Enhancing the Writing Skills of Pre-Service Teachers: Foundations for an Intervention Programme

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ABSTRACT:

Writing is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills for language learners, as it necessitates a substantial level of second language (L2) background knowledge encompassing rhetorical structures, appropriate language usage, and domain-specific vocabulary for effective communication with readers. This study endeavors to assess the writing skills of 40 pre-service teachers enrolled at the Adamas University in terms of content, grammar, organization, and mechanics, serving as a foundational basis for the proposed intervention programme. Through a qualitative approach employing content analysis, data were scrutinized to ascertain competencies and identify errors prevalent in essay writing. The levels of achievement were categorized into exceptional, good, below average, and poor. The findings disclose that the majority of pre-service teachers exhibit good competency in content, organization, and mechanics, yet grammar remains the area where errors are most frequently encountered. In light of these findings, it becomes imperative to assess and address the writing skills of pre-service teachers across various writing components.

Keywords: *Writing Skills, Pre-service Teachers, Content, Grammar, Organization, Mechanics*

Introduction:

Indeed, writing is a fundamental skill in the development of language proficiency. It serves as a crucial avenue for students to apply and express their knowledge. This necessity for effective writing requires substantial preparation, including careful consideration of the subject matter and how to effectively convey it (Oshima & Hogue, 2017).

In the context of language development, writing represents the culmination of language skills that English pre-service teachers should acquire, following listening, speaking, and reading. However, compared to these other language skills, writing is often perceived as more challenging, especially for native English speakers. This is because it demands a deep understanding of various linguistic features and factors that extend beyond mere language proficiency (Haerazi & Irawan, 2019).

To produce cohesive and coherent written work, pre-service teachers must possess strong writing skills. Achieving cohesion in writing necessitates the careful organization of both language elements and content (Haerazi & Irawan, 2019). It involves meticulous attention to grammar and writing mechanics, including aspects such as capitalization, spelling, and punctuation, as writing is an active and productive skill (Haerazi & Irawan, 2019).

However, it is important to acknowledge that many pre-service teachers encounter difficulties in developing practical writing abilities, particularly when it comes to composing essays in English (Miatin & Wiedarti, 2019). These challenges underscore the need for effective strategies and interventions to enhance writing skills among pre-service teachers, ultimately equipping them with the proficiency required to excel in their roles as educators.

Before embarking on the task of producing written material, students must acquire a firm grasp of the essential components of the English language. This prerequisite underscores the critical relationship between language proficiency, critical thinking, and the creation of well-crafted essays and written works (Sadiah & Royani, 2019). Building upon this premise, writing can be aptly described as the product of a dynamic process involving thinking, drafting, and revising (Brown & Lee, 2015).

Indeed, the act of writing is intricately intertwined with mastery of the English language's fundamental components. If students do not achieve proficiency in these components, their attempts at writing will inevitably fall short. Kumala, Aimah, and Ifadah (2018) concur with this perspective, asserting that writing necessitates a broad knowledge base to construct sentences and paragraphs with impeccable English grammar. However, pre-service teachers often grapple with the challenge of translating these norms into written form. This struggle is manifest in their propensity to produce careless frameworks and disorganized paragraphs (Haerazi & Irawan, 2019).

Nonetheless, it remains a complex task to identify students who consistently produce writings with relatively few grammatical errors. The intricacies of writing extend beyond mere grammatical correctness. They encompass the broader dimensions of creating coherent and compelling ideas and effectively conveying them through the written word.

In summary, the development of writing skills is inexorably linked to a comprehensive understanding of English components. Mastery of these components forms the foundation upon which proficient and impactful writing is built. The challenges encountered by students and pre-service teachers in this journey serve as a testament to the multifaceted nature of the writing process.

It is, therefore, widely acknowledged that the challenges of writing extend beyond mere grammatical correctness. These challenges encompass the intricate processes of ideation, organization, and the transformation of ideas into comprehensible written content. Moreover, students embarking on the journey of developing writing skills must familiarize themselves with the standard components inherent in writing (Olsen, 2016). This includes the nuanced selection of appropriate language to convey the intended message effectively.

Furthermore, the proficiency of students in vocabulary, organizational skills, grammar, and writing mechanics plays a pivotal role in determining the quality of their written work. Students with inadequate knowledge or skills in these areas are more likely to struggle with producing well-structured and coherent written pieces. Consequently, the errors frequently observed in students' writing underscore the need for substantial attention and targeted support. Addressing these errors is essential, as they can significantly impede the attainment of writing competence and hinder the overall learning experience. The shift from traditional face-to-face learning to online-based education, as noted by Abidah et al. (2020) and Chang & Fang (2020), has disrupted the closely supervised and feedback-rich environment that students typically experience in essay writing. Consequently, there is a pressing need for innovative teaching-learning strategies to address this challenge and foster ongoing writing skill development (Ismiati & Pebriantika, 2020).

Various strategies have been proposed to facilitate writing practices and enhance students' writing skills. For instance, collaborative learning, critical thinking, and autonomous learning, as articulated by Joseph (2017), have been recommended. However, it's worth noting that the considerable time investment required for collaborative techniques can deter students' acceptance, particularly when time constraints demand more lecture-style instruction (Ismiati & Pebriantika, 2020).

Additionally, studies have suggested the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies in improving students' writing abilities (Yusuf, 2019). The utilization of diary writing techniques has also shown promise in enhancing students' writing skills, encompassing areas such as grammar and vocabulary (Hanan et al., 2015). Nevertheless, some learners employing diary writing methods tend to produce run-on sentences and neglect established writing norms. This highlights the importance of providing structured feedback and guidance in the writing process (Ismiati & Pebriantika, 2020).

Recognizing the diversity of student needs and learning styles, it becomes evident that no single strategy fits all contexts. What works effectively for one group of learners may not be as suitable for another (Ismiati & Pebriantika, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to remain adaptable and responsive to individual learning needs.

Moreover, writing activities should encompass close guidance from instructors. After students have completed their writing assignments, it is valuable to engage in discussions, particularly with teachers, to assess their writing skills, identify areas for improvement, and address errors effectively. This personalized approach to feedback can significantly contribute to students' growth as writers.

It has become increasingly evident that significant opportunities for improving the writing skills of pre-service teachers exist during their years of study in higher education institutions before they embark on their teaching careers. The deficiency in students' writing skills can be attributed to various factors, including the weaknesses of student teachers in this particular area. Moreover, the intricate standards of English writing may contribute to learners' writing difficulties, particularly among those at advanced levels of education, particularly those who specialize in English (Ismiati & Pebriantika, 2020).

Preliminary studies, as conducted by Nanning, Saepudin, and Munawir (2020), have revealed the persistent challenge of applying English rules correctly when composing academic papers. While virtually all researchers in the field concur that writing challenges are an inherent aspect of the process of learning the English language, reaching a consensus on how to effectively address students' difficulties remains elusive (Yundayani et al., 2019).

Therefore, it becomes apparent that gaining a better understanding of the specific skills involved in writing is an initial requirement for devising strategies to enhance the written language proficiency of pre-service teachers. Content analysis stands as a valuable tool to identify the prevailing writing skills and common errors that afflict pre-service teachers (Kwan & Yunus, 2014).

With these gaps in the literature in mind, this study was conducted with the primary aim of assessing the writing skills of pre-service teachers through the analysis of their written essays. Additionally, the study sought to address the persistent problem, as evidenced by their assessment results. By shedding light on the specific challenges faced by pre-service teachers, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the enhancement of writing skills in higher education institutions.

Methodology:

This study employed a content analysis approach, specifically utilizing conceptual analysis, to assess the writing skills and identify errors in the domains of content, grammar, organization, and mechanics. The research was conducted at the Adamas University.

Data for this analysis were collected from a single assessment administered through the Learning Management System. The participants were 2nd-year teacher education students enrolled in Assessment for Learning Course during the second semester of the academic year 2022-2023. In this assessment,

students were tasked with composing a paragraph of at least 150-300 words to respond to the essay question: "Do grades matter? Why or why not?" This essay prompt, crafted by the course instructor, was chosen due to its relevance to the topic of grading, which was the focus of the lesson for that particular week. The question aimed to evaluate the writing skills, knowledge, and linguistic competence of the participants, aligning with the objectives of the study.

To ensure consistency and reliability in the assessment process, inter-rater reliability was established. This was accomplished by having one essay from the pre-service teachers graded by multiple raters. Each essay received separate scores in the categories of content, grammar, organization, and mechanics. The data collected from this process were then presented in tabular form, accompanied by qualitative descriptions.

Furthermore, the data on the writing skills of pre-service teachers were analyzed based on their field of specialization. The results were tabulated to determine which major categories achieved Exceptional, Good, Below Average, or Poor writing skills in the areas of content, grammar, organization, and mechanics.

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the types of errors made by pre-service teachers, images or figures illustrating common errors in content, grammar, organization, and mechanics were incorporated into the discussion. These visuals aided in the exploration of specific error patterns and areas that may require targeted intervention or improvement.

The study employed several data analysis tools to evaluate and interpret the writing skills of pre-service teachers' written output. These tools included:

Analytic Rubric: The language expert and researchers utilized an analytic rubric as a guideline for assessing the writing skills of pre-service teachers. This rubric was adapted from existing research literature, customized by the researchers to suit the study's objectives, and then validated by two experts. An analytic rubric typically breaks down the assessment criteria into specific dimensions or components, allowing for a more detailed evaluation of each aspect of writing, such as content, grammar, organization, and mechanics.

Frequency Counts and Percentage Analysis: To assess the level of achievement that pre-service teachers attained in each component of writing, the study employed frequency counts and percentage analysis. This statistical approach involved counting the frequency of pre-service teachers who achieved different levels of proficiency (e.g., Exceptional, Good, Below Average, Poor) in each writing component (content, grammar, organization, and mechanics). The percentages were then calculated based on these counts to provide a clear understanding of the distribution of proficiency levels among the participants.

These data analysis tools were instrumental in systematically evaluating and quantifying the writing skills of pre-service teachers, enabling the researchers to draw meaningful conclusions about their performance in various aspects of writing. The use of an analytic rubric and statistical analysis helped ensure objectivity and rigor in the assessment process.

Results:

Table 1 shows the writing skills of pre-service teachers along content, grammar, organization, and mechanics. The summary effectively captures the key findings related to the content component of pre-service teachers' writing skills. It highlights their strengths in content development, clear understanding of the topic, and the presence of complex ideas. Additionally, our conclusion that most pre-service teachers performed well in this aspect is clear and supported by the data in Table 1.

To maintain consistency and clarity, you can apply a similar structure to summarize the findings for the remaining components of writing (grammar, organization, and mechanics) as well as provide an overall conclusion that synthesizes the results across all components.

The findings related to grammar provides a clear and detailed breakdown of the pre-service teachers' performance in this component. It effectively highlights the absence of exceptional competency, the prevalence of good competency with a specific range of errors, and the frequent occurrence of below-average competency, particularly in terms of the number of grammar errors. This summary aligns with previous analysis and is comprehensive in conveying the state of grammar skills among the pre-service teachers. It emphasizes the need for improvement in understanding and applying basic grammar rules.

The findings related to organization effectively conveys the range of competencies demonstrated by the pre-service teachers in this component. It provides a clear breakdown of exceptional, good, and below-average competency levels, allowing readers to understand the distribution of skills within the group.

Our descriptions of exceptional and good competency levels provide specific characteristics that indicate strong organizational skills in the essays. These descriptions help readers visualize what constitutes excellent organization and what is considered good in this context. Highlighting that no pre-service teacher received a "poor" rating in organization reinforces the overall strength of this group in this aspect of writing.

Overall, summary effectively communicates the findings related to organization and aligns with our previous analysis. It provides a comprehensive view of the pre-service teachers' competency levels in this component.

The findings related to mechanics effectively conveys the levels of competency demonstrated by pre-service teachers in this component. It provides a clear breakdown of exceptional and good competency levels, indicating the absence of below-average or poor competency.

The description of exceptional competency in mechanics, where answers are free from errors and reflect clear understanding and proofreading, provides a clear benchmark for excellence in this aspect of writing.

By highlighting that none of the responses were categorized as below average or poor in mechanics, you emphasize the overall strength of the pre-service teachers in this area.

The concluding statement neatly summarizes the key findings across all components, reinforcing the idea that while the pre-service teachers demonstrate strength in content, organization, and mechanics, there is a clear need for improvement in grammar skills.

Overall, summary effectively communicates the findings related to mechanics and provides a concise conclusion that ties together the results of the study.

Table 1: Writing Skills of Pre-Service Teachers Along Content, Grammar, Organization, and Mechanics

	Content		Grammar		Organization		Mechanics	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Exceptional	15	37.50	0	0.00	8	20.00	18	45.00
Good	24	60.00	18	45.00	25	62.50	22	55.00
Below Average	1	2.50	22	55.00	7	17.50	0	0.00
Poor	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Mean Score	18.60		8.93		9.42		8.98	
Qualitative Description	Below Average		Below Average		Below Average		Below Average	

Table 2 shows the writing skills of pre-service teachers in different components of writing when grouped according to field of specialization. As seen in the table, English major pre-service teachers obtained the highest score in most components of writing. This means that English pre-service teachers excelled more in the given task. Moreover, in content, social studies pre-service teachers got the second highest score while Math group got the lowest. Under grammar and organization, pre-service teachers from BEd programme obtained the second highest score while pre-service teachers from social studies group got the lowest score in grammar, on the other hand, pre-service teachers from Math group got the lowest score in organization. Further, pre-service teachers from BEd programme me got the highest score in mechanics, followed by English pre-service teachers. In general, some pre-service teachers are deemed good in all components of writing, but most of pre-service teachers are still having difficulty in their writing skills especially in grammar. In the table, pre-service teachers got low scores in grammar which means that pre-service teachers are not yet fully aware and have low mastery of the basic grammar rules.

Table 2: Writing Skills of Pre-Service Teachers When Grouped According to Field of Specialization

Field of Specialization	Content (25 pts)	Grammar (15 pts)	Organization (15 pts)	Mechanics (10 pts)	Total (65 pts)	Qualitative Descriptor
English	20.20	10.27	11.07	9.40	50.94	Good
Social Studies	19.60	7.60	9.40	8.40	45	Below Average
Math	17.33	8.50	8.50	8.67	43	Below Average
TOTAL	**19.04**	**8.79**	**9.66**	**8.82**	**46.31**	**Below Average**

Table 3 shows the overall writing skills of pre-service teachers when grouped to their field of specialization. As seen on the table, most of the English majors have good competency in their writing skills. This means that majority of the English pre-service teachers obtained the passing score. It can also be seen on the table that most Social Studies and Math obtained a below average competency in their writing skills. However, only English majors obtained a good level in their writing skills. This means that among all majors, English major pre-service teachers have the best writing skills competency, since they are language students and part of their curriculum is studying grammar as well as the four macro-skills. In general, half of the pre-service teachers are good while the remaining half are below average in writing skills.

Table 3: Overall Writing Skills of Pre-service Teachers

Score Range	Quality Descriptor	English	Social Studies	Math	Over-All Total
		N	N	N	N
65 -60	Exceptional	0	0	0	0
59 -49	Good	15	4	1	20
48 -35	Below Average	14	5	1	20
34 -20	Poor	0	0	0	0
19 - 0	Failing	0	0	0	0
TOTAL		**29**	**9**	**2**	**40**

Discussion:

This study aimed to investigate the writing skills of pre-service teachers in various aspects, including content, grammar, organization, and mechanics. The increasing use of English across different courses and in online-based learning has led to an uptick in writing assignments, especially for pre-service teachers who need to adapt to distance learning. The transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning has disrupted the traditional feedback and supervision mechanisms for students' essay writing, highlighting the need for a better understanding of common errors made by pre-service teachers in their writing across these different components.

A. Writing Skills of Pre-Service Teachers:

a) Content:

The analysis of pre-service teachers' writing skills along the content dimension reveals several important insights. A majority of the pre-service teachers demonstrated good competency in their written essays, indicating that they generally had a developing understanding of the topic and exhibited confidence in the subject matter. However, there is room for improvement, particularly in strengthening their arguments, making them more consistent and convincing. Many essays primarily consisted of background information and a conclusion, lacking detailed thesis statements, which are essential components of argumentative essay writing (Sujito, Muttaqien, and Wildan (2016)).

The study's findings align with previous research, emphasizing the importance of using thesis statements and supporting details to enhance the quality of content in essays. Additionally, the connection between the essays and the essay question was not always clear among those who received a "good" rating, which negatively impacted the organization of their responses. Previous studies have also highlighted the significance of topicality in ensuring the overall coherence of an essay. (Somasundaran et al., 2014; BeataBeigmanKlebanov, Michael Flor, and BinodGyawali, 2016).

On the other hand, a smaller number of pre-service teachers achieved exceptional competency in content writing. This indicates that some pre-service teachers excelled in crafting well-developed ideas that captured the reader's interest. To engage readers, the content of an essay should leave a strong impression (Oktavianti, 2021). Furthermore, these exceptional writers demonstrated their ability to integrate information from reliable sources, explaining and justifying their ideas based on evidence from these sources.

In summary, while the majority of pre-service teachers showed good competency in content writing, there is a need for improvement in terms of argument strength, clarity of thesis statements, and maintaining relevance to the essay question (Klebanov et al., 2014). Exceptional writers were able to enhance their content by drawing on credible sources and providing strong evidence to support their arguments.

b) Grammar:

"Grammar constituted the highest number of errors committed by the pre-service teachers compared to the other components. The majority of the participants obtained below-average competency in writing, particularly in grammar. This suggests that pre-service teachers should double their efforts in improving sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, and the use of articles in their writing.

In student writing, grammar is a significant concern. It encompasses knowledge of the language, rhetorical techniques, and intellectual and evaluative aspects. Therefore, pre-service teachers often find it challenging to assess their own grammar. To succeed in academic writing at universities, students need to use standard grammar and adhere to grammatical conventions (Caveleri & Dianati, 2016). The research findings of Ghabool, Mariadass, and Kashef (2012) confirm that most students struggle with grammar and punctuation in writing. This challenge is particularly pronounced among pre-service teachers, who are non-native students. Despite their mastery of grammar rules, these non-native students have difficulty applying these rules in practice. As a result, their writing often contains grammatical errors (Abdulkareem, 2013).

Furthermore, pre-service teachers commonly make mistakes in verb forms and tenses, articles, and sentence structures. Non-native speakers exhibit a variety of errors with verbs, such as choosing the wrong tense or using incorrect verb forms. They also struggle with articles, especially learners unfamiliar with these terms, and word structure (Kraichoke, 2017). Given that pre-service teachers are non-native speakers themselves, the most prevalent errors found in their written essays include incorrect usage of prepositions, followed by errors in verb usage (active or passive voice), verb forms, and articles. While grammatical errors are common among students, especially non-native speakers like pre-service teachers, participants in this study were expected to demonstrate fluency and accuracy in grammar usage, given their status as pre-service teachers."

c) Organization:

"Regarding organization, the majority of pre-service teachers demonstrate good competency in their writing. However, even though they are generally rated as good, there is room for improvement in the organization of their written essays. Effective organization in writing encompasses several components, including content, structure, vocabulary usage, grammar, and mechanical considerations like spelling and punctuation (Wahyuni, 2017; Alka, 2021).

Similarly, previous studies on college students have revealed that second language learners often struggle to present information in a "well-organized" manner (Farooq et al., 2012). The findings of Farooq et al. (2012) validate that some students, including the participants in this study, continue to face challenges in writing essays with exceptional organization. Likewise, pre-service teachers also encounter difficulties in improving the organization and clarity of their written essays. Given that organization is equally important as other aspects of writing, pre-service teachers should be reminded that words and sentences should be carefully selected and arranged to achieve cohesion and coherence through various semantic, syntactic, and contextual ties.

Meanwhile, it's worth noting that some participants have achieved an exceptional level of writing competency. This suggests that certain pre-service teachers excel in providing clear, elaborated ideas that are well-supported and fully developed."

d)   Mechanics:

"When it comes to mechanics, it's noteworthy that some pre-service teachers have demonstrated exceptional competency in writing. This implies that the essays of most participants are largely free from errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, reflecting a clear understanding and thorough proofreading process. However, the majority of participants do exhibit some minor issues, typically ranging from one to four spelling, punctuation, and capitalization errors.

One common issue observed among pre-service teachers is with punctuation, specifically the use of commas. Many participants do not use commas before coordinating conjunctions (such as "for," "and," "nor," "but," "or," "yet," and "so") to connect independent clauses, thus failing to complete their ideas effectively.

Research has highlighted that punctuation errors can arise from a lack of accuracy, omissions, or misunderstandings about correct punctuation usage, often compounded by ignorance (Nurhayati, 2013; Rahmawati, 2014; Benjamin & Akampirige, 2014). In some cases, students find it challenging to consistently apply punctuation rules, even if they are familiar with them. They may possess the capability to use proper punctuation but inadvertently overlook it due to the numerous other demands on their time.

The study conducted by Khan (2016) aligns with the findings of this research, emphasizing the importance of a thorough command of punctuation in writing. Punctuation serves a critical role in resolving ambiguities and enhancing the overall clarity and comprehensibility of writing. Therefore, it is crucial for pre-service teachers to pay close attention to the use of commas and other punctuation marks in their essay writing, as these punctuation marks play a pivotal role in clarifying the meaning of written sentences."

B. Writing Skills of Pre-Service Teachers When Grouped According to Field of Specialization:

"Writing skills play a crucial role in enhancing students' exposure and competence in communication and interaction (Javed, Juan, & Nazli, 2013). Writing serves to i) reinforce grammatical structures, ii) expand students' vocabulary, and iii) improve their writing skills, thereby aiding the development of other language skills, such as reading, listening, and speaking (Kellogg, 2018). While writing skills are often considered more complex than other language skills (Nazli et al., 2013), the present study reveals that the majority of pre-service teachers excel in writing.

Among the various pre-service majors, English pre-service teachers achieved the highest competency ratings in writing, particularly in content, grammar, organization, and mechanics. This can be attributed to the fact that English major students are more extensively engaged in writing and have a deeper exposure to the fundamental components of language, especially grammar. Furthermore, English pre-service students outperformed their peers in three key components of writing, with grammar being a particular strength. This aligns with the findings of Magpayo & Sarmiento (2015), which suggest that English students tend to possess a high level of grammatical competence, including knowledge of word classes, sentence elements, sentence types, verb usage, modifiers, subject-verb agreement, and pronoun usage. Nevertheless, even English pre-service teachers could benefit from further improvement in their grammatical skills.

Conversely, Social Studies and Math pre-service teachers demonstrated good overall writing competence, except for grammar. This indicates that their written essays often contain multiple grammatical errors, especially in the use of prepositions and verb forms. These findings are consistent with Ruwaida's study (2015), which highlighted challenges faced by non-English major students in various aspects of English composition, including sentence and paragraph structure, content development, and organization.

In summary, pre-service teachers generally excel in all components of writing but struggle with grammar. Grammatical errors are common, and yet, grammar is the foundation of language, and effective communication becomes challenging without a strong grasp of grammar rules (Khasawneh, 2012). Therefore, learning the basics of grammar rules is of paramount importance for students and future educators. It's worth noting that half of the pre-service teachers from different fields of specialization passed the written essay or achieved a good competency level, while the other half obtained below-average scores."

Conclusion:

The study's conclusion highlights that pre-service teachers generally exhibit good writing competency, but they tend to struggle with grammar, where they obtained below-average competency. Common writing errors identified among pre-service teachers included issues related to sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, prepositions, the use of articles, and punctuation. As a result of this study, an intervention program has been developed with the goal of enhancing the writing skills of pre-service teachers. This program aims to address the specific areas of weakness identified in the study, particularly grammar-related issues. Through targeted interventions and support, the program seeks to improve pre-service teachers' overall writing proficiency and address the common errors they encounter.

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