

THE CHALLENGES OF COMPLETING ENGLISH WRITING TASKS: THROUGH THE LENS OF ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SYSTEM LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The study provides a deeper understanding on the lived experiences and challenges of completing English writing tasks. This research utilized a purposive sampling of eight Alternative Learning System (ALS) graduate students who are studying Senior High School in Bunawan National High School. The data were gathered through in-depth interviews with validated interview guide. The findings reveal that the ALS learners found writing essays, sentences, and reflections difficult and exhausting. Results also showed that organization of idea, uses of punctuation marks, content, and vocabulary were the challenges common among participants. This led to the difficulty in comprehension, difficulty in sentence construction, difficulty in understanding instructions, difficulty in explaining and having low self-esteem. These affect their performance in completing English writing tasks. However, it was found out that ALS students cope with the challenges by gathering information, self-study, and brainstorming and collaboration with teachers, peers and family. With this, an intervention program is proposed.

Keyword: *challenges of completing English writing tasks, lens of alternative learning system learners, phenomenological*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing in English is considered as one of the future-ready skills that each student must know and be competent at, particularly in education and business disciplines. To become competent language users in writing, learners must have intensive English vocabulary, good grammatical competence, and appropriate knowledge writing mechanics.

In international context, Nguyen and Suwannabubpha (2021)[10] reported that the constraints in achieving effective writing skills in Thailand includes lack of grammar and vocabulary, teachers' lack of English language, and instructional skills to facilitative wring classes. Moreover, contextual difficulties in terms of time constraint, insufficient resources, poorly motivated and mixed-ability students, national test structures, and presence of untrained English teachers were also found outsome difficulties faced by the students in the same country. In the present education system of the Philippines, in the study of Hikmah et al. (2019)[6], results showed that the style, organization, and contents were writing aspects in which students are good at; however, it was revealed that writing skills of the junior high school students in Iriga City, Camarines Sur were poor in mechanics and grammar at the

same time. According to the report submitted in the office of Bunawan National High School, 20 – 35 % of the ALS students were dropped out or no longer in school during pandemic times. Since learning was distributed through modules, ALS students with limited knowledge of the topics were unable to expound their thoughts naturally, affecting their performance. Although it is said that ALS curriculum contents were tantamount to formal classroom, some competencies relevant to English writing were left unrealized due to some challenges confronting the alternative mode of delivery.

In this sense, the study opens a lens for those teachers to view writing competence and skills through ALS learners since they remain understudied in most of the academic and research undertakings, making them left behind in terms of intervention and remedial instruction for bridging the learning gaps.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of the ALS students in completing English writing tasks?
2. What are the challenges experienced by the ALS students in completing English writing tasks?
3. What are the mechanisms utilized by the ALS students in completing English writing tasks?
4. What intervention program can be developed from the findings of the study?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study is anchored on Sociocultural Cognitive Development of Lev Vygotsky or Lev Vygotsky's Instructional Scaffolding. This theory asserts that a child's cognitive development and ability can be guided by their social interactions by a more knowledgeable member of community- such as parent or teacher. His theory states that learning is crucially social process as opposed to an independent journey discovery. This is largely manifested in the case of ALS learners who would normally experience transition adjustments when proceeding to formal school. The students must learn how to use instructional scaffolding as they move from receiving direct instruction from the teacher to independent problem solving and networking with other students. In this way, learners would be able to lead their own learning experience. However, before becoming competent writers, learners need adherence with the 'writing mechanics', including writing form, spelling, punctuation, and writing conventions. These basics of writing would help them write coherently, correctly, and cohesively.

To progress from teacher-reliant to self-sufficient learners, ALS students require facilitators and learning supports who can effectively guide them through the process of learning writing skills, as well as a conducive learning environment that promotes goal setting and collaboration in the development of writing skills. In order to bridge the indicated learning gap of the ALS learners, writing intervention programs may also be implemented. Exploring adequately prepared writing tasks is required to strengthen the learners' fundamental writing abilities.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

The researcher adopted the qualitative phenomenology research design to surface the lived experiences of the ALS learners in accomplishing their writing tasks. According to Adams and Van Manen (2010), Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that echoes the contemplative human experiences using and expressing through language. The approach tries to evoke the empirical definition as lived through before one conceptualizes, abstracts, or explains them. This research design is the most appropriate design to utilize in this research venture as it tries to provide an in-depth discussion and authentic accounts about the experiences of ALS learners regarding the one of the most important skills in English, the writing skill. Thus, the appropriateness of this method was prompted by the fact that human experience is subjective in nature.

2.2 Research Participants

There were eight participants involved in the study that were selected through purposive sampling technique. The selection of proponent must be an ALS student before, an A&E passer, and a SHS level student at Bunawan National High School who have been included in the formal schooling.

2.3 Data Collection

With respect to the process of phenomenological analysis, the researcher used an interview guide created by the researcher as a qualitative analysis method. The researcher prepared a tool, which has a list of questions to keep track of to ensure that all of the topics necessary to address the research questions will be covered. The study interview guide aims to learn about the challenges of completing English task: through the lens of alternative learning system learners. Furthermore, interview is the primary method of data collection in the phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007). Interviewing, according to Rubin and Rubin (2012), helps researchers appreciate experiences they may not have had or offers them a different viewpoint on an experience. They also said that interviewing is the best method for providing insight into personal or sensitive issues.

The researcher made sure to undergo the guidelines on the procedure of gathering the data. Before conducting the interview, the researcher wrote a letter to the Schools Division Superintendent and the school principal seeking permission as part of the data collection process. Aside from that, signing of data privacy act and acceptance form was conducted to show the willingness and availability of the participants to become part of the study. Personal field notes during the interview process will also be created to provide support explanation to the possible results of the study.

The researcher conducted the face-face interviews, making sure to observe and follow the health protocols. In the interview audio recording will be made in order to ensure that all responses from the participants will be data collected and properly analyzed.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the findings to the research questions that examined the challenges of completing English writing tasks from Alternative Learning System learners. The presentation of the discussions was divided into four subsets; a) experiences, b) challenges, c) mechanisms and d) intervention program. The structured themes and those emerging within them were formed as a basis for expanding the discussion of the results of this study.

3.1 EXPERIENCES

Describing Writing Task Requirements in SHS. The emerging themes in this structured theme were difficult, seeing the importance of writing skills, and exhausting. The result showed that ALS students had to go through complex understanding and were forced to gather more basic information to fully understand the given tasks. Participants noted that the level of writing skills at the ALS center is very basic compared to SHS, where there are words that are difficult to understand. They have to browse the internet or self-study in order to complete the task. Adas and Bakir (2013) [1] considered writing as an intricate and complex task, and it is the most difficult of all the language abilities to acquire.

Another theme is seeing the value of writing abilities. The informant said that it is important to have more knowledge of writing skills in order to be better equipped for future endeavours. Student conveyed that, as ALS graduates, they were challenged to write lengthy writing assignments that were difficult to complete and spent extra time brainstorming, revising, or even editing to achieve an excellent result. Erkan and Saban (2011) [4] further explained that writing is an active, productive, and complex still that is relevant to academic success.

Writing Skills Learned. The writing skills learned by research participants in ALS center were spelling, comprehension, and composition. The study revealed that ALS center place a greater emphasis on spelling, whether in English or Filipino. They also master comprehension techniques in order to become a skilled writer. Moreover, they were taught about the particulars in composing letters, constructing sentences, and employing good grammar. As cited in Jebreil et al. (2015) [8], the importance of writing skills enhancement is not only limited to making oneself aware of the rules of good writing such as unity, coherence, and emphasis, but it includes comprehending cognitive processes, such as expression of intention, composition of ideas, solution to a problem, improvement of critical thinking skills.

Motivation in Accomplishing English Writing Tasks. The emerging themes were family, do research and self-study, to become achiever, motivated to be competent, encouragement from friends and family, and wanting to finish. The finding showed that their family is one of the reasons they wanted to study hard. Indeed, family influences children's learning habits and academic performance. Participants also conducted researches on their own to gain additional knowledge, and able to accomplish tasks is indeed fulfilling to them. Moreover, the participant admitted that the goal is to succeed, if not to the top, and then at least to a level that will make their

parents proud. Another motivation is competent motivation. The results showed that as an ALS completer, being competent is a must. Engaging in a formal set-up with regular students during senior high school is somewhat discriminatory for them, ALS graduates. They have to strive hard in order to fit into the circle. This supported by Novariana et al. (2018) [11], which identified problems includes low motivation and disengagement in classroom activities that affected the writing skills of senior high school students in Indonesia.

Other motivation is the encouragement from parents or friends. One participant highlighted that family and friends' encouragement is a huge motivator to accomplish work related to academics, especially the writing assignments. Lazarus and colleagues (1986) [9] proved that active coping techniques which entails seeking social support, which requires gathering knowledge and emotional support, and positive reappraisal, which involves giving the situation a positive spin and emphasizing one's own personal development.

Participants also shared that the ultimate goal is to finish studies, use the learning to help others, and find a decent job. Hulleman (2018) [7] emphasized to encourage the students to see the value in what they are learning to boost their interest in the subject, engagement, and academic performance.

3.2 CHALLENGES

Considered as the most difficult to learn. The emerging themes were organization of idea, uses of punctuation marks, content, and vocabulary. The finding revealed that constructing sentences and concept organizations are challenging. As an ALS completer with little writing experience, they must strive hard in order to be a competent writer. Another considered as difficult to learn is employing correct punctuations. Findings revealed that sometimes, participants find it difficult to utilize. This is similar to the findings of Ghabool et al. (2012) [5], in which they found out that punctuations were common problems in writing tasks.

Content is another theme that students assessed as difficult to learn. ALS completers find it difficult to articulate the way they would prefer due to lack of knowledge of the topic. Additionally, results find out that learner was having difficulty to understand some unfamiliar words and challenged to compose complete sentences because of the ability to communicate through words will be restricted to what they can imagine. According to Al-Khairiy (2013) [2], one of the major problems includes inappropriate vocabulary choice.

Considered as the easiest to learn. The theme served as results in terms of spelling. Spelling has a big impact on a learner's ability to write effectively and efficiently. The findings revealed that ALS center makes a greater effort with the basic spellings. Mostly participants stated that spelling is simple since they practice them from morning to afternoon. In addition, determining and jotting down simple words were also easy for them.

Problems Encountered in Accomplishing Writing Tasks. The emerging themes were lack of ideas, internet connection, limited reading materials, difficulty in understanding, difficulty in sentence construction, lack of self-confidence, difficulty in understanding instructions, and difficulty in explaining. The findings showed that common problems encountered by the students were lack of ideas, no internet connection, and limited reading materials. Participants pointed out that there were times when the topic was too simple; however, there were also times when it was too difficult. They encountered difficulty in comprehending questions in SHS and intend to seek assistance from others to fully comprehend the subject. Effective sentence structure makes the reading informative. Nonetheless, proponents revealed that they cannot construct their own sentences, paragraphs, essays, or even fully express their ideas. Furthermore, the result reported that ALS graduates did not engage in intensive writing, which would have caused writing anxiety to impair their performance. Interpreting instructions in module mode became more challenging to ALS graduates. There have been instances when questions have been difficult to comprehend and nobody has been able to explain it to them. Moreover, explaining a subject improves understanding. Findings revealed that complex writing requirements can be challenging to explain at times.

Assistance Received from the Teachers. The emerging themes were nothing, filling the missing, giving consideration, answering queries, giving interventions, giving clear instructions, and giving encouragements. Inadequate assistance may result in poor writing. The findings appeared that some research participants did not do anything to approach their teacher. As a result, the teacher would fill in the missing information; especially it was time of pandemic where the set-up is through module sessions. Meanwhile, participants also shared that they seek help from the teacher via phone call if they fail to understand some topics. Another assistance received is interventions which participants conveyed that their teacher will provide interventions if they were having difficulty with the topic and occasionally allowed them to revise their paper based on his/her corrections which worked well in terms of learning new writing techniques. In addition, the findings showed that the teacher gives a brief explanation of sentence construction and give assistance if there were any instructions in the module that were challenging to comprehend. Also, the result revealed that teachers encourage them to complete their modules, even if they passed them late or only a few of them did.

3.3 MECHANISMS

Coping difficulties encountered. The emerging themes were gather information, self-study, and brainstorming. The result showed that participants used to gather information by asking to their classmates, teachers, or browsing the internet. There were situations when regular students were reluctant to ask an ALS completer for help. All will therefore be self-taught. Self-directed learners have the chance to improve their educational experience and study skills. Different aspects were shared by the participants, such as reading books, blogs, and researching. Another strategy to encounter difficulty is brainstorming. The finding revealed that students seek out companies to collaborate with and asking someone who has previously been in a similar situation. They also ask for assistance from parents, siblings, or acquaintances who have experienced a similar scenario, as well as from regular class students who can easily relate.

Consistent practices to improve writing skills in English. The emerging themes were writing in English, making dairy, consistent training, taking note of new words, doing nothing, try to familiarize words, and write down idea/s. One can express oneself more effectively by writing more often. The finding showed that writing English words needs to be practice. Other practices were keeping a regular journal, consistent writing or jotting down unfamiliar words. Participants stated that writing a diary followed by consistent training and taking down new words is another advantage of a competent writer.

Individuals who do not write for a living or on a daily basis, in particular, perceive writing to be intimidating. The participants emphasized that they did nothing because of family matters. UNICEF (2021) [13] stated that many learners have decided to enroll in the ALS program due the flexibility of learning sessions which permits them to work or to accomplish their day-to-day commitments while studying. In the same manner, the findings revealed that mostly of the participants' familiarized words through watching movies with subtitles shown in the screen. Moreover, students admitted that writing ideas on scratch paper first and had them reviewed by some friends is what they do. And also, researching the words that were unfamiliar helped them fully understand the meaning of the sentence.

Ways Teachers could help in improving Writing Skills. The emerging themes were explain thoroughly, follow-up the students, monitor the students from time to time, be more hands on, interventions, need for face to face sessions, feedback, and encouragement for students. The result showed that the role of the teacher and the student can both be made clearer and simpler by including a thorough, comprehensive assessment with the task. Another way of teachers is to follow-up the students from time to time. The informants suggested that follow through should be impose when having assignment tasks. Regularly monitoring student progress also gives the teacher the opportunity to evaluate each student's present performance level. The teacher should keep in touch to students and monitor them. And from time to time, give the students tips or advices to accomplish tasks. Another significant way of teacher to help is that hands-on learning should be required in order to recognize and correct students' mistakes while they are still learning in order to substantially reduce the probability that the mistake will be repeated.

In addition, the findings revealed that there should be physical interaction with the teacher so that the students can ask questions and receive feedback. It is preferable to have someone whom they can turn for assistance if they cannot understand some topics.

Materials needed that can help to Improve. The emerging themes were nothing, simple module, consistent intervention, journal, drafting book, and more English books. There have been instances when a student simply requires the teacher's assistance to learn. Simple modules should be implemented so that students can advance on their own with little to no assistance from the teacher. Another emerging theme was journaling. Mostly participants suggested having a journal where they can write or practice writing letters, in which they can edit drafts and have access to it to review comments and corrections until they perfect their piece. Additionally, reading helps to become acquainted with various writing styles, broadens vocabulary, and discovers new word combinations. They recommend having reading materials like English pamphlets, books, booklets, and other materials that could help them. This will be used to practice writing essays and responding to questions.

3.4 INTERVENTION PLAN

The researcher developed an English Writing Task Compliance Intervention Plan which will serve as guide for ALS teachers how to deal with the learners who have difficulty in completing their English writing tasks. This comprises the objectives, action steps, responsibilities, timeline, resources, potential barriers, and communications plan. The resources will mostly be funded by the MOOE with school memorandum and other event request letters attached with respect to the communication matters.

In step 1, the objective is to conduct one day school-based training and conference for the planning and activity design proposal of School Head, English Coordinator, English Reading Coordinator and all teachers during August 2023 onwards.

In step 2, the objectives are Launching of the School Writing Program and Writing Assessment. The school teachers, class advisers, pupils, PTA officials and other stakeholder groups are held responsible for this activity during the month of September 2023.

In step 3, there are six (6) specified objectives for the intervention plan. First is the submission of individual teacher's action plan for SH approval to the School Head in the month of August 2023. Second, in the same month will be the Parent's meeting for the conduct of monitors writing remediation by the class advisers with invitation letter to parents attached. Third is the Initiate remedial instruction for the identified pupils with writing difficulties by the class advisers from the months of October 2023 to June 2024. Fourth is the conduction of writing assessments / culmination quarterly through journal, diaries, reflections or essays by the class advisers. Fifth is monitoring and evaluation with the School English Team of Evaluators starting on January 2024. Sixth objective is the submission of final writing report for the school year 2023 – 2024 by class advisers.

Since there are 60 – 80 percent of Schools in the District have School Reading Programs and 90 -100 percent participation among the school heads established writing program, this concludes that the intervention plan will be made possible.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The challenges explored in the study are the gaps between the experiences of the ALS learners in completing English writing tasks and the setting they are in. These experiences would become a basis in the development of intervention strategies to overcome the challenges encounters by the research participants. ALS learners described the writing tasks requirement as more complex in SHS which requires them extra effort to put an excellent output. The following internal drawback includes organization of idea, uses of punctuation marks, content, and vocabulary. Moreover, lack of ideas, internet connection, limited reading materials, difficulty in understanding, difficulty in sentence construction, lack of self-confidence, difficulty in understanding instructions, and difficulty in explaining were the problems encountered in accomplishing their writing tasks. In this sense, teachers play a vital role in the acquisition of the effective writing skills of the learners. Therefore, conducting intervention program for writing can improve learners' basic writing skills, thus, bridging the identified learning gap. Students frequently internalize encouraging remarks from their teachers, and this could inspire them to work hard and achieve success.

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