



**TECHNIUM**  
**SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL**

**Vol. 31, 2022**

**A new decade  
for social changes**

[www.techniumscience.com](http://www.techniumscience.com)

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

## “I can’t write”: problems, factors, and recommendations

Joanne D. Gorospe<sup>1</sup>, Ma. Imelda C. Rayton<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>College of Teacher Education, Occidental Mindoro State College, San Jose,  
Occidental Mindoro, Philippines 5100

[joannedgorospe@gmail.com](mailto:joannedgorospe@gmail.com), [ma.imelda\\_crayton@gmail.com](mailto:ma.imelda_crayton@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** Writing is a significant skill whose significance increases when it comes to writing in the English language which is used for global mediation of knowledge. This study explored the problems encountered by students who have difficulty in writing, the factors which could be reasons for these difficulties, and the possible solutions to overcome these. This made use of qualitative research design and employed phenomenological case study framework. After thematic analyses, it was found that the students encountered problems in writing specifically in syntax, grammar, and vocabulary. The students believed that lack of reading and writing practice, lack of ideas, and lack of self-confidence were the factors affecting their writing skills. To address the problems that they encountered in writing, the students recommended increased reading, writing practice, and teacher assistance.

**Keywords.** writing skills, writing problems, writing difficulties

### Introduction

Writing is of paramount importance for learners. It is a survival skill as students are obliged to use it as a medium for learning other courses, to prepare home assignments and projects, and, eventually, to communicate with their instructors (Kasem, 2017). It is an important part of daily life, and it is involved in many situations in which a series of symbols convey meanings with several purposes (Niño & Páez, 2018). However, writing in English is considered the most difficult skill in English by most students (Inayah & Nanda, 2016). Many studies and literature in the past have studied writing skills and several factors were found associated with it. One of the factors found is with the motivation of learners who are generally unclear about the purpose and significance of their text in their second language learning. Similarly, social media, inconsistent feedback from teachers, learners’ lack of analytical and evaluative approach, and large and unmanageable class sizes are also found to have a negative impact on the structural and communicative accuracy of the students’ texts (Pineteh, 2013).

The significance of writing is stressed by many researchers (Li, 2012; Choi, 2013; Olanezhad, 2015) who assured the crucial role that writing has played in the history of mankind. Writing provides people with a means to communicate their feelings, achievements, dreams, and opinions. Writing bridges the gap and connects people from different backgrounds and across borders.

There are a number of factors that contribute to poor academic writing skills amongst first year university students (Chokwe, 2013). Knowing these factors will help educators, especially the English teachers, in finding the best interventions that would best remedy students' difficulties in writing. The current paper will have students having difficulty in writing as beneficiaries. As they benefit from the results of the study, teachers who are handling students with the same difficulty may also benefit from the results.

Factors that contribute to poor academic writing skills among college freshmen include under-preparedness caused by ineffective teaching of writing at school level, socio-economic issues, and inadequate reading (Chokwe, 2013). There is a need to strengthen the bilingual teaching of undergraduate general and specialized courses since this is one way to adapt to the development of economic globalization and domestic higher education internationalization (Ma & Chen, 2017). As Yong (2010) argues, the transition from secondary school to foundation studies poses a serious challenge for many in terms of academic writing. With the findings of the study, it is expected that these would bridge the gap and connect people from different backgrounds.

Tuan (2012) argued that motivation affects students' enthusiasm to participate in learning writing. Studies that have investigated how the learners' performance in writing correspond with writing anxiety show results such as: (1) learners with a high level of anxiety get low scores on standardized tests of writing (2) EFL learners' writing quality is negatively affected by writing anxiety, and (3) writing in the target language involves a high level of anxiety as writing is a skill that expects individuals to work individually (Kasem, 2017).

Researchers in the past have found out students' weaknesses in writing. Inayah and Nanda (2016) revealed that the students have difficulties in developing writing skills, in particular, problems with lack of vocabulary, grammar, text organization, and mechanics and among these, grammar and lack of vocabulary were the most common problems they faced in their English writing. Moreover, Albalawi and Younes (2015) stated that grammar and structure are the major weaknesses in English writing. Students often make mistakes in tenses, punctuation, syntax errors, verb agreements, or articles in grammar rules. In turn, a large number of learners consider writing as a process that provokes much anxiety. This motivates many researchers to employ different techniques to assist their students in overcoming their writing anxiety such as working in groups and establishing a sense of community in the class. Thus, creating a non-threatening environment in English writing classes is essential to reduce students' English writing anxiety.

However, writing is often considered merely a part of teaching and learning grammar and syntax, which resultantly underestimates the nature and importance of writing, and affects its growth. Fhonna (2014) also mentions that comments or feedback from their teachers influence students' ability to produce better writing making it one of the most influential inputs for the students in order to develop more and better writing in the future. Writing is not an instant activity; instead, it is a progressive one that is obtained through several processes (Inayah & Nanda). Therefore, the development of this skill draws considerable attention for its learning and teaching from the very early phase of language education (Fareed et al., 2016).

This study is supported by Krashen's (1987) second language acquisition theory which suggested that there are two independent ways containing acquisition and learning to develop the ability of a second language. As known, the acquisition is a subconscious process that is consistent with the process of a child acquiring the mother tongue. During this process, language is usually acquired unconsciously by learners. On the contrary, learning is a conscious process and means a clear understanding of a second language. This also holds that acquisition is more

important than learning in the use of a second language. The acquisition takes listening as an important source. Second language learner generally experiences a silent period in the beginning and then can be in harmony with expression after accepting plenty of inputs.

It is on this premise that this study was conducted. The output of the study will add to the existing literature on various strategies as recommendations to improve students' writing skills. This will also give both students and teachers insights into the possible reasons for poor writing skills and the factors behind these. Thus, with the information on the suggestions from the students who have experienced the problem themselves; interventions to improve students' writing skills may be formulated. According to Raja and Zahid (2013), identifying problems only is not sufficient to take students out of writing phobia, it is a need for time to suggest practical treatment. Thus, the significance of this study will be realized by most students, especially those who are experiencing difficulty in writing, and by teachers in English who also experience the problem.

### **Objectives**

Generally, this paper aimed to explore the problems encountered by students who have difficulty in writing, the factors which could be reasons for these difficulties, and the possible solutions to overcome these. More specifically, this study aimed to:

1. explore the problems encountered by the students in writing;
2. investigate the different factors affecting the students' writing skills; and
3. examine students' recommendations to improve their writing skills.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the students' writing problems, factors that hamper writing development, and suggestions to improve writing skills. Phenomenological case study framework was used due to the exploratory lens that provided the flexibility for discovery and a better understanding of the freshmen's experiences related to their problems in writing, the factors associated with it, and their recommendations to improve it. To answer the problems of the study, data were collected through interviews with college students in the College of Teacher Education of Occidental Mindoro State College, Philippines.

Twelve (12) freshman students who experienced difficulty in writing were selected as the sample of the interviews. The respondents' consent was obtained prior to the interviews; they were also be assured of complete confidentiality. The interview questions were carefully designed and checked for self and expert validity as (Cohen et al., 2013) states that validity is an important requirement and a touchstone for both qualitative and quantitative research. Besides ensuring that an instrument works well with respondents, piloting also helps in verifying the clarity of questions and removing ambiguous language. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data since thematic analysis identifies the emerging themes and patterns in the qualitative data.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### *Problems Encountered By the Students in Writing*

Writing is a language skill that is an essential medium people use in expressing their thoughts, ideas, and attitudes. It is a difficult skill for both native and nonnative speakers as they must regard multiple issues in their writing such as purpose, audience, content, organization, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (Rass, 2015). Mohammad et al. (2020) noted that the complexity of writing may increase the level of confusion and university students

are no exception. Such confusion can often demotivate and hinder the students' writing achievement, and thus students may show a negative attitude towards writing.

When students were asked of the problems they encountered in writing especially using the English language, three themes emerged. Half of the participants (6 or 50%) said that syntax makes it difficult for them to write. It was hard for them to arrange words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in the English language. This is evidenced by one of the respondents saying “Para sa akin po, kapag ako ay nagsusulat ng English ay feeling po ‘di sapat or may kulang sa gawa ko. May gusto pa akong sabihin pero di ko alam kung paano ko sasabihin at isusulat nang tama (*For me, when I write English, I feel inadequate or something is missing from my work. I still want to say something but I don't know how to say and write it correctly.*)” Another student added, “Ang problema po na nai-encounter ko tuwing nagsusulat ako sa Ingles ay yung hindi ko po ma-express nang ayos yung idea o yung gusto kong sabihin (*The problem that I encounter every time I write in English is that I can't express the idea or what I want to say properly.*)”

Problem on syntax was also encountered by one of the participants. According to her, “Isa po sa mga problema na aking kinakaharap sa pag sulat gaya ng mga sanaysay gamit ang salitang English ay ang mayroong limitasyon sa pagpapapayahag ng aking mga ideya o saloobin sa pagsulat nito sa kadahilanang hindi ito wasto. Nagiging direkta na lamang sa pagpapahayag dahil magkaroon ng komplikasyon sa daloy ng mga ideya (*One of the problems I face in writing essays using English is that there is a limit to expressing my ideas or thoughts in writing it because it is not valid. It becomes only direct in expression because there is a complication in the flow of ideas.*)”

Alsamadani (2010) points out that writing using the second language is more demanding as it is a complex and challenging process in which writers are required to produce writing form considering the accuracy of syntax, the acceptability of semantics, and the appropriateness of culture.

During the interviews, it was found that another problem encountered by the students in writing is grammar (4 or 33.33%). One of participants answered, “Nagiging problema ko po sa pagsusulat sa English ang gamit ay ang paggamit ng tamang grammar (*My problem with writing in English is using the correct grammar*). One of the participants seconded when she said, “Isa sa mga problema ko po pagdating sa pagsusulat lalo na po kapag English ang ginagamit ay ‘yung correct usage of grammar po, kung kelan ginagamit at pwedeng gamitin (*One of my problems when it comes to writing, especially when English is used, is the correct usage of grammar, when it is used and can be used*).

Finally, 2 or 16.67% of the participants said that they found vocabulary as a problem in writing. When asked about it, a participant said, “Ang problema ko po ay kakulangan ng English vocabularies at takot magkamali, majudge lalo na kapag ni-require na gumamit ng mga malalalim na English words (*My problem is lack of English vocabularies and fear of making mistakes, and being judged especially when required to use deep English words*).

Similarly, according to Fareed et al. (2016), the major language issues in the learners' writing were of grammar and syntax. These errors included incorrect use of prepositions, articles, tenses, singular/plural, verbs, sentence structure, and the use of informal and spoken expressions. Vocabulary also poses a problem for learners as they are not aware of the collocational and connotation meanings of the words. Moreover, in their study, it is revealed in the thematic analysis that one of the factors that hinder students' writing is insufficient linguistic proficiency which includes grammar, syntax, and vocabulary.

Table 1. Problems encountered by the students in writing.

<b>Problems Encountered in Writing</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Syntax	6	50.00
Grammar	4	33.33
Vocabulary	2	16.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>

### *Factors Affecting the Students' Writing Skills*

Though considered formidable, writing skills can be successfully imparted by teachers provided they are aware of the underlying factors influencing the acquisition of these skills (Dhanya & Alamelu, 2019). After students were asked about the problems that they encountered in writing, they were asked about the factors they believe affecting their writing skills. After analyzing students' responses, three themes came out, and these are lack of reading and writing practice (5 or 41.47%), lack of ideas (4 or 33.33%), and lack of self-confidence (3 or 12%).

In terms of the first theme, 5 or 41% of the participants said that lack of reading and writing practice is a factor affecting their writing skills. It is supported by one of them when he said, "Sa palagay ko po ang nakakaapekto po sa kakayahan ko sa pagsulat ay ang hindi ako naglalaan ng time para magbasa nang magbasa upang matuto. Iyon po ang isa sa mga pagkukulang ko sa sarili ko (*I think what affects my writing ability is that I don't take the time to read and read to learn. That is one of my shortcomings*)." Another seconded, "Kakulangan po talaga sa sa pag-eensayo sa pagsulat (*There is a real lack of writing practice*)." The same is also supported by a participant who said "Kasi po hindi talaga kami ako naglalaan ng time para magbasa (*It is because we don't really take the time to read*)."

This is the same with the finding of Yaakob (2014) who in his study revealed a number of factors that stand as a hindrance for the development of writing skills. He noted that lack of reading and awareness and quality time to practice writing are the hindrance in the development of writing skills.

Another theme that came out is lack of ideas (4 or 33.33%). Participants of the study believe that when one has lack of idea, it would be hard for him/her to come up with a good writing output. One of them mentioned that, "Kulang po sa ideya kaya hindi na po ganoon kalinaw ang nais iparating ng aking kaisipan sa pagsusulat (*I lack an idea so my mind doesn't convey that clear what I want when writing*)." Another added, "Para po sa akin nakakaapekto po yung kakulangan ko sa ideya ko. Pakiramdam ko po hindi siya ganon kalawak, kaya limitado lang din po 'yung mga nagagamit kong salita tuwing magsusulat (*For me, my lack of ideas affects me. I feel like it is not that wide, so I only use limited words when I write*)."

With this, it can be concluded that English instructors' role in English writing skills is very important because they are required to teach techniques and skills related to concepts of mapping ideas and organization. Any failure or less attention to doing that would certainly lead to difficulties of brainstorming for ideas on topics of writings and consequently difficulties for writing in general.

Lastly, 3 or 25% of the participants said that their lack of self-confidence affects their writing skills. This is confirmed by a participant who said "Yung sarili ko po mismo kasi wala akong tiwala sa pagsagot at pagsulat ko ng English (*It is myself because I don't have confidence in answering and in writing English*)." Another supported this by saying "Yan talaga ay dahil

sa kakulangan ng tiwala sa sariling at takot sa pagkakamali (*That is really because of lack of self-confidence and fear of mistakes*).

Therefore, proficient writing would not be achieved with students lacking self-confidence and unwilling to disclose their feelings overwriting. Most students, in this sense, are inclined to show negative attitudes towards writing. They are not confident to display their thoughts through writing for fear of making writing mistakes (Mohammad et al., 2020).

Table 2. Factors affecting the students' writing skills.

<b>Factors Affecting the Students' Writing Skills</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Lack of reading and writing practice	5	41.67
Lack of ideas	4	33.33
Lack of self-confidence	3	25.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>

#### *Students' Recommendation to Improve Their Writing Skills*

The researchers believed that suggestions from the respondents on the improvement of their writing skills will bring the latent psychological and cognitive factors into the light for further inquiry and suitable solutions. With this, based on the problem and factors affecting the students' writing skills, they were also asked for their own recommendations to address the problem. After analyzing their responses, three themes came out. They believe that increased reading (6 or 50%), writing practice (4 or 33.33%), and teacher assistance (2 or 16.67%) can help them in improving their writing skills.

In terms of increased reading (6 or 50%), the students believe that one way of improving their writing skills is by reading more especially those which are written in the English language. When asked about their recommendation, a student answered, "Pagbabasa po ng mga English books/newspapers, lalo na po ng mga English terms gamit ang English dictionary (*Reading English books/newspapers, especially English terms using the English dictionary*)." Another seconded, "Makakatulong din po ang pagbabasa at panonood ng English. Makakatulong din ang paggamit ng dictionary (*Reading and watching English will also help. Using a dictionary can also help*)." This is also reported by a statement of one of them saying "Ang suggestion ko po ay reading different genres of written or online articles, pagbabasa ng mga sulatin English, panonood ng pelikulang English at pag aaral ng dictionary. Magbasa nang magbasa upang madagdagan pa ang bokabularyo sa paggamit ng salitang English gayun din ang pagsulat nito (*My suggestion is reading different genres of written or online articles, reading English writings, watching English movies and studying the dictionary. Read on to increase vocabulary in the use of the English word as well as in using it in writing*)."

In connection to this, Fareed et al. (2016) revealed that there are various factors at play hindering the development of undergraduate learners' writing skills. First of all, writing is not given much importance in our society. It is considered as a secondary skill to speak. Consequently, the culture of reading and writing does not flourish at the academic and social levels and these skills remain ignored.

The participants also suggested writing practice (4 or 33.33%) to improve their writing skills. A participant mentioned, "Ang isa po sa rekomendasyon ko na sa palagay ko na dapat gawin upang ma-develop o mahubog ang kakayahan ko sa pagsulat ay pag-practice ng

pagsusulat gamit ang English (*One of my recommendations that I think should be done to develop or shape my ability to write is practice writing in English*).

Another followed up “Kapag nagsusulat kasi tayo ay masasanay ang kakayahan natin (*When we write, we will train our ability to write*).”

Similarly, the participants in the study of Fareed et al. (2016) suggested developing a writing culture and providing opportunities for writing practice to improve their writing skills. Moreover, Dhanya and Alamelu (2019) mentioned that students tend to do a writing activity better when they collaborate rather than doing it alone, thus it is better to do it in class.

Finally, 2 or 16.67% said that they need teacher assistance. “English time po siguro. I mean once a week dapat may isang teacher na magtuturo sa amin kung paano magsalita, magsulat, at umunawa ng English (*English time maybe. I mean once a week there should be a teacher who will teach us how to speak, write, and understand English*).”

According to Herdi (2015), the teacher’s strategy in the teaching-learning process also could influence the students’ writing skills. The last factor that could influence the change of students’ writing skills was the teacher’s approach to classroom activities. On the other hand, Fareed et al. (2016) noted that untrained teachers and ineffective teaching methods are also influential in developing learners’ writing skills, the absence of which affects writing adversely.

Table 3. Students’ recommendation to improve their writing skills.

<b>Students’ Recommendation to Improve Their Writing Skills</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Increased reading	6	50.00
Writing practice	4	33.33
Teacher assistance	2	16.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>

## Conclusions

The following are concluded based on the findings of the study:

1. The problems encountered by the students in writing are syntax, grammar, and vocabulary
2. The different factors affecting the students’ writing skills are lack of reading and writing practice, lack of ideas, and lack of self-confidence.
3. To improve their writing skills, the students recommend increased reading, writing practice, and teacher assistance.

## Recommendations

With the foregoing findings, the following are hereby recommended:

1. It is suggested that instructors of English writing courses focus their attention on teaching mechanics of writings specifically on syntax, grammar, and vocabulary.
2. Students may be given sufficient opportunities for reading and writing activities, to select a subject to write on, and be given adequate time to collect thoughts.
3. Constructive feedback should be provided by the teachers to help learners, criticism on their writings should be minimized, and writing competitions may be organized to motivate the learners.
4. The present study can be replicated in other year levels and colleges and can also be extended especially to non-board programs.

## References

- [1] Albalawi, S.F., & Younes, B.Z. (2015). Exploring the most common types of writing problems among English language and translation major sophomore female students at Tabuk University. *Asian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 3 (2), 7-26.
- [2] Alsamadani, H.A. (2010). The relationship between Saudi EFL students' writing competence, L1 writing proficiency, and self-regulation. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 16(1), 53-63.
- [3] Choi, S. (2013). Language anxiety in second language writing: Is it really a stumbling block? *Second Language Studies*, 31(2), 1-42.
- [4] Chokwe, J.M. (2013). Factors impacting academic writing skills of English second language students. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(14), 377-383.
- [5] Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2013). *Research methods in education*. Routledge, United Kingdom.
- [6] Dhanya, M. & Alamelu, C. (2019). Factors influencing the acquisition of writing skills. *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering (IJITEE)*, 8(7), 259-263.
- [7] Fareed, M., Ashraf, A., & Bilal, M. (2016). ESL Learners' writing skills: Problems, factors and suggestions. *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 81-92.
- [8] Herdi, H. (2015). An analysis on factors influencing the students' writing skill. *ELT-Lectura*, 2(2), 19-22.
- [9] Inayah, N. & Nanda, R.P. (2016). Efforts to improve writing skills of high school students. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 3(1), 50-64.
- [10] Kasem, M. (2017). Developing business writing skills and reducing writing anxiety of EFL learners through wikis. *English Language Teaching*, 10 (3), 151-163.
- [11] Krashen, D. (1987). *Second language acquisition theory. Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Hertfordshire: Prentice-Hall International.
- [12] Li, M. (2012). Use of wikis in second/foreign language classes: A literature review. *CALL-EL*, 13(1), 17-35
- [13] Ma, F. & Chen, J. 2017. Second language acquisition theory based bilingual teaching methods of computer science. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 142, 103-106.
- [14] Mohammad, A., Al-Mofti, K., & Hussein, J. (2020). Difficulties of writing in English encountered by Iraqi EFL learners at university level. *Journal of Critical Reviews*, 7(15), 5157-5163.
- [15] Niño, F. & Páez, M. (2018). Building writing skills in English in fifth graders: Analysis of strategies based on literature and creativity. *English Language Teaching*, 11 (9), 102-117.
- [16] Olanezhad, M. (2015). A comparative study of writing anxiety among Iranian university students majoring English translation, teaching and literature. *English Language Teaching*, 8(3), 59-70. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n3p59>
- [17] Pineteh, E.A. (2013). The academic writing challenges of undergraduate students: A South African case study. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 3 (1), 12.
- [18] Raja, Z. B. & Zahid, R. Z. (2013). Enhancing writing skills: An Analytical study of obstacles in writing at B. A. level in Najran University, KSA *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(2), 1-7 . DOI:10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130702.2775
- [19] Rass, R.A. (2015). Challenges face Arab students in writing well-developed paragraphs in English. *English Language Teaching*, 8(10), 49-59.

- [20] Tuan, T.L., 2012. An empirical research into EFL's learners' motivation. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(3), 430-439.
- [21] Yaacob, S. (2014). Factors affecting students' writing skills in primary schools shahrohan binti yaakob bachelor of education tesl. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/20824278/Factors\\_Affecting\\_Students\\_Writing\\_Skills\\_In\\_Primary\\_Schools\\_Shahrohan\\_Binti\\_Yaakob\\_Bachelor\\_of\\_Education\\_TESL\\_Primary\\_Education\\_With\\_Honours](https://www.academia.edu/20824278/Factors_Affecting_Students_Writing_Skills_In_Primary_Schools_Shahrohan_Binti_Yaakob_Bachelor_of_Education_TESL_Primary_Education_With_Honours).
- [22] Yong, F.L. (2010). Attitudes toward academic writing of foundation students at an Australian-based university in Sarawak. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 13(2), 472-478. Shen, B., Reinhart-Lee, T., McCaughtry, N., & Li, X. (2012). African-American female adolescents' participation and intention in physical education. *Sex Role: Journal of Research*, 67, 323-333.