

EFL writing skill requirements and challenges: Teachers and learners perceptions in focus**Article info****Article Type:**

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Abstract

Although there have been many studies concentrating on writing development and techniques to improve it, there still remains the need to investigate more and give extra insight to the EFL language learners and teachers on these issues. Using a grounded model of research, the researchers performed an investigation to examine the various aspects concerning writing challenges, and requirements to improve it. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an aim to achieve a thorough understanding of the topic by recruiting 25 male and female experienced EFL teachers along with 25 male and female intermediate EFL learners from language institutes in Tehran as the participants of the study through purposeful sampling technique. Then, 5 distinctive questions were chosen for the teachers and another set of 5 different questions for the learners to elicit their perceptions. After gathering the data and identifying the initial codes, the sub-categories emerged and helped the researcher to form the final model. Among the categories, writing strategies like collaborative and game-based, requirements like background, vocabulary, and grammatical knowledge were found to be essential. Based on the findings, a model was developed which is believed to support EFL learners in improving their writing proficiency.

Keywords: EFL Students' Perceptions, EFL Teachers' Perceptions, EFL Writing Challenges, EFL Writing Requirements

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1. Introduction

In the globalization era, it is crucial to realize English as an international language for interaction among humanity around the world (Fuadilah, 2019). Currently, due to the improvements in technology, English is used widely in the community for communication (Adas & Bakir, 2013, p. 254). With reference to Mahu (2012), just one out of five people can comprehend English. Consequently, English has become a required part of our lives. On the other hand, among all four skills, writing is the most challenging and problematic skill for English language students (Adas & Bakir, 2013). Writing is viewed as a game of chess by many researchers due to its elaborateness and complication (Baqerzadeh Hosseini & Pourghasemian, 2020, p. 243). Both instructors and learners have to deal with some challenges since writing is a computerized and specialized skill (Wall, 2020).

Learners with writing disabilities are those who face many complications, such as production fluency, dictation, accuracy, vocabulary variety, and sentence structure (Collins et al., 2017). Many sub-skills are required in writing, which makes it a detailed skill. Fine motor skills, multisensory integration, mastery, meaningful vocabulary, spelling proficiency, syntactic abilities, and the ability to establish ideas are examples of these sub-skills (Wall, 2020, p. 4).

One component that facilitates writing quality is the ideas in writing (Crossley & McNamara, 2016). Prewriting exercises can be a useful strategy to enable the learners to think about the subject and present their ideas. Therefore, after performing the prewriting exercises, learners suffer less from cognitive blocks and have something to begin with. There are several prewriting strategies, including mind mapping, brainstorming, discussion, outlining, and free writing (Brinton et al., 2020). As recently asserted, free writing has been assumed to be a beneficial process for prewriting. Particularly, it encourages writers to clear their minds from grammar and focus more on developing ideas.

2. Review of literature

One of the most valuable tools for communication is writing, through which learners aim

to generate paragraphs and coherently combine them to develop a communicative and influential text (Alrouji, 2020). Writing is a strategy that delivers noticeable results for recording language with a special method or form (Deveci, 2018, p. 1). Writing is a fundamental skill that has always been used as a way of engaging people, communicating information, and protecting culture (Wall, 2020). Writing has always been in the second/foreign language curriculum, and in the 21st century, the need to have the capacity to write well has been felt more than before (Weigle, 2014). In fact, through the use of grammar principles, people can skillfully convey and transfer their assumptions, impressions, and emotions since writing is a tool of communication among people (López-Díaz et al., 2020). According to Brown (2016), writing is a culturally particular learned behaviour, unlike speaking. Individuals realize to write when it is taught to them in an educated society.

The crucial function of writing cannot be rejected in people's lives. Improvements in computer technology need more interaction in writing than speaking (Deveci, 2018). Hence, it is difficult to separate it from life itself; interest in continual academic growth through writing enables individuals to expand the quality of their lives. Besides, writing is rapidly linked and attributed to students' learning. There are some beliefs for this statement. Firstly, learners can profit from writing for evaluating what they have already learned; therefore, it assists to enhance learning by transferring the information from short-term memory to long-term memory. Second, writing assists learners to accomplish a deeper and better awareness of theoretical information. Reflecting on the texts and information can be deeper when it is done through writing. More precisely, writing training can facilitate the acquisition and learning process (Deveci, 2018).

Instructors constantly try to support their students to produce the correct and fluent target language (Dolati & Mikaili, 2011). This goal can be accomplished by providing learners with a pleasant and enjoyable learning environment (Tabatabaei, 2012). As the world changes, learning and teaching styles face many changes. Newly, modern styles have developed several different and distinct teaching and learning opportunities in current education (Haddadi & Tahririan, 2014). According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) had a serious influence on learning and pedagogy. Mediation is a crucial belief in this theory, which implicates the use of equipment to

accomplish goals or solve difficulties (Aghazadeh & Soleimani, 2020, p. 183). Tools in sociocultural theory are the symbolic exercises of students which include computers, television, schedules, etc. (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

The notion of writing fluency is a questionable issue like reading and speaking fluency that has been defined in various ways. Explanations implied for fluent writing are qualitative in nature. They relate to the generation of the written language quickly, coherently, properly, and creatively (Abdel Latif, 2013, p. 99). Fluency means writing text in a way that is easy for the reader to read without any part of the text making the reader stop while reading (Atasoy & Temizkan, 2016). Writing fluency means building more words and structures in a limited time, regardless of the complexity and accuracy of the structure. Fluency is a measure concerning rhythm and time (Atasoy & Temizkan, 2016, pp. 1461). In contrast, writing accuracy is specified as a learner's proficiency to write a passage without errors in punctuation, items, subject-verb consistency, spelling and conjunctions (El-Sakka & Seiffedin, 2017). Consequently, many EFL writing instructors attempt to manipulate students to write correctly (Almasi & Tabrizi, 2016). To estimate and check text accuracy, investigators require to evaluate different characteristics of text accuracy such as vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and mechanical parts of the text (Anderson et al., 2010).

As Brown (2016) points out, half a century ago, the focus of writing instruction was on the product approach. They determined how the product (e.g. dissertation, article, and story) should look like. The product approach neglected the criteria of English rhetoric, appropriate use of grammar, and organized text structure. However, all of these criteria should be considered. Instructors should enable students to concentrate evenly on subject, messages, and ideas. Therefore, the process approach and innate motivation of the individual should not be dismissed but must be placed at the center of learning (Brown, 2016). Writing is a productive skill that implicates three stages: Pre-writing, writing and post-writing (Alsmari, 2019). The pre-writing stage is dedicated to gathering input and writing text. The second stage is the writing phase, in which learners do different activities such as writing a paragraph or a report. The last stage is post-writing, which is the activity confirmation and feedback phase (Alsmari, 2019).

Various theorists have described the characteristics of process-oriented writing and product-oriented writing. For instance, Murray sees process-oriented writing as inner corrections used to interpret what it means to oneself. However, the process-oriented text is an external modification that makes the meaning obvious to the reader (Feng & Sun, 2009, pp. 150-151). Based on Nunan's idea, the product's approach directs the writing task by simulating and copying the model exemplified by the teacher. However, the process approach directs the stages that must be taken to finally develop the text (Bijami & Raftari, 2013). Table 1 shows the various stages of the creation process with definitions and examples. The process approach normally includes learners at various stages: prewriting, drafting, revision, and finally the finished version of the work (Brinton et al., 2020; Brown, 2016; Harmer, 2001).

Table 1. Writing Process

Phase	Definition	Examples of Teaching and Learning Activities
Pre-writing	Structures activities to provide motivation, content, fluency, language practice	Structured language practice, readings, films, discussions, brainstorming, webbing, outlining
Writing	First draft	Focus on content, getting ideas on paper
Response	Reaction of a reader or listener	Peer review, partners or small groups, teacher conferences, written feedback
Revising	Reseeing or rethinking content; second draft	Reorganizing, adding details, adding support for arguments
Editing	Refinement and attention to writing conventions, including grammar and vocabulary; third draft	Checklists, grammar logs, exercises, proofreading practice
Post-writing	What students and teachers do with finished pieces	Display, share online, compile class writing into a booklet
Evaluating	How teachers and/or students assess student's writing	Rubrics, conferences, self-evaluation, portfolios

Adapted from California State University, Stanislaus (n.d.).

The literature on writing procedures in a foreign language lacks practical guidance on overcoming EFL writing challenges including linguistic and cultural barriers. Indeed, there is a void in comprehensive strategies addressing grammar nuances, idiomatic expressions, and cultural context integration, crucial for effective communication and authenticity in second language writing. In the present study the researcher tried to catch

a deep understanding about the different challenges that an EFL learner faces from both teachers and learners' point of view. To address the objectives of the study, the following research questions were proposed:

1. What are EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the challenges, and requirements of improving L2 writing skill?
2. What are EFL students' perceptions regarding the challenges, and requirements of improving L2 writing skill?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

As noted by Birks and Mills (2015), grounded theory methods are popular when the purpose of research is theory building, and this makes a lot of sense given the lack of research in this area (Glaser, 2007). Currently, this method is famous in the field of language learning and teaching, and several studies have been administered using grounded theories (e.g. Adel, Egtesadi & Sadeghi, 2019; Ghadyani, Tahririan & Afzali, 2020). The primary goal of the Grounded Theory method is to develop a theoretical framework that captures teacher-learner perspectives on writing skills, an area that is underexplored in existing literature, making it an apt choice for this study.

Among the various schools of grounded theory, the researcher opted for the Glaserian classical grounded theory method. This approach aligns with the novel methodology proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which allows the data to guide the researchers. The methodology adopted involves iterative processes where data collection, coding, and analysis (inputs) are continuously interchanged with classifying, categorizing, and theory development (outputs). The decision to use the Glaserian approach is rooted in its flexibility and responsiveness to the data, which is essential for uncovering nuanced insights in the complex field of language education. The iterative nature of this method ensures that emerging theories are grounded in empirical data, providing a robust framework that accurately reflects the realities of teacher and learner experiences.

3.2. Participants

Participants in this research were selected using a 'purposeful sampling' technique (Creswell, 2012). The criteria for participant selection included intermediate students according to their placement test results which were recorded in the language institutes they were studying English with varying levels of writing skills and experienced teacher with over five years of teaching experience. To ensure diversity, the researcher employed maximum variation sampling (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014), which allowed for a wide range of gender, age, cultural, and family backgrounds among the participants. The only restrictions were on the participants' proficiency levels and years of English study.

Both the students and the teachers were invited to participate in separate and individual semi-structured interview sessions. The selection of participants was guided by theoretical sampling, meaning data collection and analysis continued until no new information emerged, thus achieving theoretical saturation (Hadley, 2017). Data collection ceased after saturation was reached with the 15th participant. Ultimately, the study included 25 EFL learners and 25 teachers from Tehran, Iran, all aged between 25 and 35, with a minimum of five years of experience in learning or teaching English.

3.3. Instruments

The primary data collection instruments for developing grounded theories are interviews and questionnaires (Birks & Mills, 2015). Hence, the researcher decided to use semi-structured interviews for data collection. The interviewer formulated three key topics for discussion with participants. For students, the topics included: (a) the perceived benefits of having strong writing skills, (b) the essential writing skills they require, and (c) the challenges they encounter during writing activities (See Appendix A). For teachers, the topics covered: (a) the necessary components for teaching writing tasks, (b) the challenges faced in teaching writing, and (c) the different styles used in teaching writing tasks (See Appendix B).

Based on participants' responses, additional follow-up questions were posed to clarify any ambiguous statements and achieve theoretical saturation. As recommended by Charmaz and Belgrave (2012), the researcher refined the interview questions through

an iterative process of data collection and analysis, asking supplementary questions as needed. To ensure a complete and accurate record, all interviews were recorded, following the suggestion by Birks and Mills (2015) that grounded theory researcher should maintain a full record of interviews to avoid data loss and allow full attention to the interview process.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data collection process began with the target participants. Over a period of three months, interviews were conducted, with data being simultaneously analyzed and coded. At the beginning of each interview, rapport was established and a friendly atmosphere was created. Then, the consent was taken from each participant to record their voices. All the interviews were done individually and each interview took almost fifteen minutes. Besides, the language during the interview was a mixture of English and Persian for the comfort of participants to give more details. The learners' initial interview prompts included five questions: the first one asked about their previous experiences with writing tasks and the challenges they faced in language learning; the second question inquired about the necessary skills for completing writing tasks; the third one assessed their proficiency in writing; and the fourth and fifth questions evaluated the advantages or disadvantages of having a clear process for writing skills.

For the teachers' interviews, the first question focused on the important criteria for scoring a writing activity. The second and third questions aimed to identify the challenges teachers face and the solutions they implement when teaching writing skills. The fourth question examined the prerequisites for teaching writing, and the fifth one investigated the relationship between writing skills and other core skills such as speaking, reading, and listening.

Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via voice calls to elicit participants' the attitudes. Data were analyzed concurrently with the interviews, and the collected data were transcribed for detailed analysis after each session. The number and content of the questions changed during the study as we proceeded in order to cover any possible data and area of interest and importance. Transcribing the interviews into Microsoft Word files enabled the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis, scrutinize

the data, and address any deficiencies in subsequent interviews. Grounded theory methods were employed to develop concepts, with interview questions designed to construct and validate unique concepts (Glaser, 1998). After transcribing all the interviews, the researcher analyzed the transcripts sentence by sentence to create open-ended codes. Open coding involved breaking down the data into codes to compare incidents and extract relevant concepts, maintaining an open attitude and discarding preconceptions throughout the process (Glaser, 1992). In this phase, *in vivo* codes—direct quotes from participants—were used. As concepts emerged and the most relevant ones were selected, these codes were refined and formalized. Once no new open codes emerged, the researcher moved to the selective coding stage.

During selective coding, the data were meticulously analyzed using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), comparing each data item with all other collected data. Through continuous comparisons of codes to incidents and codes to other codes (Urquhart, 2013), categories and subcategories were developed and revised as new data were added. This involved grouping data related to the same concept and refining the groups as necessary. Following Charmaz's (2014) perspective on the fluidity of the classification process, categories were merged or split during the analysis. In the final stage, theoretical coding explored the relationships between concepts and categories, as well as the interconnections among various categories. According to Glaser (1978, 2001), theory emerges during theoretical coding, which allows for a deeper understanding of the data and the development of a cohesive theoretical framework.

In the following, the categories which emerged from the interviews with the participants will be presented. The raw data were made concise and converged through initial, open, and axial coding in order to make a meaningful and comprehensive model.

4. Findings

4.1. EFL Teachers' Perceptions

By analyzing the interview data elicited from the teachers, the following categories were emerged:

Styles, Requirements, Challenges of Writing

For the case of teachers two different and one similar category were shaped with different subcategories. The main categories included: the styles, challenges, and requirements of writing. For the main category of style, game-based strategy was proposed for children to make them motivated and collaborative and for adults peer-learning was suggested. Other styles encompassed process versus product oriented writing that could be assimilated by top down or bottom up process of writing. The last style that was mentioned by the teachers was free writing and on the other hand instructed writing.

In terms of the requirements of writing, teachers believed that lexical and structural knowledge were essential for successful writing. The next issues concerning the requirements of writing were background knowledge and motivation. These two were frequently expressed by the teachers. Another most necessary prerequisite of writing according to teachers was making an outline as a draft and practice of prewriting. They believed that this activity needed brainstorming to gather all needed information to make a framework for the next writing stage. Moreover, teachers asserted that writing shouldn't be secluded from other skills and there should be coordination with other skills as they are interrelated especially in case of reading skill that is somehow directly connected to writing and can be used as a sample for writing task in different genres by which lots of things can be learnt by the learners inductively.

The third factor concerning the teachers' insights included the challenges of dealing with writing tasks. The first stated challenge was the time consuming nature of doing a writing task. This issue is because of writing process which requires writers go through several stages including pre-writing and revision when engaged in a writing task. Besides, in modern life through the online communications and instant messaging many bad/good habits have entered the language of learners that either help them or take them away from the standards of writing.

4.2. EFL Learners' Perceptions

On the other hand, the responses provided by the learners yielded the following categories:

Advantages, disadvantages, and writing requirements

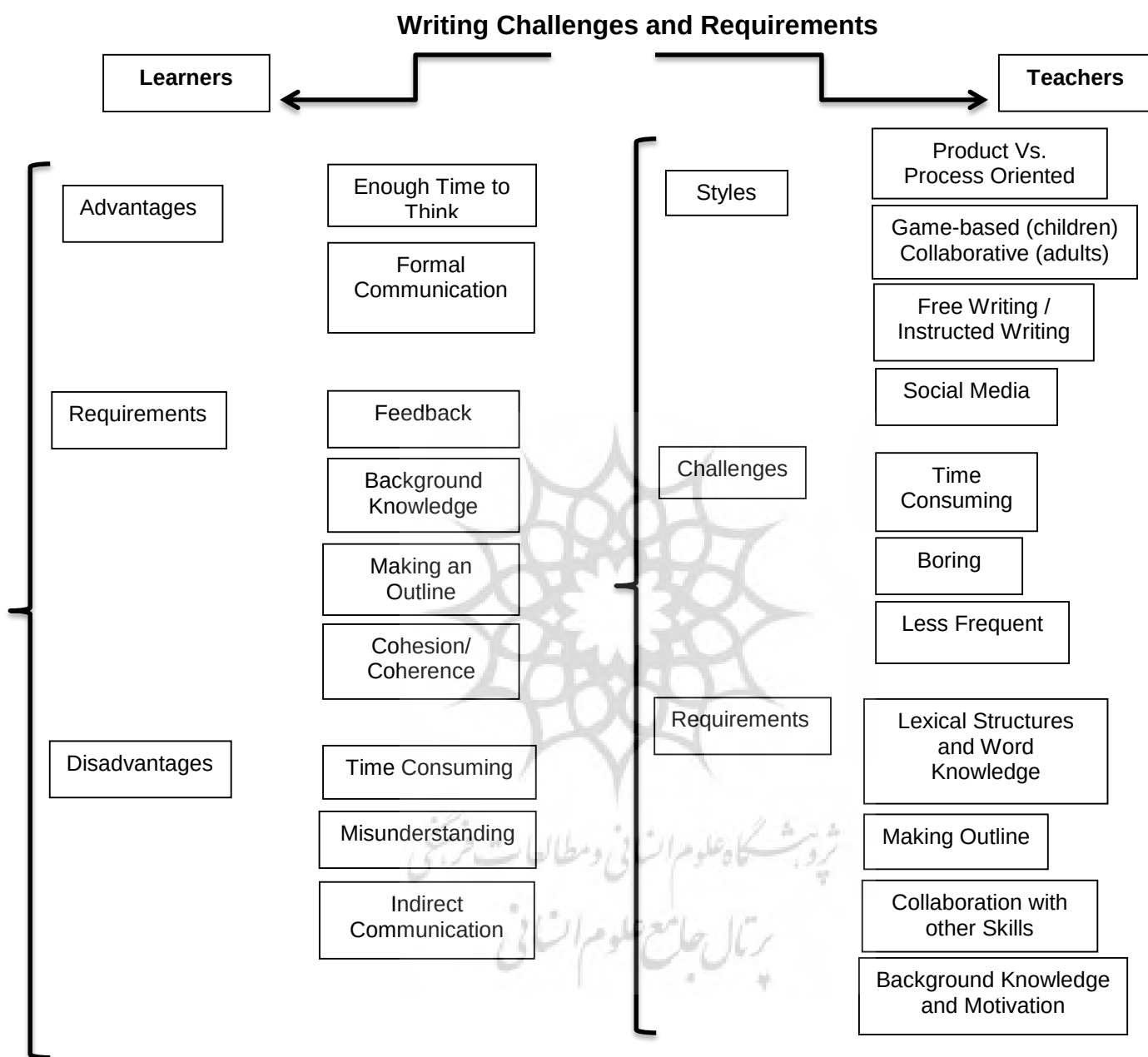
The learners typically talked about the advantages and disadvantages of EFL writing. Indeed, the learners discussed both the positive and negative aspects of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing. They highlighted several advantages. One benefit they mentioned was having sufficient time for writing tasks, which allows them to revise their work thoroughly before submitting it. Additionally, they noted that practicing EFL writing helps them develop a formal communication style. On the other hand, they also pointed out several disadvantages. These included the time-consuming nature of writing, the potential for indirect communication which may lead to misunderstandings, and the complexities involved in conveying meaning effectively. Furthermore, the learners identified several key elements necessary for effective EFL writing. These included maintaining cohesion and coherence in their writing, possessing adequate background knowledge on the topic, receiving constructive feedback, and preparing a clear outline before beginning to write.

In summary, the learners engaged in a comprehensive discussion about the pros and cons of EFL writing, while also outlining essential requirements for improving their writing skills in this context.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Since writing is one of the most challenging and time consuming tasks and skills of language learning and teaching, the researcher of the present study decided to perform a qualitative study to capture a deep understanding and insight about the challenges and requirements of EFL writing teaching and learning by recruiting 25 male and female intermediate English learners and 25 male and female experienced teachers. Semi-structured interview sessions which included five initial questions for the teachers and five questions for learners were asked through the study in a cyclical mode based on the upcoming issues during the interviews. Next, the collected data were coded through initial and axial coding and based on the results a model was created. Many areas were stated by the learners and the teachers under the categories of challenges, requirements, styles, advantages, and disadvantages about writing.

Figure 1. Overview of core and major categories, related subcategories, and concepts in writing skill



While some learners considered writing as a task where they had enough time to develop, and found it suitable for formal communication and desirable for the individuals who did not like engaging oral tasks, others believed that it could cause misunderstanding and could be time consuming and boring. Nearly all teacher participants believed lexical

and syntactic knowledge as necessary requirements to develop a good writing along with background knowledge and motivation. Besides, it was stated that writing should be learnt and practiced along with other language skills especially reading in order to achieve more efficient results which is in line with Fitzgerald (2010) who states that reading and writing rely on analogous mental processes so it can be understood that they can help each other development.

The findings of this study are in line with the literature in recognizing writing as a crucial skill for communication and cognitive development (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The results also acknowledge the importance of teaching methodologies (e.g., process-oriented vs. product-oriented) and the integration of writing with other language skills (Fitzgerald, 2010; Memari Hanjani, 2014). In terms of EFL writing requirements, the results support Ferris' (2003) arguments who believes that students should possess a strong command of grammar and vocabulary; understand planning and organization of their thoughts clearly, concisely, and logically; be aware of style and register in different situations for their audiences; and be sensitive to cultural and social context of the language they are writing in.

The findings of the study outline several implications for EFL teaching and learning which include:

- Tailoring instructional strategies to accommodate different learner preferences and developmental stages.
- Integrating writing with other language skills to reinforce learning and enhance proficiency holistically.
- Providing structured support for prewriting activities and revision processes to help learners overcome challenges and improve writing quality.
- Offering opportunities for constructive feedback and reflection to foster continuous improvement in writing skills

In conclusion, these findings highlight the complexity of EFL writing instruction and underscore the need for adaptable teaching strategies that address the diverse needs, challenges, and preferences of learners while promoting effective skill development in writing.

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Appendices

Appendix A: EFL Teachers' Interview Prompts

1. How do you evaluate your students' writings?
2. What are the challenges for teaching and developing writing skill?
3. What is the best way you adopt to teach writing? (explain)
4. What items and factors should precede teaching writing?
5. Is there any priority for teaching other skills than writing (if yes, why and how?)

Appendix B: EFL Learners' Interview Prompts

1. What problems do you have when doing a writing task?
2. What are the pre-requisites for doing a writing task?
3. How strong are you in writing regarding your writing scores and what are your areas of strengths?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing in case of communicating ideas?
5. How would you prefer to proceed through a writing task?