

A Study of Metaphor for Writing Skill in EFL Contexts

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Abstract

To communicate effectively in any language, one needs to be competent in using four language skills; that is, reading, listening, reading, and writing- and accordingly the integrative skills instruction has come into prominence in L2 teaching. EFL teachers' beliefs, ideas, perceptions, attitudes are known to have a significant impact on their profession. Termed as "teacher cognition" by Borg (2003), the mentioned beliefs or perceptions are not directly observable. In this study, it is argued that teachers' perceptions about four language skills as a part of their teacher cognition will give insight to their instruction. This is a qualitative study which aims at finding out the prospective EFL teachers' perceptions about writing skill through metaphors. The participants included the undergraduate students studying English as a foreign language at two universities, Istanbul and Amasya. The data were analyzed with the content analysis technique. The findings revealed that prospective EFL teachers had various views regarding the nature of writing. These perceptions, either positive or negative, will influence their future practices; thus, it is essential that the awareness of prospective EFL teachers should be sharpened to help learners to understand the complicated nature of writing and proceed in writing.

Keywords: metaphor, writing, teacher cognition, prospective EFL teachers

1. Introduction

Research in the field of language teacher cognition has recently gained prominence. The term 'teacher recognition' as Borg (2003), is a critical factor in the teaching and learning process since the opinions and perceptions of teachers play a fundamental role in specifying classroom events and activities. In terms of research conducted on teaching, teachers' emotions have not been investigated much, although emotion plays a significant role as an aspect of teaching (Zembylas, 2005). Many studies have emphasized the role of emotion in teaching (e.g., Acker, 1999; Nias, 1996; Goldstein, 1997; Stough & Emmer, 1998; Hargreaves, 2000); however, little has been performed to integrate affective factors into teaching systematically. Besides, studies have pointed out that compared to cognition, affect has been deemed more complex and challenging among researchers (Boler, 1999; Janack, 2000; McLeod, 1989; Simon, 1982; Zembylas, 2002).

Studies conducted to shed light on teachers' perspectives and affective concerns about teachers revealed the crucial role teachers play in the implementation of pedagogical tasks and the design of classroom procedures. Moreover, the perspective of teachers, particularly language teachers, has provided invaluable insights in terms of teacher education and their instructional practices (Borg, 2015).

Through the study of teacher cognition, much can be unveiled about the nature of language teachers' instruction, the repertoire of knowledge, assumptions, attitudes, theories and most importantly, their classroom practices. Accordingly, a thorough understanding of how language teachers regard different skills within a language class and how they approach teaching these skills to their students may be used efficiently in shaping teacher education and development programs and policymakers (Borg, 1999).

Studies in the field of teacher cognition have begun to emerge in the field of second language teaching and interesting results have been demonstrated in terms of the comparisons of teacher and students' perspectives in language learning process. For instance, Hawkey (2006) concluded that although both language teachers and students were in favor of the use of communicative approaches in language teaching, they diverged on the prominence of grammar and pair work in their classes. In his study, where a summary of research conducted on L2 teachers' beliefs were examined, Gabillion (2013) also stressed the importance of further research into L2 teacher and learner belief systems and the probable influence of these beliefs on their learning process.

In terms of the second language learning process, the ability to use metaphors is developed through using language communicatively in various contexts. The language learning process becomes meaningful through metaphors (Danesi, 1986). Whereas the term metaphor was considered a stylistic issue, it is now deemed a critical component of everyday language. Using metaphors could purify conceptualizations of language learners about their language learning and teaching processes. In addition, there is a growing body of research about the use of metaphors in second language learning (L2) (Hoang, 2014). Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5) define metaphor as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another". Focusing on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the number of metaphor studies has increased significantly since the use of metaphors might provide researchers with the means to understand how language learners.

As a result of the developments in the field of cognitive linguistics, there has been a growing body of research in second language learning to highlight the importance of using metaphors in language learning contexts (Andreou & Galantomos, 2008; Bachman, 1990; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Littlemore, Chen, Koester, & Barnden 2011; Low, Littlemore, & Koester, 2008). Although metaphors are part of our daily lives, their presence of them is rarely realized and they are neglected even in our first language. For a second/foreign language learner, metaphoric competence has a fundamental role in all spheres of communicative competence, as Bachman (1990) puts it.

Metaphorical competence has the potential to contribute to all other competencies, grammatical competence, illocutionary competence, strategic competence, and textual competence. Thus, the use of metaphor is highly relevant to second language learning. Despite its importance, the ability of second and foreign language learners is still limited in terms of use of metaphors and in various language curricula metaphors are still not considered a core ability.

Writing skill needs to be attended to with care during the language teaching process since students are required to use this skill in their future endeavors. Nunan (1999, p. 273) refers to writing as 'an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate control of variables simultaneously'. Strong writing skill is an indicator of students' success, and most language learners are supposed to be equipped with the writing skills to achieve their short term and long-term goals. Hence, the way writing skill is perceived and interpreted matters in language learning and teaching since perceptions of language teachers and students alike will affect their writing related academic success and achievement.

Scrutinizing the perceptions of prospective EFL teachers toward the writing skill is also significant in that writing embodies cognitive, affective, social, and physical aspects within itself as a productive skill. To this end, the current study aims to address the following research question:

What are the perceptions of pre-service English teachers about writing skills?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This is a qualitative study in which the participants' understanding of the writing skill describes their cognition and understanding through metaphors. The use of metaphor in qualitative research allows the researcher to analyze the phenomena from a creative perspective. As Cameron and Low (1999) point out, metaphor analysis as a method involves the accumulation of linguistic metaphors that are employed to clarify the topic and to use the results of the data to 'suggest understandings or thought patterns which construct or constrain people's beliefs or actions' (p. 88).

In qualitative studies, metaphors are utilized as a data collection instrument when the purpose is to describe a situation delicately (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Accordingly, the following stem was directed to the participants to complete: 'Writing in English is like ... because ...'

2.2 Data Collection Tool

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2.3 Sampling

The participants of the study were determined via the maximum variation sampling technique, where a small number of units or cases that maximize the diversity are included in the research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The participants were a hundred (100) undergraduate students studying at English Language Teaching Department at Amasya University and Istanbul Medeniyet University at the time of the study.

Table 1. Demographical Information of the Study

Variables		n	Total
Gender	Female	73	100
	Male	27	
Grade	Preparatory	11	100
	Freshmen	21	
	Sophomore	26	
	Junior	25	
	Senior	17	
University	Amasya	83	100
	Istanbul	17	

3. Data Analysis

The data were transferred to the digital platform and analyzed with descriptive content analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Firstly, the data were coded in general, and a code list was created with the recurring and similar codes. The data were recorded according to the finalized code list, and the general themes which emerged in the coding were identified. Finally, the coding process was implemented by two researchers twice at different intervals. Interrater reliability of the analyses was calculated as α . 90, which reveals that the degree of agreement by two researchers was calculated by agreement (9)/ phenomenon (10).

4. Findings and Results

The analyses have shown that the participants used various English writing metaphors; however, some of them are more common.

Table 2. Metaphors for ‘Writing in English’

Metaphors	f	Metaphors	f
Constructing/ building	7	Making a cake	2
Cooking	3	Creating	2
Doing puzzle	3	Knitting	2
Drawing a picture	3	Riding a bike	2
Being an artist	3	Meditation	2
Being a painter	3	A factory	2
Being an author	3	Space	2

Table 3. Other metaphors as stated by the participants

• riding a bike	• two-sharp edge knife
• screaming	• unburden one’s heart in a more effective way
• solving math problems	• walking
• spilling problems into water	• walking a tightrope
• sport	• watching a film about the medieval ages
• Swimming in the ocean	• water for a tree
• taking an exam	• working in a field
• torture	• working like a miner
• transporting my knowledge	• writing a letter to a foreigner
• travelling in a labyrinth	• writing a novel
• travelling on a bus	• writing something informal
• writing to your love	

As a result of the data analysis, some themes were generated by the two researchers following the coding process. The main themes emerging from the analysis were as follows:

Theme 1: There are some definitions for writing English.

Theme 2: Writing English has benefits.

Theme 3: Writing in English is a skill which is perceived differently.

Theme 4: It is a process to learn how to write in English.

Theme 5: There are some requirements to write well in English.

The codes and frequencies regarding each theme were demonstrated in the following tables.

Table 4. Theme 1 as revealed by the data analysis

Theme 1: There are some definitions for writing English.	
Codes	f
1. It is a construction process	27
2. It is a planned process with some rules.	8
3. It is a different way of thinking	3

As demonstrated in Table 4, most participants stated that they regarded writing as a construction process in that writing, as a productive skill, pertains to creating new form in new ways. For example, P10, a female participant, emphasized that writing resembles cooking: 'Cooking because writing you have to find lots of words and put them together like putting ingredients for your dish'. Similarly, P48 noted that writing skill is like constructing a building because of the need to have excellent and robust words and determination to write well. A builder needs strong cement and patience to have a strong building.

P48: Raising a building because raising a building is a hard process and we have to use quality building materials. If we are patient and we use the good words for writing in English, we will be able to create a quality writing.

Similarly, P83 stated that writing is like doing a puzzle because of some reasons.

P83: Doing puzzle because choosing the correct words, grammar and suitability of content is like putting the pieces together. Analyzing the possible ways to form sentences and conveying the meaning in it is a really hard work.

Some participants also highlighted the rules students must obey as writing process inherently is a rule-governed system where students must consider many features such as grammar, word choice, spelling, punctuation, and some components of the writing process itself prewriting, revising, and editing.

Eight of the participants also perceived writing skills as a planned process with its own rules. P71, for instance, overtly stated that one has to 'be careful and choose the appropriate word for writing'. Likewise, P73 also revealed that she deemed writing a complicated process where obeying some rules was necessary. The participant expressed her view: 'Walking a tightrope because it is difficult, and we should pay attention to some rules'.

Similarly, P81 emphasized 'keep everything under control where the writer must consider every detail during a writing process'. Thus, it is clear that writing pertains to a process where any student must pay attention to various components to create a decent product.

P81: Building a magnificent structure because you feel you need to keep everything under control and take into consideration every detail so that you can build the structure up in an amusing way.

In terms of the definitions mentioned so far, three participants also defined writing as a different mode of thinking. The codes deriving from the research revealed that the participants emphasized a set of higher order thinking skills, albeit unawares. Critical thinking was highlighted as a form of responsible thinking to be able to create a piece of writing that meets the criteria of decent writing. Besides, in the light of their comments it was demonstrated that they referred to non-routine thinking during the writing process where they must apply specific critical thinking processes; thus, cognitive skills were referred to such as analysis, inference, and deductive and inductive reasoning. P27 also highlighted the case of being a different person when writing: '(during writing) ...you cannot think in your native language, you should focus and think in English. So, this makes you different. Because your brain begins to think in a different way'. Similarly, P40 highlighted the

process with a new perspective: 'Being a different person because when you try to write in foreign language you need to think in that language because the common phrases in your native language may have a different meaning or it might be meaningless'. Hence, it is interesting to note that when defining writing, thinking in a foreign language with the right words and phrases was compared to being a new person.

Apart from the writing definitions, the participants also stated that writing in English has some benefits. The table below demonstrates the frequencies of the codes as revealed by the thematic analysis.

Table 5. Theme 2 as revealed by the data analysis

Theme 2: Writing in English has some benefits.	
Codes	f
1. It is a way of self-expression.	11
2. It helps you to let off steam.	5
3. It improves your vocabulary.	4
4. It improves your English.	3
5. It improves your grammar.	2
6. It is a tool to communicate your knowledge.	2
7. It is a tool to test what you know.	1
8. It helps you learn.	1

As Table 5 shows, writing in English was considered to bring about some benefits. The findings related to the benefits that are brought about by writing are its being a means of self-expression (f=11), a way to let off steam (f=5), a means to develop lexical knowledge (f=4), a means to develop English as a foreign language (f=3), a way to develop grammar (f=2), a tool to relay information (f=2), a tool to reflect on (f=1) and a means to keep on learning (f=1).

Among the benefits that were listed in the above table, the most frequently reported gain by the participants was the feature of writing providing a way for self-expression. For instance, P78 stated that she regarded writing as a way to project her inner world.

P78: Opening our inner world to others because writing is the best way to express ourselves. It gives us an opportunity to find best ways to speak our mind freely. And it gives immortality to our thoughts. The words we speak fades away but the things we write stays with us forever.

P33 also reported that writing allowed her to express himself easily and freely: 'Writing to your love because for me writing is the way to tell your feelings comfortably'.

Among the benefits that come along with writing, its soothing effect was also reported by the participants as follows:

P68: Being in wonderland because when I write I feel I am the happiest person in the world.

P7: Meditation because you can express your feeling another language and you feel that different people can understand yours. And this way you can feel relaxed.

It is clear from the above quotes that students regard writing as a rewarding skill since it contributes to their grammatical knowledge and, grammatical competence, lexical knowledge. Besides, it is evident from the findings that students view writing as a means to relax and express themselves clearly and comfortably.

Regarding the personal judgments about writing skills, the analysis revealed that the participants had diverse views. As Table 6 demonstrates, some participants regarded writing as a positive endeavor, whereas others approached this skill cautiously.

Table 6. Theme 3 as revealed by the data analysis

Theme 3: Writing in English is a skill which is perceived differently.	
Codes	f
1. It is creative.	14
2. It is challenging.	9
3. It is different.	8
4. It is fun.	5
5. It is limitless.	5
6. It is boring.	2
7. It is easy.	2
8. It is permanent.	1

It is significant that among the interviewed participants, 14 of them stated that they found this skill creative. For example, P25 compared writing to drawing a picture: 'Drawing a picture because you create new things by using your ability and creativity'. P38 interestingly associated writing skill with making a cake and creating a new end product: 'Making a cake because you blend lots of your knowledge and create new things'.

9 of the participants also reported that they viewed writing as a challenging skill. Interestingly, one participant even considered writing as struggling inside a labyrinth to reach the exit.

P57: Travelling in a labyrinth because we get lost while writing in English. There are many words, and you can't find suitable one. Your pen is walking about among words, vocabulary, and phrases.

Besides, P63 made an analogy between writing and swimming in the ocean by adding that writing is the most challenging of all skills in that it embodies some difficulties, particularly academic writing.

P63: Swimming in the ocean because writing is a productive skill and, in my opinion, it is the most challenging skill among four basic language skills. While writing in English it is hard to write especially in academic language, so it is like swimming in the ocean.

Additionally, 8 of the participants highlighted the difference between this skill compared to other skills. For instance, P24 compared writing to art by highlighting the need to use some words and phrases when writing, and she added that these were the words and phrases that she would not use in her daily life. P34 deemed writing as a different skill among others since writing is inherently formal and that she emphasized the need to be more careful when writing: 'because English is a foreign language for me and whatever I write it feels like it is very formal, and it makes me more careful.'

Finally, regarding the perceptions of prospective EFL teachers toward writing, 5 of them found it fun, and the other 5 participants believed that writing was a skill that knew no limits. Only 2 of the participants, however, believed that writing was a boring skill, probably because of the conventions and rules that come together with writing.

Table 7 below demonstrates the participants' views concerning the process aspect of writing. It is important to note that prospective EFL teachers regard writing as a process where learners must do much practice to write well.

Table 7. Theme 4 as revealed by the data analysis

Theme 4: It is a process to learn how to write in English.	
Codes	f
1. At first, it is hard but gets easier as you practice.	3
2. At first, it is easy but gets more difficult as you progress.	2

However, some participants (F=3) deemed writing a process through which a learner improves as they do practice and that the process becomes manageable. For instance, P30 believes that writing gets easier as one goes on writing, just like a miner digs a hole underground. The first hole might be complicated; however, as the miner keeps digging, s/he will achieve the desired outcome gradually:

P30: Working like a miner because it is really struggling job and hard to manage but when you put the first hole on the stone wall, your job will get easier and easier, and you accomplish gradually.

On the other hand, some participants point out that the writing process is more straightforward at the beginning yet becomes more complex as they progress. They probably refer to academic writing and the conventions that accompany it, like drafting and evaluation.

P20: Solving math because English language has a kind of grammar that is easy for beginners, difficult for experts. As you go deeper it gets so complicated that you don't know what to do.

Finally, Table 8 demonstrates the participants' views about the requirements that writing embodies in itself. Among the requirements that were listed to write well in English, being attentive (f=5) had the highest frequency.

Table 8. Theme 5 as revealed by the data analysis

Theme 5: There are some requirements to write well in English.	
Codes	f
1. You need to be attentive.	5
2. You need to practice.	4
3. You need imagination.	3
4. You need to put in effort.	2
5. You need patience.	1

P59, for instance, interestingly pointed out that writing was similar to knitting in that one needs to pay attention when writing just as one knits to have a good end product: 'Knitting because knitting requires attention but if we make a fault our product may be out of order.' P91 emphasized the need to be watchful when writing as a quality controller if there were some mistakes during the writing. These mistakes need to be attended to: 'If you are an absent-minded person, you may make so many mistakes in your essay. So, you need to be like a quality controller while you are writing in English'.

Four of the participants also stated that writing is a skill that needs to be practiced. In this respect, P53, for instance, maintained that writing skills and doing sports are alike since one needs to practice all the time to get better. P15 also reported that writing was similar to being a journalist in that, just as a journalist does, a student also must try to write more to become qualified: '...you should try to write more and get qualified'. The need to practice (f=4), imagination (f=3), the need to make an effort (f=2) and patience (f=1) were other codes as revealed by the analysis.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative study aimed to explore how prospective EFL teachers perceived the writing skill through metaphors. More than 50 metaphors were created out of 100 participants about the writing skill in English. The fact that participants created many metaphors could be associated with the importance they attach to writing as a concept and a language skill and their perceptions about writing as a complex skill that embodies many features from various angles.

The metaphors that prospective EFL teachers created were organized under five main categories: writing with its different definitions, the benefits of writing in L2, various perceptions regarding writing, writing as a process and the requirements to write well in a foreign language. When the themes of the analysis are scrutinized, it is evident that prospective EFL teachers have different perceptions, at times conflicting, regarding the writing skill in a foreign language.

Since metaphor in a foreign language could provide us with the opportunity to see one thing in terms of another, it enables us to make a connection between the metaphorical sense of the concept that is considered and the senses of another concept in other domains as an equivalent; thus, allowing us to extend the sense for the concept that is under consideration. Within the body of this research, the metaphorical senses of the writing skill in a target language were investigated, and the perceptions of prospective EFL teachers were unearthed. As writing skill is perceived and interpreted differently by prospective EFL teachers as well as EFL teachers who are currently teaching at various institutions, it is essential to address these perspectives to be able to deal with writing in a target language with all its social, cognitive, and emotional aspects and to educating foreign language learners in terms of the achievement of this highly complicated skill.

This study revealed that writing skill is mostly perceived as a construction process by prospective EFL teachers in which they merged different components. Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997) maintain that writing embodies

a social and an affective aspect, which are mostly neglected in research related to writing. Moreover, during a writing process any writer is supposed to act out through an awareness of the expectations of their readers and revise the manuscript again and again until final submission phase. It is also a socio-cognitive process in which the writer must be enthusiastic to spare enough time and effort to create a written material. Moreover, it was indicated within this study that writing is a difficult process although it gets easier by practice. From this standpoint, it is clear that writing is a constructive, yet a challenging process in which writers must consider some rules as demonstrated by the participants in this study.

The findings revealed that prospective EFL teachers had various perceptions regarding writing skills. The majority of the participants emphasized the constructive role of writing, and the constructivist perspective of learning offers some significant pedagogical advantages. The participants' comparisons of writing to knitting or doing a puzzle reflect the significance of previous knowledge and the influence of this background on learners' interpretations of new information. As learning is situational and contextual (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991), the situations where learners write and how they grasp new information about writing will eventually affect their writing skills and how they transfer their new knowledge to new situations. Accordingly, it is essential to shedding light on how prospective EFL teachers regard writing in that they will be the agents to put this information into practice in the future. Since most participants regard writing as a process of knowledge construction, their evaluation processes will naturally be influenced owing to their mindset about writing. For instance, prospective EFL teachers may be encouraged to replace traditional writing tests with assessment techniques. They attend to the writing process and the learning process rather than adopt a surface approach (Tynjälä, 1998, p. 211).

Sutherland and Topping (1999) maintain that writing process requires planning, thinking, discussing, and feedback just as the participants emphasized the metacognitive aspect of writing through an emphasis on planning stage within the body of this research. Scrutinizing the metaphors as revealed by the participants, the researcher brought the planned aspect of writing into light along with its other features like a tool for self-reflection and a way to relax and express feelings. In this respect, it is also worth to note that writing as a productive skill is composed of cognitive and affective aspects (Koksal, 2001). However, some participants regarded the act of writing as 'drawing a picture' and with this metaphor they may refer to the mechanistic aspect of writing although they suggest that creativity is important. Tandy and Howell (2008) maintain that student need more than mechanistic skills to succeed in writing. In addition to some mechanic skills, cognitive and visual-perceptual skills are also required to write well in any writing process (Vinter & Chartrel, 2010).

Among the listed metaphors, it is also essential to state that writing is considered a process where writers narrate their thoughts, express themselves in ways they would not be able to otherwise, and communicate with other people. As Graham and Harris (2000) suggest, writing is a means to express feelings, learn, and communicate. Since some participants stated that they regarded writing as a way to express themselves, it is confident that they realized the practical side of the writing process. They explicitly reported that they regarded writing as a creative, challenging, and different task.

Moreover, according to Erdogan and Erdogan's (2013) study, some students deemed writing tedious, tiring, and even sickening. Some of the participants in this study also regarded writing as a dull and demanding activity. These negative attitudes may derive from the complex nature of the writing process itself. Because writing will pose some other acts like reading, thinking about the writing process and accurately putting thoughts into words and phrases, some students might avoid writing (Ungan, 2007).

6. Educational Implications

It is clear from the findings that some participants viewed writing as a bridge to help them improve in other components of the language, such as grammar and vocabulary. Thus, the unwillingness may directly derive from the feeling of language-related insufficiency. Graham, Berninger, and Abbott (2012) mentioned that negative perceptions need to be fixed. The nature of these negative attitudes must be examined properly to help learners proceed in writing. One participant in this study also reported that writing requires patience on the part of the learners. In line with this finding, Bruning and Horn (2000) also note that writing is the process which embodies learning in itself and that learners should be patient, determined and flexible in their writing endeavours. It is understood that prospective EFL teachers are aware of the need to practice more to improve and improve writing in English.

Overall, the majority of the participants regarded writing as different, creative, fun, and joyful. The positive feelings may also derive from the previous writing activities or writing classes. It is worth mentioning that the participants seem to be aware of the importance and necessity of writing as a skill in the language learning

process. Raising awareness of prospective EFL teachers regarding the complicated nature of the writing process, writing strategies, and deeper thinking is necessary. Since writing is a combination of cognitive skills, metacognitive skills, and the ability to organize, analyze, and evaluate (Almaden, 2006; Benjamin, 2005; Canady, 2008; Sharples, 2003) it is essential for language teaching programs and professionals to make language teachers more understanding about the nature of writing so that they can help the future generation of learners to be aware of these processes rather than just performing. Learners need to be sensitive to the writing process requirements, and they need to be flexible. Performing well in terms of writing is essential but not enough to improve writing instruction and motivate learners (Tandy and Howell, 2008).

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