



Perspectives of Students in EFL Writing

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Abstract

This research paper aims to describe students' difficulties in writing. It was conducted in a public higher education institute in Riobamba, Ecuador. To answer the research questions of this descriptive study, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. The survey, which was applied through Google forms to 52 students, had two sections. The first one was designed to collect demographics about participants while the second part was addressed to find out about students' challenges in writing. In the second part, Likert scales and open questions served as means to obtain information; the results were uploaded in an Excel sheet. The findings showed that what prevents students from writing is the little knowledge of verb tenses, vocabulary words and spelling. Furthermore, not following a writing process grants students little ability to develop a text composition. Additionally, the findings show that students prefer collaborative writing due to its benefits to strengthen social practice, develop learning skills, and to work towards the same purpose. This study contributes to future research on English as a Foreign Language students' difficulties to develop writing skills.

Keywords: writing, collaboration, EFL.

Resumen

Este artículo de investigación tiene como finalidad describir las dificultades de los estudiantes en la escritura. Se llevó a cabo en un instituto público de educación superior en Riobamba, Ecuador. Para responder a las preguntas de investigación de este estudio descriptivo, se recogieron y analizaron datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. La encuesta, que se aplicó a través de un formulario de Google a 52 estudiantes, tenía dos secciones. La primera fue diseñada para recopilar datos demográficos sobre los participantes, mientras que la segunda parte fue dirigida a conocer los desafíos de los estudiantes en la escritura. En la segunda parte, escalas de Likert y tres preguntas abiertas sirvieron como medio para obtener información; los resultados fueron analizados en una hoja de Excel. Los hallazgos demostraron que lo que impide a los estudiantes escribir es el escaso conocimiento de los tiempos verbales, las palabras de vocabulario y la ortografía. Además, no seguir un proceso de escritura otorga a los estudiantes poca habilidad para desarrollar una composición. Así mismo, los hallazgos mostraron que los estudiantes prefieren la escritura colaborativa debido a sus beneficios para fortalecer la práctica social, desarrollar habilidades de aprendizaje, y trabajar hacia el mismo propósito. Este estudio contribuye a futuras investigaciones sobre las dificultades para desarrollar habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras claves: Escritura, colaboración, EFL.

Perspectives of Students in EFL Writing

Language is the means humans use to communicate ideas, feelings, views and thoughts. Currently, globalization has empowered the way people communicate and has made some languages more accessible than others. English, for example, has become a powerful language used worldwide and has played an important role in different fields (Nishanthi, 2018). Crystal (2003) motivated to learn English because “it will put you in touch with more people than any other language” (p. 3).

Learning a language implies acquiring the different skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. Developing writing skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is essential to show mastery and acquisition of the target language. Jabali (2018) stated that due to the high use of the internet, written communication is more used nowadays. Nevertheless, for EFL learners putting ideas into words is not as simple as it seems. RahmtAllah (2020) mentioned that “writing is seen as a complex task, a social act that represents the communication skills of the writer, which are difficult to acquire and learn, especially in an EFL context” (p. 120). Another challenge EFL students encounter when learning the language is pronunciation since a written word is pronounced different from the way it is spelled. Moreover, grammar, cohesion and coherence, and ideas development deter developing writing skills as well (Al Badi, 2015).

In 2016, the Ecuadorian government made efforts to implement new policies for teaching English by introducing the Content and Language Integrated-Learning (CLIL) methodology in elementary and secondary instruction. The aim of this new curriculum was to provide more meaningful learning experiences that lead to better English proficiency outcomes (Ministerio de Education de Ecuador, 2016). In addition, local authorities have referenced the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for

languages as the foundation for planning and level progression, from A1 to B2 level.

Furthermore, it is expected that once students finish higher education, they will have a sufficient level of proficiency in a foreign language.

Locally, higher education authorities require at least a B1 level in a second language before a degree is conferred (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2022). In accordance with the CEFR for Languages, a person with a B1 level of language proficiency is considered an independent user of the language. In general terms, this user is able to understand main points on familiar topics, can produce simple connected texts, describe experiences, and briefly give reasons for opinions or plans (Council of Europe, 2019). In spite of the efforts made to improve the English level of Ecuadorian students, statistics are contradictory and show that Ecuador has a very low proficiency level (Education First, 2021).

There are different studies conducted in countries overseas that describe EFL learners' difficulties when learning the language (e.g., Adam, 2016; Adas & Bakir, 2013; Bhowmik, 2021). In Ecuador, researchers have addressed descriptive studies focusing on EFL learner's listening, speaking or reading skills. However, there has been little attention to EFL perspectives towards writing. Consequently, this research aims to collect information about students' difficulties developing writing skills in English. The participants are students who belong to a public technological institute in Riobamba, Ecuador. Their expected level of proficiency by the time they graduate is A2; their ages ranged from 19 to 48 years old, and they belong to middle class.

Literature Review

Writing

Writing is a productive skill which is considered one of the most difficult to master in language learning. It is challenging since it is an individual activity that

follows a process, and learners need linguistics aspects and attitude towards writing in the target language (Muhamaroh et al., 2020). Writing is also a skill that allows learners to communicate hence the importance of developing it. Learners are required to do two things, learn the English language as well as to learn how to write it (Bhowmik, 2021).

Nunan (2003) defined writing considering the three following aspects. First, writing is a physical and mental activity. It is physical because the writer consigns words to some medium; it is mental because it involves thinking to generate ideas to convey a message. Second, the purpose of writing is to express and communicate. It allows the writer to communicate ideas, and, sometimes, to please an audience. Third, it is a process and a product. On one hand, writing is a cyclical activity that has certain stages; on the other hand, what readers see is a product that can take different formats: a recipe, list, essay, or other form.

Writing Learning Principles

Most of the time, students are bound to write about topics labeled by the teachers. Nevertheless, for students to feel involved in the writing experience, the teacher should consider some important features. Adas and Bakir (2013) mentioned that the teacher should bear in mind three main factors: first, what skills are taught; second, which tasks can help students achieve the learning goal; third, which topics can guarantee students' engagement and involvement. In addition, Nation (2009) highlighted the following principles for teaching writing:

- Meaning-Focused Input: learners have previous knowledge of the topic.
- Meaning-Focused Output: learners write a lot in different styles; they have an audience and a reason for writing.
- Language-Focused Learning: learners are aware of the writing process and are able to use writing strategies. Teacher scaffolds and promotes improvement.

- Fluency Development: learners write with ease about familiar topics.

Difficulties in Writing

Younes and Albalawi (2015, as cited in Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017) concurred that developing writing skills requires effort and practice, especially in organization, language use, and mechanics. Nevertheless, learners struggle and their writing performance is low since they are not able to formulate ideas or use correct vocabulary. Alisha et al. (2019) pointed out that there are some elements that impact the writing process. After they conducted descriptive research, they concluded that students do not understand the generic writing structure; others do not know how to organize their ideas clearly, and others feel their paragraphs are not coherent since they lack sequence.

Jabali (2018) noted, “the writing process is very likely to be negatively affected by a number of factors including students’ feelings about themselves as writers, about the atmosphere, or even about the writing task itself” (p. 11). Alamri and Yaseen (2021) stated that students do not feel confident when writing because they lack vocabulary, organization and practice; they do not master grammar, and do not know about writing mechanics.

Writing Components

Jennifer and Ponniah (2017) agreed, “to communicate a thought, language knowledge is indispensable as writers encode their ideas using the properties of language such as vocabulary, spelling, syntax, and grammar” (p. 557). However, learners struggle to develop ideas when writing due to the poor knowledge of writing components. When it comes to analyze the quality of a written work, different factors are considered. Kantor (2012) mentioned that after a study was conducted, in which 3.557 essays were analyzed, five main factors were identified. First, ideas mainly focus on clarity, relevance and purpose. Second, mechanics which refers to sentence errors,

punctuation, and structure. The third factor was organization and analysis of the ideas in the text. Wording and phrasing were considered the fourth factor, and finally flavor or style, which refers to the writer's way of writing. In addition, grammar, mechanics, organization, and clarity are important elements to be considered when helping learners improve their writing performance (Gabrielatos, 2002 as cited in Pihuave, 2021).

Vocabulary

Wilkins (1972, as cited in Adam, 2016) affirmed that vocabulary competence is essential since it allows learners to read, listen, speak, or write. If there is no vocabulary, then it would be hard to develop any language skill. Tovar (2017) remarked that with no vocabulary words, learners cannot communicate even if they have good knowledge of grammar or a good pronunciation. "Vocabulary is central to language and is of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, ideas without which people cannot convey the intended meaning" (Ghazal, 2007, p. 84).

Grammar

Shakir and Jabbar (2021) related to the significance of grammar in language learning. Grammar displays how words are organized within a sentence in oral or written language. Grammar knowledge minimizes mistakes and stimulates fluency. Additionally, Dalil (2013) mentioned that grammar helps to understand a language and facilitates communication. Thus, exchange of accurate sentences leads to understanding and being understood by others in oral or written form. In addition, Euson (2015) defined grammar as:

A system of rules (and exceptions to those rules) that reveals and structures meaning in language, and is made up of two things: syntax and morphology. Syntax is concerned with the pattern or sequence of words in sentences, while

morphology, as the name suggests, is concerned with the shape or nature of words (p.1.6)

Mechanics

Naeem (2007) stated, “Mechanics of writing clarify the author's message and mark formal pieces of writing” (p.10). Thus, there are different conventions to consider when referring to writing. Some authors agreed that spelling, punctuation and capitalization as the governing elements (Dani, 2014; Naeem, 2007; Norquist, 2020). Nevertheless, some other characteristics are also considered. Norquist (2020) included abbreviations whereas Naeem (2007) added sentence structure as another important convention.

The Writing Process

Bouzar (2021) stated that writing is a complex process that involves cognitive, problem solving, and social skills. It refers to cognitive ability because the human's brain allows us to explore the words and respond to it using the language. It is a problem-solving process because it combines the linguistic knowledge and writing techniques to respond to the writing purpose. Finally, it is a social process because it takes place in a context. Seow (2010) affirmed, “the writing process as a private activity may be broadly seen as comprising four main stages: planning, drafting, revising and editing” (p. 315).

McLean (2012, p. 380) stated, “Effective writing can be simply described as good ideas that are expressed well and arranged in the proper order.” Additionally, he also described the writing process in five steps. First is prewriting where the writer starts putting his ideas into words. The writer can use different techniques such as reading, freewriting, asking questions or using life experiences. The second step is outlining. Here the writer organizes the ideas from the previous stage. He can follow

either a chronological, spatial, or importance order. Third is drafting. Once the writer has organized ideas, it is time to write the first draft of the work. Revising is the fourth step. At this stage the writer rereads the content and is able to change information so that it looks more convincing to the audience. The last stage is editing where the writer focuses on the format and corrects mistakes in structure, grammar, or punctuation.

Collaboration in Writing

Fung (2010) stated that collaboration has different benefits. For example, students can beware of their peers' thinking strategies and writing style and model them. Collaboration also promotes negotiation, interaction, and problem solving. Anggraini et al. (2020) remarked the following characteristics of collaborative writing. First, it enables each member to contribute with their strengths to achieve the work. Next, pairing students with others allow them to transfer knowledge and construct their own understanding from the shared experience. Finally, collaborative writing let students consider the audiences as they share their opinions inside the group and see how others react to their opinion.

Research Methodology

Design

The present research is a descriptive study. Nassaji (2015) affirmed, "the goal of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. This research is more concerned with what rather than how or why something has happened" (p. 129). In addition, Travers (1978, as cited in Baha, 2016) stated that a descriptive study is one that "provides a knowledge base which can be a foundation and ground for further quantitative analysis, since it maps the landscape of a specific phenomenon" (p. 4).

In this research qualitative and quantitative data will be analyzed. Qualitative data shows findings about "persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and

feelings” (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 11). Quantitative data, on the other hand, relates to analyzing variables through different statistical techniques to get results (Apuke, 2017).

Research Questions

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 was addressed to 52 students from a public technological institute in Riobamba. Students belong to the third, fourth and fifth semesters of the following majors: Tourism (Turismo), Higher Technology in Tourism Operations Management (Tecnología Superior en Gestión de Operaciones Turísticas), and Higher Technology in Software Development (Tecnología Superior en Desarrollo de Software). It is necessary to highlight that participants were chosen on availability rather than random selection. Their ages ranged from 19 to 48 years old, and they belong to an A2 proficiency level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

With regard to the demographics section of the survey, 55.8% were women, 42.3% were men, and 1.9% preferred not to state gender. All of them are Ecuadorian; their social status shows 69.2% belong to the middle class, and 30.8% have low-income.

Most of the participants mentioned had internet access at home; and they used their smartphones, laptops, and desktop computers most of the time. All of participants spoke Spanish, and stated they have a basic level of English.

Participants' background about learning English show more positive than negative experiences. On one hand, they stated that they have had great teachers, the experience at the institute level has been pleasant, and many of them wrote their answers in English. In contrast, they mentioned that they find difficult to understand and be understood by others.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study was a survey which consisted of two parts. The first part was related to demographics and the second part to writing experiences. A Google Form was created and the link was sent to students' mails.

Demographic section

The demographic section gathered information about the participants. It included information about their age, gender, language, access to the internet and use of technology.

Students' Perspectives in EFL Writing Section

This section consists of two parts, both in English and Spanish so that participants can provide their answers without confusion. The first section gathered information using a Likert Scale. The information collected was about the learners' difficulties in writing in English, the writing process, and collaborative writing. The second section consisted of three open-ended questions about participants' motivation to write, other challenges or difficulties regarding writing, and the third questions was about their perspectives towards writing and recommendations for the teacher.

Data Analysis

Data collected was quantitative and qualitative. The information was gathered in an Excel sheet; then, it was analyzed to compare the results. The document was uploaded to SPSS statistics to display the results in tables with the means. With regards

to the qualitative data, open questions were formulated to obtain information about student's perspectives towards writing. The answers were grouped and contrasted with literature review.

Ethical Considerations

Govil (2013) highlighted some important ethical considerations to show responsibility towards participants' rights when conducting educational research. Researchers must maintain participants' privacy, assurance anonymity and confidentiality, and avoid harm, betrayal or deception. Additionally, researchers should not make distinction among participants unless the nature of the study. Besides, participants' consent is also essential. If participants are minors, parents or guardians provide consent.

In order to conduct this research, the researcher asked for the permission of the authorities of the institute. In addition, the participants signed a consent letter to participate in the research. The participants remained anonymous and data was confidential.

Results

This section reports the students' difficulties in writing in English, the kind of activities students do in the writing process, and the student's perspectives towards collaborative writing. After collecting the data through the survey, the results were analyzed to answer the three research questions.

For the first research question: "What are the students' difficulties in writing in English?" participants answer an open question. According to their responses, 17.31% of the students struggle with English grammar since they do not know the correct verb tenses, grammar rules or use of connectors. A student mentioned, "*When I write I forget about verb tenses and their correct use.*" Other student stated, "*It takes me a while to*

write because I don't understand the verbs.” Similarly, another group of students, 17.31%, showed they do not have enough vocabulary to express their ideas. A participant wrote, *“It is difficult to write because I do not know the meaning of words.”* Finally, 9.62% of the students mentioned that they do not know how to spell words correctly.

Additionally, participants showed their writing difficulties using a Likert scale. There were five different options in the scale. The options were coded as *To a great extent* (5), *A lot* (4), *Some* (3), *A little bit* (2), and *None* (1).

Participants showed more difficulty in mastering the use of verb tenses (M=3.23). Besides, results show participants struggle with writing appropriate sentences (M=3.35). In addition, participants' difficulties in writing are related to developing a topic sentence (M=3.37) and developing a sequence of ideas to support it (M=3.37).

Table 1

Likert survey results about difficulties in writing.

Difficulties in Writing	
	Mean
I can write correct sentences	3.52
I can write appropriate sentences	3.35
I master the use of verb tenses	3.23
I recognize the use of punctuation marks correctly.	3.46
I know how to spell	3.52
My paragraphs include a topic sentence	3.37
I can support the topic sentences with a sequence of ideas.	3.37

To address the second question: Do learners follow the writing process? participants fill a Likert scale. There were five options to respond: *Never* (1), *Hardly ever* (2), *Sometimes* (3), *Frequently* (4) and *Always* (5).

Table 2

Likert Survey about activities based on the writing process.

Activities developed in the process of writing	
	Mean
I brainstorm ideas.	2.81
When I write I know who I am writing for.	3.12
I reflect on what I write.	3.19
I write a first draft	3.21
I revise my drafts.	3.21
I edit my drafts.	3.33
I provide feedback	3.08
I receive feedback.	3.29
It is necessary to receive feedback to improve your writing.	3.37
I write in English.	3.12
It's difficult to write in English.	2.94
I practice writing in English	3.10
I interact with others while I write.	2.87

Apropos the writing process, the results show that students hardly ever brainstorm ideas (M=2.81) nor interact with others while writing (M=2.87). They sometimes provide feedback (M=3.08) or receive it (M=3.29). They sometimes write a first draft (M=3.21) or revise it (M=3.21). In fact, students sometimes know who they are writing for (M=3.12).

With regard to question 3 “What are the students’ perspectives towards collaborative writing?” participants had five options with the scale *Totally disagree* (1), *Disagree* (2), *Neutral* (3), *Agree* (4), and *Totally agree* (5). Table 3 shows that respondents do activities in groups (M=3.63); collaborative writing strengthens social practice (M=3.60). Collaborative writing allows them to develop learning skills such as decision making, flexibility, problem solving (M=3.63), and to work together towards the same purpose (M=3.60).

Table 3

Perspectives towards collaborative writing.

Perspectives toward writing in collaboration	
	Mean
I have done writing activities in groups.	3.63
It is much better to write individually.	3.08
Writing assignments in groups strengthens social practice.	3.60
Collaborative writing activities allow you to explore about the topic	3.60
Collaborative writing activities allow you to discuss with your partner about the topic.	3.60
Collaborative writing activities allow you to work together towards the same purpose.	3.60
Collaborative writing activities allow you to develop learning skills such as decision making, flexibility, problem solving.	3.63
Writing assignments in groups helps you to increase your knowledge of vocabulary.	3.63
Writing assignments in groups helps you to increase your knowledge of grammar.	3.58
I feel motivated when I work on writing assignments in groups.	3.56

Discussion

The findings exhibit that most of the students struggle with grammar when they try to write in English. Shakir and Jabbar (2021) mentioned that grammar allows written and oral language to be organized. According to Euson (2015), grammar, which consists of syntax and morphology, grants meaning in language. Furthermore, students showed that lack of vocabulary is also a factor that prevents them from writing.

With respect to vocabulary, Wilkins (1972, as cited in Adam, 2016) highlighted the significant importance of vocabulary since it makes communication happen and it allows learners to develop not only writing skills, but reading, listening, and speaking skills as well. With regard to this, Ghazal (2007) compared vocabulary to building blocks of language because they label objects, actions and ideas that people use to communicate. The results also show students sometimes do not know how to develop appropriate sentences ($M=3.37$) or to a sequence of ideas to support them ($M=3.37$). In reference to this, Alisha et al. (2019) stated in their study that learners do not know how to structure their writing, organize their ideas or develop coherent sentences which negatively impact their written production.

Regarding the writing process, the results proved that students are not used to brainstorming ideas ($N=2.81$); they usually do not write a first draft ($M=3.21$) or revise it ($M=3.21$). McLean (2012) remarked some steps to consider when writing. He mentioned prewriting as clue since it helps to put ideas into words. For brainstorming ideas in prewriting, he suggested using life experiences, reading, free writing or asking questions. Furthermore, McLean (2012) mentioned that it is important for the author of a writing to revise the composition and make changes so it satisfies the audience. Nation (2009) emphasized learners need to know about the steps in writing and be able to use certain strategies; and teachers are in charge of scaffolding the process and promoting

improvement. As the participants of this study do not follow the process of writing (M=2.94), this could be the reason why they consider it is difficult to write in English.

Moreover, participants agreed collaborative writing could allow them to foster learning skills like decision making, flexibility, and problem solving (M=3.63). In addition, participants likely prefer to work with other towards the same purpose (M=3.60). These results can be supported by Fung (2020) who considered working in collaboration foster thinking strategies including negotiation and problems solving. Anggraini et al. (2020) added that collaborative writing enhances participation since each student contributes with their strengths, and they work towards the same goal; it also helps to transfer and construct knowledge.

Conclusions

The purpose of this work was to obtain information about the different challenges students face when developing a writing composition. The findings indicated that the main difficulty in students is related to grammar. They do not know verb tenses, how to write proper sentences or to give further support to the topic. Regarding following different steps while writing, students do not brainstorm ideas nor write a first draft. In addition, they do not provide feedback or revise their work before the submission.

With regards to collaborative writing, students concurred that working with others can contribute to enhancing their participation and fostering their critical thinking skills. In addition, working with others towards their same goal, allows them to interact, negotiate and listen to other ideas and perspectives. Thus, they can learn from others and construct knowledge.

Limitations and Recommendations

There were some limitations encountered in the development of this research project. First, it was distance since the participants live in Ecuador while the researcher is in the United States. This situation made it difficult to find a group of participants and to do all the paperwork for authorization in the institution. As a result, the researcher was in the need of looking for the assistance of a teacher in Ecuador so it took some time to ask for permission in the institute and to start with the research. In addition, it was also challenging to gather the information because the participants did not answer the survey in the time stipulated. Thus, it took some days to gather the information and fulfill the number of responses needed. Moreover, as the number of students required for this research was 50, students from different majors participated.

As a recommendation for further research, it will be important for the researcher to be familiar with the participants that will collaborate in the study. In this way, it will be easier to conduct the study and address the survey accurately. Moreover, it is recommended to include additional instruments to collect information, for example an observation.

Regarding time management, it is advisable to elaborate a chronogram with the possible dates and activities to carry out the study because some activities may take more time than others or because unexpected situations may delay the research. Researcher's attention should be placed on possible solutions or strategies to overcome students' difficulties in writing. It may help to include a new research question to address this issue.

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Appendix

Demographic and Writing survey:

Available upon request.