

## ESL Learners' Perceptions of the Use of Product Writing Approach: A Mixed-Methods Study

By

**Sayyed Rashid Ali Shah**

Galileo Institute of Learning & Development, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: [director@gild.pk](mailto:director@gild.pk)

**Ubaid Ullah Ubaid**

The Oxford School Dubai, UAE.

Email: [ubaidwahid@gmail.com](mailto:ubaidwahid@gmail.com)

**Dr Irfan Bashir**

University of Management and Technology, Pakistan.

Email: [irfanbashir@umt.edu.pk](mailto:irfanbashir@umt.edu.pk)

**Abdul Malik**

University of Management and Technology, Pakistan.

Email: [Abdul.malik@umt.edu.pk](mailto:Abdul.malik@umt.edu.pk)

### Abstract

The English as a second language (ESL) learners' ability to write a well-structured and cohesive piece of work is the ultimate goal of every English language pedagogy across the globe. To help teachers achieve the learning outcomes, the linguists and researchers have introduced several writing approaches. Among them, the product writing approach is the oldest and most commonly used method to teach writing skills in ESL contexts. However, researchers mainly overlooked to investigate the learners' perceptions of the use of the product writing approach in ESL contexts. Thus, the current study aims to investigate the ESL learners' perceptions of the use of the product writing approach and identify factors that impact the ESL learners' writing in the Pakistani ESL context. It employs a mixed-method approach by combining both quantitative and qualitative research designs. The quantitative data was collected from 200 ESL intermediate level (Grade- 12) learners enrolled in five different colleges. As part of the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five ESL learners. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data reveal that the ESL learners prefer to write on a given topic after developing familiarity with the topic through a model text. Moreover, they prefer to show their written tasks to their teacher for feedback rather than to their friends. The qualitative data indicates some additional factors, such as lack of motivation, L1 interference, lack of writing practice, memorisation, weakness in spelling, and lack of vocabulary that influence the learners' writing practice in the Pakistani ESL context.

**Keywords:** English as second language, product writing approach, mixed-methods, writing in English; intermediate level.

### 1. Introduction

Learning a second or foreign language in a classroom setting can be a daunting task. Teachers are often required to assess learners' needs, adopt appropriate teaching methodologies, and design materials that contribute to the learners' linguistic competence. In English as a second language (ESL) contexts, writing becomes significant as it is widely used for global mediation of knowledge

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(Mahboob, 2014; Mansoor, 2005; Marlina & Giri, 2014), and ESL learners' linguistic competence becomes subject to their improvement in their writing skills (Hyland, 2003). This competence in writing is depicted in learners' ability to write a well-structured, cohesive, logical and well-organized piece of writing that also shows a wide range of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and command over conventions in mechanics (Hall, 1988). According to Hyland (2002), "learning to write in a second language was mainly seen to involve developing linguistic and lexical knowledge as well as familiarity with the syntactic patterns and cohesive devices that form building blocks of texts" (p. 13)

The ESL learners' ability to write well is a desired outcome of any teaching and learning endeavor. Teachers employ various approaches to expose learners to different types of texts and help them develop their writing skills. The two most commonly used approaches are *product* and *process*, which require learners to use their cognitive skills by analyzing and synthesizing the sources and produce a compact piece of writing in the target language (Klimova, 2014). In early 1960s, schools had adopted a product approach to teach writing skills. Since 1980s, the focus has been on the process approach as it emphasizes on the process, whereas the product approach stresses upon the form and considered an obsolete teaching approach in contexts where communication, interaction, communicative competence, and student-centeredness have replaced more traditional teaching strategies.

Despite the fact that 21<sup>st</sup> century writing classrooms have developed a more balanced position by adopting top-notch pedagogies and eliminated traditional teacher-centered approaches (Carter & Nunan, 2001), in some teaching contexts, i.e. Pakistan, teachers tend to use traditional methods such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and product approach to teach structure and writing skills to second language (L2) learners (Ahmad et al., 2022). In classrooms with product approach to teaching writing skills, rules are introduced to students, text is provided for analysis and discussion, an outline is given to students based on the text which they complete individually, and comments are offered on the final product of the learners. Such classrooms are usually teacher driven where writing is based on imitation and manipulation of models provided by the ESL teachers (Isma-ard, 2020; Mirzaii, 2012). Richards (2002) named it a controlled composition approach, which includes activities, such as developing familiarity, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing. In addition, "activities based on controlled composition predominated during the period that sought to prevent errors and develop correct writing habits" (Richards, 2002, p. 21).

Product approach and controlled composition models dominated 1960s and 1970s, when traditional teaching methodologies, i.e., GTM, audiolingual methods were more common in language schools. The emergence of communicative approaches led to the introduction of a process approach to teaching writing which is "a complex, recursive and creative process that is very similar in its general outlines for first and second language writers: learning to write requires the development of an efficient and effective composing process" (Silva & Matsuda, 2002, cited in Richards, 2002, p. 261). Even though the process approach was widely accepted as the most effective substitute for the product approach, teachers still use the latter to develop ESL students' skills in writing personal letters, essays, emails, and stories. This approach is widely practiced and observed in the ESL context of Pakistan.

Pakistani schools and colleges generally adhere to traditional language teaching approaches and methodologies that often pose problems in developing their communicative competence. Despite being an official language of the country, English language is mainly taught through GTM in the Pakistani ESL context (Irfan et al., 2020; Mesti, 2020). Teachers with limited training and

understanding of communicative language teaching (CLT) practices in this context, rely on GTM while teaching grammar and vocabulary, and the product approach while teaching ESL writing skills. Since literature underscores the role of the process approach in developing writing skills of ESL learners and the product approach is considered less effective, the application of the latter may not be in line with the learners' needs, wants and interests. Although language teachers, curriculum designers and policy makers are mainly responsible for adopting the ESL curriculums, syllabi, and course books. Yet, the students' voices are ignored in this respect, it is important to explore the learners' views on the use of the product approach, and identify factors that influence the ESL learners' writing practice in the Pakistani context. Research in this area has largely compared the strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches to teaching ESL writing, and there is dearth of empirical evidence on the use, effectiveness, and suitability of the product approach in the Pakistani ESL context. Hence, this mixed-methods study aims to bridge that research gap and understand the research phenomenon from the ESL students' perspectives. This study has the following two research questions to answer:

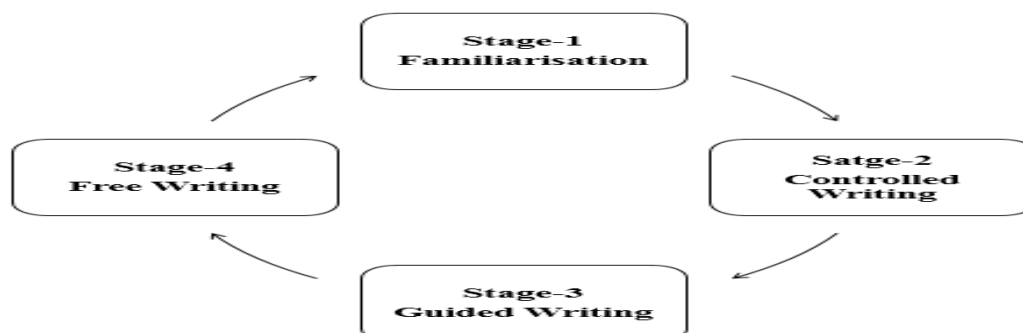
1. To what extent does product approach contribute to the development of the ESL learners' writing skills in the Pakistani context?
2. What factors might affect the learners' writing practice in ESL classrooms in the Pakistani context?

## 2. Literature review

### *Product Writing Approach*

The product writing approach is one of the most extensively used methods in schools and colleges worldwide (Palpanadan et al., 2014). The main aim of this approach is to encourage learners to produce the end product in the shape of an essay or a letter etc. It also aims to provide some linguistic knowledge to the learners to improve their linguistic competence. Consequently, learners just imitate some basic sentences to develop familiarity with the main topic (Palpanadan et al., 2014). Gabrielatos (2002) stated that a "product approach encourages students to mimic a model text" (p. 5). Further, Harmer (2015) explained that the focus of the product approach is the end product, rather than an ongoing process. For instance, the teacher shows a model in the shape of a text, and the learners are required to mimic the model to reproduce a similar composition. The learners' ability to write is measured through consistent and correct spellings, organization, and accurate grammar (Nunan, 2003). Moreover, product writing works well in exam-oriented classrooms in which the students' test scores are measured through the completion of a task.

The product writing approach is theorized by Steele (2015) who suggested four stages as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Steele (2015) Product writing model

Stage-1. Familiarisation: In stage one, the learners are given a model text and certain vocabulary and grammatical rules are taught given in the text. For instance, if the learners are learning a formal letter, first their attention is drawn to the grammar, paragraphing, and the kind of language should be used for making a formal request. In addition, if the topic is reading a story, the students should be asked to focus on techniques used by the writer to make the story more interesting.

Stage-2. Controlled writing: During this stage, the learners are asked to highlight the main features used in the text. The learners may be asked to practice certain language items that are used for making formal requests, such as “I would be grateful...” structure (Hasan & Akhand, 2010, p. 78).

Stage-3. Guided writing: During this stage, the learners reproduce the given text. The worth is given to the organization of the ideas and the control of the learned patterns (Isma-ard, 2020).

Stage-4. Free writing: This is the final stage where the end product is reproduced individually by the students. In this stage, the students use previously learned vocabulary and structures. Thus, the student’s fluency and competence in writing are evaluated.

Although product writing is considered a “traditional approach” (Gabrielatos, 2002, p. 5), it has some advantages for ESL learners.

First, this approach is easy to use in large-size classrooms. Research illustrates that this approach is teacher-centered (Isma-ard, 2020; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2003). However, Palpanadan et al. (2014) claimed that in a large classroom, the teacher’s response plays an important role due to the time and syllabus constraints. Further, Isma-ard (2020) pointed out that this approach offers the opportunity to the students to learn vocabulary and sentence structures from the work marked by their teacher.

Second, this method of writing is very beneficial for lower-level learners. Tangpermpoon (2008) claimed that “students at a lower level can learn how to write systematically from using pattern-product techniques” (p. 3). According to the experience of the authors, this method seems to be beneficial for learners who have a small bank of vocabulary and have minimal grammar knowledge. Similarly, Hyland (2003) asserted that this approach is commonly used to scaffold and develop the writing skills of lower-level learners.

Although the product writing approach has many advantages, it also has several limitations. For instance, it focuses on the imitation of texts which leads to the lack of creativity. Similarly, researchers believe that by replicating model texts, learners may lose their creativity and critical thinking (Hashemnezhad, 2012; Li, 2007; Tong, 2007). As a result, this replication method may lead learners to plagiarise others’ work in the future (Palpanadan et al., 2014). It may also deny the learners’ ability to self-expression while writing (Tickoo, 2003).

Previously, researchers mainly focused on the comparison of product, process, and genre writing approaches. For example, in the Malaysian ESL context, a comparative study of the product-process approach was conducted by Palpanadan, Anthony, Ngadiran, and Shahar (2019) among ESL teachers. The results revealed that teachers primarily applied the product writing approach compared to the process approach. However, the respondents reported that process writing approaches were more beneficial for the learners because it provided learners

with more opportunities for evaluative writing, creative writing, and independent writing.

A similar study was carried out in the Saudi Arabian EFL context by Alnufaie and Grenfell (2012) among 121 undergraduates. The data was collected through a questionnaire on the comparison between product and process writing strategies. It was assumed that the learners followed the product writing approach; however, 95.9% of the participants reported that they were mixing both process and product approaches while writing in English.

Hasan and Akhand (2010) conducted an experimental study to explore the effects of process and product writing approaches on the Bangladeshi ESL learners at the university level. One group of students was asked to follow the product writing approach and the other was instructed to follow the process approach in writing. After that, both approaches were mixed in both classes. The results revealed that the combination of both process and product approached better facilitated the learners' writing skills.

A quasi-experimental study was conducted by Parveen et al. (2018) in the Pakistani ESL context, which aimed to examine the effectiveness of the process, product, and genre writing approaches on intermediate-level learners. The intervention was done for 3.5 months by applying different activities. Pre- and post-tests were conducted. The results revealed that the genre approach had more positive effects on the learners' writing skills than other approaches.

It is obvious that research studies have mainly focused on the comparison between product, process, and genre approaches in different ESL/EFL contexts. Due to the content-based examination system, the product writing approach is widely used in developing countries like Pakistan. However, researchers have overlooked the learners' perception about the use of the product writing approach inside the classroom. Moreover, after a comprehensive literature review, the authors could not find a questionnaire on the students' perception of the use of the product approach. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the Pakistani ESL learners' perception of the use of product-based approach and identify factors that impact the ESL learners' writing in the Pakistani ESL context inside the classrooms.

### ***Factors Affecting Learners' English Writing skills***

Previous research found that a number of that numerous factors hinder ESL learners' writing skills. Fareed et al. (2016) stated that in the Pakistani ESL context writing in English is not given much value. Further, Fareed et al. (2016) found that several factors that hindered the writing skills of ESL students such as the examination system which does not encourage creative writing, writing anxiety, L1 interference, untrained teachers, outdated teaching style, lack of writing practice, large classrooms, lengthy courses, lack of peaceful environment, outdated courses, lack of motivation to write, lack of ideas, lack concentration, and lack of topic familiarity. Hasani (2016) found that learners writing skills were influenced by students' background knowledge, outdated teaching methods, crowded classrooms, lack of teaching facilities, lack of feedback on learners' written tasks, lack of writing practice, and lack of motivation. In another study, Alfaki (2015) found that students' writing was affected by lack of practice of the writing habit among learners, lack of creative writing activities, and lack of free writing opportunities. Sarwat et al. (2021) that an array of factors hinder the English writing skills of the learners. These factors comprised the right use of tense, poor spellings, lack of vocabulary bank, and difficulties in the use of passive and conditional sentences. The interviews with teachers were also conducted. The majority of the teachers expressed that the learners face problems due to a lack of knowledge about prepositions, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. The teachers also reported that lack of teaching facilities, overcrowded classrooms, and due to the limited time in

the class the teachers do not have time to give constructive feedback on the students' written work which influence their writing skills. Some of the teachers also responded that social circumstances do not allow learners to practice writing in English. Other teachers responded that they are unaware of the use of modern teaching methodology.

### **3. Research method**

The current study employed a mixed method approach by combining quantitative and qualitative research designs. Montoya and Lugo-Ocando (2020) stated that a mixed method design is the combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to uncover the reality. Plano-Clark and Ivankova (2016) defined mixed method research as “the intentional integration of quantitative and qualitative research approaches to better address a research problem” (p. 57). The combination of both designs increases the validity of the undertaken research. It also gives an in-depth understanding of the researched phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The mixed method design helped the researchers to achieve a deeper understanding of the ESL learners' regarding the use and effectiveness of product writing approach in the Pakistani ESL context.

#### ***Participants***

The current study recruited 200 intermediate level (Grade-12) students from five different colleges in the Swabi district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. These participants were learning English as a compulsory subject from the primary level (Grade-1). Their ages ranged from 17 to 19 years. The participants' informed consent was sought via email. The aims and scope of the study were shared with the participants via email, and they were informed to withdraw their participation at any stage of the study. Out of 200 students, 150 responded to the questionnaire. In the second phase of the study, 10 students were reached out to confirm their availability for the interviews on the same topic; however, only five of them expressed their interest in the interviews.

#### ***Instruments***

After the extensive literature review, the researchers could not find a questionnaire on the learners' perceptions using the product writing approach in ESL contexts. Consequently, the authors developed and validated a questionnaire on the product writing approach. First, the items were designed according to the different stages of product writing. Second, keeping in mind the proficiency level of the students, the authors tried to construct unambiguous, concise, and simple items. Zikmund et al. (2003) stated that the items of a research tool should be concise, unambiguous, simple, attractive, and according to the objectives of the study. Third, the searchers determined the content validity of the questionnaire. In the content validity of an instrument, the judgment of the expert plays a vital role (Pamuk et al., 2015). Gable and Wolf (2012) believed that a minimum of two experts are required to evaluate the content validity of a research tool. Resultantly, two experts in the field were involved in the validity process. The experts examined the structure and appropriateness of the wording of the questionnaire. Finally, the reliability of the questionnaire was established using Cronbach's alpha. The results revealed that the alpha value of the questionnaire was  $\alpha=.90$  considering it a highly reliable instrument.

#### ***Data collection***

The data were collected in two phases through purposive sampling method. In phase one, a survey questionnaire was administered among the respondents to collect quantitative data. Prior to the data collection, permission to collected data from the students was sought from college administrators in the district. Similarly, the participants' agreement was sought through a consent form. The participants took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete the online questionnaire. In phase two, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants to gather qualitative

data. Each interview lasted for 20-35 minutes. The interviews were recorded on iPhone 13 ProMax. To ensure the participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used to refer to their views. The recorded files and the interview transcripts were deleted after completing the analysis stage.

### **Data Analysis**

This study combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze the data. The quantitative data was analyzed through mean and standard deviation using SPSS version 25. The qualitative data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach by following the guidelines by Creswell (2012) and Saldaña (2009). In the first stage, open coding was done that produced 150 initial codes. Identical codes were put together that reduced the number to 70 codes in the second stage. The third stage involved developing 12 categories out of 70 codes, which led to the emergence of four overarching themes in the final stage: a) Developing learners' schema about the topic; b) Learning from standard texts; c) Teacher's feedback; and d) Influential factors

## **4. Quantitative Results**

This section presents the results obtained from the questionnaire.

Table 1 shows the ESL learners' perceptions of using the product writing approach. It is evident that writing in English was easy for the learners in some situations i.e., when they got familiar with the topic prior to writing ( $M=4.424$ ) when they organized their ideas prior to writing ( $M=4.032$ ), when imitating from a model text ( $M= 4.124$ ), and when helped by the teacher during writing ( $M= 4.345$ ). On the other hand, writing was difficult for them in some situations, such as when they were writing individually ( $M=2.789$ ) and when their work was evaluated by a friend ( $M= 2.654$ ). Moreover, writing was neither easy nor difficult for the learners when they learned vocabulary ( $M= 3.354$ ), grammatical rules ( $M=3.023$ ), or when they focused on spellings during writing ( $M=3.365$ ), highlighted the main features in the text ( $M= 3.456$ ), practiced the verbs used in the text ( $M=3.256$ ), and when writing tasks were evaluated by the teacher ( $M=3.256$ ). It shows that the informants had mixed views regarding the product writing approach in ESL classrooms in the Pakistani context.

**Table 1.** *The ESL learners' perception of the product writing approach.*

	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Deviation</b>
1	Writing in English is easy when I learn the vocabulary given in the text.	3.354	.998
2	I write in English confidently when I learn the grammatical rules given in the text.	3.023	1.084
3	When I get familiar with the topic, it is easy for me to write in English.	4.424	.785
4	During writing in English, I frequently focus on the spellings.	3.365	.875
5	Writing in English is easy when I highlight the main features used in the text.	3.456	1.254
6	Writing in English is easy when I practice certain tenses used in the text.	3.453	1.355
7	Writing in English is easy when I practice the verbs used in the text.	3.256	.987
8	I write in English confidently when I organize my ideas about the given topic.	4.032	.675
9	I enjoy writing in English when I imitate certain type of text i.e., letter or essay.	4.124	.876
10	I feel encouraged when my teacher helps me to write in English.	4.345	.965
11	I feel happy when I write in English individually about the given topic.	2.789	1.145
12	I feel happy when my written task is evaluated by my friend.	2.654	1.098
13	I feel happy when my written task is evaluated by my teacher.	3.256	.976

## 5. Qualitative Results

This section presents the qualitative findings gathered from the semi-structured interviews with five ESL learners. The quotes included in this section are representative of what the participants shared in the interviews.

### *Developing learners' schema about the topic*

The qualitative data suggests that ESL learners prefer to develop familiarity with the topic prior to the start of the writing task. The participants view the warm-up stage a key to a successful writing endeavor. Similar to other participants, Ahmad considers pre-writing stage an important step to understanding and completing a task:

When teacher introduces a new topic, I always struggle with ideas. He usually gives us time to think and brainstorm ideas that we discuss as a class. In a class of 25, there are lots of points that students share, and the teacher writes them up on the board. Once we know about the topic in detail, we start writing about it. (Ahmad)

*Similarly, Jawad opined, "The teacher has to help me with ideas and vocabulary to start writing on a given topic. It's never easy to do it with the teacher's help and it's always helpful to do in class when everyone participates".*

Saleem pointed out the lack of support available in the book, hence, the ideas brainstormed at the start of the writing lesson are pivotal to the students' improved performance.

We have a textbook but it's too generic and too simple. I personally don't like it. I like the way we start our essay by discussing ideas in pairs or groups and share with the teacher. He writes them up in the whiteboard and let us start writing on the given topic. Sometimes, we browse the internet to learn about the topic before we begin the writing task. (Saleem)

### *Learning from standard texts*

The interview data indicates that students deem the teacher's role crucial in completing a writing task. Although this support is vital in all stages, at the beginning it helps the students a great deal. Saeed's and Ahmad's comments suggest that exposure to sample essays and other standard texts helps students develop their schematic knowledge of the topic.

Writing a letter or an essay becomes easy when I see model texts before writing on the task. It's never easy when I start on my own. I always do better when I know the topic, words, style, structure. (Saeed)

Model essay is sometimes helpful, but it needs a lot of practice to learn and memorize new words and use them in a new essay. If the model essay is closer to the target task, it can be helpful, but it's not always the case. (Ahmad)

Learners' exposure to the standard texts increases their chances to copy, memorize and reproduce the key ideas, lexis, and grammatical structures, as pointed out by Saleem.

Reading model essays is a great way to learn new words and expressions. While reading, we have to highlight or underline new words, understand their meaning and re-use them in our writing tasks. At the end, there is always something new to learn about. So, I believe it's a wonderful technique to learn from already written essays. (Saleem)



### ***Teacher's feedback***

In the guided stage of writing, the participants underscored the teacher's support and feedback in ESL classrooms. For example, Ahmad and Anwar highlighted the impact of teacher's help on their writing:

I learn from my teacher. If he is not around, I feel like I can't think of anything. I have to ask him for anything when I write my essay. If his immediate feedback is not there, I will not be able to write. I improved a lot because my teacher is always there to help in class. (Ahmad)

*The guidance I receive from my teacher is the main reason that I write well. He is more knowledgeable than my friends. So, I trust him more than others and I rely on him more than others. I get the teacher's feedback and work on my essay to improve my writing. (Anwar)*

The data also suggests that students prefer not to share their writings with peers in class, rather allow the teacher to see and give them critical feedback. The participants have shown lack of trust in their peers, as expressed by Saleem and Jawad:

To be honest, I don't feel comfortable exchanging my tasks with my friends. I'd love the teacher to see my task and give me written feedback. I also don't like to look at my friends' writings. We are quite reserved in this way and do not want others to learn about our mistakes. It's better to keep it private. (Saleem)

Teacher has the knowledge and experience to comment on my writings and give me feedback, but my friends don't have that. So, I don't like asking friends for their opinions. I don't think I can learn anything from friends in class because we all need to learn and get good scores. (Jawad)

### ***Influential factors***

The qualitative data has revealed several factors that can hinder the learners' bid to practice and improve their writing skills. These factors include learners' lack of motivation to write in English language, learners' L1 (Pashto language) interference in the process of writing in English language, inadequate writing practice in ESL classrooms, memorization of words and phrases to write well in English, weakness in spellings and grammar, and insufficient vocabulary for writing essays. Like other participants, Ahmad highlighted the significance of intrinsic motivation for students in a writing class:

If I don't have interest in the topic or in writing lessons, I cannot perform well. Those friends in class who really love the topics and want to write about them and improve their writing, they really score well in exams. I also want to develop my interest and motivate myself to write on different topics and become a good writer. (Ahmad).

The ESL learners in this context speak Pashto as their first language and the data indicates that writing in English becomes challenging when they have to transfer their thoughts and ideas from Pashto to English. As a result, their writing becomes a time-consuming effort.

The major problem that I face is that I need to think about the topic in Pashto and write in English. It's never easy to translate my ideas into English. My teacher often has a problem with my grammatical structures and choice of words and keeps asking me to think in English. (Jawad)

My instructor always finds problems with my writing style and underlines sentences which look like directly translated from Pashto. I try to think in English and write good sentences, but this issue is always there. (Saeed)

The participants have repeatedly mentioned several other challenges that they encounter in ESL classrooms. These challenges hinder the writing practice of learners and affect their performances. The excerpts taken from the interviews highlight these factors.

I think a 40-minutes class is never enough for a writing class. We need to think about the topic, read sample essays or other texts, go through a list of words sometimes, and start writing. We never have much time to share our essays with our teacher and receive his feedback. I think there should be more time for writing lessons and more practice sessions before writing the final draft. (Saleem)

Before writing a 200-250 words long essay, the teacher needs to help us with improving our basics. For example, I have spelling issues that affect my overall score. Also, my grammar is so simple, and vocabulary is so basic that I need to work on. I have to memorize all these things to do well in the exam. Since there is not enough practice in classroom and we don't have time to learn from our teacher in a 50-minutes class, my writing skill doesn't improve quickly. (Anwar)

## **6. Discussion**

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data showed that familiarity with the topic (prior to writing) exerts the learners' writing skills. For instance, some of the participants reported that knowing about the topic in detail enables them to write. Likewise, brainstorming ideas also triggered the learners' writing in English. Sarwat et al. (2021) also claimed that organizing scattered ideas prior to writing enhances the learners writing skills. Similar findings were obtained by Yuli and Halimi (2020) the results revealed that familiarity with the topic contributed to the learners' improved writing skills. McDnough (2018) also opined that the use of familiar topics encourages learners to write. It seems that the ESL learners in the Pakistani context were unable to write without prior knowledge about the topic. The findings suggest certain reasons for the learners' inability to write without prior knowledge of the topic, which include their lack of vocabulary, lack of knowledge about the grammatical rules, and lack of awareness of the sentence structure. Research also showed that a lack of grip on grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and sentence structure hinders the learners' writing skills (Fareed et al., 2016; Sarwat et al., 2021; Siddique, 2020).

Both the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that learning from a model text in the shape of a story, essay, or letter helped the ESL learners to write well. This is due to the fact that the examination system in Pakistan encourages cramming, rote learning, and plagiarism (Fareed et al., 2016). During examinations, students need to write a 200-250 words essay in 20 minutes which encourages memorization rather than creative writing. Consequently, both teachers and students focus on the reproduction of the final product (i.e., story, essay, letter, etc.), rather than understanding the process of completing a task. This is the reason that most of the ESL learners liked to learn or memorize from an already written text.

It is evident from both the quantitative and qualitative data that the learners preferred the teachers' feedback on their writing tasks, rather than their peers' comments. Research indicated that the teacher's feedback plays a vital role in developing the learners' writing skills (Siddiqui, 2020).

Similarly, Fareed et al. (2016) found that teachers' feedback positively influenced the Pakistani students' writing skills. Hasani (2016) also found that the learners' writing was influenced by improper teacher feedback. On the other hand, the ESL learners in the current study reported that they did not feel comfortable when their tasks were evaluated by their friends. There could be several reasons for this. First, the learners may be afraid that their ideas can be imitated by their friends who achieve more marks in the final exam. In Pakistan, the students' ability to write is measured by their scores in their final (board) exams (Siddiqui, 2020). Second, they could be laughed at by their friends due to poorly written tasks. Third, the learners wanted to keep their writing tasks private because they were quite reserved in this regard. Moreover, the participants preferred to show their written tasks to their teachers as they are considered more knowledgeable, experienced, and expert than friends.

The qualitative data revealed various factors that affected their English writing skills and hindered the writing practice in ESL classrooms. The qualitative data suggest that learners were not motivated by their teachers to write. Furthermore, due to the lack of time and lengthy courses they do not have opportunities to practice writing skills, and cannot complete the writing tasks in a 40-minute lesson. The data also indicate that learners memorize certain texts to achieve good grades in final examinations. Several other reasons have been noted in the data, for example, learners cannot write properly because of their poor spellings, lack of target vocabulary, and L1 influence on their thinking process. It appears as they first think in Pashto (native language) and then try to translate it into English. Similar findings were obtained from the previous research (e.g., Alfaki, 2015; Fareed et al., 2016; Hasani, 2016; Sarwat et al., 2021).

## 7. Implications

The current study has implications for language teachers, curriculum designers, and other stakeholders in ELT. First, ESL teachers could provide opportunities for learners to practice the new topic. This could be done through activities such as discussion in groups, role-playing both in front of the class and within the groups, and presentations. ESL teachers could bring in modern teaching methods and activities such as jigsaw, think-pair-share, and mind-mapping, which will enable learners to develop new vocabulary, learn grammatical rules, and improve spellings by sharing their ideas in an active manner.

Curriculum designers can also add interactive and CLT orientated activities to the English language courses, which can help ESL teachers to incorporate these activities into writing lessons. ELT practitioners and teacher trainers should facilitate ESL teachers with audio-visual aids to make the learning process a more interesting experience for students and motivate them to read and write in English. The teacher could also refrain learners from memorisation. Instead, students' creative writing ability needs to be enhanced by teaching writing through a collaborative, cooperative, problem-based, and differentiated learning and teaching approach. These modern pedagogical approaches believe in the process writing approach rather than the product writing approach. In other words, the focus should be on the process writing approach compared to product writing. As this study suggests that the ESL learners prefer teachers' feedback compared to their friends' feedback, teachers should encourage learners to share their work with friends and create a friendly environment in the class to decrease the learners' anxiety.

## 8. Conclusion

This mixed-methods study has investigated the ESL learners' perceptions of the use of the product writing approach and explored factors that can affect the writing practice in the Pakistani ESL context. It was found that students preferred certain stages to product writing in

English including topic familiarity prior to writing, organising ideas and imitating a model text, and teachers' feedback. This study has also found several factors that hinder the ESL learners' writing skills including lack of motivation, L1 interference, lack of writing practice, memorization, weakness in spelling, and lack of vocabulary. Like other research studies, the current study has some limitations and recommendations for future researchers. First, in the current study, the data were obtained from male ESL learners only due to gender segregated system in Pakistani colleges in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Future research studies should collect data from both male and female learners to achieve a more comprehensive picture of the research problem. Second, the study was conducted in an unprivileged district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province where the schools and colleges lack in teaching facilities, and the students have fewer opportunities both inside and outside of classrooms to practice writing. Future studies should be conducted in more privileged and developed areas of Pakistan, such as federal areas and metropolitan cities where the students have more exposure to the English language and the classrooms have AV aids. Third, the focus of this mixed-methods study was on the students' perceptions of product writing approach, future studies in the current context and other contexts can examine the product writing approach from ESL teachers' perspectives to see its relevance and applicability in modern day ESL classrooms. Finally, the current study has focused on the intermediate level (Grade-12) students, hence, future studies can recruit students from more senior classes (university level) or more junior classes such as primary, elementary, and high schools.

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