



Investigating factors and influences of learners' english writing skills during distance education

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Abstract

This study identified the factors and influences on students' acquisition of written communication skills during distance education of Grade 11 students in distance learning at Roberto E. Sato Memorial National High School, Academic Year 2021 – 2022. It adopts the qualitative single case study research design; and employs the thematic analytical framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyze the data gathered from the research tool used which is an in-depth interview with thirty-seven participants who reflected on their performance in written communication skills. The study participants were interviewed to gather the needed data about the factors that affected them in the acquisition of English written communication skills while in distance learning as well as the influences of those factors. Findings revealed variables that affects the students' acquisition of written communication skills during the distance education context, namely; language background, learning support, experience, environment and technology. The following factors mentioned brought different influences to the students' acquisition of written communication skills, both the positive and negative, namely: learning independence, internet dependence and peer dependence. Thus, it is concluded that these problems and challenges can be resolved by several remedial measures at individual as well as institutional level.

Keywords: written communication, writing skills, distance learning

Introduction

Writing, as Nourinezhad *et al.* (2022) put it, is an essential skill that facilitates communication among human beings. That is why it requires clarity and consistency in order to convey concepts and avoid misunderstanding. In fact, Mohammadzadeh *et al.* (2022) pointed out that negotiation is necessary to make the input comprehensible. However, in the case of those communicating through written modality with the use of English as second language often times commit errors, like in the report of Nourinezhad *et al.* (2022), thereby leading to misunderstanding and miscommunication, and that these errors are taken for granted which somehow eventually recur along the way.

Errors in writing among non-native English speakers is prevalent. As cited in Sermsook, et.al, (2017) ^[35], writing in English has been perceived as the most difficult skill among the four skills of English. Even a native speaker fails to write a good piece of writing. Writing is a skill that is hard to master as many different types of errors can occur during this process. Moreover, these errors are the use of words, speech acts, or grammatical constructions in a way that suggests inadequate learning and makes them appear defective and significant. Errors are organized, repeated deviations from the norm that pupils' language systems make at specific learning stages. Errors are typically made by language learners who have not fully mastered a formalized system; they develop as a result of imperfect competition in the target language (Adam, Latif & Umaternate, 2022).

Additionally, Fareed (2016) ^[13, 14] mentioned in his journal, that according to Nuna, writing is an extremely difficult cognitive activity which requires the learner to have control over various factors. Furthermore, according to Boltron and Ramos (2021), writing is always seen as a fundamental skill, especially in the context of formal communication, and, like reading, it is absolutely essential for enhancing educational results and having significant effects.

This prevalence can further be caused by the distance education implemented due to lockdowns and quarantines. These drastic changes in everyday life contexts throughout the globe affected all areas of human interaction, the educational context being one of them. With regards to educational scenarios, face to face classes were suspended and teachers were therefore required to find and implement immediate yet effective ways to continue delivering the mandatory curricula in order to conclude the academic year satisfactorily (Martínez, 2020).

The 3 modalities of how learnings shall be delivered in the "new normal" are Distance Learning, Blended Learning, and Homeschooling respectively (Ceniza, 2020). The challenge in this "new normal" educational system is dealing with learners not capable of independent learning, especially that the demands on the Filipinos to be a skilled writer in English language for personal and ultimately for national development has become great, if not more significant. Writing is the framework of communication. It is incredibly pliable and can be used to give information, an opinion, a question or poetry. Thus, writing problem may lead to communication problem.

The problem

This study aims to identify the errors in written communication of Grade 11 students in distance learning at Roberto E. Sato Memorial National High School, Academic Year 2021-2022, as basis for a proposed English teaching framework for written communication.

It specifically sought answers of the following sub-problems:

1. What are the factors that influenced the students' acquisition of written communication skills during the distance education context?
2. How do these factors influence the students' acquisition of written communication skills during the distance education context?

Methodology

This research employed the qualitative single case study research design. The single case examined in the study pertains to the writing errors of the participants along with their factors and reasons as they learn written communication skills during the distance education context. Simply, in this research, the case being studied served as focus of analysis. This case is a real-time phenomenon since the participants of this study are having distance education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Rashid, et. al. (2019), a qualitative case study is a research methodology

that facilitates the analysis of a phenomenon within a specific context using a number of data sources. It also explores the phenomenon through a variety of lenses to show numerous features of the phenomenon. A real-time phenomenon is investigated in a case study within its naturally occurring setting with the understanding that context will make a difference.

Results and findings

Findings and discussions

Table 1: Factors that Influenced the Students’ Acquisition of Written Communication Skills During the Distance Education Context

Themes	Categories
Language Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Less exposure to textual communication activities ▪ Unfamiliar written communication activities
Learning Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-learning ▪ Teacher’s absence
Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Writing for academic purposes ▪ Writing for personal purposes
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ challenging conditions and surroundings ▪ School works versus House chores
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poor/No internet connectivity ▪ Unavailability of gadgets/ electric learning resources

Table 1 displays the different factors that affected the students’ acquisition of written communication skills during the distance education context. Several questions and concerns were expressed and gathered throughout the interview with the goal of learning the various aspects that could affect and hamper learners in obtaining written communication skills in the setting of distant education. It is very evident that students’ written communication skills are affected during the pandemic. These factors are divided into four (4) themes: Background on the language, academic guidance, environment and technology. Anjum *et al.* (2021) state that writing challenges are brought on by insufficient vocabulary, bad sentence structure, inexperienced teachers, poor grasp of English syntax and tenses, a lack of creative ideas, and improper vocabulary and rhetorical conventions.

Background on the language

Less exposure to textual communication activities and Unfamiliar written communication activities are the most common factor that influenced them in terms of checking their background on the language. While they are having their modular distance learning, the activities on their modules are mostly on questions with choices of answers that follows and if they are given written activities, it is still unfamiliar to them since they were unable to experience writing one while they have the normal face-to-face classes. Communicative competence involves the following aspects of language knowledge: knowing how to use the language in different situations, knowing how to vary the use of the language according to settings and participants (formal and informal speech), being able to understand different types of texts, and knowing how to maintain communication despite any limitation the speaker might have (Toro *et al.*, 2018). CLT enables language learners to communicate in target language. That is, learning takes place “through the process of struggling to communicate” (Alamri, 2018). Furthermore, CLT emphasizes on learners’ knowledge about the usage of language in real communication. Therefore, it involves the

learners in real activities such as negotiation of meaning and interaction between groups of people (Abrejo *et al.*, 2019).

Learning support

During the Covid-19 pandemic, institutions, administrators, educators, students and even parents have unpreparedly found themselves in the distance education process. Transition from face-to-face teaching methods to more indirect methods, has forced schools into a flow of learning which is full of complexities and limitations (Rasmitadila, 2020). This process has had a great impact on school, teachers and students (Mailizar *et al.*, 2020). In this process, individuals inevitably have faced specific difficulties and obstacles in institutions. Students have been affected psychologically by school closures, lack of equipment to participate in courses, being unable to access online materials from home and being unable to leave home for a long time (Apriyanti, 2020).

English teachers expect their language learners to develop their communicative competence in reading, speaking, listening and writing skills as the comprehensive outcomes and performances after completing the language modules. However, different skills may appear to be more relevant for specific learners. For example, different learners have different demands for language skills. International graduate students may have the desire to develop their writing and speaking skills due to the high-demand of project writing and thesis pressures (Sottie, Mfoafom’Carthy, & Moasun, 2018).

According to Richards and Rogers as cited in AL-Garni and Almuhamadi (2019), CLT approach is beneficial since it focuses on the development of the four skills on which language and communication depend; this approach aims at fostering EFL learner’s competence in communication. EFL learners can be communicatively competent in the target language if they work hard on developing their communicative competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively using the target language within social happening. Furthermore, teachers and learners have

important roles which contribute to the success of CLT in learning. On the one hand, EFL learners play the role of negotiators with one another in cooperative rather than individualistic tasks. Instead of relying entirely on the teacher as the source of knowledge, learners feel more comfortable listening to their peers in pair or group tasks. Learners can learn best through listening to their classmates' making mistakes and correcting themselves. Therefore, in CLT, learners are encouraged to be more confident about following their peers' steps in improving their speaking skills (AL-Garni and Almuhammadi, 2019).

Experience

The communicative approach is very important; it makes the learners able to use language in real life situation and it also motivates and encourages them. It helps in trigger the language acquisition, and, therefore, it is the best practice of language use (Memon, *et al.*, 2019). Giving the student autonomy over his writing will help him write more fluidly, but it won't let him stray from the rules of grammar while he's writing in various contexts. There is a need to identify the writing weaknesses of students in a particular field and to develop an instructional approach that will enable learners to practice writing in that field in order to address the deficiencies (Samiullah, Khan & Ahmad, 2018). However, in the case of the this set of learners it was found that they are not exposed enough to academic writing which is mostly the written activities tasked while they are in Senior High School that is through modular learning. Furthermore, they are not also into using English language in writing for personal purposes and that contributed to their lack of appropriate applications of the basic grammar rules and even committed mistakes in punctuation and spelling.

Environment

Participants in the study reported that they have faced Challenging circumstances and environment, School works

versus House chores. Since they are in modular distance learning, they said that they cannot focus on studying the discussions on their modules and they cannot even produce an appropriate written work since they are torn between doing their module activities and doing their household chores.

Samiullah (2019) said that writing is a communicative process. Writing should be taught as a conversational process in real settings. The appropriate environment is mandatory for teaching writing in various disciplines. The classroom conversation about a particular phenomenon is considered for writing about that phenomenon. Samiullah and Zaigham (2018) stated that writing is a multifarious process as it depends on coordination of various components to produce a communicative discourse. They reported that learning to write conveniently is a complicated task. Thus, the issue on having the appropriate surroundings is a factor that that influenced the students' acquisition of written communication skills during the distance education context.

Technology

As independent learners as they can be while they are having the modular distance education, the use of technology is one factor that influenced the students' acquisition of written communication skills during the distance education context. These students lives in a barangay that has poor to know internet connectivity and most of them belong to families with enough income for food and education that they may have less chance of having a good quality gadget or electric learning resources. These are common cases to the respondents that lead to demotivating them to find ways on how to do the particular written activities and even be able to find correct English words and apply appropriate usage of grammar rules.

Table 2: Influences of the Factors that Affected the Students' Acquisition of Written Communication Skills During the Distance Education Context

Themes	Categories
Learning Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore grammar rules ▪ Research writing activities
Internet Dependent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Get ideas from the internet ▪ Copies ideas from a written work online
Peer Dependent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Get ideas from classmates ▪ Copy classmate's written output

Table 2 reveals the influences of the factors that affected the students' acquisition of written communication skills during the distance education context. Participants expressed answers that fall into three (3) different themes and with corresponding categories. Positively, the variables encouraged some participants to be independent learners as they trusted themselves to complete their written assignments and researched grammar rules and writing styles for specific written tasks they were required to do in their modules. On the other hand, Participants' responses also indicate how the factors have a negative impact on students' ability to develop written communication skills when enrolled in distance education. They have grown reliant on the internet, where they can research topics and write assignments using ideas they have learned. Some of them just simply copy ideas from written works or other

online outputs. Additionally, some students admitted that they depend on their peers or classmates since they wait for them to send specific responses in group chats or messenger. Others have even requested written examples from their friends, copied concepts from those examples, and even copied the entire piece verbatim without realizing the teacher would read their work and would catch them with this tactic.

Learning independence

One influence that was revealed in the findings of the study is academic independence which specifically focuses on whether the learner explored grammar rules and the new written works or activities being introduced to them through the self-learning modules used during the distance education mode of delivery. The responses of the participants have

presented positive and negative influences of the latter while acquiring written communication skills.

Positively, the impact of the aforementioned variables highlights how dependent on themselves independent learners grew. As a result of the trust, they have established within themselves, they are now able to study grammatical principles and specific texts that they must analyze in order to complete assignments for their modules. On the other hand, those variables have also a negative impact to the learners, participant shared that they have become lazier and did not even allow themselves to explore on specific grammar rules and certain written activities. Instead, they have become dependent on the internet and to their peers.

Internet dependent

The used of the internet during the distance education context is very rampant since it is through the internet that the learners communicate with their teachers and classmates if they have queries about a certain lesson or activity from their module. It is cited in the work of Nur *et al.*, (2020) that students can learn from the internet use to increase basic skill and knowledge, and can use information technology for a variety of goal in the learning process and can serve as a resource to help them develop their writing performance. Thus, the internet contributed on the learners' acquisition of written communication while on distance learning, specifically, it allowed them to gather ideas on what to write about and how to write a certain literary text or academic text. Moreover, through the internet they were able to understand certain grammatical rules that they have confusions before.

Peer dependent

Another influence that was found from the responses of the students is being dependent to their peers. Although they are not together and they live away from each other, they find ways to communicate through the use of the internet. Their dependence on the internet have shown positive and negative side. The category that was specifically identified from this them is a negative contribution of the use of the internet while the students are learning written communication while in distance learning. Participants honestly admitted that aside from being dependent on the internet, they have become dependent on their peers as well. It started with sharing of written outputs or accomplished activities so that a peer can get an idea and can write their own out from that idea. However, due to laziness they arrived into an instance where in they merely copy word for word the work of their peers or classmates.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the data presented, the study indicates that the causes and effects impeding the development of writing skills in Grade 11 pupils were exacerbated by the modular distance education setup. Thus, based on the problems, factors, and influences identified in this study, it can be concluded that Roberto E. Sato Memorial National High School learners face a variety of writing challenges while enrolled in distance education, but their writing skills can be improved by addressing the root causes of these challenges. Consequently craft a teaching strategy or approach that will help students resolve these problems and challenges. Moreover, design remedial measures at individual or institutional level. Teachers should increase learners'

exposure to all four skills with specific emphasis on reading and writing. Constructive feedback should be provided to help learners correct their errors, criticism on their writings should be minimized, and writing competitions should be organized to motivate the learners.

Finally, because this research was conducted within the confines of a modular setting, it is suggested that a replication of the study be conducted among those who have transcended in the blended learning context, particularly once the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided and academic communities have begun to re-adjust in another context. Furthermore, the findings showed that most of the participants struggles learning on their own considering the set up in their respective homes and the availability of the materials. It is recommended to conduct a study that will provide a methodology to effectively teach written communication skills while students are self-learning.

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