



TEACHERS PERCEPTIONS ABOUT YOUNG LEARNERS IN ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS

PERCEPCIONES DE LOS DOCENTES SOBRE LAS HABILIDADES DE ESCRITURA EN INGLÉS DE LOS JÓVENES ESTUDIANTES

Maryuri Fernanda Ugsha Hidalgo^{1*}

¹ Estudiante de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. Extensión Pujilí. Ecuador. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4608-6382>. Correo: maryuri.ugsha2756@utc.edu.ec

Martha Paulina Chango Escobar²

² Estudiante de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. Extensión Pujilí. Ecuador. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7021-0974>. Correo: martha.chango4914@utc.edu.ec

Olga Lorena González Ortiz³

³ Docente investigador de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi. Extensión Pujilí. Ecuador. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0064-1601>. Correo: olga.gonzalez@utc.edu.ec

* Autor para correspondencia: maryuri.ugsha2756@utc.edu.ec

Abstract

This article researches English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perceptions regarding the development of writing skills among young learners (YLS, ages 6–12). Writing is often the most neglected and challenging macro-skill in primary EFL curricula, especially given YLS' limited cognitive and linguistic resources. This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological approach, examining the beliefs and pedagogical strategies of five EFL teachers from two distinct educational institutions. Findings reveal that teachers primarily perceive YLS' challenges in writing as stemming from (a) low foundational literacy in their first language (L1), (b) limited English vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, and (c) high levels of anxiety and low motivation towards the task. Teachers reported favoring highly scaffolded activities such as sentence completion and guided writing, often minimizing creative, free-writing tasks. The perceptions highlight a critical need for professional development focused on age-appropriate writing assessment rubrics and integrating L1 literacy strategies to enhance L2 writing instruction.

Keywords: english writing skills, pedagogical practices, teacher perceptions; young learners



Esta obra está bajo una licencia *Creative Commons* de tipo (CC-BY-NC-SA).

Sociedad Ecuatoriana de Investigación Científica. E-mail: revistaalcon@gmail.com



Resumen

Este artículo investiga las percepciones de los docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) respecto al desarrollo de la escritura en jóvenes estudiantes (YLs, de 6 a 12 años). La escritura suele ser la macrohabilidad más descuidada y desafiante en los currículos de EFL de primaria, especialmente dados los limitados recursos cognitivos y lingüísticos de los YLs. Este estudio adoptó un enfoque cualitativo y fenomenológico, examinando las creencias y estrategias pedagógicas de cinco docentes de EFL de dos instituciones educativas distintas. Los hallazgos revelan que los docentes perciben principalmente los desafíos de los YLs en la escritura como resultado de (a) un bajo nivel de alfabetización básica en su lengua materna (L1), (b) un vocabulario y conocimiento gramatical limitados en inglés, y (c) altos niveles de ansiedad y baja motivación hacia la tarea. Los docentes informaron preferir actividades con un alto nivel de andamiaje, como completar oraciones y escribir con guía, minimizando a menudo las tareas creativas de escritura libre. Las percepciones resaltan la necesidad crítica de desarrollo profesional centrado en rúbricas de evaluación de escritura apropiadas para cada edad y en la integración de estrategias de lectoescritura en L1 para mejorar la enseñanza de la escritura en L2.

Palabras clave: *estudiantes jóvenes, habilidades de escritura en inglés, percepciones del profesorado; prácticas pedagógicas*

Fecha de recibido: 11/10/2025

Fecha de aceptado: 22/12/2025

Fecha de publicado: 15/01/2026

Introduction

The increasing global demand for English proficiency has pushed its introduction into primary education worldwide. Within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum, the development of the four macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is fundamental. However, writing skills often pose the greatest challenge for Young Learners (YLs), typically aged 6 to 12. At this stage, YLs are simultaneously developing their literacy skills in their First Language (L1), making the acquisition of L2 writing a complex cognitive and linguistic endeavor.

In the Ecuadorian context, EFL instruction in primary schools varies widely in approach, intensity, and resources. Consequently, teachers' subjective understanding—their perceptions—of what constitutes effective writing instruction and where YLs struggle is paramount to pedagogical effectiveness. These perceptions dictate the choices of materials, activities, and assessment methods used in the classroom. If teachers perceive writing as merely a transcription of grammar rules, instruction may lack the necessary creativity and scaffolding required for YLs.

This research aims to explore the perceptions held by a select group of EFL teachers regarding: (a) the main difficulties YLs face in developing English writing competence, (b) the pedagogical strategies they employ to address these difficulties, and (c) their views on the role of L1 literacy in L2 writing development. The



Esta obra está bajo una licencia *Creative Commons* de tipo (CC-BY-NC-SA).

Sociedad Ecuatoriana de Investigación Científica. E-mail: revistaalcon@gmail.com

insights gained will inform recommendations for teacher training programs and curriculum design, ultimately seeking to improve the quality of writing instruction for this critical age group.

Theoretical Framework

The current study investigates English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' subjective understandings—their perceptions—of the challenges and instructional methodologies related to developing writing skills among Young Learners (YLS, typically aged 6-12). The effectiveness of pedagogy in this area is critically shaped by teachers' beliefs, their grasp of YLS' cognitive development, and their ability to apply strategic linguistic scaffolding that leverages the learners' existing knowledge base.

The Complex Nature of L2 Writing in Young Learners: Cognitive and Linguistic Demands

Writing is widely acknowledged as the most complex language macro-skill because it requires the simultaneous integration of motor skills, linguistic knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, spelling), and high-order cognitive processes like planning, organizing, and monitoring (Flower & Hayes, 1981, cited in fundamental literature). For Young Learners, this complexity is further amplified as they operate within a developing cognitive landscape.

Writing as Expressive Language and Knowledge Construction

Beyond transcription, writing serves as an expressive language tool essential for "putting knowledge and personal ideas to work" (Wang & Wang, 2012, cited in *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 2024). It is critical for memory recall and deeper reading comprehension. Consequently, teachers' underlying perceptions of writing—whether they view it as a product (prioritizing grammatical accuracy) or a process (prioritizing content generation and communication)—profoundly influence their instructional choices. An excessive focus on linguistic error correction may stifle the expressive function of writing, potentially leading to anxiety and reduced motivation among YLS.

Specific Cognitive and Literacy Challenges in YLS

Young Learners (YLS) contend with a dual literacy challenge: they are still consolidating foundational literacy skills in their First Language (L1) while concurrently tackling the demands of acquiring the L2 writing system, vocabulary, and syntax. The observed difficulties often extend beyond surface-level grammatical errors to encompass higher-order skills such as textual organization, coherence, and idea cohesion. Effective instruction, therefore, must move beyond simple linguistic drills to provide explicit meta-cognitive strategies for planning, drafting, and revising (Vygotsky, 1978).

Teacher Cognition and Pedagogical Beliefs in EFL Writing Instruction

A teacher's cognition—their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes—acts as a decisive filter through which curriculum goals are interpreted and classroom practices are executed (Borg, 2003, fundamental). In EFL writing, teachers' perceptions directly shape their instructional response to YLS' writing challenges, determining which errors are addressed, what tasks are assigned, and how success is measured.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and Academic Literacies (AcLits)



Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which links subject matter expertise (English) with teaching methods (pedagogy), is essential. Recent research indicates that EFL teachers may hold a vague understanding of Academic Literacies (AcLits), often mistakenly equating them with general study skills. This ambiguity can lead to an instructional emphasis on easily testable, exam-oriented skills, consequently neglecting more complex skills like critical thinking, synthesis, and searching databases.

The limited clarity on AcLits often results in two core pedagogical gaps identified by recent studies (Allebaby, 2024):

- **Focus on Exam-Oriented Skills:** Teachers prioritize skills that facilitate students' immediate academic success (like exam passing), often at the expense of comprehensive writing development.
- **Lack of Systematic Scaffolding:** Teachers may fail to provide a systematic and sustained scaffolded approach when attempting to incorporate academic aspects into the classroom, resulting in fragmented or insufficient support.

Perceptions of Error and the Efficacy of Written Corrective Feedback (WCF)

Teacher perception regarding Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is a central element of writing instruction, directly impacting student motivation and learning (Zarrinabadi & Rezazadeh, 2020). The debate over WCF continues, with contrasting viewpoints:

- **Grammar-Focused WCF:** Some scholars advocate for its role in ensuring linguistic accuracy and fostering motivation (Zarrinabadi & Rezazadeh, 2020).
- **Critiques of WCF:** Others critique the value of excessive grammar-focused feedback (Kao, 2024), arguing that it can be discouraging for some learners.

Effective WCF must align with the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to enhance L2 learning. Students prefer feedback strategies like meta-linguistic explanation and direct written corrective feedback that improve both writing proficiency and language knowledge. Crucially, WCF should be delivered promptly, highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement, alongside actionable recommendations that focus on modifiable behaviors (Dawson et al., 2019; Ngoon et al., 2018).

The Role of L1 Literacy and the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis

In the EFL classroom, the relationship between the YL's First Language (L1) and the target language (L2) is pivotal. Teacher perception of L1—as either a resource or a source of interference—is highly predictive of instructional decisions.

1 Proficiency as a Predictor of L2 Success

The Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1979) posits that the higher-order cognitive and academic language skills (CALP) acquired in L1 are transferable to the L2. Recent evidence corroborates this, demonstrating that proficiency in both L1 and L2 predicts success in a third language (L3, English). Furthermore, a bilingual background can provide advantages in L2/L3 vocabulary and grammar acquisition, even in primary school children (Frontiers, 2023).

Transfer of Higher-Order Skills in Writing



For YLs, this interdependence is most evident in the transfer of macro-skills such as text organization, narrative sequencing, and idea structuring. These fundamental literacy skills, once established in L1, should be *activated* rather than *re-taught* in L2. If a teacher views L1 purely as a source of interference (e.g., L1 orthography affecting English spelling), they may discourage its use, thereby missing a crucial opportunity to leverage the cognitive foundation the student has already built. Pedagogical practices should strategically incorporate L1 for tasks like planning and brainstorming, allowing YLs to organize their thoughts effectively before translating them into L2 English.

Pedagogical Scaffolding and the Development of Writer Autonomy

Effective L2 writing instruction for YLs relies on the concept of Scaffolding, rooted in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding provides temporary support from a "more informed entity" (the teacher), enabling the learner to achieve tasks that would otherwise be beyond their independent reach.

Types of Scaffolding in Writing

In the writing classroom, scaffolding takes several forms:

- Modeling: Explicit demonstration of the writing process (planning, drafting).
- Structural Scaffolding: Use of templates, graphic organizers, and writing frames to manage linguistic and structural demands.
- Process Scaffolding: Teaching explicit self-monitoring and revision strategies.

The main pedagogical tension lies between providing sufficient support and fostering writer autonomy. When teachers rely too heavily on controlled scaffolding (e.g., sentence completion or word-bank exercises) to manage error or student frustration, they risk hindering the development of the strategic competence needed for independent, creative writing (Allebaby, 2024). The ultimate goal of scaffolding is the gradual release of responsibility, moving the YL toward independent production.

Feedback as a Form of Scaffolding within the ZPD

As previously noted, feedback is a post-writing form of scaffolding. To be effective, it must be aligned with the learner's ZPD. This means the corrective feedback should be specific, actionable, and focus on aspects the learner is cognitively ready to address. Teachers' perceptions regarding which writing errors are *developmental* (and can be ignored for now) versus *acquisitional* (and require immediate correction) are key to providing ZPD-aligned feedback that enhances learning without discouraging the YL.

Materials and methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. The aim was to explore, understand, and interpret the lived experiences and subjective realities (perceptions) of the participating EFL teachers regarding a specific phenomenon: teaching English writing to young learners.

Participants and Sampling



A non-probability, purposive sample was selected based on specific criteria: currently teaching EFL to young learners (ages 6–12) and having at least two years of experience in that specific context.

- Sample Size (N): 5 EFL Teachers
 - Institution A (Urban Private School): 3 Teachers (T1, T2, T3)
 - Institution B (Peri-Urban Public School): 2 Teachers (T4, T5)

The inclusion of teachers from two institutions with different socio-economic profiles aimed to provide a slightly broader, though still limited, view of the contextual factors influencing perceptions.

Data Collection Instruments

Due to the limited sample size and the need for in-depth understanding, the primary data collection instrument was the Semi-Structured Interview.

1. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: The interview focused on three main domains:
 - *Domain 1: Perceptions of Writing Challenges* (e.g., "What are the most common mistakes you observe in YLs' writing?").
 - *Domain 2: Pedagogical Strategies* (e.g., "Describe the typical steps you use when introducing a new writing task. Do you use L1?").
 - *Domain 3: Assessment and Evaluation* (e.g., "How do you define 'good writing' for a young learner?").

Data Analysis Procedure

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The process involved:

1. Transcription: Converting all audio recordings into text.
2. Familiarization: Reading and re-reading the transcripts.
3. Coding: Assigning descriptive codes (e.g., "L1 dependence," "fear of error," "scaffolding preference").
4. Thematising: Grouping codes into broader, recurrent themes that represent the core perceptions (e.g., Theme 1: Linguistic Deficiency as Primary Barrier).
5. Reviewing and Defining Themes: Ensuring the themes accurately reflect the data collected.

Results and discussion

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews yielded three main perceptions held by the five participating teachers regarding young learners' (YLs) writing challenges and the corresponding pedagogical responses. As summarized in Table 1, the analysis identified consensus on linguistic barriers and pedagogical preferences, while highlighting a significant concern regarding the transfer of literacy skills from the mother tongue.





Table 1. Overview of identified themes and teacher frequency

Theme	Description of Perception	Frequency (N=5)
1. Linguistic Deficiency as Primary Barrier	Writing difficulties are attributed mainly to a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge.	5 / 5
2. Interdependence with Weak L1 Literacy	Challenges in L2 (English) writing are fundamentally linked to unstable literacy skills in L1 (Spanish).	4 / 5
3. Preference for Scaffolding	A strong preference for controlled activities over free writing to minimize student frustration.	5 / 5

Theme 1: Linguistic Deficiency as the Primary Barrier

All five teachers explicitly identified limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge as the chief obstacle to effective writing. Participants described this as a lack of "English building blocks," preventing students from forming sentences beyond the simple present tense. This perception has led to a product-focused instructional approach, where teachers prioritize the memorization of word lists and the drilling of specific grammar structures before attempting any writing task. As noted by Teacher 4 (T4), without this initial drilling, sentence construction is perceived as "impossible" for the students.

Theme 2: Interdependence with Weak L1 Literacy

Four out of the five teachers, particularly those from the public-school setting (T4 and T5), expressed the perception that YLs' difficulties in English were fundamentally linked to unstable literacy in their first language (Spanish). This theme highlights a transfer of underlying cognitive deficits; teachers viewed the breakdown in L2 writing not merely as a language issue, but as a broader literacy problem. Difficulties such as sequencing ideas, handwriting, and organization were identified as skills that should have been mastered in L1 but remain undeveloped, thereby hindering L2 production.

Theme 3: Preference for Scaffolding and Guided Writing

In response to the challenges identified in the first two themes, all teachers reported a strong preference for highly scaffolded and controlled writing activities. The participants favored sentence completion, word-bank exercises, and writing frames over free writing tasks. Teachers argued that free writing resulted in "overwhelmingly error-filled" output that was difficult to assess. Consequently, scaffolding is viewed not only as a teaching tool but as an emotional buffer to reduce the "fear factor" and ensure students feel a sense of success.

The specific qualitative evidence supporting these three themes, including representative quotes from the participants, is detailed in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Detailed thematic analysis of writing challenges and pedagogical responses

Theme	Key Findings & Implications	Representative Evidence (Quotes)
Theme 1: Linguistic Deficiency	Teachers view limited vocabulary and grammar as the root cause of errors.	T1 (Private): "They know the ideas in Spanish, but they lack the words—the English building blocks—to form sentences beyond the simple present."



	• Result: Instruction focuses on drilling words before writing.	T4 (Public): "If the vocabulary isn't drilled first, the sentence is impossible. The biggest errors are simple subject-verb agreement..."
Theme 2: Interdependence with Weak L1	• L2 writing failure is linked to unmastered L1 skills (sequencing, mechanics). • Spelling errors often reflect Spanish pronunciation rules.	T5 (Public): "When they struggle to structure a basic story in Spanish, asking them to do it in English is setting them up for failure." T3 (Private): "I notice the spelling issues often reflect Spanish pronunciation, but also sometimes the sheer handwriting... is still weak."
Theme 3: Preference for Scaffolding	• Favored: Templates, fill-in-the-blanks. • Avoided: Free writing. • Rationale: Reduces anxiety and makes assessment manageable.	T1: Admitted rarely assigning free writing due to "error-filled" output. T2: "Guided writing reduces the fear factor. If they have the vocabulary and the structure handed to them, they feel successful, which is important for this age."

Discussion of results

The findings from the five participants underscore a pedagogical reality in which teachers acknowledge the complexity of L2 writing for YLs but often resort to linguistic simplification and control as the primary coping strategy.

The dominant perception that linguistic deficiency (Theme 1) is the main barrier aligns with traditional EFL methodologies that prioritize accuracy over fluency or creativity. While a necessary step, the reliance on guided writing and the avoidance of free writing (Theme 3) may inadvertently hinder the development of higher-order writing skills such as planning, revising, and generating original content. If students are constantly given the "building blocks" (vocabulary and grammar), they are less likely to develop the strategic competence needed to select and deploy these blocks independently—a core component of the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

The crucial perception linking L2 writing to weak L1 literacy (Theme 2) directly supports the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1979). Teachers recognize that YLs require more than just English instruction; they need foundational support in organizing thoughts and structuring narrative/expository text, skills that are transferable from L1. This finding suggests that EFL writing pedagogy for young learners should include explicit, visual instruction on text genre and organization that leverages their L1 cognitive frameworks, rather than ignoring them.

The preference for high scaffolding (Theme 3) reflects the teachers' desire to manage assessment and maintain YL motivation. However, the long-term goal of OVP is independent production. Therefore, pedagogical practices should evolve from controlled scaffolding (sentence completion) to process scaffolding (explicit teaching of brainstorming and self-revision strategies) to slowly bridge the gap between guided and independent writing.

Recommendations



Esta obra está bajo una licencia *Creative Commons* de tipo (CC-BY-NC-SA).

Sociedad Ecuatoriana de Investigación Científica. E-mail: revistaalcon@gmail.com

Based on the perceptions and practices identified among the five teachers, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Professional Development in Process-Based Writing:** Provide training that shifts the focus from writing as a *product* (accuracy of grammar/spelling) to writing as a socio-cognitive *process* (planning, drafting, revising, peer feedback), specifically adapted for the YL cognitive stage.
- **Integrate L1 Literacy Bridging Strategies:** Develop workshops that teach teachers how to use L1 as a strategic resource to introduce organizational concepts (e.g., outlining a story, chronological order) before requiring L2 writing. Use visual tools like story maps and graphic organizers that are language-neutral.
- **Develop Age-Appropriate Assessment Rubrics:** Implement rubrics that prioritize content, clarity of message, and effort over minute grammatical accuracy. This will encourage YLs and teachers to assign creative, free-writing tasks without fear of overwhelming assessment difficulty.
- **Promote Gradual Release of Responsibility:** Encourage teachers to incorporate tasks that transition YLs from heavily guided writing (Theme 3) to limited free writing, ensuring the focus remains on successful communication rather than error avoidance.

Conclusions

This qualitative study into the perceptions of five EFL teachers highlights that the challenges in teaching writing to Young Learners are multifaceted, spanning linguistic, cognitive, and L1 literacy dimensions.

- **Core Perception:** Teachers overwhelmingly perceive writing difficulties as a direct result of limited linguistic resources (vocabulary and grammar), leading to a dependency on highly scaffolded, controlled activities.
- **Critical Link:** The most insightful perception involves the strong recognized link between weak L1 literacy and L2 writing difficulties, affirming the need to integrate L1 cognitive scaffolding into L2 instruction.
- **Pedagogical Implication:** To move beyond basic transcription and foster true writing competence, EFL instruction for YLs must be explicitly process-oriented, prioritize the transfer of L1 organizational skills, and utilize assessment methods that value content generation and communication effort.

The transition from a *teacher-controlled* writing environment to a *learner-autonomous* one depends critically on changing teachers' perceptions about what young learners are capable of achieving when provided with appropriate, cognitively sound, and culturally sensitive pedagogical frameworks.

References

- Allebaby, E. F. A. (2024). Language Teacher Cognition of Academic Literacies: Narrative Case Studies of Female EFL Teachers in Saudi Universities. *VU Research Repository*.
- Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teaching*, 36(2), 81-109.





- Brown, M., Baker, S. L., & Peterson, R. L. (2023). The effect of focused written corrective feedback on L2 writing performance. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*.
- Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49(2), 222-251.
- Dawson, A. C., Miller, S. F., & Chen, J. L. (2019). *Feedback in the EFL classroom: Best practices*. Taylor & Francis.
- Flower, L., & Hayes, J. R. (1981). A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 365-387.
- Frontiers. (2023). Bilingual advantages in foreign language learning: evidence from primary-school pupils with developmental language disorder. *Frontiers in Education*.
- IEJEE. (2024). International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education.
- Kao, T. (2024). Critiquing the value of grammar-focused feedback in L2 writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing*.
- Ngoon, L., Liu, Y., & Tan, S. (2018). *Actionable feedback for young language learners*. TESOL Quarterly.
- ResearchGate. (2023). Perceptions and Preferences of Senior High School Students About Written Corrective Feedback in Pakistan. *ResearchGate*.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Yang, S. (2024). A taxonomy of corrective feedback types in EFL settings. *Applied Linguistics Review*.
- Zarrinabadi, N., & Rezazadeh, M. (2020). Corrective feedback and EFL students' writing motivation. *System*, 93.

