

# An Investigation into Factors that Affect Students' Writing Skills: The Case of Sodo Secondary School

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**Abstract:** The study aimed at investigating grade nine students' difficulties in using writing skills in EFL classroom. To achieve the intended objective of the study, descriptive research design was employed. To collect the data for the study, three research instruments were employed. They are: interviews, field notes, and questionnaire conducted with Grade Nine English teachers and students learning at the same grade level. Accordingly, the findings indicated that the practice of writing skill was not satisfactory. As it was revealed in the study, the teaching/learning activities using the writing skill in the actual classrooms of Grade Nine were not largely in line with the principles of skills teaching strategies. According to the present researchers' investigation, the following difficulties were identified as major constraints affecting the use of writing skills, the poor background of the students towards the writing skill English, lack of classroom facilities, lack of appropriate teaching materials, lack of understanding about writing skills, and lack of motivation towards writing skill were crucial challenges that impeded the writing skills during the English lessons. According to the information provided by participants, shortage of time become one of the factors that hinders from expressing themselves in writing, were the most outstanding ones. Finally, recommendations were forwarded.

**Keywords:** Learners Difficulties, Writing Skills, Language Acquisition

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## 1. Introduction

Education is the most important instrument to bring changes in human livelihood. All human beings use education as a source to discover new phenomena. It is known that without education nothing can happen. In order to develop skills, knowledge and appropriate behavior, the only means is promoting it. Language skills are very crucial as a means to share ideas culture, customs, and beliefs etc. Among these, writing is one and such a valuable tool for communication, learning, and self-expression, therefore students who do not have adequate writing skills will be at a great disadvantage and will face limited chance for education and even for employment. The ability to achieve communicative competence in writing is a major facet of language development and academic success among students at all levels of the education system. Hence, it is not an abstract process of memorizing vocabulary and the

application of grammatical rules. The language learning process is interplay of learners' background, culture, experience beliefs, perceptions and learning environment. In this case, written communication strategies play crucial role in how this skill is acquired, and whether the language learner acquires adequate skills to communicate effectively in the foreign/second language. In addition, English language is the medium of instruction for later years in some primary schools, secondary schools and in all higher education in Ethiopia. Educational systems foster national unity by inculcating social, cultural and political ideas. Currently, English medium instruction is having a detrimental effect on Ethiopian educational attainment. English is a foreign language in Ethiopia with little support from the media outside educational establishments.

The process of learning English is slow and progressive and it could be interpreted as a series of challenges to face. This process consists of the development of certain skills. Writing particularly, is significant because it authorizes

learners to perform in communicative aspects such as written studies, report writing, communicating using electronic materials and formal writings among others. Therefore, this skill needs to be developed and learnt properly.

Written communication is the development and expression of ideas in writing. It involves learning to work in many genres and styles. In addition, written communication involves any type of interaction that makes use of the written word and it involves expressing oneself clearly, using language with precision; constructing a logical argument; note taking, editing and summarizing; and writing reports. Moreover, writing is a very essential skill that will benefit students for their entire lives by helping them to connect to the world around them. Students struggling with the writing process develop a negative view of writing as well as a negative image of their own abilities to conduct written communication Diliberto [1]. When teachers introduce and allow students to practice writing with engaging activities in elementary school, they will be able to foster confidence and hopefully a lifelong love of writing.

The main goal of this Research was to investigate factors that affect Students' writing skills in EFL Classroom that hinder them from improving their performance in written communication skill and perform written abilities to communicate efficiently and effectively in different contexts. Acquiring and developing written skill in English as a Foreign Language context is a difficulty faced by students at all levels in English teaching schools in Ethiopia. Thus, this research focused on observing and analyzing the development of written skill at Sodo Secondary schools, specifically those students who are learning English as foreign Language. The study also attempted to understand how the influencing factors hinder the students from mastering and performing well the aforementioned skill throughout the different activities provided by the teacher and the way in which students' motivation affects their participation and interaction in class.

### ***1.1. Statement of the Problem***

Even though different scholars have always agreed that writing is a crucial skill, the responsibility for teaching writing had been placed outside the content areas into a small component of the secondary English curriculum. Reformers in the writing across the curriculum movement argue that writing is central to learning in every discipline, and that writing has the power to produce active, student-centered learning. Writing allows students to synthesize and integrate information into their existing knowledge.

It is a demanding task for language teachers to provide sufficient inputs for students to be competent writer in language learning. Usually, students feel insecure about their level of English and they face problems communicating using writing in the target language. As a result, they rather sat down calmly as they do not show in expressing themselves using writing skill. For example, according to Dar & Khan [2], in Pakistan, the writing skills of the students are alarmingly weak and substandard. Although, English

language users in Pakistan have exponentially increased to 49% in 2003 from 2% in 1961, they still face issues in English language, particularly in writing.

Writing is a significant skill in language production. Its significance increases when it comes to writing in English language which is extensively used for global mediation of knowledge. As Mahboob [3] defines: Writing is a significant skill in language production. Its significance increases when it comes to writing in English language which is extensively used for global mediation of knowledge. Research has revealed that writing promotes learning and enhances critical- thinking skills. Emig [4] pointed out that higher cognitive functions, such as analysis and synthesis, seem to develop most fully only with the support of verbal language, particularly of written language.

A text of an EFL writer must be cohesive, logical, clearly structured, interesting and properly organized with a wide range of vocabulary and mastery of conventions in mechanics. However, writing is often considered merely a part of teaching and learning syntax, which resultantly underestimates the nature and importance of writing, and affects its growth. Therefore, the development of this skill draws considerable attention for its learning and teaching from very early phase of language education. In addition to this, Rico [5] showed in his study an incoherent text fails to communicate ideas which cause lack of confidence in learners even if they have mastered syntactic, lexical and grammatical command over text composition. Nunan [6] argues that writing is extremely difficult cognitive activity which requires the learners to have control over various factors. These factors that vary from academic background and personal interest of the writer to various psychological, linguistic and cognitive phenomena. Corresponding to the finding of Megaib [7], spelling and punctuations errors were also found in abundance in writing samples. However, these errors were not highlighted as a problematic area by any of the present research participants during the interviews. Due to these and other factors, the writing skill of Sodo Secondary EFL learners is weak and substandard.

Previous studies have addressed several aspects of factors affecting writing. In Jaramillo and Medina's study [8], the written skill is perceived as an art in which willingness and motivation are important. In Ellis [9], it was shown that learning difficulties varied according to the type of knowledge students have. In addition, in Ferrari and Palladio's certain skills [10] were examined that showed that the most frequent difficulties come from students' previous knowledge as well as the different disorders they presented. Furthermore, it is necessary to explain that there are many learners who need to express their ideas in a second language but they find themselves without the linguistic resources to carry it out, Gass and Selinker [11]. This means that they are not acquiring knowledge correctly. Hopefully, identifying these problems may help find a solution to overcome these problems. Subsequently, the purpose of this study is to investigate learners' difficulties in writing skill.

## 1.2. Research Questions

According to the experiences of some foreign languages learners, most difficulties are found in the writing skill, thus the main purpose of this study was to investigate learners' difficulties in writing skill. This study sought to answer three questions related to the causes of the difficulties presented when learning a foreign language

1. What are the pressing factors that affect students' writing skill?
2. How do the factors affect their performance in writing?

## 1.3. Objectives of the Study

### 1.3.1. General Objective

The general objective of this study is to investigate learners' difficulties in writing skills.

### 1.3.2. Specific Objectives

1. Identify pressing factors that affect students in using writing skills.
2. Examine the influence of these factors on the overall performance of students' writing.

## 1.4. Significance of the Study

This study helps to determine the effectiveness of writing skills in EFL classroom. It provides language teachers with the rationale to carry out activities that students perform in class to improve students' writing skills. This study also gives suggestion to EFL teachers to develop successful written activities as they can identify the major problems faced by their students. Thus, teachers are conscious with the advantages of writing skills in teaching and learning process. In addition, the students will appreciate and work with the strengths of others. This will increase learning, planning and discussion skill and eventually improve their writing capabilities. This study is also helpful to provide knowledge on ways to develop natural ways in writing activities.

## 1.5. Scope of the Study

Since the main purpose of this study was to investigate learners' difficulties in writing skill. It is delimited to Sodo Secondary School grade nine students who are learning English as foreign language and it focuses on the problems that students face while learning English as foreign language.

# 2. Research Methodology

## 2.1. Research Design

In this study the present researcher employed qualitative and quantitative approaches. The reason why the researcher has chosen this method is that social science researchers remark that to investigate different phenomena in the field of education. In the same way, this study attempted to assess factors causing problems to writing skill among Foreign Language Learners in Grade 9 classroom at Sodo general secondary and preparatory School. Researchers collected the

appropriate data from the relevant source and analyzed. Different research tools were used, such as questionnaire, field notes and interviews. The target population was Sodo general secondary and preparatory school particularly grade 9 students in Wolytta zone. A total of two female and two male students were picked for interviews, and interviewed. Three English teachers were interviewed and 25 respondents from grade 9 students were given questionnaire that consists of 18 questions.

Target of participants were Sodo general secondary and preparatory School students and teachers. Students are the most important target to gain result for this research.

## 2.2. Sampling Techniques

### 2.2.1. Setting

From common point of view it is easy to describe the meaning of setting. It is the place where the study has been conducted. According to Larsen and H. Long [12], investigators should recognize the importance of the role of the institution where they are going to carry out their investigation, thus in order to make reference to pedagogical values, keeping in mind this perspective, it is important to mention that the present study was carried out at Wolytta zone Sodo general secondary and preparatory school, particularly grade 9.

In order to determine sample population, who involved in this study the researcher employed Sodo general secondary and preparatory school. Sodo general secondary and preparatory school is one of the governmental Schools in Sodo town. It is located at the center of the town. The school has a total number of 8 Grade Nine English teachers and 1,200 grade 9 students.

### 2.2.2. Research Subjects

Based on the information given by the Department of English language at Sodo general secondary and preparatory school, the numbers of teachers that are currently teaching English in Grade Nine are 8 and three were randomly selected and interviewed. Grade Nine students are allocated into 24 sections. From selected class 25 students were randomly selected for questionnaire. In addition, among 25 students 2 male and 2 female students were selected for the interview.

## 2.3. Instruments and Data Collection

The data was collected through three instruments: questionnaire, interviews, and field notes.

### 2.3.1. Interview

Semi-structured interview was one of the instruments used in gathering information. The reason for using this type of tool is that it is a research tool in qualitative research which serves to capture people's experiences, implementations, their inner perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of realities. Similarly, since this study was highly connected with practices, it was mandatory to employ this type of research

tool. The second reason is that when the researcher employed semi-structured interviews, the respondents had chance to give responses by going to and fro. This in turn, helped the researcher to get their thought freely and comprehensively. In addition, the data that obtained through interview from students had the advantage to identify what the problems that the students face in using writing skill. With regards to interviews, the researcher took into account the view of Hatch [13] on interviews as instruments to complete observations and as tools to involve participants in order to know their viewpoints about a subject. According to Cohen and Manion [14], interviews are considered as the best way to understand the factors that govern human beings' conduct. In this inquiry these were effective in distinguishing what participants felt when expressing their ideas in writing. These were also necessary to identify the criteria participants had in relation to the problems they presented. The two interviews were conducted differently. The first one was with the grade nine EFL students. The researcher decided to do a one-on-one interview because the researcher realized that when participants had been interviewed as a group, they expressed their opinions based on their classmates' ideas. One-on-one interviews gave the researcher a clearer understanding of the opinions and points of view of each of the participants. The second interview was conducted after the first one with grade 9 EFL teachers.

### 2.3.2. Note Taking

This type of data gathering tool is very important to have at hand which is accurate and tangible while observing the situations. On the other hand, the use of note-taking is a very relevant factor which can help the researcher to better develop the process of data collection, Gwyn and Mort [15], state that the process of note-taking is very important to revise the events which have already occurred. In this study, the notes the researcher took were useful since they gave the researcher a general description of the researchers' observations, of the researchers' impressions in the field and important aspects during the process. More importantly, the researchers' notes were useful in complementing the information the participants provided of the researcher with in the interviews. Through them the researcher was able to remember the participants' attitude, thus it was easy for the researcher to reflect on different aspects that were not presented in the class.

### 2.3.3. Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used in this study to collect data on the students' attitudes towards and perceptions of using writing skill. The researchers designed the questionnaire on

### 2.6.1. Data from Questionnaire

the basis of those used in previous studies and of his own long experience in teaching writing skill. The students were given the questionnaire at the beginning. The questionnaire was translated from English into Amharic in order to make sure that they understood it clearly.

The questionnaire was concerned with the attitudes and perceptions of students regarding writing skills.

## 2.4. Data Collecting Procedures

It is known that things done procedurally are easy to be understood by the reader. Accordingly, this research followed some procedures that direct to the final goals. First, the researcher got permission from the school principal to conduct interview and administer the questionnaire. Then the researcher surveyed informally how writing skills was taking place in the research site aforementioned. After having this, researcher developed semi-structured interview items and then conducted it with both Grade nine English teachers and students. Finally the researchers collected the questionnaire.

## 2.5. Data Organization and Analysis

It is known that this study focused on qualitative and quantitative data analysis method and most of the data was analyzed in relation to the principle of qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data analysis requires coding the responses, identifying categories or themes and explaining their meaning. By the same token, interviews were first transcribed on a sheet of paper, coded, categorized and ordered into major and minor themes and finally explanations and interpretations were carried out in line with the objective of the study. Questionnaires were collected and interpreted. Moreover, the data was analyzed and conclusions were made based on the findings of the research. Finally, recommendations were given.

## 2.6. Data Presentations, Interpretations and Discussions

The major objective of this study was to investigate factors causing problems to writing skills among Foreign Language Learners. To achieve this, the researcher employed questionnaire, interviews and field note as data gathering tools. Accordingly, the data collected were described, interpreted and discussed as follows. Taking into account the purpose of this study, to investigate the factors causing difficulties on writing skill of students, the information obtained through the three instruments; questionnaire interviews, and field notes, were analyzed.

**Table 1.** Participants responses in questionnaire.

[illegible]

Participants' Responses in each choice (Items)												
4a	7	28	11	44	4	16	3	12				
5	6	24	12	48	7	28						
6	4	16	4	16	5	20	4	16	4	16	4	16
7	23	92	2	8								
8	1	4	2	8	21	84	2	8				

As indicated on the above table the respondents responded for each items and the result of the responses have been put in the ratio. The responses of the participants were discussed as follows.

Item one shows that 20 respondents or 80% confirmed that they feel uneasy when they express their ideas and thoughts in writing and the rest 5 respondents or 20% feel free while expressing themselves in writing. This implies that there is gap of topic knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, how to write (style), etc. So, there would be some mechanisms that overcome the problem and enhance students writing skills.

In Item two, 16 students or 64% replied that they sometimes practice writing and the rest 9 students or 34% said that they never practice writing. This shows that there is no conducive environment to practice writing.

Item 4 and 4a indicates that scarcity in vocabulary, grammar, style, coherence/cohesion, punctuation and content itself lead the students to face difficulties in writing English.

As the respondents replied in Item five, almost all of them find difficulties in all level of writing such as sentence, paragraph and essay. But around half of the respondents face difficulties in paragraph level. It is easy to recognize that all the respondents need to have some sort of method which leads them to improve their writing in English.

The responses in item six indicate that all the respondents agreed that there is weakness in writing due to the following factors. Teachers factor, lack of motivation in writing, learners factor, lack of good approach to teaching writing, lack of practice, lack of reading. These statements indicate that mechanisms should be needed to overcome the aforementioned factors.

In Item seven almost all students have no opportunities to write outside the classroom. This implies that there are different factors that hinder the students from writing out of the actual classroom.

The last item disclosed that more than 20 respondents or 80% qualify their writing level as poor. As indicated in the above items there should be means for students to advance their writing level.

### 2.6.2. Data from Interview and Field Notes

The researcher found that insecurity, unwillingness to use the target language, lack of knowledge and languages transfer caused difficulties to the participants' development on writing skills. In addition, the researcher found that time allocation and the teachers' methodology also affected the participants' writing skills.

With regards to internal factors, it was found that lack of confidence caused participants difficulties when writing in a foreign language. Participants explained that lack of confidence might be linked to their behavior. While being

interviewed, participants stated that lack of confidence was a factor that affected their written productions because sometimes they felt they did not have the appropriate knowledge to accomplish certain class activities. As they stated: taking into account their words, it seems that insecurity comes from the lack of knowledge students have about certain topic. Likewise, unwillingness to use the target language caused difficulties. The researcher realized that all of participants favored the use of Mother tongue and Amharic to communicate among themselves, and to develop the tasks proposed by the teacher. Nevertheless, they used the target language to ask questions to the teacher and to communicate between themselves. These actions demonstrated that participants were not willing to write in the target language unless they were forced to do it.

The unwillingness to use the language was also caused by the lack of practice on the participants' part. During the interviews, participants agreed that the process of learning a foreign language implied a series of autonomous work and practice. However, that they did not practice as they should. As the participants stated: Unwillingness and lack of practice were negative factors that affected participants' language production, not only because they experienced problems when presetting ideas, thoughts and opinions, in written text.

Lack of knowledge was another aspect that affected the students' participation. Production based upon unknown topics, the lack of vocabulary and the lack of knowledge about grammar structures were issues that belonged to this factor with regards to production based on unknown topics. The researcher realized that students did not like to participate in class, especially when they felt that they did not understand the context or when they did not have the knowledge of the topic they were studying. When learners were not familiar with the topic, they remained silent, and refused to answer the teacher's questions.

The written production based on unknown topics was also noticed by taking into account the participants answers. Some of the participants explained that writing production was an activity that they could develop correctly when they had the possibility to select the topic they were going to write about. Similarly, they stated that if they were asked to write about something they were not familiar with, it was more difficult because they had to start looking for relevant information and

Another aspect that researcher took into account when considering the participants' lack of knowledge was the familiarity they had with the vocabulary and grammar. From field note the researcher noticed that participants' written reports lacked coherence and cohesion. Students had to do a presentation in which they explained a short article they had written. Analyzing their productions the researcher realized

that they did not know how to put the words in order, how to connect their ideas they had and also their choice of words was not appropriate. When they were taking notes or writing in their notebooks, they thought in Amharic and then they had to look for the words in a dictionary. This caused loss of confidence; and interruptions during participants' productions.

In the interviews participants confirmed what the researcher had thought about their lack of vocabulary as they stated that it caused their mental blocks when writing. Language transfer was another internal factor affecting participants' written productions. Language transfer made them lose control of their productions, and their concentration. In addition, while being interviewed, one participant explained that it was difficult for her to continue producing an idea when they transferred the languages they were learning. First, because it interrupted their production process and second because it made them lose concentration.

The language transfer might be interpreted as a factor that affects the student's written productions, and also it can be related to the participants' lack of vocabulary and knowledge. When observing them the researcher understood that participants doubted themselves when they knew little about the topic. The researcher found that teacher's methodology and time allocation were the most prevailing factors.

During the interviews participants stated that teachers' methodology was another factor that impacted upon their language production. When considering the teachers' role, one of the participants declared that they were part of their foreign languages learning, and they stated that the problem might start when teachers teach inappropriately: In the interviews, participants clarified the importance of the teachers' methodology in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. For them, teachers and their methodologies were very important because they were going to connect them with the real use of the language. Participants could not advance appropriately with gaps in their learning process, which is one reason why they had doubts.

Finally, time allocation was another factor that negatively influenced participants' productions. The researcher carried out, one of the students stated that he did not develop his homework because he did not have time; in this instance he was not able to participate in the class.

The researcher also saw this during the interviews when two of the participants declared that it influenced their productions in a negative manner, especially when the allotted time was not enough. They stated that the process of writing demanded time, not only to write, but also to think, read and investigate. They confirmed that problems emerged when they could not do it. The same situation occurred when participants did not have the possibility to practice because they had to dedicate time to other subjects. Because of this, it is convenient to state that the factors found through the questionnaire and the interviews were all related to each other. In this case the lack of time was a factor causing participants' unwillingness to use the target language, and

this unwillingness led to lack of knowledge.

According to the information provided by participants, it was confirmed that the more time dedicated to practice, the better the overall quality of the productions presented. Thus time become effect especially when it was not enough and this factor caused frustration.

To conclude, it is relevant to state that factors were considered as factors causing difficulties to writing among foreign languages students. These were identified as the most relevant factors affecting Unwillingness to use the target language and the teachers' methodology, lack of knowledge, lack of confidence, language transfer and time allocation. As a consequence, inappropriate productions, obstructions, and frustration emerged.

### 3. Conclusions

The major objective of the research was to investigate factors cases problems in writing among foreign language learners in Grade Nine at Sodo general secondary and preparatory School. To achieve this, the researcher used research tools such as interview conducted with Grade Nine English teachers and students of the same grade. The questionnaire was administered to grade nine students. Accordingly, the result from questionnaire and interviews indicated that Grade Nine English teachers, who responded to the interviews, had more than 25 years of experience in teaching English in secondary schools. This experience should have helped them to implement writing skills effectively and efficiently. However, the implementation of writing skill was not satisfactory. As it was revealed in the study, the teaching/learning activities using the writing skill in the actual classrooms of Grade Nine were not largely in line with the principles of skills teaching strategies. According to the interview response, grade nine English teachers had made attempts to involve students in the activities given during the lessons.

The respondent teachers in the interview responded that they provide feedback to their students frequently. However, the poor back ground of the students towards the English subject, lack of classroom facilities, lack of appropriate teaching materials, lack of understanding about writing skill, were crucial challenges that impeded the writing skills during the English lessons. According to the information provided by participants, time become effect especially when it was not enough and this factor caused frustration.

To sum up, it is relevant to state that factors were considered as factors causing difficulties to writing among foreign languages students. Among these many students have little opportunity to write which means much of the writing students are asked to do in school is in short-answer form, such as fill-in-the blank or short answer worksheets and tests, unwillingness to use the target language and the teachers' methodology identified as the most relevant factors affecting and the rest of them such as, Lack of knowledge, lack of confidence, language transfer and time allocation were generally seen as causing a certain degree of difficulty.

## 4. Recommendations

On the basis of the major findings in this study and the conclusions drawn, the researcher forwarded the following recommendations.

- a. The school administrators need to have better understanding about the implementation of writing skill as this helps to urge Grade Nine English teachers and students to implement these skills. So, the city, zonal or regional education bureaus should look for mechanisms through which Grade Nine English teachers get refreshment training by creating affiliation with nearby universities.
- b. Grade Nine English teachers should first improve the performance conditions by giving their students time to prepare for a writing task, teaching the students how to use mind map to generate ideas and giving students enough time to perform their tasks.
- c. Some lessons were found that they were difficult for most students to understand. Thus, curriculum designers need to consider the problem when the textbook is revised.
- d. Grade Nine English teachers should personalize and simplify the topics in the textbook to make them easier, more interesting and relevant to their lives. Moreover, writing skill should be included in tests and exams because the students will be more motivated to learn writing skill because they are tested.
- e. Grade Nine students should first understand the importance of writing skills. Their awareness of their studies may result in their motivation for learning.
- f. Grade Nine students should practice writing in English outside the classroom more often by doing the writing tasks in the textbook at home with their classmates.
- g. Grade Nine students should use English in the class instead of Amharic or mother tongue to make it a habit.
- h. In general, Writing is a difficult task for most students and therefore, quality instruction is needed on a daily basis. A high-quality writing program will provide a balance between opportunities for students to engage in writing that is meaningful to them. It will also allow them to receive explicit instruction in the skills and strategies they need to become proficient writers. The process of teaching effective writing instruction at the beginning of a student's formal educational experience is one way of preventing difficulties and negative reactions to writing Diliberto [1].

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