

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A descriptive Survey on Teachers' Perception of EFL Writing and Their Practice of Teaching Writing: Preparatory Schools in Jimma Zone in Focus

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Abstract

In order to examine the perception about writing and the practice of teaching the skill among English language teachers at preparatory schools in Jimma Zone (Agaro, Asendabo, Jimma, Limu Genet, Sekoru and Toba), data were collected from nineteen teachers and two hundred and ninety-five students through questionnaires. Classroom observations were also conducted to find additional information from the actual teaching learning encounters. Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings show that, due to teachers' failure to put into classroom practice their beliefs about the nature of writing and how it should be taught, writing is given little attention and is taught inappropriately. In other words, the study demonstrated that teachers' perception of writing and their practice of teaching the skill are loosely correlated. Based on these findings, it is recommended that: 1) preparatory school English language teachers need to give enough attention to writing in their instruction, 2) they should also develop practical skills and put into action their beliefs regarding writing and its teaching, and 3) the Ministry of Education and other responsible bodies need to offer trainings to preparatory school English language teachers on the implementation of the process approach to writing.

Key Terms: Perception, belief, practice

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Currently, all aspects of modern life such as government, education, industry, commerce, healthcare, to name just a few, depend not only on oral interaction but on written communication (West 1988:19). Regarding this, Geremew (1999) points out that one has to write in order to meet persistently changing social demands and pursue personal interests. In a related line of argument, Guth (1989) emphasizes that students are judged mainly by their ability to put ideas down on paper. Thus, students at university level need to write notes, assignments, term papers, reports and senior essays. To accomplish these writing tasks successfully, they are required to develop their writing skills in the instructional language. Jordan (1997) also supports this view, contending that writing skills are a prerequisite for the completion of academic writing tasks and university study more generally.

However, in the researchers' experience, the reality in Ethiopia falls short of these objectives. Although writing lessons are included in all high school English textbooks, implying that writing should be taught as an independent skill, students who complete preparatory schools and join universities seem to be below the required level. This problem can partly be ascribed to teachers' failure to teach writing appropriately. It could also be associated with teachers' perception about writing and their practice of teaching the skill. Most often, writing at high school level is either not covered at all or not taught effectively, since teachers perceive that writing is not as important as listening, speaking, reading, grammar and vocabulary (Alamrew 2005).

With regard to the nature of perception, Hardy and Heyes (1979) explain that the perception system filters some information

that will be brought to conscious awareness, organizes and interprets this information to build up the model of the world that is experienced. Perception refers to the sorting out, interpretation, analysis and integration of stimuli involving our sense organs and brain, and our behavior is essentially a reflection of how we react to and interpret stimuli from the world around us (Richardson 1996; Smith 2001). This implies that our perception shapes our belief system and determines our practice.

It follows that teachers' beliefs influence their judgments and practices, thereby determining how they behave in the classroom. That is, if teachers fail to consider writing important, their perceptions can influence their teaching of this skill, since, according to Noe (2004), perception has a relationship to our actions and practices. Thus, if English language teachers give less attention to writing due to their perception that writing is less important and that teaching writing is a difficult task, this can adversely affect their teaching and their students' performance in writing. As such, language teaching has been described in terms of what teachers do, that is in terms of the actions and behaviors which they carry out in the classroom and the effects of these on learners (Richards and Lockhart 1996).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While one of the current assumptions is accepting writing as a process, teachers usually implement the product approach to teaching writing (Reid 1993). In other words, instead of engaging students in regular classroom and extensive practice of writing through the process approach, i.e. generating ideas, drafting their paragraphs/ essays and checking their writing individually or in groups (Hedge 2005; Squire 1979), teachers expect learners to produce a piece of written product for

evaluation. This kind of writing does not replicate real-life writing, rather it is writing meant for learning, not for communication. This has hindered the development of students' writing skills for years.

Similarly, the researchers, instructors at Jimma University, have observed that students have critical EFL writing problems. As such, it is not uncommon to see many students who cannot construct correct and meaningful sentences, let alone constructing acceptable paragraphs and essays. Students' poor experience of writing in high school could be the main factor for their poor writing performance. This means, partly, teachers at high school level may not teach writing at all or may give the skill little attention, and their perception about writing and how it should be taught can have something to do with this situation.

In relation to this, Alamrew's (2005) study also indicates that students do not learn writing effectively because English language teachers do not give attention to writing lessons. For the teachers' lack of attention to writing lessons, one reason could be their misguided perceptions. Whilst this is the case, research work that addresses this issue seems to be scarce in Ethiopia, and is hardly available in the context of preparatory schools in Jimma Zone. It then seems crucial to conduct research on the English language teachers' perception of EFL writing and practice of teaching the skill. Thus, this research tries to address this issue focusing on six preparatory schools (Agaro, Asendabo, Jimma, Limu Genet, Sekoru and Toba) found in the stated zone, and attempts to provide answers to the following basic questions:

- How do preparatory school English language teachers in the schools in focus perceive writing as a skill?
- How do these teachers teach writing?
- What is the relationship between teachers' perception of writing and their practices of teaching the skill?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Descriptive research design was adopted in this study. Descriptive research describes relationships that exist, beliefs that are held, effects that are evident, or trends that are developing; it is non-experimental because it deals with the relationships among non-manipulated variables (Best and Kahn, 2003).

Respondents

The respondents were selected from teachers and students of Jimma Zone governmental preparatory schools. While all preparatory class English language teachers (N=19) were included, samples of 295 Grade Eleven students were chosen out of a population of 1475. In addition, sample Grade Eleven classes were taken from selected schools for observation.

Sampling Technique

To select teachers to fill out questionnaire, comprehensive sampling technique was used. On the other hand, 20% of Grade Eleven students were selected from each of the six preparatory schools through systematic random sampling, and participated in the study by filling out questionnaire. Two preparatory schools were also chosen by lottery method for classroom observation. Two classes (taught by different teachers) in each sampled school were then observed for a period of three consecutive weeks.

Data Collection Instruments

To collect data for the study, two types of instruments, namely questionnaire and observation checklist were used.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires are used to collect data on phenomena like attitude, motivation and perception, which are not easily observed. When opinions rather than facts are desired, a questionnaire with a rating scale is usually employed (Kumar 1996). In this study, two types of questionnaire (questionnaire for teachers and questionnaire for students) were administered. Designed carefully and pilot-tested, the questionnaires contained both close-ended and open-ended items.

Observation

To investigate the teachers' actual teaching of writing, a semi-structured classroom observation was carried out using a checklist prepared based on the literature and in line with the items of the teachers' questionnaire that focus on their writing instruction. Four classes of Grade Eleven in three preparatory schools (two from each) selected through the lottery method were observed for three consecutive weeks, and important activities pertaining to how writing was taught were recorded in the form of notes.

Data Analysis

In this study, frequency, percentage, mean and average mean of means were used to analyze quantitative data in order to obtain descriptive statistics which provides a very basic summary of variables by showing a proportionate breakdown of the categories for each variable (Harries 1998). Qualitative analysis was also used to analyze the data elicited through open-ended items of the questionnaires and via the observation.

RESULTS

This part presents the analysis of the data collected through teachers' and students' questionnaires. The results of the classroom observation are integrated in the discussion with the interpretations of the data obtained through these two methods.

Analysis of Teachers' Responses

The main objective of the teachers' questionnaire was to gather data about the teachers' beliefs on writing and teaching writing, and their practice of teaching the skill. The following is the analysis of teachers' responses.

Table 1: Beliefs about the Nature of Writing

No	Items	Responses										Total	Mean (M)	
		SA(5)		A(4)		UD(3)		DA(2)		SDA(1)				
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
1.	Writing is more inborn than learned.	-	-	2	10.5	-	-	7	36.9	10	52.6	19	100	1.7
2.	Writing requires regular practice.	12	63.3	7	36.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	19	100	4.6
3.	Writing requires critical thinking.	11	57.8	7	36.9	-	-	-	-	1	5.3	19	100	4.4
4.	Writing is more difficult to teach than other language skills (listening, speaking and reading).	2	10.5	6	31.8	1	5.3	6	31.8	4	21.1	19	100	2.7
5.	Teaching writing in English requires more effort than teaching grammar, vocabulary and other language skills. So, I do not teach writing.	1	5.3	2	10.5	1	5.3	9	47.4	6	31.8	19	100	2.1
Average Mean of Means														3.1

Table 1 indicates that 7(36.9%) and 10(52.6%) of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively with item 1; these teachers believe that students can develop their writing skills if they get the chance to learn them. Similarly, 12(63.3%) and 7(36.9%) of the teachers strongly agreed and agreed respectively that writing requires regular practice. Besides, 18(94.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that writing requires critical thinking. In short, the teachers in focus do not seem to have problems in relation to the belief they hold about writing.

In addition, most respondents believe that teaching writing is not more difficult than teaching speaking, listening and reading. Hence, the majority of them, 9(47%) plus 6(31.8%), respectively expressed disagreement and strong disagreement with the claim that teaching writing is more challenging than teaching grammar and vocabulary. In other words, most of the respondents believe that teaching writing requires similar efforts to teaching grammar, vocabulary, speaking, reading and listening, and thus they claim that they teach writing to their students.

Table 2: Beliefs about Teaching Language Forms in Writing Lessons

No	Items	Responses										Mean (M)		
		SA(5)		A(4)		UD(3)		DA(2)		SDA(1)			Total	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%		No	%
6.	Students should not be made to write in English before they master the grammar of English.	1	5.3	-	-	1	5.3	7	36.9	10	52.6	19	100	1.7
7.	Students should not be made to write in English before they master the vocabulary of the language.	1	5.3	-	-	3	15.8	5	26.3	10	52.6	19	100	1.8
8.	Writing is not as important as grammar and vocabulary for students.	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	15.8	16	84.2	19	100	1.2
9.	At high school level, it is not necessary to teach writing because students can learn it at higher institutions.	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	10.5	17	89.5	19	100	1.1
10.	In the process of teaching writing at high school level, more focus should be given to grammar and vocabulary.	-	-	-	-	3	15.8	13	68.4	3	15.8	19	100	2.0
11	In a writing class, more focus should be given to making students practice constructing error free sentences.	2	10.5	5	26.3	1	5.3	6	31.8	5	26.3	19	100	2.6
12	If students are allowed to make mistakes while writing in English, it will be difficult to make them write correctly later on.	-	-	2	10.5	5	26.3	6	31.8	6	31.8	19	100	2.2
Average Mean of Means													1.8	

As it is shown in Table 2, Items 6 and 7, most teachers disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statements which respectively claim that students should not be made to write in English before they master the grammar and the vocabulary of the language. Similarly, all of the respondents, i.e. 19(100%) expressed disagreement with the claim in Item 8, which states that writing is not as important as grammar and vocabulary. In other words, the highest number of the respondents, 16(84.2%) of the total, believe that in a writing lesson at high school level, it is not advisable to give more focus to grammar and vocabulary, and 11(58%) of them said that expecting students to practice constructing error free sentences is not appropriate in the teaching of writing, while 7(36.8%) of them believe that requiring students to write error-free

sentences can be considered worthwhile. On the other hand, all of the respondents articulated disagreement with the idea stated in Item 9, i.e. “At high school level, it is not necessary to teach writing because students can learn it at higher institutions”, and 12(63.6%) of them expressed that tolerating errors in students’ writing may not necessarily make it difficult to enable students to achieve writing accuracy later on.

Similarly, 1.7, 2, 1.8, 1.1, 1, and 2.0, the means for the items in Table 2, are considerably below 3 (the value assigned to the UD option of the Likert Scale). What this means is that the majority of the respondents disagreed with the assertions stated in the items. The means for the last two items in the same table also indicate that the majority of the teachers hold that making students write error-free sentences should not be the emphasis in the teaching of writing.

Table 3: Preferred Approach to Teaching Writing

No	Items	Responses										Mean (M)		
		SA(5)		A(4)		UD(3)		DA(2)		SDA(1)			No	%
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%			
13.	The product approach (accuracy focused) of teaching writing is preferable to the process approach (fluency focused) of teaching writing because the process approach is time consuming.	-	-	1	5.3	5	26.3	11	57.9	2	10.5	19	100	2.3
14.	The controlled approach of teaching writing is preferable to a free writing approach.	-	-	2	10.5	3	15.8	7	36.9	4	21.0	19	100	1.8
15.	The guided approach of teaching writing is preferable to a free writing approach.	1	5.3	8	42.1	2	10.5	6	31.6	1	5.3	19	100	2.9
Average Mean of Means													2.3	

As indicated in Table 3, most teachers, i.e. 11(37.9%) plus 2(10.5%), which equals 13(68.4%) of the total, believe that the process approach to teaching writing is preferable to the product approach to teaching this skill. In a related manner, 11(37.9%) of them revealed that they do not accept the idea which claims that the controlled approach to teaching writing is preferable to the free writing approach. More of the respondents, however, agreed that the guided approach to writing is preferable to a free writing approach (see Item 15 in Table 3). Besides this, the average mean of means in Table 3, i.e. M=2.3, is less than the UD value (3). This illustrates that most of the respondents tend to favor the process approach which helps students exercise writing freely.

Table 4: Beliefs and Practices Related to Feedback

No	Items	Responses												Mean (M)
		SA(5)		A(4)		UD(3)		DA(2)		SDA(1)		Total		
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
16.	Making students correct each other's written work is helpful for developing their writing skills.	10	52.6	8	42.1	-	-	1	5.3	-	-	19	100	4.4
17.	Teachers' written feedback can help learners improve their writing skills.	13	68.4	3	15.9	-	-	1	5.3	-	-	19	100	4.2
18.	Making students rewrite what they have written helps them to write better.	8	42.1	10	52.6	1	5.3	-	-	-	-	19	100	4.4
19.	Giving comments and corrections on students' written products is difficult and time-consuming. So, I do not give comments and corrections.	1	5.3	1	5.3	6	31.6	11	57.9	-	-	19	100	2.6
20.	I often give my students out-of-class writing activities.	7	36.9	6	31.6	2	10.5	4	21.0	-	-	19	100	3.8
21.	I make my students reflect on and correct their own writing.	7	36.9	10	52.6	-	-	2	10.5	-	-	19	100	4.2
22.	I make students correct each other's written work.	2	10.5	16	84.2	1	5.3	-	-	-	-	19	100	4.1
Average Mean of Means													4.0	

As it is indicated in Items 16 and 17 of Table 4, the majority of the respondents believe that peer and teacher feedbacks help learners to develop their writing skills. They also agreed that making students rewrite what they have written helps them to produce quality pieces of writing. However, as it is shown in the same table (Item 19), most teachers, 17(89.5%), indicated that they do not give comments and corrections on students' writing.

Luckily, the majority of them, 13(68.5%), 17(89.5%) and 18(94.7%), respectively responded that they give out-of-class writing activities to their students, make them reflect on and correct their own writings and encourage them to correct each other's written work. All these claims are also supported by the value of the average mean of means, i.e. 4.0.

Table 5: Beliefs about Strategy Training

No	Items	Responses										Mean (M)		
		SA(5)		A(4)		UD(3)		DA(2)		SDA(1)			Total	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%		N	%
23.	In the teaching learning process of writing, more focus should be given to teaching the writing strategies (thinking, planning, writing and checking).	7	36.9	3	15.9	-	-	9	47.4	-	-	19	100	3.4
24.	In the process of teaching writing, making students brainstorm for ideas, write outlines, write a first draft, revise and edit it is a waste of time. Therefore, it is not necessary.	1	5.3	1	5.3	-	-	3	15.9	14	73.6	19	100	1.5
Average Mean of Means													2.5	

Table 5 indicates that a little more than half of the teacher respondents, 10(52.8%), agreed with the idea which claims that in the teaching-learning process of writing, more focus should be given to teaching the writing strategies. However, most respondents, 3(15.9%) and 14(73.%) of the total disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively with the assertion which says that in the process of teaching writing, making students brainstorm for ideas, write outlines, write a first draft, and revise their writing is a waste of time and so it is not necessary. This means that the majority of the respondents do not believe that strategy training involves encouraging students to practice the stages of prewriting, writing and checking.

Table 6: Practice of Encouraging Group Writing, Reflection and Self-correction

No	Items	Responses										Total	Mean (M)	
		SA(5)		A(4)		UD(3)		DA(2)		SDA(1)				
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%			
25.	I usually encourage group writing.	1	5.3	7	36.9	4	21.1	6	31.6	1	5.3	19	100	3.1
26.	I make my students reflect on and correct their own writing.	7	36.9	10	52.6	-	-	2	10.5	-	-	19	100	4.2
27.	I make students correct each other's written work.	2	10.5	16	84.2	1	5.3	-	-	-	-	19	100	4.1
Average Mean of Means													3.5	

As Table 6 illustrates, a little more of the respondents, i.e. 8(42.2%) revealed that they encourage students to write in groups, whereas the second majority of them, 7(36.9%), said that they do not promote group writing. In Item 26, 7(36.9%) and 10(52.6%) respondents respectively expressed that they make their students reflect on and correct their own writing: the two together constitute $7(36.9\%) + 10(52.6\%) = 17(89.5\%)$, the great majority, of the respondents. On the other hand, the responses to Item 27 indicate that 18(94.7%) of them encourage their students to correct each other's writing, whilst only 1(5.3%) respondent remained undecided. In addition, the mean scores ($M=3.1$, $M=4.2$ and $M=4.1$) generally demonstrate that most of the teacher respondents encourage group writing, reflection and peer correction.

Finally, the teachers were required to respond to five open-ended items intended to elicit information on whether teachers teach all the free writing lessons in the student's textbook, their beliefs on what teachers should focus on in the teaching of writing, their views of how writing should be taught to preparatory school students, their practice of encouraging out-of-class writing activities and their views on giving feedback.

In response to the five items, almost all of the respondents made it clear that, due to scarcity of time, task difficulty for students and lack of student willingness, they teach only a few selected free writing activities out of the several ones incorporated in the Grade Eleven English textbook. Again, most of the teachers said that writing should be taught through the process approach with more emphasis on writing strategies. They also claimed that they engage students in classroom and out-of-class practice of writing paragraphs, essays, reports, letters, diaries and CVs, while few explained that they do not give out-of-class writing tasks since they believe that students do not have time to do such extended writing exercises. The majority of the respondents also expressed belief that giving feedback on students' writing is the responsibility of the teacher since students learn from the educative feedback given by teachers; few claimed that self-correction and peer feedback are indispensable.

4.2. Analysis of Students' Responses

The purpose of the students' questionnaire was to collect data from students about whether their teachers teach them writing, provide them with enough chance of practicing writing and give correction and feedback on their writing. The results of the data analysis are presented as follows:

Table 7: Whether or not Teachers Teach Writing

No	Items	Responses	
		No	%
1.	Among the following language skills, which one does the English language teacher focus more on?		
	A. Reading	25	8.5
	B. Speaking	189	64.1
	C. Writing	60	20.3
	D. Listening	21	7.1
	Total	295	100
2.	Does your English language teacher teach you to write paragraphs and essays?	214	72.5
	A. Yes		
	B. No	81	27.5
	Total	295	100
3.	If your response to item 2 is 'yes' how frequently does he/she teach you?		
	A. In every unit	34	11.5
	B. In most of the units	27	9.2
	C. In some selected units	107	36.3
	D. In few of the units	42	14.2
	Total	210	98.1
4.	When the teacher teaches you writing, which part of writing does he/she give you more emphasis?		
	A. Grammar and vocabulary	227	77
	B. Writing strategies	41	13.9
	C. Content	13	4.4
	D. Mechanics	14	4.8
	Total	295	100

It is shown in the above table that 189 (64.1%) of the student respondents reported that their English language teachers focus more on the speaking skill, but 60 (20.3%) of them indicated that their teachers teach them writing. Therefore, according to the majority of the respondents, writing is not given sufficient focus in classroom instruction, and it implies that students do not get adequate chance to engage in writing activities initiated by their teachers. Asked if their teachers teach them paragraph and essays writing, most respondents, i.e. 214 (72.5%), indicated that their teachers teach them paragraph and essay writing. However, 107(36.3 9%), claimed that their teachers teach them writing paragraphs and essays only in some selected units.

Regarding the aspects of writing their teachers give more attention to in their instruction, the majority of the respondents,

227(77 %), stated that their teachers put more emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, while 13(4.4%) and 14(4.85%) respectively said that their English language teachers focus more on content and mechanics when they teach writing. Only 41(13.9%) of the students in focus replied that their English language teachers give more attention to training in writing

strategies. In other words, close to 60% of the respondents reported that their English language teachers give little attention to writing strategies.

Secondly, the respondents were asked to give information on their teachers' efforts to encourage students to practice writing in English. The following table indicates their responses:

Table 8: Teachers' Efforts to Make Students Practice Writing

No	Items	Responses	
		No	%
5.	Does your English language teacher make you practice writing in English?	261	88.5
	A. Yes		
	B. No	34	11.5
	Total	295	100
6.	Does he/she encourage you to write paragraphs and essays outside class?		
	A) Yes	114	38.6
	B) No	181	61.4
	Total	295	100
7.	If your response to 'Item 6' is 'yes', how often does he/she make you write paragraphs and essays out of class?	3	2..6
	A) In each unit		
	B) In most of the units	15	13.2
	C) In some selected units	76	66.6
	D) In few units	20	17.5
	Total	114	100
8.	Does your English teacher encourage you to practice writing in groups?	75	25.4
	A) Yes, usually		
	B) Yes, sometimes	136	46.1
	C) Yes, rarely	41	13.9
	D) Not at all	43	14.6
	Total	295	100
9.	Does your English teacher encourage you to write diaries and letters?	34	11.5
	A) Yes, usually		
	B) Yes, sometimes	47	15.9
	C) Yes, rarely	117	39.7
	D) Not at all	97	32.9
	Total	295	100

As indicated in Table 8, 261(88.5%) of the respondents stated that their teachers make them practice writing in English. However, 181(61.4%) of them reported that their

teachers do not encourage them to write paragraphs and essays outside class. This may mean that their teachers make them practice guided writing. Even among those

who claimed that their teachers encourage them to write paragraphs and essays, 76(66.6%) of them disclosed the latter make them write paragraphs and essays outside the classroom only in some selected units.

The students were also asked whether or not their teachers encourage them to

practice writing in groups. Accordingly, the majority, 136(46.1%) of them, stressed that their teachers sometimes make them practice writing in groups. Finally, asked if their teachers encourage them to write diaries and letters, 117(36.7%), most of them (see Table 8), ascertained that they rarely encourage them to engage in these kinds of writing.

Table 9: Teacher Feedback, Peer-feedback and Self-correction

No	Items	Responses	
		No	%
10.	Does he/she give you comments and corrections on your writing?	295	100
	A. Yes		
	B. No	-	-
	Total	295	100
11.	If your answer to question No. 1 is 'Yes' how often does he/she give corrections on your written work?		13.9
	A. Always		
	B. Usually	47	15.9
	C. Sometimes	63	21.4
	D. Rarely	144	48.8
	Total	295	100
12.	Does your English language teacher make you correct your own writing?		
	A. Yes, usually	92	31.3
	B. Yes, sometimes	120	40.7
	C. Yes, Rarely	60	20.4
	D. Not at all	43	14.6
	Total	295	100
13.	Does your English language teacher encourage commenting on your friends' written work?		
	A. Yes, usually	62	21
	B. Yes, sometimes	115	39
	C. Yes, rarely	47	15.9
	D. Not at all	71	24.1
	Total	295	100

As indicated in the above table, Item 10, all the respondents replied that their English language teachers give correction and feedback on students' writing. Out of those who confirmed that teachers correct and give feedback on students' written work, 144(48.8%) indicated that teachers rarely

give them comments and corrections, while the second highest proportion of the respondents, 63(21.4%), reported that the said teachers give corrections and comments only sometimes. 89(29.8 %) replied that the teachers give corrections and feedback most of the time. On the

other hand, 92(31.3%) of the respondents explained that their teachers make them correct their writings whenever there is a free writing lesson, while 120(40.7%), the majority, said that the teachers do this sometimes. Again, whilst 60(20.4%) of the respondents expressed that the teachers in focus rarely encourage students to correct their own writing, the remaining 43(14.6%) asserted that these teachers do not encourage self-correction at all. Finally, 62(21%), 115(39%) and 47(15.9%) of the student respondents revealed that their teachers encourage peer comment usually, sometimes and rarely respectively, whereas 71(24.1%) indicated that the teachers do not encourage peer feedback.

In the students' questionnaire, there was one question meant to elicit information on students' general comments on their English language teachers' practice of teaching writing. Reacting to this item, most of the student respondents commented that their teachers give little emphasis to the writing skill in their teaching; they focus more on reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary, which are thought to appear in end-of-semester summative and national achievement exams. Some of the respondents also claimed that their teachers give more emphasis to the speaking skill in order to help students to develop oral fluency, and, as a result, they overlook the teaching of writing.

DISCUSSION

In this part, the data analysis results are interpreted and discussed in relation to the research questions set out in the first chapter, and the findings are weighed against previous findings and scholars' views. The relationships and the implications of the data collected through the two different instruments are also evaluated.

To begin with, the findings regarding teachers' perception about the nature of writing (see Table 1) indicate that most of the teachers perceive writing as a skill that can be mastered through learning and regular practice. This belief is apparently consistent with the views of a scholar like Hedge (2005) who notes that students can be good writers only if they write a lot. The teachers also hold that writing needs critical thinking, and believe that teaching writing does not require more effort than teaching other language skills and language forms.

However, 'to believe' does not mean 'to practice' in the context of this research since the teachers in focus failed to put their beliefs into practice. Their responses to one open-ended item clearly illustrate that they teach few selected free writing activities out of the many such tasks incorporated in the student's textbook. Most of the students also confirmed this fact by stressing that their teachers, due to more emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, speaking and reading comprehension, give little attention to the writing skill, and as a result, make their students practice writing paragraphs and essays only in selected units (see Table 7). The classroom observation, which showed that teachers teach writing rarely, especially in the second term of the academic year when they are presumably required to train their students in grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension, which are commonly thought to appear in end-of-semester summative and national achievement exams, also proves this fact. This finding is consistent with the findings of Alamirew's research (2005), which indicated that students do not learn writing effectively because English language teachers do not give attention to the skill.

Generally, although the teachers perceive writing as a learnable skill requiring critical thinking and regular practice, they failed to put this belief into practice by engaging their students in learning the skill through consistent practice. One can also question the teachers' claimed belief that teaching writing is not more difficult than teaching listening, speaking, reading, grammar and vocabulary. If the teachers indeed live by this belief, one can expect them to prove it by teaching writing at least as frequently as it appears in the student's textbook. However, they were not found doing this, and this may indicate that there is a weak correlation between teachers' beliefs and their practices.

The fact that most of the teachers in focus believe that students do not have to master the grammar of the English language in order to be able to write paragraphs and essays, and their view that writing is as important as vocabulary (see Table 2) show that there seem to be no significant problems with teachers' perceptions regarding the importance of the writing skill. This finding appears to be in contradiction with Alamirew's (2005) study, which demonstrated that high school English language teachers do not teach writing since they believe that writing is less important than the other language skills or language forms (grammar and vocabulary).

Thus, the problem in teaching writing to preparatory school students does not seem to be the result of teachers' wrong perception; it rather emanates from their failure to practice what they believe in. This is because although the teachers claim that it is not necessary for students to master the grammar and vocabulary of English to be able to write paragraphs and

essays in English, they do not give as much emphasis to writing in their teaching as they give to grammar and vocabulary. On the whole, the findings show that there appears to be a loose relationship between teachers' perception of writing and their practice of teaching the skill. This condition may force one to critically consider Noe's (2004) claim that the individual's perception is realized through action, because in this case, either the teachers' perception is only a claimed one, or it can be argued that not all perceptions are shown in action.

The results pertaining to writing accuracy imply that the majority of the teachers hold that expecting preparatory school students to construct error-free sentences in their writing is not appropriate, while a considerable number of them were concerned that tolerating errors can have undesirable consequences as it can be difficult to enable students achieve accuracy in writing later (see Table 2). Nevertheless, it was found during the observation that feedback (teacher feedback and peer feedback) was accuracy-focused: the teachers and students were looking for errors in grammar and mechanics with the intention to correct them. From this, one can deduce that most of the teachers require students to write error-free sentences.

On the other hand, when asked to compare the process approach to teaching writing with the product approach, which focuses on the final product, the majority of the teachers expressed that they prefer the former (see Table 3). However, most of them indicated that guided writing is better than free writing. It should be taken into account that the process approach, which is a step-by-step procedure that requires active invention, pre-writing, drafting, and careful revision (Harmer 2004), is better

implemented through free writing which gives students freedom to navigate through these steps. Guided writing may not enable students to go through these stages as they usually write based on given models.

When it comes to practice, as it has been indicated earlier (based on the teachers' and students' responses and classroom observation), most of the teachers in focus teach free writing only in few selected units. In these circumstances, it can be difficult to give students sufficient chance to practice the process of writing. Thus, one can conclude that teachers are not doing all they can do to train their students to master the process of writing which enables them to develop the skill of writing autonomously. In this regard, it appears that teachers' perception of writing and their practice of teaching the skill are weakly correlated.

In a related manner, the majority of the teachers believe that both peer-feedback and teacher feedback are important for developing students' writing skills (see Table 4). The responses depicted in the same table also illustrate that most of the teachers believe that the teacher's written feedback helps students to learn from their mistakes and develop their writing skills. Furthermore, most of the teachers involved in the study hold the view that making students rewrite what they have written helps them to write better. It is worth noting that making students rewrite their paragraphs and essays implies self-correction. Generally, the majority of the teachers consider teacher feedback, peer-feedback and self-correction vital in the endeavors to help students develop their writing skills.

Regarding practice, although the teachers believe that correcting students' written works and commenting on them helps

learners to improve their writing skills, the students' responses to Item 11 in Table 9 indicate that teachers rarely do so. Moreover, while 18(94.7%) of the teachers claimed that they make their students correct each other's writing (see Table 4, Item 22), the data obtained from students' questionnaires and classroom observation shows that this is done rarely and inappropriately. The students' responses indicate that while teachers very rarely encourage self-correction, they sometimes promote peer-feedback. The findings from the classroom observation, in which teachers were seen correcting selected students' paragraphs and inviting the whole class to analyze these few writings instead of facilitating self-correction and all-inclusive peer-feedback, also confirm the fact that the practice was inadequate.

Here too, the belief and the practice are not compatible. While the teachers in focus believe in the importance of self-correction, peer feedback and teacher feedback, they do not practice these consistently in their teaching. It was mentioned earlier that teachers view writing as requiring critical thinking. However, one can question how they can enable students to develop critical thinking skills without encouraging self-correction and peer-feedback. This is because, other things being equal, it is if students criticize their own and their colleagues' writings on regular basis that they develop critical thinking skills (Hedge 2005). This again shows that the correlation between the teachers' perception of writing and their practice of teaching writing to be loose.

The results in Table 5 reveal that the number of the teachers who hold the belief that the teaching of writing should focus on writing strategies (thinking, planning, writing and checking) is slightly higher than the number of teachers who do not

have this belief. In their response to the one open-ended item, some teachers said more focus should be given to the writing strategies in the teaching of writing. However, a significant number of them, in their responses to Item 24 in the fifth table, revealed that because making students brainstorm for ideas, write outlines, write a first draft, and revise and edit it wastes their time, the teachers feel that this process is not necessary.

The implication of the above findings is important. One can infer that although more teachers believe in the significance of strategy training, they may suppose that emphasis on writing strategies means giving explicit explanation of the stages of the writing process. That could be why, during the observation, three of the four teachers were seen explaining the stages of writing to their students instead of practically engaging the latter in generating ideas, planning their writing, writing first drafts, checking their paragraphs/essays and writing final drafts. While teachers can play a valuable part in raising awareness of the process of composition by talking explicitly about the stages of writing, their efforts can be fruitful if only they involve their students in the process by structuring activities that take account of these stages (Hedge 2005).

Regarding encouraging group writing, reflection and peer feedback, while only few of the teachers claimed that they have the practice of making students do writing tasks in groups, the majority of them said that they encourage reflection and peer feedback. In other words, students are occasionally made to practice writing cooperatively in groups, but they are given opportunities, albeit limited, to reflect on their own and correct each other's writing. Group writing activities help students to

learn the skill in cooperative learning contexts where peer-feedback and criticism are freely exercised, while reflecting on their own writing helps them to self-correct their works and develop critical thinking skills.

This being the case, however, the teachers' practices of promoting group writing, reflection and peer-feedback appear to be inadequate. This is evidenced by the students' and teachers' responses as well as the classroom observation which disclosed that writing does not receive enough emphasis in classroom instruction. For example, out-of-class authentic writing activities such as writing letters and diaries which help students write for genuine communication purposes and enable them to cope with the requirements of real-life writing are not frequently practiced by the target students. Thus, in a situation where writing receives less emphasis, it is hard to imagine adequate cooperative writing, reflection and peer-feedback. This also shows that the teachers' belief of how writing should be taught only loosely correlates with their practice. That is to say teachers seem to lack practical skills, courage and determination to practice what they preach.

At this point, it is necessary to check whether the findings highlighted in the above discussions answer the specific research questions. Firstly, it has been demonstrated that most of the teachers perceive writing as a skill that requires regular practice, critical thinking, cooperative learning, teacher feedback, self-correction and peer-feedback. Most of them also believe that writing should receive equal emphasis in teaching as listening, speaking, reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary, and it is better taught through the process approach that involves focus on writing

strategies. These findings answer the first research question stated as, "How do preparatory school English language teachers in the schools in focus perceive writing as a skill?" Secondly, the teachers' minimal attention to writing in their teaching (mostly requiring students to produce error-free sentences), their limited attempts to engage students in group writing, self-correction and peer-feedback, their emphasis on guided writing and their minimal efforts to correct and comment on students' writing, are related to practice and answer the second research question, "How do these teachers teach writing?" Finally, teachers' failure to practice what they believe in reveals a loose correlation between their perception and practice, and provides an answer to the last specific question: "What is the relationship between teachers' perception of writing and their practices of teaching the skill?"

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The study identified a weak correlation between teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practices. That is, although the teachers believe that writing is as important as listening, speaking, reading, grammar and vocabulary, and that it needs regular practice, they fail to put their beliefs into practice. Secondly, despite their expression of views that the process approach to the teaching of writing is preferable to the product approach, the majority of the teachers were not seen regularly exposing their students to writing activities which enable them to practice the writing process (prewriting, drafting, checking and writing final draft). Thus, the problem associated with the teaching of writing to preparatory school students appears to be the result of teachers' lack of practical skills, courage

and determination to practice what they preach, and the resulting loose correlation between their perception of writing and their practice of teaching this skill.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis the findings and the conclusions drawn from them, the following recommendations can be forwarded. It is necessary that the teachers in focus give equal emphasis to writing as they give to reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary in their instruction. They need to realize that writing helps students to reinforce their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and develop other language skills, since language skills are learned iteratively. Teachers should also try their best to internalize their claimed beliefs, develop practical skills, and possess courage and determination to put their beliefs. In addition, the Ministry of Education or other responsible bodies need to train teachers, especially in the implementation of the process approach to the teaching of writing.

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