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**Abstract**

The present study aimed at characterizing what skilled or more proficient ESL college writing is in the Philippine setting through a contrastive analysis of three groups of variables identified from previous studies: resources, processes, and performance of ESL writers. Based on Chenoweth and Hayes’ (2001; 2003) framework, the resource level variables are represented by linguistic and content knowledge, writing experience, and writing approach; the process variables are represented by *proposer* (idea generation), *translator* (idea encoding), *transcriber* (idea transcription), and *reviser* (idea revision/evaluation). Writing performance was represented by length of essay and writing fluency. Essay score, also a measure of writing performance, was used to group the writers into less proficient and more proficient writers. Means and standard deviations of the items were obtained. The internal consistencies for tests using scales were obtained using Cronbach’s Alpha; for tests with right and wrong answers, Kuder Richardson #21 was used. Inter-rater agreement for essay scores was tested using Kendall’s Tau coefficient of concordance. To compare the mean scores between the less proficient and more proficient writers, independent samples t-test was used. Results indicated that there are significant differences between the two proficiency groups in content knowledge, vocabulary, elaborative writing approach, school writing experience and confidence in writing, and in all the measures of text production processes. Due to methodological limitations, conclusions made in the present study are restricted to the sample under study and to the genre of writing selected (viz., argumentative essay).

Keywords: proficiency; cognitive process; ESL writing; writing performance; text production processes; writer’s resources

**Introduction**

Writing is often viewed by many as the most difficult task compared to the three macro skills (listening, speaking, reading) because it relies on complex interrelated skills and (meta) cognitive abilities (DeGroff, 1987; Devine, 1993; Devine, Railey, & Boshoff, 1993; Gustilo, 2010; Johnson, Mercado, & Acevedo, 2012; McCutchen, 2011; Schoonen et al., 2003; Zhang, 2008; Zhai, 2008). This is why the identification and description of the different factors that underlie L2 writing which characterize good or proficient writing have riveted the attention of

scholars from different disciplines such as second language acquisition (McCune, 2000; Wagner & Stanovich, 1996), writing instruction (Ferrari, Bouffard, & Rainville, 1998; McCormick, Busching, & Potter, 1992), writing assessment (Bacha, 2001; Gustilo & Magno, 2015; Kroll, 1998), cognitive psychology (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Galbraith, 2009), computational linguistics (Grant & Ginther, 2000; Gustilo, 2011; Reid, 1997), and discourse analysis (Aktas & Cortes, 2008; Loudermilk, 2007; Mei, 2007). The present study has identified three groups of variables for contrastive analysis: writers’ resources, text production processes, and writing performance.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The present study recruited 112 ESL college freshmen students from four English classes in a private institution in the Philippines. The sample is composed of Filipino students, 66 males and 46 females. The majority of students has been schooled since their preschool years in the Philippine schools whose medium of instruction in most subjects is English. The average number of years of English language learning of the students is 11 years.

**Instruments and Data Sets**

**Writing proficiency diagnostic essay task*.*** The students’ writing ability was tested by asking them to write an argumentative essay regarding a controversial issue in the Philippines. They were asked to discuss three reasons in favor of their stand. Using Gustilo’s (2013) six-point essay scoring guide, the essays were holistically rated by two raters who have doctoral degrees in Applied Linguistics and who have taught English for more than 10 years. The raters had a consensus that the selected scoring guide captures the elements usually focused on by evaluators in assessing essays written in English as a second language, namely: (1) Content—sound information, adequate and appropriate details; (2) Organization—skillfully arranged ideas in introduction, body, and conclusion; these ideas get their direction from the thesis statement in the introduction; (3) Effective and varied syntactic structures—making use of different sentence patterns; (4) Language use—appropriate choice of vocabulary and correct usage of the English grammar; and (5) Punctuation and mechanics—correct usage of capitalization, spelling, and punctuation rules. The rubric has a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 6. A trial rating was held for the raters to ensure that the ratings were not disparate. No essays were rated with 1 and 2; 24 essays were assigned a score of 5, and only 7 was given a score of 6; the majority of essays were assigned either a score of 3 or 4. The computed inter-rater reliability between raters was ω=.62 (*p*<.05). The coefficient of concordance was positive and significant.

The 112 essays were divided into two groups. Those which scored 1–3 (described in the rubric as writing with very little proficiency, little proficiency, and developing proficiency) were considered less proficient (N=81); those which scored 4–6 (described in the rubric as writing with adequate proficiency, advanced proficiency, and highly advanced proficiency) were considered more proficient or good writers (N-31).

**Topic knowledge test*.*** A 15-item test with a multiple-choice format was constructed to measure students’ background knowledge about the topic of the writing test. The computed Kuder Richardson #21 measuring internal consistency is .83.

**Writing production processes scale.** After the essay writing,students accomplished a survey regarding the different composing processes they had utilized while writing their essay. Gustilo and Magno’s (2015) text production processes scale was adopted for the present study.The scale has 24 items which aimed at measuring text production processes of writers. The items were based on Chenoweth and Hayes’ (2001; 2003) description of the process level of writing, which includes four factors.

***Four factor-process level of writing.*** (1) idea generation, which measures students’ strategies and sources of ideas and corresponds to Chenoweth and Hayes’ *proposer*; (2) idea encoding, which corresponds to Chenoweth and Hayes’ *translator*, and refers to students’ strategies in representing their ideas into English words and structures; (3) idea transcription, which represents Chenoweth and Hayes’ *transcriber* and tells at what point the writers transcribe their ideas; (4) idea/text revision, which corresponds to Chenoweth and Hayes’ *reviser;* itinquires as to whether writers evaluate or revise their texts while writing. The questionnaire has a four-point scale with the following responses: Not at All (1); Very Little (2); Somewhat (3); and To a Great Extent (4). The generated internal consistencies of four subscales ranged from .60 to .70 (see Table 1).

**Procedure**

The tests were administered during the English classes by participating teachers within a period of two weeks. First, the diagnostic essay writing test was administered on the first week of the 13-week English course. This is a required test prescribed in the course’s syllabus, which is aimed at assessing students’ weaknesses and areas to improve on in writing academic essays. The students were informed that their diagnostic writing test result would determine whether or not they would be sent to the English Language Laboratory tutorial sessions aimed at helping them improve on their weak areas. Since most students were unwilling to spend additional hours in the writing laboratory, they did not treat this task lightly. The topic familiarity test that measures content knowledge was administered prior to the essay writing test. Then after the diagnostic essay writing, a retrospective survey on the students’ text production processes was administered. The linguistic tests, writing background survey, and writing approach survey were administered on the second week of the course.

**Data Analyses**

The means and standard deviations were obtained for fluency rate, length of essay, linguistic tests, content knowledge test, and measures of writing approach and writing background. The internal consistencies for tests using scales were obtained using Cronbach’s Alpha; for tests with right and wrong answers, Kuder Richardson #21 was used. Inter-rater agreement for essay scores was tested using Kendall’s Tau coefficient of concordance. To compare the mean scores between the less proficient and more proficient writers, independent samples t-test was used.

**Results and Discussion**

Descriptive statistics of the variables under study indicate that, on the whole, the participants of the study are familiar with the topic of the essay and have a fairly good linguistic knowledge stored in their long-term memory as indicated by considerably high mean values in the aforementioned measures (i.e., for vocabulary, M=41.12; for spelling, M=76.04; for grammar, M=44.31; for content knowledge, M=31.00; see Table 1). However, there is a large variation among the scores obtained for the knowledge tests (SD=3.95 to 7.25). Acceptable internal consistencies were obtained for the tests and scales except for some of the subscales of writing approach, writing background, and text production scales. The low reliability results of some subscales (see right panel of Table 1) may be explained by the low mean scores (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996) and fewer items of the subscales (Wells & Wollack, 2003).

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Reliability of Measures of Variables under

Study

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Valid N** | **M** | **SD** | **Reliability** |
| ***Writer’s Performance*** |  |  |  |  |
| Length of essay | 112 | 306.42 | 99.23 |  |
| Fluency rate | 112 | 10.88 | 3.77 |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| ***Writer’s Resources*** |  |  |  |  |
| **Content Knowledge:** (40 items) | 112 | 31.00 | 3.95 | .61 |
| **Linguistic Knowledge** |  |  |  |  |
| Vocabulary (60 items) | 112 | 41.12 | 5.23 | .87 |
| Spelling (85 items) | 112 | 76.04 | 7.25 | .88 |
| Grammar (72 items) | 112 | 44.31 | 7.15 | .87 |
| **Writing Approach** |  |  |  |  |
| Elaborative | 112 | 2.93 | 0.32 | .85 |
| Low self-efficacy | 112 | 2.84 | 0.26 | .47 |
| Reflective-revision | 112 | 2.82 | 0.24 | .47 |
| Spontaneous-impulsive | 112 | 2.67 | 0.29 | .63 |
| Procedural | 112 | 2.96 | 0.34 | .68 |
| **Writing Background** |  |  |  |  |
| School writing | 112 | 2.91 | 0.44 | .69 |
| Personal writing | 112 | 1.95 | 0.69 | .59 |
| Confidence | 112 | 2.56 | 0.70 | .89 |
| ***Writer’s Text Production Process*** |  |  |  |  |
| Idea generation | 112 | 3.22 | 0.38 | .60 |
| Idea encoding | 112 | 3.11 | 0.49 | .70 |
| Idea transcription | 112 | 2.73 | 0.47 | .63 |
| Idea/text revision | 112 | 3.07 | 0.55 | .70 |

In order to determine whether there are significant differences in the mean scores of students from less proficient and more proficient groups, an independent samples t-test was used. The homogeneity of variances and the normality assumptions that warranted the use of T-Test are satisfied. Results showed that the mean scores of more proficient writers were significantly (p < 0.005) higher than the mean scores of less proficient groups in length of essay, fluency rate, vocabulary, content knowledge, elaborative writing approach, school writing, confidence in writing, and in all measures of text production processes as represented in Table 2.

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**Appendix A: Sample linguistic test items: Vocabulary test: Encircle the letter of the word whose meaning corresponds to the meaning of the italicized word in the sentence.**

1. The government is expected to implement ***drastic*** changes in the implementation of policies.

a. very noticeable

b. something dreary

c. very annoying

d. something ordinary

2. Rene’s compulsive behaviour stigmatizes him as a tough person.

a. exciting

b. boring

c. constrasting

d. compelling

**About the Author**

**First name and last name of Author is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

(email: [leah.gustilo@dlsu.edu.ph](mailto:leah.gustilo@dlsu.edu.ph))

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**Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest**