

Uncovering Writing Difficulties of the Senior High school Students: A search for Early Intervention among Primary School Children

Analyn D. Saavedra*
Felixberto C. Labastilla
Cheryl P. Barredo

*Western Mindanao State University
Zamboanga City, Philippines*

Abstract

Detecting children who face challenges in acquiring writing skills at an early stage is crucial because difficulties in literacy emerge before children enter kindergarten and have a significant impact on their academic achievements throughout their schooling years. In this study, it is aimed to determine the level of writing competence of the senior high school students based on content, content, accuracy of words, spelling and punctuation marks and structure. Also, this is conducted to find out if academic strand and type of school of the respondents all significant factors on their level of writing competence. In order to meet the research objectives, the study employed a quantitative-descriptive design which was participated by 244 Senior High school students enrolled in the University and public school with Science and Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) at Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) tracks. Although the overall writing competence of the respondents is very satisfactory but, on the components content (nilalaman) and structure (estruktura), the respondents have manifested a satisfactory level only, lower than the other components. In terms of variables, it also appear that school had significant difference while academic track is not significant at all. Moreover, there is no significant relationship between schools while academic track shows the other way around. This empirical data may serve as a basis for finding solutions for the writing difficulties encountered by most students and could also serve as an early intervention program among primary school children.

Keywords: writing difficulties, senior high school students, early intervention, primary school children, academic strand, type of school

Introduction

Experts agree that writing is a highly regarded academic skill as it demonstrates a person's language proficiency, ability to develop concepts, and capacity for abstract thinking (Saladino, 2009; Lasaten, 2018). However, writing is a multifaceted task that necessitates the integration of diverse abilities. Proficient writing relies on the proficiency of fine motor skills, visual-motor planning, attention, sequencing, critical thinking, memory, and a comprehensive understanding of grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary, and the intended purpose of writing (Steven et al., 2001). Interestingly, good writing goes beyond mere accuracy in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. According to Nordquist (2012), it also involves addressing the readers' interests, having a clear purpose, presenting a specific point, supporting it with relevant and well-organized information, and using appropriate language.

In the K to 12 Program's Senior High School (SHS) curriculum, students are held to high expectations regarding their academic performance. The SHS subjects possess specific benchmarks that students must satisfy to successfully pass. These benchmarks, encompassing both content and performance standards, are clearly delineated in the curriculum guides provided by the Department of Education (DepEd). The attainment of these standards is an indispensable requirement for SHS graduation. Within this course, one of the obligatory academic writing tasks is the composition of an academic essay. An academic essay is a meticulously structured document that encompasses an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion (Bryne, 1988). When undertaking the task of crafting an academic essay, students are obligated to articulate a well-defined thesis statement, substantiated by meticulous attention to supporting details and compelling evidence.

Despite the significance of writing courses for college students, it remains a challenging skill for many. This phenomenon is observed in various contexts worldwide, with students encountering difficulties in several areas of writing, including structure, grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary (Ginting, 2019; Sabarun, 2019; Toba et al., 2019). Moreover, academic essays adhere to specific stylistic conventions, such as formality, objectivity, explicitness, caution, and structure. However, despite the opportunities provided to students to develop their academic writing skills, there is a continuing concern among SHS teachers regarding the poor quality of essays submitted by students.

Okpe and Onjewu (2017) emphasized the benefits of acquiring essay writing skills, which include improved everyday communication, better academic performance, and enhanced professional competence. As a result, the essay writing course holds significant importance for tertiary-level students. Therefore, it is consistently recommended that the Department of Education establish mechanisms to promote essay writing skills at an early stage of schooling.

According to Polichroni (2007), addressing learning difficulties in schools through early detection, prevention, valid intervention, and proactive coping strategies has been a focus of professionals working with cognitive, learning, and secondary psychological and social challenges. Identifying these difficulties and designing pedagogical interventions through structured educational programs, with an emphasis on individualization to strengthen specific areas of cognitive development where weaknesses exist (such as phonological awareness and psychomotor maturity), have proven to be the most effective long-term approach.

In general, the delivery of early identification, assistance, and intervention services for children with special needs is guided by the principles of differential diagnosis and problem-solving. This approach underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration among specialists and professionals. The involvement of families is also considered essential in preventing and reducing special educational needs and disabilities (Tsimpidaki, 2007). Additionally, individual diagnostic assessments of children and their family history are fundamental factors in effective intervention. Specialists from various disciplines, such as education, psychology, psychotherapy, social work, medical professionals, and school nursing, can play a crucial role in addressing these challenges (Varma, 1997). Through interdisciplinary collaboration and the integration of diverse perspectives, education plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural transformations in today's globalized society. The training of educators, educational professionals, and healthcare practitioners significantly influences the profile of the modern citizen, fostering active citizenship and emphasizing pedagogical and social interactions within different educational contexts (Malikiosi-Loizou, 2001).

Hence, determining of the writing difficulties of the students in the higher level of education is a very significant move among educators because the results may be used as basis for the intervention program in the early years of schooling.

Related Literature and Studies

On the Writing as a Skills

The act of writing, considered a productive skill, encompasses a range of cognitive processes including expressing intentions, organizing thoughts, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Jebreil et al., 2015; Fareed et al., 2016; Ginting, 2019). It involves the collection and refining of ideas into a coherent and comprehensible output for readers (Linse, 2005, p.98). Cumming (1998, p.61) appropriately defines writing not only as the written text itself but also as the cognitive activities of thinking, composing, and transforming language into written form. Consequently, the process of composing written work necessitates a distinct set of competencies that involve comprehension, cognition, planning, and revision (Brown, 2000).

The extensive utilization of comprehensive writing assessments as markers of literacy competence across different grade levels underscores the importance of writing within the educational curriculum. Writing possesses significant importance not only as a crucial skill necessary for future achievements,

but also as an evaluative instrument for assessing student learning and as a prerequisite for academic progress. According to Graham and Perin (2007), proficiency in writing is indispensable in various life contexts, such as educational institutions, professional settings, and the community, each with its distinct yet interconnected requirements. Nevertheless, despite writing being a natural extension of communication processes, its inherent complexities make it a formidable skill for students to acquire mastery in (Hidi & Buscolo, 2006). Similarly, teaching and assessing writing pose difficulties for educators (Huot, 2002). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that students are provided with instructional approaches and evaluation techniques that adequately enhance their writing abilities (Graham & Perin, 2007; McCarthey, 2008). Despite the acknowledgment of the significance of teaching and evaluating writing, Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken (2009) found that secondary school teachers from various disciplines frequently express a lack of readiness in effectively instructing and evaluating writing.

To develop their writing skills, students are expected to produce well-structured written compositions (Ceylan, 2019). Additionally, it has become crucial for them to master the organization and regulation of their writing behavior, as well as the ability to review and create reader awareness in their compositions (Bakry & Alsamadani, 2015).

Flower and Hayes (2009) present a cognitive process theory of writing, asserting that writing encompasses separate cognitive processes. They contend that writers engage in the arrangement and organization of ideas throughout the process of composition. These writing processes exhibit a hierarchical structure rather than a linear one, with embedded organization allowing one process to be integrated within another. Flower and Hayes emphasize that writing is influenced by the writer's evolving network of goals and is inherently goal-oriented. Their research focuses on providing insights into the writing process and advancing pedagogical approaches to address writing difficulties. The writing process can be divided into three essential elements: the task environment, the writer's long-term memory, and the writing processes. The task environment encompasses external factors, including the rhetorical challenge and the specific text being written. The writer's long-term memory encompasses their understanding of the subject matter, the target audience, and various writing strategies. The writing processes, on the other hand, involve planning, transforming thoughts into written expression, and reviewing the final composition.

On Students' Writing difficulties

As previously mentioned, writing, especially in English education, is considered a challenging skill that involves various complex processes and competencies. Tertiary-level students often encounter obstacles in their writing processes, which have been identified in prior research. These obstacles encompass aspects such as vocabulary and diction (Nugraheni & Basya, 2018; Toba et al., 2019; Zhan, 2015), grammatical features (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Hajeid, 2018; Hasan & Marzuki, 2017; Nugraheni & Basya, 2018; Toba et al., 2019), idea exploration and generation (Ceylan, 2019; Nugraheni & Basya, 2018), organization (Hajeid, 2018; Nugraheni & Basya, 2018; Toba et al., 2019), and the teaching process (Ceylan, 2019; Hajeid, 2018; Jebreil et al., 2015). These studies indicate that the main difficulties students face in their writing predominantly revolve around vocabulary and grammar, emphasizing their linguistic competence.

Essay as a Written Output

Furthermore, within the field of academic writing (Bailey, 2015; Meyers, 2014), the essay remains a popular form of assignment (Van Geyte, 2013). Specifically, an essay is a written composition that focuses on a particular topic, divided into paragraphs (each representing a major point), beginning with an introductory paragraph and concluding with a closing paragraph (Oshima & Hogue, 2006). The essential components of an essay include an introduction paragraph that grabs the reader's attention, body paragraphs that provide the development of sub-topics, and a conclusion paragraph that restates the main points and may include additional quotations.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of writing competence of the senior high school students based on the following components:

- a. Content
- b. accuracy of words
- c. spelling and punctuation marks
- d. structure

2. Are the academic strand and type of school of the respondents all significant factors in their level of writing competence?

Methodology

This study is quantitative-descriptive in nature. This aimed to determine the level of writing competence among the Senior High School students and find out the writing difficulties based on the components being tested. Part of the study is also to find out if the academic strand and the type of school of students contribute to their level of writing competence. 137 Senior high school students from a University in the Region and 107 also voluntarily participated from one of the biggest secondary schools in the region. Respondents were selected using stratified random sampling. They are enrolled in the Science and Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) at Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) tracks. The respondents were asked to compose an essay anchoring on the validated title. To ensure impartiality, the written outputs of the respondents were assessed by Senior High School teachers who were not affiliated with the schools attended by the respondents.

Results and Discussion

On the Senior High School Students' Level of Writing Competence based on Components

Table 1. shows the mean for each component. As reflected in the table, the respondents were rated with a very satisfactory level in terms of using appropriate words and in their spelling and using od punctuation marks, with a small standard deviation of 0.86 and 0.76, indicating that the rates are clustered around the mean. Moreover, in terms of their output content and structure, they got a mean of 3.16 and 3.02, respectively, and a standard deviation of 0.80 and 0.79, the rates are clustered around the mean. Overall, the respondents' writing competence is described as very satisfactory.

Although the overall result seems favorable, it must be noted that Senior High students manifested only a satisfactory level in terms of their content and structure. There have been several studies that support this claim. According to Saavedra and Barredo's (2020) study, teachers reported several observations and experiences while teaching writing to elementary pupils. These included: 1) insufficient vocabulary knowledge in the target language; 2) challenges in effectively expressing and organizing thoughts; 3) the perception among students that writing is a difficult task; 4) a lack of motivation and interest in writing; and 5) difficulties in spelling, grammar, and sentence construction. These factors were associated with the students' primary languages (Chabacano, Bahasa Sug, and Cebuano), while English and Filipino were considered secondary languages (L2). Despite the teachers' efforts, they recognized that the writing abilities of elementary students still did not meet the expected standards.

Table 1. Senior High School Students' Level of Writing Competence based on Components

Component	STDEV	Mean Rate	Descriptor
Content	0.80	3.16	Satisfactory
Using of Appropriate Words	0.86	3.79	Very Satisfactory
Spelling and Punctuation Marks	0.76	3.41	Very Satisfactory
Structure	0.79	3.02	Satisfactory
Over all		3.35	Very Satisfactory

On the Respondents Level of Writing Competence based on their Academic Track

Table 2. shows a significant value of 0.164, which is greater than the alpha level of 0.05. Thus, there is no significant difference when grouped according to academic strand. More also shown, the mean rank for STEM and HUMMS is 127.91 and 115.21, respectively, and this means that STEM students have better performance than HUMMS.

In a study conducted by Quinal (2020) on Grade 11 students, it was discovered that similar results were obtained regarding the correlation between English language reading anxiety and academic strands. The findings demonstrated that all academic strands displayed a moderate level of reading anxiety, while reading comprehension levels were deemed satisfactory. Specifically, the STEAM strand exhibited an intermediate level of reading anxiety, whereas both ABM and HUMSS strands showed a high level. Additionally, the data analysis indicated that there were no notable variations in reading anxiety levels among students belonging to different academic strands.

Table 2. Mann Whitney Test Result On The Significant Difference When Grouped According To Academic Strand

Variable	Mean Rank	Significant Value	Interpretation
STEM	127.91	0.164	Not Significant
HUMMS	115.21		

Table 2. 1 reveals the result of the Mann-Whitney Test Result On The Significant Difference When Grouped According to the type of school. The table shows a significant value of 0.000, which is less than the alpha level of 0.05. Thus, there is a significant difference when grouped according to school. It also shows the mean rank of the University is 152.46 points higher than that of public schools (84.14), meaning Universities have better performance than public schools.

Table 3. Mann Whitney Test Result On The Significant Difference When Grouped According To School

Variable	Mean Rank	Significant Value	Interpretation
University	152.46	0.000	Significant
Public School	84.14		

Conclusion

The significance of writing skills in the 21st century has increasingly been acknowledged in recent times, as learners face the global challenges of the digital age and the need for effective communication. Students from various educational institutions express a strong interest in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for writing. However, it is evident that a significant majority of learners currently face difficulties in both writing and communication. This study, it is concurred that the respondents had manifested an overall level of writing competence of very satisfactory which means that the Senior High school students are good enough in writing an essay in the Filipino language. However, When data were grouped according to components, it further reveals that paggamit ng angkop na mga salita (using appropriate words) and pagbabaybay at pagbabantas (spelling and using of punctuation) are similarly very satisfactory. However, on the content of the component (nilalaman) and structure (estruktura), the respondents have manifested a satisfactory level only, lower than the other components. In terms of variables, it also appears that schools had significant differences while the academic track is not significant at all. Moreover, there is no significant relationship between schools while academic track shows the other way around. This empirical data may serve as a basis for finding solutions for the writing difficulties encountered by most students and could also serve as an early intervention program among primary school children.

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