A Study on Major Elements of Writing Difficulties and the Effectiveness of Using EZ Writing Template in Writing Process of ESL Writers

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ABSTRACT

Composing a well-produced piece of writing is quite challenging for most writers, especially for ESL writers who need to sync and blend with some writing techniques and writing elements. This situation portrays the fact that writing is a complex skill to learn, which causes writing difficulties among the ESL writers. Hence, the writers should be guided properly by the writing instructors to regulate them throughout the entire writing process. The main objective of this study is to investigate the major elements of writing difficulties faced by ESL writers in the writing class. Also, the study aims to identify the effectiveness of using writing templates while composing the essays. A pilot study involved a sample of 30 participants from a local tertiary institution. To obtain pertinent data, an adapted questionnaire was distributed to the participants. Findings from the study revealed that the participants found writing difficult because they are not familiar with different types of writing. Findings also showed that the goal for the essay writing is sometimes hard to achieve and students need to know what to write in each paragraph (mean score=2.7). It was also found that the overall mean of how the respondents perceived the writing template being used in the writing process was high. The insights obtained are also crucial to improve teaching and learning of ESL academic writing.

Keywords: (ESL writing, composing process, writing difficulties, writing template)

INTRODUCTION

Writing can be defined as the acts of thinking, composing, and encoding language into text. It is crucially essential for ESL writers specifically for the students at tertiary level. Al-Khazraji (2019) pinpointed the importance of learning writing for the students and the need for enhancing writing skill in an academic setting. It shows that writing skill requires the ESL writers to gather and organize ideas in polished and comprehensible products to readers. This skill urges the writers to communicate, express ideas and thoughts with a decent language use (Akram et al.2020). In a different view, a writer should concern on vocabulary, coherent and cohesive, spelling, grammar, and other writing mechanics besides applying critical thinking during a writing process.

Despite the importance of mastering writing skill for ESL writers, this skill has been perceived as an onerous skill due to some difficulties faced by the writers. Writing has become the most difficult skill in which the writers have to go through complex processes that engage several competencies (Ruqiyah et al.,2021). There are several aspects of writing difficulties committed by the writers such as structural, grammatical, mechanical, and vocabulary (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Ginting, 2019; Sabarun, 2019; Toba et al.,2019).

Writing difficulties usually occur in the writing process from pre-writing until reviewing the written text. Morgan (2016) states that writers will get stuck when they want to begin writing the first idea of the topic, confused to write the thesis statement, think of audiences' perception, fear or failure while writing because they have difficulties expressing ideas, feeling and experience. Consequently, they could not produce their ideas in well-written paragraphs or essays.

Briefly, ESL writers are expected to master writing skills, especially students at the tertiary level. This skill is crucial as it requires the writers to develop critical thinking skills as well as communication skills. Developing writing competencies is important for successful communication at all levels of the education system (Akram et al.,2020). To generate a well-organised composition, ESL writers should be aware of the writing process involving planning, translating, and reviewing (Bulqiyah et al.,2021).

However, the problems occur when the writers fail to organize their writing due to several writing difficulties. Abdul Hadi et al. (2024) suggested a study to investigate students who are lacking writing knowledge and the potential writing difficulties during the composing process. Noorezam et al. (2024) proposed future studies to investigate other elements of writing difficulties. Besides that, the writers are clueless on how to produce well-organised compositions as they do not have a proper writing guideline or template to regulate their writing step-by step. As suggested by Rahmat (2023), writing instructors should teach a variety of writing skills such as brain-storming, mind-mapping, and making detailed outlines before the actual write-up.

Therefore, this quantitative study is intended to investigate several major elements of writing difficulties, and to identify the effectiveness of EZ writing template that the writers use while composing the essays. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions.

1. What are the main writing difficulties that influence the composing process of ESL writers in the writing class?

2. How does the EZ writing template help ESL writers in composing essays in the writing class?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing Skill and ESL Writing

Writing is a complex skill and it involves social and cognitive processes. Parnabas et al. (2022) defines writing as a process of constructing ideas and conveying them to the reader through paragraphs and statements. Meanwhile, Hasnawati et al. (2023) described writing as a process that involves pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading stages, which provides a systematic approach to the writing process. Guneyli (2016) defined writing as a transferring process that involves emotions, opinions and thoughts based on language rules and symbols. Besides that, the researcher also identifies writing as a social cognitive skill of an individual to represent himself or herself through writing. In fact, writing is said as a skill that promotes social interaction between writers and readers. Instead of sharing ideas, writers are also capable of sharing feelings and convincing others through their writing (Aluemalai and Maniam, 2020). Besides connecting the writers to the readers, writing is also known as a process of transferring ideas, information, and thoughts that the writers plan in their mind.

ESL writing on the other hand demands ESL writers to communicate their ideas through writing using their second language. As such, this process becomes complex when the language proficiency of the writers becomes a matter. Al- Sawalha *et al.* (2012) also state the complexity of learning writing in the second language as they claim that the process is much more complicated than writing in one's native language. The process demands ESL writers to learn and apply some specific processes and strategies to produce good text. The most important thing is the writers must ensure that the written text should be successfully delivered to the readers.

Writing Process

In the composing process, writers need a strategic plan and technique. Skilled and strategic writers will have purposes for their writing, and they know how to adjust their purpose for each writing task (Al-Jarrah et.al, 2018). The researchers also state that students with writing problems normally do not have a proper plan for their writing. Furthermore, in the writing process, besides having good writing skill, writers should have specific plans such as using writing strategies to produce good written products. This has been supported by Grabe and Kaplan

(2014) who agree that strategic writers will use strategies and skills when they construct paragraphs. According to Lakshmi (2006), writing process involves 5 stages as follows;

Stage 1: Prewriting

• Students write on topics based on their own experiences.

• Students gather and organize ideas.

• Students define a topic sentence.

• Students write an outline for their writing.

Stage 2: Drafting

• Students write a rough draft.

• Students emphasize content rather than mechanics.

Stage 3: Revising

• Students reread their writings.

• Students share their writings with teachers.

•Students participate constructively in discussions about their writing with their teacher.

•Students make changes in their compositions to reflect the reactions and comments of the teacher. Also, students make substantive rather than only minor changes.

Stage 4: Editing

• Students proofread their own writings.

• Students increasingly identify and correct their own mechanical errors.

Stage 5: Publishing

• Students make the final copy of their writings.

• Students publish their writings in appropriate forms.

• Students share their finished writings with the teacher.

Despite its complexity, the process of ESL writing involves a few stages to be called a complete writing process. Planning, drafting, rewriting, and editing are the four processes that make up the writing process and there is no sequence to the stages (Mohd Yunos et al.,2023). Additionally, studies on the ESL writing process were first pioneered by Flower and Hayes (1981), who came out with a theory of the writing process. The studies on ESL writing process were later prolonged and explored by many other researchers (Noorezam et al.,2024; Parnabas et al.,2022; Rahmat, 2018; Veerappan *et .al,* 2013; Silin and Chan, 2015). The model viewed the ESL writing process as a repeating or recursive process that involves three major elements: planning, translating, and reviewing. These processes, however, can be combined at one time and writers are free to apply the stages without restricting themselves to orderly follow a linear process.
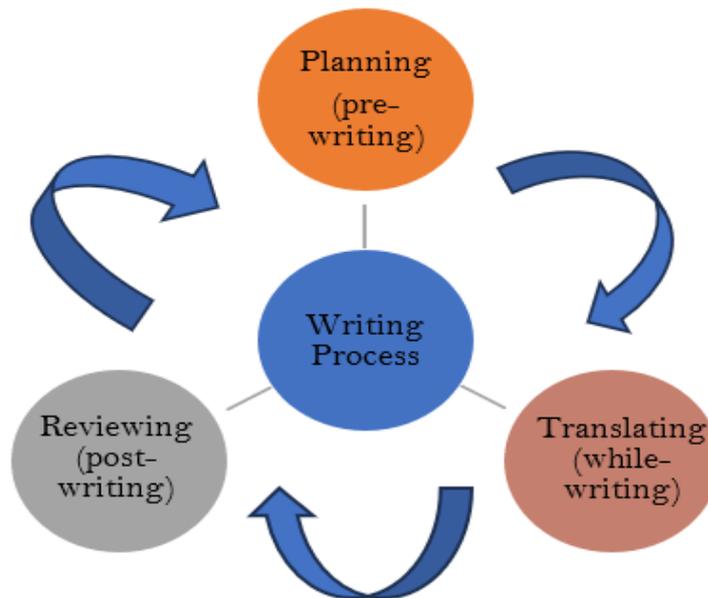
Figure 1: Writing Process model (Adapted from Flower and Hayes, 1981)

Writing Difficulties

In the writing process, students need proper guidance and assistance to compose well-organised essays. The failure to develop the skill has caused the students to struggle in their writing process. Writing requires a level of sophistication and understanding that can be difficult to master, especially for those who have not yet developed their writing skills (Park, 2020). The struggle to develop writing skill can be associated with some writing difficulties that the students encounter. The difficulties are sourced from many factors such as cognitive demands, language commands, physiology, and others. Baharudin et al (2023), proposed that the difficulties stem from several areas such as strong language command, strict conventions and structure of academic writing, and critical thinking process. These overwhelming writing difficulties make academic writing more challenging to the ESL writers.

Additionally, it is important for the students to understand the conventions of academic writing such as using proper grammar and punctuations. They are also expected to think critically and analyse complex topics during the writing process. However, the students who have problems mastering the English language will have difficulties writing. According to Parnabas et al. (2022), students face challenges in transforming ideas into written form due to their low English proficiency and often struggle with coherence, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, and overall essay structure. Meanwhile, Bulqiyah et al., (2021) found that writing difficulties can be sourced from affective problems such as students' and lecturers' attitudes while learning and teaching essay, cognitive problems which are their difficulties to transfer information, and linguistics problems in grammar, structure of the essay and vocabulary. These writing difficulties can be a challenge for those whose English is not their dominant language which makes writing a complex process.

Past Studies

In a recent study by Baharudin et al. (2023) the researchers found that the writing process is a systematic approach that the writers refer to when writing their essays. The study investigated 179 ESL learners in the centre of foundation study. Based on the study, the students feel frustrated and perceive writing as difficult since they are unable to meet the writing goals when they are writing. During pre-writing, ESL students are found to employ the strategy of jotting down words or drafting notes related to the assigned topic. By involving in the before-writing process through brainstorming of ideas, it can help these learners to overcome their difficulty in writing from the very beginning. The study also found that ESL students were actively involved in the while-writing

stage as they reread the writing to find ideas and to connect them. The study concludes that pre-writing stage and while-writing stage as the crucial stages in the writing process since both stages have set a certain template that they need to follow while writing. Therefore, it is believed that ESL students should be guided by proper writing instructions in the writing classroom to minimize the writing difficulties and writing anxiety.

A study conducted by Abdul Hadi et al., (2024) investigated the challenges students encountered in composing essays for extended writing. The quantitative study involved 169 pre-university students from the Centre of foundation studies. The study utilized purposive sampling and a survey analysis using SPSS version 29. Based on the findings the learners tended to struggle in constructing written texts in academic writing. Besides that, another difficulty that they faced was the struggle in achieving the writing goals such as lack of prior knowledge on specific points to be written about in each body paragraph. Aside from that, familiarity of various essays or text structures also played an equal role in writing. In addition, instructions and explanations given by lecturers when it comes to writing essays were also important for the students to avoid obstructions in the writing process.

Conceptual Framework
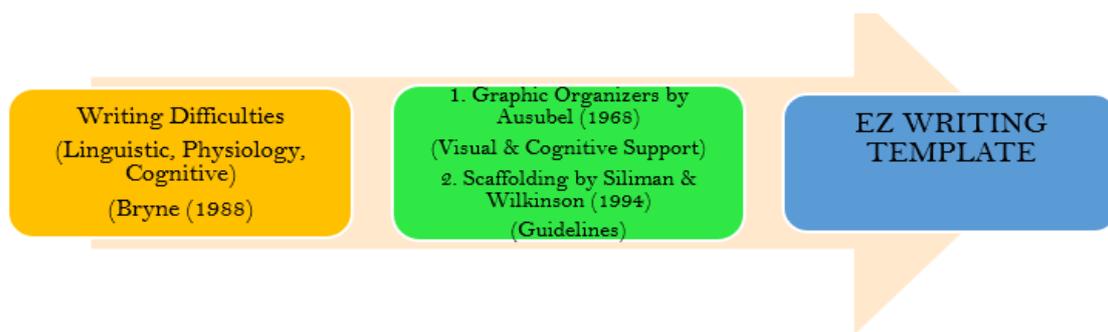
Source: Bryne (1988) Ausubel (1968) , Silian & Wilkinson (1994)

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the Study-The Concept of EZ Writing

Figure above shows the conceptual framework. The need for EZ writing is because writers face difficulties when they wrote. According to Bryne (1988), the difficulties can be categorized as linguistic, physiology and cognitive. What makes writing even more difficult is that the composing process involves three main stages such as planning, translating, and reviewing (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Hence EZ writing was constructed bearing roots from classic theories of graphic organizers by Ausubel (1968) and scaffolding by Silliman & Wilkinson (1994). The theory of graphic organizers states that learning can be facilitated using a template (EZ template). This template provides a visual of representation of the concepts used in writing. The concepts help students see the relationship between ideas when they wrote. Next, the use of EZ writing acts as scaffolds to help students write. The scaffolds provide temporary support to learners so they can grasp the writing task using the guidelines provided.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is intended to investigate some major elements of writing difficulties that influence writers' writing process. Besides that, the study aims to identify the effectiveness of using instructional scaffolding, namely EZ writing template during the composing process of ESL writers. To meet the study purposes, a pilot study was conducted to 30 participants of a local institution in Selangor. The participants enrolled in an English course called LCC113 and they have been taught writing for 14 weeks. A writing template has been introduced and used by the writing lecturer to regulate the writers during the composing process. To obtain the pertinent data, a survey questionnaire was administered through google form. The instrument used a 5 Likert-scale survey rooted from Flower and Hayes (1981). The gathered data were then analysed using SPSS 29.0.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings for Demographic Profile: Gender of the Respondents There were 30 participants involved in the study. the proportion of the respondents based on gender are as follows;
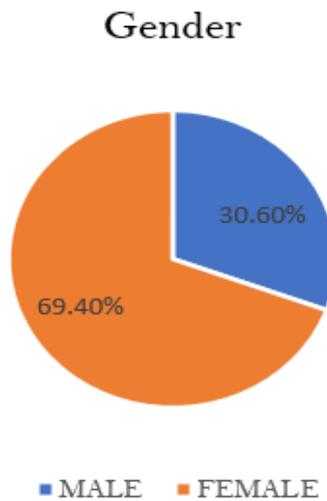

Figure 3: Gender of Respondents

Figure 3 shows the gender of the respondents for the study. The finding shows that 69.4% are female, and 30.6% are male.

Findings for Research question 1: What are the main writing difficulties that influence the composing process of ESL writers in the writing class?

The table below presents the mean score for seven different factors contributing to writing difficulties.

Table 1: Mean for Writing Difficulties

NO	ITEM	Mean	SD
1	Rhetorical situation WDQ1I find writing difficult because I am not familiar with different types of writing	2.7	.96
2	Goal setting WDQ2I find writing difficult because the goal for the essay writing is sometimes hard to achieve	2.7	1.10
3	Teaching instruction WDQ3The teacher's instruction on what to do is sometimes not clear and that makes the essay writing difficult	1.8	1.07
4	Teacher explanation WDQ4Sometimes the teacher's explanation makes me feel that writing is difficult	1.8	1.16
5	Long term memory WDQ5Writing essays are difficult because I do not have background knowledge of the topic given	2.5	.98
6	Individual paragraph WDQ6Writing essays are difficult because I have to know what to write in each paragraph	2.7	1.04
7	Writing Process WDQ7I find the writing difficult because I am unsure of the writing process	2.5	1.07

As reported by the respondents, the highest mean score that contributed to writing difficulties was 2.7 representing item 1,2 and 6. The findings indicate that the participants find writing difficult because they are not familiar with different types of writing, the goal for the essay writing is sometimes hard to achieve and they need to know what to write in each paragraph. Furthermore, the respondents agreed that writing is difficult because they do not have background knowledge of the topic given and they are unsure of the writing process (Mean score=2.5). Findings also show that participants feel that essay writing is difficult because the teachers' instruction on what to do is sometimes not clear and sometimes they feel that the teachers' explanations make the writing more difficult.

Findings for Research question 2: How does EZ writing template help ESL writers in composing essays in the writing class?

Table 2 below presents the mean score of how the respondents perceive the writing template being used in the writing process.

Table 2: Mean for The Effectiveness of EZ Writing Template

NO	ITEM	Mean	SD
1	WTQ1 With the templates given, I am able to learn writing with my classmates	4.5	.82
2	WTQ 2The template allows me to learn writing step by step	4.5	.89
3	BWTQ 3The template contains clear information on how to write a good introduction.	4.5	.74
4	BWTQ 4The template contains clear information on how to write each developmental paragraph	4.3	.83
5	WTQ 5The template contains clear information on how to write a good conclusion.	4.3	.83
6	WTQ6 The template provides a clear guideline to write a complete essay.	4.4	.74
7	WTQ7 I am at ease whenever I use the template during my essay writing.	4.5	.74

Based on the findings in Table 4.3, the overall mean of how the respondents perceive the writing template being used in the writing process was high. The highest mean score recorded was 4.5, where the respondents stated that (1)they are able to learn writing with their classmates with the help of the template, (2) the respondents agreed that the template allows them to learn writing step-by-step, (3) the template contains clear information on how to write a good introduction, and (4) they feel at ease whenever they use the writing template during the composing process. Aside from that, the finding indicates that the template provides a clear guideline to write a complete essay (Mean=4.4). Next, the respondents found that the template contains clear information on how to write each developmental paragraph and clear information to write a good conclusion.

DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis derived from research question 1, the findings of the study were presented in the following section. The first part regarded writing difficulties faced by ESL writers during the composing process. The findings from a survey questionnaire reveals that writing difficulties can derive from rhetorical situations, goal setting and individual paragraphs. In a study by Hamzah et al. (2024), the similar findings were retrieved in

which rhetorical situations, goal setting, and individual paragraphs scored high mean scores. From the result of item 1, students mostly picked out the highest response to being unfamiliar with different types of writing as the one of the sources of writing difficulties. The percentage of item 2 also has the most response in which they set the goal for their essay writing. Hamzah et al. (2024) indicates the similar finding in their study. Setting goals can help the students to keep focus on the writing task.

However, Ceylan (2019) reveals a contradictory view in which most of the participants did not set their goal when they started writing. Furthermore, item 3 and item 4 indicate the lowest mean score (1.8), whereas participants' writing difficulties encountered with teaching instruction and teacher explanation. The finding reveals that participants did not see these two factors as the problems in the writing process. This indicates that the participants have been clearly instructed before they start writing. Tseng (2019) states that clear and explicit writing instructions will help students to have a better understanding of the writing process. However, the result opposes the previous studies by Ceylan (2019) whereas the teacher's insufficient writing instructions lead to the problems during the writing task. Furthermore, item 5 and item 7 deal with writers' long-term memory and writing process. From the result, students picked out the neutral response for both items in which they agreed that they did not have background knowledge about the given topics and they were unsure of the writing process. Finally, item 6 reveals individual paragraphs as the significant problem encountered in the writing process. The result indicates that students did not know what to write in each paragraph.

Next, the discussion is concerning the effectiveness of using EZ writing template during the composing process by ESL writers. Based on the findings, the mean scores for all the seven items were high (Mean: 4.3-4.5). According to Bulqiyah et al. (2021), using templates is one of the effective writing strategies. In the study, the researchers stated that the writers were guided by an outline or template while writing. The lecturer should guide the students properly by using a step-to-step procedure so that the students feel comfortable in writing their essays (Ariyanti& Fitriana, 2017). Hence, having this EZ template as writing guideline has proven that the students were at ease while writing as displayed in item 7 where most students picked out the highest response (mean:4.5) to feeling at ease whenever they use the template during my essay writing. Overall, it can be summarized that the EZ template has helped ESL writers in composing essays in the writing class.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

In the writing process of ESL writers, it is common for the writers to face many writing difficulties that might influence their writing performance. In this study, it has been found that the most difficulties that the students encountered in their writing process were goal setting, rhetorical situations, and individual paragraphs. They admitted that they had writing problems when they were not familiar with the types of writing. Besides that, the students stated that the process of writing was complicated when they were expected to achieve the writing goal especially when they did not know what to write in each paragraph. However, it was good to know that they did not agree that teachers' explanations and instructions made the writing task difficult. This shows that the students did not have problems understanding teachers' explanations, as well as getting clear instructions during the writing process. This situation can be related to the procedure that the teacher conducts in the writing class. In the study, it was found that the students were properly guided by a writing template called EZ writing template that has helped them to write. This can be proven from the data that most students agreed that the EZ writing template guided them to write step-by-step, besides containing clear information on how to write a good introduction, to develop good paragraphs and to write a good conclusion. The students also admitted that using the EZ writing template, they managed to write a complete essay without any hassles.

Pedagogical Implications of the study

The present study delves into the difficulties faced by the ESL writers in composing their essays. Based on the discussion of findings, it was notified that both students and teachers were impacted from these challenges. These difficulties have caused the students to perceive writing as a difficult and complicated skill. According to Al

Murshidi (2014), the arduous nature of writing causes a significant number of instructors to perceive it as the most challenging skill to impart. By acknowledging these writing difficulties, a comprehensive understanding can be gained to develop more advantageous guidance for both teachers and students. The findings potentially have valuable implications for identifying and proposing viable solutions to the issue at hand. Incorporating the writing template when teaching writing could help the teachers to furnish their students with a proper writing procedure. Hence, the students will be more metaconscious in their writing process, which helps them to produce organized essays.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should explore a more thorough investigation of the ESL writers' challenges and difficulties in writing. It is also suggested for the future scholars to conduct semi-structured interviews to obtain students and teachers' perspectives on the writing difficulties. Having their personal perceptions about this issue will give a better insight for more fruitful findings. More respondents can be involved in the study to gather a rich data in which to probe deeper investigation on the writing difficulties. Future studies may also consider exploring some strategies that could help the students to overcome the difficulties in writing. Overall, this study had provided valuable insights into how students perceived their writing process and their difficulties in academic writing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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