward the feedback process.

These many studies highlight the significance of teacher-student alignment and feedback on student learning and performance. Furthermore, they stress how different the methods and approaches that can be used can be, depending on the situation and the unique needs of the students. In the end, the alignment between teachers' perceptions and students' writing abilities is an important part of good EFL teaching that can have a positive effect on students' learning.

The potential impact of discrepancies on writing proficiency

Concerns arise, however, when there are gaps between teacher perceptions and students' actual difficulties, particularly when our well-intentioned instructors' perceptions are inconsistent with the realities of students' issues. In such circumstances, teachers may accidentally ignore components that need improvement, possibly limiting student learning and advancement.

Disagreements in teacher-student alignment have been shown to have a negative impact on writing proficiency. A study, for example, revealed that when teachers and students had different perceptions of the writing task, students' writing performance

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worsened (Cui et al., 2021). Similarly, another study found that when teachers and students had divergent expectations for the writing task, students' writing performance was negatively affected (Tu & Phung, 2023). Furthermore, it was revealed that when teachers and students had different perceptions of the writing process, students' writing performance dropped. Overall, these findings highlight the need of clear communication and shared understanding between teachers and students, demonstrating that discrepancies in teacher-student alignment may have a negative impact on writing proficiency.

In the domains of organization and mechanics, misguided interventions or a lack of targeted support may hinder students' development of basic writing abilities, resulting in a detectable gap between teacher perceptions and student performance. This highlights the need for more effective techniques to bridge the gap and improve students' writing talents. Teachers can give better interventions to help students improve their writing skills by employing effective tactics.

According to research, instructor perceptions can have an effect on students' writing abilities. For example, a study indicated that journal writing, both with and without an audience, increased students' competency level, particularly in terms of organizing skills (Yurekli & Afacan, 2020). Similarly, a study found that language teachers were enthusiastic about including reading and writing abilities into EFL classrooms (Alhujaylan, 2020). In a short period of time, the integrated-skills teaching approach had a considerable influence on students' reading and writing abilities. Furthermore, a study discovered that the flipped classroom model had a considerable favorable impact on university students' paragraph-writing skills in general, and on the writing of most paragraph constructs in particular (Moussaoui & Moubtassime, 2022). Overall, these studies indicate that teacher perceptions and teaching methods can have a good impact on students' writing proficiency, however specific methods and approaches may differ based on context and individual student needs.

Enhancing Teachers' Pedagogical Competence for Better Alignment

To successfully address these issues, teachers' pedagogical competency must be improved. Improved professional development opportunities can help teachers recognize and handle writing issues, hence enhancing pedagogical competence. Teachers have a vital role in shaping students' language skills, making their ability to correlate their perceptions with students' actual issues critical.

Reflective practice emerges as a critical tool for equipping EFL teachers to effectively integrate technology and new teaching practices within the sphere of pedagogical competence (Sari et al., 2021). Reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action are all components of this multidimensional process.

Teachers engage in profound thought on the current teaching scenario during the reflection-in-action phase, displaying understanding of classroom conditions (Murphy & Ermeling, 2016; Wilson, 2008). This instant feedback enables them to adapt and make real-time adjustments based on student responses and input, thereby improving teaching and lesson planning (Crichton & Valdera Gil, 2015).

In EFL education, reflection occurs in two stages. The first, post-teaching reflection-on-action, involves teachers reviewing their instruction and identifying faults, strengths, and impediments, sometimes through activities such as video review or peer reflections (Farrell, 2018). This reflective phase results in a thorough examination of instructional approaches. The second, reflection-for-action, occurs prior to teaching and involves teachers proactively planning and considering classroom settings, student reactions, and available resources, allowing them to identify potential difficulties and solutions for future courses (Minott, 2010; Sari et al., 2021). These reflective activities improve pedagogical expertise, allow for the incorporation of technology and fresh instructional strategies, and bridge the gap between teacher perceptions and student writing performance, eventually enriching the learning experience over all writing components.

This emphasis on reflective techniques emphasizes the importance of teacher development in improving teachers' abilities to detect and address students' writing issues. In a way, it connects the results of our work to real-world ways to make EFL teaching better.

Further insights from related studies on teachers' perceptions

Our understanding of teachers' perceptions is also improved by insights from linked studies. While our focus has been on a specific set of EFL teachers and students, comparable research provides a broader perspective and essential background. These studies have the potential to provide critical insights into successful techniques for tackling the difficulties of alignment and discrepancies between teacher perceptions and student writing.

In the context of English as a foreign language, researchers have looked into the effect of teacher-student alignment on student learning results. One study, for example, discovered considerable discrepancies in EFL teachers' assessment literacy, showing inconsistencies between assessment tasks and course learning outcomes (Umer et al., 2018). Another study discovered that, while Chinese EFL teachers had good attitudes about technology in education, they mostly used it for teacher-centered goals, emphasizing the importance of aligning technology, curriculum, and pedagogy (Li & Ni, 2011; Rotjanawongchai, 2019). Furthermore, a study discovered misalignments between teachers' views and actions regarding written corrective feedback in EFL, which included characteristics such as praising comments, redrafting, feedback volume, explicitness, and focus (Trabelsi, 2021). Finally, study showed that effective questioning strategies had a good influence in an online EFL reading class, stressing the importance of such techniques in online learning environments (Harunasari et al., 2023). These findings highlight the significance of teacher-student alignment in EFL environments, as well as the continued need for research and professional development to improve teaching techniques and pedagogy.

Practical strategies and approaches to narrow the misalignment gap

Given these findings, it is critical to examine practical ways for reconciling the misalignment between teacher perceptions and student writing, thereby improving the entire learning experience and boosting writing proficiency. Several studies provide insights into effective methods for improving EFL writing proficiency. Teacher-student conferences, for example, have shown the ability to improve paragraph writing among EFL learners (Suthipiyapathra, 2021). In Chinese tertiary EFL contexts, novice writing teachers have taken a thorough approach to feedback providing, with a major emphasis on language faults, particularly grammar (Cheng et al., 2021). Computer-mediated feedback, namely teacher-only multiple-draft feedback and combined peer-teacher multiple-draft feedback, has demonstrated statistically substantial gains in writing quality, particularly in terms of syntactic complexity and competency levels (Pojslova, 2021). Using guideline sheets to implement peer feedback and self-correction has proven to be particularly effective, as it not only provides valuable input from peers but also fosters self-awareness and structured improvement in areas such as organization, mechanics, and vocabulary usage (Cahyono & Rosyida, 2016). These solutions have the potential to improve EFL writing performance while addressing alignment issues.

Finally, these ideas provide practical methods for improving teacher-student alignment in EFL writing, hence boosting students' writing proficiency and overall learning experience. We can close the gap between instructor perceptions and student performance by combining these approaches into EFL teaching practices, resulting in more effective writing instruction and support for students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study revealed the alignment and discrepancies between EFL teachers' perceptions of student performance in particular writing components and student performance in those components. We discovered that EFL teachers displayed good alignment in vocabulary and grammar components, correctly recognizing language-related problems and offering focused treatments for their students. This alignment aided student learning and language development.

However, significant discrepancies arose in the areas of organization and mechanics, where teacher perceptions did not match the reality of students' issues. These misalignments emphasized the need for more effective techniques to bridge this gap and improve students' writing talents. Such discrepancies can impede students' development of critical writing abilities.

Improving teachers' pedagogical competency is critical for addressing these difficulties. Reflective practice, which includes reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action, is an important technique for preparing EFL teachers to effectively utilize technology and creative teaching methodologies.

The implications of our findings for EFL instruction and student support are important. Teacher perceptions and interventions in vocabulary and grammar components that are accurate can significantly improve language development. The misalignment in spotting structural and mechanical faults, on the other hand, may impede student

advancement in these critical writing skill areas. To narrow this gap, teachers' instructional skills must be improved. Customized professional development opportunities should offer educators with the knowledge and strategies they need to effectively support students in areas such as text structure and mechanics. These initiatives have the potential to improve EFL instruction while also enriching students' learning experiences and increasing their writing skills in all important components.

In conclusion, our research emphasizes the significance of aligning instructor perceptions with student performance in all components of writing, recognizing strengths in vocabulary and grammar perception as well as areas that require additional attention, notably organization and mechanics. We may improve EFL writing instruction through these insights and the consequent pedagogical adjustments, eventually helping students' language growth and writing competency.

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