

# Teaching Elementary ESL Writing in Canada: Teacher Preparedness and Challenges

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*Writing is an important skill for children's academic success, underlining the need for effective ESL writing instruction in the elementary classroom. However, there is a paucity of research on elementary ESL writing instruction in Canada. Specifically, we have little understanding about the pedagogical practices in this context. To fill this gap, this article reports on findings of a study that investigated (a) factors that influence teacher preparedness, and (b) challenges that teachers encounter in teaching ESL writing. Eight elementary teachers, each with at least three years of teaching experience, participated in the study. Data were collected from interviews and online surveys. Findings suggest that teacher preparedness was affected by four factors: (a) background knowledge of teaching ESL writing, (b) professional learning opportunities, (c) self-learning and experience as a teacher, and (d) collaboration, mentorship, and support for teachers. The challenges teachers encountered were grouped into five categories: (a) making sense of the writing curriculum, (b) finding relevant resources, (c) lack of time, (d) difficulty providing feedback, and (e) parental involvement at home. Drawing on these findings, the article discusses implications and recommendations for ESL writing instruction in the elementary classroom.*

*L'écriture est une compétence importante pour la réussite éducative des enfants, ce qui souligne la nécessité d'un enseignement efficace de l'écriture en anglais langue seconde (ALS) dans les classes du primaire. Cependant, peu d'études ont examiné l'enseignement de l'écriture en ALS au primaire dans le contexte canadien et plus spécifiquement, nous avons peu d'informations sur les pratiques pédagogiques mises en place. Afin de combler ce manque, cet article rapporte les résultats d'une étude portant sur (a) les facteurs qui influencent la préparation des enseignants et (b) les défis rencontrés lors de l'enseignement de l'écriture en ALS. Huit enseignants du primaire, ayant chacun au moins trois ans d'expérience en enseignement, ont participé à l'étude. Les données ont été collectées à l'aide d'entrevues et de questionnaires en ligne. Les résultats suggèrent que la préparation des enseignants est influencée par quatre facteurs : (a) les connaissances antérieures sur l'enseignement de l'écriture en ALS, (b) les opportunités de formation continue, (c) l'autoapprentissage et l'expérience en enseignement, et (d) la collaboration, le mentorat et le soutien aux enseignants. Quant aux difficultés rencontrées par les enseignants, elles ont été regroupées en cinq catégories : (a) la compréhension du programme d'enseignement de l'écriture, (b) la recherche de ressources pertinentes, (c) le manque de temps, (d) la difficulté à fournir de la rétroaction, et (e) l'implication des parents à la maison. En s'appuyant sur*

*ces résultats, l'article discute des implications et des recommandations pour l'enseignement de l'écriture en ALS dans les classes du primaire.*

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*Keywords:* elementary, ESL writing, teacher challenges, teacher preparedness, writing literacy

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Although writing is considered to be a fundamental literacy skill for children's academic success (e.g., Cutler & Graham 2008; Fitts et al., 2016; Graham, 2019), there is a paucity of research on English as a Second Language (ESL) children's writing (Flinspach et al., 2010). In particular, we know little about pedagogical practices in K–6 ESL writing classrooms. Research on this topic is scarce (e.g., Ortmeier-Hooper & Enright, 2011), while research in this area in Canada is almost non-existent, leaving a gap in our understanding about how prepared teachers feel and the challenges they face in teaching ESL writing.

The importance of effective ESL writing instruction at the elementary level cannot be overemphasized, especially in Canada, where English Language Learners (ELLs) constitute a high percentage of students in the classroom. Recent reports show that 24% of students in public schools and 21% of students in Catholic schools in Edmonton, Alberta, are ELLs (Zabjek, 2015). In Calgary, there has been a significant rise in the number of ELLs as well, from 26.4% in 2011 to 28.7% in 2015 (Ferguson, 2016). According to the latest data, approximately 25% of the students attending schools in the Calgary Board of Education are identified as ELLs (Calgary Board of Education, 2021). The Vancouver School Board in British Columbia reported that 60% of students were registered as ELLs in 2017, whereas the Durham District School Board in Ontario reported that their ELL student numbers doubled between fall 2014 and fall 2018 (see Bhowmik & Kim, 2021). Smaller cities in Canada have also seen a similar trend of increased ELL enrollment, with 60% of students in Brooks, 40% of students in High River, and 25% of students in Canmore being reported as ELLs (CBC, 2018).

Research shows that, unfortunately, ELLs in Canadian schools are falling behind in provincial achievement tests when compared to their native-English-speaking counterparts (e.g., Pavlov, 2015). The high-school dropout rates and academic failure of these students are also among the highest (e.g., Sweet et al., 2019). Cutler and Graham (2008) found that children who did not learn to write well were at a disadvantage. For example, weak writers could not support content-area learning through writing, and opportunities to attend university decreased, as writing is a skill that is evaluated in applications. In this regard, Stagg Peterson and McClay (2014) noted that a lack of training in teaching students how to write resulted in numerous students entering the workforce with a lack of writing skills necessary for their jobs. In light of this, ESL writing instruction at the elementary level, as part of ESL children's early literacy education, is an important area to pay attention to.

Therefore, we undertook this study to investigate the factors that influence teacher preparedness for teaching elementary ESL writing and the challenges that teachers encounter. The findings of this study will help provide a deeper understanding about ESL writing instruction at the elementary level and contribute to making informed decisions regarding how to prepare pre- and in-service teachers.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors influence teacher preparedness for teaching ESL writing in the elementary classroom?
2. What challenges do these teachers face while teaching writing in this context?

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Framework: Principles of Initial Teacher Education*

Given the practical implications of our project and its direct relevance to teacher preparation programs in Canada, we used the Principles of Initial Teacher Education (PITE) by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE, 2016) as the theoretical framework for this study. The principal goal of the PITE, according to the ACDE, is to inculcate a view of an education among teachers that will encourage children to build a world that is “inclusive, equitable and sustainable” (p. 1).

The ACDE recognizes that teachers must be prepared for teaching students from a variety of diverse and ethnic backgrounds. In conceptualizing the PITE, the ACDE (2016) emphasizes three different levels of teacher knowledge: “situated practical,” “pedagogical,” and “academic content” (p. 2). That is, in addition to becoming an expert in their academic fields, teachers are also expected to possess the skills to deliver content knowledge in an effective manner, with a deep level of situational awareness of the context of their classroom. The ACDE also believes that the process of teacher preparation is complex and that “becoming a teacher is a developmental process” (p. 2), and, as such, teachers are expected to be engaged in learning throughout their lives.

The PITE contains 12 specific expectations that a teacher education program should meet in order to prepare future teachers to be ready to take on the challenges of teaching in the twenty-first-century classroom. It is expected that teacher education programs should both prepare a teacher to be “responsive and responsible to learners” and educate the teacher to be someone who “observes, discerns, critiques, assesses, and acts accordingly” (ACDE, 2016, p. 3). Furthermore, the PITE calls for teacher education programs to be responsible to prepare future teachers in such a way that they “understand the development of children and youth” at various levels—for example, “intellectual, physical, social, creative, spiritual, moral” (p. 3).

In sum, the PITE includes 12 principles for effective teacher education programs. Future teachers can use the PITE as aspirational goals as they prepare to become teachers and life-long learners. The PITE helps envision the standards, good practices, and responsibilities of good teachers.

### *Elementary ESL Children as Writers*

Scholars have underlined the importance of early writing-literacy development among children (e.g., Fitts et al., 2016). They have maintained that writing involves complex neuromotor, psycholinguistic, and metacognitive processes (e.g., Roessingh, 2018; Roessingh et al., 2019). In this regard, Berninger (1999b) has identified three important skills in order for children’s writing development to occur in sync with various neuromotor, psycholinguistic, and metacognitive processes: handwriting automaticity, spelling, and composition. Elsewhere, Berninger (1999a) made the case that, since automaticity in transcription helps free up the working memory for children’s composition, writing instruction for young children should be directed toward transcription as well as the process of construction of meaning through writing. Roessingh (2018) has suggested that strategic instructional

practices that include explicit teaching of handwriting, spelling, colouring, sketching, and focused vocabulary learning help develop young ESL learners to overcome the challenges they encounter in developing writing skills.

In spite of the challenges that children appear to encounter in developing their writing skills, however, Graham et al.'s (2012) findings provide strong evidence that explicit writing instruction does make a difference in elementary children's writing development. For example, they reported that of the 13 writing interventions they found to have been effective through their research, six directly related to "explicitly teaching writing processes, skills or knowledge" (p. 879). Unfortunately, Cutler and Graham (2008) found that a vast majority of the teachers (i.e., 72%) took an eclectic approach to teaching writing to elementary students, implying that they were doing so without being aware of the most efficacious approaches for teaching writing to young children. Thus, the extant research appears to indicate that teachers need specialized skills to teach children writing.

Teaching writing to ESL children further underlines the specialized skills that teachers need due to these students' unique needs. For instance, in describing ESL learners, Ortmeier-Hooper (2013) notes that in order for young ESL students to be successful as writers, they have to fulfill the dual goals of learning the English language and developing requisite skills as writers. Cummins (1982) illustrates the language-related challenges that ESL children encounter by conceptualizing the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) continuum. The BICS-level English proficiency relates to the ability to use context-reduced, cognitively undemanding, "here and now" and "my lived experience" language, whereas CALP-level English proficiency relates to the ability to use context-embedded, cognitively demanding "there and then" and abstract language (Roessingh, 2006, p. 93). Roessingh (2006) notes that it takes about two years for ESL children to acquire the BICS-level proficiency. However, it becomes more laborious and increasingly difficult for ESL children to reach the next language threshold as they move along the continuum toward the CALP-level proficiency.

While English language proficiency is a major prerequisite for ESL children's development as writers, Silva's (1993) landmark research provides insights into the unique characteristics of ESL students as writers. By reviewing 72 research reports, Silva identified the following characteristics of ESL writers. With respect to the composing process, ESL writers spend less time planning; their transcribing of texts is more laborious, less fluent, and less productive; and they generally spend less time reviewing the texts they produce. As far as ESL writers' textual features are concerned, their texts are less fluent, less accurate, and less effective. In addition, the texts that ESL writers produced were found to have distinct patterns in three different rhetorical styles: expository, argumentative, and narrative (pp. 661–668).

In light of the above, teaching writing to ESL children is a complex undertaking as a result of these students' unique needs (Roessingh, 2008)—as both English language learners and writers. Additionally, most of these children arrive in Canada from different parts of the world at various ages or are born to immigrant parents (onted, 2013). In addition to adjusting to a foreign country, they have to contend with disparate linguistic and cultural experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom (Roessingh, 2008). As a result, teachers encounter numerous pedagogical challenges, not least because of their students' (and students' parents') limited English language proficiency, lack of or no literacy-learning experiences in their L1, and limited or no familiarity with Canadian culture (Roessingh & Kover, 2002). Thus, pedagogical practices that are informed by research and are sensitive to the needs of ELLs are essential for making writing instruction meaningful. Unfortunately, there is little research on how prepared teachers feel about teaching ESL writing to children in Canadian K–6 classrooms.

## Teacher Preparedness for Teaching ESL Writing

Generally, most studies on teacher preparedness for ESL writing instruction have taken place in the United States. An exception is Webster and Valeo (2011), who found that pre-service teachers were not prepared for teaching ELLs in Ontario, although their study did not focus specifically on ESL writing instruction. Among the studies that took place in the United States, Athanases et al. (2013) found that teachers must focus on understanding their ELL students' needs in order to feel prepared to teach them writing. They argued that pre-service teachers could enhance their understanding about their students by collecting information about student achievement, pattern finding and predicting student performance, and asking and listening beneath the surface. The authors concluded that developing an understanding of ELLs' writing development is key to feeling prepared for teaching writing. Similar findings were reported by Huie and Yahya (2003), who noted that teachers must have an understanding about how to teach writing to ELLs. According to the researchers, writing tasks such as dictation, filling in the blanks, and copying are ineffective for ESL writers, and writing tasks should encourage ESL students to write creatively and meaningfully.

Highlighting the importance of ESL teachers having specific skills, Kibler (2011) found that her participant teachers were not explicit about their expectations of content-area writing tasks assigned to ESL writers. Consequently, students' understanding of content-area writing diverged from that of their teachers. In a separate study, Kibler et al. (2016) found that teachers generally lacked both instructional strategies for ESL writing and ways to support ESL students. They found that teachers had little opportunity to develop expertise in ESL writing instruction. S. H. Lee's (2016) findings in this regard underlined the importance of training teachers through teacher education programs so that they are best prepared to address ESL students' linguistic needs and adopt strategies for helping them with their writing. In a separate study, Yi (2013) found that pre-service teachers lacked an understanding of how their students viewed the task of writing. She noted that her participants viewed writing as a *means of assessment* rather than *to learn how to write*. The findings of this study also indicate that teachers' sense of preparedness for teaching ESL writing depended on opportunities for them to observe their mentor teachers teach. Aligned with Yi's findings, Gilliland's (2015) research indicates that teachers' views on second language (L2) development and L2 writing influenced how they went about teaching writing to ESL students. For example, her participants believed that "language is learned inductively" (p. 291) and that "language is structure and style" (p. 292). Consequently, both teacher participants in this study focused on their students following a formulaic structure in writing, leaving little room for them to write creatively. One implication of the findings is that unless teachers are trained in ESL students' writing development and needs, they may not know how to effectively teach ESL writing.

A related concern is that writing is often viewed as part of ESL children's language development rather than as a separate literacy skill (I. Lee, 2011). As a result, writing skills development is conflated with general L2 development. The trend of viewing ESL writing instruction as part of English language pedagogy is prevalent in teacher education programs. Consequently, teacher education programs with a specialization in ESL do not usually include dedicated L2 writing courses (Larsen, 2013, 2016; S. H. Lee, 2016). This programmatic culture seems to permeate among teachers, as they see themselves as teachers of *language* rather than as teachers of *writing* (e.g., I. Lee, 2011; Yi, 2013).

That teacher education programs typically do not include dedicated ESL writing courses in BEd programs was confirmed by our examination of BEd programs at 10 major Canadian universities. Our goal was to analyze publicly available information on university websites to

examine whether universities offer ESL writing courses in their BEd programs. Table 1 provides a summary of our findings. Of course, we acknowledge that these universities do not represent all Canadian universities; neither do they represent the trends of BEd programs in other Canadian universities not included here. Also, the information we present was collected from university websites, which at the time of this research may have been incomplete, inaccurate, or both. Nevertheless, this information provides a helpful snapshot of the status of ESL-writing-focused courses in initial teacher education (ITE) programs at some Canadian universities.

Table 1  
BEd Programs at Canadian Universities

Name of University	ESL-writing-focused courses in the ITE program		Comments
	Yes	No	
University of British Columbia	√		Offers a Teaching English Language Learners through Cross-Curricular Case-Based Inquiry program. However, this program does not seem to include a specific ESL writing course (University of British Columbia, 2023).
University of Alberta	√		Offers a Language Arts in the Elementary School course, which includes writing. However, this course does not seem to have a focus on teaching ESL writing (University of Alberta, 2023).
University of Calgary	√		Offers courses on teaching English Language Learners. However, these courses do not seem to have an ESL writing component (University of Calgary, 2023).
University of Lethbridge	√		Offers the option for students to major in “modern languages,” with a focus on French/Spanish, but the BEd program does not seem to offer any ESL-writing-specific courses (University of Lethbridge, 2023).

University of Saskatchewan	√	Offers courses on early literacy and reading and writing development but does not seem to offer any ESL-writing-specific courses (University of Saskatchewan, 2023).
University of Manitoba	√	Offers an after-degree BEd with a focus on second language education. This program does not seem to include a specific course on ESL writing (University of Manitoba, 2023).
McGill University	√	Offers a course on current literacy theory and practice, focusing on the teaching of writing skills for the production of texts in various genres, formats, and functions, in ESL for elementary- and secondary-level students (McGill University, 2023).
University of Toronto	√	Offers a Supporting English Language Learners course in both the Primary/Junior and Junior/Intermediate divisions. This program does not seem to offer any ESL-writing-specific courses (University of Toronto, 2023).
Western University	√	Offers an International Education specialty area that prepares pre-service teachers to teach in international and culturally diverse schools. The program does not seem to offer a specific course in teaching ESL writing (Western University, 2023).
Memorial University	√	Offers a Language Arts in the Primary/Elementary School course that provides students with a holistic view of the learning and teaching of language arts but does not seem to provide a specific ESL writing course (Memorial University, 2023).

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As can be seen from Table 1, only one out of the ten universities surveyed offers an ESL-writing-focused course in its BEd program. As such, there appears to be a general trend that pre-service teachers are not provided with adequate training in ESL writing instruction in ITE programs at Canadian universities.

Although writing instruction receives the least attention among the four language skills (Graham, 2019), it is widely recognized that writing is an important skill for ELLs in their academic career (e.g., Larsen, 2013, 2016). However, despite the importance ascribed to writing, there is little empirical evidence to draw on regarding how prepared teachers feel and the challenges they encounter in teaching writing to elementary ESL students in Canada. Therefore, this study was undertaken to gain insights into teacher preparedness and the challenges of ESL writing instruction in the elementary classroom. The evidence gleaned from this study will help informed decisions to be made regarding what could enhance teacher preparation programs and what needs to be done to support both pre- and in-service ESL teachers.

## **Methods**

For this study, we drew on the methods that are used for similar studies as reported in Bhowmik and Kim (2021). Below, we discuss the methodology adopted for this study.

### *The Setting*

The study took place in Calgary, Alberta. Calgary is a cosmopolitan city that has seen a steady increase in ESL students in K–6 schools. As discussed previously, Calgary schools typically have 25–30% of their students coded as ELLs (Ferguson, 2016; Zabjek, 2015). Therefore, schools in Calgary made for an ideal setting to carry out our research.

### *Participants*

A total of eight teachers from different schools in Calgary participated in the study. In order to participate, each teacher had to have a minimum of three years of teaching experience in Alberta schools. We did not embark on the study to choose participants from any particular school; rather, we followed an open-ended selection procedure. For example, we contacted the ESL program liaison at the Calgary Board of Education (CBE), who provided us with the contact information of different schools under the CBE that she thought had a high concentration of ESL students. For charter and private schools, we either asked for the superintendent's contact information from the contact person listed on the school website or contacted the principal or superintendent directly if their contact information was available on the school website. Due to a separate ethics approval requirement, our project timeline did not allow us to extend the invitation of participation in our study to schools in the Calgary Catholic School District.

For participant recruitment, we first contacted the school principal or superintendent and asked them to forward our email invitation to their teacher colleagues who had a minimum of three years of teaching experience in Alberta schools and would likely be a good candidate to participate, given the focus of our study, namely ESL writing instruction. The principals or superintendents forwarded our email invitation to teachers, who then contacted us directly expressing their interest to participate. Of the eight participants, the most experienced teacher had 13 years of teaching experience. All participating teachers were female, and all names used are pseudonyms. A summary of the participant information is provided in Table 2.



Table 2  
Participant Information

Name	Teaching experience (in years)	Academic qualifications	Grade teaching
Hanna	13	MEd	3
Monica	3	BEd	1
Ruby	6	MEd	2
Sara	9	MA	4
Jewel	3	BEd	K
Rose	4	BEd	4
Elisa	12	MEd	3
Rani	8	MEd	4

### *Data Collection*

We obtained institutional ethics approvals before beginning data collection. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and surveys. We gathered all data electronically.

We wrote the questionnaire survey (Appendix A) and semi-structured interview questions (Appendix B) by drawing on the PITE discussed previously and the extant research on this topic (Bhowmik & Kim, 2021; Gilliland, 2015; Kibler et al., 2016; Larsen, 2013, 2016; Yi, 2013). Once the draft questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview questions were written by the first author, they were revised by the second author for clarity and conciseness. Subsequently, they were sent to two colleagues of the authors for further review and feedback before we finalized the versions that were used for the study.

We administered the surveys to gather information about the participants' academic and professional backgrounds. In addition, we included open-ended questions regarding participants' preparedness and challenges for teaching ESL writing. Given that the survey was administered prior to the interviews, participants' responses to these open-ended questions provided us with the opportunities to further probe various aspects of their preparedness and challenges for teaching ESL

writing that they had shared. Consequently, the surveys were complementary to the semi-structured interviews that were used for data collection.

Once we received participants' consent, we emailed them the questionnaire survey and then interviewed them after they had completed the survey. We shared the semi-structured interview questions with each participant so that they were able to review the questions in advance. Each interview lasted about an hour and was audio-recorded and transcribed. While we recognize that eight may not be deemed a sufficiently high number of participants from which to draw generalizations, the qualitative methodology we adopted provided us with opportunities to obtain in-depth insights into the topics covered in this study. The multiple sources of information (i.e., questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews) ensured the reliability of the information gathered, while semi-structured interviews provided us with the flexibility to probe any aspect of participant responses during the interviews, as necessary.

### *Data Analysis*

We began the data-analysis process by collating the interview and survey data. We adopted a grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis (Silverman, 2014). That is, we did not embark on the data-analysis process with a set of pre-conceived themes; rather, we allowed the themes to emerge on their own.

For coding, we first read and re-read the interview and survey data, and then we identified the units of analysis. Tesch (1990) describes a unit of analysis as "a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode, or piece of information" (p. 116). As we read through the interview and survey data, we looked for "an idea, episode or piece of information" that would help answer the research questions. Once all units of analysis were identified, we assigned descriptive labels or codes to them to create categories; Table 3 provides sample categories and coded transcripts. This step was followed by focused coding (Merriam, 2009), where we interpreted and identified the categories of recurrent themes of all data. We employed the constant comparison method (Merriam, 2009) to differentiate the emerging themes. Through discussion and review, consensus was reached about the labels to use to represent the emergent themes of the findings. Through subsequent discussion and cross-checks, we worked toward achieving an interpretive consensus based on our analysis, ensuring linkages, and corroborating themes across all data.

For this study, we used a mixed-methods case-study approach (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Different types of data sources—that is, questionnaire surveys and interviews—ensured triangulation of data sources and types. We ensured the reliability of the analysis of qualitative data by employing an inter-rater reliability check (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which was found to be 97%.

## **Findings**

In this section, we discuss our findings with respect to each research question (RQ).

*RQ #1: What factors influence teacher preparedness for teaching ESL writing in the elementary classroom?*

We divided the findings related to the factors that influenced teacher preparedness in the elementary ESL writing classroom into four categories. We discuss each of these categories below.

Table 3  
Data-Analysis Procedures

Research questions	Sample categories	Sample coded transcripts
<i>What factors influence teacher preparedness for teaching ESL writing in the elementary classroom?</i>	Background knowledge of teaching ESL writing	“So, during this program, for ESL writing especially, there was no component that really prepared you for that. So, there was nothing as such...like I said, there was nothing of the sort in our coursework...” (Jewel)
	Self-learning and experience as a teacher	“I have been teaching for almost 10 years, my sense of preparedness comes from experience of working with ELL learners for the duration of my career” (Sara)
<i>What challenges do these teachers face while teaching writing in this context?</i>	Making sense of the writing curriculum	“We need to get some clarity. We don’t know which curriculum we’re heading towards and it’s causing people to have concerns. We are abiding by the programs of study. What does the curriculum say about writing?” (Elisa)
	Difficulty providing feedback	“I find feedback challenging. It’s hard. It was really hard at the beginning of my career to not correct everything, and it was just totally demotivating for these kids. And it is totally demotivating when you take apart their writing” (Ruby)

### Background Knowledge of Teaching ESL Writing

Participants described their initial teacher education training as a factor that influenced their perceptions of preparedness for teaching ESL writing. In the following interview excerpt, Jewel

described how her initial teacher education program did not include a course specifically targeted for teaching ESL writing:

So, during this program, for ESL writing especially, there was no component that really prepared you for that. So, there was nothing as such...like I said, there was nothing of the sort in our coursework....

Rose echoed Jewel's sentiments: "I do not have any educational background specific towards teaching ESL writing."

In contrast, some participants reported that even though they did not have specific training in ESL writing in their teacher education programs, taking ESL courses later on helped them feel prepared to teach ESL writing. Ruby described how taking ESL courses helped her feel prepared to teach ESL writing:

I did one of the interdisciplinary topics about teaching ESL. Again, each of the four courses was general about writing and that being said, I feel probably more prepared than someone who hasn't had coursework on teaching ESL students.

Participants' survey comments are also consistent with the interview excerpts discussed above. For example, Rani indicated that she felt her teacher education program prepared her only marginally to teach ESL writing:

I did not take a specific course for ELLs, however, I was able to use some skills that I had discovered through other courses in which we created units that planned for differentiated instruction.

Finally, it appears that teaching experience coupled with a graduate degree in ESL can build teacher confidence. Elisa, who at the time of her interview had both teaching and administrative experience, reported how having both made her feel prepared to teach ESL writing:

I did a graduate degree in TESL. So, that was very beneficial. I learned more from my graduate degree. I was in a different place in my career, too. I had teaching experience. And then I did my graduate degree. I felt very, very prepared.

### Professional Learning Opportunities

Attending workshops and professional development (PD) specific to teaching ESL writing had a positive impact on participants' sense of preparedness. Elisa reported that participating in professional learning influenced the way she was teaching so much that she changed her practice: "As time went on, I took more professional learning and I had to really change my practice."

Findings suggest that professional learning experiences help teachers build confidence in teaching ESL writing as well. For example, learning from professional learning experiences helped Rose build her confidence in teaching ESL writing. She commented that professional learning workshops made her more aware of the importance of learning how to teach writing. In her comment, she compared teaching writing to teaching math; she perceived both as conceptual and scientific. Also, learning about writing strategies built up her confidence to teach ESL writing:

Prior to attending the workshop...I had no idea how to teach writing...so that was the only workshop that gave me an idea..., there needs to be certain lessons to teach writing. Writing needs to be taught. I, as a teacher, I need to learn how to implement those strategies...there is some conceptual understanding behind teaching writing, very scientific, there are certain strategies, and each, of course, built confidence in me.

Findings indicate that teachers learn about and use specific writing resources that they acquired through various professional learning opportunities. Hanna, for example, wrote in her survey comments that she had been trained to use Mariconda in a professional learning program: "Mariconda writing program which I seriously read, attended, practiced, and saw the difference."

Jewel, on the other hand, noted in her survey comments that she was trained in using a phonics resource from a professional learning workshop:

I have been teaching reading and writing using the Jolly Phonics program. It is a multi-sensory program which is beneficial for both ESL and other learners. I had the opportunity to attend a workshop on this program.

### Self-Learning and Experience as a Teacher

In their interviews, participants reported that they also learned about teaching ESL writing on their own, by gaining experience over time. Elisa commented that not knowing about ELLs and not knowing the complexities of English contributed to her feeling of not being prepared to teach ESL writing at the beginning of her teaching career. She commented that she learned on her own:

I did not feel prepared. I think learning about English language learners...learning how interconnected language is and not really understanding...understanding it in a way that was very basic when I came into teaching, and I couldn't understand why kids couldn't do things like, 'Let's write a fairy tale.' The students really struggled with this and that was at the beginning of the career.... So what I did was, I would try to learn on my own.

Teachers reported that experience and practice teaching ESL students helped them to feel prepared. Rani observed her students' progress in their ESL writing abilities. She commented that the use of graphic organizers supported her students' progress in their abilities:

I do feel pretty strongly prepared in the sense that I have been teaching students for eight years. And I have seen them grow in their writing with some of the strategies that I have described to you. With the graphic organizers that I use for my grade fours, the slide presentations, activities that we do.

Sara also noted in her survey comments that experience was a factor that made her feel prepared:

I have been teaching for almost 10 years, my sense of preparedness comes from experience of working with ELL learners for the duration of my career.

Similarly, Elisa commented in her survey that having confidence from experience made her feel prepared to teach ESL writing: “Having professional learning and confidence from experience [made me feel prepared].”

### Collaboration, Mentorship, and Support for Teachers

Teachers reported that having more support and guidance would make them feel more prepared to teach ESL writing. Rose commented that having an introduction to teaching ESL or a mentor would have helped her understand her students’ struggles in their learning. She also reported that she needed more support, even though her school had an ESL coordinator:

I feel if I could actually understand, maybe I understand the [student] struggles. But if I was well-versed in understanding how I can approach a child who is struggling, or maybe having an introductory idea about how to teach ESL to kids, maybe some association with mentors who can guide [me]. We do have an ESL coordinator. But at the same time, like...it wasn’t much. Just one on one [support was what I needed]. So I feel as a teacher, I personally would have needed more support.

Elisa also reported that having more support when she was a new teacher would have helped her feel more prepared. Other factors that would have made her feel more prepared as a new teacher were understanding language learning, mentorship in the classroom, observing an expert teach ESL writing, and collaborating with other teachers:

I would have liked to have understood language learning. I think having mentorship in the classroom [would also be helpful], so I can watch somebody teach ELL writing effectively. I can observe, so I can get ideas. Lots of feedback would have helped me. A lot of collaboration with other teachers of how to teach ELL writing, what did they find that was successful? Can I go watch them? A lot more scaffolding as a new teacher would have helped.

Rani noted that having an expert come into her classroom to observe her teach and provide her with specific feedback on what she is not doing in her classes would be helpful:

I would say if I had an expert in the field come into my classroom, observe how I am giving instruction and provide feedback that is specific to the way that I teach. Sometimes when you go to workshops, they give you certain strategies that you can use, but you’re already using them. Well, it would be nice to have someone come in and see something that I’m not doing. And also, someone that’s not really evaluating me. They can just give me feedback.

Rani’s comment about having someone advise her on what she could be doing in her lessons suggests that teachers want to have an expert in their classrooms they can collaborate with about their teaching.

Further analysis of the survey data provides additional insights into participants’ lack of preparedness for teaching ESL writing. In response to a question regarding how prepared they felt for teaching ESL writing based on their previous academic training, 25% responded that they did not feel prepared at all, 50% said they felt only marginally prepared, and 25% noted that they felt somewhat prepared. Some of the reasons provided are included in what follows.

Hanna noted that “no tips were shared to enhance my writing skills [instruction],” while Rose’s recollection was “I do not remember learning specific strategies.” These findings are consistent with the responses to another survey question that asked whether participants’ teacher education programs offered a course in ESL writing and/or L2 writing theory and pedagogy. The analysis suggests that 75% of participants’ teacher education programs did not offer such a course, whereas only 25% of the participants’ teacher education programs required them to take such a course. This evidence serves to suggest that teacher education programs, as they are currently structured, do not offer much to prepare pre-service teachers as future ESL writing instructors.

*RQ #2: What challenges do these teachers face while teaching writing in this context?*

We divided the challenges teachers encountered in teaching ESL writing in elementary contexts into five categories. We discuss each of them in turn below.

### Making Sense of the Writing Curriculum

Teachers reported that it was overwhelming to work with ESL writing benchmarks in Alberta. Ruby noted that it was difficult to understand students’ writing development because the benchmarks included many different categories and were complex to work with:

But with writing, I don’t know what that progression is even with the benchmarks. Because there are seven different categories in the writing benchmarks. Each with five categories of, you know, student progression. It’s a lot to take in. So, I find that progression isn’t as obvious as it is with reading.

Monica compared the programs of study in the Alberta curriculum to the sea. She commented that the programs of study should be clarified. In Monica’s opinion, as they existed, the programs of study were vague:

... the programs of study, it’s so vague. As if it’s diving in a sea. The expectations should be very clear. It is writing but it doesn’t say what type of writing. So, the programs of study for literacy should be clear. Because if you look at the programs of study for literacy, it’s just like a sea.

Similar to Ruby and Monica, Elisa’s comment below suggests that the programs of study were confusing and the cause of stress for teachers:

We need to get some clarity. We don’t know which curriculum we’re heading towards and it’s causing people to have concerns. We are abiding by the programs of study. What does the curriculum say about writing?

### Finding Relevant Resources

Choosing culturally relevant topics for students was a challenge for some teachers. Hanna elaborated on this in her interview, with the example of pets as an inappropriate topic, as many of her students could not have pets because of religious reasons:

It's a challenge to even select what topics I should give to the students that they can write about. Because kids that come in our school, in their culture, they cannot keep pets, they don't keep pets as a culture because they have some religious ceremonies that they do at home where cleanliness is required and a pet can be unclean.

On that point, Samway (2016) notes that ELLs may write more and use more complex grammatical structures if they choose their own topic (see, e.g., Peyton & Seyoum, 1989).

Finding level-appropriate resources was another challenge noted by teachers. The level of language in many writing resources was too advanced for elementary ELL writers, as Rose mentioned in the following interview excerpt:

I have faced challenges of actually finding resources ... for example, I just have the *Empowering Writers* book ... the language is so advanced for ESL writers. So, for ESL students, if I just give them the same work as it is in the book, they will have a hard time to produce the writing ... I feel that is always one of my struggles.

In her survey comment, Hanna mentioned a different aspect related to resources in that sometimes there were too many resources to choose from and that this became overwhelming: "Resources. Way too many available to sieve from [through]."

The comments above suggest that the absence of level-appropriate resources for developing ESL writers and the sheer number of resources available to teachers to choose from increased the amount of time teachers had to spend on lesson preparation. This, consequently, was perceived to be a significant challenge by teachers.

## Lack of Time

Participants reported that a lack of time was a challenge. When discussing a lack of time, participants indicated a number of issues, most notably, that they did not have enough time to provide sufficient feedback, work with individual students, complete teacher duties, and plan for and include writing in the day's lesson. For example, in the following interview excerpt, Ruby explained that she did not have enough time to provide each of her students with sufficient feedback on their progress and what they were learning:

That's not enough time to give 27 students sufficient feedback for their learning. It results in less feedback or less specific feedback. And it also limits our planning time. So, the challenges with that are that each child is different, and if we could devote the time to each one that they truly need ... and time to assess their work.

In her survey comments, Hanna emphasized the lack of time she had during the school day to complete tasks:

Time is a huge challenge for the teacher to prepare [for teaching ESL writing and] ... schedule a task with available time because time cannot be [a] stretchable component.

Rani explained that making learning resources for her students was time consuming. Her comment below suggests that she used strategies to help her students with their writing. What was



challenging was finding the time to create classroom resources that could help her students develop their writing skills:

I would say that my biggest challenge has been time. I find that if I want to use all these strategies to help them, I need to have time to create them. I mean, like creating those popsicle sticks with the eyes, to remind them to look for these things when they're writing.

Sara also reported that writing must be consciously planned into daily literacy lessons so that there was enough time during class to practice writing. Her strategy was to give an equal amount of time to both reading and writing, so that she had time to cover writing:

I'm trying to balance reading and writing to make sure that they're getting appropriate reading instruction and writing instruction. Because I find that writing tends to get put on the backburner when we're running out of time. And you have to make it a conscious thought in your planning to make sure that you do include the writing.

### Difficulty Providing Feedback

What to provide feedback on in their students' writing was another challenge reported by teachers. Ruby's comment suggests that providing feedback that did not discourage her students was a challenge:

I find feedback challenging. It's hard. It was really hard at the beginning of my career to not correct everything, and it was just totally demotivating for these kids. And it is totally demotivating when you take apart their writing.

In her survey comment, Sara noted feeling overwhelmed by what to provide feedback on. Through experience, she realized she needed to provide focused feedback:

Knowing what to provide feedback on was a struggle early in my career. I recall being overwhelmed by having to determine what to focus on when a student submitted their writing. I recognized that I needed to focus on providing feedback on a) what I had taught b) gradually on what each student was working on—not everything at once.

Another participant, Elisa, also commented on providing feedback. For Elisa, not knowing where to start with providing feedback and how to give it were challenging:

It was fragmented when I was giving feedback. I didn't know what to exactly provide feedback on. Where to start. Why do I talk about this? Where do I start as a classroom teacher? Do I start with, "the story makes no sense"? Where's your plan with this story? What is the best or most effective way to have students plan?

One of the findings of Stagg Peterson and McClay's (2014) study was that teachers at the Grade 4–6 level used both written and oral feedback on student writing and they were doing so every week.

## Parental Involvement at Home

A lack of parental involvement in students' schooling was another challenge. Hanna, for example, noted that the parent who was the stronger English speaker in the family was sometimes not available to speak to the children at home in the evenings because they had to work. From participants' perspectives, parents not being physically home for the children in the evenings meant a lack of home support:

You were talking about the home support thing. So I would say that sometimes they know English, but if the dad knows very good English, the dad is probably working ... during the night or in the evenings and when the kid comes home that parent is not there to communicate with. And then there is a mum who ... may not have English. So whoever can really speak English with them are not available at home to talk to them. So those are some kinds of supports I'm talking about.

Monica also mentioned that parents did not have time to help their children at home with their schoolwork. As a teacher, she supplied her students with worksheets or other tasks to complete at home. Her comments below suggest that the homework she assigned was straightforward, so parents did not have to guess what the child needed to complete. The real challenge for teachers was that parents did not have time to help the child with the homework:

Sometimes parents don't have time to help them at home. That is the biggest challenge. Although I provide them with all the sheets, I am very transparent with what I'm teaching in class. So parents know what I'm teaching in class, they have to do the same kind of worksheet at home. But sometimes they don't have time...that becomes a challenge for me.

Sara reported that some of her students left Canada for several months to visit their grandparents abroad. These parents had a responsibility to work on their children's skills while they were away:

I wish that Alberta Ed had a policy that if kids are going to be away for months at a time that they had to do some sort of work to keep their levels or skills up. That would be helpful and then cooperation with the parents. So, if they can dedicate some time every day to continue to work with their skills, that will be really helpful. The ones that do, we see the difference. And there's a drastic difference.

Parental involvement would have helped the children maintain their English skills, as Sara reported that it took the children some time to get used to English when they returned to school:

And when they do come back, it takes them a long time to settle and immerse back in the English language again before we can really dive into the curriculum that they missed.

## Discussion

Our findings provide insights into elementary teachers' perceptions of preparedness for and the challenges they face when teaching ESL writing. When viewed through the PITE, our findings show that participants have sound knowledge of subject matter, use effective methods for teaching literacy,

and develop writing instructional practices. As reflected in the interview data, teachers demonstrate a great commitment to their students, schools, and communities. Through experience and experimentation, they learn about the writing development of young ELL students and use available resources to help their students develop their writing skills. Our findings suggest that some of the elements in teacher preparedness and challenges involve teacher education programs, parents' lack of involvement in children's writing literacy education at home, lack of teacher resources, confusion around ESL writing benchmarks in Alberta, lack of time, lack of recognition for self-learning, lack of targeted professional development opportunities, and lack of opportunities for collaboration and mentorship. In what follows, we discuss in greater detail how these elements played out in teachers' feeling of preparedness and the challenges they encountered in ESL writing instruction in the elementary classroom.

It appears that the teacher education programs that the participants in this study attended had a significant bearing on the way they approached teaching writing and their sense of preparedness. For instance, based on the teacher education they received, participants felt prepared, marginally prepared, or not prepared at all to teach ESL writing, aligning our findings with previous research (e.g., Larsen, 2013, 2016; S. H. Lee, 2016). This finding demonstrates that teacher education programs often fail to provide pre-service teachers with the "academic content" knowledge required to teach ESL writing (ACDE, 2016, p. 2). Stagg Peterson and McClay (2014) note in this regard that courses in teacher education programs have an important role to play in shaping pre-service teachers' sense of preparedness and competence as teachers.

Our findings suggest that generally participants did not feel prepared to teach ESL writing, as the teacher education programs they attended included neither an ESL writing course nor training in ESL. Interestingly, this lack of focus on ESL writing in teacher education curricula may be a reflection of how writing-literacy instruction is treated as an afterthought rather than a priority in the classroom. To illustrate, one of our participants, Sara, shared how writing is left "on the backburner" when she does not have enough time to complete the lesson. A lack of ESL writing courses or focus on ESL impacted teachers' day-to-day teaching and planning in that they sought ways to compensate for their lack of knowledge in ESL writing pedagogy on their own time. Implications are that teacher education programs with ESL writing courses can help teachers gain knowledge for teaching writing in a systematic way that meets the unique needs and interests of their ELL students. Previous research focusing on pre-service teacher preparation for ESL writing instruction aligns with this implication (e.g., Larsen, 2013).

One important finding of this study is that participants expressed feeling more prepared and confident to teach ESL writing after taking TESL-related courses in either undergraduate or graduate degrees, even if they were not focused on writing. This is significant in that it seems BEd programs across Canada vary in focus: while it is possible to take an ESL course in one program, other programs seem to take a generalist approach. Consequently, even programs such as the Bridge to Teaching program (a teacher preparation program in Alberta for internationally qualified teachers), designed for internationally trained teachers, for example, which some of the participants of our study attended, did not include an ESL component. Therefore, it goes without saying that teacher education programs should consider including an ESL component, specifically addressing the nuances of ESL writing, to better prepare pre-service teachers. In his article, Larsen (2013) highlights several key issues that pre-service teachers may face when it comes to teaching writing to ELLs. One issue that aligns with our findings is that pre-service teachers may have insufficient understanding of ELLs' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Another is that pre-service teachers may have few

opportunities to practice writing with students, leading to a lack of confidence in their ability to support their ELL students.

Due to an apparent lack of training in ESL writing, participants attended workshops and professional development to gain knowledge for classroom pedagogy. The PD that participants engaged in seemed to have a significant impact on them, most notably on their classroom practices, confidence in teaching, awareness of the importance of writing and how to teach ESL writing. What is striking is that a lack of academic training in ESL writing instruction seems only to perpetuate the deeply entrenched views that writing does not need to be taught and/or writing is an afterthought in the literacy classroom, as reflected in participants Rose and Sara's interview excerpts above. Undertaking professional development appears to have removed some of these misconceptions about ESL writing literacy. Our findings align with other research (e.g., Babinski et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2012) that found various PD programs helped teachers increase their understanding of ELLs' literacy development and refine their approaches to teaching writing to ELL students.

Also striking is the fact that the need to be prepared to teach ESL writing becomes more real for teachers when they are teaching their own groups of students. Consequently, in addition to engaging in PD, participants reported that they also learned about teaching ESL writing through self-learning. Regardless of engaging in PD or learning on their own, our data suggest that once teachers are engaged in teaching and becoming familiar with the needs of ESL students, they undertake further learning beyond what they learned in their teacher education programs, and that the feeling of not being prepared is a motivating factor. This further learning is reflected in the principle of the PITE that pre-service teachers investigate their teaching practices and continue to investigate them throughout their lives (ACDE, 2016). Implications are that teacher education programs or PD opportunities could include strategies for how to learn about the unique needs of ESL students' writing development and how to address these needs. As well, PD would have the most buy-in for teachers when the focus of the workshops is on classroom issues that the teachers are dealing with at the time and on new strategies that the teachers are not yet utilizing. This is echoed by Babinski et al. (2018), who found that participating in a PD program helped teachers increase their research-based instructional practices to support ELLs in learning how to write.

In light of the above, another implication of our findings is that schools and school districts should actively find ways to support teachers' self-learning efforts, possibly by providing them with course releases and allowing them a fixed amount of time off for self-learning. Another way in which teachers' self-learning efforts can be supported is by helping create ESL writing resources that are easily accessible and easy to implement. Yet another way this can be done is by creating recorded webinars or workshops on various aspects of teaching writing, so teachers can watch them at home as part of self-learning. Some of our participants may have benefited from professional learning videos on what feedback to provide students with or how to provide feedback without demotivating their students.

Related to the above, participants emphasized that collaboration with colleagues, mentorship, and support would improve their sense of preparedness for teaching writing. To illustrate, having a mentor present in the classroom who could provide focused feedback on instruction would help make in-service teachers feel more prepared. Collaboration with teachers is another principle in the PITE assumed to be emphasized in teacher education programs as a means for teachers to develop their teaching craft. The desire for collaboration suggests that teaching was viewed by participants as a joint undertaking that involved the classroom teacher, students, school administration, and an expert (e.g., a senior colleague, or a scholar working in a post-secondary context). Having an expert observe teachers and provide focused feedback free of critique and evaluation would benefit both less-experienced and experienced teachers alike. Similarly, if the expert taught the students and novice teachers observed, it would make less-experienced teachers

feel even more prepared to teach ESL writing and increase experienced teachers' confidence. Of note is participants' desire for feedback on what they were *not* doing in the classroom or could be doing, rather than feedback on what they were already doing. This implies that learning about one's teaching may require an outside person to come into the teacher's classroom to provide focused, non-judgmental feedback in order for them to feel prepared.

The above finding may point to the fact that there may not be sufficient collaboration among classroom teachers and experts in ESL writing. To overcome this, partnerships can be built focusing on ESL writing instruction. For example, ESL writing scholars from post-secondary institutions can work with schoolteachers on specific aspects of ESL writing pedagogy, offer workshops and constructive feedback, and observe them teach. These partnerships can also help teachers contact post-secondary scholars for advice on recurring challenges they might be encountering in the classroom that were not addressed during their teacher education programs. An example of this type of professional development partnership is reported in Gebhard et al. (2010). The partnership involved university faculty observing school district classes and providing in-service teachers with constructive feedback to help them improve their teaching and support their ELLs' writing development. Regardless of the format of collaboration, whether it might involve inviting experts into the classroom or partnering with university faculty, professional learning should include opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other within their own schools and school district (Stagg Peterson & McClay, 2014).

It appears that a lack of academic training and pedagogical skills were the root causes of most of the challenges encountered by the participants when teaching ESL writing. For example, in addition to how to teach writing to ESL students effectively and give feedback on their work, as discussed above, selecting culturally relevant topics for students to write about was a challenge for some participants. Not all topics, however simple, such as writing about the family pet, are culturally appropriate in an ESL context. Without adequate training and an academic background in ESL, being aware of such nuances of teaching in the ESL writing classroom can be challenging.

Participants reported that there were few resources designed specifically for beginner-level ELLs rather than their native-English-speaking counterparts. Even when they do exist, these publications often include advanced-level vocabulary and complex exercises that are not appropriate for beginning ESL writers. The comments from participants suggest that not having resources to support beginning ESL writers requires that teachers invest more time in preparing for teaching. This implies that there is a need for commercially published writing resources for young ELLs, especially at the beginner levels.

Additionally, making connections between the programs of study and writing benchmarks, specifically in the context of Alberta, was a challenge for teachers. This suggests that the programs of study and the ESL writing benchmarks need to be aligned with each other. As well, there should be enough flexibility in the programs of study so that teachers can adapt them to their pedagogy and address individual student needs. If there is enough flexibility, teachers can adapt the programs of study themselves as part of PD and use them as a tool to guide their teaching. This would make the programs of study a helpful tool rather than an overwhelming "sea of vagueness," as described by participants like Monica.

Alongside clarifying the programs of study, the type of writing expected of ELLs should also be specified and included as exemplars. This is important because teachers who use the programs of study end up guessing the types of writing that ELLs should practice. Guessing becomes time consuming and affects teacher confidence and preparation of actual pedagogy. Exemplars for different proficiency levels for each grade would help clarify the assessment criteria, and teachers

would know what a completed writing task might look like at each level. Exemplars could also be used by students in class activities. For instance, students could use the exemplars to practice improving a piece of writing.

In addition to the above, a lack of time was identified as a significant challenge. Giving feedback thoughtfully to each student in a large class seemed almost impossible in one class period because of a lack of time to do so. For example, Rose explained that she did not have enough time to give every student in her class feedback on their journal writing. Her students who had not received feedback ended up making the same mistakes in subsequent assignments. Consequently, these students fell behind. Concerns about what to provide feedback on in their students' writing were also raised in the interviews. For example, one of the difficulties expressed by Ruby was that the feedback she provided to her students was potentially demotivating for them. Ruby described providing feedback on student writing as "taking their writing apart," which suggests that her students perceived the feedback as a criticism of their writing. An implication of this for teacher education programs is to train pre-service teachers on how to provide feedback on ESL writing, especially techniques that motivate ELLs and boost their confidence. In this regard, Samway (2016) provides the example of teacher-student dialogue journals and suggests that teachers provide meaningful rather than cursory comments as a means to motivate students to write more.

A unique finding of this study is that a lack of parental involvement in students' writing at home was perceived as a challenge by participants. Specifically, it is the parent with stronger English abilities who is typically unavailable to support children's literacy practices at home, which takes away opportunities for children to communicate with this parent, and this, according to participants, has an impact on students' writing development. Findings suggest that parents with stronger English skills can provide literacy-rich environments which can support children in developing their language skills. Drawing on this finding, we believe that both parents should be involved in their children's schooling regardless of the parents' English abilities, as parents can model effective writing skills by supporting their children in English and/or in the L1. Thus, schools and teachers need to take time to talk to parents about the methods for practicing English writing at home. In other words, this finding points to the need for a strong home-school connection in order to support elementary ESL learners' writing development. Tran (2014) provides recommendations for programs and practices that involve parents helping to promote literacy development in their ELL children. Parent handbooks, as described in Samway (2016), could also include explanations of the type of writing students are working on in their classes (p. 98).

Finally, participants in this study felt the need for academic training in ESL writing and enhancing their pedagogical skills. This is consistent with previous research (e.g., Kibler et al., 2016) and is important for designing pre-service teacher education programs. On a positive note, the findings suggest that there seem to be opportunities for professional development for teachers to support them through the challenges they encounter while teaching ESL writing.

## **Conclusion**

This study has provided insights into elementary teachers' perceptions of preparedness for teaching ESL writing and challenges they encounter. The findings highlight the importance of preparing teachers for the challenging task of teaching writing to young ESL learners.

The study has concluded that K-6 teachers in a Canadian context generally do not feel prepared to teach ESL writing. Teachers' perceptions of how prepared they feel about teaching ESL writing seems to be influenced by the training they receive in their teacher education programs, the amount of time teachers have, and the support and resources that are provided to them.

Despite the challenges, there is evidence of teachers' deep passion for and commitment to student learning and the teaching profession. Teachers commit extra time and go out of their way to engage in self-learning to prepare themselves to teach their students. Even though insufficient time and lack of academic training were significant challenges to participants, their commitment to student learning and the teaching profession are noteworthy. It is therefore incumbent upon schools and government leaders to support these teachers in their teaching.

Before concluding, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. All of the teachers were female, and the sample was drawn from teachers in one Western Canadian city. Therefore, one needs to be cautious when generalizing the results. Another limitation is the timing of data collection. Data collection took place at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing; as such, it is reasonable to assume that the teacher participants may have been mentally exhausted when they completed the survey and were interviewed. The findings need to be interpreted with this situational context in mind. Despite these limitations, this study has provided new insights into the research on K-6 teacher preparedness for and the challenges of teaching ESL writing, although more research is required to gain deeper insights into this topic.

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*Appendix A: Questionnaire survey (adapted from Larsen, 2016)*

1. Please provide a pseudonym of yourself for this study: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Which of the following best describes your teaching context?

Elementary school

Junior high school

High school

3. How long have you been teaching ESL at this level?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

4. Please provide your academic qualifications.

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Did your teacher education program offer a course focusing specifically on ESL writing or second language writing theory and pedagogy?

Yes, it was required.

Yes, as an elective, but I did not take it.

Yes, as an elective, and I took it.

No.

Not sure.

6. Do you feel that your teacher education program prepared you well enough to teach writing to ESL learners?

- \_\_\_ Very much so
- \_\_\_ Somewhat
- \_\_\_ Only marginally
- \_\_\_ Not at all

7. Depending on your answer to Question 6 above, please elaborate on your answer with specific examples.

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8. What factors affect your sense of preparedness for teaching ESL writing? Please provide examples to elaborate on your answer.

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### *Appendix B: Semi-structured interview questions*

#### RQ1

1. Can you tell me a little about your teaching background? Have you taught ESL writing? If so, can you give a little bit of that background as well?
2. How prepared do you feel about teaching ESL writing? Can you explain with examples and details to justify your answer?
3. What factors influence your feeling of preparedness of teaching ESL writing?
4. What would make you feel even more prepared for teaching ESL writing? Can you please give some examples?
5. Can you describe your teacher education program? What in this program made you feel prepared/not prepared for teaching ESL writing? How so?

#### RQ2

6. When you teach writing to ESL students, what do you teach? Why?
7. What does a typical ESL writing lesson in your context look like?

8. What challenges have you encountered when you taught writing to ESL students? Why do you consider them challenges? Can you provide examples to elaborate?
9. What challenges have you encountered in helping your ESL students develop effective writing skills? Can you provide examples to illustrate?
10. Can you speak about the challenges you faced specific to various aspects of teaching ESL writing, e.g., feedback and error correction practices?