

## Teachers' Perceptions of the Affective Dimension in EFL Writing

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### Abstract:

Much research on language writing instruction has focused on cognitive processes while little attention is paid to the affective side involved in writing namely from teachers' perspectives. Teachers have a significant role in shaping learners' experiences of success inside and outside the classroom setting. As such, the present paper is concerned with teachers' perceptions of learners' affect in EFL writing. It is a humble attempt to understand the ways teachers view learners' writing difficulties, and teachers' impact on creating supportive learning environments. To answer the research questions, writing teachers of first year undergraduates completed questionnaires for the sake of gaining an understanding of teachers' educational practices. The results indicate that though teachers acknowledge students' writing difficulties, they partially relate that to the affective dimension in writing. The paper concludes with some

implications for classroom practice that derive from teachers' experiences in EFL writing classrooms.

**Keywords:** Affect, EFL writing, teachers' perceptions, writing difficulties

**Jel Classification Codes:**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is a challenging task for many people, and a large body of research is addressing the issue of factors related to successful second language achievement ( Horwitz et al. 2010). Cognitive aspects of learning have always been regarded as important factors in learning; however, more attention should be given to emotions and affect ( Arnold 2019). The term “affect” as conceptualised by researchers includes “feelings of self-confidence, feeling willing to communicate or feeling anxious” (MacIntyre and Gregersen, 2012,p.103).

Writing in a foreign language is not an easy task for some language learners. In fact, they have to perform in a language which they are still learning and in the process of mastering. As Hyland (2003, p. 34) stated “ students themselves commonly identify language difficulties, particularly an inadequate grasp of vocabulary or grammar, as their main problems with writing and frequently express their frustration at being unable to convey their ideas in appropriate and correct English.”

If we assume that foreign language writing is much influenced by positive or negative affect , that teachers of writing should pay attention to the affective side of the EFL writer, the present study has set forth objectives that aim at verifying the research following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the role of affect in learners' EFL writing?

Research Question 2: What sort of measures teachers suggest to cope with learners' difficulties and negative affect in writing classes?

This study is descriptive and tentative in nature as it endeavors to shed light on teachers' perceptions of learners' affect in EFL writing within a university context.

## 2.The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Dealing with topics related to emotions and feelings has been a great challenge for researchers (White 2018). That essentially derived from the difficulty of defining affective constructs and conducting research studies on variables that are largely interrelated. Historically speaking , early attempts to depict the role played by affect in language learning derive from Stephan Krashen's (1982) Monitor Model and his hypothesis of the affective filter. Krashen (1982) was one of the pioneers who sparked researchers' interest into the area of affect.

In the field of second language acquisition, Krashen (1982, 1983) hypothesized that certain affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-esteem are strongly related to second language achievement. Those psychological barriers are subsumed under the rubric “affective filter”. In his Affective Filter Hypothesis, Krashen (1982, p.32) states that “ our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that en-

courages a low filter. The effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation.”

Crookall and Oxford (1991) commented on the “Affective Filter”. They explained that although the notion of the filter seems rather too abstract, it serves to remind teachers that “negative affect” is something they should be concerned about. In the language classroom, learners’ attempts of language production will be evaluated according to uncertain or even unknown linguistic and socio-cultural standards. For this, Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that second language learning entails risk taking and is necessarily problematic for many language learners.

It is interesting to note that some researchers have devoted attention to the complexities of the learning process. Following this argument, Tsui (1996) views foreign language learning as a “stressful process” rather than a process of accumulating linguistic rules and participating in classroom activities. Specifically, it is described as “a process in which individual learners are constantly putting themselves in vulnerable position of having their own self-concept undermined and subjecting themselves to negative evaluation.” (Tsui,1996, p. 155) .Those considerations put forward the idea that some “unobservable” dimensions of the classroom are even more important than the “observables (Tsui 1998). Thus , affect in EFL writing is one of the invisible dimensions that needs careful attention on the part of teachers.

### **3.The Affective dimension in EFL Writing**

At the level of language production, writing is a central component in second language learning. It is an aspect that needs special care on the part of language teachers. As pointed out by researchers (Krashen 1982, Horwitz et al, Price 1991), attitudes towards oneself and the group play a crucial role in learners’ achievement in any given skill. Probably no other field of study implicates “self-concept” and “self-expression” to the degree that language study does (Horwitz et al. 1986).

In foreign language classes, learners may face difficulties while engaging in different tasks, especially those that require written production. Schumann states that “the learner is haunted by doubts as to whether his words accurately reflect his ideas” (1975,p.211). He suggests that it is essential to enhance learners’ self-confidence and effectiveness in language learning. This could, to a certain extent, reduce that sense of shame, which results from feelings of insufficiency and inadequacy (Schumann 1975). Thus, students who are afraid of embarrassing themselves by writing incorrectly may try to avoid opportunities that would aid their writing development ( Cheng 2004).

The teacher’s presence in the classroom must not be perceived as a threat to learners. Error correction, for instance, can generate frustration on the part of language learners since the risk of being subject to negative evaluation is very recurrent in language classes. As Allwright and Bailey (1991, p.173) put it:

"Learners report that one of their major worries is that when forced to use the language they are learning they constantly feel that they are representing themselves badly, showing only some of their real personality, only some of their real intelligence."

#### 4.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

A total of eight teachers (N=8) were administered questionnaires : a background questionnaire and another questionnaire designed to consider some aspects of teaching writing first year undergraduates at the English Department, University of Algiers 2. The sample of teachers was required to answer questions that range from closed-ended questions to open-ended questions. As explained by Dornyei (2007), closed-ended items are given to respondents who are required to choose one of the alternatives. By contrast, open-ended questions are not followed by response options and permit "greater freedom of expression"( Dornyei 2007:107). For open-ended questions, data is content analyzed to specify major categories. Instances of teachers' comments are given whenever necessary.

##### 4.1.Teaching writing and the EFL learner

This part is devoted to presenting and discussing the results relative to teachers' attitudes about areas of writing difficulties for the EFL undergraduates, components of writing that should be given importance , and activities that teachers use in their writing classes:

**Question 1:** What areas of EFL writing create difficulties for your students?

Table 1 reveals that more than half of first year teachers (N=5) consider "assessment" as the most problematic aspect for language learners when it comes to teaching writing . Other areas of EFL writing that are thought to create difficulty for learners might be specific to "teaching materials" or "teaching method". Moreover, three of first year teachers commented on "learners' reluctance" and " lack of motivation", and "problems of English language mastery":

**Table 1: Areas of EFL writing and students' difficulties**

Areas of EFL writing that might create difficulties for students	Number of Teachers	%
1-Teaching materials	2	25
2-Teaching method	2	25
3-Assessment	5	50

**Question 2:** In teaching writing, which of the following should be given more importance?

The second question aimed at depicting teachers' attitudes towards writing components that should be given more importance when teaching writing. Results in table 2 indicate that two-thirds of the teachers agreed upon giving higher concern to "mechanics" (N=6) and "vocabulary" (N=5). Four other teachers ranked "grammar" as one of the most important aspect in EFL writing followed by "EFL culture" (N=3). Other teachers referred to "strategy training" to help learners know about appropriate writing strategies, "outlining and knowledge of the topic" and "practice in writing". Surprisingly, the option "handwriting" was not perceived to be important in EFL writing on the part of first year teachers:

**Table 2: Components of writing that should be given importance in writing**

Components of writing that should be given more importance	Number of teachers	%
1-Grammar	4	50
2-Mechanics	6	75
3-Vocabulary	5	62.50
4-Handwriting	0	0
5-EFL culture	3	37.5

**Question 3:** What sort of activities or tasks you use more in your writing classes? Please explain:

Table 3 provides the results obtained from the analysis of question 3 which is about the frequently used writing activities and tasks in class. Teachers' responses reveal that the majority of first year teachers favour activities specific to "combining sentences" (7) , "re-recognizing scrambled sentences " (6). Other less frequently used writing activities as selected by the respondents include: "grammar and mechanics" (4) and "free writing" . For "cloze test" and "gap-filling", only one teacher ticked such options (T4). Some other teachers cited activities of different types and justified their usefulness in teaching EFL writing:

Table 3: Activities and tasks used most by teachers in their writing classes

Writing activities or tasks used mostly in teaching writing	Number of teachers	%
1-Cloze test	1	12.50
2-Gap-filling	1	12.50
3-Combining sentences	7	87.50
4-Re-organizing scrambled sentences	6	75
5-Grammar and mechanics	4	50
6-Free writing	4	50

On the whole, the results indicate that most of the teachers find assessment, students' reluctance to write, and lack of motivation as areas of difficulty for their students. This implies that teachers think of writing as an examination-oriented course. For them, undergraduates seem not to understand the reason behind assessment. Teachers assess learners' writing for the sake of improvement and preparation for mid-term tests and exams. This perception is even reflected in the results obtained for components of writing that should be granted more emphasis. More than half of the participants of the study ranked mechanics, vocabulary, and grammar as the ones that should be practiced more in writing classes. However, instructors' over concern for accuracy might be problematic for some learners. That could make writing in a foreign language a stressful and frustrating experience and even "kill" students' motivation to write (Cheng 2004).

#### 4.2. Teachers' perceptions of learners' affect in EFL writing

In this second part, we consider data elicited from questions depicting teachers' perceptions of students' preferences in EFL writing, assessment and effective correction modes, individual differences, anxiety in writing, and beliefs of students' writing problems:

**Question 4:** Do you take into consideration students' preferences? If so, how do you manage that?

As presented in table 4, teachers' responses to question 4 have been analyzed and classified into: teachers catering for students' preferences in writing (N=5) and those giving less importance to learners' choices in EFL writing (N=3). In justifying their answers, teachers who consider learners' preferences choose teaching materials and activities that fit learners' interests (T3), provide activities that account for learners' needs (T4), ask students directly about their preferences (T7), and give learners entire freedom to choose topics in writing paragraphs (T5 and T2). Teachers who men-

tioned giving less attention to learners' preferences have explained that students prefer tasks that are not challenging. Others considered the issue of learners' preferences to be out of reach especially in large classes:

**Table 4: Teachers' reactions to students' preferences in writing classes**

Students' preferences in writing classes	Number of teachers	%
1-Yes	5	62.50
2-No	3	37.50

**Question 5:** How would you assess students' writing? What type of correction you consider more effective in class?

As far as assessment is concerned, teachers presented different views. All teachers perceive "whole class correction" as the most effective one in EFL writing (N=8). They suggested that it would be very helpful for students as long as they correct mistakes for the whole class in an anonymous way. Two teachers selected "teacher's correction" and "peer editing". One of the teachers considered "peer editing" important as it encourages learners to improve writing. Besides, "self-monitoring" was also viewed as an effective way for self-improvement in class as one of the teachers noted: "Self-editing by following specific editing sheets really helps learners perceive their mistakes." (T5).

**Table 5: Teachers' assessment and their perceptions of the most effective corrections in class**

Teachers' assessment and their perceptions of the most effective corrections in class	Number of teachers	%
1-Teacher's correction	5	62.50
2-Peer editing	5	62.50
3-Whole class correction	7	87.50
4-Self-monitoring	4	50

**Question 6:** Do you cater for students' individual differences? If yes, how would you do that?

Data obtained for this question is classified into: teachers who are aware of individual differences in EFL writing (N=5) and teachers giving less or no importance to individual differences in EFL writing (N=3). The researcher was surprised by the fact that three of the respondents had difficulties in understanding the concept of individual differences:

**Table 6: Individual differences and the teaching of writing**

Individual differences and EFL writing	Number of teachers	%
1-Yes	5	62.50
2-No	3	37.50

Table 6 indicates that more than half of first year teachers react positively to learners' differences in EFL writing. The ways that manage that could be summarized as follows:

-Giving more "attention and time" to those learners who encounter writing difficulties (T2).

-Observing "students' individual styles" to select appropriate classroom activities (T3).

-Providing "various activities" (T4).

-Answering "individual questions or giving feedback on writing" (T5). This teacher explained that such practice is likely to be helpful for "shy students" in expressing their weakness to the teacher and avoiding to expose that to the whole class.

-Using "different activities" that could motivate and help learners in writing (T7).

On the other hand, three teachers overtly denied that individual differences would be part of their concerns in teaching EFL writing. One mentioned that the "learning-teaching environment" is not that helpful to the point that teachers cater for learners' differences (T1).

**Question 7:** Are your students anxious about writing in English? How did you know that?

Table 7 below summarizes the results obtained for question 7. Most of the teachers (N=7) expressed the belief that students might experience anxiety in EFL writing:

**Table 7: Teachers' beliefs about anxiety in EFL writing**

Anxiety in EFL writing	Number of teachers	%
1-Yes	7	87.50
2-No	1	12.50

Teachers' explanations on how did they know about students' writing anxiety are presented into four sub-categories:



**-Students' frustration whenever asked to write in class:** This is the case for T2 and T7 who explained that students complain about the difficulty of some writing tasks.

**-Inhibition** and fear of not being effective in writing (T4).

**-Writing is stressful because it is a demanding skill:** One teacher (T5) mentioned that many students are anxious to the point that they are unable to start writing while another teacher (T6) emphasized the importance of writing for students that might turn into a frustrating skill.

**-Lack of confidence in writing :** Some other teachers ( T8 and T7) commented that students are 'slow' at getting started as a sign of anxiety.

One of the participants (T3) rejected the idea that anxiety might instantly influence student's writing. This teacher suggested that students are not that conscious about the amount of work they must do to improve their writing. So it should not be a matter of anxiety in writing.

**Question 8:** As a teacher of writing, what are the sources of students' writing problems at the English department? Please justify.

This question aimed at eliciting possible sources of student's writing problems as thought by first year teachers. Table 8 reveals that teachers selected more than one answer with some of them highlighting other problems students might encounter in EFL writing:

**Table 8: Teachers' beliefs about students' sources of writing problems**

Sources of students' writing problems	Number of teachers	%
1-Poor grammar	8	100
2-Limited vocabulary	5	62.50
3-Limited time to write in class	3	37.50
4-Topic avoidance	1	12.50
5-Lack of concentration	4	50
6-Apprehension	3	37.50

The results in the above table show that all of the teachers agreed on "poor grammar" as the most encountered problem in students writing. One of the teachers (T2) suggested that students seem "to ignore this aspect when they write". "Limited vocabulary" presented the second source of students' writing problems. Five teachers selected this op-

tion with one explaining that "limited vocabulary" inhibits the students' writing process. According to TF2, such students often write in French or Arabic or they leave a space. Besides, half of the teachers suggested that "lack of concentration" might hinder students' writing. A similar number of teachers (three per option) selected "limited time to write in class" and "apprehension". Besides, answers to question 8 of the teachers' questionnaire exhibit a variety of results mainly for the "other" option. Teachers' beliefs about students' sources of writing problems represent the following:

- **Poor English use and lack of autonomy:** students value "rote learning" which is useless for improvement (T1).
- **Over-reliance on the teacher:** students are unaware of the importance of personal work outside the classroom to develop writing skills (T3 and T5).
- **Lack of learning strategies:** which are necessary for self-improvement . (T5)
- **Lack of reading:** students are not that motivated to read outside the classroom. (T3 and T5)
- **Limited practice in writing:** (T5 and T8)

An examination of teachers' responses indicate that students' preferences in writing are not that attributed importance when teachers design and select activities. Some teachers believed that students favour tasks and activities that are not challenging. Others explained that in large classes, it would be difficult for instructors to pay attention to students' preferences. As for teachers' attitudes about EFL writing correction, most of the participants considered whole class correction as the most practical one. They perceive it to be more helpful for students as long as feedback is provided in an anonymous way.

In the field of second language writing research, Cheng (2002) posited that it is crucial for teachers to use activities that lead to feelings of achievement not failure to build up self-confidence. In language learning, when students are involved in unfamiliar situations, they would feel embarrassed and adopt avoidance behavior ( Messadh 2010). Students' motivation to write could be expected to develop in the classroom when topics and activities stem from learners' concerns. As such, it is important for teachers to devote attention to learners' preferences when requesting them to write in English writing classes.

With regards to teachers' perceptions of individual differences in writing, the results show that more than half of the subjects endorsed negatively question 6. Some of the teachers even found it difficult to understand the notion of learner variables in writing. Conversely, when asked about the possibility of anxiety influencing students' writing, most of the teachers agreed with question 7. This implies that teachers display awareness of the negative impact could anxiety have on learners. The subjects commented that some of their students exhibit frustration whenever asked to write in class, appear stressful due to the nature of writing as a demanding skill, and lack of self-confidence in writing. Additionally, teachers believed that psychological insecurity shown by students could derive from a variety of writing problems. They suggested that students suffer essentially from poor grammar, limited vocabulary, lack of concentration, apprehension, and lack of practice in writing. This means that the results of the present study are in line with Hyland's (2003,

p. 50) assumption that “learners have their own personalities and there are numerous individual variables that can intervene to influence their acquisition of L2 writing.”

### 4.3. Teachers’ insights for classroom instruction

Data collected from questions (9) and (10) provided teachers’ recommendations. This includes ways teachers recalled from their writing classrooms experiences:

#### 4.3.1. Remedies to help students overcome writing difficulties

**Question 9:** How would you help students who have some of the writing problems?

- Use of continuous assessment as it motivates students. They would develop the habit of writing in a regular manner. This would reduce students’ fear of being evaluated. Teachers might think of collecting a specific number of students’ writings and give whole class correction.
- Increasing grammar and vocabulary practice by assigning students with activities directed to improve that.
- The use of reading texts is very helpful and effective for vocabulary learning. Reading encourages students to infer meaning within contexts and practice that vocabulary in writing.
- Writing outside the classroom for the sake of students’ self-improvement.

#### 4.3.2. Recommendations to improve the teaching of writing

**Question 10:** What would you suggest to improve the teaching of writing at the English department?

- Organizing writing workshops for students. The most successful students could give oral presentations to display their written contributions. This would motivate other students who are less willing to write in their classes.
- Creating small groups since teaching writing is likely to be challenging for many teachers. It would be better to put students in small manageable groups. Teachers could monitor students’ progress easily.

## 5.CONCLUSION

Taking into account that teachers’ perceptions of affect in EFL writing is a less addressed research topic, this study aimed to shed light on this area of inquiry. Students’ writing difficulties might not be necessarily rooted in linguistic inadequacies, but rather in negative affect. Thus, it is important for teachers to consider the role played by affect in shaping students’ writing experiences. Arnold (2019, p.13) has made a comment that could be very useful for teachers of writing “ we can find many indications from our teaching experience as well as from empirical research which show how attention to affect can bring positive changes to the classroom and that the foreign and second language learning and teaching processes will be more effective if they are affective”. As such, students’ willingness to write is likely to

develop when teachers balance between concern over language accuracy and the psychological well-being of their learners.

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