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ASSESSING DEFICIENCIES IN COMPOSITION WRITING: A CASE OF
FILIPINO COLLEGE FRESHMEN LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the gamut of writing errors committed by the first-year purposive communication students in a Philippine university. Utilizing quantitative and qualitative data analyses complemented by focus-group interviews, written compositions were evaluated and inter-rated by two language experts. The results showed prevalent grammatical errors, less familiarity with mechanics, and limited English vocabulary. Other serious issues are the lack of comprehensiveness and depth of ideas evident in need of relevant and stronger support. Moreover, a mismatch exists in what students manifested in the actual writing versus what they recognized and admitted as their errors. Such findings concluded that writing problems among first-year higher education students in ESL classes remain despite the many years of schooling and the number of English subjects studied notwithstanding the additional two years for senior high school.

INTRODUCTION

Despite its key role, writing has been one of the least mastered skills. Many higher education students stumble in their writing tasks (Elton, 2010; Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2010). Writing has received preferential attention as it is regarded as present in all endeavors, be it personal or professional, and “it leads to analytical, critical and logical thinking” (Smyth, 2004, p. 3). Teaching-learning processes will never be complete without the writing tasks. Essentially, writing is a gauge of one’s depth of understanding of the lesson or one’s ability to express his thoughts and ideas (Hyland, 2011).

Developing the writing skills of higher education students continues to challenge educators. In countries where English is considered a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL), various types of deficiencies are encountered (Bacha, 2002). Teachers have been subjected to different training and workshops (Shin, 2003) to equip them with more creative and modern ways of making writing enticing and motivating them. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) recently implemented a paradigm shift embracing competency-based standards (CHED, 2013) and outcomes-based and typology-based Quality Assurance (QA). It was intended to “produce high-level graduates with cognitive, reasoning, behavioral and technological skills/competencies that are consistent with national expectations and needs of academic and industry and international standards” (CHED, 2012, p. 2). This translates to the commitment to improve the higher education learners’ competencies so that they will never lack the writing skills and other general communication skills required in the workplace, thus enabling them to meet both national and international standards. Wijewardene, Yong & Chinna (2014) in Sri Lanka suggested that good English command implies strong job potential.

As written English competency is increasingly needed for “it has emerged as the international language of study and scholarship” (Hyland, 2011, p. 54), students are more likely to be well-equipped with the requisite knowledge target language and the basics of writing. Generally, they are trained to write with the right context, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and form with the target audience in mind (Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009) but errors remain frequently committed. Written outputs show the various deficiencies prompting possible remedies and/or interventions. In this context, assessing the college freshmen’s writing errors is essential as this provides concrete bases for the appropriate feedback needed. Students without getting enlightened on their errors will remain stagnant and complacent, eventually leading to underdeveloped academic skills. In the same light, educators will continue their writing practices unyielding of the necessary corrections and adjustments. Consequently, this affects the teaching-learning cycle and the development of learners’ skills constructs needed for future employment.

Literature review Perspectives on Writing

They are writing ushers a learner into various facets of thinking and language enrichment. Through writing, students are introduced into the different aspects of language use. Thus, each instructor must “a.) identify the kinds of language use that students need to be familiar with to write effectively; b.) make these uses accessible to students in ways that improve their learning and encouragement to write and engage in higher education; and c.) find ways to draw on the existing awareness and uses of language by students” (Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis & Swann, 2005, p. 12). Many kinds of research were conducted to probe how far writing is involved in disciplines. The study of Mateos, Villalon, de Dios & Martin (2007) indicated that psychology students regarded writing a summary of a single text as most useful in learning their course while writing a commentary for history students. Various writing tasks are lined-up so students can be

provided with the essential drills to develop their writing skills. But caution must be exercised to include those that simulate their future careers (Smyth, 2004).

Common Writing Errors

Hammad (2016) stated in a review of the essay writing problems of EFL students that writing issues were comprised of "grammatical errors, lexical errors, word-for-word translation, cohesion errors, lack of academic style, and lack of knowledge of material" (p. 115). Thai English-major students also manifest similar errors (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). These findings show a similarity with other Asian students. In Malaysia, Darus & Dubramaniam (2009) carried out research that examined 72 participants' essays. They found out that errors committed mainly dealt with grammar and limitations in English vocabulary. Severino & Prim (2015) supports these results in their study of the Chinese students' written draft. They concluded that Chinese, like other ESL learners, demonstrate a dilemma in choosing words as they write. They noted that "word choice problems can negatively affect rhetorical effectiveness and readers' comprehension and evaluation" (p. 115).

Alinsunod (2014), on the other hand, found that more errors were made in punctuation and capitalization in her study of typical writing errors of engineering students at a Philippine University. In Japan, Stapleton (2001) revealed that Japanese students display critical thinking skills in their writing and elaborate if given topics are familiar. Zheng & Park (2013) reported the similarity between Chinese and Korean students' writing errors that were mainly grammatical. One specific result was comma usage, which led to faulty sentence construction among Chinese students.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study participants were 49 first-year higher education students enrolled in the first semester, taking up the Bachelor of Arts (BA) program. They currently study Purposive Communication—one of the General Education subjects. They all took and graduated Senior High School (SHS) program (2nd batch of graduates since K+12 implementation in the country) with 27 from public schools and 22 from private schools. Before enrolment, only 17 passed the entrance examination and enrolled in their desired course, while 32 of them were on the waiting list since they did not meet the required cut-off grade in their preferred courses. As a resolve, the majority took the BA program to study at the tertiary level.

Classroom context

Of the 49 students, 28 were female, and 21 were males. All of them speak fluent Filipino language but not all in the English language. During English subjects, they are required to communicate in English. While most do their best, once they don't know the English words to convey their thoughts, some do codeswitching. In non-English classes, they speak in either plain Filipino or codeswitch into "Eng-log" (English-Tagalog). None of them had enrolled in any English tutorial program.

Data collection and analysis

A combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis approaches was utilized to gather data. During their Purposive Communication subject with one and a half-hour duration, they were instructed to write a 400-500-word composition about social media and its effects on young adults. While writing, two sheets of paper were provided: one for the draft, the other for final output. They were not allowed to use any of their gadgets. Hence cellphones were kept, and no browsing from any source took place. Purely, they

wrote ideas and words from their own. With the given time duration, 44 of them finished within an hour, and five maximized the allotted time.

Two experts in the field of teaching English evaluated the papers in three occurrences. Considering the four major error categories, namely: contents, grammar, lexicon, and mechanics, the listing of specific error was upon encounter to ensure that all errors will be included. Each sentence was scrutinized to spot and categorize the errors committed. Since there was a required number of words, word counting was also done to determine if they met the required number.

Focus Group Interviews (FGI) was performed to collect additional data and perform triangulation through face-to-face and messaging (Flick, 2004). The responses of the respondents were qualitatively processed.

RESULTS

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Content Errors

Content errors	FEMALE		MALE		TOTAL	%
	f	%	f	%		
1. Needs relevant and stronger support ideas	23	29.11	16	23.19	39	26.35
2. Lacks variety in sentence types and structure	18	22.78	13	18.84	31	20.95
3. The flow of ideas is confusing to follow	15	18.99	9	13.04	24	16.22
4. The conclusion does not summarize the main points	6	7.59	8	11.59	14	9.46
5. The introduction is not separate from the main body	5	6.33	7	10.14	12	8.11
6. One paragraph for the entire composition	3	3.80	7	10.14	10	6.76
7. No conclusion at all	3	3.80	4	5.80	7	4.73
8. The main idea is not identifiable	2	2.53	3	4.35	5	3.38
9. Details are lacking	2	2.53	1	1.45	3	2.03
10. No composition title	2	2.53	1	1.45	3	2.03
TOTAL	79	100.00	69	100.00	148	100.00

Table 1 shows the ten types of content errors that occurred in the written outputs. The three dominant errors need relevant and stronger support ideas, lack *variety in sentence types and structure*, and *the flow of ideas is confusing to follow*. This implies that while students can produce a composition, the ideas presented are shallow and sentence structures are basic. Moreover, despite writing shorter compositions, males registered more errors in items 4 to 8. Interestingly, no one codeswitched in their writing, which they usually do when speaking.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors	FEMALE		MALE		TOTAL	%
	f	%	f	%		
1. *Subject-verb disagreement	145	15.12	80	20.62	225	16.70
2. *Wrong verb form	155	16.16	48	12.37	203	15.07
3. Misuse of articles or non-use where needed	88	9.18	22	5.67	110	8.17
4. Run-on sentences	68	7.09	32	8.25	100	7.42
5. Used singular instead of the needed plural noun	55	5.74	31	7.99	86	6.38
6. Misused prepositions or none where needed	63	6.57	19	4.90	82	6.09
7. Used singular noun after a plural indefinite pronoun	63	6.57	16	4.12	79	5.86
8. Wrong use of pronouns	52	5.42	10	2.58	62	4.60
9. Sentence fragments	41	4.28	14	3.61	55	4.08
10. *Wrong tenses	34	3.55	15	3.87	49	3.64
11. Inconsistency in the number of subject	35	3.65	12	3.09	47	3.49
12. Needs to use transition words	24	2.50	17	4.38	41	3.04
13. Shifted person of pronouns	21	2.19	7	1.80	28	2.08
14. Faulty parallelism with items in series	19	1.98	7	1.80	26	1.93
15. *Lack of auxiliary verb	13	1.36	12	3.09	25	1.86
16. Wrong plural form	14	1.46	9	2.32	23	1.71
17. *Put linking verb before a transitive/ intransitive verb	13	1.36	7	1.80	20	1.48
18. *No verb in the sentence	12	1.25	6	1.55	18	1.34
19. Wrong word sequence	9	0.94	4	1.03	13	0.97
20. Wrong question pattern	4	0.42	6	1.55	10	0.74
21. Used plural noun after a singular indefinite pronoun	6	0.63	2	0.52	8	0.59
22. Used an adjective instead of needed noun	7	0.73	1	0.26	8	0.59
23. Used adjective instead of needed adverb	6	0.63	2	0.52	8	0.59
24. Wrong possessive case	1	0.10	6	1.55	7	0.52
25. Used a noun instead of needed adjective	4	0.42	1	0.26	5	0.37
26. *Used a verb instead of needed noun	4	0.42	0	0.00	4	0.30
27. *Used a noun instead of needed verb	1	0.10	2	0.52	3	0.22
28. Used adverb instead of needed adjective	2	0.21	0	0.00	2	0.15
Total	959	100.00	388	100.00	1347	100.00

Table 2 depicts the grammatical errors committed by the college freshmen. Subject-verb disagreement accounted for the highest number (16.70%), followed by the wrong verb form (15.07%). It is worth noting that eight (8) errors (items 1, 2, 10, 15, 17, 18, 26, and 27) were within poor verb use. Second, most errors were on the use of articles (for females) and run-on sentences (for males). The frequency figures show that females, in which 57% wrote 400 words and above, incurred more errors than males in which only

43% wrote 400 words and above. This reflects that more females attempted to meet the required number of the composition through elaboration, making them susceptible to committing errors. Some of the flaws with verb use include *"to inspired," "will gone," "to doing homework," "cannot be steal," "many young adults is used an internet," "they have no concentrating," "you always doing in everyday life is can affected," "if you are not commit,"* and *"some of our responsibilities is."* This implies that freshmen students are confused about the proper use of verbs.

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage of Lexical Errors

Lexical errors	FEMALE		MALE		TOTAL	%
	f	%	f	%		
1. Redundancy	111	35.58	28	26.17	139	33.17
2. Inappropriate word use	59	18.91	50	46.73	109	26.01
3. Included unnecessary words	62	19.87	3	2.80	65	15.51
4. The word needed is missing	40	12.82	10	9.35	50	11.93
5. Separated joined words	25	8.01	9	8.41	34	8.11
6. Abbreviated/ clipped word	6	1.92	1	0.93	7	1.67
7. Joined separate words	3	0.96	2	1.87	5	1.19
8. Wrong collocation	2	0.64	2	1.87	4	0.95
9. Wrong syllabication	3	0.96	0	0.00	3	0.72
10. Did not use gender-neutral word	1	0.32	1	0.93	2	0.48
11. The same word in a sequence	0	0.00	1	0.93	1	0.24
Total	312	100.00	107	100.00	419	100.00

Table 3 shows the 11 discovered lexical errors. Redundancy (33.17%) was the principal lexical error committed. This was followed by inappropriate word use (26.01%) and the inclusion of unnecessary words (15.51%). In their outputs, the repetitively written word was "social media." The majority of the freshmen failed to substitute it with the right pronoun. In the interview, they said among the difficulties they have, next to wrong grammar, is a limited vocabulary. Some words often repeated were *addicted, advantages, disadvantages, technology, your, picture, game, eat, limit, good effects, bad effects, adults, information, gadgets, sick, health, daily life, and sleep.* One wrote, *"The main effect of social media in young adults is we sleep late than usually the right sleep is 8 hrs or above, young adults now a days sleep in "12 am or 2 am" that because of social media,"* and *"About social media, social media have a lot of use."* In the first sentence, "sleep" was repeated three times and in the second, "social media" was written twice.

On the other hand, while they struggle with vocabulary, many unnecessary words were included as in the case of the following: *"I provoke myself that there's have a limitation for this...," "Social media it can be give as a high impact in our daily life," "First, I have a time how long do I spent, I have in mindset what is important to do before anything else."* The extra words in the sentences utterly tend to perplex the message being conveyed. These lexical errors show how college freshmen learners struggle with accumulating English words that serve as their tools for expressing thoughts and ideas.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentage of Mechanical Errors

Mechanical Errors	Female		Male		Total	%
	f	%	f	%		
<u>Spelling:</u>						
1. Wrong Spelling	98	17.01	35	11.08	133	14.91
<u>Capitalization:</u>						
1. Common Noun And a Non-Noun Initial Letter Written in Uppercase	214	37.15	126	39.87	340	38.12
2. Lowercase at the Beginning of a Sentence	40	6.94	17	5.38	57	6.39
3. "F" Is Written in Capital Letters	0	0.00	48	15.19	48	5.38
4. Did Not Capitalize "I"	34	5.90	3	0.95	37	4.15
5. Proper Noun Initial Letter Was Written in Lowercase	14	2.43	8	2.53	22	2.47
6. Wrote in All Capital Letters	0	0.00	1	0.32	1	0.11
7. An Acronym is Written in Lowercase	0	0.00	1	0.32	1	0.11
<u>Punctuation:</u>						
1. No Comma Where it is Needed	86	14.93	35	11.08	121	13.57
2. No Apostrophe in Contracted Words, Wrong Position of the Apostrophe	48	8.33	9	2.85	57	6.39
3. No Period at the End of the Sentence	22	3.82	18	5.70	40	4.48
4. Used Comma Instead of Needed Period	7	1.22	4	1.27	11	1.23
5. No Question Mark Where it is Needed	3	0.52	4	1.27	7	0.78
6. Put Period Though Not Needed	6	1.04	1	0.32	7	0.78
7. Did Not use Quotation Marks for Local Words	1	0.17	4	1.27	5	0.56
8. Used Comma Instead of a Needed Semi-Colon	2	0.35	1	0.32	3	0.34
9. Wrong Use of the Apostrophe	0	0.00	1	0.32	1	0.11
10. Put Comma Though Not Needed	1	0.17	0	0.00	1	0.11
Total	576	100.00	316	100.00	892	100.00

The table displays the exhibited errors in mechanics. Of the three sub-categories, freshmen students registered the highest number in capitalization (56.73%), followed by punctuation (28.36%) and spelling (14.91%). Some of the capitalization errors were on common nouns and even non-nouns. Females had 214, and some were *Homeworks, Generation, Country, Abroad, Educational, Advance, Time, To, The, This, and Then*. Males had 126, and these included *Bad, Impact, Young, Adults, Knowledge, Police, Fake, Internet, Because, Information, Composition, Not, They, Our, Lets, and Globe*. While the trend reveals females are committing more errors, males outnumbered them in the error writing "f" in capital letters. This could be argued as either a result of carelessness or writing style orientation.

In punctuation, problems with comma use topped the list. Samples are “*In this year most of the people...*,” “*In this modern world most of the people,*” “*Now a days it is important to us...*,” “*In the past school year we study the effects...*,” and “*As a student we can do something.*” When asked why such error surfaced, the majority said they forgot. In contrast, others attested that it was due to their practice in sending SMS (short messaging system) commonly known as *text* and posting at various social media platforms where apostrophe and other punctuation marks are frequently omitted.

Unexpectedly, there were still many spelling errors spotted in the written outputs. Some of which were *medial* (media), *hobbits* (habits), *controbercial* (controversial), *choirs* (chores), *jealouusy* (jealousy), *plagirize* (plagiarize), *authomatically* (automatically), *proffessors* (professors), and *iresponsible* (irresponsible). For males, nine (9) students had misspelled words such as *likwise* (likewise), *Filipinoes* (Filipinos), *resposibilities* (responsibilities), *sibilization* (civilization), *persfective* (perspective), *temporarily* (temporarily), *easely* (easily), and *incountered* (encountered).

DISCUSSION

The current study revealed that writing is a continuous challenge for ESL learners. First-year College students, in their attempt to produce a composition that meets the required number of words, committed a large number of errors primarily in grammar and mechanics. Interviews, however, noted that with grammar as their main difficulty, vocabulary follows. Meanwhile, students continue to think of grammar as the main issue, but during the writing process, it was observed that they tend to exhibit poor writing strategies. The majority never had a rough draft. They started late as they think of the first words to write. And once they started writing, they use right away the provided final paper. With that, they failed to realize the significance of pre-writing and post-writing stages. It may be argued that this practice contributed to their writing deficiencies and the fact that problems in grammar and mechanics prevail. Lexical errors and content errors fell second last and last, respectively. This showed that in writing, students do have ideas in mind, but they need to deepen and provide more supporting ideas is discernable. When asked about where the problem lies, some of them expressed:

We were given many writing tasks, but we really have major problems with grammar and vocabulary. We were encouraged to do the translation, but we still find it difficult.

In our past years of schooling wherein, we were many in the class, and writing tasks were not returned immediately. (CF 5)

We had writing tasks in SHS, but I don't think the grading is fair. We noticed that if the composition is longer, the score is higher. But if it is short, automatically, the score will be low. (CF 25)

Our teacher put correction marks sometimes, but not all the time. So we don't know where we were mistaken. We just comply with the task. (CF 17)

Based on these views, another set of issues emerged. The problem goes not only on the technical side of writing but on the non-technical as well. Issues such as lack of motivation to write, negative attitudes toward writing in the official language (English), lack of regular English reading inputs, and poor error correction and feedback surfaced. Without them focusing on developing their writing skills in this least mastered skill, the problem would remain as they advance in their year levels. Consequently, more serious impacts could be on employment (Harris, Graham, Brindle & Sandmel, 2009).

CONCLUSION

As communication continues to thrive in terms of accessibility and complexity, writing has become more challenging for college freshmen learners. In the current study, results showed prevalent grammatical errors, less familiarity with the mechanics and structure of the compositions, limited vocabulary, and lack of comprehensiveness and depth of ideas. Furthermore, there was a perceived problem is not following the writing stages.

With the trend of writing tasks getting progressively complex and moving beyond the traditional paper and pen as computer-mediated activities are now integrated into the teaching pedagogy, a more informed, intensive, and consistent error correction mechanism needs to be in place. For that, teachers may opt to use software applications to augment the checking of voluminous outputs. A regular review of the basics in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling is also needed. Likewise, there is a need to enlighten students on the value better writing skills bring to keep their motivation high. Lastly, reading-based intervention programs would help address the content issues in writing as they would discover input ideas and writing styles and enhance their lexicon. It would also have the additional effect of making them equipped with 21st-century skills, making them work-ready and globally competitive.

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