

HARVEST

The Institutional Research Publication
of Baliuag University

2020

VOLUME 16, NO. 1



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Harvest is a journal published annually by Baliuag University's Center for Research and Publications. It adheres to the promotion of multidisciplinary and timeliness of issues.

Articles included in every issue do not represent the views and opinions of the Editorial Board. This journal is accredited by the Andrew Gonzales Philippine Citation Index (AGPCI), a journal indexing and citation database for Philippine academic journals.

The journal's website may be accessed through
<http://www.ejournals.ph/index.php?journal=HARVEST>.

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The Institutional Research Publication of Baliuag University



BALIUAG UNIVERSITY

Baliwag, Bulacan

VOLUME 16, ISSUE NO. 1
OCTOBER 2020

HARVEST

The Institutional Research Publication of Baliuag University

Volume 16, Issue No. 1

2020

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NEWSLETTER: AVENUE FOR IMPROVING THE WRITING SKILLS OF EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

News writing is one opportunity to develop the writing skills of students. Schools that have newsletters or school papers need to know the writing proficiency of their students before they recommend them to become staff writers. Thus, this study aimed to obtain a baseline data for selecting the best staff writers for the newsletter of an EFL school. The researcher gathered one hundred twenty news articles of thirty EFL learners aside from getting their writing proficiency scores. Their choice as news writers or news reporters was likewise recorded. To investigate the relationship between the writing proficiency scores of the students and their ratings in their news articles, Pearson-Product Moment Correlation Analysis was used. Kendall's *Tau-b* correlation coefficient was used to find the relationship between the students' writing proficiency scores and their choice as news writers or news reporters. Findings revealed that a significant relationship existed between the writing proficiency scores and the writing performance of students in their four writing drafts as well as in their choice as news reporters or news writers. From the results, the adviser had a basis for choosing the best staff writers for their newsletter. The qualified staff writers and their adviser believe that the newsletter gives students opportunities for improving their English most especially in their writing skills. It is recommended, therefore, that other schools should have a sound basis in choosing their staff writers.

Keywords: proficiency, writing performance, newsletter, news writing, staff writer

Many schools around the world come up with newsletters or school papers which vary as to content and purpose. Some are used to inform parents about the activities of their children, such as those in preschools. For high school and college newsletters, they are not just used to inform readers but rather to give more opportunities for students to enrich their learning experiences, most especially in the field of writing.

In the article "Why School Newsletters Still Matter" written by the School Communications Agency (2018, par.5), it states, "Newsletters offer consistent messages with consolidated and summarized information about upcoming activities, student achievements, menus, fundraiser programs, and photos from school events." The same article also mentioned, "Research shows that students

do better when consistent, open communication exists between schools and parents” (par.1). This statement was supported by Frank Hagen who says in the same article that “parent engagement increases as a result of consistent monthly newsletters, leading to improved student success” (par. 6).

In the Philippines, public schools are required to have school papers (Act No. 7079, otherwise known as Campus Journalism Act of 1991) which are broader in content than a newsletter. Selected students in the elementary, high school, and tertiary levels are trained by their teacher adviser on what to write for their school paper, and among them is news writing. Writing contests in different areas are held, such as news writing, and schools are given awards or extra points during accreditation periods (Rocero, 2019).

The advantages of having a newsletter (in English) has been treasured by colleges and universities where English is taught as a foreign language. In one country, for example, some schools started having an English newsletter in addition to their Chinese newsletters. In a telephone survey of twenty-four colleges and universities in one city done by a class of English-major students, five have at least started putting up a school newsletter in English. For the first school, the English newsletter is published every two months; the second, every month; the third, every four months; the data for the fourth was not given by the informant; and for the fifth, after a semester.

All the newsletters of the first four schools were written by teachers. It is in this light that the present researcher, a visiting professor at the time of the study, thought of starting a newsletter that should be integrated in her English lessons with the students writing the articles themselves. She got the permission of the department chair to put up a newsletter, and with the cooperation of teachers teaching English, Chinese, and Japanese, a newsletter was organized with her as the editor in chief. The articles written in English by the students were translated by themselves into Chinese and Japanese, edited by Chinese and Japanese professors.

Choosing the right staff writers for a school paper is necessary. Schools that do not have a standard or criteria may not be able to spot their right student writers. There are many ways that a school can do to select its best writers; however, no study has yet been published on how they do it.

Review of Related Studies and Literature

Benefits of having newsletters. Opinions as to the importance of a newsletter vary. In a study done by Bartholomaeus (2002, p.6), she emphasized that “a newsletter is usually a regular form of communication with families, frequently referred to as the school community, although often the wider community is not included in this communication.” She analyzed eleven texts

from different newsletters and found out that some texts represent a disciplinary role with parents—how they need to act to comply with the wishes and directives of the school leaders.

Bartholomaeus (2002, p.6) underscores the role of a newsletter in informing parents about the school where their children are studying. As clients, parents are anxious to know about the activities of the school and their children in particular. For instance, in one article of the *Free Press* (July 2010) newsletter of Shu College of Medicine and Management, in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, a student received a gold certificate from TOEIC for getting a score of 880 in listening and reading and explained how she achieved such a high score. Students and parents who read this article may come to know that the school is one factor in the success of a student, which may motivate them to have their other children study in this same school. They may spread the news to their friends and neighbors, thus making the newsletter a tool in promoting the school in one way or another.

A newsletter contains relevant news and information regarding school and community events as well as students and faculty. It develops a feeling of belongingness among students, gathering them together, as it relays important and special happenings (Small, 2017).

John Davis (2011), in citing the effectiveness of school newsletters, stressed that visible symbols such as the newsletter convey messages of what the school really values. They “illustrate and confirm what is considered to be important in the school” (p.1). He believes that if academic achievement is part of the school’s culture, it must be communicated, and this is where the importance of the newsletter falls.

Broussard and Floress (2007) believe that newsletters can create or increase awareness among its readers. They can provide basic information, too. In addition, they can create a sense of stability and commitment for a project, or support and enforce educational messages.

Operation of English newsletters. It really takes courage to run an English newsletter for a school that teaches English as a foreign language . It is a tough job for teachers who act as advisers and editors of the whole staff. They guide student reporters or writers on how to interview different department staff in order to report or write news articles, edit students’ work due for publication, or work in the printing press to check the final layout and editing of each article in the entire school paper. Thus, the idea of publishing a newsletter in order to inform readers about the affairs of the school is one challenging accomplishment.

Jarvis Finger (2009) advised editors on the importance of proofreading their work. He gave the following guidelines:

1. Work from a printout, not the computer screen. Research has shown that more errors are missed on screen than on paper.
2. Don't rely on your computer's spellchecker—it rarely catches every typo, let alone every blooper and gaffe. For example, it would not distinguish between 'God' and 'Dog' – and there is a potential blooper residing there!
3. If necessary, consult a dictionary to see that every word you have doubts about is spelled correctly.
4. Allow yourself some time between the writing task and the proofreading task. In other words, put some distance time-wise between what you have written, and what you thought you wrote. After a break of, say, 15 minutes, an hour or a day, you'll return to your writing with a fresh eye and mind. It is sometimes surprising what you find.
5. Devote enough time to proofreading. If you dedicate the time to look over your writing carefully, you will catch errors you might otherwise miss.
6. Always read through your writing slowly. Most errors are made and overlooked by speeding through the writing and proofreading processes. If you read at a normal speed, you would not give your eyes sufficient time to spot errors.
7. Read aloud. This encourages you to read every little word.
8. While reading, put yourself in your reader's shoes. In this way, you will see your writing in a different context.
9. Involve other people. Ask a friend to read what you have written. A fresh reader can help you find the mistakes that you might have overlooked.

The guidelines are very useful to news writers, proofreaders, and editors. They prevent the printing of gross errors which may cause readers to give unpleasant remarks about a poorly proofread news report.

The structure of a news report. Simon Cotton (2018) claimed that a news report has three main components: the lead, the main body, and the end. It has no fixed pattern because it is in constant development and change. However, there are two common types: pyramid structure and inverted pyramid structure. In the pyramid structure, the sentences are arranged according to the time of the

event, and the outcome of this event is written until the last paragraph. It is the opposite in the inverted pyramid structure where the sentences are arranged according to facts, and the most important facts are described first. He advised that news writers should express the news content thru a structure which they think is best for their readers.

A news report contains five essential parts: heading, subheading, by-line, summary lead, and fact-based paragraphs. The *headline*, which is the title of the article, aims to introduce the topic of the article and to attract the reader's attention. The *subheading*, an extension of the title, is optional, while the *by-line* includes the writer's name. The *summary lead* consists of the first paragraph, and answers the *wh*-questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how) about the article. Finally, the *fact-based paragraphs* expand on the *wh*-questions mentioned in the summary lead.

Approaches to teaching writing. The most common approaches to teaching writing are the product approach and the process approach. In later years, both approaches were combined, producing the process-product approach.

Vanessa Steele (1992) compared the product and the process approaches to teaching. In the process approach, collaborative work and creative process are encouraged while in the product approach, individual and end product are emphasized. The text is used as a resource for comparison, and multiple drafts are required in a process approach, but in a product approach, the learner imitates a model text and uses only one draft. The process approach is global, focuses on the purpose and theme of the topic, while the product approach focuses on the features of the topic.

To consider a newsletter as a learning experience for students, most especially in the field of writing, it is important to note that writing undergoes a process where the learner goes through the prewriting stage, writing or drafting stage, revising stage, and finally, the publishing stage (Cusipag et al., 2006, pp.29-30).

Prewriting stage. This stage lays the framework for the rest of the writing process. The learner uses important prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, interviewing, surfing the internet, outlining, and others in order to come up with ideas necessary to help him/her write about a certain topic.

Writing or drafting stage. This involves the actual writing of the first draft of the topic based on the ideas gathered in the prewriting stage. The writer is never contented with his/her draft, so he/she finally decides to improve or change it.

Revising stage. Once the writer decides to improve or change his/her draft, the *revising stage* comes in. Editing and rewriting of drafts is done. All the feedback given by peers or by the teacher have to be implemented.

Publishing stage. This is the final stage in the writing process. When a student's final draft is being read by his/her classmates or by the teacher, his/her work is undergoing the publishing stage.

Process-Product approach. Gabrielatos (2002) emphasized that "... teachers need to be clear regarding the desirable outcomes of a writing programme and the processes involved in good writing...." In his article entitled "EFL Writing Product and Process," the two aspects of good writing are *product* and *process* (p.1).

Brookes and Grundy, as cited in Tangpermpoon (2008), believe that "if we teach the writing approaches separately this will result in unbalanced L2 writing performance" (Pasand, 2013, p.76). According to Pasand, "by integrating these approaches to writing, EFL learners can transfer the skills they have gained from each approach from one mode to another and have a much better writing performance."

Pasand (2013) did a study integrating both process and product writing. The results of the paired *t*-test showed that students' writing accuracy improved when they tried to complete an unfinished model text. Based on the writing performance of the students, he found out that "completing the model text in process-product writing can have a rather positive influence in some aspects of their writing accuracy such as punctuation, capitalization, spelling, subject-verb agreement, tense, the use of connectors, using correct pronouns, and possessives" (p. 76). Similar to the present study, students were asked to complete a model text in writing their news articles.

Sun (2009, p. 153) believes that "it is better to combine the process- and product-oriented approach to teaching writing to the lower level students in English." She states;

The reading of a model text, so important in a product-oriented approach to writing, is not so as to subjugate the students' ideas to their organization, but so as to make students aware that there is a particular way to express their ideas. In this way, students are given the form in order to enable them to adapt it to carry their own meaning.

Agustiana (2016) examined the effects of applying the combined product-and process-based approaches on EFL students' writing skill in the writing discussion texts of 24 grade two students. The findings showed that there was an improvement in the writing skills of the students as shown in their

pretest and posttest scores. Generic features, textual language, and aspects of syntactical language were improved. Moreover, there was active participation among the students. In like manner, the researcher used both product-and process-based approaches among her students.

Proficiency and writing performance. Fatt (2007, p.16) describes proficiency as “a fourfold interpretation which deals with the four major skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.” In his study on the effects of time constraints and proficiency on ESL essay writing performance, he found that proficient students fared significantly better than the less proficient students on the composite and component scores of essays.

Similarly, Cusipag (2018, pp. 182, 184), in her study about the self-reviewed compositions of EFL learners, it was revealed that students with high proficiency scores generally wrote compositions with more word count and obtained better ratings.

In another study, Gustilo (2011) proved that proficiency is related to linguistic features in essay writing. She investigated 150 essays written by Filipino college freshmen. She found that most of the *general text characteristics* (fluency/word count, unique words, word per sentence, number of sentence, number of paragraphs), *lexical features* (intensifiers such as really, very), *demonstratives* (this, that), *additive adverbs* (both, neither, too), *exclusive adverbs* (merely, only, just), except *conjunctions* (however, for example), *clause-level*, and *grammatical features* all have a steady increase across proficiency levels.

In this study, the students’ proficiency ratings in writing were correlated with their ratings in their news reports using the process-product approach. Selected news reports were intended to be published in the school’s newsletter.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two basic approaches to teaching writing—the process approach and the product approach. The *process theory of composition* is a field of composition studies that focuses on writing as a process rather than as a product. According to Nunan, as cited in Pasand (2013, p. 76), the *process-based approach* focuses on the “steps involved in drafting and redrafting a piece of work,” while the *product-based approach* focuses on the “final product which should be a coherent, error-free text and students will initiate, copy, and transform models provided by textbooks or by teachers.” In this study, a combined process-product approach was used in teaching news writing.

Conceptual Framework

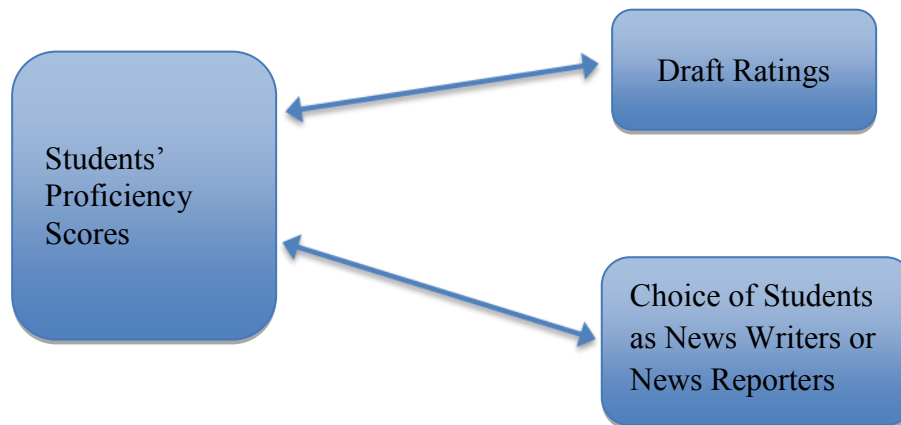


Figure 1. The paradigm of the study.

Research Questions

Considering the importance of a newsletter in strengthening the English writing skills of foreign language learners, the present researcher came up with the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between the students' writing proficiency scores and their draft ratings in their news articles using the process-product approach?
2. Is there a relationship between the students' writing proficiency scores and their choice as news reporters or news writers?
3. How is the school's newsletter viewed by the following:
 - a. Learners
 - b. Teachers

Method

Research Design

The study made use of the quantitative and qualitative research design. A total of 30 news articles written by 30 students with four drafts each were rated using a rubric and were submitted to an expert for statistical analysis. Their writing proficiency scores were analyzed to find out if they correlated with their draft ratings.

Participants

Thirty EFL learners, majoring in English, participated in the study. Their past English grades from their foreign and local English teachers ranged from 60% to 85%. They met once a week for 100 minutes per meeting. Their course lasted for 18 weeks. Their textbook included basic grammatical patterns, as well as exercises using the patterns. To apply these patterns in more meaningful situations, news articles were written by students, thus integrating the newsletter work with the objectives of the curriculum.

Prior to the conduct of the study, the participants were taught composition writing for two consecutive semesters by the researcher. They were introduced to the process-product approach in writing their descriptive essays. Moreover, they were taught how to improve their essays through the teacher's feedback on form and content.

Instruments

Free Press newsletter. This newsletter contained articles which the students were supposed to use as their model in writing their news articles.

Students' news articles. These news articles were written by 30 students. Each article was written in four drafts. All the 120 drafts were rated by three English teachers using a rubric. The rubric contains the following criteria: (1) Title captures reader's interest (10 pts.); (2) Lead paragraph answers *wh*- questions (20 pts.); (3) Supporting paragraphs contain facts that help explain the news event (10 pts.); (4) Facts are supported by sufficient details (20 pts.); (5) Sentences and paragraphs are well organized (10 pts.); (6) Exhibits grammatical accuracy (20 pts.); and (7) Shows evidence of originality (10 pts.). The criteria were described as excellent (100 pts.), very good (90 pts.), good (80 pts.), satisfactory (70 pts.), and needs improvement (60 pts.).

Proficiency test. All the thirty respondents took the NETPAW (National English Test in Proficiency for All on the Web), a writing test given online to the students at the start of the semester. This proficiency test was conducted by ROCMELIA, a private testing center in Taiwan. Scores below 69 were classified by the researcher as low (L), 70-79 as moderate (M), and 80 and above as high (H), with *high* as Level 3 proficiency. As in Fatt's (2007, p.17) study, "test scores indicated their level of proficiency."

List of students identifying their choice of position. The list contained the choice of the students whether they wanted to become news writers or news reporters.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data collected were taken from the different drafts of the participants regarding the news reports gathered from the different departments of the college. The procedure involved different phases: prewriting, writing, revising, and publishing.

Prewriting phase. The students were asked to work with a partner and write a department news report for publication in the *Free Press*, the school's newsletter. They were assigned to each of the ten departments of the school. Assignments were done by lottery, except for those who agreed to swap with other partners. Since there were fifteen pairs, five pairs had to look for departments that had many activities during the semester. Each pair was instructed to talk with the department chair or the assigned teacher responsible to answer their queries. Interviews had to be done by appointment. The writing prompt below was given to the students:

- Choose a partner and decide who will be the news reporter and the news writer. The news reporter is in charge of gathering all the needed data for the news report. The news writer writes the news report.
- Ask the department chair or his/her assigned teacher about the most important activity that their department had conducted. Ask as many questions as you can about their activity.
- Write your news report as accurately as you can. Review your model news articles. Be sure to have your title, by-line, lead paragraph, explanation, and additional information if there is any when writing your drafts.
- Each pair should be able to write two different news reports. See me for oral conferencing in case of problems writing your department news report.

Writing phase (Draft 1). Fifteen pairs of students wrote the first drafts of their two news articles in the computer lab during their scheduled time of 100 minutes and submitted them to their teacher through e-mail in order to avoid biases on poor penmanship in the reading of their drafts. Unfinished drafts were brought home, but they have to be submitted the following day following a certain time. In Fatt's (2007) study, it was revealed that the total essay scores and three of the five component scores of essays written in 45 minutes were significantly better than those written in 30 minutes. Likewise, Fitria et al. (2014) found out that there was a significant difference in the students' writing performance between 90-minute and 120-minute test taking time.

The total number of words per draft were not limited by the teacher. According to Stewart and Cheung (as cited in Cusipag, 2018, p.176) teachers should “simplify writing tasks by removing limitations on the number of words and the required language forms, and ensure the familiarity of the subject matter.” Oral conferencing for both teacher and student was done after a total of 30 articles were provided feedback by the teacher.

Feedback on form and content were given by the teacher. For any inaccuracy or insufficiency of content, students were sent back to the department informant. As to form, the researcher underlined errors in grammar, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation marks before they were given back to the students for revision. They were further required to get photos and write their captions to accompany their articles.

Revising phase (Drafts 1, 2, 3). The 30 articles were revised three times except for the final draft which was the fourth draft. The drafts were written in the computer lab and submitted to the teacher through e-mail. The researcher received 120 drafts for marking/rating.

Publishing phase. This is the final stage in the writing process. When a student’s final draft is being read by his/her classmates or by the teacher, his/her work is undergoing the publishing stage. Instances where the articles presented were not accepted for publication are: (1) when the activity does not relate to the department’s objective, such as conducting a sports activity when the department is not a Physical Education department; (2) when the department’s activity has already been published in the past issues of the newsletter, such as an annual capping ceremony that has already been published in the previous year; (3) if the article is full of grammatical errors; or (4) if the article does not give enough information about the activity.

The selected articles were brought to a computer shop for lay out and printing. Proofreading was done by student writers, the English/Japanese/Chinese editor, and the editor in chief.

Marking the Compositions

Three outside raters marked one hundred twenty news reports (thirty each for D1, D2, D3, D4). They used the rubric for news writing which was prepared by the researcher to suit the grading system of the school. The raters were all college English teachers, and they were given proper instructions on how to rate the papers.

Statistical Analysis

The researcher gathered all the raw data regarding the students' writing proficiency scores and their ratings for D1, D2, D3, and D4). Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis was used to investigate the relationship between the variables in the writing proficiency scores and the ratings in the news articles using the process-product approach. Kendall's Tau B was used to find the relationship between the students' writing proficiency scores and their choice of tasks as news writers or news reporters.

Results and Discussion

Based on the analyses done, the following research questions were answered:

1. Is there a relationship between the students' writing proficiency scores and their draft ratings in their news articles using the process-product approach?

To determine whether writing proficiency scores are related to writing performance, correlation using Pearson r was computed. Table 1 shows that writing proficiency is positively related to writing performance ($r=.864, p < .01$). It indicates that students who are good in their writing proficiency have better writing performance.

Table 1. Correlation Between Writing Proficiency Scores and Four Writing Drafts of the students

		Writing Proficiency	Average of students' four writing drafts (Writing Performance)
Writing Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	.864**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	<i>N</i>	30	30
Average of students' four writing drafts (Writing Performance)	Pearson Correlation	.864**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	<i>N</i>	30	30

**Correlation is significant at 0.01level (2-tailed).

2. Is there a relationship between the students' writing proficiency scores and their choice as news reporters or news writers?

To determine whether the students' choice as news reporters or news writers (task) is related to their proficiency scores, correlation using Kendall's Tau B was computed. Results in Table 2 show that students' choice of task is positively related to their proficiency scores ($r=.616, p < .01$). Students with high proficiency scores generally chose to become news writers while students with low proficiency scores generally chose to become news reporters. This finding became the basis for choosing the best staff writers of the school's newsletter. Hence, only the students who got high proficiency scores were qualified to become staff writers.

Table 2. Correlation Between Proficiency Scores and Choice as News Writers/ Reporters (Task)

		Choice of Task		Proficiency Score
Kendall's Tau-b	Choice of Task	Correlation Coefficient		.616**
		sig.(2-tailed)		.000
		N	30	30
	Proficiency Score	Correlation Coefficient	.616**	1.000
		sig.(2-tailed)	.000	
		N	30	30

**Correlation is significant at 0.01level (2-tailed).

3. How is the school's newsletter viewed by the following:

- a. Teachers
- b. Learners

Ten students were interviewed regarding their perceptions about having a newsletter in their school. When asked about how they feel regarding their school's newsletter, R1 (Respondent #1) said, "I am motivated/encouraged to write news for publication." R3 claimed that her English skills improved most especially in writing. R4 and R7 expressed, "Because of the newsletter, my grade in English became better even if my news articles were not accepted for publication." R2 said, "My sentences in English have improved. I always revise them." R10 said, "I hope that my articles will be published. I want to get more points for my grades. My parents will be very happy if they will see my name in the newsletter." R9 happily said, "If my article will be published, my parents will say that it is a nice accomplishment. They will give me more money to buy food." R5 responded bravely, "I want to study in a good university. I heard that some good universities require their student applicants to submit copies of their written work. If my article will be published in the newsletter of our school, this will help me in my application." R6 and R8 gave the same reason that they developed confidence in speaking.

Based on the answers of the students from the interview, themes were drawn like motivation to write, better grades, improved sentences, satisfaction of parents to see their articles, better chances to enter a university, and confidence in speaking .

Similar to the students, the teacher was very optimistic about the presence of a newsletter in their school. She said, “A newsletter is an avenue for students to enrich their learning experiences, most especially in improving their writing skills. They develop skills in following and modifying a writing model; in planning their work; in listening to informants; in interviewing people, which is a good way to improve their speaking skill; in reading materials; or in surfing the internet while writing their news reports.

The teacher added, Working with a partner develops collaborative learning as student writers and news reporters cooperate with each other in getting information from different sources. They experience teamwork, overcome their anxieties when assigned to conduct interviews, develop their social skills when dealing with other people, become aware of the importance of beating deadlines, show accuracy in taking down notes, and be more specially careful in their grammar when writing their articles.”

Furthermore, the teacher explained that the experiences that students gain when writing and revising their news reports give a feeling of reward when their articles are finally published in their newsletter. This makes the newsletter a significant achievement for them. Once an article is published in the school’s newsletter with the writer’s name, this gives a different feeling than when the final draft is merely read and graded by the teacher.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are given:

1. Learners with high proficiency levels achieve better than those with low proficiency levels.
2. Learners with high proficiency choose more challenging tasks than others. The job of a news writer is more challenging than a news reporter.
3. A newsletter is an avenue for better learning experiences where students acquire the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and most especially writing.
4. The benefits of having a newsletter are not only for a documentation of the accomplishments of the school but also for a feeling of fulfillment achieved by all the staff members and teacher advisers concerned in coming up with one issue of a newsletter.

Recommendations

1. This study is limited to the students of just one school; hence, the findings could not be fully generalized. A wider sampling should be considered by future researchers.
2. Students with low proficiency levels should be given more attention in class to motivate and improve their skills in writing.
3. Since a newsletter is read by parents and other people in the community, staff members, particularly the staff writers, should be carefully chosen following a valid set of criteria. A proficiency test should be given to applicants before they can be accepted as staff writers.
4. More studies should be conducted by future researchers on how teachers integrate newswriting in their EFL or ESL classes. Other writing jobs included in a newsletter like editorial writing may be included.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Shu Zen College of Medicine and Management, Kaohsiung, Taiwan and the students for their participation in this study.

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