

# **Beliefs About Online-Based Teaching and its Effectiveness on Teaching Writing among ESL Teachers from Public and Private Schools in Sabah, Malaysia: Insights from Literature**

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## **Abstract**

The move to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the way ESL writing instruction is taught across the world. The literature review summarises publications that enable a critical look at the perception of ESL teachers regarding the effectiveness of online pedagogy. The results place the beliefs held by teachers as difficult, although as important as, in determining whether to embrace modern technology. Digital tools are potential creators, organisers, and participants in the writing process of students, yet the potential is still to be exploited by remaining barriers. These barriers are the very nature of ESL writing and a lack of internet connectivity, incompatible tools, and students. In Malaysia, particularly Sabah, the transition to an online teaching environment could have become a turning point in terms of revisionism towards traditional approaches and the prospective hybrid character. Comparative studies indicate that school status (public or private) plays less in terms of its ability to influence teacher beliefs than other systemic and contextual influences. This synthesis, therefore, emphasises that there is an urgent need to develop specific professional learning combining technology upskilling with the pedagogical modification to optimise online writing education.

**Keywords:** Online-based Teaching, ESL Writing Instruction, Teachers' Beliefs, Digital Pedagogy, Educational Technology

**Introduction**

The global learning environment has undergone a tremendous transformation that is credited to the extensive adoption of digital technologies in learning models. In Malaysia, this change is aligned with the National Education Philosophy (NEP) and the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013- 2025), where the importance of creating English proficiency alongside Bahasa Malaysia is also emphasised. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the national agenda of switching to online-based learning with minimal preparation, which is now an urgent necessity (Constantine Limbai, 2021; Constantine Limbai and AlSaqqaf, 2024). This radical shift predetermined the crucial role of the beliefs of teachers, including the values, attitudes, and perceptions, which are identified to have a vehement impact on classroom practice and the adoption of new pedagogical practices (Pajares, 1992; Gilakjani and Sabouri, 2017).

In this context, one of the challenges is the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) writing. Writing is often perceived to be the most difficult skill to learn as an ESL student, and its teaching must be approached in its subtleties and in an interactive manner. The immediate shift to online instruction because of the pandemic, then, became a distinct kind of challenge to writing pedagogy (Constantine Limbai and AlSaqqaf, 2025). The given literature review is specifically dedicated to the Malaysian state of Sabah, where the researcher explores the perceptions of both public and private school teachers on the effectiveness of online-based instruction on writing. Based on theoretical models of blended learning (Harasim, 2012, 2017) and teacher cognition, this discussion examines the interaction between pedagogical beliefs, the practical aspects of teaching writing online, and the comparative conditions of schools of diverse types. The results obtained can help to inform post-pandemic education plans, instructors' professional growth, and develop sustainable and effective hybrid teaching models of ESL writing.

The synthesis of the existing literature in this review provides a novel contribution to three major areas. First, it offers a focused investigation into the geographical environment of Sabah, Malaysia, explaining the unique socio-economic and infrastructural conditions that give form to teacher beliefs that are unique to this region. Second, the analysis leaves behind the generic discussion of online teaching to focus on the complex realm of writing proficiency, which is often augmented by online revolutionization. Third, and with the most significant, the research challenges the perceived dichotomy between the existence of a public and a private schooling by showing that the convergence of teacher beliefs and professional experiences takes down institutional demarcations, thus suggesting that systemic and pedagogical processes have more to do with teacher cognition than the institutionalisation of teacher cognition. This work has relevance to the social sciences on the basis that its foundation is empirically based and that it provides a platform on which to design integrated, context-specific professional development programmes and policy interventions that should address the common needs of the ESL teacher and, by extension, enhance the overall efficiency of digital writing pedagogy.

**Literature Review Insights***Centrality of Teachers in Belief and Influential Role in Online Pedagogy Formation*

Among the most basic observations made based on the set of readings is that the beliefs of teachers are used as an internal map to inform instructional decisions and changes, especially when a time of crisis-induced change occurs (Xu, 2012). These perceptions, attitudes, values, and generally abstracted views, often referred to as the messy construct (Pajares, 1992), are not permanent; they are activated according to the needs in the environment (Ertmer et al., 2016; Ferri et al., 2020). The forced transition into online instruction due to the COVID-19 closure of schools caused a significant redrawing of such convictions. This is empirically proved by the region, showing that the practice of the teachers was quickly transformed, starting with confusion and a perceived lack of control, to a feeling of agency and skill in using digital tools (Moorhouse and Beaumont, 2020; Zainal and Zainuddin, 2021). This phase of crisis remote training, though difficult, was a major turning point in terms of professional development, pressure requiring review of established practices, and emphasising crisis as a challenge to belief change (Soon & Aziz, 2022; Constantine Limbai and AlSaqqaf, 2024).

These philosophies are inherently linked with principles of solving the everyday professional dilemmas and holistic well-being of educators, hence affecting their capacity to develop high-quality learning environments and mould student motivation and achievement (Xu, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic was a confusing quagmire that forced teachers to engage in desperate reasoning that adhered to the transformative learning theory (Finlay, 2018). Before the case of ESL teachers in Sabah, it was established that they already had a preconceived belief about the effectiveness of traditional and face-to-face writing skills, and this assumption created a sense of cognitive dissonance that was compelling them to adapt pedagogically. This active approach to the crisis not only performed as a form of reactive response to it, but also as a driver of rethinking the professional agency of educators and the teaching methods, which ultimately demonstrates that teacher beliefs are not a fixed construct; they are dynamic (Zainal & Zainuddin, 2021; & Hu & AlSaqqaf, 2021).

Therefore, the imposition of all teaching online instruction despite its disruptive value served as a significant power stimulus towards professional growth and transformation of belief systems on the part of ESL educators. This observation underscores the necessity that future professional growth programmes go beyond the more technical teaching. To be effective, in this case, these initiatives must instantiate the space of critical reflection and dialogue, thus enabling the teachers to actively question and re-articulate their pedagogical beliefs according to the demands of the digital learning environment of the 21st century (Ertmer et al., 2016; Tondeur et al., 2012; & Hu et al., 2020).

*Inherent Problems of ESL Writing and how they are Multifaceted in the Online World*

As shown in the literature, writing has been identified as the most challenging competence among English as a Second Language learners due to challenges in lexical, grammatical, syntactic, and coherence (Fareed et al., 2016; Rao, 2019; & Joannes & AlSaqqaf, 2023). These barriers, as they were reshaped into digital pedagogy, were not softened; in many cases, they were aggravated. Teachers have mentioned the problem of providing prompt, complex feedback on written writing and the inability to create the conditions of a collaborative and interactive environment that usually constructs the process of writing development (Moses and Mohamad, 2019). On top of that, such phenomena associated with learners as plagiarism,

distraction, lackadaisical attitude have become more prevalent in the paradigm of remote learning (Yunus et al., 2013; Mustafa, 2016). These discoveries underline the need to have the pedagogical strategies that directly address these compounded challenges and, therefore, go beyond the transposition of face-to-face programmes developed in the real-life environment to the digital environment.

Difficulties that are involved in the process of second-language learning are complex, and they touch both the learner and the instructor. ESL students often find the lack of lexical repertoire, presence of consistent errors in grammar and syntactic constructions, along with lack of accuracy in subjects-verb agreement, tense use, use of articles, and basic sentence structure (Fareed et al., 2016; Anh, 2019). Additionally, the lack of ideas and synthesised writing, along with inabilities in coherence and use of transitional devices, all contribute to the progression of the learners into further decline (Fareed et al., 2016). In the case of transforming instruction with inadequate professional skills (especially in novice teachers), stress and anxiety accumulate (Gündoğmuş, 2018). The varied tasks and experiences of educators require the creation of relevant instructional questions, lesson schemes, and the delivery of valuable feedback that required considerable extra time and effort; and such issues were complicated during remote instruction, during which measuring student capabilities and the creation of rapport turned out to be more complicated.

In turn, the online environment does not just duplicate current writing difficulties, but it intensifies them and provides a more complicated pedagogical environment. The digital platforms also contribute to the problem of engagement with students and offering them immediate feedback, in different ways, and feedback that provides the depth and delicacy that they require when they need to develop their writing (Nieves, 2012). This fact requires essential restructuring of the way online writing courses are designed and should no longer include an attempt at direct transfer of the ways of in-person writing instruction, but emphasises the pedagogy that is specifically designed to operate within the environment of online education and is focused on the organisation of teamwork, multimedia feedback, and measures to build a supportive online learning atmosphere.

#### *The Two-Sided Form of Digital Tools for Teaching Writing*

There is an emerging acceptance of digital tools in their ability to make a positive change in writing instruction. They could facilitate creativity in students, automate organisation processes, and present numerous platforms of expression and feedback (Purcell et al., 2013). Self-assessment technological applications have proved to maintain continuous development in writing and increased evaluation accuracy, thus promoting learner autonomy (Zhang and Zhang, 2022). However, a vital observation made of the material literature indicates that there is a remarkable difference between the aspirational potential and real practice. The efficiency of these tools is heavily conditional on the extent to which factors are external to it, especially a good internet connection and the availability of proper hardware, a matter of particular high importance in areas like Sabah. The recent empirical studies in Malaysia highlight that enablers such as infrastructure and support are the main determining factors in technology usage, and the environment (rural or urban), teachers may be subject to an acute digital divide that hampers technology usage (Yap et al., 2024). Based on this, technology alone is not enough; it depends on pedagogical implementation in an ecosystem where technology is used.

Along with results of studies, it is known that digital tools positively contribute to the sphere; more precisely, according to surveys, many teachers within the framework of Advanced Placement (AP) and the National Writing Project (NWP) agree that digital tools help students to become more creative and, in addition, provide more opportunities to properly organise and structure a writing assign (Purcell et al., 2013). Nevertheless, there is a significant problem with their implementation of them. Research has also shown that technology is commonly used in the classroom by teachers more than it is used by students, which has created access to current trends of teacher-centred teaching as opposed to student-centred learning (Applebee and Langer, 2011; Kilpatrick et al., 2014). What this discussion implies is that unless there is a change in the pedagogical movement, there will not be the optimal use of the digital tools, where their impact can be seen changing the way the ESL writing classroom respective to reinforcing the existing traditional practices.

Therefore, the effectiveness of digital tools is a phenomenon of dualistic character, as it may act both as a possible channel of greater knowledge and as a potential obstacle that can be explained by the inability to access and deliver. The opportunities of digital tools are not limited to the technological nature but rather limited by their usage. Although digitised resources may be helpful in teaching writing and fostering creativity in students, as Purcell et al. (2013) note, their feedback is finally regulated by the pedagogical strategy embraced. The final value sensed in these instruments is not inherent to the tools but again depends on the philosophy of pedagogy, which guides how to deploy the tools. To be able to exploit their capabilities in terms of writing instructions, the shift towards the student-centred as opposed to the teacher-centred paradigm is obligatory with the utilisation of technology as the means of a student-related active creation, collaboration, and critical analysis as opposed to an inactive reception of education material delivered by a teacher. This emphasises the fact that tools remain inanimate; all the manipulation of writing instructions in ESL by tools is only realised when they are incorporated into a student-centred learning environment, which does not replicate the traditional, teacher-centred paradigm (Applebee and Langer, 2011; Kilpatrick et al., 2014). Such a shift requires a correlative determination to reduce the digital divide in infrastructures such that all learners receive equal access.

#### *A Synthetic View: The Small Differences between Teachers in Public and Private School Set-Ups*

One observation in the Sabah real-life context is the noticeable lack of statistically significant differences in beliefs and perceived efficacy between ESL teachers working in either a public or a private school (Constantine Limbai, 2021; Constantine Limbai and AlSaqqaf, 2024). Even without the possible resource and administrative imbalances, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as one and the overwhelming challenges related to the remote writing instruction are likely to have led to a convergent worldview. Both groups reported similarly neutral-to-professional beliefs about the opportunities of online pedagogy, and at the same time, they expressed similar frustrations about its limitations. The implication of these findings is that any effort to design and implement professional development initiatives and professional development programmes aimed at facilitating the promotion of online writing education can be best groomed via a single paradigm that responds to the needs and issues of all ESL teachers within the state, instead of school-type-specific responses.

This intersection of experience as well as perception reveals that systemic and contextual standards (e.g. national curriculum) directives, as well as the larger pedagogical issues involved in the instruction of writing, have a stronger effect on teacher thought than does institutional affiliation (Constantine Limbai, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a levelling factor, in which educators in both the public and private sectors were faced with similar core issues, such as student engagement with the online learning framework, maintaining evaluation integrity, and offering suitable feedback on the academic work under strict resource conditions. Such commonality suggests that the professional persona of ESL writing teachers in Sabah is more influenced by a group pedagogical agenda and situation-centred nuances rather than the fact that they are employed in a public or a private institution; thus, there is still justification to approach teacher support and market-extensive professional development using a single, statewide outlook on the process.

Therefore, the effectiveness of digital tools is a phenomenon of dualistic character, as it may act both as a possible channel of greater knowledge and as a potential obstacle that can be explained by the inability to access and deliver. It is found that the mutual presence of the pandemic created a strong, glueing professional environment due to the similarity of perceived experiences in the teaching of writing and the universal nature of the latter. The final value sensed in these instruments is not inherent to the tools but again depends on the philosophy of pedagogy, which guides how to deploy the tools. To be able to exploit their capabilities in terms of writing instructions, the shift towards the student-centred as opposed to the teacher-centred paradigm is obligatory with the utilisation of technology as the means of a student-related active creation, collaboration, and critical analysis as opposed to an inactive reception of education material delivered by a teacher. Indeed, the results of the empirical study indicate that systemic factors, especially the national curriculum and associated pedagogical requirements of teaching ESL writing, have a stronger influence on teacher cognition than institutional type (Constantine and Limbai, 2021). Consequently, to policymakers and those with vested interests in education, such understandings form the basis of establishing a single, statewide system to support teachers and their professional growth, and it must consider such shared challenges instead of introducing unequal programmes based on school type. Such a shift requires a correlative determination to reduce the digital divide in infrastructure such that all learners receive equal access.

#### *Trait of Online-Based Instruction Established as a New Norm Due to its Strengths and Shortcomings*

Online learning is dichotomous as outlined in the literature. Its strength of it has a deep foundation, flexibility, accessibility, self-paced learning promotion, and the elimination of geographical barriers (Haron et al., 2015; Reolizado, 2017). In the case of writing teaching, it may lead to more time for drafting and revision of their text taught and having as much online material as possible to use. According to post-pandemic reviews, teacher learning outcomes were reported to be sustained during the mentioned time due to the lessons learned during that period, which further supports the usefulness of blended approaches (Govindaraju et al., 2024). On the other hand, its minorities are also very substantive. These are the digital divide, isolation, increased self-discipline requirements, and the intricate restrictions inherent to non-verbal, rich communication inherent to face-to-face settings of a physical classroom (Nieves, 2012; Sawhney, 2012). This pattern of advantages and disadvantages guides an increasingly popular argument that a transition-type approach, involving a strategic

combination of the best aspects of online and face-to-face learning, can represent the most viable and efficient measure to rely on when it comes to the teaching of challenging skills every ESL writing. This assertion is immediately confirmed by some evidence about the positive impact of blended learning on a general linguistic performance (Li, 2022).

The merits of e-learning are significant; it will be characterised by undeniable flexibility since learners will have access to instructional resources at any time and regardless of location, which is especially beneficial to other people in remote areas or people with non-standard schedules (Haron et al., 2015). An environment of collaboration fostered by it might also be less formal than face-to-face communication and results in self-control and responsibility due to its self-directed nature (Sawhney, 2012; Nieves, 2012; Recolizado, 2017). On the other hand, they are weak, and this makes them deterrents. Pain and barriers to access may be caused by technical issues like sluggish Internet connection, outdated hardware, among others (Nieves, 2012; Sawhney, 2012). The lack of physical presence can encourage isolation, which leads to fostering a sense of alienation and lack of support among students, and even the borderline aspect of flexibility, which is their benefit, can be the pain of those who experience problems with self-control and procrastination (Recolizado, 2017). Additionally, it is impossible that online learning can completely simulate the opportunities offered by a real classroom rich in non-verbal communication and dynamic interaction to teach and learn the material, which makes the pedagogical experience and learning process restricted (Nieves, 2012; Kaltura, 2020).

Consistent with this dichotomy, thus the wisest thing one can do at present is not to judge or choose solely either full online or full traditional training, but a calculated and strategically combined mixture of the two teaching models. To the extent that this literature review provides evidence in favour of stating that a strategically coordinated presence of online and online teaching is the most feasible specific course of action, this information is accurate. Combining conventional classroom with online modalities, as Chung (2021) confirms, is the solution of further educational practise, as on the one hand, a hybrid model can successfully exploit the benefits of both of the mentioned models and, on the other hand, effectively reduce their limitations that, in turn, will result in a stronger and more effective framework, wherein not only the difficult ESL writing skills will be taught. The hybrid or blended learning design proves to be the most pedagogically justified strategy, as it takes the best of the self-directed and non-restrictive aspect of online education and applies it to the drafting and the research of work, whereas the benefits of the intensive, demanding, and rapid face-to-face communication method are to be awarded to the collaborative work with peers (through interactive workshops, collaborative peer review) and addressing more problematic aspects of the writing process (that can be resolved only through immediate interpersonal feedback). This model helps in effectively reducing the intrinsic flaws of the two approaches and capitalises on the strengths of each approach to create a more robust and effective ecosystem of ESL writing instruction.

## **Conclusion**

To identify the issues surrounding the critical aspects of the online ESL writing instruction field, a literature review has revealed that educational research is more than a complicated matter that is influenced by the inextricable relationship between teacher cognition, pedagogical issues, technology tools, and situational limitations. The position of the ESL

teachers does not involve peripheral beliefs; instead, they form the core of what defines the effective implementation of digital pedagogies. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in the most apparent challenges, namely overcoming the inherent difficulties of the instruction of writing and granting equitable access to technologies, it has also sparked a possible change in the mindsets of teachers, as can be seen based on the increased levels of teacher agency and reflective practices during the post-pandemic phase. The harmonisation of ideologies among educators in both private and government schools within Sabah is an indication of collective professional experience that cuts across geographical boundaries of the school institutions. Any future strategies aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of online writing teaching must be based on the generation of these insights to design holistic professional development programmes that do not merely constitute technical upskilling but tuition that proactively involves instructors to refocus their pedagogical ideology and facilitates them to use the digital tools not just as substitutes but as departure ways in an integrated, student-centred online ESL writing programme.

The results were encouraging, making it rise to the fore that professional growth is continuous and purposeful and is responsive to classroom practice needs in the modern world and that professional growth is affected in practice (Constantine Limbai, 2021). The future research on the issue should seek to define the most effective virtual support tools and to assess the opportunities offered by new frameworks like a Student Collaborative Online Learning Environment (COLE); such platforms may allow educators not only to explore new methods of teaching (VanOostveen et al., 2018). Future studies should not remain narrow but rather extend their scope to include the urban-rural digital divide as well as carefully evaluate the effectiveness of internet-based ESL teaching methods among other ethnic groups of people, like their age, sex, and digital satisfaction. Institutional, national, and international levels of holistic policies are required to incite pedagogic change and build a robust and sustainable future of digital education in Malaysia and other countries (Okada and Sheehy, 2020).

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