

Exploring Students' Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in English Writing: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: English proficiency is increasingly important across professional and academic contexts, requiring learners to develop adequate vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and written communication skills. However, students learning English as a second language, including Filipino learners, may encounter challenges that affect their ability to produce effective written outputs.

Objective: This study examined the challenges encountered by students in English writing and the coping mechanisms they employed to address these challenges.

Methods: The study employed a qualitative approach involving students enrolled in English 211 at the University of Southern Mindanao. Data were gathered through interviews focusing on students' experiences with English writing and analyzed thematically using the cognitive/motivational perspective of Hayes writing model and the theoretical perspective attributed to Larry Selinker.

Results: Five major writing challenges emerged: lack of vocabulary, poor grammar usage, difficulty organizing thoughts and ideas, spelling problems, and difficulty expressing feelings, emotions, and moods in writing. Five corresponding coping mechanisms were also identified: reading books and watching English movies, consulting dictionaries, studying and applying knowledge, drafting outlines, and focusing and brainstorming to develop ideas.

Conclusions: The findings indicate that students experience both linguistic and cognitive-affective challenges in English writing and employ varied strategies to manage these difficulties. The study highlights the importance of strengthening students' vocabulary, grammatical competence, organization of ideas, and strategies for generating and expressing ideas in English writing.

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1. Introduction

English plays an important role in international communication and remains widely used across academic, professional, and occupational contexts. In the Philippines, its historical and institutional presence has established English as a second language and an important component of education and professional preparation (Flanegin & Rudd, 2000). Developing proficiency therefore requires sustained exposure to and practice in the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Ybarra & Green, 2003). Among these skills, writing is particularly demanding because learners must simultaneously generate and organize ideas while attending to vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and coherence.

Writing in a second-language context can be especially challenging because learners must manage linguistic and cognitive demands while producing meaningful and organized texts. In the Philippine educational context, where English is widely used as a medium of instruction, students are expected to develop sufficient written proficiency for academic and professional purposes (Platt et al., 1984). Writing has consequently been described as one of the more complex language skills to acquire (Mourtaga, 2004), as learners must coordinate multiple aspects of language use during the writing process. These demands may result in difficulties involving vocabulary, grammar, organization, spelling, and the expression of ideas and emotions.

Beyond linguistic difficulties, writing challenges may also generate psychological stress, particularly when students perceive academic writing tasks as demanding or difficult to manage. In such situations, coping becomes relevant to understanding how learners respond to and manage these challenges. Lazarus and Folkman conceptualize coping as the changing cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals employ to manage internal or external demands perceived as taxing or exceeding their resources (as cited in Psychological Stress and Coping Theory, 2017). From this perspective, coping is an ongoing process through which individuals respond to stressors, regulate their behavior, and draw upon available resources to manage challenging situations.

Although writing difficulties among English language learners have been widely recognized, understanding how students themselves experience these difficulties and how they respond to them remains important, particularly within specific educational contexts. Examining students' reported challenges alongside their coping mechanisms can provide insights into the linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions of second-language writing. Such understanding may also help educators develop writing instruction that responds more directly to students' needs and the strategies they use to manage writing-related demands.

Accordingly, this study sought to explore the challenges encountered by students in English writing and the coping mechanisms they employ to address these challenges. Specifically, it examines students' experiences of writing-related difficulties and identifies the strategies they use to manage the linguistic and psychological demands associated with English writing. By viewing coping as a dynamic process, the study provides a student-centered account of how learners navigate and respond to challenges in second-language writing.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges students encountered in English writing and the coping mechanisms they used to manage these difficulties. Data were derived from participants' accounts and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and meaningful categories. The analysis focused on two central areas: students' writing challenges and their corresponding coping mechanisms. This approach enabled the study to capture and interpret participants' experiences within their academic writing context.

2.2. Respondents and Sampling Procedure

The participants were language writing students enrolled in English 211 at the University of Southern Mindanao (USM), Kabacan, North Cotabato. Ten students were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling to ensure that participants met the study's predetermined criteria and could provide relevant information regarding their experiences with English writing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit their accounts of writing challenges and the coping mechanisms they employed.

2.3. Research Instruments

The study employed three primary research tools: an audio recorder, a semi-structured interview guide, and a computer for transcription. The audio recorder was used to accurately capture the interviews and preserve participants' responses for subsequent analysis. The interview guide contained questions designed to elicit information about students' writing challenges and the coping mechanisms they employed. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed using a computer to facilitate the systematic organization, coding, and analysis of the qualitative data.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Permission to conduct the interviews was obtained from the instructor handling English 211. The researcher then recruited eligible students and conducted individual interviews focusing on the writing challenges they encountered and the coping mechanisms they employed. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of their responses. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate systematic analysis. The transcribed data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes related to students' writing challenges and coping mechanisms. The interpretation was informed by Hayes' (1996) cognitive/motivational model of writing, which provided a framework for understanding the cognitive and motivational dimensions underlying students' writing experiences. The analysis also considered the study's second theoretical perspective in interpreting students' responses. Relevant patterns identified across the interview accounts were systematically organized into themes and reviewed by experts to strengthen the credibility and consistency of the findings.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher obtained the necessary permission to conduct the study and clearly communicated its purpose and scope to the participants. The researcher maintained a descriptive and non-evaluative approach, reporting students' writing challenges and coping mechanisms without judging whether their experiences or strategies were right or wrong. Participants' responses were treated confidentially throughout the research process. The researcher also employed researcher debriefing to examine personal assumptions, perspectives, and potential biases that could influence data interpretation. This process provided an opportunity to reflect critically on the analysis and minimize subjective influence. In addition, the selected theoretical perspectives were used consistently to guide the interpretation of the findings and establish theoretical coherence. The interview data were examined systematically to identify patterns and recurring themes across participants' accounts. The researcher also verified the identified themes and interpretations through expert review to strengthen the credibility of the findings. These procedures were undertaken to ensure that the reported challenges and coping mechanisms accurately represented the participants' accounts and that the interpretations remained grounded in the collected data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Challenges and Problems of the Students in their Writing

There were several themes coded in the interviews from the participants. In the said interview, they were asked what problems or challenges they usually face in writing activities. There were few varied answers and other answers fitted together. They were asked for the reasons for their problems and challenges in terms of writing using the English language.

Table 1. Thematic Statements on Students' Challenges in English Writing

Theme	Thematic Statements
Lack of Vocabulary	- Words are not substitutable; there is a certain word for a certain purpose. (IN2, IN3) - Lack of Vocabulary (IN4) - Less confident in the usage of English terms (IN5) - Forgetting words and basic terminologies (IN6) - Incorrect usage of words (IN10)
Poor Grammar Usage	- Awareness of new learning like lexicons and others that were used in the sentences. (IN1) - There are sentence structures to be followed. (IN3) - Not confident with the grammar and unsatisfied because of not be able to do the best (IN5) - Wrong grammars are unavoidable (IN9)
Difficulty in Organizing oof thoughts/ideas	- Sometimes, there are patterns used in organizing. (IN1) - It is hard to organize thoughts; it's difficult to decide what to write first when there are lots of ideas inside the mind. (IN8, IN9) - Not really good enough in organizing of ideas (IN10)
Spelling Problems	In some words, having a difficult time in spelling. (IN3)
Absence of feelings, emotions and moods	- When mind is unable to think, there is also an inability to write; depends on the mood. (IN6) - Lack of emotions (IN9)

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha; ω = McDonald's omega.

3.1.1. Lack of Vocabulary

It refers to the lack of known words that limits the writer's ability to fully develop or specify ideas in written or spoken form. In second-language writing, limited vocabulary makes it harder to express intended meaning, choose appropriate words, and produce well-structured written texts (Viera, 2017; Karakoç & Köse, 2017). Participants described difficulty recalling and selecting appropriate English words to express their intended meanings, which is consistent with evidence that learners with limited vocabulary often struggle with word choice, repeat words, and rely on simpler language (Putri et al., 2022; Thùý et al., 2022). This challenge is especially relevant to second-language writing because vocabulary knowledge influences writing performance, lexical quality, and the writer's ability to convey ideas precisely (Dhuli et al., 2023; Karakoç & Köse, 2017). The participants' accounts similarly indicate that limited vocabulary can restrict idea formulation and lead to repeated or inappropriate word choices, a pattern also reported in studies of EFL learners' academic writing (Putri et al., 2022; Thùý et al., 2022). According to the IN2, he said that:

"Kasi ang mga words, hindi siya substitutable kung ano yung ideas na icompose mo... ano yung appropriate dun na word, yun pag-aralan mo din yun siya." (Personal Communication, IN2)

The answer of N2 was then in congruence to the statement of IN3 when she stated:

"There are cases that I cannot ... I cannot...I cannot convey my ideas but there is that proper word." (Personal Communication, IN3)

Both IN2 and IN3 expressed that words have their own distinct meanings and cannot be substituted. They said that every word has its own purpose and one idea has an equivalent of one proper

word to use. Moreover, IN10 shared her thoughts too when she was asked the same question. She answered:

“The usage because sometimes, there is a tendency that there s another form of words or meanings that is not abbb fit with my....” (Personal Communication, IN10)

Same problem was identified with the statement of IN10, in which words may be misused and does not fit the meaning of the thoughts he wants to convey; thus it was caused by lack of vocabulary. In addition to that, IN4 and IN5 expressed that:

“abhhmmn, specially the breath of ano... vocabulary. Vocabulary... if you lack in vocabulary” (Personal Communication, IN4)

*“I’m not confident with my vocabulary.”
(Personal Communication, IN5)*

The participants’ experiences also suggest that vocabulary difficulty involves more than simply knowing individual words. Students reported having to consider the meaning and appropriateness of particular terms before using them in writing. This indicates that limited lexical knowledge may increase the cognitive demands of composing in a second language. Huy (2015) likewise associated vocabulary difficulties with problems in understanding and recalling words across the first and second languages. These findings suggest that strengthening students’ vocabulary resources is an important component of supporting their English writing development.

3.1.2. Poor Grammar Usage.

Participants reported difficulties with sentence construction, grammatical patterns, and the application of English rules. These difficulties fit the broader evidence that second-language writing requires learners to manage grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and organization at the same time (Hikmatovna, 2026; Iswati, 2025; Raslee et al., 2022). Their confusion about applying grammatical structures is also consistent with studies showing that EFL learners repeatedly struggle with complex sentences, including subject–verb agreement, tense consistency, fragments, and run-on sentences (Nurdin et al., 2026; Mishu & Jaashan, 2025; Tongsukkaeng & Fangsaken, 2026). Increased awareness of grammar and vocabulary does not automatically remove errors, because learners often know rules in isolation but still fail to transfer that knowledge into actual writing (Nurdin et al., 2026; Mishu & Jaashan, 2025; Fitrawati & Safitri, 2021). This supports the need for sustained, contextualized grammar instruction integrated with writing, rather than rule memorization alone (Nurdin et al., 2026; Mishu & Jaashan, 2025; Li, 2026; Marjokorpi, 2023).

One of the participants said that:

“as I learn... I learned na marami din akong hindi natutunan... so parang specially sa mga lexicality.. gyan.. grammar..”

Also:

“And so basic palang yung alam namin so when sir introduces another.. ano... another .. ano ba..yang patterns or system, parang abbb ganon..parang.. marami pa pala talaga kaming hindi alam.. so yun.. parang mashock pa kami pero, ganon pala... we continue to learn.” (Personal Communication, IN1)

She expressed that the more awareness of English rules in writing or making sentences, there will be more confusion as to how she will be able to write sentences with correct usage. She said that their teacher introduces another rule or lesson about English grammar, she was able to understand but still faces difficulty in writing, specifically with the use of grammar. The statement of IN3 expressed that:

“if you want to excel in writing...you have to... you have to study the rules, you have to study the structures.”(Personal Communication, IN3)

As a result to what IN1 said, IN3 affirmed that as the lesson was given, one only had to study the structures in order to excel in the field of writing. N5 had answered about confidence in grammar when she was asked the same questions. This is what she answered:

“I’m not confident with my grammar, with my vocabulary, and ahmn, I’m not really that satisfied in everything that I do regarding English language when I got to use that in writing poems, or in speech like that... I know there are a lot of things ahmn that are, that were made ahmn, or mistaken or ahmn what do you call this one... I’m not able to do my best in all these things.” (Personal Communication, IN5)

It was concluded in her answer that if one lacks vocabulary so as poor in using the English grammar, there is tendency that one confidence in writing decreases. With the use of grammar, IN3 concluded that:

“Of course, you cannot really ano.... Of course you cannot really ahmn, you cannot... ahmn, you cannot ahmn,... di mo maiwasan ate yung mga wrong grammar, cause... yeah you cannot really.. that.” (Personal Communication, IN9)

She concluded that in writing English, committing wrong grammar is unavoidable. Therefore, the more awareness of the sentence structures and elements, the more they think that this sentence must contain such elements to say that there is a correct grammar usage. Also, the sentence structures are significantly needed to follow the rules in writing using the English language. Sometimes, if there is unawareness of the structures or other elements of the sentences, there is a big possibility that one will not be confident and doubtful of one’s work.

3.1.3. Difficulty in organizing thoughts/ideas.

Students described difficulty sequencing and structuring ideas before and during writing, including uncertainty about what to present first and how to connect ideas into a text (, 2023; Bisriyah, 2022; Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022). This pattern is consistent with broader L2 writing evidence showing that organization, coherence, and linking sentences are common problem areas for EFL and ESL learners (, 2023; Fareed et al., 2016; Bisriyah, 2022; Plakans & Gebril, 2016). The participants’ accounts also suggest that organization is not just generating ideas, but selecting, arranging, and connecting them into coherent writing, which aligns with research showing that cohesion and textual connection are significant predictors of essay organization and overall writing quality (Tabari et al., 2024; Crossley et al., 2016; He, 2020). This supports the value of prewriting strategies that help learners visualize relationships among ideas before drafting, since prewriting is designed to generate and organize ideas, and outlining or visual diagramming can help writers sort ideas into a logical sequence for later drafting (Lu et al., 2019; Hung & Van, 2018).

In parallel to this, the one reason that challenges the students in organizing thoughts is when they cannot put ideas into words. IN9 expressed that:

“maybe it’s when ah, the most challenging one, ahmn, it’s ahmn, when you have a lot of things in your mind but you really cannot put it into words, because you don’t know what to write first or... yeah what to write first, because ahmn, there’s just a lot of things in your mind.” (Personal Communication, IN9)

She expressed that over-flowing ideas may confuse her in writing to which one to write first. IN8 said that it is better to write than to use English in speaking. She supported the argument of IN9. She admitted that:

“organizing of thoughts, kasi minsan it’s really hamn, hard to abmn organize your thoughts, abh and especially when you’re writing it; in writing you can think deeper, mas makapag-iisip ka ng maayos...” (Personal Communication, IN8)

As a result, students are having a difficult time in coordinating their thoughts into a form which shows clarity and organized flows of ideas and events. To learn more specially the patterns of writing students must have an organized the ideas in accord. With this, there is one of the interviewees who had a hard time dealing with patterns to organize her thoughts. IN1 expressed that:

“organizing thoughts ... kasi paminsan di ba may ano ba yon.. pattern.. then yon...” (Personal Communication, IN1)

3.1.4. Spelling problems.

Participants reported difficulties with spelling unfamiliar or complex English words. Although this issue was less frequently reported than some other challenges, it remains an important aspect of written accuracy. Al-Zuoud and Kabilan (2013) and Lakshmi (2019) identified several common spelling difficulties among English learners, including substitution, omission, addition, and transposition or disordering of letters. Among these, substitution and omission are frequently observed, often resulting from learners’ unfamiliarity with the correct spelling of English words. Such difficulties may lead students to omit or replace letters when they are uncertain about the intended word form.

Spelling difficulties may also extend beyond accuracy and affect students’ confidence and overall writing quality. Daffern and Mackenzie (2020) noted that learners may have limited strategies for spelling unfamiliar words and consequently experience reduced confidence in writing. Similarly, Sultani and Himat (2021) found that spelling problems can negatively influence sentence construction and overall written performance. These findings suggest that difficulties with spelling unfamiliar words may not only hinder mechanical accuracy but may also constrain learners’ ability to express their ideas effectively in written English. IN3 admitted that:

“of course the spelling, even though you are in this year, you really have some difficulty... having a difficult time in spelling...” (Personal Communication, IN3)

Therefore, having hard time in spelling holds one back from writing effectively.

3.1.5. Absence of feelings, emotions and moods.

Participants emphasized that effective writing, particularly creative and expressive writing, requires the ability to communicate emotions and personal experiences. They perceived writing as more meaningful when ideas and emotions could be conveyed clearly to readers, and expressive writing with stronger emotional involvement and more personal, integrated narratives is associated with better outcomes (Mordechay et al., 2021). The participants’ accounts therefore extend the discussion of writing difficulties beyond linguistic accuracy to include the affective dimension of written expression, which is recognized alongside linguistic and cognitive dimensions in EFL writing research (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Hamdani & Abid, 2025). Taken together, the themes suggest that students’ writing difficulties are multidimensional, involving linguistic resources, cognitive processes, and affective factors that interact in shaping written performance (Hamdani & Abid, 2025; Bulqiyah et al., 2021). IN6 expressed this attitude in writing. She shared that:

“Yes... I have.. I have ... i-I have a chal... I have ...yes, I do have a challenge in facing, ayy in writing like...if ... if my mind is not really on thinking anything, I won’t be able to write anything too. So, depends on my mood; if i... pour my mind into it, I would just ... and then, when I start writing it will gradually continue...” (Personal Communication, IN6)

Being full of emotions can boost students' writing abilities but it sometimes challenges them when they are lacked on it. Thus, worth reading writing output can be gained with the use of overflowing emotions. IN9 admitted that:

"sometimes I abmn have these days that I cannot write... because I am abmn being emotionless or I'm having abmn, I, I, abmn I'm lacking some emotions..." (Personal Communication, IN9)

Indeed, these few identified themes are the most challenging part that the students encounter in doing a writing activity. That these following challenges prevent them to write something thoughtful, full of emotions, idealistic, factual, and visually conveyed writing products.

3.2. The Coping Mechanisms of the Students to Address the Problems and Challenges in Writing

In order to gather the answer in the second research question, the same interviewees have been interviewed on how they overcome the challenges in writing. In the process, themes were identified with the thematic statements connected to it. Here is the table below.

Table 2. Coping Mechanisms Employed by Students in Addressing Writing Challenges

Coping Mechanisms	Thematic Statements
Reading Books and Watching English Movies	• Reading different kind of books for vocabularies • and organization of thoughts. (IN2, IN3, IN4, IN5, IN8) • To help enhance knowledge in English. (IN4)
Browsing Dictionaries	• Skimming and scanning the dictionary for • vocabularies and unfamiliar terminologies. (IN5, IN6, IN7, IN10)
Deep Studying with Application of Knowledge	• For understanding and knowing the patterns • and other essential things (IN1, IN3) • □ For retention of learning (IN1, IN2)
Drafting Outlines	• For much more organized writing output (IN9))
Focus/Brainstorm and Feel the nature	• For the ability to think in order to write • something continuously. (IN6) • To produce an output full of sense and • emotions. (IN9)

3.2.1. Reading Books and Watching English Movies.

It is an essential theme considered as a coping mechanism activity that helps students deal with writing challenges, as students report extensive reading and reading more publications as strategies that support idea development and academic writing (Asnas et al., 2022). Books also provide learners with broad word exposure, since reading novels exposes students to a wider range of vocabulary, including idioms, expressions, and descriptive terms beyond traditional textbooks (Tan, 2025). Thus, reading books contributes to broadening vocabulary, and stronger reading habits are associated with better academic writing performance (Atayeva et al., 2019). According to IN2:

"by reading... L... sometimes by reading nakakakuha ako ng mga ano... vocabulary, and then... by using it even more... mas ano, mas nadadagdag ko siya, mas nareretaing ko siya sa mind ko...tas mas narerecall ko siya, mas nagagamit ko siya,.. mas dumadami jung vocabulary na pwede kong magamit." (PersonalCommunication, IN2)

She expressed that reading books will help her gain more vocabularies to help her convey her thoughts clearly with the right terms to use. That by reading and using new terms will retain in her memories and helps her to gain more vocabularies. It was then agreed by the statement of IN3 that:

"I read and read... I read a lot because if you want to excel in writing, you also have to read; I excel in writing when I read a lot of books just like novels... different books, even magazines..." (Personal Communication, IN3)

It was supported by the statement of IN4 and IN5 that reading truly helps them to address lack of vocabulary. Thus, this is what they conveyed:

'abb, reading books at home, then watching ano... English movies, cause it can help you understand what they are saying..." (Personal Communication, IN4)

Also:

"abmn, reading a lot of books," (Personal Communication, IN5)

By reading lots of books, it will help them not only in feeding their minds with vocabulary but also in helping them to learn on how they could effectively organize their ideas. Moreover, reading books is not the only way to help them learn more terminologies used to convey their thoughts. This coping mechanism does not only address the lack of vocabulary problem but also the challenge in organizing thoughts. Thus, it was testified by the statement of IN8 when she said that:

"I read and read.... Lagi akong nagbabasa ng yang mga books, especially yung mga fictions to organize my ideas in my mind, and to gain more information, to gain more knowledge about what I- I ... to what I will be able to write." (Personal Communication, IN8)

IN4 said that she could also overcome her problems by leisurely enjoying herself in watching English movies. She gained ideas on how she could possibly organize her thoughts and learn new terminologies because of the language used in the movies. Both IN4 and IN7 have same coping mechanism, as they share:

"abb, reading books at home, then watching ano... English movies, cause it can help you understand what they are saying..." (Personal Communication, IN4);

"yes, I love reading dictionaries... and ...especially when I am watching movies ... hollywood movies, we can't deny that American movies uses, use abmn, the abmn, highfalutin words and I always have a dictionary in my side.!" (Personal Communication, IN7)

Participants described reading as a means of expanding vocabulary and observing how ideas and sentences are organized. Jones (2011) emphasized the importance of reading in developing knowledge and language-related skills, while Atkinson-Cornthwaite (2012) reported that reading can contribute to vocabulary development and improved sentence construction. Participants also identified English-language movies as a useful source of vocabulary exposure. Sabouri et al. (2015) similarly reported that watching movies, particularly with subtitles, can facilitate vocabulary learning by exposing learners to words in meaningful contexts.

3.2.2. Browsing Dictionaries.

Another coping mechanism identified is browsing dictionaries, which helps students address writing challenges related to limited vocabulary, and students commonly rate dictionary use as a helpful strategy in academic writing (Mustafa et al., 2022). Browsing dictionaries involves consulting word meanings when unfamiliar terms are encountered, and dictionary use has been shown to facilitate vocabulary comprehension and improve vocabulary learning beyond contextual guessing (Chen, 2012; Zhang et al., 2020). In this sense, dictionary use serves as an immediate lexical support strategy, because learners facing vocabulary limitations and difficulty using new words can rely on dictionaries to expand word knowledge while writing (Mustafa et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). According to IN7:

"I have some coping mechanism... abmn, finding a... a certain word in the dictionary; I find it very effective abmn, dictionary helps me gain my vocabulary... yes..." (Personal Communication, IN7)

“It was then supported by the statements of IN5, IN6, and IN10:

—I use a dictionary, sometime a marriam websters to help me to a... abh, understand the words that is not familiar or....” (Personal Communication, IN10)

“abmn, reading a lot of books, yes and aside from that, dictionary as well.” (Personal Communication, IN5)

“yes, I usually ... abmn, I usually seek an advice from the dictionary... I find it useful... because the dictionary has the synonyms and the antonyms for the words.” (Personal Communication, IN6)

“yes, I love reading dictionaries... and ... especially when I am watching movies ... holly wood movies, we can’t deny that American movies uses, use abmn, the abmn, highfalutin words and I always have a dictionary in my side.” (Personal Communication, IN7)

These interviewees came with the same thought that dictionaries provide words that helps them express their ideas in much detailed manner. IN6 agreed that having dictionaries around will really ease the challenges for it provides synonyms and antonyms of a certain word. Also, IN7 shared that using dictionaries can help you understand word not just words in books but also in movies. Along with this, IN5 also practices browsing dictionaries to aid his problems in writing.

3.2.3. Deep Studying and Application of Knowledge.

Reading is a form of learning and studying, and it is a common coping strategy students use to address writing difficulties, especially for developing ideas and finding references (Asnas et al., 2022). Reading also supports writing more broadly because instruction and increased interaction with text improve overall writing performance, including writing quality and spelling (Graham et al., 2017). In addition, students reported that overcoming writing problems requires not only learning through reading but also applying and practicing writing itself, as writing exercises were identified as a coping strategy that helps facilitate the writing process (Asnas et al., 2022). They affirmed that:

“since given the materials...so, ano.. hindi lang siya nakatambak ... and then it doesn’t mean na hindi na ikaw yung reporter hindi mo na din stadiban yan.. so you need to study para mas maintindihan mo siya.. and then you need to apply...” (Personal Communication, IN1)

“by using it even more... mas ano, mas nadadagdag ko siya, mas nareretaing ko siya sa mind ko...tas mas narerecall ko siya, mas nagagamit ko siya,.. mas dumadami yung vocabulary na pwede kong magamit.” (Personal Communication, IN2)

“.. if you want to excel in writing...you have to... you have to study the rules, you have to study the structures,” (Personal Communication, IN3)

Participants described studying difficult areas and applying what they had learned as a means of improving their writing. Their responses suggest that they did not view studying as sufficient by itself; rather, they recognized the importance of applying acquired knowledge to actual writing tasks. This finding highlights the role of repeated practice and application in developing greater familiarity with language patterns and writing conventions.

3.2.4. Drafting outlines.

This is a coping mechanism in which students lay down their ideas before writing and arrange them in a more sequential order (Muñoz-Luna, 2015). Outlining is also used to organize thoughts more clearly, and students report that it helps them organize and express their ideas better on paper (Marmita et al., 2023). It therefore functions as a pre-writing strategy that supports writing preparation, because outlining helps students organize ideas more easily and systematically before the main writing task (Hung & Van, 2018). IN9 declared that:

“I write everything down and after that I try to organize them abmn sequentially and... yeah, it’s like I do the drafting first and I just... I’ll just rewrite it afterwards.” (Personal Communication, IN9)

Participants used outlines to organize ideas before producing a written output. This strategy directly corresponds to the difficulty in organizing thoughts identified earlier. Dean-Rumsey (1998) found that drafting and revising can support students' ability to organize their ideas. In the present study, outlining provided students with a structured means of determining what information to include and how ideas should be sequenced before completing the final written product.

3.2.5. Focus/ Brainstorm and feel nature.

A focused mind is important for effective writing because maintaining focus supports coherence, clarity, and the logical connection of ideas throughout a text (Manik & Harahap, 2025). Emotions also shape students' writing development, since positive and negative emotional states influence learning and writing performance, and students' ability to manage those emotions is tied to their writing development (Driscoll & Powell, 2016). Brainstorming helps students generate ideas, overcome mental blocks, and organize what they want to write before drafting, which supports more coherent and complete writing (Alemu, 2020). As IN6 affirmed:

"the coping mechanisms that I usually do... abmn, I tried to.. abmn, I tried to.. to.. to be focus on the things or on the topic, and tried to brainstorm so that I could really answer the... the writing... or the act...or write it well..." (Personal Communication, IN10)

Furthermore, to make it an effective writing outcome, one of the interviewees had said that there is a need of emotions to let the ideas flow and make an expressive writing. IN9 shared:

"I usually ... abmn I usually go out... abmn, feel the air or abmn... watch the sunset, because when you watch the sunset you... you would really abmn feel a lot of emotions... feel the emotions of course and also sunrise and sunset gives me a lot of emotions..." (Personal Communication, IN9)

Participants described focusing on the writing task and brainstorming ideas as strategies for sustaining the flow of ideas. Some participants also associated spending time outside or connecting with nature with reduced pressure and greater clarity when developing ideas. The responses indicate that students employ both task-oriented and personally meaningful strategies to manage writing difficulties. The reference to collaborative brainstorming is also consistent with Dean-Rumsey's (1998) observation regarding the potential value of collaborative work in improving writing-related tasks. Similarly, Diaz (2009) emphasized the relationship between experience, emotion, and creative expression in writing.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that students enrolled in English 211 encounter a range of linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges in English writing. The identified challenges include lack of vocabulary, poor grammar usage, difficulty organizing thoughts and ideas, spelling problems, and difficulty expressing feelings, emotions, and moods. These findings demonstrate that students' difficulties in second-language writing extend beyond grammatical accuracy to include the processes involved in generating, organizing, and meaningfully expressing ideas. The study further found that students employ varied coping mechanisms to manage these challenges. These include reading books and watching English movies, consulting dictionaries, studying and applying knowledge, drafting outlines, and focusing and brainstorming. The strategies reflect students' active efforts to address specific writing difficulties and improve their ability to produce meaningful written outputs. Overall, the findings emphasize that English writing is a multidimensional process that requires learners to draw on linguistic knowledge, cognitive resources, and personal strategies. The study highlights the importance of supporting students not only through direct instruction in vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and organization but also through strategy-based writing instruction that develops their capacity to independently manage writing difficulties. English instructors may therefore incorporate reading-based vocabulary development, contextualized grammar activities, prewriting and outlining, guided drafting, and opportunities for authentic English-language exposure into writing instruction. Future research may examine these challenges and coping mechanisms across larger and more diverse student populations to further establish their applicability across different second-language learning contexts.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to 10 students enrolled in English 211 (Writing Across the Disciplines) at the University of Southern Mindanao (USM), Kabacan, North Cotabato. The participants were selected to provide accounts of their experiences and challenges in English as a second language. Consequently, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to students from other courses, institutions, or educational settings. The study was also limited to participants' self-reported experiences gathered through interviews; therefore, the findings reflect their perceptions and reported coping mechanisms rather than objectively measured writing performance. Future studies may include a larger and more diverse sample and incorporate additional data sources, such as students' written outputs or classroom observations, to provide a broader understanding of challenges and coping mechanisms in second-language writing.

Supplementary Details

Supplementary Materials & Data availability statement:

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality considerations involving Grade 8 student participants.

Author Contributions:

Monaliza Caup Nawal: Conceptualization, methodology, participant recruitment, data collection, qualitative data analysis, interpretation of findings, writing—original draft preparation, and writing—review and editing. The author reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and accepts responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Necessary permissions were obtained from the concerned educational authorities and participating higher education institutions prior to data collection.

Informed Consent Statement:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to decline or withdraw from the study without penalty.

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Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Disclosure Statement:

The author disclosed that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist in editing the manuscript, particularly in improving language, grammar, clarity, and readability. AI tools were not used in the collection, analysis, interpretation, or generation of the study's findings. The authors reviewed, verified, and revised all AI-assisted edits and retain full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript and its contents.

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