

## **Assessment of English Writing Learning Outcomes of Students at Secondary School Certificate and Ordinary Level**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the comparison between English writing skills on narrative and persuasive writing of students of Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Ordinary level (O level). In this quantitative study, we selected private schools of Lahore that offered both streams simultaneously. We developed the Essay type test with the help of English teachers of secondary level to assess students' learning outcomes at SSC and O level. Similarly, rubrics were developed for scoring students' responses to writing test. We assessed writing learning outcomes cumulatively and by dimensions, such as developing and organizing ideas as well as mechanical accuracy. Results showed that learning outcomes, overall and separately for narrative and persuasive English writing were higher at O level as compared to SSC, indicating that O level students acquired better writing skills than SSC students. Within each narrative and persuasive writing, by dimensions learning outcomes were found higher at the O level than the SSC. The findings of present research are anticipated to upgrade the quality of assessment that may lead to quality teaching in English writing classrooms. Moreover, this could also help in improving assessment strategies in English writing classes at secondary school level and may pave the way to help teachers towards successful attainment of the desired learning outcomes. For future research, motivation of students towards learning may play an important role in improving the writing learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Writing learning outcomes, Narrative writing learning outcomes, Persuasive writing learning outcomes

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## Introduction

Learning outcomes determine the quality of education and specify the competencies expected to be attained by students after specific learning phases. Students' learning outcomes are generally classified into three domains i.e., knowledge, skills and dispositions.

Learning outcomes are about knowledge and skills that students are expected to develop after instruction (Kubiszyn & Borich, 2004; Ebel & Frisbie, 2009; McMullan, 2014; Bingham, 1999). Dispositions of students and teachers are also important in any written text. There is a relationship between dispositions and learning. Voseless and Haughey (2007) and Iseri (2010) described that disposition is a voluntary habit of thinking and doing involving non-academic experiences and personal characteristics such as acceptance, encouragement and stimulation. Although there are effects of disposition in students' writing text but owing to the limitation of the current study in terms of time, the researcher could not study this concept in great detail. However, this is a researchable topic and can be studied in future studies.

The educational policies during different regimes in Pakistan have been formulated by primarily focusing on expanding educational opportunities. These policies deal with aims, goals and objectives and provide guidelines for achieving those objectives for every educational stage from primary to higher education. In educational policies secondary education has been discussed as a transitional stage for students because it enables them to either get employment or entering into higher education institutions.

The National curriculum of SSC for classes IX and X outlines the learning outcomes in the form of competencies, standards, benchmarks and operationalized learning outcomes. The writing curriculum aims at developing five competencies including writing skills. In English language curriculum for IX & X, Competency 2 is related to the 'writing skills' followed by one standard, four bench marks detailed out in the form of various students learning outcomes (Government of Pakistan, 2006). On the other hand, at O level, aims are stated in the form of general statements while specific objectives into specific statements (W1 to W4) (University of Cambridge, 2014). The curricula of the two streams were reviewed to identify common intended learning outcomes. The commonality was determined on the basis of concepts not necessarily using the same terminology.

Common writing learning outcomes of curricula of both streams included developing creative writing skill, write for specific purpose, use of punctuation, appropriate vocabulary, grammar, narrative and persuasive writing ability. List of common students learning outcomes also included develop and organize ideas in writing,

reflect on extended social and academic environment for developing cross cultural awareness, develop appropriate style and tone in writing with variety of sentence structure and accurate spellings.

Writing is a necessary skill in curriculum of SSC and O level. Teaching writing is compulsory part at secondary level. In the language learning field researchers have shown interest in the areas pertaining to writing composition. Mirza, Nosheen and Nasir (1999) found that language skills of students of O level were better than SSC. Similarly, Waheed (2005) in his study on “A Comparative Study of English Language writing courses meant for teaching writing skills at Matriculation and O levels” found that O level students are comparatively good in terms of English writing skills. Naseem (2007) studied “Analysis of Errors made by students at Matriculation level” and identified that reason behind poor English learning is syllabus which students and teachers want to cover within given duration. If teacher do not follow the prescribed schedule the syllabus cannot be completed on time.

Chandio, Khan & Samiullah (2013) expressed that in Pakistan writing skills of students of secondary level are weak. Haider (2014) worked on organizational problems faced by Pakistani student writers with learning difficulties in EFL writing and pointed out that students in Pakistan have low proficiency in English writing. They face problems due to challenging role of writing skill as compared to other language skills for second language learners. There is strong need to help students attain the learning outcomes to cope with the market needs of the modern world and to have quality in education. On the basis of learning outcomes, it can be judged whether students have learnt the required skill or not.

This study is based upon similar intended learning outcomes of SSC and O level in English writing skill. Framework in table 1 exhibits similar intended learning outcomes of SSC and O level taken from curriculum of both streams.

Table 1

*Intended learning outcomes related to writing skills of SSC and O level curriculum*

Secondary School Certificate (SSC)	Ordinary level (O level)
Competency 2(C2): Writing skills Standard 1: Produce with developing fluency and accuracy, academic, transactional and creative writing, which is focused, purposeful and shows an insight into the writing process. C2, BM1, SLO: Develop focus for own writing by identifying audience and purpose C2, BM1, SLO: Use correct conventions of grammar and punctuation.	Ability to communicate precisely and appropriately. W1 articulate experience what is thought, felt and imagined. W4: use register appropriate to audience and context. W5: use punctuation and grammar.

C2, BM1, SLO: Use appropriate vocabulary	W3: communicate using a varied range of vocabulary
C2, BM2, SLO: Write a personal narrative	Essay title may require narration i.e. Narrative essay writing
C2, BM2, SLO: Write a persuasive/argumentative essay on a given topic:	Essay title may require argumentative writing
C2, BM2, SLO: List ideas and arguments that support opinion.	Develop ideas effectively
C2, BM2, SLO: Organize ideas and supporting arguments in a clear, structured and logical manner.	W2: Sequence facts, ideas and opinions
C2, BM3, SLO: Write and revise formal letters to people in extended social and academic environment for various purposes. Write the address on the envelope clearly and in proper format.	Reflect on the familiar issues of own community indicating cross cultural awareness
C2, BM3, SLO: Analyze and compare various informal and formal emails to note differences of conventions, vocabulary, style and tone	Communicate with a clear awareness of register
C2, BM4,SLO: Proof read and edit given texts for faulty sentence structure	Use a varied range of sentence structure
C2, BM4,SLO: Proof read and edit texts for errors of spelling.	W5 Use accurate Spellings

*C = Competency, C2 = writing skills, S = Standard, BM = Benchmark*

*Source: Government of Pakistan, National curriculum for English language Grades I-XII, 2006; Cambridge O level English language syllabus code 1123, 2018*for writing demonstrates that there is apparently no difference in intended learning outcomes of writing skills at SSC and O level so same conceptual framework was adopted for both streams

### **Theoretical framework of the study**

As described earlier, this study focused on assessment of English writing skills based on similar intended learning outcomes of SSC and O level. The theoretical framework that characterize writing research are psychological, sociocultural and linguistic. The psychological framework conceptualizes writing as a cognitive process. Hayes and Flower (1980) developed a cognitive model of writing that involves process of writing including planning, reviewing and translating. According to Shuell, cognitive approach focuses on the mental activities of learner. Those activities lead up to a response and acknowledges the processes of mental planning and goal setting.

The learner centered training regarding process of writing was influenced by Vygotsky's social constructivism in zone of proximal development (ZPD). The active construction of knowledge is promoted by the teacher who acts as a facilitator and provides authentic and challenging tasks to the student. Vygotsky contributed to constructivist thought by linking human development with the socio cultural environment. Dobberfuhl- Quinlan (2018) discussed that ZPD is the area outside of a students' comfortable ability. Hence, tasks must be developed by keeping in mind the level of students. Therefore, test developer should keep in mind the level of students when writing tasks are designed. Similarly, the tasks must be challenging enough to check the true ability of learners.

### **Statement of the problem**

It is common observation that English language learners face difficulties in developing English writing skills. There is apparently no difference in intended learning outcomes related to writing skills in curriculum of English language of SSC and O level. This study primarily focused on identifying the differences in the English language learning outcomes on narrative and persuasive writing of students preparing to take the SSC and O level examinations. English writing skills were assessed with reference to overall and the domains of writing such as 'development of ideas', 'organization of ideas', and 'mechanical accuracy' within each narrative and persuasive writing.

### **Objectives of the study**

This study aimed at assessing English writing learning outcomes of SSC and O level students. The objectives of the study were to:

- a) assess the differences between overall writing learning outcomes of SSC and O level students on English writing test
- b) determine the difference between SSC and O level students' writing skills on English writing test for developing ideas, organizing ideas and mechanical accuracy on narrative writing task.
- c) ascertain the difference between SSC and O level students' writing skills on English writing test for developing ideas, organizing ideas and mechanical accuracy on persuasive writing task.

### **Significance of the study**

In the age of globalization, writing demands meaningful communication. It enhances personal and social development of students which enables them to use English in practical lives. This study may contribute by seeking out the differences in English writing skills of SSC and O level students in curriculum implementation (as present

research is based upon similar intended learning outcomes of both streams) at classroom level. This study may help teachers to use appropriate assessment practices for achievement of learning outcomes for developing writing skill. English teachers may get help from this study how to use rubrics and score papers for reliable marking. Teachers may get help regarding development of writing skills of students beyond the content given in textbook to achieve intended learning outcomes given in curricula of both streams. The findings of the study may provide guidelines to the curriculum developers and experts in implementing the intended learning outcomes of curriculum of SSC in true spirit. Educational administrators may consider reallocation of funds for training of the English language teachers of SSC to develop assessment practices. Future researchers may use the findings of the study as a base for identifying reasons behind such differences in achievement.

### **Hypotheses**

Following hypotheses were tested to determine the significance of difference between variables.

- H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant difference between the overall students' learning outcomes in English writing test at SCC and O level
- H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant difference between the mean scores on persuasive mode of writing of SSC and O level students.
- H<sub>03</sub>: No significant difference exists between the mean scores on items measuring developing ideas regarding persuasive writing at both streams.
- H<sub>04</sub>: There is no significant difference between the mean scores on items measuring organizing ideas with respect to persuasive writing of SSC and O level students.
- H<sub>05</sub>: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of students for mechanical accuracy on persuasive writing at SSC and O level.
- H<sub>06</sub>: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of students on narrative writing at SSC and O level.
- H<sub>07</sub>: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of students for developing ideas on narrative writing at SSC and O level.
- H<sub>08</sub>: There is no significant difference between the mean scores for organizing ideas of SSC and O level students on narrative writing.
- H<sub>09</sub>: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of students for mechanical accuracy at SSC and O level on narrative writing.

## **Methodology**

It was a descriptive research with two different groups of students (SSC and O level) with common intended learning outcomes taken from curriculum of both streams. Essay type test was given to the students of both streams to address the learning outcomes given in their curriculum. Test was based upon similar intended learning outcomes of both streams (table 1). Development of test to assess the narrative and persuasive writing was the first part of this study. Students' scores on writing tests were compared and significance of difference was determined. Difference in English writing skills was assessed by three dimensions of writing. These dimensions include generation of ideas, organization of ideas and mechanical accuracy. These dimensions were measured under persuasive and narrative writing tasks.

## **Population and sample**

All the students studying at secondary level in Lahore city comprised the population of the study. There are 101 institutions running O level in Lahore. From those, only 27 schools were offering SSC and O level simultaneously. Multistage sampling technique was used for selecting samples. In the first stage 12 schools were selected randomly out of 27 schools offering Matriculation and O level concurrently. Eight schools had only one section each of the O level and Matriculation stream. These were included in the sample. In case of more of one section of any of the stream (four schools having more than one section) one section was selected randomly. In this way 24 classes were selected. The test was administered to 324 students (167 from SSC and 157 from O level).

## **Writing Test Development**

An English writing test on narrative and persuasive writing was developed by the researchers to assess the writing learning outcomes of SSC and O level students. Test was based on common learning outcomes. These learning outcomes were taken from SSC and O level curricula. Six writing tasks on narrative and the persuasive writing were pilot tested for ensuring question clarity and time duration to complete the test. After this initial administration two writing tasks inviting one narrative and other on persuasive writing were finalized for data collection. Writing test comprised of 60 marks, thirty marks were allocated to each task. On each writing (narrative and persuasive), three dimensions of writing were assessed such as developing ideas, organizing ideas and mechanical accuracy. According to rubrics 10 marks were allocated for developing ideas, 10 for organizing ideas and 10 for mechanical accuracy. Time given to complete the test was one hour.

For content validity opinions of experts were sought for usefulness and relevance of test items with the learning outcomes to be assessed. Prompts for writing included in the test were pilot tested. For piloting two groups were selected from the same population (25 students from SSC and 25 students from O level) and these students were excluded from the population while selecting final sample. During pilot testing students were asked to write 300-350 words on persuasive writing task. Students writing responses on persuasive writing tasks were analyzed for clarity of the prompt and students' ability to respond it. It was decided to require a response of 200 to 250 words by looking into students' responses. Likewise, on narrative writing task, initially students were asked to write 400 to 450 words. Students of SSC faced difficulty in writing so long response. That is why it was reduced to 300 to 350 words. After piloting, the test was finalized for data collection purposes.

### **Comparison of intended learning outcomes related to writing skills of SSC and O level**

Similar intended learning outcomes of both streams (SSC and O level) are in boldface in the table 1. On the basis of similar intended learning outcomes, a writing test was developed containing two essay tasks.

Table 2

### **Test Blueprint**

Table 1 shows the blue print of English writing test to assess the learning outcomes on narrative and persuasive mode of writing by three dimensions of writing.

Table 1

#### *Blueprint of English writing test*

Category	Ideas	Organization	Mechanical	Total marks	Total time (Minutes)
	- Depth	- Structure of text	accuracy		
	- Development and organization	- Coherence	- sentence structure		
	- Relevant details/ examples	- Concentration on topic	- vocabulary		
			- tone		
			- grammar		
			- mechanics		
Persuasive writing	10	10	10	30	30
Narrative writing	10	10	10	30	30
Total	20	20	20	60	60

### Development of scoring rubrics

Rubrics play a key role while designing writing assessment task (Hyland, 2003). Scoring rubrics were developed to score students' responses on essay type writing test. These rubrics were used for deriving general guidelines about scoring complexity. Performance of students was evaluated on writing tasks from 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high, labelled as little, marginal, adequate, competent and effective skill. Validity of the rubrics was ensured by experts' opinion.

For scale reliability, training of scorers was conducted to mark the students' responses on essay type writing test. Scorers went through the responses. There was a discussion afterwards to relate these responses with rubrics. Scorers were asked to mark the writing responses as test instalment. They also made distinction between high quality and low quality scripts by keeping in view the criteria given in rubrics and assigned scores from 1 to 5 on each dimension of narrative and persuasive writing. Practice sessions on test instalments were conducted to ensure uniformity of scoring among three scorers. Scorers were provided with feedback by scoring supervisor on their marking in case of large variation in scoring.

Fulcher and Davidson (2007) described that if scorers are not trained, they will likely to respond on grammatical errors with less emphasis on developing and organizing ideas.

For ensuring reliability, inter-rater reliability was determined. Scoring reliability was assessed through Krippendorff's alpha. Reliability of narrative writing question was .7709 and question on persuasive writing contained reliability  $\alpha = .7696$ .

### Data analysis and Findings

#### Overall students' learning outcomes

Total score on the test was 60, students of O level attained higher score as compared to SSC.

Table 3

*Overall mean scores of SSC and O level students*

SSC(n=167)		O level(n=157)		<i>t</i>	df.	Sig
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
33.44	9.65	39.34	7.38	6.17	322	<.001

$\alpha=0.05$

In table 3, results of independent sample t test shows that there is significant difference between overall mean score of SSC and O level students [ $t(322) = 6.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. Hence it can be concluded that overall writing skill of O level students was significantly better than that of SSC students. So  $H_{01}$ , stating no significant between overall mean scores at SSC and O level was rejected.

### Students' learning outcomes on narrative writing

Comparison of mean scores of students of SSC and O level on narrative writing was tested by using t-test.

Table 4

*Comparison of the mean scores on narrative writing*

SSC(n=167)		O level(n=157)		<i>t</i>	<i>df.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
16.38	5.51	19.29	4.34	5.13	322	<.001

$\alpha=0.05$

Table 4 shows that difference between overall mean score of SSC and O level students on narrative writing is significant [ $t(322) = 5.13, p < .001$ ]. Hence,  $H_{02}$ , comparing the mean difference on narrative writing was rejected. Mean score of O level students was significantly higher than that of SSC students.

### Students' learning outcomes by dimensions of narrative writing

Hypothesis  $H_{03}$ ,  $H_{04}$ , and  $H_{05}$  were tested to determine the differences in mean scores of students of SSC and O level.

Table 5

*Mean scores on three dimensions of narrative writing*

Dimensions of Writing	SSC (n=167)		O level (n=157)		<i>t</i>	<i>df.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Development of Ideas	5.59	2.22	6.41	1.87	3.22	322	.001
Organization of ideas	5.48	1.94	6.52	1.62	5.24	322	<.001
Mechanical accuracy	5.56	2.19	6.53	1.64	4.47	322	<.001

$\alpha=0.05$

Table 5 gives detail between the mean scores on three dimensions of writing. It exhibits that there is significant difference in generating ideas between students of SSC and O level [ $t(322) = 3.22, p < .001$ ]. So,  $H_{03}$ , stating no significant difference between the mean scores on developing ideas was rejected.

Moreover, for organization of ideas, there is significant difference between mean scores of SSC and O level [ $t(322) = 5.24, p < .001$ ]. It has been noticed that Mean scores of students was higher at O level as compared to SSC on organizing ideas. Hence the null hypothesis ( $H_{04}$ ) developed for organizing ideas was rejected.

Furthermore, for mechanical accuracy, difference is significant between mean scores of students of SSC and O level [ $t(322) = 4.47, p < .001$ ]. So,  $H_{05}$ , for mechanical accuracy was rejected. Mean score indicated that students of O level performed better on mechanical accuracy as compared to SSC.

### Students' learning outcomes on persuasive writing

The test of students' learning outcomes regarding persuasive writing also contained 30 marks. Significance of difference of overall students' learning outcomes on persuasive writing was calculated by employing t-test.

Table 6

*Mean scores of SSC and O level students' learning outcomes*

SSC(n=167)		O level(n=157)		t	df	Sig.
M	SD	M	SD			
17.05	4.92	20.05	3.50	6.29	322	<.001

$\alpha=0.05$

Table 6 shows that the difference between mean scores of SSC and O level is significant [ $t(322) = 6.29, p < .001$ ]. It showed that students' learning outcomes related to persuasive writing was found higher at O level. Therefore,  $H_{06}$ , stating no significant difference between the mean scores was rejected.

### *By dimensions students' learning outcomes on persuasive writing*

Table 6 shows the significance of mean difference on scores of SSC and O level students on the English writing learning outcomes on three dimensions of persuasive writing. The null hypotheses  $H_{07}, H_{08}, H_{09}$  were tested.

Table 7

*Mean Scores of SSC and O level Students by dimensions of writing*

Dimensions of writing	SSC (n=167)		O Level (n=157)		t (322)	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Development of ideas	5.77	1.66	6.64	1.23	5.50	<.001
Organization of ideas	5.64	1.63	6.77	1.08	7.27	<.001
Mechanical accuracy	5.69	1.99	6.67	1.31	5.18	<.001

$\alpha=0.05$

Table 7 demonstrates that mean scores on generation of ideas of SSC and O level students is found to be significant [ $t(322) = 5.50, p < .001$ ]. In case of organization of ideas, difference between mean scores is significant between SSC and O level [ $t = 7.27, p < .001$ ]. Similarly, for mechanical accuracy, t test on the mean scores at SSC and O level shows significant difference [ $t(322) = 5.18, p < .001$ ]. So the null hypotheses  $H_{07}, H_{08},$  &  $H_{09}$  stating no significant difference were rejected at .05 level of significance. The students of O level attained higher mean score than the SSC students on each dimension.

## Discussion

This research aims to compare the English writing learning achievements of SSC and O-level students. The research results show that O-level students are better than SSC students in narrative and persuasive writing. This finding is consistent with Naeem (2011). It has been evaluated that SSC students as compared to O level students have low writing skills. Haider (2014); Chughtai (1990) & Ahmad, Ahmed, Bukhari & Bukhari (2011) revealed that SSC students have lower English proficiency skills.

This research also compares the writing learning outcomes within three dimensions namely development of the ideas, organization of the ideas and mechanical accuracy. It was found that O-level students well performed in all dimensions of English writing. This result supports the results of Nasir, Naqvi & Bhamani (2013). There may be several reasons for the low performance of SSC students, such as examination mode, rote memorization, and inappropriate teaching approaches used by SSC teachers.

In the context of Pakistan, classrooms of secondary level are overly dependent on the examination model. Teachers lack the ability to assess the writing of students existing in the curriculum, because the purpose of evaluation is only to pass the examination. The examination system focuses on cramming and getting the highest score. The examination hardly assesses the expected learning achievement of the curricula, and only test the students' rote memorization ability (Ali, 2011).

Curriculum of classes I-XII was revised in 2006. In 2012, the English language curriculum was implemented for the 9th class, and in 2013, the 10th English curriculum was also implemented. In addition, evaluation methods are suggested in the curriculum but still traditional methods play a dominate role in evaluation of writing to assess the ability of recall skills rather than developing creative writing skills. Since the teaching strategies have to be examination driven and teachers are totally helpless for any creativity or innovation in students' work. Therefore, students memorize the knowledge and duplicate the same work as they learned (Bashir, Shahzadi & Afzal, 2018). In fact, there is an inconsistency among the students' learning outcomes given in the curriculum, successively practice of teaching writing in classroom and the language assessment in the examination (Iqbal & Rehman, 2010).

As the examination is based on textbooks, teachers follow the content given in the prescribed pattern. Although the textbook was revised according to the National Curriculum of 2006 and some creative writing questions were raised, but still there are old examination methods forcing teachers to prepare students according to the perspective of the examination. Thus, the writing learning skills can't be completely accomplished until the plan of learning, classroom practice of teaching writing and particularly assessment system are not lined up with each other.

In this study, letter composition (persuasive writing) and story writing (narrative writing) were used (table 1 shows that these are similar intended learning outcomes from curriculum of SSC and O level). It was found that in the BISE examination, the letters and stories are taken from textbooks that have been memorized already in class. This observation is same to Khattak (2012). He points out that as a result, students did not spend their energy in the writing process, but they just add what they have learnt for marks. A significant aspect is that students have option to choose between story, letter and dialogue. Students prepare what they think easy, and ignore the other two types, but still get high scores in the examination. Therefore, the students appearing in matriculation are less likely to write as compared to O-level students. In this study, the scorer also comments on the answer scripts showed that SC students focus to memorize most often and have low creativity. In contrast, the paper pattern of the O-level education system based on clarity, innovation and creativity (Cambridge University, 2018). In this way, students who study O level can carry out thoughtful writing and classroom teaching is based on their own understanding and experience.

### **Conclusion**

On the whole this research has been done with meaningful conclusion. This study explores ways to assess writing skills of students of SSC and O level. The skill development has been a massive challenge for teachers particularly the assessment of writing skill. This study looked for the assessment of writing skills in three domains named generation and organization of ideas as well as language facility and conventions on narrative and persuasive writing at SSC and O level. Clearly, the study found that students studied in O level have presented their writing better on the narrative and persuasive writing as compared to students of SSC.

### **Recommendations**

Following are the recommendations of the study

- The language teachers and BISE's examination paper setters should be trained enough to use techniques of testing to assess writing skills of students instead of traditional approaches that are based on the ability to recall.
- There should be unseen questions in BISE examination. Teachers should also give unseen question in classroom to practice writing.
- Teaching writing demands a lot of time so in school time table there should be separate classes for writing at secondary level.
- In this research, cross sectional data was used to assess students' achievement due to design of the study. Experimental and longitudinal studies are recommended with longer treatment periods.
- Future research can be carried out with large samples throughout the regions of the country to get the complete overview of English writing skill at secondary level.

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