Exploring the challenges faced by EFL learners in developing writing skills: a mixed methods case study

Exploración de los desafíos que enfrentan los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en el desarrollo de habilidades de escritura: un estudio de caso mixto

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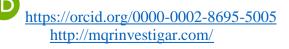https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3778-4992

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Resumen

Desarrollar habilidades de escritura en inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) representa desafíos significativos para los estudiantes, especialmente en gramática, vocabulario y organización. Este estudio exploró estas dificultades y los desafíos que los docentes perciben que los estudiantes presentan al momento de desarrollar sus destrezas en la escritura. A través de un enfoque mixto, se recopilaron datos de estudiantes de nivel A2 mediante un cuestionario tipo Likert y de tres docentes a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas en un instituto de idiomas privado en Cuenca, Ecuador. Los datos cuantitativos fueron analizados con Jamovi, mientras que los datos cualitativos fueron examinados mediante análisis temático con Atlas.ti. Los hallazgos revelan que los estudiantes enfrentan dificultades con la interferencia de la lengua materna, la precisión gramatical y la estructuración clara de sus ideas. Los docentes destacaron la dificultad de brindar apoyo individualizado debido al tamaño de las clases y las limitaciones de tiempo. Aunque los docentes mencionaron que se implementaron herramientas digitales como ChatGTP al momento de corregir errores gramaticales y de estilo y colaboración entre pares para mejorar la enseñanza de la escritura, su efectividad dependió de la capacidad de los estudiantes para interpretar y aplicar debidamente la retroalimentación. El estudio enfatiza la importancia de los enfoques basados en el proceso de escritura, la retroalimentación estructurada y la integración de tecnología para mejorar las habilidades de escritura. Estos hallazgos sugieren que la combinación de instrucción directa, aprendizaje colaborativo y recursos digitales puede fortalecer la competencia escrita en los estudiantes. Se recomienda investigar intervenciones a largo plazo para abordar estos desafíos de manera efectiva.

Palabras clave: escritura en inglés; desafíos; retroalimentación; herramientas digitales; percepciones

Abstract

Developing the Writing skill in EFL contexts, presents significant challenges for learners, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and text organization. This study explored these difficulties and the challenges teachers perceive in writing instruction. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from A2-level students through a Likert-scale questionnaire and three teachers through semi-structured interviews at a private language institute in Cuenca, Ecuador. Quantitative data were analyzed using Jamovi, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis with Atlas.ti. The findings reveal that students struggle with first-language interference, grammatical accuracy, and structuring their ideas clearly. Teachers highlighted the difficulty of providing individualized support due to class size and time constraints. Although teachers mentioned that digital tools such as ChatGTP were implemented to correct grammatical and style errors and to facilitate peer collaboration to improve writing instruction, their effectiveness depended on students' ability to properly interpret and apply feedback. This study emphasizes the relevance of process-based writing approaches, structured feedback, and technology integration in improving students´ writing skills. These findings suggest that combining direct instruction, collaborative learning, and digital resources can enhance writing competence in EFL classrooms. Further research should explore long-term interventions to address these challenges effectively.

Keywords: EFL writing; challenges; feedback; digital tools; perceptions

Introduction

Developing the Writing skill in a foreign language is widely considered one of the hardest skills to master because it requires learners to use new vocabulary and structures accurately (Amalia et al., 2021). Some learners find it difficult to organize their ideas and express themselves clearly, which can slow their overall progress in English (Alotaibi & Alzu'bi, 2022). Moreover, many students experience anxiety when faced with writing tasks which demand both linguistic accuracy and critical thinking, such as planning and revising (Pardede, 2024). Teachers try to address these challenges by encouraging their students to share ideas, give each other feedback, and use technology resources to practice writing (Pitukwong & Saraiwang, 2024). However, large class sizes and limited support makes it difficult to provide personalized support (Amalia et al., 2021). Teachers also perceive that learners have problems with grammar rules and paragraph organization which complicates their writing process (AlMarwani, 2020). Additionally, students tend to have problems applying feedback in an effective way, because they may not fully understand the reason why certain corrections need to be applied (Alharbi & Alqefari, 2021).

The role of feedback and interaction is a key aspect of writing development in EFL contexts. According to Hyland (2019), developing writing skills is a social activity, and learners improve when they receive structured instruction and work with peers. In this regard, students enhance their grammatical accuracy and their ability to structure ideas coherently when they receive feedback (Rao, 2017). However, research has revealed that students often have trouble applying feedback from teachers and peers effectively because they either do not understand it or they doubt their ability to make the necessary revisions (Hyland, 2007). Furthermore, the development of the Writing skill is influenced by cognitive and sociocultural factors. According to Ellis (1997), input and interaction in second language learning directly impacts learners' ability to write. Likewise, the Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory (1978) emphasizes the importance of scaffolding, where learners improve through guided support from teachers and more knowledgeable ones. This perspective supports the notion that writing is a socially influenced process and not simply an individual cognitive activity (Hyland, 2007).

According to Flower and Hayes (1981), developing strong writing abilities depends on continuous practice and self-reflection at different stages, such as drafting, revising, and

editing. When learners follow these steps, they can gradually improve their grammatical accuracy and text structure, while also building confidence in their writing (Frazier & Brown, 2001). By taking a process-oriented view of writing, instructors can focus on each student's progress, rather than only evaluating the final product (Hyland, 2003). This approach aligns with socio-constructivist ideas because learners perform better when guided by more capable peers or teachers, especially in tasks that involve challenging language use (McKinley, 2015). While Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive process model provides a strong foundation for understanding writing development, it was originally designed with native speakers in mind. In the EFL classroom, additional factors, such as limited exposure to the target language, first language interference, and differing educational backgrounds, make writing a challenging journey for learners (Hyland, 2003). This highlights the need for instructional approaches that not only emphasize process-oriented writing but also consider the specific struggles that EFL students face. By incorporating structured guidance, peer collaboration, and meaningful writing tasks together, teachers can help learners overcome these difficulties and develop their Writing skill in English.

Despite efforts to enhance writing instruction, the specific challenges faced by both students and teachers in EFL contexts remain underexplored. Current research indicates that students frequently struggle with motivation and self-belief in their writing abilities, highlighting the need to explore their points of view (Sun et al., 2014). The previous author also suggest that students often encounter challenges regarding motivation and self-efficacy in writing, making it crucial to know what their perspectives are. Similarly, Moqbel and Rao (2013) claim that the role of teachers and what they incorporate in their classes significantly influence students' writing performance, but teachers often face constraints such as time limitations and lack of professional development that is visible when integrating methods and current resources in the classroom. According to Arochman et al. (2024), understanding how teacher feedback, peer review, and digital tools can help EFL learners write more effectively is paramount in order to address both student and teacher difficulties. Current research about the development of the Writing skill mainly focuses on the lack of language mastery students have, but the challenges educators face, such as high workloads or limited training in writing pedagogy, are not payed too much attention (Amalia et al., 2021). As a consequence, the wide picture of EFL writing development remains incomplete unless classroom practices, teacher

support, and student challenges are explored (Pardede, 2024). Likewise, the implementation digital resources might offer instant feedback and reduce anxiety, but these tools alone cannot solve entirely the deeper problems related to low confidence and weak grammatical foundations (Tran & Nguyen, 2021). Therefore, it is still necessary to investigate how writing instruction can be improved through a more holistic perspective, where learners' needs and teachers' constraints are both acknowledged (Alharbi & Alqefari, 2021).

The present mixed-methods research study aimed to explore the difficulties EFL students experience when developing writing skills and to understand teachers' perspectives regarding students' challenges. This research focused on two important goals: first, it sought to identify the barriers that hinder students' writing development, including grammar, vocabulary, and emotional factors. Second, it explored how teachers perceive and address these challenges in the classroom.

To guide this investigation, the study focused on two research questions:

1) What challenges do EFL students face in enhancing their writing skills?
2) What challenges do English teachers perceive EFL learners face when teaching writing?

Ultimately, this research aimed to highlight a gap in this field by showing how an integrated view of student and teacher perceptions can be useful to guide more effective strategies for EFL writing instruction.

Materials and methods

Study Design

This research employed a mixed-method design, which combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges EFL learners face in developing their writing skills, their perceptions of classroom practices, and the difficulties teachers perceive students face when enhancing their writing development. Mixed-method research is widely used in educational studies as it allows for a more in-depth exploration of complex issues by integrating numerical data with detailed qualitative insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Participants

The participants who took part in this study were seven students enrolled in an A2 level English course at a private language school located in Cuenca, Ecuador. This school follows CEFR guidelines, with an emphasis on improving students' ability to

communicate in English. These particular students were chosen because they had previously created written work in English. Including them in the study was important because examining the difficulties they faced could offer valuable information about how writing challenges begin at this level and potentially continue as students become more proficient. Students from lower levels were considered because their responses might introduce bias and made it harder to understand effectively their views and experiences. To ensure ethical compliance, a short meeting with their parents was conducted to explain the data collection procedures and obtain parental consent.

Regarding teachers, three EFL instructors from the same institute participated in semi-structured interviews. These teachers were chose taking into consideration their experience in working with A2 level courses and their direct involvement with the students participating in the study. These interviews aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of the difficulties their students faced when developing their writing skills.

The study intended to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the challenges their students encounter when developing writing skills, as well as what they do in order to address those challenges in the classroom. Their insights provided valuable context so the broader instructional and pedagogical factors that influence students' writing progress can be better understood.

Instruments

The survey was created to match the objectives proposed at the beginning of this study and to examine the problems EFL students face when writing, as well as teachers' perceptions about these difficulties. To develop the survey, previous studies on the challenges of EFL writing were reviewed and also after conversations with students and teachers from the language institute (Hyland, 2003; Hinkel, 2015).

The survey featured a five-point scale, where 1 meant "Strongly Disagree" and 5 meant "Strongly Agree." To make sure the survey was clear and reliable, it was first pilot tested with a small group of learners. Based on the feedback from these students, some small changes were made to make the questions clearer and more relevant.

The questions in the survey covered important areas that are often discussed in research, such as specific writing difficulties (like grammar, vocabulary, and how to organize ideas), students' views on what happens in the classroom (like group work, teacher feedback, and using online tools), how motivated and confident students feel about writing, and their thoughts on available resources and teaching methods.

The semi-structured interviews with teachers involved six open-ended questions. These questions were included to get detailed answers about the challenges students face and the teaching strategies that teachers use to help them improve their writing. These questions were based on earlier research about teaching writing in EFL contexts, which helped ensure they were in line with good practices for collecting qualitative data (Hyland, 2016; Bitchener & Storch, 2016).

Procedure

Data collection followed a structured process to ensure reliability. Seven students completed the questionnaire, and it took them about ten minutes. After the students answered the questionnaires, the three teachers were interviewed using a set of open-ended questions that allowed for some flexibility in the conversation. Each interview took around fifteen minutes and was conducted in a comfortable place to help the teachers feel at comfortable at the moment of delivering their responses.

While the questionnaire provided viewpoints about the students' writing problems, the interviews helped us understand things in a better way by letting the teachers share their viewpoints and what they've experienced. Even though the interviews weren't that long, the fact that the questions were structured helped make sure that the main topics and challenges were covered effectively.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire was analyzed using the statistical software Jamovi. By using that tool, relevant statistics such as mean, median, and standard deviation were analyzed, providing insights regarding students' perceptions about their writing challenges.

For the qualitative data obtained from teacher interviews, the software Atlas.ti was used for thematic analysis. After transcribing the interviews, common themes were identified, and a thematic coding approach was applied to refine the findings. This method is widely used in qualitative research to extract recurring patterns and insights from interview responses (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Using both statistical analysis of the questionnaire and thematic analysis of the interviews allowed for a thorough interpretation of the research findings (Creswell, 2014)

Results

The findings of this study comes from two primary data sources: a quantitative student questionnaire (N = 7) and qualitative semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers

(N=3). The questionnaire results provided a wider image on learners' perceived challenges and experiences in developing their writing skills, while the interviews explored teachers' perspectives on these challenges as well as the procedures they followed to deal those. Taking these two data sets into account, a comprehensive understanding of both student and teacher views regarding the development of the Writing skill in EFL settings can be obtained. The section is divided into two parts: (1) Quantitative Findings from the student questionnaire, and (2) Qualitative Findings from the teacher interviews.

Student Questionnaire Results

In response to the first research question, "What challenges do EFL students face in enhancing their writing skills?" seven EFL students at an A2 level responded to a 14-item Likert-scale questionnaire designed to explore the challenges they face in developing their writing skills. For analysis, each response was assigned a numeric value from 1 to 5, and the mean (average) indicates whether the group overall leans toward agreement (mean > 3), disagreement (mean < 3), or neutrality (mean = 3). The median shows the "middle" response among the participants, which helps verify the central tendency without being skewed by outliers. Finally, the standard deviation (SD) measures how spread out or uniform responses are around the mean, with a higher SD indicating more variability in participants' answers.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows data that contains mean, median, and standard deviation for the 14 questionnaire items. For clarity, responses were coded in the following manner:

5 = Strongly Agree, **4** = Agree, **3** = Neutral, **2** = Disagree, **1** = Strongly Disagree

Table 1.

Descriptive Overview of Likert-Scale Responses on Writing Challenges

Item (Abbreviated Statement)	**Mean**	**Median**	**SD**
Q1: Difficulty using correct grammar	3.43	3	0.53
Q2: Struggling to choose the right words (vocabulary)	3.57	4	0.53
Q3: Organizing thoughts into a clear structure is challenging	3.43	3	0.53
Q4: Feeling anxious or nervous when writing in English	2.86	3	0.69
Q5: Losing motivation if a writing task is complex or long	3.71	4	0.95
Q6: Considering having enough time in class to practice writing	3.00	3	0.82
Q7: Digital writing tools help significantly	4.14	4	1.07
Q8: Feeling comfortable sharing written work for peer review	3.14	3	0.90

Q9: Teacher's feedback is generally more helpful than peer feedback	3.86	4	0.69
Q10: Difficulty revising and editing after receiving feedback	3.00	3	1.00
Q11: Writing topics are relevant to real-life needs	4.00	4	0.82
Q12: Teacher provides clear instructions for writing tasks	4.14	4	0.90
Q13: More writing exercises beyond the classroom would aid improvement	3.86	4	0.69
Q14: Real-life writing tasks keep me interested and motivated	3.71	4	0.95

Grammar, Vocabulary, and Organization (Q1, Q2, Q3)

Items related to grammar, vocabulary, and organization yielded mean scores around or above the neutral midpoint (3.00). Participants indicated moderate agreement that using correct grammar (M = 3.43) and organizing their thoughts (M = 3.43) can be challenging. They also somewhat agreed that selecting appropriate vocabulary is difficult (M = 3.57).

Anxiety and Motivation (Q4, Q5)

When asked about writing-related anxiety, the mean score (M = 2.86) indicated that most students were either neutral or only slightly agreed they felt nervous. However, five out of seven students agreed or strongly agreed that they lose motivation if a writing task is complex or long (M = 3.71), suggesting that task length and complexity may influence their willingness to write.

Time Availability and Digital Tools (Q6, Q7)

Participants were neutral on whether they had sufficient in-class time to improve their writing (M = 3.00), with responses split between agreement and disagreement. In contrast, most students found digital tools (e.g., grammar checkers) beneficial (M = 4.14); three participants strongly agreed that these tools helped them significantly.

Peer vs. Teacher Feedback (Q8, Q9, Q10)

Most students indicated neutrality about feeling comfortable sharing their written work with classmates (M = 3.14). In contrast, the majority agreed that their teacher's feedback is more helpful than peer feedback (M = 3.86). Difficulty revising after feedback (Q10) showed a neutral average (M = 3.00); however, responses varied, with one student strongly disagreeing (finding revision easier), two agreeing, and four remaining neutrals.

Relevance, Instruction Clarity, and Additional Practice (Q11, Q12, Q13, Q14)

The items on topic relevance (Q11; M = 4.00) and clear instructions (Q12; M = 4.14) both scored high, suggesting that students consider class writing activities to be practical and well-guided. Similarly, there was a strong inclination to believe that additional writing exercises outside class could lead to faster improvement (Q13; M = 3.86). Students also

agreed that real-life contexts (Q14; M = 3.71) keep them motivated, though one participant disagreed with this statement.

Overall, results from the survey showed that students face moderate challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and organization, and many lose motivation with complex or lengthy writing tasks. Although a part of the group does not report significant anxiety, there is a general preference for teacher feedback over peer feedback. Additionally, digital tools, clear teacher guidance, and real-life writing tasks appear to be beneficial, while views on having sufficient class time and peer-review preference remain mixed.

Teacher Interview Results

To address the second research question, "What challenges do English teachers perceive EFL learners face when teaching writing?" a thematic analysis was conducted on three semi-structured teacher interviews. This thematic analysis began with ten initial codes obtained from multiple readings of the three interview transcripts. These codes captured specific issues such as grammar problems, vocabulary difficulties, organization, motivation, technology use, and types of feedback used in the writing process. As the analysis continued, these ten codes were clustered into six broader themes that best enclosed the main ideas emerging from the data: (1) Language-Related Difficulties, (2) Motivational and Emotional Factors, (3) Classroom Constraints, (4) Role of Feedback, (5) Technology in Writing, and (6) Instructional Strategies for Overcoming Challenges. This process involved reviewing the initial codes for similarities and then organizing them under more comprehensive categories. The final themes reflect recurring patterns in teachers' perceptions of their students' writing challenges, as well as the conditions and strategies that shape writing development in EFL contexts. Excerpts from the interviews are included to illustrate each theme. Teachers are identified as T1, T2, or T3 in order to ensure confidentiality.

Themes

1. Language-Related Difficulties

Across all interviews, teachers emphasized grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation as recurring challenges. They noted that students frequently apply mother-tongue structures to English, leading to errors in word choice and sentence construction.

"They might be able to write sentences, but then they can't arrange them into a coherent paragraph, let alone an essay" (T1)

"Students tend to write things as they are used to in their native language... They transform their Spanish words to English as best as they can" (T3)

Teachers also highlighted that students often struggle with punctuation and the use of linking words, which hinders the clarity and flow of their writing.

2. Motivational and Emotional Factors

All teachers reported that anxiety, fear of mistakes, and low motivation influence students' willingness to write.

"When students don't enjoy writing or don't know how to begin, they feel stressed. Anxiety and a lack of motivation play a huge role" (T1)

"Fear is the biggest issue, fear of getting it wrong... or being laughed at by classmates" (T2)

Moreover, teachers observed that these emotional barriers are more present with certain students rather than uniformly across a class. Student interest in the writing topic was identified as a motivator, with topics considered irrelevant often increasing anxiety and disinterest.

3. Classroom Constraints

Time constraints in class and large student groups emerged as key limitations to individualized feedback and scaffolded writing activities which are considered essential in students' writing development by teachers. Teachers noted that insufficient class time can reduce opportunities for revision.

"If class time is too short... they tend to keep making the same mistakes. Rushing against the clock really impacts their writing" (T1)

"One of the greatest challenges with large groups is reaching every student if they're at different proficiency levels" (T2)

4. Role of Feedback (Teacher and Peer)

The importance of teacher and peer feedback in enhancing writing was noted by all participants, though teacher feedback was often perceived as more reliable.

"To fix their mistakes, students need direct feedback that addresses each error with clear examples... Indirect feedback is useful... but it doesn't always help them improve 100%" (T1)

"I believe feedback is extremely important... it's a way to measure their attention and interest in class" (T2)

Peer feedback was viewed as beneficial for encouraging collaboration but less reliable if both peers struggle with similar language issues. Some teachers also noted that receiving feedback can cause student anxiety.

"When I try to give feedback, students sometimes feel judged... they prefer not to try new grammar forms" (T3)

5. Technology in Writing

All three teachers acknowledged the growing impact of digital tools (e.g., AI, grammar checkers, learning platforms). While these tools can enhance writing skills and provide faster error correction, teachers said that students might rely too much on them.

"Technology should be incorporated responsibly... it can be a distraction or keep students from learning core skills on their own" (T1)

"It's usually obvious to us when students use them excessively... their vocabulary suddenly seems advanced for their level" (T2)

Teachers reported employing websites, online prompts, and grammar-checking platforms in group feedback sessions, highlighting the value of technology when combined with teacher oversight.

6. Instructional Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Interviewees described several methods to help students progress in writing:

Incremental Tasks: Breaking down the writing process from short sentences to more structured paragraphs and essays.

"First, pick an interesting topic. Then begin with short sentences, gradually move to write a paragraph, and eventually work toward a full essay" (T1)

Vocabulary and Grammar Immersion: Encouraging students to switch their devices to English to gain consistent exposure to the language. (T2)

Journaling: Assigning personal journals for ongoing practice and increased engagement, though this might be time-consuming for larger classes. (T3)

Model Analysis: Presenting sample paragraphs or student work anonymously and collectively identifying areas for improvement. (T3)

These strategies focused on structured guidance and gradual progression, aiming to reduce student anxiety and foster sustained language development.

Overall, the thematic analysis revealed that language-related challenges (grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary) persist due to mother-tongue interference and inadequate opportunities for corrective practice. Motivational and emotional barriers such as anxiety

and fear of errors further hinder writing performance, especially when students lack engaging topics or feel judged. Classroom constraints, most notably time shortages and large class sizes, limit the individualized feedback needed to address persistent errors. Nevertheless, teachers view both teacher-led and peer feedback as vital for improvement, as long as students do not over-rely on digital tools. Lastly, teachers identified progressive writing tasks, journaling, and practical exposure to English (e.g., changing device settings) as effective in boosting learners' writing proficiency and confidence.

Finally, when comparing the two data sources, some similarities and differences were visible regarding the writing challenges students face. Teachers mentioned challenges with grammar, vocabulary, and organization, and students' responses confirmed moderate to strong agreement that these areas are challenging. Moreover, both teachers and students agreed that motivation and emotional barriers (e.g., anxiety and fear of making mistakes) affect writing development, particularly when assignments are too long or unfamiliar. Additionally, learners' preference for teacher feedback rather than peer feedback matched teachers' emphasis on individualized guidance as a key to addressing recurring errors. However, a notable difference appeared in perceptions of technology use. While students viewed digital tools as helpful resources, teachers expressed concerns about over-reliance and the risk of not mastering core writing skills. Teachers also mentioned time constraints within the classroom, especially with large groups, as a barrier to providing detailed feedback, a limitation that students partially acknowledged when neutral views were reported about having enough class time.

Discussion

The main goal of the present research study was to explore the challenges EFL learners face at the moment of developing their writing skills and the difficulties teachers perceive during writing instruction. The findings suggest that both groups see grammar, vocabulary, and organization as significant challenges, which reflects earlier research highlighting persistent language-related barriers in EFL contexts (Frazier & Brown, 2001). These difficulties are widely reported in EFL writing studies, as many learners struggle with syntactic accuracy, lexical variety, and textual cohesion (Hyland, 2019; Rao, 2017). Teachers noted that many students transfer first-language structures into English, leading to errors in syntax, word choice, and punctuation, a phenomenon frequently observed in second-language acquisition research (Ellis, 1997). Learners themselves reported moderate struggles that often hindered clarity and coherence,

consistent with previous studies on common linguistic challenges in EFL writing (Alharbi & Alqefari, 2021; Amalia et al., 2021).

Covering motivation and anxiety, the results showed that although some students do not show high levels of writing anxiety overall, a portion of them are afraid of making mistakes, which can reduce their willingness to experiment with new language forms. According to Sun et al. (2014), writing anxiety may depend on individual factors rather than affecting all students in general. Teachers also described instances of pronounced fear in certain learners, suggesting anxiety levels can vary within the same class. Such diverse emotional responses underline the need for personalized support to help students overcome hesitation and increase their confidence.

Regarding teacher and peer feedback, most learners preferred teacher feedback, which is not surprising in sociocultural contexts that view the teacher as the main authority (Pardede, 2024). At the same time, some students recognized the value of peer review for collaboration, but they hesitated to rely on classmates they perceived were struggling with similar issues. Teachers acknowledged these concerns, pointing out that peer review can be useful as long as the group members are at the same level. Digital tools were also seen as helpful in identifying mistakes or suggesting alternatives, but teachers repointed that students tend to rely too much on technology rather than developing their writing skills consciously. This perspective aligns with existing research suggesting that technology should supplement, rather than replace, foundational language instruction. For instance, Moqbel and Rao (2013) highlighted that integrating technology into EFL teaching enhances learning outcomes but emphasized that it should complement core instructional practices. Furthermore, a study by Pitukwong and Saraiwang (2024) demonstrated that digital writing tools positively impact EFL learners' writing skills; however, the authors cautioned against relying solely on technology, underscoring the necessity of direct language instruction.

These results align with socio-constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes structured guidance within a supportive environment. Although students valued group activities and peer review to a certain extent, they still leaned on the teacher's expertise, suggesting that a more balanced approach might help them benefit from both collaboration and expert feedback. From a process writing perspective (Flower & Hayes, 1981), the data indicate that many learners lack opportunities to revise and edit their work, which weakens the impact of feedback. Teachers claimed that limited class time and other

constraints often prevent the production of multiple drafts and reduce practice in process-oriented writing. In addition, a genre-based approach (Hyland, 2007) seems relevant, since both students and teachers mentioned the importance of meaningful, real-life tasks. Offering writing assignments tied to specific text types or authentic scenarios may give learners a clearer sense of audience expectations and ways to organize their thoughts.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

The small sample size, however, limits the strength of these conclusions. This study took place in one private language institute in Cuenca, Ecuador, and only seven students and three teachers participated, which reduced the ability to generalize. Further research in the field could explore a wider and more diverse sample across multiple contexts, especially in Ecuador, where research related to this topic is scarce to almost non-existent. It would also be beneficial to track students' writing over a longer period in order to see more clearly how feedback and repeated practice influence improvement. In particular, there is a growing need to study how teachers and students perceive the inclusion of AI-driven resources, such as ChatGPT, in writing tasks, examining both the opportunities they offer and the risks of over-reliance. Finally, future studies could investigate the cultural and contextual factors that shape learners' preference for teacher feedback, and how those preferences might be used effectively within group or peer-assisted writing tasks.

Despite these limitations, the study presents practical suggestions. Students appear to benefit from regular, structured guidance and purposeful writing tasks that match real-life interests. Digital tools can help address grammar and organizational issues efficiently, but teachers need to implement a balanced approach so that learners develop fundamental grammar skills. Pairing direct feedback with peer-review exercises, under clear guidelines, may help students gain confidence and learn from each other. Overall, the findings support a mix of teacher-led, peer-based, and technology-assisted strategies to address language-related challenges, motivate learners, and reduce anxiety in the EFL writing classroom.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that EFL students at an A2 level face difficulties in enhancing their writing abilities, especially in areas like grammar, vocabulary, organization of their writing. Furthermore, the influence of their mother tongue and difficulties when implementing feedback also impacted negatively their writing product.

Even though teachers tried to help students by incorporating methods that involve process-based strategies and digital tools, time constraints and having large classes made it hard to deliver individualized instruction.

This study supports the idea that using process-based writing approaches and providing structured feedback are key elements that might help students become better writers. Also, it highlights the inclusion of technology as a useful resource to teaching, offering more opportunities to practice and allowing students to learn and practice by themselves. Implementing teaching strategies that combine direct instruction, peer collaboration, and technological support can greatly improve students' writing skills in the EFL context.

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