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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFL University Instructors' Conceptions of Speaking and Writing Competence: Insights from Egyptian Higher Education

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| ABSTRACT

The present study investigates Egyptian EFL university instructors' conceptions regarding speaking and writing competence, emphasizing how their personal learning experiences, institutional policies, students' misconceptions and classroom challenges influence their teaching practices. Using a qualitative case study design, ten instructors from private universities participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews, with three participants (two experts and one novice) were chosen as exemplars for detailed analysis. Data were analyzed using ethnographic semantics involving open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis to identify key themes, including learning histories, institutional constraints, technology use, tensions between speaking and writing, and distinctions between expert and novice instructors. Findings revealed that instructors' personal language learning experiences strongly affect their pedagogical practices, with expert teachers demonstrating theorized, reflective practices and novices relying more on exposure-based strategies. Institutional assessment tended to privilege writing over speaking, hindering communicative teaching approaches. Institutional assessment practices tended to privilege writing over speaking, constraining communicative teaching approaches. Technology emerged as both a facilitator and a challenge, with purposeful integration proving most effective. Future research should incorporate classroom observations, public university instructors and student perspectives to capture a holistic view of teaching-learning dynamics.

| KEYWORDS

Speaking and writing competence; EFL instructors; personal practical knowledge (PPK); teacher cognition; expertise

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, language teacher cognition (LTC) has emerged as a major line of research in applied linguistics, aiming to understand the "unobservable dimension of teaching" (Borg, 2003, p. 81). LTC investigates examines what teachers think, know, and believe about teaching and learning, emphasizing that these internal processes strongly influence classroom practices. Over the last decade, research on teacher cognition has grown significantly, highlighting its importance in understanding classroom practices and the development of successful instruction (Borg, 2006; Phipps and Borg, 2009). According to Lortie (1975), teachers' cognition is influenced by both their personal learning experiences and contextual elements such as standardized testing, available resources, institutional requirements, curriculum demands and social expectations. Thus, understanding teacher cognition is crucial, especially in higher education, where instructors are responsible for preparing students not only for passing exams but also for their future careers (Wang & Zhang, 2024).

Despite intensive research on language teacher cognition and its influence on classroom practice, several studies have revealed an imbalance in language instruction, with the integration of speaking and writing still being underexplored, particularly within the Egyptian higher education setting. Despite the importance of speaking and writing for academic success and professional growth, both remain challenging tasks for many EFL students in higher education. For instance, Nassaji et al. (2023) pointed out several factors which caused difficulties in speaking for EFL university students, such as mispronunciation, lack of vocabulary, fear

of making mistakes, mother-tongue reliance, and psychological barriers like anxiety and shyness. On the other hand, writing presents challenges to many EFL university students, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic and the presence of MCQ-based exams. Also, students over-rely on AI tools, such as ChatGPT to submit high-quality assignment within few seconds without going through the traditional writing process of brainstorming for ideas, organizing supporting ideas, drafting coherent paragraphs, and revising the final version. Other difficulties include sentence and paragraph form, content organization, punctuation mistakes and misuse of grammar (Taye & Mengesha, 2024).

Another gap lies in the process of teaching writing and speaking, which are frequently instructed separately despite their interrelated nature. For instance, many curricula are divided into modules that target individual skills, leading instructors to teach them separately. On the other hand, some instructors prefer teaching one skill at a time because of their personal experience or training, while others think that this technique helps beginners comprehend foundations before combining skills (Susnjak, 2022). Limited class time further hinder chances for integrated education, and standardized tests frequently assess speaking and writing separately, reinforcing isolated teaching practices. Addressing this gap is particularly urgent in higher education, where both skills are vital for academic success and employability (Akki & Larouz, 2025).

Besides, higher education in Egypt faces major challenges that directly affect EFL instruction and language learning. For instance, universities frequently struggle with outdated curricula that do not meet the demands of today's job market while large class sizes make it difficult for instructors to give students the individualized attention and detailed feedback they need. Besides, many students join universities based on their high school grades, which heavily rely on written exams, regardless of actual language proficiency. As a result, instructors often teach classes that are supposed to be intermediate where students' true skill levels vary widely (Mekheimer, 2025). This mismatch, combined with limited proper training, heavy workloads and restrictions on choosing teaching materials or assessment methods, makes it particularly challenging for instructors to develop students' speaking and writing competence effectively (Taye & Mengesha, 2024). All the above-mentioned factors make it challenging for even motivated instructors to help students develop strong writing and speaking competence.

The current study is framed in Egypt, where there is little research on teacher cognition and its role in shaping how speaking and writing are integrated in EFL higher education. This study sheds light on the images underpinning instructors' personal practical knowledge (PPK) and how this knowledge shapes their instructional choices. In addition, this study compares novice and expert instructors, offering insights into the ways experience mediates teaching beliefs. By situating these findings within SLA research and the Egyptian higher education context, the study extends the area of teacher cognition and addresses a pressing need for more integrated approaches to language instruction.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Teacher Cognition

Language teacher cognition (LTC) refers to teachers' knowledge, beliefs, personal experiences, and assumptions shaped by their prior schooling, professional experiences, and contextual factors (Borg, 2003, 2013). Despite similarities in educational background, curriculum, access to information, use of technology, and opportunities to attend pedagogical and professional trainings, teachers often implement different teaching techniques in their classes (Chen & Abdullah, 2022). Thus, understanding LTC is crucial because these internal processes guide classroom practices and instructional decisions, including how productive skills such as speaking or writing are integrated, how activities are designed, how content is prepared, and how students' challenges are addressed in the classroom (Sugesti et al., 2020). In higher education, where instructors are responsible for preparing students for academic and professional growth, focusing on instructors' cognition is essential to help them reach their full potential in classroom instruction (Gao & Yang, 2022).

According to Wang and Zhang (2024), while LTC research has expanded significantly in Asia and Europe, African nations, including Egypt remain underrepresented, leaving a gap in understanding how teacher cognition functions under resource-constrained and exam-oriented educational systems. On the other hand, recent studies has already explored LTC in multiple dimensions including the differences between novice and expert teachers, in-service and pre-service teachers, and the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices, yet few studies have specifically investigated how instructors' beliefs shape the teaching of productive skills, such as speaking or writing, in higher education contexts (Lin et al., 2024; Gao & Yang, 2022).

Existing Egyptian studies have largely focused on teachers' beliefs about assessment and educational reform (e.g., Gebril & Brown, 2013; Zajda et al., 2008) rather than on their cognition surrounding language instruction. Furthermore, these studies were conducted before the COVID context, which has largely reshaped classroom dynamics through blended and digital modes. Hence, little is known about how Egyptian university instructors conceptualize and implement productive-skills under current conditions. This study responds to this gap by exploring the cognitive dimensions underlying instructors' approaches to speaking and writing in EFL higher education.

2.2 Teacher Expertise

A significant strand of research within teacher cognition has explored the nature of expertise in teaching, emphasizing that experience alone does not equate to expertise (Li & Zou, 2021; Tsui, 2009). This raises questions about how expertise is defined and measured. Yuan & Yang (2021) argued that it is incompatible to consider teachers as experts only based on their years of classroom experience since teaching experience does not necessarily guarantee expertise. Expertise, rather, reflects a combination of advanced knowledge, effective decision-making, and flexible teaching practices. Thus, a more holistic view is to consider expertise as multifaceted, integrating pedagogical content knowledge, adaptive practice, and reflective capacity. From a cognitive perspective, expertise involves both behavioral proficiency and reflective judgment, as teachers continually interpret and respond to classroom complexities (Chew & Carbin, 2020). This view aligns with the broader LTC framework, where teachers' beliefs, experiences, and mental representations inform instructional practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987; Golombek, 1998).

Although expertise has been extensively examined in several educational contexts, there has been less focus on how expert EFL instructors perceive and combine speaking and writing in higher education. Most existing studies have examined expertise in general pedagogical competence, neglecting how expert and novice teachers may conceptualize and combine these two core skills in higher education (Sarkar et al., 2024). Investigating this relationship can reveal how pedagogical knowledge and experience influence teaching in contexts like Egypt, where formal professional development remains inconsistent.

2.3 Personal Practical Knowledge (PPK)

PPK has emerged as a key concept in research on teacher cognition for both L1 and L2, serving as the bridge between teachers' personal experiences and professional practices. Defined as "a moral, emotional, and aesthetic understanding of life's educational contexts" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987, p. 59). Golombek (1998) further conceptualizes it as a filter through which experiences are interpreted and reconstructed, making it a dynamic resource rather than a static one. A critical strength of PPK lies in its explanatory power. In other words, PPK explains why teachers frequently choose specific instructional methods even when they have similar educational backgrounds or curricula. For instance, Talaee et al. (2023) revealed that teachers' choices, like prioritizing fluency over accuracy or combining speaking with writing, are shaped not only by their training or school policies but also by their experiences and personal insights.

However, the highly subjective nature of PPK raises concerns. Due to its reliance on individual experiences and insights, it may be challenging to evaluate systematically, and there is a risk of perpetuating outdated methods without ongoing updates through new experiences and professional development (Li, 2025). Despite these constraints, PPK continues to be an important framework for understanding the interplay between teacher cognition and classroom action.

PPK is rarely examined empirically in EFL higher education, and even less so in underexplored settings like Egypt. The post-pandemic shift toward digital and hybrid learning further complicates how instructors reconstruct their professional knowledge. Investigating how PPK influences Egyptian instructors' conceptions of speaking and writing is thus critical to identifying how their personal histories, technological adaptation, and institutional expectations are translated in current practice.

2.4 The Integration of Speaking and Writing in EFL Instruction

Integrating speaking and writing enhances language frameworks across different communication modes: oral discussions support idea generation and fluency, while writing activities improve organization, accuracy, and academic literacy (Gatcho & Ramos, 2020; Namaziandost et al., 2018). In higher education, both are essential for preparing students to fulfill institutional requirements, engage in knowledge exchange, and thrive in the job market (Akki & Larouz, 2025). Fathi et al. (2024) also argued that classroom discussions can improve students' writing processes, as oral interaction helps students to reflect on and regulate their writing more consciously.

Despite their interrelatedness, speaking and writing remain artificially separated in EFL contexts due to several reasons. For instance, assessment systems emphasize writing over speaking while several curricula separate skills into individual modules (Mekheimer, 2025). Another limitation is that the majority of Egyptian universities require students to complete at least one level of composition course. This course, typically combined with explicit grammatical instruction under the title of writing, is often taught following an individualistic, instructor- centered method where students complete their writing assignments outside of class, investing most of the class time to focus on direct grammar instruction (Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2025). Additionally, limited class time, lack of instructors' preparation, rigid curricula, and students' proficiency level makes integration challenging in EFL classes (Hadah et al., 2025; Mykoliv, 2020). No recent Egyptian studies have investigated how instructors decide whether or how to combine speaking and writing, and how their beliefs and experiences shape these decisions. Thus, addressing these deficiencies is particularly crucial in Egyptian higher education, ensuring that students develop balanced communicative competence and are more equipped for academic and professional challenges.

2.5 Institutional and Contextual Constraints in EFL Higher Education

Within the Egyptian context, a sharp divide exists between public and private universities. Private universities typically offer smaller classes, digital tools, continual practicum opportunities, and various types of assessment (Alhassan & Saleem, 2022). In Constrast, public universities often encounter overcrowded classrooms, limited funding, lack of practicum opportunities and inflexible curricula linked to national guidelines (Abdelfattah et al., 2023).

Despite these differences, both sectors share common constraints: exam-oriented systems, high teaching loads, graduation requirements and institutional reputation frequently emphasize quantifiable results, like test scores, over comprehensive language proficiency (Azazy et al., 2025). Moreover, even in well-resourced settings, resources alone do not guarantee effective pedagogy. Taamneh et al. (2021) found that the availability of digital tools and institutional support does not necessarily translate into meaningful integration of speaking and writing instruction.

Existing studies in Egypt have predominantly examined structural and policy dimensions of English language teaching, with limited attention to how instructors themselves perceive, interpret, and respond to these institutional realities (Elbadrawy & Halim, 2022; Zahran, 2023; Hassanien, 2024). Factors such as restricted curricular autonomy, dominance of Arabic, limited teacher preparation, and the widespread adoption of multiple-choice testing continue to constrain opportunities for communicative competence and productive-skill development (Mekheimer, 2025).

This study addresses these limitations by shifting the focus from institutional structures to instructors' cognition and personal practical knowledge (PPK). It explores how Egyptian EFL instructors conceptualize and integrate speaking and writing within these institutional contexts, thereby filling both a content gap, the lack of focus on productive-skill integration, and a methodological gap, the absence of qualitative, post-COVID explorations of teacher cognition in higher education. In light of these conceptual and methodological gaps, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do EFL university instructors in Egypt conceptualize speaking and writing competence?
2. In what ways do instructors' personal learning experiences influence their teaching practices of speaking and writing?
3. How do novice and expert instructors differ in their conceptions and practices of integrating speaking and writing?
4. What institutional and student-related challenges shape instructors' approaches to teaching these competence?

3. Method

3.1 Study Desig

This study employs a qualitative case study design, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the conceptions of EFL university instructors regarding speaking and writing competence (Stake 1995). A qualitative approach was selected to capture the instructors' experiences, learning histories, beliefs, and context-dependent practices in depth (Borg, 2006). The case study design is appropriate because it facilitates an intensive, contextualized comparison across bounded cases (novice vs. expert instructors) and supports detailed examination of how institutional context shapes pedagogical choices within the context of Egyptian higher education (Yin, 2014). This method aligns with the study objective of examining the nuanced ways in which educators perceive and instruct speaking and writing, especially concerning their personal experiences and the institutional limitations they encounter.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committees of the following Egyptian universities: British University in Egypt, Modern University for Technology and Information, Heliopolis University for Sustainable Development, and Badr University in Cairo. These institutions were selected to ensure a diverse representation of teaching contexts and institutional types (private and international universities). In addition, informed consent was secured from all participants before their involvement in the study. Participants were provided with a detailed consent form explaining the study's objectives, their voluntary participation, permission to audio-record interviews, permission to transcribe and anonymize quotations, and their right to withdraw at any time. Approval letters are available upon request.

3.3 Researcher positionality

The researcher is an experienced EFL instructor and applied linguistics scholar who has taught in Egyptian higher education. Through ongoing involvement in teaching and training university students in English language learning, the researcher developed a reflective awareness of how teachers' conceptions shape their classroom practices. This perspective guided the study's focus on teacher cognition while reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis.

3.4 Participants

Participants were purposively sampled to provide variation in teaching experience and context (Patton, 2002). Inclusion criteria were: (a) currently teaching EFL at a private or international university in Egypt, (b) a post graduate researcher in applied linguistics, and (c) willingness to participate in a 45–60-minute online interview. Participants were a mix of ten EFL university instructors with varying levels of teaching experience in Egypt. The expert teachers had extensive teaching experience, ranging from 6 to 8 years, whereas the novice teachers had only been teaching for 2 years. All participants were non-native English speakers with Arabic as their first language, ranging in age from early to late twenties. Gender distribution among the 10 participants was five males and five females. For the purpose of presenting in-depth data, 3 participants were selected as exemplar cases to illustrate variation in conceptions and to emphasize the diversity of experience and richness of interview data.

All instructors had undergraduate degrees in Education, specifically from Egypt's public universities' English Departments, and all held postgraduate degrees (MA or PhD) in Applied Linguistics. The participants also taught a variety of courses in various departments and faculties at private universities, including general English, conversation classes, academic writing, business English, TOEFL, and IELTS preparation. These included the Schools of Business, Engineering, Pharmacy, Nursing, Organic Agriculture, Languages and Translation, and Mass Communication. Typically, novice instructors focused on general English, business English, and technical English, while expert teachers handled all of these courses in addition to academic writing, TOEFL, and IELTS preparation. This variety of schools and disciplines highlight the broad expertise of the participants, supporting the study's aim to explore diverse conceptions of speaking and writing competence among EFL instructors in higher education.

3.5 Data collection procedure

Data consisted of (1) audio recordings and verbatim transcripts of semi-structured interviews, (2) researcher field notes and reflexive memos written immediately after each interview, and (3) analytic memos created during coding and theme development. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom in English, lasting on average 45 minutes. The interview guide covered six thematic areas: personal learning experiences; conceptions of speaking and writing; teaching practices; students' challenges; integration of digital tools; and professional development. The interviews explored how participants had learned speaking and write themselves, the strategies and resources they employed, their beliefs about developing these skills in students, and the classroom and out-of-class activities they implemented. In addition, interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were checked for accuracy and anonymized. While a list of questions guided the interviews, participants were encouraged to elaborate any topics they felt were significant, and follow-up questions were posed to clarify responses or gather additional insight.

3.6 Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using ethnographic semantics (Spradley, 1979), focusing on the meanings that participants attributed to their verbal expressions. First, transcripts were imported into NVivo and read multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data, during which initial reflections were documented in analytic memos. Second, open coding was conducted to identify discrete meaning units and recurring concepts without imposing pre-existing categories (Strauss & Corbin,

1990). Third, related codes were grouped into higher-order categories through axial coding, examining relationships between concepts and across participants. These categories were iteratively refined into themes using thematic analysis, such as institutional constraints, integration of speaking and writing, and use of technology. For example, one prominent theme that emerged was the tension between speaking and writing instruction. This theme was identified in responses from both expert and novice teachers, revealing differences in how they prioritize and integrate these skills in their classrooms. Analytic decisions were documented in memos, and themes were validated through peer debriefing and member checking to ensure trustworthiness. Results will be organized around the main themes generated from the analysis, with anonymized quotations and cases to illustrate variations in conceptions and practice.

3.7 Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework. Member checking was employed, where participants reviewed their transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their responses. Peer debriefing was conducted with 2 assistant professors in the field of applied linguistics at the Heliopolis University for Sustainable Development, who provided feedback on the findings to ensure consistency and validity. These steps were taken to ensure that the results accurately represented the participants' experiences and analyzed the broader teaching context.

4. Results

4.1 The First Teacher

Ahmed, who had been teaching English at the university level for eight years, conceptualized speaking and writing as distinct yet complementary competencies influenced by his own learning experiences and teaching environment. He defined speaking as the ability to convey meaning effectively under real-time pressure, allowing for minor grammatical errors as long as comprehension was achieved and the general message is clear, whereas writing was viewed as a deliberate and organized process that required clarity, coherence, and a logical organization. As he explained, "Speaking is the ability to communicate ideas properly to someone even if there are small grammatical errors. Writing, on the other hand, must be clear and well-organized, with a beginning, middle, and end. But for both, vocabulary is everything. Without it, nothing can be conveyed." This illustrates a lexically oriented conception of language, emphasizing that mastery of form is less important than creating meaning. By highlighting vocabulary as the core of both skills, Ahmed values communicative effectiveness more than grammatical accuracy, demonstrating a holistic approach to language acquisition.

Ahmed's reflections on his own learning experiences revealed how his PPK influenced his teaching approach. He improved his oral proficiency mainly beyond formal education, by joining conversation clubs, media exposure (e.g., CNN and VOA), morphological expansion activities (deriving noun/adjective/adverb families from a root and using them in sentences), self-practice, and volunteering as a translator at tourist sites. Conversely, his writing proficiency was developed through reading essays from different genres, imitating their formats, and using mind maps to plan and organize his thoughts. These experiences made him aware of the inadequacy of traditional lecture-based classes in Egypt, where large class sizes, frequently with more than 300 students, and minimal chances for feedback hinder authentic communication. His comments also revealed how institutional factors such as the rise of multiple-choice tests post-COVID-19, have diminished students' motivation to write, narrowing their communicative engagement. As he noted, "After COVID emerged, the use of multiple-choice question (MCQ) tests led students to stop practicing writing since it is not required in the final exams and doesn't have any grades. They also believe that writing will be improved automatically with other skills without any deliberate practice" Such remarks illustrate how broader educational policies overlap with teacher cognition, influencing classroom realities and perceptions of students' learning habits.

To tackle these limitations, Ahmed implemented blended learning that combined online engagement with in-person classes to enhance English practice beyond fixed class hours. His integration of speaking and writing was guided by process-oriented principles: students were encouraged to discuss ideas orally before transforming them into written tasks. For instance, he implemented a writing prompts activity in which he asked students to choose a picture, create a story about it, share it orally, and later convert their stories into written texts, which were exchanged for peer oral feedback. This illustrates a process-oriented approach in which oral discussion precedes written composition, promoting reflection and linguistic transfer between modalities. To deal with plagiarism and AI usage, Ahmed suggested that AI-assisted tools, such as QuillBot, can be used as useful scaffolding devices while checking students' submissions to maintain originality and accuracy. This process, he explained, encouraged reflection and linguistic transfer between the two modes. Ahmed selectively employed digital tools, incorporating

TED Talks, podcasts, and WhatsApp voice notes to enhance fluency, while warning against excessive dependence on technology: "Some instructors use many tools to show off their technical skills. It overwhelms students. Quality is better than quantity." This demonstrates his reflective and adaptive use of technology, balancing innovation with practical classroom realities.

Ahmed's case demonstrates how expertise appears as flexible decision-making guided by practical knowledge. His implementation of reflective strategies, constructive feedback, and thoughtful incorporation of digital resources demonstrates how a teacher's cognition mediates between pedagogical ideals and institutional realities. His approach also reveals an evolving post-pandemic pedagogy that values students' autonomy, diverse engagement methods, and authentic language use, indicating a shift from rigid, exam-driven instruction toward communicative competence and reflective practice.

4.2 The Second Teacher

Ali had been teaching English for 6 years and demonstrated a pedagogical orientation shaped by self-directed learning and early exposure to digital and cultural resources. Even though he started teaching English at 20 while still in college, he had already accumulated a great deal of experience by his mid-twenties. During this period, he developed both oral and written competence through informal, experiential learning, including watching films and cartoons, listening to folk songs, reading novels and dramas, and engaging in digital storytelling with scripts and subtitles. As he described, this allowed him to "extract useful sentences and practice them until they became part of my natural speech instead of merely memorizing a chunk of words in isolation" His use of shadowing, mirror practice, and imitation of newscasters reveals an autonomous, performance-based orientation to learning, in which confidence and communicative control were developed through rehearsal and exposure rather than formal instruction.

Ali's conceptualization of speaking and writing reflected this experiential foundation. He viewed speaking as a dynamic form of communication that "should be clear and to the point," prioritizing intelligibility over perfection. Writing, by contrast, was viewed by him as both a process and product: the process involved planning, drafting, and revising, while the product was a final piece of text capable of transmitting coherent final text to readers. This dual perspective aligns with process-oriented views of writing (Hyland, 2003), yet Ali emphasized that students need exposure to authentic models before they can generate coherent works. As he explained, "Students can't produce coherent writing unless they see real examples first. They need meaningful input and gradual scaffolding before being asked to write essays or speak," emphasizing the significance of input and modeling before production.

Ali's classroom practices closely reflected his beliefs about integrating speaking and writing. He typically began lessons with oral discussions, reading, and listening tasks that scaffolded subsequent writing tasks. For example, when teaching descriptive essays, he started with a discussion encouraging students to describe their old schools. This was followed by reading a model essay in which a person described his neighborhood, highlighting word choice, cohesive devices, and organizational structures. Students then used mind maps to outline the steps for composing their own descriptive essays, using the reading as a model before drafting their versions. These practices exemplify his integration of speaking and writing as mutually reinforcing processes. Through such tasks, Ali operationalized a task-based cycle (Ellis, 2003), progressing from comprehension to analysis to production, thus fostering both fluency and coherence simultaneously.

Ali's views on technology and learner engagement were pragmatic and balanced. Similar to Ahmed, he noted the post-pandemic reliance on multiple-choice tests and the tablet system integrated in high schools since 2019 has led to a decline in students' motivation to write: "Students tend to guess the right answers and neglect writing practice." However, Ali resisted banning technology entirely. Instead, he allowed students to use their smartphones to search for information or check their digital dictionaries, while maintaining classroom oversight. His remarks demonstrate an educational balance between authority and independence, where technology acts as an enabling rather than a distracting tool.

To keep students engaged, Ali asserted the necessity of respecting their autonomy. For example, he motivated students to select their project subjects and teamwork formats, stating that "Unlike young learners, university students should be given choices in assignments, projects or topics to develop their interpersonal and social communication skills" Yet, he cautioned against excessive freedom that could overwhelm students while too much control can demotivate students. Ali additionally emphasized that instructors should design tasks that are directly related to their academic majors and carefully adjusted to their current proficiency level, regardless of their level on placement test results.

While Ali's views resonate with Ahmed's in their shared emphasis on authentic input and blended learning, his distinctive contribution lies in the deliberate procedural scaffolding of tasks and his nuanced balance between autonomy and structure. His approach demonstrates how early-career instructors internalize and adapt contemporary pedagogical theories, task-based learning, learner-centeredness, and multimodal engagement, to their local EFL contexts, transforming personal learning strategies into classroom practice.

4.3 The Third Speaker

Sarah had one and a half years of teaching experience at the time of the interview, indicating a growing, active, reinforcing effective learning practices. She conceptualized speaking as the ability to share ideas, feelings, and information effectively and confidently, emphasizing the importance of confidence and audience awareness over vocabulary and grammar. In contrast, writing involved the ability to arrange ideas clearly and smoothly on paper; however, she admitted that she favored speaking over writing, declaring that "speaking is the primary sign of language learning success, a fundamental necessity for securing any job, and what employers seek." That's why I focused more on improving my speaking abilities, reserving writing practice solely for the final exams. This definition reflects a communicative focus that prioritizes oral fluency instead of written accuracy, a perspective frequently associated with early-career instructors (Richards, 2008).

Her case highlighted a growing focus on student independence and experiential learning via blended and immersive methods. She stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, she designed a daily self-study routine, including listening to news in the morning, shadowing practice, reading and summarizing stories, joining online conversation classes and clubs, watching English tutorials on YouTube, and using mobile apps to practice speaking with both native and non-native speakers. She explained that these steps helped her in "enhancing confidence and fluency via real-life communication," and she intentionally avoided from using subtitles, believing that they distract learners from real sounds and cause cognitive overload (Sweller, 1988; Vanderplank, 2016).

In her teaching, Sarah implemented the language immersion strategies she had adopted as an undergraduate during the COVID-19 pandemic, employing blended and student-centered approaches to foster students' autonomy and overcome institutional constraints. She revealed that "face-to-face instruction is not enough to improve students' oral language skills as we only have limited time. So, I used blended learning to maximize learning time and enable my students to access content anytime and anywhere." For instance, she used WhatsApp, Quizlet, and Nearpod to design quizzes, interactive videos, track students' progress and answer their inquiries, especially those who have other commitments or live far away from university. On the other hand, she used specific online platforms, such as Google Docs or Uquiz when class time was insufficient for writing tasks. In this regard, Sarah stressed that technology should be chosen "for its effectiveness, not its novelty", highlighting that instructors should know exactly when and how to use these tools before assigning any online activity. In addition, her use of flipped-classroom tools (Bergmann & Sams, 2012) enabled students to prepare and interact with materials before class, thereby maximizing in-person time for practice and discussion.

However, she critically reflected on the institution's emphasis on written evaluation, stating that "After all my efforts to enhance students' speaking skills, the university will just finally deice to give oral exams 5 only marks." This tension between communicative goals and evaluation policies reflects the frustration of novice teachers balancing teaching ideals with institutional requirements. A further layer of conflict emerged in Sarah's reflection of the tense relationship between students and the university system, especially concerning final exams. She revealed a scenario where the administration suddenly decided to increase the weight of essay questions in final exams, reducing the proportion of multiple-choice questions to increase students' writing practice. This decision triggered a wave of student protests that eventually forced the administration to reserve its policy. Sarah stated, "That experience showed me that conflicts and that approach to communicating with adults won't be effective with the current generation." These examples demonstrate the gap between institutional power and students' increasing sense of autonomy, highlighting how evaluation policies can create conflict between students and institutions. As a result, she improved her teaching methods to foster student independence, incorporating democratic strategies such as allowing students to choose presentation topics, determine discussion points, and contribute to assessment criteria. By doing this, Sarah transformed students' willpower into a chance for engagement, reinforcing her belief that participation and negotiation are central to maintaining motivation and democratic atmosphere in EFL classrooms.

On the other hand, Sarah's approach to feedback was distinctive and humanistic, focusing on positive reinforcement rather than error correction. When she identified areas that required improvement, such as mispronunciation, she designed targeted activities, either face-to-face or online, to address these challenges. Once a student successfully mastered the target,

she praised his or her progress publicly to motivate others. This method demonstrates an evolving recognition of the affective dimension of language learning and illustrates the role of encouragement in sustaining engagement (Dörnyei, 2005). Overall, Sarah's case completes Ahmed's fluency-oriented scaffolding and Ali's task-based integration by exemplifying how emerging teachers draw on their personal learning experiences to shape pedagogical decisions. Her flexible application of digital tools, emphasis on fostering confidence, and critical awareness of systemic challenges underscore a transitional stage of professional identity, moving from dependent novice to reflective practitioner capable of reconciling institutional expectations with communicative and student-centered principles.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that while all three instructors face similar institutional and pedagogical challenges, their approaches to teaching speaking and writing differ considerably, shaped by their personal learning histories, pedagogical beliefs, and institutional constrains (table 1). These variations highlight the dynamic nature of teacher cognition and its contextual enactment, echoing Borg's (2006, 2013) claim that teacher beliefs are context-dependent, shaped by experience, and influenced by institutional pressures. The study also highlights a persistent tension between communicative goals and exam-oriented practices, revealing the complexity of promoting balanced skill development in Egyptian higher education.

5.1 Relation of Findings to Previous Research

The findings both confirm and broaden previous findings on teacher cognition and skill integration in EFL settings. All the instructors' personal learning history clearly shaped their pedagogical decisions and classroom methods, reflecting what Connelly and Clandinin (1985, 2000) refer to as Personal Practical Knowledge. For example, Ahmed's focus on media immersion, shadowing, and self-practice illustrates a traditional input-driven approach to language acquisition, in which deliberate exposure is expected to lead to fluency (Long, 1985; Lewis, 1993). Within the PPK framework, Ahmed's practices can be seen as an extension of his own learning experiences, where repetition and structured exposure to the target language were central were crucial to enhancing his speaking and writing skills. However, his approach could be criticized for not giving sufficient emphasis to active interaction in real-life tasks, which are central to communicative competence (Long, 1985). While Ahmed's focus on vocabulary acquisition corresponds with lexical approaches to language learning (Lewis, 1993), his emphasis on memorization (e.g., idioms) could unintentionally restrict contextual usage, indicating a gap between what students learn passively (via media) and what they practice actively (in the classroom). In addition, his integration of oral tasks as scaffolds for writing, such as mind maps, exemplifies the potential of linking writing and speaking, yet feedback continues to be skill-specific, highlighting the challenge of balancing spoken with written accuracy (Bygate, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978).

Ali, in contrast, adopts a more holistic approach to speaking and writing, drawing on his artistic interests as well as a rhythm-based view on language development. Ali's implementation of movies and folk songs as teaching tools in the classroom aligns with the communicative approach (Widdowson, 1990), highlighting the significance of authentic and contextual acquisition of language. However, Ali's reliance on non-structured activities (e.g., listening to music) might lack the scaffolding needed for students to move beyond surface-level fluency. While this approach is beneficial for exposure, it reveals the selective nature of PPK and risks ignoring the need of deliberate practice in improving writing accuracy (Anderson, 1982). Another disadvantage of depending largely on songs is that it exposes students to informal and context-specific language that might not be suitable for various academic or professional contexts.

Sarah's focus on chatrooms and YouTube tutorials demonstrates a dedication to student autonomy and self-correction, which is consistent with learner-centered approaches (Little, 1991). However, her apparent neglection of writing raises concerns about skill imbalance. By emphasizing speaking as a primary measure of proficiency, Sarah reflects a common novice bias, valuing oral competence as a vital indicator of communicative competence, particularly in the labor market (Richards, 2008). While her use of tools like Google Docs and Uquiz for reading and writing practice shows an awareness of skill integration, these remain secondary to oral tasks.

5.2 Novel Findings on Digital and Institutional Dynamics

One unexpected finding was that novice instructors such as Sarah demonstrated higher digital flexibility and creativity compared to the more experienced counterparts. Although previous studies often links technological skills with professional expertise (Aldahdouh et al., 2023; Pablos et al., 2022), the current study suggests that digital fluency could be influenced more by generational differences than by teaching experience. Another insight was the degree to which institutional policies, particularly assessment frameworks, undermined teaching objectives. Even very reflective instructors such as Ahmed discovered that their

communication methods were limited by exam structures and grading priorities, reflecting and building upon Pennycook's (1996) critique of institutional authority in EFL education. These results emphasize the ongoing negotiation of teacher cognition and innovation within systemic limits

5.3 Institutional Constraints

Across all cases, institutional assessment policies emerged as the dominant factor shaping teachers' instructional practices and their conceptions of speaking and writing competence. A key point of tension among the instructors lies in how institutional structures reinforce the separation rather than the integration of these two skills. Although Ahmed and Ali viewed speaking and writing as interrelated processes, using oral tasks such as discussions, mind maps, and storytelling to scaffold written production, their ability to implement such integration was constrained by institutional demands. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, where learning is mediated by contextual factors, including institutional structures that either support or limit pedagogical autonomy. While Ahmed and Ali's task-based strategies (Ellis, 2003) sought to link oral and written fluency, institutional assessment systems often prioritized written accuracy as the main indicator of competence, restricting innovation in teaching approaches.

In addition, Sarah's disappointment with the five-mark allocation for speaking in final exams reflects the institutional bias towards written accuracy and product-oriented evaluation that contradicts communicative competence (Pennycook, 1996). Instructors like Sarah who prioritize oral practice are at odds with a system that prioritizes written assessment, limiting students' opportunities to develop both competence ultimately. This finding parallels Hyland's (2003) observation that, despite pedagogical reforms advocating communicative balance, writing continues to dominate assessment in EFL programs. On the other hand, the shift towards multiple-choice testing post-COVID-19 (Rapanta et al., 2020) further extended this gap, normalizing passive learning and undermining students' motivation to engage in authentic writing tasks. Thus, while teachers recognized the value of integrated skill development, institutional policies often reinforced separation and superficial assessment of competence.

The exam-oriented environment also shapes students' perceptions of language learning. As Ahmed expressed, "even when students improve in speaking, it does not affect their GPA," while Sarah observed that her students "see speaking as extra, not essential." Such perspectives reveal how assessment policies construct a skill hierarchy that privileges written accuracy over communicative competence, discouraging students from investing effort in oral tasks. Teachers, in turn, adapt to these constraints by aligning their instruction with institutional metrics rather than their pedagogical beliefs.

5.4 Expert-Novice Distinctions

A major question underpinning this study is how novice and experienced instructors' teaching techniques differ, particularly in terms of theorization and integration of speaking and writing. Consistent with Tsui's (2009) and Farrell's (2013) frameworks of teacher expertise, this study confirms that experience enables more theorized, reflective, and integrated pedagogical practice. Ahmed and Ali, the more experienced instructors, demonstrated rigorous techniques to teach speaking and writing. For example, Ahmed utilized mind maps, storytelling, and peer feedback to connect spoken and written production, whereas Ali used jigsaw activities, task-based cycles, and role-play exercises to improve vocabulary retention, fluency, and accuracy in both competence. Their concept of speaking and writing demonstrated expert-level pedagogical reasoning, aligning theory with context-sensitive application. In contrast, Sarah's focus on confidence-building and positive reinforcement reflects a developmental stage where teaching is guided more by affective intuition than theoretical synthesis. For instance, writing was mostly handled for final exams, and feedback focused on the positive side of students' work rather than targeted improvement. This contrast emphasizes the importance of the professional trajectory from experiential to conceptual knowledge, suggesting that expertise arises not only from cumulative experience, but also from continuous reflection and conceptualization of practice.

6. Limitations of The Study and Directions for Future Research

The current study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. It included ten EFL teachers from private universities in Cairo, therefore, the results may not fully represent the experiences of instructors in public institutions or from other regions of Egypt. The urban institutional environments of the participants also pose a contextual boundary, as experiences in rural or lower-resourced universities can vary significantly. Moreover, data collection occurred during the post-pandemic shift, a period when digital teaching methods and evaluation practices were experiencing considerable changes, potentially amplifying challenges related to online and hybrid teaching. The study's reliance on semi-structured interviews, while suitable for exploring

teacher cognition, could have been strengthened by incorporating classroom observations or document analysis to improve triangulation.

Nevertheless, various strategies were utilized to guarantee the integrity and reliability of the results. Data saturation was closely observed until no additional themes appeared, ensuring depth and completeness Credibility was strengthened by member checking, in which participants confirmed the accuracy of transcripts and interpretations; peer debriefing with applied linguistics experts, which assisted in validating emerging themes; and ongoing analytic memoing to record reflexivity and analytic choices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These measures strengthened the dependability and confirmability of the study despite the acknowledged methodological boundaries.

7. Transferability and Scope of Findings

As a qualitative case study, the findings are not statistically generalizable but can be analytically applied to comparable EFL higher education settings (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The insights gained here could enhance understandings of teacher cognition processes and pedagogical integration in similar educational environments characterized by exam-focused curricula, digital transitions, and emerging learner autonomy. Readers are urged to evaluate transferability by considering how closely their own contexts align with those outlined in this study.

8. Implications of the Study

The results of this study carry significant implications for various stakeholders involved in EFL education. The findings highlight the necessity for teacher education programs to incorporate reflective modules that allow instructors to link their personal learning experiences with pedagogical decision-making, which promotes the theorization of practice and the integration of speaking and writing skills. For instructors in practice, the study underscores the importance of creating task-oriented teaching cycles that clearly connect spoken and written communication, enhanced by intentional and strategic use of technology rather than excessive tool reliance. At the institutional level, policy makers and administrators are encouraged to revisit assessment practices that overly focus on writing, and instead embrace more equitable frameworks that acknowledge communicative competence in both oral and written forms. Finally, for future researchers, the study suggests incorporating classroom observations and student viewpoints to offer a more comprehensive insight into how teacher cognition interacts with instructional practices and student engagement in authentic educational settings.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research enhances knowledge of how Egyptian EFL university instructors conceptualize and teach speaking and writing under evolving institutional and technological contexts. The results extend current teacher cognition studies by emphasizing the interplay between personal learning experiences, institutional constraints, and developing digital teaching methods. This research highlights the significance of professional development that connects practical experience with conceptual knowledge by revealing how expertise is expressed through reflective and theorized practice. Ultimately, fostering a balanced, communicative, and context-sensitive pedagogy requires institutional support that values both oral and written skills as vital components of academic literacy in higher education.

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Table 1

The Images and Corresponding Beliefs of The Participants.

Image	Corresponding beliefs
Ahmed: input and structured rehearsal	(1) Language development occurs through persistent exposure (media, conversation clubs) (2) Focus on vocabulary, idioms, and shadowing as keys to fluency. (3) Difference between speaking (real-time, confidence, body language) and writing (planned, structured). (4) Writing is a process-oriented, using mind maps, model texts, peer feedback (5) The intentional use of digital tools.
Ali: holistic rhythm and integration	(1) Movies, folk songs, and news as authentic input. (2) Integrate speaking and writing instruction. (3) Using task-based language learning cycles (controlled-less controlled- free practice) (4) Balance freedom with responsibility (5) Using technology as support, but keep an eye on AI abuse and plagiarism.
Sarah: language immersion, student autonomy and democracy	(1) Prioritization of speaking over writing; fluency and confidence as main indicators (2) Using language immersion tools such as YouTube, apps, vlogs, and flipped/blended learning. (3) Considering students' needs and autonomy. Encouraging them to choose themes, assignments, and evaluation criteria. (4) Provide only positive comments and scaffolded exercises for weak points. (5) Institutional limits affects oral skills negatively (speaking is valued just 5 marks).