

Digital Pedagogy Perspectives: Exploring ESL Teachers' Beliefs towards Online-Based ESL Writing Instruction

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the closure of schools worldwide to safeguard public health, resulting in unprecedented disruptions to education. These changes profoundly affected teachers, significantly altering their roles and responsibilities. This study aims to investigate the impact of school closures on the perspectives of ESL teachers in Sabah, Malaysia, regarding online-based instruction of ESL writing skills. A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a descriptive and survey-based methodology to examine teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards online ESL writing instruction. The study gathered data on various demographic factors, including the type of school (public or private), participants' gender, age, and professional experience. The results reveal no significant differences in the attitudes and beliefs of public and private school ESL teachers in Sabah concerning the effects of online-based education. Notably, the forced transition to online education during the pandemic may have catalysed future innovations, paving the way for a more effective hybrid education model.

Keywords: Online-based Teaching, ESL Writing Instruction, Digital Pedagogy, Teacher Perceptions, Educational Disruption, Malaysia

Introduction

The educational landscape in Malaysia is undergoing significant transformations, with concerted efforts to align teaching and learning practices with the National Education Philosophy (NEP). A pivotal area of focus within this transformation is the enhancement of writing skills, a fundamental component of effective communication and cognitive development. English, being a critical second language in Malaysia, is taught from preschool through university, highlighting the importance of proficient writing skills among students.

However, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) underscores the need for students to be proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, presenting a unique set of challenges for ESL educators.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift towards online-based teaching, bringing to the forefront the opportunities and challenges associated with digital pedagogy. This sudden transition required teachers to adapt rapidly to new teaching methodologies, leveraging digital tools and resources to facilitate effective learning. In Sabah, Malaysia, ESL teachers from both public and private schools have had to navigate this new educational paradigm, often with varying degrees of success and acceptance.

Despite the increased adoption of online-based teaching methods, there is a paucity of research focusing on the beliefs and attitudes of ESL teachers in Sabah, Malaysia, towards these methods, particularly in the context of teaching writing skills. Understanding these beliefs is crucial, as they significantly influence the implementation of online teaching strategies. Moreover, the potential differences in beliefs between public and private school teachers remain underexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the perspectives of ESL teachers on online-based writing instruction and identifying any differences between public and private school educators.

Research Objectives

- RO1 To identify the beliefs and attitudes towards online-based ESL writing instruction among ESL public and private school teachers in Sabah, Malaysia
- RO2 To compare the beliefs and attitudes towards online-based ESL writing instruction among ESL public and private school teachers in Sabah, Malaysia

Research Questions

- RQ1 What are the beliefs and attitudes towards online-based ESL writing instruction among ESL public and private school teachers in Sabah, Malaysia?
- RQ2 Is there any difference in the beliefs and attitudes towards online-based ESL writing instruction among ESL public and private school teachers in Sabah, Malaysia?

Literature Review

Importance and Challenges of ESL Writing Skills

Writing is often undervalued in language learning due to its perceived lesser impact on conversational skills. However, writing is crucial for mastering linguistic structures, as it allows for the organization and refinement of ideas. Rao (2019) highlights the difficulties ESL learners face with writing due to the complexity of English phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic systems, making writing a challenging skill to acquire. Zagada (2019) further emphasizes that writing enables learners to methodically process their thoughts, research, and incorporate new vocabulary, which aids in solidifying language learning through practice. Writing facilitates better retention and recall of information, as it involves analysing and organizing received information, thus strengthening neural connections in the brain (Joannes & AlSaqqaf, 2023; & Zagada, 2019).

Brink (2020) underscores the unique human capability to communicate through writing, which has historically aided in informing, collaborating, and preserving personal and

collective knowledge. Writing extends communication across time and space, significantly impacting one's life and career outcomes. It reflects personal expertise, goals, and achievements, demonstrating the enduring value of writing skills.

ESL learners face numerous challenges in developing writing skills. Fareed et al. (2016) identifies a lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge, grammar, and syntax issues as primary obstacles. Common errors include subject-verb agreement, pronouns, tenses, articles, prepositions, and basic sentence structures. Anh (2019) supports this, noting that even long-term English learners struggle with grammar, which remains a significant barrier.

Additionally, students often lack ideas, coherence, and the ability to use transitional and cohesive techniques effectively (Fareed et al., 2016). Moses and Mohamad (2019) argue that each learner's unique obstacles can impede their progress in writing. Misbah et al. (2017) highlight the impact of limited vocabulary on students' writing development. The teaching approach must differ across educational levels, from elementary to tertiary, to address these varied challenges effectively (Moses & Mohamad, 2019).

Instructors also encounter significant challenges in teaching ESL writing. According to Gündoğmuş (2018), a lack of professional expertise, particularly among novice teachers, increases stress and anxiety. Teachers' varying experience and training levels influence their ability to create suitable instructional materials and lesson plans. Building a strong rapport with students and understanding their competence levels and interests are essential for designing effective exercises and providing meaningful feedback (Gündoğmuş, 2018).

Using Digital Tools to Teach Writing Skills

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the education system in Malaysia and globally, necessitating the integration of traditional classroom settings with online learning to establish a new standard teaching approach (Ating, 2020). This hybrid model aims to mitigate the pandemic's adverse effects on education, fostering a more resilient and adaptive learning environment (Chung, 2021).

Digital tools have been recognized for their positive impact on students' writing skills. According to Purcell et al. (2013), a significant number of teachers in Advanced Placement (AP) and the National Writing Project (NWP) acknowledge the benefits of digital tools. Specifically, 78% of teachers agreed, with 26% strongly agreeing, that these tools enhance students' creativity and expressive capabilities in writing. Moreover, 24% of teachers rated their students' ability to effectively organize and structure writing assignments as "excellent" or "very good" when digital tools were incorporated. Furthermore, 50% of teachers found that the internet and digital tools facilitated the teaching of writing, underscoring their utility in modern education (Purcell et al., 2013).

Despite the benefits, there are challenges and criticisms regarding the use of digital tools in writing instruction. Kilpatrick et al. (2014) emphasized the need to understand the usage patterns of digital tools in classrooms. Applebee and Langer (2011) reported that teachers are the primary users of these technologies rather than students, suggesting a continuation of teacher-centred teaching practices. This indicates that digital tools are not

always leveraged to create new learning opportunities for students but are often used to reinforce existing instructional methods (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Kilpatrick et al., 2014).

The integration of digital tools in teaching writing skills presents both opportunities and challenges. While these tools can enhance creativity and organizational skills in student writing, their potential is not fully realized when used primarily by teachers to maintain traditional teaching methods. Therefore, a balanced and student-centred approach is essential to maximize the benefits of digital tools in writing instruction.

Teachers' Practices

Teaching practices are essential to the education process, serving as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application. As Mustafa Kemal Atatürk poignantly stated, "A good teacher is like a candle—it consumes itself to light the way for others." This metaphor encapsulates the selfless dedication required in teaching and underscores the importance of setting exemplary standards in the profession.

Teaching practice, as defined by various scholars, involves the ways faculty recognize and conduct instruction, often reflecting their beliefs and ethics in the teaching and learning process (Hunter & Rasmussen, 2018). Finlay (2018) describes teaching practice as a component of an education degree where students engage in supervised teaching within a school. Incikabi & Kacar (2016) further specify that teaching practice occurs within a particular classroom setting and involves the practical application of teaching a subject.

Teaching practice provides student-teachers with an invaluable opportunity to experience the art of teaching before fully entering the profession (Msangya et al., 2016). It is seen as a crucial phase that bridges the gap between being a student and becoming a professional educator (Ranjan, 2013). Koross (2016), quoting Andabai (2010, 2013), emphasizes that teaching practice focuses on the practical application of teaching concepts, methods, and daily school tasks, highlighting its importance in real-world teaching.

Ababio (2013), stresses that teachers must exhibit professionalism, providing students with the highest quality education. Teaching is not merely about transferring knowledge but also about how learners use, engage with, and respond to instruction and feedback. Ababio (2013) identifies two primary forms of institutionalized teaching:

1. Structured Teaching: An instructor-led process with limited student involvement.
2. Informal Teaching: A more dynamic approach where the teacher acts as a mentor, facilitator, advisor, or motivator, encouraging high student participation.

Strengths and Weaknesses Of Online-Based Teaching

Online-based teaching, often termed e-learning, has emerged as a transformative force in education, providing both opportunities and challenges. As John Thomas Chambers noted, combining the internet and education has the potential to eliminate barriers related to time, distance, and socioeconomic status, making education more accessible globally.

E-learning platforms enable learners to access educational materials from anywhere and at any time. This flexibility is particularly beneficial for students who require a non-traditional schedule or live in remote areas (Haron et al., 2015). The ability to learn at one's

own pace and revisit materials as needed enhances the learning experience for students, especially English Language Learners (ELLs), who benefit from interactive visual aids and self-paced lessons (Halwani, 2017; Schwartz, 2020).

The integration of technology in education fosters collaboration among students through various online tools and platforms. This collaborative environment is more relaxed and convenient compared to face-to-face interactions (Sawhney, 2012). Additionally, technology can enhance language learning more effectively than traditional methods, as it engages students in innovative and interactive ways (Haron et al., 2015).

Online learning eliminates the need for physical travel, making education accessible to a global audience without the associated costs of flights or accommodations (Recolizado, 2017). This global presence allows educational institutions to offer a wide variety of courses to a diverse student body. One of the significant advantages of e-learning is its self-paced nature. Students can manage their learning schedules, which can lead to better retention and understanding of the material (Recolizado, 2017). This aspect of online learning also promotes self-discipline and responsibility (Nieves, 2012).

However, slow internet connections and outdated computers can hinder access to online courses, causing frustration among students and teachers (Nieves, 2012; Sawhney, 2012). These technical challenges can lead to decreased engagement and increased dropout rates. Online learning can lead to feelings of loneliness and a lack of support, as students do not have the immediate assistance of teachers or peers (Nieves, 2012; Sawhney, 2012). This isolation can negatively impact the learning experience and reduce motivation.

The flexibility of e-learning can also be a drawback. Without the structure of a traditional classroom, some students may struggle with self-discipline and procrastination, causing their learning to deteriorate over time (Recolizado, 2017). Despite advances in technology, online learning cannot fully replicate the experience of in-person interaction. Non-verbal communication, which plays a significant role in effective learning and teaching, is limited in an online environment (Nieves, 2012). Video conferencing tools, while useful, often lack the flexibility needed to create a dynamic and interactive learning experience like that of a traditional classroom (Kaltura, 2020).

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study examines teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards online-based ESL writing instruction among ESL public and private school teachers in Sabah. The methodology involves a quantitative approach to collecting and analysing numerical data. The study utilizes a survey method to gather data from a large sample of individuals within a short timeframe.

Population and Sampling Technique

The target population comprises ESL teachers from 39 private schools and 1,269 public schools in Sabah, totalling 3,924 teachers. Utilizing Bartlett's Test of Variances with continuous data at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, the minimum required sample size for a relational survey design is determined to be 119, as recommended by Bartlett et al. (2001).

The survey was administered through a simple random sampling technique to ensure representativeness and minimize bias.

Instrument

The instruments included 15 items that reflected teachers' beliefs towards online-based teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The items were adapted from eight articles; Al-Maqtri (2014), Larsen (2012), Bracher (2013), Ismail et al. (2013), British Council (2020), Kim & Buchanan (2009), Shahid Javed & Muhammad Shahzad (2013), and Hartman et al. (2014). The survey was distributed using Google Forms, which handled the distribution and compilation of web-based survey questions.

Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument

Content validity of the survey was ensured by evaluation from two expert validators, while face validity was assessed for operationalization and relevance by non-experts. On the other hand, the reliability of the instrument was confirmed through a pilot study using SPSS 29 software, which yielded a high Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.961, indicating strong internal consistency. Descriptive analysis, Cronbach's Alpha, and an independent-samples t-test are employed to analyse the data, comparing the beliefs and perspectives of ESL teachers from public and private schools. The results indicated that the reliability of the questionnaire exceeds the acceptable threshold of 0.70 for all variables.

Table 1

Distribution of Respondents by Items

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.961	.960	15

Results and Discussion

Results

A total of 117 ESL teachers responded to the survey of this study through a Google Forms questionnaire. The respondents included both elementary and secondary teachers from public and private schools.

Demographic analysis revealed that 87.18% (102) of the respondents were ESL teachers in public schools, while 12.82% (15) were from private schools. Gender distribution showed that 24.79% were male and 75.21% female. The age distribution included 20.51% aged 20-29, 32.48% aged 30-39, 33.33% aged 40-49, and 13.68% aged 50 and above. Regarding professional experience, 22.22% had less than five years, 18.80% had six to ten years, 17.95% had eleven to fifteen years, 16.24% had sixteen to twenty years, and 24.79% had more than twenty years of experience.

The data met the criteria for normal univariate distribution, with skewness and kurtosis values falling within the acceptable range of -1.96 to +1.96. The independent-samples t-test revealed no significant difference in attitudes toward online-based instruction between public and private school teachers during the pandemic, with $t(18) = 0.296$, $p = 0.770$. The mean performance scores for public schools ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.62$) and private schools ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.69$) were not significantly different. These findings suggest a shared neutral to agreeable perception of online-based teaching efficacy among English teachers in Sabah during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

The study conducted by Constantine Limbai (2021) emphasizes the need for governmental amendments to optimize the efficacy of online education, a sentiment supported by the OECD (2020). In Malaysia, the transition from traditional to modern classrooms has been particularly challenging for teachers. Investigating teachers' beliefs is one proposed solution to assist with this transition (Zikre & Eu, 2016, Hu et al. 2020). This research specifically examined ESL teachers' attitudes towards online-based teaching in Sabah, Malaysia, revealing that time limitations and lack of access to necessary equipment were major barriers.

For RQ1, the analysis showed that ESL public school teachers in Sabah had a mean score of $M=3.55$, while private school teachers had a mean score of $M=3.49$. Both groups exhibited favourable attitudes towards online-based teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, with no statistically significant differences between them. The JPNS statistics highlight a considerable gap between the number of public and private schools, yet the attitudes towards online teaching remained consistent across both groups. Comparative research underscores the unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in states like Sabah (Alea et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Mansor et al., 2021).

Before the pandemic, some ESL teachers were hesitant to integrate technology into their teaching due to rapid technological advancements (Singh et al., 2018, Hu & AlSaqqaf, 2021). Despite this, the pandemic has necessitated a swift adaptation to online teaching, even among previously reluctant educators. The t-test results for RQ2 revealed no significant difference in beliefs regarding online-based ESL teaching between teachers in public and private schools. However, there has been a marked shift in teachers' attitudes, particularly towards recognising the benefits of online teaching during the pandemic. The discussion is further enhanced by exploring various perspectives on online education, including its creative potential, inherent limitations, and the increased accessibility it offers. Additionally, the potential adoption of a hybrid teaching model is proposed as a means of effectively balancing traditional and online methods in the post-pandemic era.

Pedagogical Implications

The current research underscores the importance of exploring and understanding teachers' perspectives, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted global education. Despite the entrenched nature of teachers' pedagogical beliefs formed through prior classroom experiences, positive technology experiences can influence their willingness to adopt more effective online teaching methods. Professional development programs have been found to be successful in encouraging teachers to embrace reform-based practices.

This study specifically aims to investigate how ESL teachers in Sabah, Malaysia, have adapted their beliefs and practices in response to the transition to online teaching necessitated by the pandemic. By identifying effective strategies to strengthen these beliefs, the research seeks to enhance the overall success of online-based teaching across various modalities. Given the lack of comparable surveys in this region since the pandemic began, this study is poised to offer valuable insights into the interest of ESL teachers in continuing with online teaching post-pandemic.

The findings suggest the necessity for ongoing professional development tailored to meet teachers' immediate classroom needs, emphasizing practical application. Further research is needed to identify the most helpful virtual support tools that can continuously aid in developing the skills required for successful online teaching. Implementing a student Collaborative Online Learning Environment (COLE) model could potentially transform teachers' beliefs about learning, allowing them to experiment with new pedagogies and ultimately promoting the usefulness of online-based education.

Recommendations

Future research should expand beyond the current study's limitations by addressing several key areas. First, it is essential to investigate the influence of teachers' beliefs on the effectiveness of online teaching, especially considering pedagogical concerns as highlighted by Constantine Limbai (2021) and Manca & Ranieri (2016). Additionally, research should extend beyond urban environments to explore the urban-rural divide, as limited internet connectivity in rural areas may impact the relevance of current findings (Brook et al., 2018). Further studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of online-based ESL writing instruction across different demographics, including age, gender, sociocultural factors, digital skills, and regional variations. Finally, comprehensive recommendations for enhancing online learning at various levels—institutional, national, and international—are necessary to foster innovation and build a sustainable future globally, as emphasized by Okada & Sheehy (2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study reveals that ESL teachers in Sabah, Malaysia, maintain positive attitudes towards online teaching despite initial difficulties. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered perceptions, highlighting the necessity for ongoing support and adaptation in educational methods. Although ESL writing instruction faces challenges, such as vocabulary and grammar issues, digital tools offer promising opportunities for enhancement. The pandemic-driven shift to online learning emphasizes the need for flexible and technologically adept teaching practices. This trend aligns with the government's objective to promote lifelong learning and mitigate virus transmission through reduced direct interactions.

This research makes a significant theoretical and contextual contribution to the existing body of knowledge surrounding digital pedagogy and ESL instruction, particularly within the Malaysian educational landscape. By examining the beliefs and attitudes of ESL teachers in Sabah towards online-based writing instruction during the unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the study not only sheds light on the practical implications of digital teaching methodologies but also enriches the theoretical discourse on teacher perceptions in a rapidly evolving educational environment.

The findings reveal that despite the challenges posed by the sudden transition to online learning, teachers across both public and private schools exhibit a shared positive attitude towards the efficacy of these methods, suggesting a potential shift in pedagogical paradigms. This research thus serves as a crucial reference point for policymakers and educational stakeholders aiming to enhance teacher training and professional development initiatives, ensuring they are responsive to the needs of educators navigating the complexities of online instruction.

Furthermore, by highlighting the uniformity in attitudes among different school types, the study underscores the importance of fostering a collaborative approach to educational reform that transcends institutional boundaries, ultimately contributing to a more cohesive and effective teaching framework in Malaysia's diverse educational context.

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