

# Brainstorming Strategy in Developing Essay Writing Skills of Grade 9 English First Additional Language Learners

Thaba Ramokone Audrey<sup>1</sup>, Tsebe Wilfred Molotja<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*Department of Language Education, School of Education, University of Limpopo*

**Abstract:** Brainstorming is the automated act of making notes of ideas in preparation for the various stages of the writing process, and it poses a challenge to English First Additional language learners (Mohammed & Sadoon, 2020). This study aimed to investigate the use of brainstorming strategy to develop essay writing skills of Grade 9 English FAL learners. The qualitative study was guided by Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism Theory which emphasises collaborative learning. Thus, in this study, the teacher instructed learners to interact and share knowledge in their pre-writing to prepare them for other writing stages. Data were collected using three methods of data collection, namely, the semi-structured interview, document analysis, and observation. Permission was sought from parents of eight Grade 9 learners, where they were interviewed and written essays were analysed. Their EFAL teacher was also interviewed and their lesson observed. The findings show that learners struggle to brainstorm ideas for their essays, thus writing essays that have ineffective introductions, weak idea support, and poor conclusions. It was evident from learners' responses that they had difficulties with planning. Some of them did not plan before writing, while others did not follow ideas as outlined on the mind map. The implication is that learners' essay writing challenges were caused by not effectively being taught essay writing. Learners were only prepared to write formal tasks. They were rarely engaged with interactive learning strategies and did not practice writing on their own.

**Keywords:** Brainstorming strategy, pre-writing activity, essay writing skills, English First Additional Language Learners.

## 1. Introduction

Essay writing is a crucial skill as it allows learners to express their ideas and thoughts in written form and is linked to the process of language learning that allows learners to communicate effectively (Nassir & Nasser, 2018; Hidayati, 2018; Salma, 2019). Hence, Yuce, and Atac (2019) indicate that to successfully fulfil communication in essay writing, a learner must use the target language accurately, present, and organise ideas coherently. In agreeing with Hence et al. (2019), Amalia, Abdullah, and Fatimah (2021) stated that learners must know that essay writing involves not only the process of discovering ideas in the text but also to putting words on paper, choosing, and organising ideas by considering several components. But for learners to master the process of essay writing, more especially brainstorming, they should be taught, motivated, and regularly assessed on essay writing skill. Because learners who are not given the opportunity to generate ideas about the given topic usually face difficulties in writing comprehensive and logical sentences. It is important for teachers to give learners the necessary support during brainstorming and writing of the mind map. The CAPS document states that learners should brainstorm ideas for the topic using mind maps (DBE, 2011). Brainstorming is a pre-writing activity that facilitates the process of generating ideas and helps organise the learners' thoughts to get involved in writing. Using the brainstorming strategy in teaching and learning process can activate learners' prior knowledge, generate new ideas and interests, increase motivation, and stimulate thinking activities, and even influence learners psychologically (Abdianpour & Omidvari, 2018 cited in Handayani & Mantra, 2022; Rashtchi & Porkar, 2020).

However, there is a decline in the writing skills for second language learners, which calls for attention to how writing is taught (Ngubane, Ntombela&Govender, 2020). Many teachers in EFAL classrooms have limited understanding of the writing approaches and as such, they use inappropriate writing strategies in their classrooms (Dornbrack& Atwood, 2019 cited in Ngubane, Ntombela&Govender, 2020). Consequently, learners show a range of problems such as presenting essays with loose content, improper sequencing, and organisation of ideas (Oyedele, 2016). The poor organisation of ideas distorts the meaning learners put across. Again, Lele and Gqoli (2023) in their recent study revealed that teachers lack appropriate methods, the time spent in teaching essay writing is grossly inadequate, and they experience many challenges in reading and writing skills, which include, difficulty in motivating their learners, learners of diverse levels, difficult materials, and time constraints to teach the learners. In support of the above, Ahmed (2019) regards the process of writing as the most challenging skill to improve as it requires more time and attention. EFAL teachers also complain of having insufficient time to progressively teach and guide learners to improve their essay writing skills. This is evident in a study conducted by Salma (2019). Salma's findings reveal that essay writing skill is an effortless task for learners, and the researcher indicated that essay writing skills must be given more emphasize and practice in EFAL contexts. The language teachers, however, do not have adequate time to assist learners with writing practice in class (Akhater et al., 2019). Thus, learners encounter challenges in brainstorming and producing comprehensible essays. Therefore, it is important for this study to explore the brainstorming strategy in developing essay writing skills of EFAL learners, with the intention to conscientize stakeholders in education to collaborate to mitigate the problems learners face.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation is the base from which knowledge is constructed to build a research study (Grant &Osanloo, 2015). In other words, it is the plan that underpins the study. In this study, the researcher employed Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism Theory to guide it. Social Constructivism is a learning theory that states that learners experience, communicate, and comprehend reality through frameworks such as language and culture (Akpan et al., 2020). That is, learning how to write an essay is imparted using language interpreted and understood by experience and interaction within an EFAL classroom.

In this study, the social constructivism theory focuses on the learners' learning of the brainstorming strategy in essay writing to produce an essay that reveals effective idea generation, accurate language, good organisation, and adequacy of the contents of written texts. Learners are viewed as active co-constructors of meaning and knowledge. The theory emphasises the idea of guidance as it builds an EFAL teacher-learner relationship, seeks to engage learners in essay writing activities that are challenging but worth to be tried, and emphasises on assessment as an active process of revealing and equipping shared understandings (Adams, 2006). During the process of essay teaching and learning, what a learner grasps is crucial, and the teacher's role is to assist learners to achieve knowledge that is beyond their level through effective assessment. Mvududu and Thiel-Burgress (2012) established that constructivism as an educational theory emphasises that teachers must consider the learners' essay writing prior knowledge and build on it to allow them to use their knowledge in practice to produce an improved essay. Teachers ought to teach how to generate ideas and frequently engage learners into writing progressively more challenging texts.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding concepts associated with Vygotsky's theory are relevant to understand the learners' essay writing challenges and the suggested appropriate instructional support. ZPD was defined by Vygotsky (1978) as the distance between the actual developmental level determined by a learner working alone to solve a problem and the level of potential development determined through solving a problem guided by the teacher or in collaboration with capable peers. Scaffolding refers to the support and guidance provided to a learner by the teacher or a more knowledgeable other. The relationship between the two tenets is that as learners develop within their ZPD, they gain confidence to tackle writing tasks with the help of an educator or peers (scaffolding). Knowledge of the learners' ZPDs is of strategic importance. It has strong implications for how teachers use scaffolding techniques to enable learners to write better essays. Knowing the learners' ZPDs help maximise the learning opportunities so that learners can reach their maximum potential (Hashem, 2021).

Thus, the researcher maintains that teachers employ the ZPD and scaffolding to ensure that learners follow the writing steps. In the planning stage, learners should be grouped and given a topic. They must discuss the topic, share ideas, and write a mind map. By so doing, they would be interacting and learning from one another. Each learner should use the said mind map to write his/her first draft. Learners are expected to organise sentences logically to create coherent paragraphs appropriate for the essay written. They should exchange their drafts and assist each other to revise, edit, and proofread. Lastly, learners should then write their final essays.

Palincsar (1998) confirmed that Vygotsky introduced the ZPD concept as a primarily innovative approach to the issue that learning must be matched with the child's level of development. This means that the essay writing development occurs as learners learn the general content of an essay and processes that can be applied to new essay tasks and problems. Thus, the researcher contends that teachers should evaluate the learners' prior knowledge of essay writing, build on what they already know by grouping them, and allow them to interact and facilitate their learning. This might enhance their existing knowledge to enable them to appropriately plan by generating ideas before essay writing.

Fani and Ghaemi (2011) argued that for learners to reach full ZPD, they must have more social interaction. The learners' increased ZPD depends more on their effective social interaction to gain more knowledge and improve their essay writing skills when collaborating with others than working as individuals. As such, the theory and its tenets were relevant to this study. They assisted the researcher to outline the learners' challenges, causes, and remedial strategies to improve their essay writing skills. The study might provide teachers with a clear description of how to facilitate and mediate learning in EFAL classes to allow learners to actively participate and achieve their essay writing goals.

### **3. Problem Statement**

Numerous studies on essay writing show that learners are challenged with pre-writing stage of essay writing (Rahmawati, 2022; Alemu, 2020; Mohammed & Sadoon, 2020;). The studies show that learners encounter problems when required to systematically start to write a text; they get difficulties expressing their ideas in words or sentences; they tend to get bored and are less motivated to learn writing because pre-writing strategies in teaching writing are used rarely which are usually accompanied with a problem of idea generation, language inaccuracy, poor organisation and inadequacy of the contents of written texts that have significant effects on learners' proficiency writing. According to Alemu (2020), writing difficulties are not merely caused by the learners themselves, but they can be also caused by the varied and uninteresting techniques the teachers used in teaching writing, and also time constraints, whereby teachers tend to set aside the importance of pre-writing especially if they need to cover a syllabus over a short period of time. Learners are not provided with sufficient opportunities to write essays in the classroom (Mhlongo, Pillay & Maphalala, 2018). Hence, the study identified the existing gap that learners are struggling to brainstorm essays in the EFAL classroom. This study therefore seeks to investigate brainstorming strategy in developing essay writing skills of grade 9 learners, with the notion of Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement in mind that states that the senior phase is, to most unfortunate learners, the end of compulsory education. After grade 9, the majority of learners tend to seek job opportunities or follow vocational careers. Thus, it is crucial to ensure that learners at senior face are equipped with the skill to write as it will play an important role in their post-school adventures.

### **4. Significance of the Study**

The results of this study could provide an insight to various stakeholders in education about the importance of brainstorming strategy and the causes of the challenges experienced by learners in essay writing. The DBE could organise lengthy workshops to effectively train qualified teachers in English on the application of brainstorming strategy in developing learners' essay writing proficiency. This might also assist in reducing the lower performance rate in EFAL in the senior phase.

## 5. Research Questions of the Study

The study answered the following main research question,

- What challenges do Grade 09 learners experience in essay writing?

To fully answer the main research question, the study answered the following subsidiary questions.

- What are the causes of Grade 09 EFAL learners' essay writing challenges?
- What strategies are employed in the EFAL classrooms?

## 6. Method

### 6.1. Sampling

The research setting of this study is comprised of one rural, low enrolment secondary school located in Limpopo province. The sample of this study is comprised of learners whose home language is one of South African's languages such as Sepedi and Xitsonga. The sample included eight grade 9 learners between the age of 14 to 16 years, and their English language teacher. The homogenous purposive sampling was used because it is a form of purposive sampling, which allowed the researcher to sample the participants who share similar traits such as the participants' linguistic background and helped to generate the data appropriate to answer the research questions.

### 6.2. Data collection

The data was collected using the semi-structured interview, document analysis, and observation, which allowed the researcher to have face-to-face interactions with the participants.

- **Document analysis**

This strategy allowed the researcher to analyse the learners' written essays. The method was applied by giving learners an essay writing test. The essay type was an argumentative one titled; 'Education is key to success.' Their scripts were marked, and the researcher analysed them. Marking enabled the researcher to identify the challenges learners experience in brainstorming ideas for their essays.

- **Semi-structured interviews**

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and individually. The researcher interviewed the Grade 9 EFAL teacher to get an insight of how learners are taught, assessed, and how the teaching and learning process affects their essay writing skills. The researcher interviewed eight learners. The six learners are those who obtained level 1 (0-29%) and two who obtained level 4 (50-59%). The two learners were interviewed to ensure that those who obtained level 1 were not stigmatised. The learners were interviewed in English, but the researcher explained the questions in their first language (Sepedi HL). This helped learners to understand the questions, and hence express themselves effectively.

- **Observations**

The researcher observed the Grade 9 EFAL teacher and used the observation schedule to record her observations. This enabled the researcher to do an in-depth analysis of the teaching methods, and how they facilitated the Grade 9 learners' creativity and imagination in writing. The lesson took approximately 60 minutes. The teacher arranged a table for the researcher in front and this enabled the latter to observe the teacher's interaction with learners. The observation did not in any way disrupt the regular class activities. The researcher did not directly interact with the participants.

### 6.3. Data analysis

The thematic data analysis was used for the interview data, while the content analysis was used for both the document and observation data. The interview, observation, and documents provided different sets of data, and hence their data could not be appropriately analysed using the same technique.

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### 6.3.1 Thematic analysis

The researcher followed the thematic data analysis to analyse data as outlined by Castleberry and Nolen (2018). Phase one was data compiling. Here, the researcher familiarised herself with data. Transcribed the interview data into written form, read and re-read the data, and took notes of the initial ideas. The second phase disassembled data to generate initial codes. The researcher coded interesting features of the data in a systematic way across the entire data sets and, collected and combined data relevant to each code. The researcher organised the information in a clear and meaningful manner. Searched for themes, and collated codes into potential themes, and gathered all data relevant to each potential theme.

The third phase interpreted data. That is, themes were reviewed and checked whether they worked in relation to the coded extracts (phase 1) and the entire data set (phase 2), and then summary of the analysis was made. The researcher defined and named themes. She engaged in an ongoing data analysis to refine the specifics of each theme. The overall story of the analysis was expressed to generate clear definitions and names for each theme. The fourth phase concluded the whole process. That is, the researcher analysed data, extracted select examples, finalised the analysis of the selected extracts, and related the analysis to the research questions. Thereafter, a scholarly report of the analysis was produced.

### 6.3.2 Content analysis

#### a. Analysis of essay scripts

The researcher examined the learners' essay writing scripts, coded the emerging themes, and drew conclusions from the coded data. The following aspects were checked in the learners' essays: the generation of ideas in a mind-map, flow of ideas in sentences and paragraphs, which makes the reader understands the essay's main points and its structure (introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, and concluding paragraph) were checked. Learners were expected to approach the essay as a process. They were expected to follow the steps in essay writing, more especially pre-writing stage.

#### b. Analysis of observation data

The researcher analysed the field notes and arranged them into specific themes. This method of data analysis gave the researcher the opportunity to grasp and outline what took place during the lesson. This included issues the participants might not have mentioned during the interviews such as the lack of skills to teach essay writing as a process rather than a product. This method assisted the researcher to move beyond the perception based to grasp personal knowledge.

## 7. Discussion of the findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of brainstorming strategy of second language learners in essay writing. The following emerged during the analysis of data collected using the semi-structured interview, document analysis, and observations.

### 7.1 Data from documents

It was evident from learners' essays that they lacked the skill of brainstorming which affected their essays. They presented essays with ineffective introductions, weak support systems, and poor conclusions. It was found that learners' biggest problem was with following the ideas indicated in the mind map. Therefore, they struggled with paragraphing, especially the introductory part. Their ideas in all paragraphs were not connected to each other. Again, their scripts showed that their introductions lack striking points that grasp the reader's attention. Its errors hinder the flow of ideas.

### 7.2 Data from Observations

Brainstorming is part of the problem-solving strategy, which entails the generation of innovative ideas without judgment. It is the development of the learners' state of mind to solve problems by the free association of several ideas (ALRababah&Rababah, 2019). Brainstorming has a positive effect on developing the learners' creative writing skills in terms of content and organisation, mechanics of writing, language use, and creative

thinking abilities (fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration). It encourages learners to be actively involved in the learning process and express themselves freely in writing. Therefore, in this study, the researcher's observation shows that brainstorming is important in the learners' essay writing journey. During the lesson observation, the teacher encouraged learners to brainstorm in pairs. It was evident that brainstorming helped them to share ideas and learn from one another as working individually was a challenge to most of them. Learners were able to effectively brainstorm ideas in groups, which helped them to understand the topic. Concurrently, Rashtchi and Porkar (2020) declared that by employing brainstorming, teachers encourage learners to reflect on the topic and help them access several ideas.

Again, numerous researchers, Rashtchi and Porkar, (2020); Helen, Paul, and Hellen, (2020); Nugraha and Indihadi, (2019) stated that teachers who address the learners' complaints about the lack of ideas in writing use brainstorming to provoke their thoughts and encourage them to get started. That was how the teacher in the study got learners to plan their essays. The teacher effectively encouraged learners to work together to share ideas about the topic. This is also supported by the theory adopted in this study which emphasises learning through interaction in the classroom. However, despite the advantages attributed above, Rashtchi and Porkar (2020) mentioned brainstorming's disadvantages as the fear of being judged, feeling the pressure of following a particular line of thinking and losing motivation to work in groups could inhibit learners. However, Ibnian (2011) believed that the use of the brainstorming technique enables learners to generate ideas, exchange opinions, and crystallize new thoughts about the raised topics, and positively affect their performance. Brainstorming is part of the problem-solving strategy, which entails the generation of innovative ideas without judgment. It is the development of the learners' state of mind to solve problems by the free association of several ideas (ALRababah&Rababah, 2019).

### 7.3. Data from semi-structured interviews

#### 7.3.1 Learners' essay writing challenges

In a study conducted by Rababah, Alshehab, and Melhem (2017) indicated that during interviews, learners claimed that they are unable to stick to the essay topic because they had no idea how to do so. As such, it is important for teachers to thoroughly teach process writing to improve the learners' essay writing skills. Akram et al. (2020) support the above findings as they stated that learners write essays that have ineffective introduction, weak support systems, and poor conclusion. In this study, the participants were interviewed and indicated that,

Teacher P1

*I have observed that learners struggle with the use of relevant information that supports the topic. There is poor planning in writing. They fail to organise the ideas or events sequentially.*

Participant L2 gave her problem in this way,

*My problem is language. I usually do not understand the topic and I do not know how to write my ideas coherently.*

Participant L3 admitted thus,

*I struggle to write using the ideas I wrote on the mind-map.*

It is evident that learners face challenges to write essays due to the lack organisation of ideas to produce a comprehensible essay. Imelda, Cahyono, and Astuti (2019) maintained that learners experience dilemma in mastering writing due to the lack of knowledge in grammatical features and vocabulary items, and low motivation. Again the above responses of participants show that learners struggle to write coherent and cohesive essays because of lack of effective planning. Their sentences and paragraphs comprised of many cohesive errors that affected the meaning and development of ideas. Pablo and Lasaten (2018); Mustika and Adnan (2019); Akram et al. (2020) support the above findings as they stated that learners write essays that have ineffective introduction, weak support systems, and poor conclusion. Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) revealed that learners have difficulties with brainstorming which affects coherence. Their biggest problem was on paragraphing,



especially the introductory part. Their ideas in all paragraphs were not connected to each other. The learner's introductory paragraph lacks striking points that grasp the reader's attention. Its errors hinder the flow of ideas.

### 7.3.2 Causes of the challenges faced by learners

The writing skill is important to learners because it is the source of communication at school and in class, and a major factor in academic endeavours (Ahmed, 2019). According to Shuvra and Roy (2022), learners require various kinds of writing strategies to apply in class. Even so, the application of strategies needs to be aligned with practical work to make learners get used to writing. Consequently, insufficient practical work in class leads to writing challenges learners face. Again, Haland, Hoem, and Tigue (2021) emphasise that there is limited time devoted to writing, with 19% of teachers not giving learners opportunities to write texts in the classroom. In this study, learners also confirmed that they are not frequently given essay writing activities. They were asked how often they were given essay writing activities. They highlighted the following;

Participant L1 noted that,

*We are not taught how to write essays. I sometimes struggle to arrange ideas in a mind map. And we are not given enough essay writing activities. Most of the time we just write formal tasks without given an activity to practice writing.*

Participant L2 suggested that,

*I get nervous when I write and most of the time I run out of ideas*

Participant L4 explain that,

*I think it is because we are not taught in class.*

Participant L5 opined thus,

*We are not taught anything in class about writing essays. We do not practice writing on our own. The only time we write an essay is when we are given a task.*

Participant L6 responded thus,

*Not plotting the mind map before I start my essay.*

The teacher also confirmed that learners are not regularly taught and assessed in essay writing. She was asked of how often she teaches and assess learners.

Teacher P1 acknowledged that,

*Once in a term, learners are assessed on essay writing abilities guided by the annual teaching plan and the programme of assessment. And I teach them twice a week or twice every term. It depends on the workload because sometimes I have many workshops to attend so I do not have much time with my learners.*

The results suggest that teachers do not teach essay writing more often. An explanation for this could be that teachers have too much on their schedules to regularly attend their classes. They only prepare learners for task writing. The results also imply that the teacher sticks to the annual teaching plan and program of assessment when giving learners writing activities. This implies that learners are not given enough practical activities in class, thus they face challenges in writing. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that they teach and assess learners' essay writing skills. This is because the envisaged essay writing experience brings rural EFAL learners' knowledge of grammar rules and their application thereof under scrutiny (Mailula&Ngoepe, 2022). If learners are given an essay writing activity once a term, they will not master the essay writing skills to become competent and confident writers.

Ngubane (2018) observed that little writing practice takes place in EFAL classes. Rajesh (2017) established that writing is not taught in schools as most teachers perceive it as a difficult skill to teach. Peter and Singaravelu (2021) averred that teachers are not motivated to write impressively; thus, they lack the motivation to teach. Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) revealed that teachers admitted that they lack creativity to teach writing.

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#### 7.3.4 Teaching strategies used to teach essay writing

According to Fareed et al. (2016), teachers fail to impart effective writing skills and strategies to learners, thus learners encounter challenges in writing. In agreement, Imelda, Cahyono, and Astuti (2019) maintain that learners experience dilemmas in mastering writing due to the strain in writing that is caused by ineffective and outdated teaching strategies.

The teacher should implement a brainstorming strategy by encouraging learners to interact with others during the writing process. Learners should work in groups to share ideas about essays, their purpose, structure, language features, and the text type's register. Learners must grasp the importance of steps followed when writing essays to produce comprehensible texts.

Similarly, Nnamani et al. (2019) argued that the challenges learners encounter in essay writing could be traced to the poor teaching methods applied by teachers in EFAL classes. Teachers still use the traditional way of teaching, which does not activate the learners' eagerness to learn and actively participate in lessons. Below is what the teacher and learners stated when they were questioned about the strategies used to teach and learn essay writing.

Teacher P1 stated that,

*I use videos and photos to teach essay writing to draw a picture of what the essay is all about...I download pictures on the internet and use a projector for learners to see. My learners understand better through visuals.*

Participant 6 indicated that,

*I believe peer teaching could assist as we are too friendly when we are with our peers.*

The results show that teachers use various innovative strategies to teach essay writing in class. Doing so motivates learners as they become attracted to videos and photos displayed by the teacher. However, these strategies are not sufficient enough to equip learners with essay writing skills. It was also evident during lesson observation that the teacher used pictures and videos but lacked the skill to engage learners in her lesson delivery. Learners did not interact much throughout the writing process. The teacher should have used different teaching methods to help and motivate learners to write coherent and cohesive essays. Learners needed to master process writing, which would have assisted them in getting used to brainstorming ideas before writing, drafting, editing, and proofreading. The writing process is emphasized in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. It stipulates that writing instruction should involve working through the writing process, which means following steps such as planning, drafting, revising, editing, proofreading, and presenting (DBE, 2011).

#### 8. Conclusion

The study investigated brainstorming strategies in developing essay writing skills of grade 9 EFAL learners. The study revealed that learners lacked the skill of brainstorming which affected their essays. Some learners wrote essays without planning. Learners presented essays with ineffective introductions, illogical sentences and paragraphs, and poor conclusions. However, the researcher's observations showed that the teacher encouraged them to brainstorm in pairs, which helped them to share ideas and learn from one another. But it is evident that they still need more support and encouragement to implement and improve brainstorming and to follow process writing. Moreover, the findings are supported by Vygotsky's Social Constructivism Theory which states that learning how to write an essay is imparted using language interpreted and understood by experience and interaction within an EFAL classroom. Therefore, it is important for teachers to emphasize collaboration as learners engage in process writing, more especially brainstorming or pre-writing strategy. Teachers should be aware that learners can only become critical thinkers and write creatively if teachers are actively engaged in their writing process.



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