TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES ON TEACHING WRITING: THE CASE OF AN EFL TEACHER AT BEGIMEDER ACADEMY, ETHIOPIA

Gebrie Mulualem (M.Ed. in TEFL)

University of Gondar
College of Social Sciences and the Humanities
Department of English Language and Literature
Gondar, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to investigate and to compare an EFL teacher's perceptions and classroom practices of teaching writing at Begimeder Academy. A teacher was selected based on available sampling. Pre-observation interview was conducted to know teacher's perceptions about teaching writing. Two observations sessions were held to see the teacher actual practices. Moreover, post-observation interview was conducted to realize the relationship between teachers' perceptions and classroom practices. The data were analyzed qualitatively through codification and theme development. The findings of the study indicated that the teacher was not very much aware of his perceptions regarding teaching writing. Hence, the overall findings revealed that teacher's perceptions converged with his practices though there are some instances of divergence.

Keywords*: Perception, classroom practices, teaching writing*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In the age of globalization, writing has become an indispensable skill for individuals. Ferede *etal*. (2012) suggests that students' language is largely evaluated by their ability to write down their thought on paper. It is often suggested that the writing skill is getting renewed focus due to its importance in education and research. Likewise, Hyland (2004:09) publicized that ″Writing is a way to share personal meanings. It means that, people construct their own views on a particular topic and share their views on that certain topic to the other in a written form understandably and acceptably.″ Regarding language teacher enactment, Burns and Siegel (2018) also suggested that the good writing teacher is one who can use attractive and well-written culturally relevant topics, perhaps selected in consultation with the students themselves.

As to Nunan (2015:77), "Writing is not only a tool for communication but also an instrument for intellectual growth and development." Supporting Nunan, Brown (2001:335) also stated that "writing is a written product of thinking, drafting, and revising that requires specialized skill on how to generate ideas, how to recognize them coherently, how to use discourse makers and rhetorical conventional to put them cohesively into a written text, how to revise a text for clear meanings, and how to produce a final product." He also added that ″writing is like a swimming.″ When people want to able swimming, they must have an instructor to show them the basics ways to swim. After they get the basic skill of swimming, they will develop their swimming ability based on their styles. It is similar with writing. At the first time, there will be teachers who guide the students to write. After the students understand about that, they will try to develop their writing according to their own style. It is impossible to be able to write effectively without any sufficient practices (ibid: 334).

However, the practical situation of teaching writing seems to be below the required level in Ethiopia (Ferede *etal,* 2012). This problem can partly be ascribed to teachers' failure to deliver writing lessons included in English textbooks either not covered at all or not taught effectively since teachers perceive that writing is not as important as listening, speaking, reading, grammar and vocabulary (Alamrew, 2005). It could also be associated with teachers' perception and practices about teaching writing.

Resounding Alamrew's ideas, Noe (2004) also revealed that if English language teachers give less attention to writing due to their perception that writing is less important and that teaching writing is a difficult task, this can adversely affect their teaching. This implies that teachers' perception determines their practice (Smith, 2001).

Therefore, it is crucial to explore teacher's perceptions and practices of teaching writing at Begimeder Academy, Ethiopia.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

English language ability in writing plays a great role in both contemporary academic and future careers. Hence, the key role of English language ability in writing has an important and encouraging impact on the academic achievement. This is because the ability to write various genres of writing effectively through English is becoming increasingly important in our global community (Weigle, 2002). In addition, "writing is an essential component of thinking and learning in school context, and writing tasks are a crucial tool for intellectual and social development." (Bruning and Horn, 2000:30).

However, many researchers and scholars notice that despite writing being a very important form of expression and communication, teaching tends to be a much neglected part of the language program in a foreign languages (Badger and White, 2000). Teachers in primary and secondary schools and even in colleges and universities lack the proficiency to teach well and become role-models (Fisher and Swindells, 1998). Regarding this, there are also local studies which confirm this problem. For example, researches disclosed that the teaching of writing is ineffective and the writing performance of the students is poor (Geremew, 1999, and Desalegn, 2011). As noted by Solomon (2004), one of the major weaknesses of Ethiopian students at different levels is writing in English. More importantly, Alamirew (2005: 228) also depicted two significant reasons for the ineffectiveness of students' writing. First, teachers do not give much emphasis to the teaching of writing although they seem to have the knowledge about the teaching-learning process of writing skills. Second, it could also be related to the unsuitability of methods adopted. Thus, for the students, writing is a form of academic torture, and for many educators, teaching it is a kind of professional agony because writing is usually considered as a boring task, and a lonely job.

As far as the researcher's reading is concerned, the present study differs from the aforementioned local studies. Firstly, it differs from Geremew's (1999) and Desalegne's (2011) studies in that Geremew and Desalegne conducted their work on requirements in writing for an academic purpose, and the practice of teaching writing skills at universities ;however, this study is on primary school. Secondly, it goes in difference with Alamirew's (2005) study in that Alamirew conducted his study on perception of writing, writing instruction and students' writing performance; however, this study comprised teacher's

perception and practice of teaching writing. On account of these, it was believed that there is a gap which has not been studied.

It was, thus, crucial to conduct research on EFL teacher's perceptions and classroom practices in teaching writing. For the sake of arriving at an objective decision, this research attempted to answer the following key research questions:

1. How does EFL teacher perceive teaching writing?

2. How does EFL teacher teach writing?

3. What is the relationship between EFL teacher's perception and actual classroom practices in teaching writing?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to make an exploration on teacher's perceptions and classroom practices at Begimeder Academy, Ethiopia. More specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Investigate teacher's perceptions of teaching writing.

2. Examine teacher's practices of teaching writing.

3. Compare the relationship between EFL teacher's perception and actual classroom practices in teaching writing.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Theoretical Underpinnings

2.1.1 Teaching Writing and its Importance

As stated by Harmer (2004:31), teaching writing is different from teaching other skills it is because "the nature of the writing process", "the need for accuracy in writing", and "the mental process that a student goes through when writing". According to Coffin et al. (2003: 20), "writing is as an evaluation process, helping to promote critical thinking, and developing the students' communication and professionalism. Those purposes can be used based on the need of the students in the classroom in related to the different types of the writing, different audiences, and different kind of languages used in the writing. As to the importance of writing, Harmer (2004:31-33) publicized that "Writing is helpful to encourage students to focus on accurate language use because they think as they write, and to prepare some other activities such as language practice, acting out, or speaking, dictation, and the like." Therefore, we no longer have to ask ourselves whether writing is a good thing or not. It is as a fundamental right.

Sokolik (2003) as cited in Nunan (2003), there are four basic principles for teaching writing: (1) understand your students' reasons for writing (make sure there is a match between what the student, the teacher and the curriculum demand); (2) provide many opportunities for students to write (practice as much and as many varied types of writing as possible, like if you are learning a sport/new skill); (3) make feedback helpful and meaningful (provide varied constructive comment on both content and code, develop students' self-awareness/criticism); and (4) clarify the evaluation procedures in operation (where the emphasis lies: creativity? grammatical accuracy? format? recently taught items? accuracy of spelling/punctuation?

2.1.2 Approaches to Teaching Writing

As to theories to the teaching of writing, Hyland (2004), Harmer (2004), and Badge and White (2000), and Barkus (2003) categorized into three. They are product approach, process approach, and genre-based approach. As a matter of fact, an effective writing teacher should be aware of the historical approaches of writing and be able to use them at the appropriate times.

A. The Product Approach

The product approach is a form focused approach. It characterized by a focus on linguistic knowledge, including the appropriate use of vocabulary, grammatical rules and cohesive devices and on rhetorical organization of texts (Harmer, 2004). In essence, the product approach sees writing as a coherent arrangement of words, clauses, and sentences, structured according to a system of rules (Hyland, 2003:3). Accuracy and clear exposition are considered the main standard for good writing. He says that this view of writing regards writing as a product of writers "control over grammar and vocabulary." The way of developing one's skill of writing, Hyland (2003) explains, is through manipulating and imitating a given text through exercises such as filling the blanks, completion of sentences, transforming of tenses or personal pronouns and other activities.

In this approach the emphasis is on the end product and not on the process which occur to create the product. Since final products are the concerns of this approach, the activities of writing are also controlled by the teachers. However, focusing mainly on forms is not enough to enhance the writing skills of the learners (Hyland, 2003).

B. The Process Approach

In the mid-1970s, the process approach began to replace the product approach which identifies four stages in writing: (1) prewriting, (2) composing/drafting, (3) revising, and (4) editing (Hyland, 2008). The process approach has changed the nature of the writing classroom into a collaborative workshop environment within which students, with ample time and minimal interference of the teacher, can work through their composing process. Harmer (2004) points out that the process approach emphasis is not on product but on the process as such. The writer has to ask questions of the purpose for their writing and who the audience is, and adds questions of how to manage to convey appropriate message in an appropriate way.

Brown (2004:335) mentioned list of typical writing activities to be done in the process approach: (1) focus on the process of writing that leads to the final written products, (2) help student writers to understand their own composing process, (3) help them to build repertoires of strategies for prewriting, drafting, and rewriting, (4) give students time to write and rewrite, (5) let students discover what they want to say as they write, (6) give students feedback throughout the composing process not just on the final product, and (7) include individual conferences between teacher and student during the process of composition.

As an addition, Badge and White (2000) states that there are a number of stages that the students will experience in composing a piece of writing work namely prewriting, drafting, revising and editing. Each stage in the process of writing, thus, will work like a wheel to help the students in composing the text and can be shown with the diagram as follows.
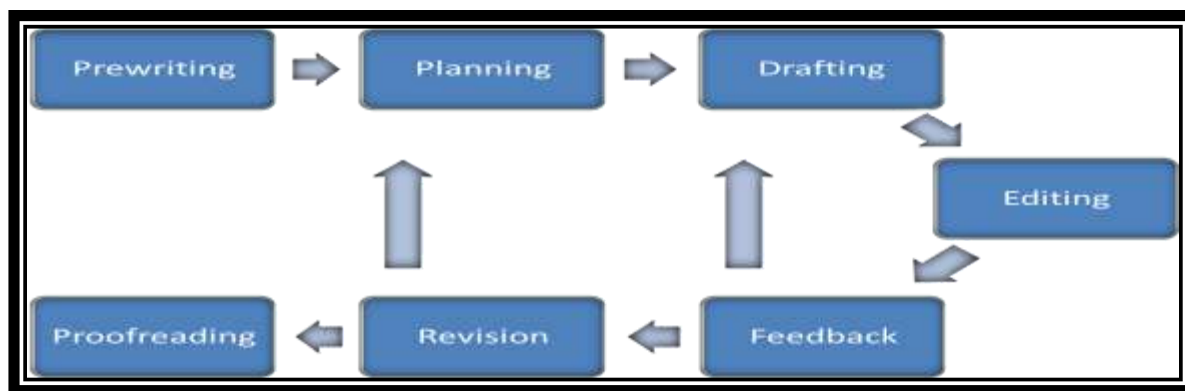

Figure 1:   Hyland, 2008:100

C. The Genre Approach

In the 1980s, the genre approach became popular along with the notion that student writers could benefit from studying different types of written texts. In the genre approach, the knowledge of language is intimately attached to a social purpose, and more focus is on the viewpoint of the reader than on that of the writer. Writing is mostly viewed as the students' reproduction of text based on the genre offered by the teacher. It is also believed that learning takes place through imitation and exploration of different kinds of models. Accordingly, learners should be exposed to many examples of the same genre to develop their ability to write a particular genre. Through exposure to similar texts, students can detect the specialized configurations of that genre, and they also can activate their memories of prior reading

or writing experiences whenever they encounter the task of creating a new piece in a familiar genre (Badger and White, 2000:155-156).

When it comes to explaining writing development in the genre approach, Hammond (1992, as cited in Burns, 2001:202) proposed "a wheel model of a teaching learning cycle having three phases: modeling, joint negotiation of text by learners and teacher, and the independent construction of texts by learners". Modeling, Hammond noted, is the time when the target genre that students should construct is introduced to the students. At this stage, discussion focuses on the educational and social function of the genre, and analysis focuses on the text structure and language. Joint negotiation of text refers to the stage when learners carry out exercises which manipulate relevant language forms. It fosters a negotiating process between the teacher and the students. It involves reading, research, and disseminating information, and the text of the genre is dependent on those activities. The independent construction of texts is the final phase; in which learners produce actual texts through activities such as choosing a topic, researching, and writing (ibid: 202). The genre approach is, thus, more effective for learners to advance their writing skills in a second language than the process approach since the model helps free students from their severe worries over writing.

Regarding the advantages of genre-based writing instruction, Hyland (2004) summarizes as: *explicit* (makes clear what is to be learned to facilitate the acquisition of writing skills); *systematic* (provides a coherent framework for focusing on both language and contexts); *needs-based* (ensures that course objectives and content are derived from students' needs; *supportive* (gives teacher a central role in scaffolding student learning and creativity; *empowering* (provides access to the patterns and possibilities of variation in valued texts); *critical* (provides the resources for students to understand and challenge valued discourses); and *consciousness raising* (increases teacher awareness of texts and confidently advise students on their writing (Hyland 2004: 10-11).

2.1.3 Corrective Feedback in Writing

Many teachers are concerned about effective ways of assisting their students with improving accuracy in their writing. This is because teachers encounter the same errors recurring in student writing even after a number of careful checking, correcting, and feedback cycles. An increasing number of studies have investigated the role of corrective feedback (CF) in teaching writing, which is defined as the information provided by the teacher, both directly and indirectly, on learners' non-target-like usage in their writing and is made with the intention of correcting and prompting revision of initial language use (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). Within discussions of the use of CF in teaching writing, the distinction between direct feedback (DF) and indirect feedback (IDF) has received much attention in both classroom practice and research. DF is the provision of explicit target-like linguistic forms to correct errors made

by students (Ferris, 2003). On the other hand, IDF consists of a teacher's feedback provided through the use of underlining, circles, codes, or other marks to indicate errors in students' writing. In IDF, the correct forms are not provided by the teacher; instead, learners are responsible for self-revising, self-editing, and correcting the errors based on the teacher's codes (Bitchener, 2008).

2.2 Previous Global and Local Empirical Studies on Teaching Writing

Studies on writing instruction in primary education around the world pinpointed three main problems: (a) evidence-based writing practices are used infrequently (Brindle *et al*., 2016; and Gilbert and Graham, 2010), (b) students spend little time to writing or being taught how to write (Brindle et al., 2016; Gilbert and Graham, 2010; and Hsiang and Graham, 2016), and (c) many teachers feel not having the necessary equipment or skills to teach writing (Brindle *et al*., 2016; and Gilbert and Graham, 2010). Likewise, Henkens (2010) interviewed teachers and observed writing lessons in primary schools and reported that writing was not taught properly in two-thirds of the schools. Little or no attention was paid to the writing process, collaborative writing, or text revision. Also, students were not provided with targeted feedback on their texts or writing processes. In addition, little time was spent on writing lessons. The teachers were not adequately prepared to teach writing, and concluded that writing education and professionalization did not seem to be considered a priority.

Kuhlemeier *et al*. (2013) employed questionnaire on classroom practice through teacher and student. The results indicated that writing received less attention than other aspects of the language curriculum: teachers spent on average 18% of the available language curriculum time on writing, whereas 26% of the time was spent on reading, and 28% on spelling. Similarly, Grisham and Wolsey (2011) found that candidates in teacher education were in a problem of learning how to teach writing because of the higher emphasis that was put on reading instruction. With the great emphasis put on reading during teacher education programs, teachers often lack the confidence in teaching writing to their students.

Franssen and Aarnoutse (2003) observed 30 writing lessons taught by 10 primary school teachers in grades 4 and 5 and interviewed these teachers. The result showed that the lessons were strongly teacher-oriented emphasizing on prewriting activities, and discussion of sample texts. However, the peer interaction, collaborative writing, or peer feedback were rarely observed. Moreover, revision and reflection hardly took place.

As an addition, Hidayati (2018) conducted a study on teaching writing to EFL learners using structured interview. The findings showed that teachers are confronted with internal factors (linguistic competence, native language interference, motivation and reading habits of the learners) and external ones (the class condition, aids available for teaching writing and the availability of time).

Another study conducted by Rietdijk, *et al.* (2018) also indicated that the communicative aspects of writing, the writing process, teaching strategies, and following students' writing development were insufficiently implemented. The allocated learning time was also insufficient but the realized learning time and the extent to which teachers promoted active learning were satisfactory, providing a strong basis for curricular improvement. Several relations were found between teachers' classroom practices, learning time, and teachers' beliefs in the domain of writing instruction.

Some local researchers have conducted studies on students' perception and practice of writing in Ethiopian context. For example, Abiy (2015), mainly concerned on peer-led writing. His finding shows that the fixed one-to-five group discussion enhanced students writing even though students depend on their group leaders and lack confidence to engage in writing tasks. Eskedar (2014) study on the investigation of the practice of teaching writing at secondary level and her finding shows that the teaching of writing has shown some improvement mainly from product approach to process approach and she claimed on the actual classroom practice of all the steps of stages are not fully applied.

More importantly, Teshome (2007) studied on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of the writing skills at Assela College of teachers. And his findings showed that the students composing skills are found very weak. The perception of the students about their way of learning writing and their teachers' way of teaching was found odd with their actual performance.

This study paper, thus, was mainly different from the local studies that it tried to focus on teacher's perception and practice of teaching writing: The case of an EFL Teacher at Begimeder Academy, Ethiopia.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

3.1 Research Method

As to Creswell (2013:48), qualitative research allows the study of the phenomenon through direct interaction with the research participants in their natural settings. Due to this rationale, the researcher employed the qualitative design subjected to case study to explore EFL teacher's perceptions, actual classroom practices and the congruence of perceptions-practices in teaching writing.

3.2 Research Site and the Participants

To select the targeted school, Begaimeder Academy, and the participant (Grade7 English teacher) for the study, the researcher employed available/access sampling technique (Kothari, 2004). The researcher also made discussion with the school principals and subject teacher about the purpose of the study. And then gave pseudonym for the assigned teacher intended for confidentiality.

3.3 Data Gathering Tools and Procedures

A multi-method approach to data collection was deemed suitable. The data presented in this study comprise both naturally occurring data, unstructured observations and generated data, pre- and post-observation interviews. The data collection process extended to two days and was conducted in three separate stages as shown below.
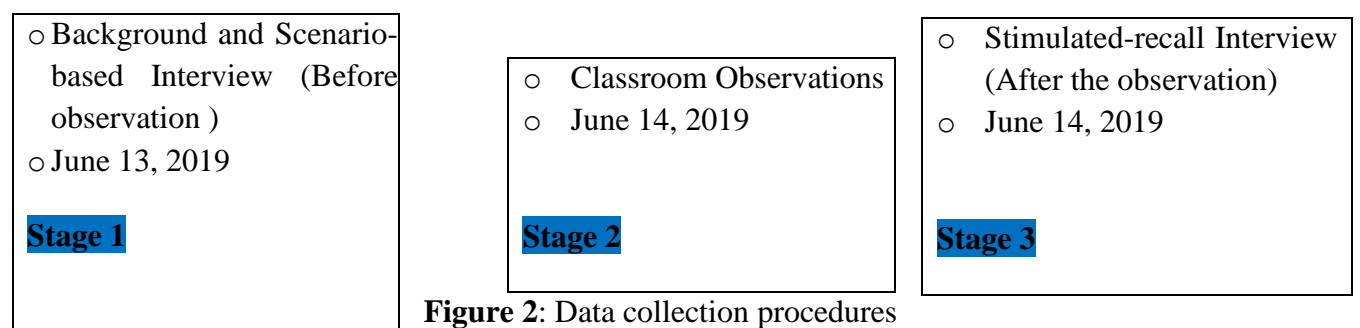
o Background and Scenario-based Interview (Before observation) o June 13, 2019 **Stage 1**	o Classroom Observations o June 14, 2019 **Stage 2**	o Stimulated-recall Interview (After the observation) o June 14, 2019 **Stage 3**

Figure 2: Data collection procedures

Overall, the teacher was first interviewed for 10 minutes (background and scenario-based interviews) to identify his stated perceptions about teaching writing. This was followed by lesson observations (two lessons, 7 A and B for 40 minutes) and stimulated-recall session for 10 minutes to compare what the teacher perceived and actually practiced. All the data are videotaped for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyze the videotaped data obtained from the interviews and classroom observation, the researcher employed qualitative analysis subjected to codification and themes development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the data obtained from the pre-observation interview, unstructured classroom practice and post-observation interview were discussed thoroughly.

4.1.1 Analysis of Pre-observation Interview

Regarding perceptions about the nature of writing, the key informant said that teaching writing was more challenging than teaching grammar, vocabulary, reading and others. He also added that teaching writing requires more effort and regular practices. Regarding this, Noe (2004) and Brown (2001) also revealed that teaching writing is a difficult task and needs sufficient practices.

Pertaining to preferred approaches in teaching writing, the teacher explained that he knows nothing about product, process or genre concepts throughout his experiences. On the other hand, Hyland (2004), Harmer (2004), and Badge and White (2000), and Barkus (2003) suggested that an effective writing teacher should be aware of the historical approaches of writing (product, process or genre) and be able to use them at the appropriate times. He leaned to teach writing through guided approach than free approach. On the other hand, the teachers perceived that free writing is more effective for teaching writing.

As to views related to feedback, the key informant perceived that feedback provision is an important tool for developing writing skill though time-consuming. He had a habit of providing direct feedback on grammar, punctuation, capitalization and spelling errors that students committed. Conversely, Bitchener (2008) publicized that provision of indirect feedback through the use of underlining, circles, codes, or other marks to indicate errors in students' writing is advisable. He added that learners are responsible for self-revising, self-editing, and correcting the errors based on the teacher's codes.

4.1.2 Analysis of Actual Classroom Practices

This part of the analysis presents the situations of the classrooms observed focusing mainly identifying the limitations that was observed in the two classes,7 A and B, in light of teaching writing.

From the two observations conducted, it is possible to deduce that there was no attempt to activate students' prior knowledge and to connect the previous learned writing topic with the new one. The teacher dominated the class explaining the basic feature of expository paragraph writing. Conversely, Sokolik (2003) as cited in Nunan (2003) publicized that teaching writing provide many opportunities for students to write. There was inconsistency between model paragraph provision and lesson presentation. The lesson delivery was dominated by product approach. Henkens (2010) also noted that little or no attention was paid to the writing process, collaborative writing, or text revision.

In the two observation sessions, ample time was not given for the students to proofread errors related to spelling, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, word simplicity and organization by themselves or peers. Consistently, Bergh, et al. (2018) indicated that the allocated learning time for writing was also

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insufficient. Three students are given the opportunity to read their written works for the whole class devoid of immediate comments from the teacher. Likewise, students were not provided with targeted feedback on their texts or writing processes (Henkens, 2010).

4.1.3 Analysis of Post-observation Interview

This section compares teacher's stated perceptions about teaching writing and his observed classroom practices. In general, teacher's perceptions converged with his practices though there are some instances of divergence.

In terms of nature of writing, the teacher expressed that teaching writing was more challenging and received less attention as compared to teaching other language skills and this view was practically observed in the two sessions. Supporting this, Kuhlemeier et al. (2013) found that writing received less emphasis than other aspects of language skills. He also believed that teaching writing requires more effort and regular practices; however, this belief was not practical in the two sessions.

With regard to writing approach preference, the teacher seemed to have awareness problem on product, process or genre concepts; nonetheless, product approach was observed in the two sessions unknowingly. To the contrary, Eskedar (2014) found that the teaching of writing has shown some improvement mainly from product approach to process approach. Regarding this, research findings suggest writing to be a combination of process and product (Sokolik, 2003). Moreover, Badger and White (2000:159) suggests the application of an eclectic approach to the teaching of writing, by synthesizing the strength of the process and genre approaches.

Relating to feedback, the teacher perceived that it is an important tool for developing writing skill. Thus, the habit of providing direct feedback on grammar, punctuation, capitalization and spelling errors that students committed was seen in the two sessions. However, Sokolik (2003) as cited in Nunan (2003) proposed that teaching writing makes feedback meaningful and develop students' self-awareness.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This study explored and compared an EFL teacher perceptions and actual instructional practices of teaching writing at Begimeder Academy, Ethiopia. The findings indicated that the teacher was not very much aware of his perceptions regarding teaching writing but from the interviews it could be deduced that his perceptions converged with his practices which was checked through observations though there was some instances of divergence among his perceptions, practices and what the contemporary literatures suggest about the best way to teach writing.

5.2 Implications

Based on the results obtained and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations can be put forward:

- It is necessary that the teacher need to give equal attention to writing as he gives to reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary in his instruction.
- The teacher needs to provide the students with adequate time and opportunity for frequent practice for developing effective writing skill.
- Intensive effort is required to contextualize approach of teaching writing to minimize the gap between stated perceptions and classroom practice.
- The teacher should also try his best to internalize this claimed perceptions, develop practical skills, and possess courage and determination to put his perceptions.

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