



Writing Difficulties in EFL Students: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract

This paper aimed to determine the challenges students face in writing. It was conducted in a public school in Guayaquil, Ecuador. In this descriptive study, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. The instrument involved a survey divided in two sections: demographic to collect information from 51 participants and a writing survey to determine the students' difficulties. This work included a Likert scale format which contained statements to measure students' difficulties, experiences/activities, and perspectives towards collaborative writing. The survey was carried out in Google Forms, and the data were analyzed in an Excel sheet. The results showed that the main problems students have are some grammar aspects and deficiency in providing clarity to their writings. The findings revealed that working in collaboration help students in the development of the writing process. This research might be useful for EFL teachers who are encouraging their students to develop writing skills.

Keywords: writing, collaboration, EFL.

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Resumen

Este artículo tuvo el objetivo de determinar los desafíos que enfrentan los estudiantes en la escritura. Se llevó a cabo en una escuela pública de Guayaquil, Ecuador. En este estudio descriptivo se analizaron datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. Los instrumentos involucraron una encuesta demográfica para recolectar información de 51 participantes y una encuesta escrita para determinar las dificultades de los estudiantes. Este trabajo incluyó un formato de escala Likert que contenía enunciados para medir las dificultades, experiencias / actividades y perspectivas de los estudiantes hacia la escritura colaborativa. Las encuestas se realizaron en Google Forms y los datos se analizaron en una hoja de Excel. Los resultados mostraron que los principales problemas que tienen los estudiantes son algunos aspectos gramaticales y la deficiencia para aportar claridad a sus escritos. Los hallazgos revelaron que trabajar en colaboración ayuda a los estudiantes en el desarrollo del proceso de escritura. Esta investigación podría ser útil para los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera que están animando a sus estudiantes a desarrollar habilidades de escritura.

Palabras claves: escritura, colaboración, inglés como lengua extranjera.

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Globalization has given place to a higher crease of English learners. However, learning this foreign language can be difficult for some non-native English speakers (Sheorey, 2006). By this fact, the Ministry of Education in Ecuador intends to provide students the skills to learn it in such a manner that they can succeed in today's world. To carry out this objective, the Ministry has also adopted the guides of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Ministerio de Educación, 2016).

The Ministry's guidelines agreed that students must reach a B1 level of English proficiency when graduating from high school. Based on the CEFR, they should be able to become independent users of the language (Ministerio de Educación, 2012). According to the Council of Europe (2019), intermediate level learners are able to produce simple texts based on familiar or personal topics. For example, descriptions of experiences, events, ambitions, as well as provide reasons and explanations briefly.

Writing is one of the productive skills that should be mastered to achieve this B1 level since it is an element of communication in a foreign or second language (Abdullah et al., 2015). However, some researchers assured that learning writing does not seem to be as simple as developing the three other skills (Slamet et al., 2017).

According to Nawal (2018), writers need mental effort and time to develop this skill. So that, writing involves cognition in such a way that the writer is required to search for new knowledge, assimilate, reflect, plan, produce and adjust (Abbott et al., 2010, as cited in, Cedeño, 2019). Consequently, Javadi-Safa (2018) manifested that most learners tend to deal with some negative reactions such as apprehension, fear, and resistance when they have to do a writing task.

On the other hand, the results from TOEFL showed that Ecuadorian learners are less confident to develop this productive skill due to the very little frequency of writing

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practices in English (British Council, 2015). As a result, it turns a difficult activity to produce a cohesive or coherent paragraph (Suharmi, 2015).

In 2015, the major problem obtained in a descriptive study about learning writing skills in Vietnam was the lack of vocabulary. It was analyzed with students of 11th grade from seventeen to nineteen years old. The reason for this issue was that students did not know any effective way to learn vocabulary, and they spent little time studying new words (Thanh, 2015).

Similarly, Sulistyani (2014) analyzed a descriptive study in eighth grade-students 'ability and problems in writing recount text where it was found that the major problems learners faced in writing was grammar. Likewise, the uses of tenses, articles, and prepositions were the major issues in writing in research made with a group of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners (Ashraf et al., 2016).

Ben (2018), in her descriptive research, confirmed that the common difficulties for learners in writing were grammar and vocabulary as well. In addition, this study revealed that first-year students from secondary school were not motivated to write. Despite the interesting topics the teacher provided, the students did not seem to be interested in working class.

Finally, Mohamed (2015) stated that writing tasks occur while there is a purpose. In other words, if students are not encouraged to write, they will not be eager to do it. Moreover, some classroom observations at a public university in Singapore indicated that the more undergraduate students received feedback and praise, the more they showed positive attitudes such as participating in class and engaging with the writing activities (Cheung, 2018).

Although these difficulties in writing have occurred at different levels, no study has been conducted with students from Ecuador at a high school. This descriptive study

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intends to gather information about the difficulties in developing writing skills that students from the second year of baccalaureate face in a public school. Their ranges age is 16-17 years old. They are from Guayaquil and live in urban and rural areas of the city.

Literature Review

Writing

Writing is a major component in language learning since this skill is a tool needed for effective communication (Srinivas, 2019). Likewise, writing is a physical and mental activity. For instance, physical by sending words or a message to some medium. While mental because writing requires thinking about how to express and organize ideas or paragraphs in order to provide a clear message for the reader (Nunan, 1992, as cited in Afrin, 2016).

Furthermore, writing is considered a social practice due to what it implies: a context, a purpose, and an audience (Ministerio de Educación, 2019). Likewise, writing entails lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as format and content in order to produce cohesive and coherent paragraphs or texts (Nyasimi, 2014).

Writing Teaching Principles

Half century ago, English teachers were mainly focused on getting the final product of their learners' tasks such as a story, an essay, and a report, among others (Brown, 2001). Nowadays, this product approach is still a concern for teachers. However, most of them prefer encouraging students to go through a process approach, which leads to achieving effective pieces of written activities (Braaksma et al., 2017).

There are some steps that good writers follow in the process approach: pupils make a general plan, reflect on what to write and audience, write drafts by sections, and while they work on them, they revise and edit their tasks as much as they can (1988, as

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cited in Alfaki, 2015). In addition, the curriculum in Ecuador indicated that this process serves for learners to think and use language critically and creatively. In other words, during the development of every stage, pupils can attain successful insight into giving and receiving feedback as well as be able to express themselves in a clearly and effectively (Ministerio de Educación, 2019).

Writing Components

Writing is a complex skill, and its development not only implies an accurate use of grammar or good knowledge of vocabulary. In fact, there are some other important areas that should also be taking into consideration in the writing process (Gabrielatos, 2002). Therefore, it is very important to understand these components in order to help learners in the development of writing.

Grammar.

According to Ngoc (2019), grammar in writing is the ability to create correct and appropriate sentences. It involves the correct use of prepositions, verb tenses, nouns, adjectives, conjunctions, and articles as well. Grammar makes written texts to be cohesive, or in other words, it comprises to write well-structured sentences (Pratiwi, 2016).

Grammar also makes written content more interesting and makes it possible to communicate efficient ideas (Hans, 2017). Generating correct sentences followed by another is an essential ability that learners should practice (Gabrielatos, 2002).

Mechanics.

Dani (2014) expressed that mechanics refers to the ability of using words correctly in a written document. It involves punctuation, spelling, abbreviations, and acronyms, among others. Rude (2006) pointed out that punctuation is an important aspect to be considered since it helps to provide accurate work.

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On the other hand, Michigan (2004) remarked that the inappropriate use of punctuation might affect meaning. For example, “I hate liars, like you.” and “I hate liars like you.” For that reason, learners should consider mechanics of writing as a primary fact in order to improve editing skills (Young, 2008).

Organization.

Organization in writing entails three main qualities in a text such as outlining, coherence, and unity (Tosuncuoglu, 2018). The outline is a helpful skill for developing writing since it serves to have a clear and well-organized list of ideas or thoughts. While coherence provides a logical and orderly connection of ideas. Likewise, coherence implies appropriate words to join sentences or make them have sense. Written texts should have coherence in order to provide effective information. Lastly, unity in writing shows that every single line of written text is connected with another (Muñoz, 2017). In other words, it creates one central idea of the whole text.

Clarity.

Clarity in writing involves critical thinking, logical development, and exact diction (Allen, 2010). Likewise, Gabrielatos (2002) pointed out that the concept of clarity helps students to follow sequences of events in narrative texts. In argumentative texts, the ideas should be developed clearly and reinforced by arguments and examples.

Collaborative Writing

Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) showed that collaborative writing assignments strengthen both group and individual students' literacy skills. Another study mentioned that learners who work together drawing on each one's strengths to elaborate a shared text, gives meaning to collaborative writing since learning writing through this way leads to a social practice (Dyson, 2016).

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Collaborative writing also allows students to explore, discuss, cooperate and develop learning skills (Dobao, 2012). Likewise, Bikowski et al., (2012) added that collaborative writing helps students increase their knowledge and motivation, even the attention to discourse structures and use of vocabulary.

Methodology

Design

As a descriptive study, its purpose is to describe the difficulties students face in writing. Therefore, it focuses on answering *what* in order to get successful research (Dynarski, et al., 2017). In this descriptive research, quantitative and qualitative data will be analyzed. According to Apuke (2017), quantitative data allows the researcher to make statistical and structured analyses concisely while qualitative provides specific characteristics or perspectives.

This descriptive study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the student's difficulties in writing in English?
2. What kind of activities have students done during the process of writing?
3. What are students' perspectives towards collaborative writing?

Participants

This study will be addressed to 51 students from the second course of baccalaureate at a public high school in an urban area of Guayaquil. The researcher selected the participants from an English class. These participants have a basic knowledge of English. They are 16 to 17 years old, but most of them are 16.

According to the survey in the demographic section participants were 47.1% (N=24) men and 52.9% (N=27) women. Almost all of them are Ecuadorian, one from Venezuela and a Cuban. Regarding their social-economic status, 78.4% are in the middle class, and the 21.6% are in low-income.

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This survey showed that nearly all of the students have internet access at home and they use mainly their smartphones to connect for their classes, followed by computers, either laptop or desktop. All of them speak Spanish but most of them stated that they have been learning English since they started school. Participants' perspectives regarding their English level is basic.

According to students' English background, there are positive and negative experiences. As positive experiences, some participants said learning English had been entertaining, quite good, and few of them had taken a course. However, English had turned complicated to pronounce and to understand others.

Instrument

In order to answer the research questions, the instrument applied was a survey divided in Demographic and Writing section:

Demographic section.

The researcher implemented a demographic survey section in order to describe the participants. This survey collected some students' characteristics, for example, their gender, age, nationality, language, status, religion, English level and background, access to internet and knowledge about the use of technology.

Writing section.

The writing survey part was applied to answer the research questions. It was presented in both English and Spanish in order to make it clear and specific for the participants. This section was subdivided into three parts. The first part measured the students' difficulties towards writing skill with seven questions in Likert Scale and an opened question. The second part consisted of thirteen questions about the students' experience/activities during the process of writing, the third one intended to provide students' perspectives towards collaborative writing. The participants were able to

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answer this survey online. A Google Form was created and the link was sent to students' mails.

Data Analysis

Data was quantitative and qualitative. All the information was gathered in an Excel sheet where it was measured and verified. The data were used with the purpose of getting the mean and compare results, so the researcher was able to make the corresponding analysis.

Ethical Considerations

This research was implemented with the permission of the authorities from the institution. What is more, there was a consent letter to authorize the researcher to take the survey in the school. In order to safeguard the students' integrity, the researcher asked their parents or tutors for permission to make possible the participation of the minors. The data were confidential and students remained anonymous.

Results

Data from the open questions and the Likert scale survey were tabulated in order to answer the first question: "What are the students' difficulties in writing in English?" In the open question, 15 participants agreed on pronunciation as the main difficulty at the moment to write since pronouncing a word is different from writing a word in English, ten students stated that organizing words or ideas in a sentence is challenging to do, seven said that some aspects of grammar they ignore also impede them to write correctly, five have problems with spelling and vocabulary. For example, they are not familiar with some words and their meanings sometimes are different from what they want to mean. Besides, two students asserted they do not have enough time to learn how to write actually, one of them would like to have a personal trainer for that. On the other hand, seven learners affirmed they do not have any problem with writing and a few of

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them said they learn rapidly. Finally, three of these participants did not mention anything about it.

According to the Likert Scale survey, the questions had five options to answer from 1 “none” to 5 “to a great extent”. The participants showed difficulties mostly in creating correct and appropriate sentences (M=2.82). Likewise, they struggled with providing support to a topic sentence (M=2.82) and mastering the use of verb tenses (M=2.90)

Table 1.

Likert survey results about difficulties in writing.

Difficulties in Writing	
	Means
I can create correct sentences.	2.82
I can create appropriate sentences.	2.82
I master the use of verb tenses.	2.90
I recognize the correct use of punctuation marks.	3.25
I know how to spell.	3.58
I can develop a topic sentence.	2.98
I can support the topic sentence with a sequence of ideas.	2.82

For the second question: What kind of activities have students done during the process of writing? Participants answered a Likert Scale survey with activities based on the process of writing. These statements had five options to respond from 1 “never” to 5 “always”.

Table 2.

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Likert Survey about activities based on the process of writing.

Activities developed in the process of writing	
	Means
I brainstorm ideas.	2.60
I consider my audience.	2.70
I reflect on what I write.	3.29
I write a first draft.	3.27
I revise my drafts.	3.29
I edit my drafts.	3.29
I provide feedback.	2.86
I receive feedback.	2.96
It is necessary to receive feedback to improve your writings.	3.41
I write in English.	2.58
It's difficult to write in English.	2.86
I practice writing in English.	2.86
I interact with others while I write.	2.52

Regarding the table above, participants certainly do not interact with others in the process of writing (M=2.52). In fact, learners do not write in English (M=2.58), which indicates most of them ignore the steps of the process of writing. For example, they do not tend to brainstorm ideas when writing (M=2.60). They seem not to take into account the audience who is going to read what they are writing (M=2.70). The majority of participants ignore how to provide feedback (M=2.86). Lastly, these students do not practice writing in English frequently (M=2.86).

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Regarding the third question: “What are the students’ perspectives towards collaborative writing?” there were five options participants could answer from 1 “totally disagree” to 5 “totally agree”. Participants showed positive perspectives towards collaborative writing mainly since they can explore more about the topic (M=3.86), collaborative writing raises social practice and develops learning skills (M=3.84). Also, working on writing assignments in collaboration lets them go through the same purpose all together (M=3.80).

Table 3.

Perspectives towards collaborative writing.

Perspectives towards collaborative writing	
	Means
I have done writing activities in groups.	3.47
It is much better to write individually.	3.47
Writing assignments in-group strengthen social practice.	3.84
Collaborative writing activities allow you to explore about the topic.	3.86
Collaborative writing activities allow you to discuss with your partner about the topic.	3.78
Collaborative writing activities allow you to work together through the same purpose.	3.80
Collaborative writing activities allow you to develop learning skills such as decision-making, flexibility, problem solving.	3.84
Writing assignments in-group helps you to increase your knowledge of vocabulary.	3.68
Writing assignments in-group helps you to increase your knowledge of grammar.	3.68
I feel motivated when I work on writing assignments in groups.	3.37

Discussion

The results showed that the majority of students have problems with grammar.

As Ngoc (2019) pointed out, grammar in writing is the ability to create correct and

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appropriate sentences that also involves verb tenses. According to Gabrielatos (2002), generating correct sentences is an essential ability learner should practice. Additionally, students showed a deficiency in providing clarity to their writings. In reference to this, Gabrielatos (2002) declared that clarity helps learners to follow a sequence of events in a narrative. On the other hand, students seemed to be more focused on recognizing the correct use of punctuation marks (M=3.5) rather than creating correct or well-structured sentences.

Although writing is considered a social practice because of the context, purpose and audience it involves (Ministerio de Educación, 2019), it was found that participants have no interaction when writing. What is more, they do not usually write in their English classes, which indicates, there is a lack of practice on this skill. According to Suharmi (2015), the less students practice the less they will produce a cohesive or coherent paragraph. This could be the reason why students ignore how to start writing (brainstorm ideas).

Another activity considered in the writing process was feedback. Although learners did not know how to give feedback, some of them considered it necessary to receive it in order to improve their writings (M=3.41). In fact, the Ministry of Education in Ecuador (2019) pointed out that during the development of every stage of the writing process, pupils can attain successful insight into giving and receiving feedback as well as being able to express themselves clearly and effectively.

Furthermore, twenty-five participants agreed collaborative writing allows them to explore more about the topic. Sixteen of them agreed collaborative writing increases social practice and twenty-three affirmed it helps to develop some learning skills. This outcome is supported by Dobao (2012) and Dyson (2016), who expressed learners

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working together on writing leads to a social practice and allows them to explore, discuss, cooperate, make decisions and solve problems.

Finally, an important issue remarked in the results of this research is that some participants stated pronunciation as a difficulty in writing due to the fact that English words are spelled different from how they are pronounced. However, the findings showed students know how to spell at least ($M=3.58$).

Conclusions

This work aimed to gather information about the challenges students face when writing in class. The results showed that the main difficulty in students is grammar. Since they do not know how to create a sentence and ignore verb tenses. The study also showed learners' difficulty in following a sequence of events or giving support to a topic. Likewise, there is a lack of writing practice. Students do not interact with others, they ignore how to start a writing task, and they do not know how to provide any feedback.

Regarding collaborative writing tasks, most students agreed that working together will help them to interact with one another. Besides, they will be able to develop their learning skills in-group and in this way, go further to explore the topic they will write about.

Limitations and Recommendations

The limitations faced in the development of this research were the connectivity problems students had. Some students used internet from the municipality and they were not able to fill the survey in the established time since this net service does not work every day. There were also students who had to wait for their parents to activate megabytes in order to have internet and work. The number expected to fill this survey

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was 100. However, only 51 completed it. Likewise, it took a long time to reach this number of students.

As a recommendation, it is advisable that future researchers consider investigating more about the way pronunciation also influences the development of writing. Besides that, what strategy would be feasible to implement in order to help students overcome writing difficulties? So, further researches might be focused on the strategies to face every single challenge mentioned in this study.

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Appendix

Demographic and Writing survey:

Available upon request.