**Active Research Report: ESL Students and Writing Skills**

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Abstract

The research report investigates the problems experienced by fifth-year technical secondary education ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. The study is based in Belgium, in which it compares the students' writing performance with other skills of the language. The study applied a mixed-methods approach composed of qualitative and quantitative data from 37 students via a standardized writing assessment, test results from reading, speaking, and listening skills, interviews with an ESL instructor, structured questionnaires, language proficiency tests, and class observations. The results of the study indicated that ESL experience challenges in the use of the language, content development, mechanics, and organization in writing. In support of these students' writing development, the study's results also emphasized the value of self-directed learning, feedback, explicit instruction, and scaffolding. The main recommendation from the study is the incorporation of technology in writing instruction, the creation of a supportive classroom environment, and the implementation of the targeted interventions for language proficiency and organization. The results add to the comprehension of writing challenges experienced by the ESL students and also give insight for improving writing instructions and supporting the ESL learning area.

**Introduction**

Anyone who wishes to excel in today’s globally interconnected academic and professional environments must have a strong command of the English language. According to Akhtar (2020), effective written communication is crucial in academic and professional contexts, and those who can express themselves clearly in writing have a major edge. Therefore, learning English as a second language equips students with the skills they need to produce coherent essays. For students in Belgium’s TSO (Technical Secondary Education), it is crucial to assess their proficiency in the language and gain insight into how their written, oral, and aural communication skills tack up against one another (Floris & Renandya, 2020). Effective writing requires students to use critical thinking, logical structure of ideas, adherence to language rules, and command of syntax and vocabulary (Bhowmik, 2021). Writing challenges are common for ESL students, making it essential to evaluate their writing ability and pinpoint any areas that require further assistance (Al Bad et al., 2015). ESL students must develop a command of the language’s syntax, vocabulary, and ability to think critically and coherently organize information (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2016). Although writing well is a vital career requirement, not much emphasis has been paid to the challenges faced by fifth-year TSO ESL students in Belgium.

Spoken language facilitates real-time comprehension and emotional connection because of its immediacy and interactivity. However, written language allows for accurate documentation, facilitating vast information distribution and permanent knowledge preservation (Floris & Renandya, 2019). Since written language lasts forever, the reader can go back over it as many times as necessary to fully comprehend it. According to Dornier (2014), writing, except for personal letters and computer-based communication like e-mail, usually does not include physical contact with the reader. Young children learn to talk before they learn to read and write. Reading and writing are typically connected with the start of formal schooling, but learning how to talk spontaneously takes place at home (Akthar et al., 2020). It is a common fallacy that spoken languages are more straightforward to pick up than written ones, yet the opposite is true.

Contrary to popular belief, as demonstrated by the research presented by Newton et al. (2018), the linguistic complexity of spoken language is comparable to that of written language, albeit in a different way. Differences in usage and grammatical structure are expected between speech and writing due to the vastly different contexts in which the two are created (Chen & Li, 2018). The stark difference between how stiff written materials can be and how casually a person can speak is where writing and speaking diverge the most (Giroux, 2017). Therefore, the permanence of written language allows for a finder-grained organizational structure and the potential for more complex systems.

Writing is crucial for effective communication in a foreign language, as it allows individuals to express their thoughts, convey complex ideas, and engage in meaningful exchanges with others (Floris & Renandya, 2019). Since many students enroll in English classes to prepare for further education or careers that need excellent writing skills, writing is of utmost significance in an ESL classroom. Recent research on second language writing has shown debates about whether or not the primary focus of writing instruction. This study aims to investigate the writing challenges faced by fifth-year TSO ESL students in Belgium and compare their writing performance with other language skills. Specifically, the study seeks to evaluate the student’s overall writing proficiency level, their perception of their writing abilities, the writing skills they struggle with the most, and the factors contributing to their writing struggle.

**Theoretical Framework**

Writing proficiency is a person’s competency and skill in using written language to communicate thoughts, ideas, and information. ESL students often face challenges in developing their writing skills (Horwitz, 2016). Accuracy, fluency, coherence, and cohesion are all crucial components of ESL writing. Coherence involves ideas’ logical and smooth flow, while cohesion refers to using cohesive devices to connect sentences and paragraphs, contributing to ESL students’ writing (Brown & Lee, 2015). Various factors influence ESL students’ writing performance, such as language proficiency, cultural factors, learning environment, and social and psychological factors, which play a crucial role in writing. ESL students who have not yet attained sufficient English proficiency may struggle with writing tasks due to limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge (Santos & Moreno, 2017). Besides, cultural differences and differences in rhetorical styles between the student’s native language and English also impact their writing abilities (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2016). Motivation and self-confidence are vital psychological factors influencing ESL students’ writing skills. Students who are motivated and believe in their abilities tend to exhibit higher engagement and effort in writing tasks, leading to improved performance (Dornier, 2014). On the other hand, students with low motivation and self-confidence may approach writing tasks with apprehension and struggle to produce coherent and well-structured texts.

The role of instructional practices and pedagogical approaches should not be overlooked. Effective writing instruction should incorporate explicit teaching of writing strategies, grammar, vocabulary, and the writing process (Hedge, 2019). Feedback and scaffolding provided by teachers also play a crucial role in supporting ESL students’ writing development (Cumming & Giroux, 2017). Besides, integrating technology in writing instruction has shown promise in enhancing ESL students’ writing skills (Chen & Lin, 2018).

Numerous studies have investigated the writing capabilities of ESL students, consistently highlighting the challenges they encounter in areas like grammar accuracy, vocabulary usage, organization, and coherence (Silva & Matsuda, 2018). Additionally, research has shown that ESL students struggle to effectively organize their thoughts and ideas, leading to incoherent and disjointed writing (Ferris, 2014). Various instructional interventions have been examined for their impact on ESL students’ writing skills, such as explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction, which has positively influenced their writing performance (Kroll, 2016). Scaffolding techniques, including providing models and guiding students through the writing process, have also enhanced the quality of ESL students’ writing (Hyland, 2018).

Previous studies have revealed that ESL students often face writing competency challenges, particularly in academic settings (Hyland, 2019). These students generally produce less accurate and complex writing than native speakers of the target language and tend to commit more errors. Apart from the difficulties associated with learning grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, cultural and educational disparities between the students’ native and target languages contribute to their writing difficulties. Furthermore, Hyland emphasizes the importance of integrating writing training into ESL curricula and the need for effective pedagogical strategies that support ESL students’ writing development.

ESL students’ general level of language competence is one of the major elements affecting their writing skills. According to Shitu (2015), it might be difficult for pupils who need help with speaking, listening, and reading to write clearly and grammatically accurately. Therefore, it is crucial to consider their language competency levels as a contributing component to comprehending the writing issues among ESL students. Cultural and linguistic backgrounds also play a role in an ESL student’s writing style, making it challenging to adopt the writing standards of the language of instruction. Language and cultural barriers may result in ESL students needing support with proper tone, style, and organization in their written works (Shitu, 2015). Classroom instructional strategies and teaching techniques can also impact ESL students’ writing abilities. Inadequate teacher guidance and feedback can hinder the development of ESL students’ writing skills. Assessing the effectiveness of instructional strategies is crucial for supporting the writing growth of ESL students.

Research suggests various instructional approaches, such as process-based, genre-based, and communicative methods, can improve ESL students’ writing skills (Martirosyan et al., 2015). Moreover, studies have shown that providing feedback and correcting errors can enhance the accuracy and complexity of writing produced by ESL students.

The sociocultural theory put forward by Vygotsky (1978) is another important theoretical viewpoint. This theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in language development. According to Vygotsky, language learning occurs through collaboration and scaffolding provided by more competent individuals. ESL students’ writing skills may be influenced by their social interaction, educational background, and exposure to English outside the classroom.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the writing challenges faced by ESL students in Belgium may be influenced by specific factors within the Belgian context. For instance, the linguistic diversity in Belgium, with multiple official languages (Dutch, French, German), can create unique challenges for ESL students (Shitu, 2015). The influence of language policies, educational practices, and the availability of resources for ESL instruction in Belgium should also be considered (Akhtar, 2020). By incorporating these theoretical perspectives and considering the context of Belgium, a comprehensive understanding of the ESL students’ writing challenges can be achieved. The theoretical framework helps to contextualize the findings and provides additional insights into the underlying factors contributing to these challenges. It is a foundation for interpreting the results and informing potential interventions and recommendations for addressing ESL students’ writing difficulties in Belgium.

**Methods**

The research participants consisted of 37 fifth-year TSO ESL students from a school located in Belgium. Students were selected based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study. Among the participants, 27 were boys, and 10 were girls, with 11 students repeating the year. They represented a diverse group in terms of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Class observations were conducted to gain insights into the participants' writing habits and the teaching strategies employed by the ESL instructor. These observations focused on participant involvement, conversations, and writing tasks.

A mixed-methods approach was used in the study to investigate the writing difficulties that ESL students in Belgium experienced. The mixed method approach was considered to obtain various perspectives, enhance the validation of the results, and build a contextualized and comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Other advantages of using this method that were also considered include enhancing the generalizability and credibility of the results. Besides, it has more specific measures based on the research context. The study used qualitative and quantitative data, incorporating a structured questionnaire, standardized assessment of writing, interviews with an ESL instructor, test results from reading, speaking, and listening skills, and general class observation. The holistic approach focussed on thorough comprehension of writing abilities, challenge areas, and the learners' perception, hence a contribution to the significance of the study.

A standardized writing competency test was conducted to evaluate the student's overall writing skills as part of the qualitative component. The prompt was designed to be engaging, thought-provoking, and suitable for the student’s proficiency level. It encouraged students to express their thoughts and opinions while demonstrating their writing skills. The assessment required the students to write a 200-word essay and a detailed rubric was developed to evaluate their writing capabilities. The rubric focused on four essential categories: grammar, word use, organization, and coherence. Each category had a maximum score of 4, with clear scoring criteria. This rubric ensured uniformity and objectivity in the evaluation process. The test was conducted under controlled conditions within a specific time frame to ensure students had an equal opportunity to complete the essay. The students were given clear instructions and guidelines while writing their essays.

Trained evaluators proficient in English and familiar with the rubric assessed the students' essays. They provided scores for each category and offered feedback on areas that needed improvement. The evaluators were blinded to the students' identities and backgrounds to minimize bias. The scores and feedback from the evaluators were compiled and analyzed to identify trends, strengths, and weaknesses in the student’s writing skills.

A structured questionnaire was also administered to collect quantitative and qualitative information on the students' self-perceived writing proficiency. The questionnaire included open-ended questions to draw qualitative insights about their experiences and Likert-scale questions to evaluate their self-perceived writing abilities.

First, standardized tests were employed to assess the participants; this measured their listening, speaking, and reading proficiency. The standardized test was also considered to give a more reliable comparison of the results of the tests, which could not have been obtained in a non-standardized test. It also helped in the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the students based on the context of the study. Secondly, the speaking test was also applied in the evaluation of the ability of the learners to describe their favorite holiday, converse, use the right sentence tenses and structures, and show clear articulation and pronunciation. Third, the reading test concentrated on comprehension skills by presenting a text concerning Blarney Stone, followed by relevant interrogations. Next, the listening test was meant to assess listening skills by using questions concerning a video on Ellis Island. The tests outlined the objective measures of the participant’s abilities and were given within a controlled surrounding of testing. The test outcome was the primary component of the analysis of the language proficiency level of the participants.

An ESL instructor was also interviewed to understand their opinions on the student’s writing skills and difficulties. Qualitative data analysis utilized a theme analysis strategy. Recorded interviews and written samples underwent comprehensive analysis and coding to identify recurring themes and patterns related to writing difficulties, attitudes toward writing, and techniques used by ESL students.

Quantitative data analysis involved using descriptive statistics, such as means, to summarize and interpret the information from the questionnaire and writing skill assessment. The writing competency levels of the ESL students were compared based on factors such as language proficiency and cultural background. Ethical considerations were considered throughout the investigation, ensuring confidentiality, voluntary participation, and obtaining informed consent from participants or their legal guardians.

A triangulation technique was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. The brief interview with the ESL instructor provided valuable insights from an experienced expert, shedding light on the instructional tactics employed and the contextual factors influencing the students' writing performance. This triangulation approach aimed to thoroughly understand the study issue and strengthen the credibility of the research outcomes.

**Results**

The findings of a mixed-methods investigation into the writing difficulties of Belgian fifth-year TSO ESL students are presented in this chapter. Upon analyzing the rubric scores presented in Table 1, several noteworthy trends and areas for improvement among ESL students' writing samples have come to light. A key issue is the absence of a well-defined structure and organization, as evidenced by the lowest mean score. Many essays fail to establish a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. The introductions often have poor structure or lack clarity, making it challenging for readers to discern the main point.

Similarly, the body paragraphs lack coherence and transitions, resulting in a disjointed flow of ideas. In certain instances, the conclusions are abrupt or lack a concise summary of the main arguments. Addressing these structural weaknesses would significantly enhance the overall clarity and effectiveness of the essays. Another notable issue revolves around inadequate addressing of the given topic. Some essays solely focus on the advantages or disadvantages of social media, disregarding the need for a balanced discussion. Others provide a superficial analysis without delving deeper into the topic’s complexities. To elevate their writing, students should explore both the positive and negative aspects of social media, considering the nuanced perspectives and conducting thorough examinations.

Weak language usage is also evident in many writing samples. The lack of sentence clarity and variety leads to confusion and hampers the understanding of the intended meaning. Frequent grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors further impede the effectiveness of the essays. Inappropriate word choices or general concerns regarding language proficiency are apparent. Interestingly, the mechanics category received the highest mean score. Although not exceptionally high, this score suggests that ESL students possess a better grasp of mechanics, including punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, compared to the other assessed categories.

The content score reflects potential limitations in vocabulary usage, as vocabulary choices often prove inappropriate, repetitive, or ineffective in conveying the intended message. Furthermore, several essays suffer from a lack of evidence and support for their arguments. They make broad statements without providing specific examples, personal experiences, or research to substantiate their claims. Consequently, discussions appear shallow and unsubstantiated. To strengthen their writing, students should incorporate relevant evidence, such as statistics, studies, or personal anecdotes, to support their claims and present a more persuasive argument. With an overall mean score of 8.56 out of a possible 16 points, it becomes evident that there is ample room for improvement in the writing abilities of the ESL students.

**Table 1**

*Mean Scores Rubric Writing Samples*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CATEGORY | MEAN |
| Content | 2.07 |
| Organization | 1.93 |
| Language Use | 2.04 |
| Mechanics | 2.56 |
| Overall Score | 8.56 |

The test results in Table 2, evaluated on a maximum score of 10, revealed that the participants performed better in their speaking, reading, and listening skills than their writing skills. In terms of speaking, the participants demonstrated various abilities, showcasing fluency and clarity to varying degrees. Similarly, their reading comprehension skills exhibited diverse levels of understanding, with some participants displaying strong comprehension abilities. Additionally, the participants showed reasonable listening skills, but there is room for improvement in fully understanding and interpreting what they hear.

**Table 2**

*Test Scores Language Skills*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Language Skills | MEAN |
| Speaking | 7.40 |
| Reading | 7.20 |
| Listening | 6.30 |
| Writing | 5.35 |

The teacher expertly highlighted that the students’ writing troubles were mostly caused by their limited outside-of-class exposure to English, a lack of writing practice, and challenges using their understanding of grammar and vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Furthermore, the instructor stressed the significance of scaffolding and detailed writing teaching that catered to ESL students’ requirements. The teacher confirmed that ESL students generally performed better in receptive skills (listening and reading) and oral skills than writing skills, especially when given time to prepare. ESL students' challenges in writing included using translation tools, literal translations, spelling mistakes, and common grammar mistakes. To address these challenges, the teacher suggested correcting mistakes, utilizing rubrics for self-assessment, and incorporating additional writing exercises in the student’s portfolio. Tools like spelling checkers, grammar rules, and translation websites were also recommended for ESL students with writing difficulties.

As indicated in the table below, the outcome of the questionnaire shows that the students have different levels of motivation, perception of writing challenges, and self-confidence. According to the mean motivation score, students have moderate writing motivation. Meanwhile, the learners have a huge range of motivation levels regarding the relatively higher standard deviation. Contrarily, the self-confidence mean score is relatively higher than the motivation mean score; this shows that the learners are relatively more confident in writing. Although, the standard deviation shows the possibility of more variation in the level of confidence among the learners. The perceived challenges mean score is also higher, depicting that most learners experience challenges while writing. The standard deviation indicates that though most learners experience challenges in writing, some have no challenges in writing. The outcome, in this case, shows the vitality of supporting and guiding the learners in the improvement of their skills in writing and developing their confidence in this region.

**Table 3**

*Writing Questionnaire results for Mean and Standard Deviation*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| CATEGORY | MEAN | STDEV |
| Motivation | 3.63 | 1.78 |
| Self-confidence | 4.43 | 1.66 |
| Perceived Difficulty | 4.32 | 1.47 |

Upon examining the questionnaire’s open questions, it is clear that many struggle with writing in English and need more practice outside the classroom. Firstly, several students have voiced concerns about their English proficiency, specifically sentence construction, word choice, conjugation, spelling, and grammar. These problems show the author’s lack of skill and confidence in writing. Secondly, there was no unified manner for enhancing their English writing skills. Some revealed methods like typing English messages, creating lists, reading English texts, and seeking input. However, some students admitted they did not employ specific strategies but relied only on their innate English-language competence. The latter suggests they use no strategies or depend on their capacity to think in English. This hints at a lack of deliberate effort to advance their writing skills. Thirdly, the regularity of writing practice beyond the classroom was generally scarce. Although a handful of students mentioned writing frequently or daily, most disclosed sporadic or negligible practice.

Some only practiced when particular tasks or exams necessitated writing in English. This shows a limited commitment to refining their writing capabilities. Fourthly, students often turned to passive exposure to English through media consumption, such as watching films, playing video games, or reading books. While this can aid in vocabulary acquisition and familiarity with the language, it does not necessarily lead to active writing practice. Fifthly, several students brought up participating in English communication through social media platforms or online chat applications. However, the extent of their communication involving substantial writing remains unclear, as some responses implied that they mainly engage in casual conversations or occasional texting with friends.

In conclusion, the students' feedback underscores the idea that writing in English presents difficulties, and they generally lack steady and purposeful practice outside the classroom. The limited employment of strategies, infrequent writing practice, and reliance on passive exposure to English suggest that there is room for improvement in their writing abilities. As educators, we are responsible for addressing these challenges and providing ample opportunities for students to develop their skills in a supportive environment.

**Discussion**

The present study examined the writing challenges encountered by fifth-year TSO ESL learners in Belgium through a mixed-methods research design and compared their writing performance with other language skills. The study's findings underscore several key areas of difficulty in writing abilities, with their writing performance notably lower than in other language skills.

The study found that EFL students in Belgium lack writing proficiency for several reasons. The discoveries propose that students may struggle to organize their ideas, express them clearly, and use appropriate vocabulary, leading to syntax errors and disjointed composition. Moreover, limited opportunities to practice and feedback may contribute to a lack of motivation and confidence in their writing abilities. Also, the results show how important it is to include self-evaluation tools like rubrics in the teaching method to help students evaluate their writing skills and determine where they need to improve. This helps students develop metacognitive skills and allows them to take charge of their learning. More scaffolding, step-by-step guidance, and constructive feedback could have improved students' writing skills. The classroom atmosphere was tense and unproductive, with disruptions and high noise levels. Creating a suitable learning environment, addressing classroom management concerns, and reducing distractions would enhance student concentration and engagement, leading to better writing outcomes. Additionally, students required assistance with time management, as excessive planning left insufficient time for actual writing and editing. Explicit training on effective time management strategies and proper time allocation for writing and editing would enhance students' writing productivity and quality.

The study’s findings, consistent with previous studies in the literature, suggest that effective pedagogical strategies may be required to address these issues. The results are consistent with the results of Adnan & Sayadi (2022), emphasizing that enhancing opportunities for meaningful writing practice and genuine exposure to the target language, incorporating technology into writing instruction, and providing explicit instruction, feedback, and scaffolding are all examples of such strategies. Language proficiency tests like the TOEFL and IELTS, frequently used to admit international students to higher education institutions or facilitate their professional mobility, may include writing proficiency assessments as an essential component. Therefore, assessing EFL students' writing abilities is crucial to their academic, professional, and social success and developing linguistic proficiency and communication skills (Hyland, 2019).

Another effective strategy is incorporating technology into writing instruction. Grammar and spelling checkers, online dictionaries, and writing platforms are just a few examples of the many resources and tools that technology can provide to make writing easier (Akhtar, 2020). Effectively incorporating technology into the classroom can increase EFL students' engagement and motivation while simultaneously providing them with immediate feedback and revision opportunities.

In addition, explicit instruction, feedback, and scaffolding are essential for supporting the writing development of EFL students. To help students comprehend and effectively apply writing's rules, structures, and conventions, explicit instruction entails explicitly teaching them. Students learn to identify areas for improvement and improve their skills when they receive timely, constructive feedback on their writing. As students improve as writers, scaffolding, which entails providing support and direction, gradually decreases.

These methods align with previous research by Bhowmik (2021) that stresses the significance of taking a comprehensive approach to writing instruction. Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can better prepare their students for academic, professional, and social success by focusing on the various aspects of writing, such as language proficiency, organization, coherence, and clarity.

Additionally, the statement emphasizes the significance of writing proficiency assessments, frequently included in language proficiency tests like the TOEFL and IELTS. These tests serve as entry points for international students wishing to increase their professional mobility or gain admission to higher education institutions. As a result, accurately assessing the writing abilities of EFL students becomes crucial for their academic and professional goals, as Floris & Renandya (2019) concluded.

Despite the study's valuable insights into the difficulties and potential factors contributing to EFL students' low writing proficiency, some limitations should be considered. The study primarily centered on a particular cohort of ESL learners from one educational institution in Belgium, thereby potentially constraining the applicability of the outcomes to a more extensive demographic. Enhancing the external validity of the findings could be achieved by conducting the research again with a more extensive and heterogeneous population of ESL learners originating from various educational institutions and geographical locations. The collected data were primarily based on student self-reports and teacher observations, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias or inaccurate collection. To address these constraints, measures were taken to safeguard confidentiality and secure voluntary participation. In the research process, four skills - writing, speaking, listening, and reading - were evaluated using a single test. This approach, while simplifying the evaluation process, may not capture the full complexity of each skill set. To illustrate, the research assessed writing proficiency through a standardized test. While this method yielded vital insights into specific writing challenges, it may not fully encapsulate the intricate nature of students' writing abilities or grasp the numerous factors that influence their writing success. Therefore, the breadth and depth of students' writing proficiency may be underrepresented in these findings. Despite these drawbacks, the mixed-methods approach, data triangulation, and standardized writing test contributed to the study's increased reliability and validity.

Based on the outcomes of this study, several recommendations can be put forth for future research projects. First, future studies might investigate the impact of various teaching methods, such as scaffolding or technology, on ESL students' writing abilities. Comparative research endeavors may explore the effects of distinct methodologies on the writing proficiency of pupils, as well as their levels of motivation and involvement throughout the writing procedure.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies can monitor the writing progress of ESL learners for a prolonged duration, thereby enabling scholars to scrutinize the enduring impacts of writing pedagogy and detect trends or trajectories of advancement. In addition, more research might determine if there is a connection between ESL writers’ writing abilities and their command of the language in other areas. Comprehending these interrelated aspects may provide insights for comprehensive language development strategies that can better incorporate the four language skills; Finally, considering the impact of cultural and linguistic backgrounds on writing proficiency, future research endeavors may investigate the obstacles encountered by ESL learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Conducting comparative analyses may facilitate the identification of culturally responsive teaching strategies and interventions tailored to address the distinct requirements of diverse populations of ESL students. Hence, it is imperative to conduct additional research that centers on exploring the viability of a particular intervention to enhance writing proficiency in the context of ESL education. For this intervention phase, the study question could be: “How can explicit instruction and scaffolding techniques help fifth-year TSO ESL students in Belgium organize their writing?”

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of the writing challenges faced by ESL students in the fifth year of TSO in Belgium. The findings highlight the importance of addressing organization, content, and language use in ESL writing instruction. By considering the factors influencing ESL students' writing skills and designing targeted interventions, educators can better support these students in developing their writing proficiency. Further research focused on interventions to improve organization in ESL writing can contribute to developing effective instructional practices for ESL students in Belgium and beyond.

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**Appendix:** Appendix A: Writing Task Guidelines and Rubric

Goals:

Evaluate the writing skills and abilities of fifth-year TSO ESL students.

Identify areas of difficulty and improvement in their writing.

Name:

Write a 200-word essay on following topic:

**What are the advantages and disadvantages of social media in today's society? Write an essay in 200 words.**

Your essay should discuss social media’s good and bad effects on people and society. You can use your own experiences or research to back up your points.

Your essay should be structured with a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. Your introduction should briefly explain the topic and your position. The body of your essay should include your main arguments and evidence to support them. Your conclusion should summarize your main points and restate your position.

Rubric

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1p | 2p | 3p | 4p |
| Content | Essay minimally addresses the topic and/or includes only advantages or disadvantages of social media, with significant lack of depth or clarity. | Essay partially addresses the topic and/or includes only the advantages or disadvantages of social media, with little depth or clarity. | Essay adequately addresses the topic and includes both advantages and disadvantages of social media, but may lack depth or clarity. | Essay thoroughly and effectively addresses the topic and includes both advantages and disadvantages of social media. |
| Organization | Essay has a poorly structured introduction, body, and/or conclusion with unclear or absent transitions. | Essay has an unclear or underdeveloped introduction, body, and/or conclusion with choppy or ineffective transitions. | Essay has a clear introduction, body, and conclusion with some transitions between paragraphs. | Essay has a clear and effective introduction, body, and conclusion with smooth transitions. |
| Language use | Sentences lack clarity, variety, and contain significant errors. Vocabulary is inappropriate or ineffective. | Sentences may lack clarity or variety and contain some errors. Vocabulary may be repetitive or ineffective. | Sentences are mostly clear and varied with minor errors. Vocabulary is mostly appropriate and effective. | Sentences are clear, varied, and free of errors. Vocabulary is appropriate and effective. |
| Mechanics | Essay contains numerous spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors and significantly falls short of the length requirement of 200 words. | Essay contains some significant spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors and may not meet the length requirement of 200 words. | Essay may contain some minor spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors, but still meets the length requirement of 200 words. | Essay is free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors and meets the length requirement of 200 words. |

**Appendix:** Appendix B: Teacher Interview

Interviewee:

Date

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in this interview. This interview aims to gather insights into the writing performance of ESL students in 5 TSO in Belgium and understand your experiences and strategies as an ESL instructor. Your valuable input will contribute to our research on ESL students' writing difficulties. Please feel free to provide detailed responses based on your expertise and observations. The interview will be audio-recorded for accurate transcription and analysis. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns before we begin.

Interview Questions:

1. In your experience, how do ESL students in 5 TSO in Belgium perform in writing compared to their speaking, listening, and reading abilities?

2. What are the common challenges ESL students face while writing in English?

3. How do you assess the writing abilities of ESL students in 5 TSO?

4. What strategies do you use to improve the writing skills of ESL students in your class?

5. How do you differentiate your teaching approach for ESL students who struggle with writing from those who excel at it?

Conclusion:

Thank you for sharing your insights and expertise. Your input will be invaluable in understanding the writing difficulties faced by ESL students in 5 TSO and developing effective strategies to address them. If there is any additional information or suggestions you would like to provide, please feel free to do so. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

**Appendix:** Appendix C: Writing Skills Assessment Questionnaire for 5TSO ESL Students

**Questionnaire writing English 5TSO**

Closed questions (score from 1 to 7)

How motivated are you to write assignments?

How confident do you feel about your ability to write in English?

How comfortable are you with using English vocabulary and grammar correctly in writing?

How well are you able to organize your thoughts and ideas when writing in English?

How well are you able to use evidence to support your arguments in English writing assignments?

How well are you able to write coherent and well-structured paragraphs in English?

Open questions

What do you find most challenging about writing in English?

What strategies do you use to improve your English writing skills?

How often do you practice writing in English outside of the class?

Note: The questionnaire will include instructions to rate the closed questions on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 represents the lowest level and 7 represents the highest level.

**Appendix**: Appendix D: Protocol for Class Observation: Writing Task Assessment

**Goal**

Watch and learn how the students write and how the teacher helps them during the writing task.

**Procedure**

Date and Time:

Gather information about:

* Classroom Setup
* Students' Involvement
* Talking:
  + What do the students say when they talk to the teacher about writing?
  + Any help or explanations the teacher gives?
  + Do the students ask questions or do they need help with the writing task?
* Writing Assignments
  + How do they write, from planning to editing?
  + How do they organize their thoughts and ideas?
  + How well do they use grammar, vocabulary to make their writing clear and organized?
* Teaching Methods
  + What does the teacher say during the writing task?
  + Is there any advice or corrections given to the students’ writing?
* Time Management
  + How long do the students have to finish the writing task?
  + Do students manage their time well?
* Classroom Atmosphere
  + How does the classroom ‘feel’ during the writing task?
  + Do things affect the students’ writing, like noise or interruptions?

**Appendix:** Appendix E: Framework of the Speaking Test

Subject: Summer plans

Task: Describe your summer plans or talk about your favorite holiday. Engage in a conversation with your English teacher.

Time: Minimum one minute.

Scoring Criteria:

**Description of Traveler (Summer Plans, Type of Holiday, Favorite Holiday):**

Score: 0, 1, 2, or 3

Feedback: The extent to which you describe yourself as a traveler, including your summer plans, preferred type of holiday, or sharing details about your favorite holiday.

**Conversation and Answering Questions:**

Score: 0, 1, 2, or 3

Feedback: Your ability to engage in a conversation and respond to questions effectively, demonstrating good communication skills and active participation.

**Sentence Structure and Tense Usage:**

Score: 0, 1, or 2

Feedback: Evaluation of your use of complete and correct sentences and accurate application of appropriate tenses in your speech.

**Pronunciation and Articulation:**

Score: 0, 1, or 2

Feedback: Assessment of your pronunciation accuracy, including correct pronunciation of words and clear articulation.

**Appendix:** Appendix F: Framework of the Reading Test

Subject: Reading test - The Blarney Stone

Task: Read the text *The Blarney Stone and answer the following questions:*

1) What word(s) does the author use for the following descriptions?

a) To get, to obtain:

b) A king or queen:

c) A kiss:

2) Kissing the Blarney Stone has the following effect:

You will become the next King/Queen of Blarney Castle.

You will be able to talk fluently and beautifully.

You will only be able to speak nonsense.

You will receive a lot of good luck.

3) Give two true explanations of how the Blarney Stone is linked to Scotland.

Explanation 1:

Explanation 2:

4) True or false? Correct if false.

a) The Blarney Stone was made out of the stones of Stonehenge.

b) Queen Elizabeth I invented the recent meaning of the word 'blarney'.

c) It is very easy to kiss the Blarney Stone.

d) Famous people have also kissed the Blarney Stone.

**Appendix:** Appendix G: Framework of the Reading Test

Subject: Listening skills - Ellis Island

Task: Listen carefully and answer the following questions:

1) How many years has it been since the general public visited the hospital?

Answer:

2) The hospital had to check if the immigrants weren't sick.

a) What test did the hospital do?

b) What would happen if the test was positive?

3) Who is portrayed in the artworks you can see in the video?

4) Why was the hospital abandoned in 1954? Give 2 reasons! Answer:

5) How many people were treated on Ellis Island? And how many died?

Treated: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Died: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

6) Which disease was the main reason for child mortality?

7) How will the proceeds (the entrance money) be spent?

8) What is the main purpose of this news video?

* Touristic
* Historical
* Entertainment

**Reflection**

The main distinction between basic and applied research is how it is used. Applied research aims to address particular concerns or practical challenges in practical settings. It is carried out to produce valuable knowledge and offers suggestions that may be implemented. On the other side, curiosity is the driving force behind basic research, sometimes referred to as theoretical research or pure research, which aims to further fundamental knowledge and understanding of a specific topic without immediately having a practical application. Practical applications and relevance to the actual world are the main goals of applied research. Solving practical issues and enhancing current methods entails investigating certain occurrences, coming up with solutions, or testing hypotheses.

On the other hand, basic research concentrates on expanding understanding and ideas within a certain area. It investigates a field's core mechanics, basic ideas, and abstract notions to further its theoretical underpinnings. It can include performing experiments, surveys, or field investigations to obtain information and assess certain circumstances. Applied research, on the other hand, is frequently longer-term and continuous.

Basic and applied research both follow the rules of the scientific process. They entail developing research questions, conducting methodical investigations, gathering and evaluating data, and coming to conclusions supported by the available evidence. Both strategies demand rigorous methods and devotion to moral principles. Applied and fundamental research contribute to the body of knowledge in their respective fields with different aims and objectives. While basic research develops theoretical underpinnings and broadens the comprehension of fundamental concepts across disciplines, applied research creates practical information that may guide decision-making and enhance practices in certain domains. The two types of study frequently interact and exchange information. The interplay between the two demonstrates the complementarity of the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Positivism, emphasizing objective truths and empirical evidence, aligns with basic research, while interpretivism, which focuses on subjective experiences and interpretation, aligns more with applied research. The distinction between basic and applied research is blurred in my subject area of English teaching. Both types of research are necessary and often overlap. For example, understanding the cognitive processes behind language learning (basic research) can directly inform teaching methods (applied research).

Many definitions of 'relevant research' may apply depending on the situation and subject of study. In general, though, research is pertinent when it deals with a specific topic, problem, or phenomenon or advances understanding. Current demands, difficulties, or knowledge gaps within a particular topic or subject are generally connected with relevant research. It seeks to offer perceptions, answers, or innovations that have applications in real-world settings or can enhance theoretical conceptions. Relevant research has applications in the actual world and has practical ramifications.

The word ‘evident’ is often used to refer to something obvious or straightforward to observe. Evidence is the data, facts, or information that substantiates or supports a claim, hypothesis, or theory in the study context. The scientific method and empirical study are directly related to evidence. Scientific ideas are based on factual data from methodical and exacting research techniques. The validity and dependability of research conclusions are strengthened by accumulating data from several studies or areas of study. Solid facts and analyses support evident conclusions consistent with accepted theories, conceptual frameworks, or empirical results.

Critical theory, the third paradigm, plays a crucial role in my educational practice. It helps in thinking deeply and asking questions, making you look closely at how and what we teach. Next, the perspective I draw from the philosophy of science concerning conducting research in English and education practice relates to the positivist paradigm. The latter emphasizes the role of empirical evidence in scientific inquiry. This paradigm motivates me in my subject area to gather data through experimentation, observation, and textual analysis to support my theories. This involves conducting literary analyses, analyzing and collecting languages, or using quantitative or qualitative methods to study educational practices or language acquisition. For example, in this paradigm, if I want to investigate the effect of a given teaching method on language acquisition among learners of a second language, I would design a study where I collect data via experiments and observations.

In conclusion, the difference between applied and basic research hinges on their respective objectives and focal points. The positivist paradigm shapes my understanding of what constitutes 'evidence.’ The interpretivism paradigm guides my approach to applying knowledge. The critical theory paradigm influences my critical thinking and questioning within my research and teaching practice. The interplay between these paradigms and the fluidity between basic and applied research shape my approach to research in English teaching.