

# METAPHORICAL CONCEPTIONS OF TEACHER ROLES IN ONLINE WRITING EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM EFL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** This study examines how EFL lecturers and students in Vietnam conceptualize teachers' roles in online writing instruction through metaphor. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory and a five-dimensional framework of teacher roles, the study adopts a quantitative descriptive design based on coded responses collected from 20 lecturers and 132 students through metaphor elicitation questionnaires. The findings reveal a clear divergence between the two groups. Lecturers tend to favor metaphors associated with guidance, development, and support, reflecting a view of teaching as accompaniment and strategic facilitation. By contrast, students more often construct teachers as authority figures and transmitters of knowledge, which suggests expectations of supervision and one-way instruction. The contrast becomes more evident in metaphors related to presence and emotion: while lecturers position themselves as sources of encouragement, students often perceive teachers as distant or insufficiently present in the online environment. These findings point to a continuing cognitive gap between lecturers and students and highlight the coexistence of traditional and more developmental conceptions of teacher roles in online learning.

**Keywords:** Metaphor analysis; teacher roles; online writing instruction; EFL; lecturer-student perceptions

## NHẬN THỨC ẨN DỤ VỀ VAI TRÒ GIÁO VIÊN TRONG DẠY VIẾT TRỰC TUYẾN: GÓC NHÌN TỪ GIÁNG VIÊN VÀ SINH VIÊN HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ

**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu cách giảng viên và sinh viên EFL tại Việt Nam hình dung vai trò của giáo viên trong dạy viết trực tuyến thông qua ẩn dụ. Dựa trên Thuyết Ẩn dụ ý niệm và khung năm chiều về vai trò giáo viên, nghiên cứu sử dụng thiết kế mô tả định lượng, với dữ liệu được mã hóa từ bảng hỏi gợi ý ẩn dụ thu thập từ 20 giảng viên và 132 sinh viên. Kết quả cho thấy sự khác biệt rõ rệt giữa hai nhóm. Giảng viên có xu hướng lựa chọn các ẩn dụ gắn với định hướng, phát triển và hỗ trợ, qua đó thể hiện cách nhìn về người dạy như người đồng hành và dẫn dắt quá trình học tập. Trong khi đó, sinh viên thường hình dung giáo viên như chủ thể nắm quyền kiểm soát và truyền đạt tri thức, phản ánh kỳ vọng về sự giám sát và lối dạy một chiều. Sự khác biệt này trở nên rõ hơn ở phương diện hiện diện và cảm xúc: giảng viên xem mình là nguồn động viên, còn sinh viên lại có xu hướng cảm nhận giáo viên như những nhân vật xa cách hoặc chưa hiện diện đủ rõ trong môi trường trực tuyến. Những phát hiện này cho thấy vẫn tồn tại khoảng cách nhận thức giữa giảng viên và sinh viên, đồng thời phản ánh sự song hành giữa quan niệm truyền thống và quan niệm phát triển về vai trò giáo viên trong bối cảnh học trực tuyến.

**Từ khóa:** Phân tích ẩn dụ; vai trò giáo viên; dạy viết trực tuyến; tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ; nhận thức giảng viên – sinh viên

## 1. Introduction

In Vietnamese higher education, teaching writing online is both a challenge and an opportunity to reshape the role of teachers. Many studies show that the presence of teachers becomes a decisive factor in maintaining engagement in online learning (Garrison et al., 1999; Jiang & Koo, 2020). Therefore, it is especially important to understand how teachers and students envision the role of teachers in the digital context, especially through metaphors that reflect implicit beliefs and experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Martínez et al., 2001).

Metaphors in education are not only rhetorical but also outline how teachers and learners think about teaching and learning (Martínez et al., 2001). Students may visualize teachers as guides, while more transmissive conceptions may depict teachers in mechanistic terms, such as machines (Golding, 2013), while teachers liken themselves to *"octopuses"* or *"sowers"* (Farrell, 2006; Leavy et al., 2007). These images show differences in expectations and experiences, especially in an online environment that is prone to tension between academic and emotional roles (Jiang & Koo, 2020; Sağlamel & Erbay, 2022).

In the Vietnamese context, this study aims to explore the metaphors that EFL lecturers and students use to describe the role of teachers in teaching online writing, thereby clarifying the differences in perceptions and proposing implications for the training of foreign language teachers in Vietnam.

On that basis, the paper aims to respond two main research questions:

- (1) *What metaphors are used by teachers and students to describe the role of teachers?*
- (2) *What do these metaphors reveal about their beliefs, expectations, and experiences in teaching online writing?*

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) opens a new way of looking at the nature of thinking. Instead of considering metaphors as rhetorical elements that decorate language, CMT asserts that metaphors are the foundational tools of cognition. People grasp and interpret abstract concepts through mapping from concrete, familiar experiences in life. For example, when saying *"the teacher is the guide"*, the learner envisions the teaching process as a journey in which the teacher takes on the role of guidance and direction, and the student is the companion.

In this study, metaphors collected from participants were treated as evidence of conceptual mappings rather than surface labels. The analytical processes therefore, traced each linguistic expression to its underlying conceptual metaphor (e.g., "manager", "controller", "mentor", "hope giver"), situated within broader mappings such as "TEACHING IS CONTROLLING", "TEACHING IS SUPPORTING", "TEACHING IS STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT", or "TEACHING IS EMOTIONAL PRESENCE". This approach ensures that metaphor analysis is grounded in the core mechanism of mapping from source to target domains, exactly as described in Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

## 2.2 Metaphors of teachers

In the field of education, metaphors are used to reflect beliefs, values, and professional identity. Different metaphorical images of teachers can signal different views of teaching, ranging from knowledge transmission and control to guidance, support, and learner development. These metaphorical choices, therefore, reflect broader pedagogical orientations and professional philosophies. These choices are not simply rhetorical but directly reflect pedagogical orientations and professional philosophy (Oxford et al., 1998).

Building on this perspective, Saban et al. (2007) demonstrate that metaphors of the teacher can be systematically organized into conceptual categories that reflect different orientations toward teaching and learning. These range from roles emphasizing knowledge transmission and authority (e.g., the teacher as a knowledge provider or a superior authoritative figure) to roles that foreground care and emotional support (e.g., the teacher as a counselor, such as a parent, friend, or companion), as well as roles highlighting facilitation, scaffolding, and collaborative learning (e.g., the teacher as a facilitator/scaffolder or a cooperative and democratic leader).

Metaphorical analysis, therefore, does more than identify surface language patterns; it provides access to implicit beliefs and the relational logic that structures teacher – student interactions. This becomes particularly salient in online environments where physical co-presence is reduced and “teaching presence” must be enacted through discourse and pedagogical design. In such contexts, metaphors offer a meaningful medium through which both teachers and students articulate how they conceptualize and experience teaching and learning.

## 2.3 The role of teachers in traditional and online contexts

Stemming from the metaphorical framework presented, the role of teachers is constantly evolving in response to the philosophy and teaching environment. In the traditional classroom, *the Knowledge Provider and Control groups* predominate, reflecting the image of the teacher as the source of knowledge development and the maintainer of order, corresponding to Biddle's role theory (1986). Within a developmental constructivist perspective, teaching is often understood in more facilitative and strategic terms, highlighting the role of instructional design and the importance of fostering learner autonomy and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the online context, the *Support* and *Presence/Emotional teams* are increasingly important. Garrison et al. (1999) view teaching presence as a determinant of quality, whereas Rapanta et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of teachers maintaining motivation and emotional support to reduce feelings of isolation. However, *Knowledge Providers* and *Controls* are not disappearing; if their presence is limited to “*frequent appearances*” without interaction, the online classroom will still return to the trajectory of communication. Building on these perspectives, the framework identifies five metaphorical dimensions of teacher roles in online writing education, namely Knowledge Provider, Support, Control, Presence/Emotional, and Developmental/Strategic, as illustrated in Figure 1.

## Figures 1

*The Five-Dimensional Metaphorical Framework for Online Writing Teacher Roles (synthesized from role/metaphor typologies and online teaching presence literature; informed by Garrison et al., 1999; Oxford et al., 1998; Rapanta et al., 2020; Saban et al., 2007, and sociocultural perspectives on learning such as Vygotsky, 1978)*

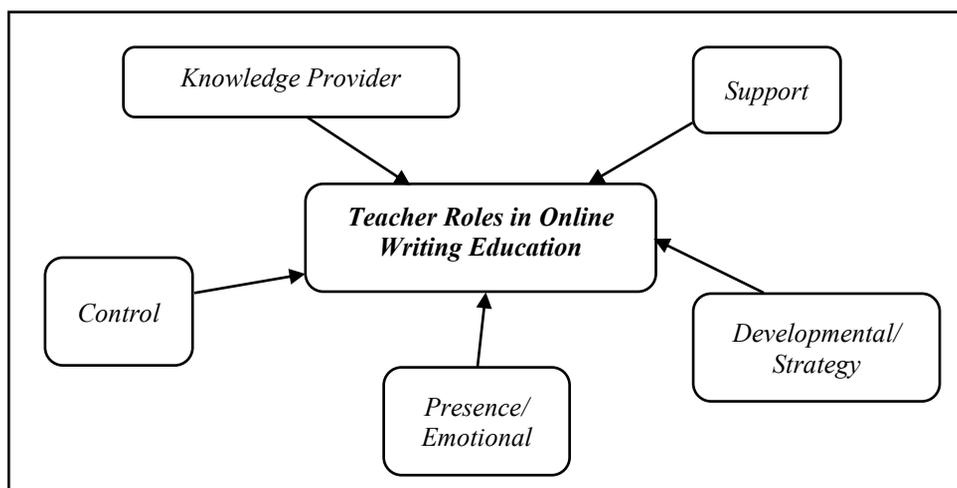


Figure 1 illustrates these five groups of metaphors as a conceptual framework that is oriented, through which the research will encode and compare data from both lecturers and students. It should be emphasized that the classification framework is not intended to test hypotheses but serve as a theoretical tool to interpret how the role of the teacher is envisioned and expressed in the context of teaching online writing.

### 2.4 Previous studies on metaphorical views of teachers' roles in language education

Over the past two decades, metaphorical analysis has become an important tool for identifying beliefs and professional identities in language education. Oxford et al. (1998) offered a systematic way to interpret teacher metaphors, making it possible to compare pedagogical orientations and to better understand how teachers perceive their roles in the classroom. Building on this approach, Saban et al. (2007) showed that demonstrated that metaphors used by pre-service teachers reflected diverse educational orientations and beliefs about teaching and learning, highlighting variations in how teachers conceptualize their professional roles, thereby demonstrating diversity in professional self-positioning.

Subsequent studies emphasized the possibility of contrasting perspectives between teachers and students. Wan et al. (2011) identified discrepancies between students' and teachers' beliefs about EFL teachers' roles in a Chinese university setting. This mismatch indicates that role expectations may not always align, potentially creating tensions in classroom practice.

In Vietnam, Nguyen (2016) employed metaphor analysis to explore the professional identities of Vietnamese primary school TEYL teachers. The findings showed that teachers understood their roles through a range of metaphorical images, suggesting that teacher identity is multifaceted and shaped by the interplay of care, professional expertise, authority, and participation.

These metaphorical constructions are closely aligned with long-standing cultural expectations shaped by Confucian traditions, in which teachers are positioned as moral authorities and knowledge bearers, while simultaneously bearing responsibility for learners' personal development (Nguyen & Hall, 2017). At the same time, recent research suggests a gradual shift in Vietnamese teachers' perceptions of their roles under the influence of learner-centered reforms. Studies suggest that teachers are showing greater openness to mentoring and guiding roles that place more emphasis on interaction, support, and shared responsibility for learning, although traditional views of teacher authority remain visible (Nguyen & Hall, 2017). Taken together, these findings indicate that metaphor use in Vietnam reflects an ongoing transition from authority-centered conceptions toward more developmental and strategic orientations.

Overall, five main metaphor clusters have emerged: Knowledge Provider, Control, Support, Developmental/Strategic, and Presence/Emotional. However, most of the evidence focuses on in-person classrooms, while data related to online EFL writing is very limited. This raises the need to re-examine how metaphor groups operate in digital environments, where teacher presence and support play a key role.

The review of research shows that metaphorical analysis is useful in reflecting on teachers' beliefs and students' expectations, but in Vietnam, the approach is often one-sided, leaving the interaction between the two groups not fully reflected. Therefore, a study comparing both lecturers' and students' perceptions in the context of online writing is needed to determine the extent to which metaphor groups are maintained or transformed in the current framework.

### **3. Methodology**

The study employs a quantitative descriptive design in which metaphors are identified, coded, and compared through frequency distributions. Data were collected from 20 lecturers and 132 students in fully online academic writing courses using a metaphor elicitation questionnaire, short lecturer reflective notes, and brief clarification interviews. These interviews were used only to confirm the intended meaning of metaphors, not for thematic analysis.

All metaphor expressions were processed using a structured Metaphor Identification Procedure. Each item was verified through a justification clause ("because...") and mapped to a corresponding conceptual metaphor before being coded into the five predetermined groups of the conceptual framework: Control-Oriented, Developmental/Strategic-Oriented, Presence/Emotional-Oriented, Support-Oriented, and Knowledge-Provider-Oriented.

Quantitative analysis consisted of frequency counts and percentage distributions to illustrate how metaphor choices differed between lecturers and students. Credibility was strengthened through cross-coder agreement and verification across the three data sources, ensuring that the reported distributions accurately represent participants' metaphorical perceptions of the teacher's role in online writing.

## 4. Findings

Based on the five-group framework presented, metaphors were codified into Control Oriented, Developmental or Strategic, Presence or Emotional, Support Oriented, and Knowledge Provider Oriented, creating a foundation for analyzing the differences in the beliefs, expectations, and experiences of the two groups.

### 4.1 Metaphors used by teachers and students to describe the role of teachers

To clarify how metaphors operate conceptually, each linguistic expression provided by participants was interpreted as an instantiation of a deeper conceptual metaphor. For example, students' choices such as "manager," "controller," or "enforcer" were mapped to the conceptual metaphor TEACHING IS CONTROLLING, while lecturers' selections such as "mentor," "guide," or "inspirer" corresponded to TEACHING IS STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT. Likewise, metaphors like "monologue actor" and "invisible person" instantiated ONLINE TEACHING IS EMOTIONAL DISTANCE, whereas "hope giver" reflected TEACHING IS EMOTIONAL SUPPORT. This mapping process ensured that the analysis reflected not only linguistic labels but also the underlying conceptual structures as defined in Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

#### *a. Control-Oriented Metaphors*

Table 1 shows a clear contrast: students used images such as "manager" (86.4%), "controller" (80.3%), or "enforcer" (73.5%), reflecting the experience of supervision in the digital environment, consistent with Biddle's (1986) description of roles as linked to social expectations. Meanwhile, lecturers largely avoided authority metaphors, except "classroom manager" (75%) and "manager" (55%), suggesting that they attempted to escape the image of control, consistent with the shift from teacher-centered to partnering (Oxford et al., 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). This discrepancy suggests a cognitive dissonance that could potentially affect engagement, especially in writing courses that require trust and interaction rather than supervision.

**Table 1**

*Control-Oriented Metaphors of Teachers' Roles in Online Writing Education*

STT	Metaphor	Teacher (n)	Teacher (%)	Student (n)	Student (%)
1	A watcher	0	0%	22	16.7%
2	A classroom manager	15	75%	80	60.6%
3	An enforcer	2	10%	97	73.5%
4	A manager	11	55%	114	86.4%
5	A controller	9	45%	106	80.3%
6	A director	2	10%	85	64.4%
7	A supervisor	2	10%	89	67.4%
8	A judge	0	0%	8	6.1%

#### *b. Developmental/Strategic-Oriented Metaphors*

Table 2 reflects the tendency of lecturers to prioritize metaphors associated with developmental orientation such as "guide" (75%), "mentor" (65%), or "inspirer" (60%), affirming the desire to design learning strategies and support learners in a constructivist direction (Vygotsky, 1978). Students also expressed similar expectations through "mentor" (78.8%) and "instructor" (67.4%) and viewed teachers as "mirrors" (34%) or "connectors" (45.5%), indicating

the need for direction and connection. This convergence suggests a suitable foundation for narrowing the gap formed in the Control-Oriented group.

**Table 2**

*Developmental/Strategic-Oriented Metaphors of Teachers' Roles in Online Writing Education*

STT	Metaphor	Teacher (n)	Teacher (%)	Student (n)	Student (%)
1	A mirror	0	0%	45	34%
2	A connector	7	35%	60	45.5%
3	An instructor	11	55%	89	67.4%
4	An experimenter	3	15%	0	0%
5	A guide	15	75%	32	24.2%
6	An inspirer	12	60%	45	34.1%
7	A motivator	11	55%	77	58.3%
8	A mentor	13	65%	104	78.8%

Source: Author, 2025

**c. Presence/Emotional-Oriented Metaphors**

Table 3 highlights the differences in perceived presence. Students often associate teachers with “monologue actor” (83.3%) and “invisible person” (14.4%), reflecting their less interactive experience in the online environment. Lecturers, on the other hand, want to maintain connection through “distant companion” (30%) and “hope giver” (25%), despite still perceiving the monotony of the online format. This gap suggests that teaching presence is not perceived equally, consistent with Garrison et al.’s (1999) warning about the risk of community cohesion declining when there is a lack of interactive intervention.

**Table 3**

*Presence/Emotional-Oriented Metaphors of Teachers' Roles in Online Writing Education*

STT	Metaphor	Teacher (n)	Teacher (%)	Student (n)	Student (%)
1	A distant companion	6	30%	15	11.4%
2	An invisible person	0	0%	19	14.4%
3	A monologue actor	9	45%	110	83.3%
4	A hope giver	5	25%	25	18.9%

**d. Support-Oriented Metaphors**

Table 4 shows that students have very high expectations for support, with “supporter” reaching 90.9% and “caregiver” reaching 59.1%, even associating it with “parent” (17.4%). Teachers still see themselves as a source of support, but in a professional sense, as “supporter” (60%) and “helper” (40%), rather than a holistic caregiving image. This suggests that students often idealize the role of teachers, while lecturers establish clear professional boundaries, creating a gap in the level of support expected in the online environment.

**Table 4***Support-Oriented Metaphors of Teachers' Roles in Online Writing Education*

STT	Metaphor	Teacher (n)	Teacher (%)	Student (n)	Student (%)
1	A coach	2	10%	63	47.7%
2	A caregiver	5	25%	78	59.1%
3	A grader	1	5%	7	5.3%
4	A helper	8	40%	43	32.6%
5	A parent	0	0%	23	17.4%
6	A supporter	12	60%	120	90.9%
7	An editor	9	45%	75	57%
8	A compass	3	15%	56	42%

*e. Knowledge Provider-Oriented Metaphors*

Finally, Table 5 reflects the stability of traditional conceptions: students choose “information transmitter” (93%) and “knowledge provider” (83%), even imagining teachers as “machines” (74%) to emphasize the regularity and accuracy in providing information. Lecturers also share this image through two images with high proportions of 80% and 75% respectively, although a few choose “builder” (5%) as an attempt to redefine the creative role. Overall, this group shows that traditional roles are still sustained in the perception of both sides.

**Table 5***Knowledge Provider-Oriented Metaphors of Teachers' Roles in Online Writing Education*

STT	Metaphor	Teacher (n)	Teacher (%)	Student (n)	Student (%)
29	A builder	1	5%	0	0%
30	An information transmitter	16	80%	123	93%
31	A machine	10	50%	98	74%
32	A knowledge provider	15	75%	109	83%

**4.2 Beliefs, expectations, and experiences reflected in metaphors***a. Lecturer's perspective*

The metaphors that lecturers choose reflect a desire to position themselves in a developmental and guiding role rather than a controlling one. The images of “mentor” (65%) and “guide” (75%) reflect the belief that teachers both impart knowledge and guide academic progress, consistent with the constructivist view (Vygotsky, 1978). The parallel appearance of “inspirer” (60%) and “supporter” (60%) suggests an expectation of emotional companionship, consistent with the online teaching competency framework (Baran et al., 2011). Metaphors such as “editor” or “coach” suggest that educators are adapting their professional identities more flexibly, consistent with Leavy et al.’s (2007) observation that identity is always tied to a negotiation between personal beliefs and context. This finding suggests that online experiences encourage educators to expand their roles from being experts to being creators of adaptive learning environments (Martínez et al., 2001).

### ***b. Student perspective***

Students maintain a strong belief in the image of teachers as centers of power and knowledge. The metaphors “information transmitter” (93%) and “knowledge provider” (83%) demonstrate a reliance on the one-way reception model criticized by Wan et al. (2011). At the same time, the repetition of “manager” (86.4%), “controller” (80.3%), and “enforcer” (73.5%) suggests that they still experience online learning as a space of supervision, consistent with Biddle’s (1986) role theory. However, metaphors such as “monologue actor” (83.3%) and “invisible person” (14.4%) suggest a lack of teaching presence, echoing the warnings of Garrison et al. (1999). On the other hand, images such as “caregiver” (59.1%) and “supporter” (90.9%) indicate that they still expect personal attention, even though it contradicts the assumption of teachers as supervisors.

### ***c. Perception distance***

Placing the two groups side by side reveals a significant difference. Lecturers prioritize growth-focused metaphors such as “mentor”, “guide”, or “inspirer”, while students associate teachers with power and supervision, such as “manager”, “controller”, or “information transmitter”. This difference suggests that lecturers reorient their roles toward support, while students retain traditional cognitive frames (Farrell, 2006). Emotionally, lecturers see themselves as “supporters,” but students perceive teachers as “monologue actors” or “invisible persons”, echoing Rapanta et al. (2020) on the need to refocus teacher presence beyond mere formal participation in online teaching, and research on teachers’ emotional labor in online contexts (e.g., Peng et al., 2023; Wang, 2022). The basis of the difference lies in two incompatible beliefs: one oriented towards developmental interaction, the other maintaining the image of supervision and communication. Metaphors in online/distance education often surface tensions and mismatches in expectations (e.g., Kaban, 2021; Tuncay, 2009).

## **5. Implications**

The results of the study show that the five-group metaphorical framework not only reflects the foundations of previous reasoning but also clarifies how they transform in the online context. In the traditional classroom, role theory works (Oxford et al., 1998), and the metaphorical classification of Oxford et al. (1998) both emphasize the nature of the *Knowledge Provider* and *Control* roles. The empirical data in this study show that these images are still strongly present in students' perceptions, through metaphors such as a “machine” or “supervisor”. However, the shift that Vygotsky (1978) and the constructivist frameworks mention is also illustrated by the fact that lecturers often choose *Developmental/Strategic* metaphors such as “mentor” or “inspiration”. This combination shows that the theoretical framework does not stand apart from practice but is the lens through which to explain the parallel between maintaining tradition and moving towards innovation.

At the professional level, the findings point to an asymmetry between how lecturers position themselves and how students envision the role of teachers. From the theoretical basis of *teaching presence* (Garrison et al., 1999) and the study of online teaching competencies (Baran et al., 2011), teachers are aware of the importance of being present, supporting, and leading in the digital environment. However, when students still associate the image of the

teacher with the control and transfer of knowledge, this cognitive gap becomes a barrier to creating an interactive learning space. This point also echoes Farrell's (2006) argument about the complexity of teacher professional identity: it is not determined merely by personal conceptions, but also influenced by how learners define it.

The practical implication is that the professional development of lecturers needs to go in parallel in two directions. On the one hand, it is necessary to maintain the capacity of pedagogical design combined with technology as suggested by the TPACK model (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). On the other hand, it is necessary to create conditions for students to participate in reflection to adjust expectations and restructure teacher-student relationships in the digital context. Metaphors, in this case, are not only research tools but also a means of fostering the capacity for reflection (Farrell, 2006), helping both lecturers and students to contrast beliefs and practical experiences. As this gap is bridged, the online writing classroom can become a co-constructive space where the teacher is not only a communicator but also an emotional and strategic factor, simultaneously meeting the learner's cognitive and connection needs (Jiang & Koo, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020).

## 6. Conclusion

This research has shown that metaphorical analysis is a useful approach to deciphering the beliefs, expectations, and experiences of both lecturers and students in the context of teaching online writing. The identification and classification of metaphors into five conceptual groups not only affirms the value of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) but also demonstrates the adaptability of this classification framework when applied to the digital environment. The results indicate that familiar images such as *Knowledge Provider* and *Control* remain prominent in student perceptions, while lecturers tend to reposition themselves through metaphors in the *Developmental/ Strategic* and *Support groups*. This phase deviation reflects the fact that teacher professional identity, as Farrell (2006) suggests, is not only formed from personal conceptions but also from the way it is defined and reflected by learners.

These findings make two key contributions. Theoretically, they provide empirical evidence for previous studies of the transformative role of teachers in the online classroom, while extending the metaphorical classification framework into the field of academic writing – a skill that has been little studied in the digital context. In practical terms, the study confirms the need to bridge the cognitive gap between lecturers and students, thereby improving teaching and learning efficiency. If metaphor continues to be used as a tool for reflection and professional development, it can help lecturers become more aware of how they are perceived, while also helping students restructure expectations to fit the online learning model.

Overall, research has demonstrated that the role of teachers in the online classroom is not a traditional negotiation but a reinvention in a new context where knowledge, support, and emotional presence coexist. This is an important suggestion for further research to explore more deeply the relationship between metaphors, professional identities, and pedagogical practices in the age of digital education.

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