

Short Paper

Essay Writing Performance of Grade 10 Students: Basis in Developing an Essay Writing Module

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Abstract

The study determined the writing performance of the Grade 10 learners along argumentative and persuasive essays which led to the development of an Essay Writing Module. It made use of descriptive, correlational, and developmental research designs. The researcher used a questionnaire and essay outputs as the data-gathering tools. The 195 student-respondents were chosen using the random sampling technique. Frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and t-test were utilized to analyze the data. Overall, the writing performance of the learners along with argumentative and persuasive essays reflected convincing results. Furthermore, respondents seem to display better performance in a persuasive essay. With these significant findings, the essay writing module was developed, which was found very valid. Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations were drawn: exposure of learners to various social media platforms may be regulated; provision of engaging writing activities is encouraged to all learners; enrichment of teaching pedagogies in writing is needed; creation of communication plan by administrators is recommended to address the problem areas; the Essay Writing Module may be used as instructional material and that further studies can be conducted to continuously explore possible pedagogical interventions.

Keywords – essay, argumentative, persuasive, module



INTRODUCTION

Writing as a highly complex process requires composite skills. Pablo and Lasaten (2018) convey the same claim stating further that writing in general relies on good fine motor functions, visual-motor planning, attention, sequencing, thinking, memory, and knowledge of grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary, and the purpose of writing. Therefore, good writing is much more than just correct writing. It should exhibit a clearly defined purpose, present a certain point, be supported by specific and connected and arranged pieces of information, and use appropriate words. Sentences are concise, emphatic, and correct.

One of the most widely used academic writing in the field of education and research is an essay. It is a short writing activity that allows one to articulate his thoughts in a way that is clearly understood providing the opportunity to share knowledge, arguments, and experiences in a wider spectrum and structured way. However, it has been observed that the academic writing performance of students particularly in essay writing has been declining.

Based on the results of the International English Language Testing (IELTS) for 2017 in academic and general training tests, both males (5.66, 5.55) and females (6.15, 6.05) got the lowest mean scores in writing. It also shows that among the Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia had taken the top spot in writing with a mean rating of 6.25 compared to the Philippines with 6.20 (<https://www.ielts.org>).

On the other hand, the researcher observed that most of the Grade 10 learners scored low in their diagnostic essays. They were tasked to develop an essay with a topic related to the importance of the English language. The results showed that most of them are beginners based on focus/content, argumentative or persuasive techniques used, development or organization, clarity of ideas, emphasis, and language mechanics and conventions.

These empirical studies and observations prompted the researcher to conduct a study on the writing performance of Grade 10 learners, particularly in argumentative and persuasive essays. The essay writing results provided pieces of evidence of the learners' progress in acquiring writing skills, particularly in their SL (Second Language) for pedagogical enhancement and the extent of their learning of the structures of essays leading to the formulation of an Essay Writing Module.

Statement of the Problem

The present study determined the writing performance of the Grade 10 learners of Santa Maria National High School along argumentative and persuasive essays which led to the formulation of an Essay Writing Module.

Specifically, the present study aimed at providing answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the writing performance of the respondents in argumentative and persuasive essays?
2. What are the common errors in writing argumentative and persuasive essays?
3. What is the level of validity of the writing module designed to improve the respondents' writing performance along argumentative and persuasive essays?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following studies are believed to be related and relevant to the present study. The following studies were carefully and analytically examined to suit the concepts enveloped in this research work.

In a study exploring the essay writing performance of high school students, the overall performance of the respondents is described as good. Domantay and Ramos (2018) revealed that most secondary students perform decently in terms of mechanics, vocabulary, and content while writing fairly in terms of grammar. The researchers concluded that students exhibit good command in spelling, capitalization, margins, indentions, punctuations, using appropriate words, organization of ideas, and the flow of the essay. However, the students manifest not-so-good but not poor ability to use correct tenses of verbs and adhere to the subject-verb agreement.

On contrary, the recent study of Totto and Ramos (2021) regarding the writing performance of senior high school students uncovered an upsetting result which states that most of the students scored ratings equivalent to 'did not meet expectation'. This outcome is reflected in the errors tallied by the researchers along with grammar and mechanics. The most frequent errors committed by the students are recorded with their use of modifiers for grammar, and capitalization under mechanics. The research also pointed out that students committed plenty of errors along with the subject-verb agreement.

Along with focus and content, Pablo and Lasaten (2018) cited that one of the most frequent difficulties of students in writing academic essays is the inadequacy of a variety of ideas or arguments which affects the quality of the essay, particularly in focus or content. This difficulty is caused by the absence of a well-defined thesis statement. This is also supported by Joan (2016) stating that errors in content are the most serious of the errors that were found in the written essays of students. Students mostly write out of a given topic. On one hand, argumentative or persuasive techniques must also be observed in writing essays to denote powerful arguments.

On development and organization, Joan (2016) revealed that the students failed to write an organized essay. Moreover, in a study conducted by Fareed et al. (2016) one of the major problems among Pakistan undergraduate ESL learners' writing was weak structure organization. These might be attributed to students' poor paragraphing as manifested in the study of Pablo and Lasaten (2018). The results conform to the study of Ka-kan-dee (2017) revealing that the student's inability to generate well-organized ideas and lack of awareness of the planning process of writing affect their essay performance.

Pablo and Lasaten (2018) posited that students have also trouble writing their ideas. They commented that they have difficulty clarifying what they intend to say to the readers. Thus, this makes their intended meaning obscure. This might be attributed to a lack of fluent expressions of ideas and insufficient linguistic proficiency which includes grammar, syntax, and vocabulary.

Along with spelling errors, Al-Oudat (2017) investigated the spelling errors committed by English-major students at BAU. The results of the study show four types of spelling errors which include substitution and insertion errors. In addition, results indicate that the difference between the English and the Arabic writing systems is one of the major causes of students' errors.

Overall, Pablo and Lasaten (2018) support the findings of the various studies. They revealed that students manifest poor paragraphing, incorrect or uncomfortably frequent word/idiom choice and usage, poor sentence construction, and frequent grammar errors. They added that one of the reasons why students commit spelling errors is that most of them do not read English magazines, books, or newspapers which are important to know words and the correct spelling.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used descriptive-developmental research designs. According to the book of Calmorin and Calmorin (2007), Best and Khan described, descriptive research design as a scientific method that involves observing and describing the existing phenomenon. In this study, the writing performance of students in persuasive and argumentative essays was described.

Developmental research design, on the other hand, was considered in crafting the essay writing module. According to Ibrahim (2016), developmental research is a systematic study of designing, developing, and evaluating instructional programs, processes, and products. In this study, an essay writing module is formulated. The result of this study is to craft an Essay Writing Module based on the results of the data gathered.

Population and Locale of the Study

The respondents of the study were the Grade 10 learners of Santa Maria National High School. They were chosen using Slovin's Formula and a simple random sampling technique. Each name has been drawn to determine the 195 respondents.

Research Instrument

The researcher used a questionnaire containing two separate topics for each type of essay. The topics for argumentative and persuasive essays were as follows: Should public school students wear their school uniform; and Should the opening of classes be moved from June to August in all DepEd Schools? Their written outputs were rated using a 5-Likert scale rubric adapted from the book of Almonte, et. Al (2015). The questionnaire was validated by experts who excel in the field of writing.

To identify the errors, the researcher used rubrics which include focus/content (states clear position at the beginning until the end of the work; topic captures the reader's attention), persuasive and argumentative techniques used (uses strong and effective persuasive techniques; details support the thesis and the stand of the writer), development/organization (has a strong organizational plan; has logically arranged statements from the most important to the least important or vice versa; develops the topic thoroughly with examples and supports), clarity of ideas (presents clear and sound arguments, and shreds of evidence are authentic), emphasis (has interesting and attention-grabbing introduction; has a strong conclusion that includes a call to action) and language mechanics and convention (displays minor spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors).

Data Gathering Procedure

Upon approval of requests, the learners were asked to develop an argumentative essay with the topic: Should the opening of classes be moved from June to August in all DepEd public schools? On the following day, the same respondents were asked to write a persuasive essay with the topic: Should DepEd public students wear school uniforms? They were only given an hour to finish the task with 300 to 500 words including function words. Before this, a comprehensive discussion about argumentative and persuasive essays was delivered to learners.

The essays were duplicated and forwarded to the experts along with the rubrics adapted from the Grade 10 English Module. Using the 5-Likert scale, the essays were evaluated based on focus/content, persuasive/argumentative techniques, development/organization, clarity of ideas, emphasis, and language mechanics and conventions.

Further, the researcher also identified the common errors committed by the learners. The frequency counting and statistical treatment of data were prepared. An essay writing module was designed based on the errors committed by the respondents. The Essay Writing Module was submitted to five experts (Education Program Specialists, Assistant School Principal, Head Teacher, and Teachers) for validation and obtained a mean score of 4.92 described as Very Good.

Statistical Treatment of Data

To treat and analyze the data gathered, the following statistical tools were used:

Frequency Distribution was used to describe the errors committed by the respondents in writing essays.

Mean was utilized to describe the essay writing performance of the respondents.

The scores obtained in the essays were used to determine the level of writing performance of the respondents along with argumentative and persuasive essays (Table 1) The results were evaluated as follows:

Table 1. Level of Writing Performance along with Argumentative and Persuasive Essays

Scale	Statistical Limit	Descriptive Rating
5	4.21-5.00	Excellent
4	3.41- 4.20	Very Impressive
3	2.61- 3.40	Impressive
2	1.81-2.60	Convincing
1	1.00-1.80	Beginning

To validate the Essay Writing Module, the following 5-point Likert scale was used (Table 2 and Table 3):

Table 2. Level of Validity of the Essay Writing Module

Scale	Statistical Limit	Descriptive Rating
5	4.21-5.00	Very Valid
4	3.41- 4.20	Valid
3	2.61- 3.40	Moderately Valid
2	1.81-2.60	Slightly Valid
1	1.00-1.80	Not Valid

Table 3. Rubrics for Argumentative and Persuasive Essays

Criteria	5	4	3	2	1	Total
Focus/Content (states clear position at the beginning until the end of the work; topic captures the reader's attention)						
Persuasive and Argumentative Techniques Used (uses strong and effective persuasive techniques; details support the thesis and the stand of the writer)						
Development/Organization (has a strong organizational plan; has logically arranged statements from the most important to the least important or vice versa; develops the topic thoroughly with examples and supports)						
Clarity of Ideas (presents clear and sound arguments, and pieces of evidence are authentic)						
Emphasis (has an interesting and attention-grabbing introduction; has a strong conclusion that includes a call to action)						
Language Mechanics and Convention (displays minor spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors)						
Total						

Legend: Rating – Description

5 – Excellent 4 – Very Impressive 3 – Impressive 2 – Convincing 1 – Beginning

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of data.

Writing Performance of the Respondents along Argumentative and Persuasive Essays

The table reveals the writing performance of the respondents along argumentative essay with an overall mean score of 2.30 described as “convincing”. The highest mean score is 2.50 for focus and content while the clarity of ideas got the lowest mean score of 2.23 both described as “convincing”. Argumentative techniques and emphasis got the same mean scores of 2.27 also described as “convincing”. Furthermore, development and organization and language mechanics and convention reflected convincing results with mean ratings of 2.24 and 2.30, respectively.

Table 4. Essay writing performance

Criteria	Argumentative		Persuasive	
	Mean	DR	Mean	DR
Focus/Content	2.50	Convincing	2.73	Impressive
Persuasive/Argumentative Techniques Used	2.27	Convincing	2.52	Convincing
Development/Organization	2.24	Convincing	2.49	Convincing
Clarity of Ideas	2.23	Convincing	2.47	Convincing
Emphasis	2.27	Convincing	2.46	Convincing
Language Mechanics and Convention	2.30	Convincing	2.53	Convincing
Total	2.30	Convincing	2.53	Convincing

Common Errors in Writing Argumentative and Persuasive Essays

The argumentative essays of the respondents lack focus and content as observed in their introduction from which a thesis statement is developed. The thesis statement serves as the controlling purpose of the essay. The goal is not clearly defined and effectively communicated. There is also inadequate support to develop the controlling purpose.

According to Pablo and Lasaten (2018), one of the most frequent difficulties of students in writing academic essays is the inadequacy of a variety of ideas or arguments which affects the quality of the essay, particularly in focus or content. This difficulty is caused by the absence of a well-defined thesis statement.

With argumentative techniques, the result indicates the absence of strong opinion signals to express emphasis, addition, comparison, or contrast in the presentation of arguments. The result could have been due to students' limited knowledge of opinion signals.

In terms of development and organization, the respondents' essays demonstrated an illogical arrangement of ideas. The body paragraphs reflected mixed arguments which may lead to confusion for readers. Ideally, in a five-point paragraph essay, the second and third paragraphs must present the affirmative side of the argument. It should have a strong organizational plan where statements are arranged from the most important to the least or vice-versa. Possible reasons for the problem could be attributed to the absence of connectives, poor paragraphing, and weak support as mentioned by Pablo and Lasaten (2018).

The results also suggest that most essays lack clarity of ideas. The presentation of arguments is vague and there is no strong evidence to support the claims. This might be attributed to a lack of fluent expressions of ideas and insufficient linguistic proficiency

which includes grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. The respondents experience difficulty in terms of emphasis. The texts do not contain varied ideas to support the claims to help readers achieve an understanding of the texts. There are also no catchy hook introductions and strong conclusions to sustain readers to continue reading the text. The result implies that the respondents might have limited knowledge of the topic and difficulty expressing their ideas. Most argumentative essays display errors in subject-verb agreement, tense, and spelling. The results imply that the learners might have limited exposure to these areas.

On the other hand, along with the persuasive essay, the overall writing performance of the respondents reflected a mean score of 2.53 described as “convincing”. Individually, focus and content got the highest mean rating of 2.73 described as “impressive” while language mechanics and convention and persuasive techniques got the second and the third slots with mean scores of 2.54 and 2.53, respectively. Moreover, development and organization obtained a mean score of 2.29, clarity of ideas of 2.47, and emphasis of 2.46.

Based on the results of the evaluated essays, the respondents demonstrated impressive focus and content but the thesis statements are not well-defined. Such a result could have been due to the absence of a well-structured thesis statement which serves as the core idea to develop in essay writing. Lack of variety of ideas and poor knowledge of the topic could have also influenced the result. This is almost similar to the findings of Joan (2016) stating that errors in content are the most serious of the errors that were found in the written essays of students. Students mostly write out of a given topic. The content of a written essay is supposed to reflect and develop the given topic.

Most of the students do not use techniques making the arguments weak. The arguments do not have a strong appeal to reason, emotion, and logic which impede the development of the essay. Possible reasons could be due to limited vocabulary and little knowledge of persuasive techniques.

The texts also demonstrate the incoherence of ideas. The expressions of thoughts are not fluid which affects the meaning of the text. The ideas are very difficult to follow and they lack fluent expression. These might be attributed to students’ difficulty to prepare an outline to see the flow of ideas from one paragraph to another.

In like manner, the study of Joan (2016) reveals that the students failed to write an organized essay. Furthermore, Fareed et al. (2016) found that one of the major problems among Pakistan undergraduate ESL learners’ writing was weak structure organization. The results imply that students have poor skills in putting their ideas together to come up with meaningful texts. These might be attributed to students’ poor paragraphing as manifested in the study of Pablo and Lasaten (2018).

The arguments are obscured by the absence of varied ideas and the inability to express them in written words. Poor flow of ideas is also evident as manifested in poor sentence construction and awkward sentences. Little details about the topic might have also affected the performance of the students.

The essays reflect the difficulty in writing the introduction and the conclusion. According to Pablo and Lasaten (2018), students complain that beginning the essay is a great challenge for them. Providing strong support for their essay is also tough, especially when they have no idea about the topic. Likewise, writing a conclusion is also challenging for them because the last paragraph generalizes all the ideas they presented. Thus, it is also recommended to prepare an outline.

The persuasive essays of the students reflected errors particularly in subject-verb agreement, unnecessary use of words, and spelling. This conforms to the study of Phuket and Othman (2015) when they explored the major sources of errors that occurred in the writing of EFL students.

The overall results both in argumentative and persuasive essays described learners' writing performance as convincing which is below average based on the levels of the essay writing performance. The results, therefore, imply the learner's poor writing performance and failure to acquire the necessary writing skills. Pablo and Lasaten (2018) pointed out that students lack variety in arguments, and thus fail to elaborate on the topic. Additionally, students cannot support the focus of the essay with pertinent details. These difficulties might boil down to the fact that the topic might be unfamiliar to the students.

Furthermore, the performance of the students might be influenced by poor sentence construction and limited vocabulary.

According to the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing, writing is cyclical. The writer goes through major steps and revisits these steps along the course. The study concludes that the overall quality of the essays written by the students falls within the convincing level which implies that most of them do not consider the major steps in writing essays. Laziness and inadequate knowledge of the process might have influenced their poor performance in essay writing. This conforms to the study of Ka-kan-dee (2017) revealing that the student's inability to generate well-organized ideas and lack of awareness of the planning process of writing affect their essay performance.

Figure 1 presents the common errors committed by the respondents along with spelling, capitalization, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, tenses, omission, unnecessary words, and word order.

Taking the frequency of errors, the respondents committed almost the same both in argumentative and persuasive essays.

Along argumentative essays, the most commonly committed error is on subject-verb agreement with 160 occurrences. Based on the results, the respondents seemed not to master the rules of providing the correct agreement of the subject and the verb, particularly in numbers. One possible reason for this error might be the learner’s inability to determine the subject and the verb, especially with complex sentences. Thus, learners are confused as to which subject the verb must agree with. It might also be attributed to some factors such as the intervention of the mother tongue and little exposure to grammar rules.

Another category with 94 recorded frequency of error is the use of unnecessary words. The meaning of the sentences could have been more concise and clear without the unnecessary words. The results imply that the respondents could hardly input ideas, especially when coming across like flickering lightning. Some tend to put everything in one basket paying less attention to the structure of the sentence. It is also possible that some deliberately increase the complexity of their vocabulary to give an impression of their intelligence. However, Oppenheimer (2015) explicitly discussed that most texts on writing style encourage authors to avoid overly-complex words. Accordingly, complexity leads to negative evaluation which may adversely affect the understanding of learners of the intended meaning.

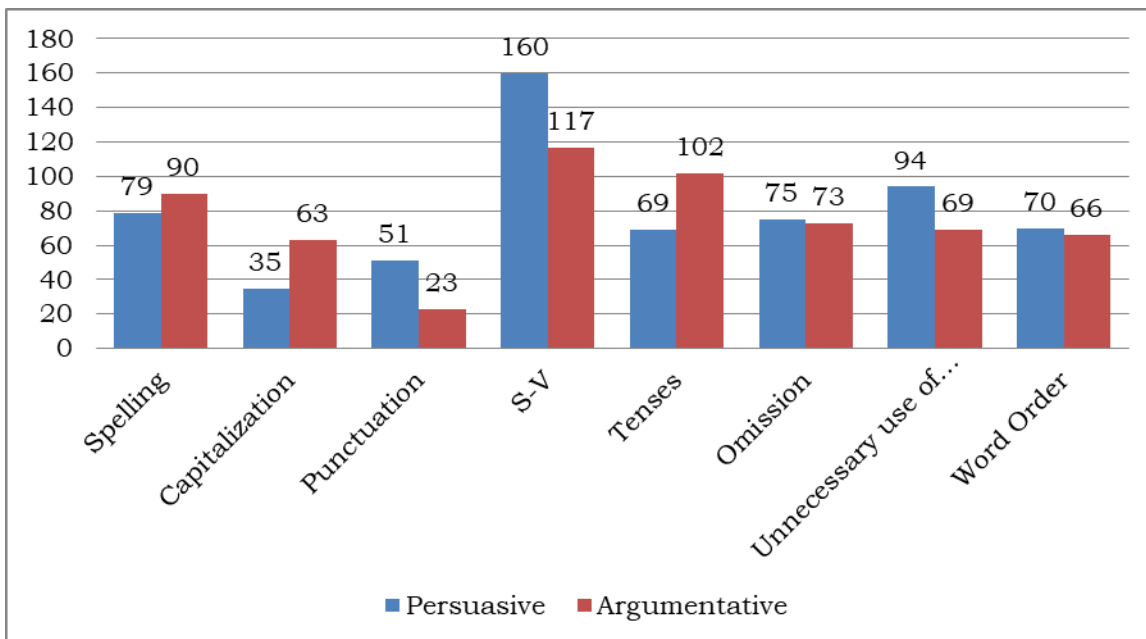


Figure 1. Common Errors of respondents

The third most commonly committed error in an argumentative essay is spelling with 73 coding errors. The results suggest that almost half of the total population committed spelling errors. One possible reason could be the interference of the mother tongue or our language. In Filipino for instance, words are spelled the way they are

pronounced which is not applicable in English. This is similar to the study conducted by t Al-Oudat (2017) when he investigated the spelling errors committed by English-major students at BAU. The results of the study show four types of spelling errors which include substitution and insertion errors. In addition, results indicate that the difference between the English and Arabic writing systems is one of the major causes of students' errors.

On the other hand, along with persuasive essays, the subject-verb agreement also posted the most numbered of errors detected with 117 occurrences. The outcomes suggest that there might be some areas under the subject-verb agreement which need more attention just like the rules under indefinite pronouns and so with the other rules. These could be attributed to students' little exposure to grammar or lack of interest. The consistency of tenses of verbs posed another major problem in persuasive essay writing with 102 respondents committing errors.

Overall, Pablo and Lasaten (2018) also support the findings of the current study. They revealed that students manifest poor paragraphing, incorrect or uncomfortably frequent word/idiom choice and usage, poor sentence construction, and frequent grammar errors. They added that one of the reasons why students commit spelling errors is that most of them do not read English magazines, books, or newspapers which are important to know words and the correct spelling.

Validity of the Writing Module Designed

The table disclosed that the first three indicators garnered the highest mean rating of 5.0, described as “very valid”. Items 4 and 5 both scored 4.8, still considered as “very valid”. The overall mean rating of 4.92, is interpreted as “very valid”, and the individual mean ratings imply that the developed essay writing module is a suitable instrument to help students improve their writing skills. The researcher-developed module can be accessed thru this link <https://bit.ly/essaymodule>.

Table 5. Result of the Validity Test

Indicators	Mean Rating	Descriptive Rating
1. The learning objectives are simple, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound.	5.00	Very Valid
2. The activities are organized based on the sequence of the focus skills.	5.00	Very Valid
3. The activities assess their understanding of what they have learned and correct errors when appropriate.	5.00	Very Valid
4. Monitor their learning and use feedback about their progress.	4.80	Very Valid
5. Provides opportunities for students to work independently or in groups to explore answers to their own.	4.80	Very Valid
Average	4.92	Very Valid

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the researcher arrived at the following conclusions: the respondents showed a lack of mastery of the skills required in writing argumentative and persuasive essays. The performance of the students in both types of essays varies from one another. The respondents have better writing performance in a persuasive essay. The most prevailing errors in essays are subject-verb agreement, verb tense, unnecessary use of words, and spelling. The Essay Writing Module is valid and it can be used as instructional material for intervention or remediation purposes with the approval of the proper authorities.

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations were drawn: The provision of authentic and engaging activities to improve their writing skills, particularly in argumentative and persuasive essays is encouraged. Since essay writing is a highly complex activity, teachers may enrich pedagogies by helping learners acquire composite skills like planning, brainstorming, expanding vocabulary, and developing a positive attitude towards writing. The errors provided reliable and accurate data on the current status of the writing performance of the students. Therefore, there must be a concrete communication plan to address these weaknesses such as follow-up and other intervention activities. The validated Essay Writing Module can be used as instructional material in teaching argumentative and persuasive essays. However, it can be modified based on the predominant needs of the learners. Further studies can be conducted to continuously explore possible pedagogical interventions to help every learner achieve his maximum potential in essay writing. Reading and writing habits of learners and other related variables may also be included as variables.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study may provide opportunities for learners to achieve writing fluency, particularly in their second language through various, but engaging tasks. Through this study, English teachers, in particular, are provided with accurate evidence of the progress of learning in writing which may yield in the development of pedagogical interventions. The development of interventions like enrichment materials and remedial activities is becoming an integral task of teachers to improve the performance of the learners. On the other hand, the results may provide feedback to administrators in designing a well-structured communication plan addressing the prevailing situations affecting the writing performance of the learners.

DECLARATIONS

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there has been no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent

The author declares that the participants have informed consent before the conduct of the study.

Ethics Approval

Respondents were informed with the purpose of the study, personal data were treated with utmost confidentiality, and the participants consent their participation in this research, hence, no ethics approval was secured.

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