

WRITTEN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF LABORATORY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN A STATE UNIVERSITY IN CAGAYAN VALLEY PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the written language proficiency of 140 high school students in a Laboratory High School students in a State University in Cagayan Valley, Philippines. The written compositions of the respondents were used as the instrument to gather data. The descriptive-correlational method of research was applied.

The study revealed that most of the students are very proficient in structure and grammar but not so much in mechanics.

The study also revealed the persistent errors committed by the respondents in their written compositions namely: use of verbs, verb tenses and proper use of capitalization. It revealed that there is no significant relationship between the written language proficiency of the respondents and their profile variables. It revealed further that there exists no significant relationship between the persistent written language errors of the respondents and their profile variables.

Keywords: Written Language Proficiency, Structure, Grammar, Mechanics.

INTRODUCTION:

Of the four skills in English, writing is considered to be the most complex and difficult skill to master. This difficulty, according to Richards and Renandya (2002: 303), "lies not only in generating and organizing of ideas but also in translating these ideas into readable texts".

The important role ascribed to writing is manifested in the status accorded to it in differing situations within the teaching and learning environment. For instance, writing serves as an important tool of assessing proficiency as attested by its inclusion in the form of writing tests in major examinations such as the TOEFL and IELTS writing sub-test. Beyond the realms of assessment, the skill of writing is an essential feature of materials development (Cumming, 1997). In academia, the skill of writing is visible in conference presentations, journals and book publication through which the transmission of new ideas and concepts are effected.

A number of studies (Jonopolous, 1992; Santos, 1988; Lorenz and Met, 1988) affirm that a lack of grammatical accuracy in writing may impede progress. Therefore, it is imperative that learners be sensitized to such errors and be trained to apply the appropriate approaches to rectify them. Ferries (1994) proposes an editing approach in which learners need to edit their own work while Bates, Lane, and Lange (1993) advocate teaching students the discovery approach through which they will become independent and critical self-editors.

Communication can be both oral and written. Writing does have one great advantage over speaking. It enables him to proceed by trial and error until he can formulate his ideas and parts of ideas in their best possible shapes as Forlini (1990) stated. Communication through writing can enrich the vocabulary of students, familiarize them with a simple style of writing, will stimulate and force them to think and can give them opportunities to improve their writing abilities.

Robles (1988) stipulated that writing furnishes opportunities for free genuine self-expression which is possible when difficulties of expression cease to be a major problem. In the light of this concern, an investigation on the written language proficiency is hoped to reveal needed solutions to difficulties that will pave the way toward better written expression; hence, this present study is envisioned to take.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

This study attempted to identify the written language proficiency of the high school students of Laboratory High School in a State University in Cagayan Valley, Philippines.

Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the written language proficiency of the respondents in terms of: structure; grammar; and mechanics
2. Is there a significant relationship between written language proficiency and the respondents' profile variables?
3. What are the persistent written language errors of the respondents?
4. Is there a significant relationship between the persistent language errors and the respondents' profile variables?

SCOPE AND DELIMITATION:

This study focused on the written language proficiency of the fourth year high school students enrolled in a Laboratory High School in a State University in Cagayan Valley Philippines during the School Year 2011-2012.

This study was confined to the grammatical, mechanical and structural errors committed by the high school students in their written compositions.

The written compositions were used in this study and the analysis of the grammatical, mechanical and structural errors in their outputs were used by the researcher in gathering the data needed in the research work.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY:

The study tested the following null hypotheses:

1. There is no significant relationship between the written language proficiency and the students' profile variables.
2. There is no significant relationship between the common written language errors and the students' profile variables.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

To achieve the purpose of the study, the descriptive-correlational method was used in gathering the needed data for the study. The descriptive method was used to give an account on students' profile and the results of the tests. On the other hand, correlation was utilized to measure the association of two or more quantitative variables. It is concerned in the changes and movements of two variables.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT:

The principal tool used by the researcher consists of one hundred forty written composition of high school students in a Laboratory High School in a State University in Cagayan Valley, Philippines.

Choosing the topic for composition was done in a democratic way. The students were asked to suggest topics/titles according to their interests and they have voted on a particular topic. The topic/title with the highest vote and which was used for their composition writing activity was “My Favorite Television Show.”

The compositions were checked and analyzed. The specific errors in writing were tallied and categorized. The corrections and evaluation of the written composition were aided by a paragraph writing rubric adapted from the internet and had been modified by the researcher (www.teachers.teachnology.com). It classified errors in three classesnamely: structure, grammar and mechanics.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:

All data which were gathered were recorded, tallied, tabulated, analyzed and interpreted and have been subjected to computer software using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

In order to have a clear understanding on the data which were gathered, these were statistically treated using the following statistical tools:

1. Average rating computation was used to determine the written language proficiency of the respondents.
2. Percentage was utilized to determine the written language proficiency of the respondents in terms of structure, grammar and mechanics.
3. Mean and rank order were used to describe the written language errors of the respondents.
4. Chi-square Test was utilized to determine the significant relationship between profile variables and written language proficiency of the respondents and the written language errors and the profile variables.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

WRITTEN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF THE RESPONDENTS:

Table 3 shows the written language proficiency of the respondents in terms of structure, grammar and mechanics.

Table 3. Written Language Proficiency of the Respondents

Area	Mean-Computed	Qualitative Description
Structure		
Main Idea/Topic Sentence	3.44	Very Proficient
Supporting Detail Sentence/s	3.59	Very Proficient
Elaborating Detail Sentences	3.65	Very Proficient
Grammar		Very Proficient
Subject Verb Agreement	3.50	Very Proficient
Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement	3.64	Very Proficient
Verbs/Tense of Verbs	2.97	Proficient
Adjectives/Adverbs	3.32	Very Proficient
Mechanics		Very Proficient
Capitalization	2.77	Very Proficient
Punctuation	2.72	Proficient
Spelling	3.26	Very Proficient

It can be gleaned from Table 3 that the respondents are very proficient in the use of structure particularly in elaborating detail sentences, supporting detail sentence/s and main idea or topic sentences shown by the mean computed of 3.65, 3.59 and 3.44 respectively. In grammar, the respondents are very proficient in pronoun and antecedent agreement, subject-verb agreement and the proper use of adjectives and adverbs with a mean-computed equal to 3.64, 3.50 and 3.32. They are only proficient in the proper use of verbs and tenses of verbs.

The role of grammar in writing is akin to the role of listening and speaking where the two are mutually synergistic. In other words, writing and grammar are inextricably intertwined as much of good writing derives its excellence from faultless grammar. This is emphasized by Frodesen and Eyring (2000: 23) who believe that, “a focus on form (grammar) in composition can help writers develop rich linguistic resources needed

to express ideas effectively". Based on these views, the researcher deduced that second language writers need to pay attention to form in developing writing proficiency. Hence, the model of grammar in this study was adopted from the model of grammar as proposed by James (1998: 96), which is based on a descriptive view and "stands between the two extremes of scientific and pedagogic grammars".

It was revealed in the table that the respondents are very proficient in mechanics particularly in spelling with mean – computed equal to 3.26 and in capitalization and punctuation with mean – computed to 2.77 and 2.72 respectively. This implies that majority of the errors committed by the respondents fall on mechanics which was their weakest area.

Results of Chi-Square Test between Written Language Proficiency and the Respondents' Profile Variables:

Table 4 reveals the relationship between the written language proficiency and the respondents' profile variables.

Table 4. Chi-Square Test between Written Language Proficiency and the Respondents' Profile Variables

Profile	X ² -Comp.	Probability Value
Gender	2.390 ^{ns}	0.4386
Elementary School Graduated From	1.96 ^{ns}	0.4986
Monthly Income of Parents	6.902 ^{ns}	0.3046
Availability of Mass Comm. Materials at Home		
Print Media	0.902 ^{ns}	0.6240
Audio/Video Equipment	5.188 ^{ns}	0.5938

ns-not significant

As revealed in the table, there is no significant relationship between the respondents' written language proficiency and their profile namely gender, elementary school graduated from, monthly income of parents and availability of mass communication materials at home. This means that the respondents' profile does not determine and do not influence or affect their written language performance.

This result leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between the written language proficiency and the respondents' profile variables namely gender, elementary school graduated from, monthly income of parents and availability of mass communication materials at home.

Other studies bared the same thing like Abon (1998) in her study found out that the type of school graduated from, socio-economic status of parents and the respondents' profile do not have a bearing in their English proficiency.

Gravoso's (1999) study also found out that the type of elementary and high school attended to by the respondents do not affect their proficiency in English as revealed by the result of the questionnaire she had given to her respondents.

PERSISTENT WRITTEN LANGUAGE ERRORS OF THE RESPONDENTS:

Table 5 shows the persistent written language errors committed by the respondents in their written compositions.

Table 5. Persistent Written Language Errors of the Respondents

Persistent Errors	Mean-Computed	Rank by Category	Over-all Rank
Structure			
Main Idea/Topic Sentence	0.721	2	8
Supporting Detail Sentence/s	0.635	3	9
Elaborating Detail Sentence/s	0.843	12	7
Grammar			
Subject – Verb Agreement	1.243	2	4
Pronoun Antecedent Agreement	0.507	4	10
Verbs/verb Tenses	1.707	1	3
Adjective/Adverb	0.935	3	6
Mechanics			
Capitalization	2.314	1	1
Spelling	1.021	3	5

It can be observed from Table 5 that in structure, the persistent error committed by the respondents was the use of elaborating detail sentences followed by the use of supporting detail sentences and the use of main idea or topic sentence with mean-computed equal to 0.843, 0.721 and 0.635 respectively. This implies that some students find it hard to support or elaborate their ideas since they cannot express themselves clearly in English.

In grammar, the persistent error was the use of verbs/verb tenses with mean computed equal to 1.707. This conforms with the study of Dizon (1997) in her findings that the use of the verb forms rank first as an area in which most of the students failed. It was followed by errors in subject and verb agreement and the use of adjectives and adverbs with mean-computed equal to 1.243 and 0.935 respectively. Errors in pronoun and antecedent agreement only come last with mean-computed equal to 0.507.

The same findings were revealed by Laforteza's study (1995) when 90 percent of her respondents committed the highest number of errors in verbs followed by the use of preposition in the written examination administered to them.

In mechanics, persistent errors in capitalization have been committed by the respondents followed by errors in capitalization and spelling with mean-computed equal to 2.314, 2.029 and 1.021 respectively. The finding in this particular aspect reveals that the students have difficulty in using the rules on capitalization. As Samson (1998) found out in his study that capitalization is one of the common errors committed by students in their compositions.

It can also be gleaned from the table that based on the mean of the errors committed, not all of the respondents committed errors in structure particularly in finding the main idea, supporting detail sentences and elaborating detail sentences.

In grammar, one or more errors in the use of subject-verb agreement; not all of the respondents committed errors in the use of pronoun-antecedent agreement and the use of adjectives and adverbs; and one or more errors were committed by the respondents in the use of verbs and verb tenses.

Regarding the relationship between writing and other variables, Rivers (1981: 296) notes that "writing is dependent on progress in other skills". Oller in Jacobs et al. (1981: 2) also expresses similar views regarding writing and its relationships with other skills. He believes that, "writing is not an isolated performance founded in some capacity cut off from the rest of human experience. Rather, writing skills have been shown to be fundamentally integrated with reading, speaking, and listening". In a similar vein, Krashen's "input hypothesis" (1981) stresses the close integration of writing with reading, and other skills.

These views regarding the inextricable link between writing and the other language skills are echoed by Jacobs et al. (1981: 74) who note that since composing involves many of the same factors as general language proficiency; "a test of composition should correlate substantially with measures of overall English proficiency even though a composition requires a writing performance specifically". In this regard, Cumming, Kantor, Baba, Eouanzoui, Erdosy, and James (2005) reported important differences in the discourse characteristics of written responses that were related to proficiency levels. Greater writing proficiency was associated with longer responses, greater lexical sophistication, syntactic complexity, and grammatical accuracy. It can thus be surmised from these views that an symbiotic relationship exists between writing and the other language skills such as listening, reading and speaking as well as the various sub-skills such as phonetics and phonology, vocabulary, and grammar.

Result of CM-Square Test between the Persistent Written Language Errors and the Respondents Profile Variables

Table 6 reveals the result of the chi-square test between the persistent written language errors and the respondents profile variables.

Table 6. Chi-Square Test between the Persistent Language Errors and the Respondents Profile Variables

Profile	X ² – Comp.	Probability Value
Gender	3.997 ^{ns}	0.7838
Elementary School Graduated From	4.862 ^{ns}	0.4329
Monthly Income of Parents	12.628 ^{ns}	0.1253
Availability of Mass Comm. Materials at Home		
Print Media	10.271 ^{ns}	0.2465
Audio/Video Equipment	11.5 ^{ns}	0.4803

ns-not significant

As shown in the table, there is no significant relationship between the respondents' persistent written language errors and their profile variables namely; gender, elementary school graduated from, monthly income of parents and availability of mass communication materials at home.

This result leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between the persistent written language errors and the respondents' profile variables which conforms to the study of Davis et al (1994).

CONCLUSIONS:

In the light of the findings of the study, the following conclusions are derived:

1. Most students are not very proficient in the use of mechanics particularly in capitalization and punctuation.
2. Most students commit the highest number of errors in the use of verbs and verb tenses and the capitalization rules in their compositions.
3. Most students are very proficient in the use of structure and grammar.
4. The result of the chi-square computed value revealed that there is no significant relationship between the respondents' profile variables and their written language proficiency.
5. The result of chi-square computed value revealed that there exists no significant relationship between the respondents' persistent written language errors and their profile variables.

SUGGESTIONS:

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

1. Composition writing must be given to the students every beginning of the school year to identify who needs assistance. Results of which may be used to choose appropriate methods and strategies suited to the written language proficiency of the students.
2. Teachers may form English gangs or pairs and appoint students with superior written language proficiency who will facilitate discussions on the weaknesses of the students.
3. The teacher may give written tests for his evaluation in the middle of the school year to see if the proficiency level of his students improved.
4. The institution particularly the language department may initiate a program that will address the writing needs of the students.
5. Similar researches may be conducted on the same respondents in order to monitor their improvement.
6. A follow-up study should be conducted as to relate factors and programs which can help improve or enhance the development of their writing skills.
7. In as much as English is a second language to the Filipino students, an English teacher must attain certain proficiency in the language so that he could teach the language efficiently.
8. Curriculum content in English should be modified to suit the present needs and demands of the students.

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