



# STUDENTS' COMPETENCE IN COMPOSITION WRITING: BASIS FOR A PROPOSED INTERVENTION STRATEGY PLAN

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra13504>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra13504

## ABSTRACT

*This study aimed to determine the students' competence in writing English compositions in terms of their content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics components; their strengths and weaknesses in writing; intervention strategy plan that could be proposed; and the implications of the findings to the teaching of English writing. To find out their writing competence along with the five components, the students were asked to write descriptive essays that were rated independently by three English teachers using the ESL Composition Profile designed by Jacobs et. al. (1981).*

*The descriptive quantitative-qualitative research design was used to obtain pertinent data. A case study was conducted to get the desired qualitative data that supplemented and strengthened the statistical data gathered. The results of the study revealed that majority of the students were described as 'good to average' in terms of their descriptive essay content; 'excellent to 'very good' in organization; 'good to average' in vocabulary; 'excellent to very good' in language use; and 'good to average' in mechanics.*

*However, calculation of the average mean scores and standard deviation in the five components of the students' writings indicated that the strengths of most of the students were in the 'organization' and 'language use' (grammar), whereas their weaknesses were in 'content development', 'vocabulary' and 'mechanics'. The case study likewise suggested similar results. Using the data as a basis, an intervention strategy plan to enhance students' writing competence along the five components was proposed and designed for classroom application.*

*Some strategies included to enhance students' language use and organization of ideas was peer editing, selective peer editing/proofreading with highlighting of errors, using graphic organizers, and essay diagramming. To enhance their content development, vocabulary, and mechanics components in writing, strategies such as adding details to complete an essay, providing Four Bases checklist, giving ample time for prewriting, facilitating collaborative writing, using word learning reinforcement, showing good writing models, using semantic feature analysis and paired word questions, preparing punctuation marks worksheets, conducting student-teacher conferences, and using authentic texts were included in the intervention plan.*

*The findings implied that English teachers should be given adequate training and should attend seminar-workshops in ESL writing pedagogy for them to have an in-depth knowledge of the complexities involved in the writing process and learn more intervention strategies that they could apply in the classroom to help students improve their writing in English with less effort, and the results of this study may be used as inputs to curriculum development and the implementation of intervention strategies in English composition writing.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Writing, Teaching, Strategies in Teaching English.*

## INTRODUCTION

As observed by many scholars in English as a Second Language (ESL), writing is an indispensable productive skill for both professionals and students. It is one of the most difficult and therefore frustrating subjects' to teach particularly in an ESL/EFL program. Individuals with writing problems may have difficulties in one or more aspects of writing skills such as proper use of grammar, conventions, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, and some of the basic and initiating aspects of writing. It is also an unpleasant piece of work for both teachers and learners in ESL classes (Leki, 1992). For second language learners, the challenges are enormous, particularly for those who go into a university and study in a language that is not their own (Nunan, 2009). Tertiary or college teachers want to know whether or not their students are likely to profit from textbook reading, daily instruction, writing, research projects, and so on. Hence, teachers use different assessment tools for the purpose of gaining insights into the students' learning (Lundgren, 2007). Students for whom English is a second or third language (ESL) have a keen understanding of how languages work.



However, they have different skills and needs than native speakers of English because they have to deal with competing cultural expectations and competing languages, ESL students can have special difficulties seeing problems with their writing and solving them. One of the most challenging tasks for English teachers inside the classroom is teaching which includes finding the proper approach to fit the students' needs and abilities. The teacher plans activities that will help students learn and produce cohesive and coherent discourse on their way to becoming competent writers in the English language; however, many secondary and college students are having difficulties in submitting academic requirements especially when asked to do so in English.

In this situation, teachers need to understand the particular issues students are facing when involved in the writing process. Writing essays is undoubtedly one of the most important skills that should be learned and mastered both by high school and college students. In fact, writing is a powerful means of learning because students are given the chance to manipulate content. Through writing, students are likely to remember and understand concepts since they learn to connect, organize, and relate ideas together. Moreover, the kind of essays that are most commonly given to students include the following: expository essay, narrative essay, descriptive essay, persuasive essay, compare and contrast essay, argumentative essay, and research essay. The article by Cooper (2014) mentions that there are common problems many students have while writing essays. These problems include misunderstanding the essay prompt or question, inappropriate tone and language, grammatical errors, writing styles, and using sources or citations. Along this line, teachers need to understand the particular issues students are facing who have limited proficiency in English. The Conference on College Composition of Communication (CCCC) Executive Committee (2009) states that assessments of written literacy should be designed and evaluated by well-informed current or future teachers of the students being assessed, for purposes clearly understood by all the participants; should elicit from student writers a variety of pieces, preferably over a substantial period of time; should encourage and reinforce good teaching strategies; and should be solidly grounded in the latest research on language learning as well as accepted best assessment process. Authentic assessment strategies provide a better technique of checking for deeper understanding. One of the authentic assessment suggestions includes writing samples where students write a narrative, expository, persuasive, or research paper (Baldwin et. al., 2006). Writing blogs and position papers, responding to prompts to various genres, writing lab reports, producing policy statements, letters, articles, critiques, and diary entries are examples of assessment practices that stimulate real-life applications (Seanson, 2012). The grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are in fact the backbone of clear communication. Developing writers need to know that precision, clarity, and correctness add credibility to what they write (De Chantal et. al., 2008).

Likewise, skill in writing grows from both practice and experience from learning the characteristics of good work and making decisions to improve one's work. Teaching writing is an overwhelming challenge since no part of writing is a static process. Effective writing cannot be reached solely through directed practice of discrete skills. Well-crafted writing is more than technique joined to vision—more than grammar and syntax with artful presentation (De Chantal et. al., 2008). The act of writing contains its own inner tensions. Wright (2014) suggests that writers must abide by a host of rules that govern the mechanics and conventions of writing yet are also expected—within the constraints of those rules to formulate original, even creative, thoughts.

However, teachers reduce students' sense of intimidation when their writing instruction makes the three stages of writing—planning, writing, and revision—clear and explicit. To improve the teaching of writing, particularly in the context of academic tasks, is to improve the quality of thinking required of students (Langer and Applebee, 2007). Teachers then play a critical role in developing the students' skills since a good writing process involves discussion, participation, and feedback. Moreover, strengthening the quality of education is urgent and critical. Along with the current implementation of any curriculum, the education sector had set the content standards for all the different subjects. For instance, writing in English requires the use of cohesive devices in basic literary and expository written discourse such as drama, essays, speeches, research reports, and scripts for broadcast communication text. By knowing a few intervention strategies for helping ESL writers, teachers can teach more effectively. Students need frequent, guided practice in writing using the English language to develop them as academic writers. As course experts, English teachers have the challenging task of helping their students learn specific written types and conventions, a skill that not all ESL learners in the world can perfectly execute. By focusing primarily on the content of student writing, a teacher may convey to students the importance of a well-designed, well-reasoned argument and audience expectations. By giving students opportunities to carry a piece of writing through a process that includes class discussion on a topic, drafting, revising, getting feedback, and proofreading, the teacher can assure better writing and better learning.

However, whatever intervention plan a teacher should carry out, it should be guided by the results of his/her assessment of the students' writing performance in the classroom. Shifting to the classroom situation in the local context, writing compositions using English is one of the major difficulties of students. Many college students, when asked to write compositions in English, omit the necessary punctuation marks, forget to observe proper indentions and margins, do not capitalize proper nouns, use sentence fragments and choppy sentences. In addition, the students have difficulties in organizing their ideas, using a variety of sentences, and choosing appropriate words.

In fact, many of the students who studied in some of the prestigious universities had verbalized the need to strengthen the English curriculum by incorporating more writing activities to train the students in the field of writing. The students reiterated the need for students to be prepared in writing reports, researches, essays, and term papers in English since most professors expect university students to have adequate knowledge in writing. In the above data as background, the researcher was motivated to conduct a case study to determine how competent the students in writing English compositions, particularly that of writing a descriptive



composition and in what components of writing were the students weak and strong. With the findings as bases, an intervention strategy plan in teaching writing was proposed.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study aimed to determine students' competence in writing English compositions. Specifically, it sought to answer the following problems:

1. How competent are the students in writing their descriptive compositions along with the following components:
  - 1.1 content
  - 1.2 organizations
  - 1.3 vocabulary
  - 1.4 language use
  - 1.5 mechanics
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the students in terms of the five components of writing?
3. What intervention strategy plan may be proposed to enhance the students' writing competence?
4. What are the implications of the study on the teaching of ESL writing?

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### The Students' Competence in English Composition Writing in Terms of the Five Components

#### 1.1 Content

The students got a mean score of 26.45 with a standard deviation of 1.42 which is within the level of good using the ESL Profile.

#### 1.2 Organization

The students got a mean score of 18.03 with a standard deviation of 1.19 which is within the verbal description of very good

#### 1.3 Vocabulary

The mean score of the students is 17.52 with a standard deviation of 0.94 and within the verbal description of good.

#### 1.4 Language Use

The students' average mean is 22.82 with a standard deviation of 1.49 which is at the level of very good in the ESL Profile.

#### 1.5 Mechanics

The students got a mean score of 4.21 with a standard deviation of 0.58 which is within the verbal description of good.

### 2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Students in Composition Writing

The students manifested their strengths in an organization with a mean of 18.03 and language use with a mean score of 22.82. However, the respondents were weak in the following areas: content, vocabulary, and mechanics with the mean scores of 26.45, 17.52, and 4.21, respectively.

### 3. Teaching Intervention Strategy Plan

Oftentimes while in the process of writing compositions, many students feel frustrated due to their writing difficulties. Hence, teachers must assist students by giving them specific feedback, enough models, and constructive criticisms. Similarly, teachers can use different writing intervention strategies to help students cope with their writing problems.

Some strategies included to enhance students' language use and organization of ideas were peer editing, selective peer editing/proofreading with highlighting of errors, graphic organizers, and essay diagramming. To enhance the students' content development, vocabulary, and mechanics in writing, strategies such as adding details to complete an essay, providing Four Bases checklist, ample time for prewriting, collaborative writing, word learning reinforcement, writing models, semantic feature analysis, paired word questions, punctuation marks worksheets, student-teacher conference, and using authentic texts are helpful.

### 4. The implication of the Study to Teaching ESL Writing

Since many students experienced problems in composition writing, teachers can provide various intervention strategies to help students cope with their writing difficulties. Writing practices such as summarizing, making outlines, and paragraph development should also be part of the teachers' writing activities to help students develop and improve their skills.

Because teachers are instrumental in developing the students' writing skills, they should master the nature and the different processes involved in writing by studying and looking into the results of various researches involving writing.

## Conclusions

The conclusions that follow are derived from the results and findings of the study:



1. The majority of the students were described as good to average in terms of their descriptive essay content, very good in terms of organization, good in vocabulary, very good in language use, and good in mechanics.
2. The strength of the students in writing was in organization and language use while their weakness was in the areas of content, vocabulary, and mechanics.
3. Teachers can use different strategies in providing writing interventions for students having writing difficulties.
4. English teachers should be knowledgeable about the latest research results involving the processes and strategies in teaching writing.

### Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn from the results of the study, the following are hereby recommended.

#### A. For the School Administrators

1. School administrators and supervisors should provide English teachers adequate training on the various processes that may be involved in writing, the research-proven strategies that can assist students, and the latest results of the different studies conducted in the field of writing. School heads or administrators can invite language experts who can help train teachers on the various approaches that can improve their teaching methodologies.

#### B. For the ESL Curriculum Planners

1. Curriculum planners should anchor learning competencies on the latest results of studies researches related to writing. In the same manner, textbook developers should include step-by-step procedures in the different stages of writing such as prewriting, drafting, and editing.

#### C. For ESL Writing Teachers

1. Vocabulary instructions should be observed inside the classroom to help students develop and a full and complete understanding of words and apply them to writing. In addition, vocabulary should be taught from a unifying context. Teachers need to select or have students select the targeted words for study from authentic texts such as newspapers, magazines, manuals, or novels.
2. Since mastery of conventions is essential to producing a quality written output, teachers should design activities or worksheets that can help students master the basic rules of conventions.
3. In order to increase the quality of the students' writing, ample time should be given to a student for prewriting, brainstorming ideas, and discussing writing plans. Teachers should not judge the students' drafts as final products but rather give enough time for the students to edit and revise their written outputs.
4. Because models offer students opportunities to critique and observe the characteristics and elements of good writing, students should be provided many good models of the genre they are writing.
5. Teachers should reinforce the students' writing skills by facilitating writing activities such as summarizing texts, outlining, and paragraph development.
6. Teachers can write their feedbacks and explain the writing errors committed by the students. In the same manner, teachers should use a set of correction symbols whose meanings are clear to the students involved.
7. Teachers should expose students to different genres such as personal narratives, how-to articles, descriptions, persuasive writing, expository writing, business letters, and research reports. Mastery of these genres allows students to adjust their written output for purpose and audience.

#### D. For the Students

Students should expose themselves to reading materials for them to learn and be familiar with different text structures. In the same way, exposure to different materials could enable them to build their own "text world". Likewise, they should also be exposed to various authentic texts by reading different materials.

#### E. For the Future Researchers

Future researchers may consider exploring more on research-driven strategies that can be used to improve the students' writing skills.

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