

## ASSESSING WRITING PROFICIENCY AMONG NATIONAL TECHNICAL AWARDS LEVEL 4 STUDENTS IN MWANZA, TANZANIA

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### Abstract

This study examines the writing proficiency of National Technical Awards (NTA) Level 4 students in a tertiary institution in Mwanza, Tanzania. The three objectives that guided the study were assessing the overall writing proficiency of NTA Level 4 students in essay writing, identifying the specific areas of strengths and weaknesses in their writing skills, and lastly, exploring potential factors influencing the writing proficiency levels of NTA Level 4 students. It has established that NTA Level 4 students face numerous challenges in essay writing, including affective, cognitive, and linguistic problems. It reveals that the lack of writing proficiency can lead to poor communication skills, limited critical thinking, reduced academic performance, and limited research skills among students. The study has highlighted that the abrupt shift of language from Kiswahili in primary schools to English in secondary schools particularly in public schools creates a weak base in producing language skills like writing.

**Keywords:** Assessment of writing proficiency, writing skills, national technical award level 4, strengths and weakness in essay writing, factors influencing writing proficiency.

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## Introduction

An essay is a piece of writing consisting of one particular topic broken down into several paragraphs (one for each major point) starting with the introductory paragraph and ending with the concluding paragraph (Bulqiyah et al., 2021). Writing proficiency demands cognitive ability for it is inconsistent to assume that the ability to speak English is equivalent to writing it. Writing practice needs proper guidance from which the writer can be able to produce an effective and coherent text.

Effective writing skills are crucial for academic success and professional development. Effectiveness in the writing process includes planning which is manifested through the use of keywords (taxonomy), drafting realized through writing information related to the content, which refers to checking the relevance and concordial agreement of words through substitutions or ellipsis to make the topic more focused, interesting, and to ensure a good structure of an essay. Finally, editing is applied to check spelling, grammar, and meanings and whether they are both clear in how they are used. In tertiary institutions, writing proficiency is a vital skill that students need to master to successfully navigate their studies (Magaba, 2023). For example, in their descriptive study Suparsa et al. (2023) from Indonesia, identified that most students performed modestly on the writing test, with some performing better than others suggesting that students with poor writing skills are likely to struggle. A similar study by Bulqiyah et al., (2021) reveal that Indonesian tertiary students' particularly, those taking bachelor's degrees and have problems in their first-year essay writing courses. Developing writing proficiency is categorized in two; the affective problems which arise from students' and lecturers' attitudes while teaching and learning Essay Writing Courses and second, cognitive problems which are considered as difficulties in writing viewpoints, transferring language, and the process of writing itself, in addition to linguistic problems in lexicogrammar, vocabulary and the structure of the essay. The latter, cognitive problems, is reported in a study on 244 first-year students in a South African University who experienced challenges related to writing an introduction, a thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting sentences, and a conclusion (Cekiso et al., 2016).

Low writing proficiency levels leads to difficulty in understanding complex concepts, inability to express thoughts clearly through writing, and struggle

to meet academic requirements like coherence, grammar, and punctuation. This results in lower grades in the class assignments and examinations among students. While Munishi and Emmanuel (2016) uphold the need for language proficiency whereby writing should be emphasized throughout the training to ensure that graduates develop effective communication, the current writing proficiency levels of NTA Level 4 students in essay writing are low and remain underexplored. This study examines the writing skills of National Technical Awards (NTA) Level 4 students in Tanzanian tertiary institutions with the aim of exploring what the challenges are to help improve the level of English language proficiency.

National Technical Awards (NTA) Level 4 is a Basic Technician Certificate Level where holders can apply skills and knowledge at a routine level. To be eligible for NTA Level 4, students must have completed the ordinary level and obtained a minimum of four passes, with a grade "D" being one of the pass grades, and hold a certificate in Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (CSEE) (The National Council for Technical Education, 2020). The NTA programs are regulated by the National Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (NACTVET). Their role is to register, accredit, and ensure the quality, and relevance of technical education and training in both public and private institutes in Tanzania (NACTE, n.d; NACTVET, 2023).

The NTA levels are competency-based and are designed to demonstrate that holders possess the necessary skills and knowledge to apply competencies flexibly in relevant occupational sectors. As the labor market becomes more dynamic and complex, the required skills are constantly evolving. NACTVET plays a crucial role in controlling the provision of these skills among tertiary institutions in Tanzania. Therefore, NTA Level 4 represents the level of education attained in post-ordinary level secondary studies in tertiary institutions. It employs a competency-based assessment system designed for evaluation purposes.

The academic performance of Tanzanian students at tertiary institutions is directly impacted by their lack of writing proficiency (Ideh, 2019; Mbunda & Ojwang, 2021). Writing proficiency is the skill anchored in the cognitive ability of the learners in higher learning institutions among students. The abrupt shift of language from kiSwahili to English in secondary schools creates a weak base for producing language skills like writing in English.

The policy in Tanzania is to use kiSwahili as the language of instruction in primary grades and English in higher grades. Writing activities play a crucial role in academic performance since there is a positive relation between the students' abilities in their writing and their Grade Point Average (GPAs) (Komba et al., 2012). Writing proficiency encompasses various forms of writing assignments such as essays, field reports, and other written tasks that students are required to complete as part of their coursework. The impact of writing activities on students' academic performance is significant and multifaceted, influencing their critical thinking skills, communication abilities, analytical capabilities, and overall academic success. If essay writing proficiency to NTA level 4 students is not well addressed, there can be negative effects such as those described below.

First, poor communication skills because low language proficiency hinders students' professional and academic success given that writing cuts across all fields of study. Second, it can lead to limited critical thinking because, writing helps learners to analyze information, develop coherent arguments, and improve critical thinking. Third, it can lead to reduced academic performance since poor writing skills lead to lower student grade achievement or even failure because most of the studies rely on written assignments and examinations (Okpe & Onjewu, 2017). Four, limited research skills among students. Without proper assessment in essay writing, students may lack the ability to explore, analyse and synthesize information from various sources and resort to plagiarism and duplication of academic works which results in poor performance and questionable academic integrity.

Additionally, low levels of writing proficiency limit career opportunities for professional students such as those taking NTA programmes. If essay writing is not well addressed, Tanzanian students may face challenges when seeking employment or pursuing further studies. Employers and academic institutions require written samples or essays as part of the application process and poor writing can jeopardise an opportunity. Therefore, improved writing proficiency adds value to employability skills. Similarly, inadequate expression of ideas. Individuals can express their thoughts, opinions, and creativity through writing. Thus, if the essay

assessment is neglected, the articulation of effective ideas by the students may even result in loss of confidence both academically and professionally.

### **Method**

This qualitative study utilized a descriptive cross-sectional design using focus group discussions, document review, and observation. The cross-sectional design was applied because of its ability to collect data from a large pool of subjects with varying characteristics like experience, academic background, age, etc. where a cohort can be divided into sub-cohorts and easily described (Setia, 2016). This design was used to observe and describe characteristics of a population at a single point in time, making it suitable for assessing writing proficiency levels among students. The study was conducted in Brilliant Institute, a tertiary institution located in Mwanza, Tanzania. Mwanza is a city in northern Tanzania known for its large number of tertiary institutions making it an appropriate setting for assessing the writing proficiency levels of students at the National Technical Award Level 4. Brilliant Institute was specifically selected because it has many faculty with expertise in language particularly communication skills with writing proficiency. These faculty easily participated as critical friends in the study. Brilliant Institute is a well-known institution for its academic excellence though NTA level 4 students normally score low marks in English language, yet the enrollment at this level is consistently high compared to other levels of study.

The participants of the study were National Technical Award (NTA) Level 4 students enrolled in a tertiary institution in Mwanza, Tanzania. The sample likely consisted of students pursuing technical education at this level with a total number of one hundred seventy-eight (178), from the March intake. All students were at the same level, studying the same modules. The recruitment process involved obtaining permission from the relevant educational authorities and institutions in Mwanza to access the students. The samples were obtained randomly from the twenty-two (22) groups of students where each group had eight students from the total population of 178 students. Random sampling ensured a representation of each relevant group. The six groups selected to ensure that the information collected had reached saturation. Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, educational background, and experience were used to provide a comprehensive profile of the participants. These details contextualize the

study findings and show some factors that could influence the quality of writing proficiency.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Three methods of data collection were used to gather primary data: document analysis, talk as data (observation), and interview, as recommended by Flick (2018). Triangulation, the process of conducting multiple approaches to a research question to verify results and ensure data is comprehensive. Integration of several data collection methods strengthened the findings by identifying different key sources and mitigating bias, providing a stronger basis for causal inferences (Hammerton & Munafò, 2021; Lawlor et al., 2016).

Flick (2018) recommends triangulation as the suitable strategy, involving the use of diverse existing records, files, and school essays to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. Relying on a single source of information can lead to biased findings. In this study, drafted essay samples from six groups of eight students were analyzed to assess proficiency levels and identify areas of strength and weakness. Results revealed critical grammatical issues, spelling errors, and issues with cohesion and coherence in the drafted essays within the relevant groups.

To ensure equal representation in data collection, I assessed the essay writing skills of 48 students randomly selected from the six groups. Each group had an equal chance of being selected as a representative. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with each selected group to gather insights, perceptions, and opinions on their experiences in essay writing practices. Semi-structured questions were used to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues (Nyumba et al., 2018; Santhosh et al., 2021). Smartphone analysis was utilized to collect dynamic and interactive conversations, enhancing comprehension of the intervention's influence on writing abilities. Classroom observations using a checklist, were conducted to understand the student's writing competence from exercises given in the classroom learning (Chacón Moscoso et al., 2019; Frels et al., 2011).

The study participants were given topics for essay writing in their respective groups, with the assistance of two lecturers to ensure that no student used online artificial intelligence platforms. The close supervision

ensured the production of human-drafted essays giving authentic evidence of ability in essay writing.

## **Findings**

This section summarizes the data collected and the analysis of the writing proficiency levels of NTA Level 4 students in essay writing. It provides an overview of the findings and highlights the students' performance. The current essay writing proficiency is examined, with focus on challenges and strengths. The areas of strengths and weaknesses in their writing skills are identified for further analysis. This analysis aims to pinpoint the aspects of essay writing that require attention and improvement.

### **The Current Level of Essay Writing Proficiency among NTA Level 4 Students**

The writing proficiency level among NTA Level 4 students appears to be low, particularly in the areas of punctuation, grammar, punctuation and the way they understand the questions based on responses and the student's essays analyzed. Students face challenges with structure, punctuation, grammar, vocabulary and even the ways of answering the essay question have revealed a low level of writing proficiency for example, the assignments groups 3, 8, and 10 scored very low marks. This revealed the poor connection between understanding the question and giving a relevant response and the critical friends (lecturers) noted issues like poor writing style and lack of clarity in ideas. However, the students demonstrated an understanding of basic essay components like introduction, body, and conclusion. For example, S1, (22/9/2023) said that "understanding the requirement of the question, then begin to write with an introduction, main body then conclusion." They also demonstrated that in essay writing, they can define essay titles. For example, S10, (22/9/2023) said "Consider the title of an essay then we continue to write the main body and the conclusion."

However, one of my critical friends noted that there are issues with poor writing style showing a lack of clarity in developing and organizing ideas among NTA level 4 students at Brilliant Institute. The critical friend on his observation of students' writing proficiency commented that "writing style among our students is poor because English is their second language so, they lack competency in it due to their insufficient vocabulary," (Lecturer 1, 22/9/2023).

Second language learners face manifold challenges with punctuation, grammar, and spelling because English is a second language (Zhang, 2023). One student said for punctuation "I always find myself making mistakes and our lecturer shows them with the red pen during marking," (S16, 22/9/2023). Therefore, while students demonstrated an understanding of basic essay structure, their proficiency is average as they struggle with language, organization, and mechanics of writing.

### **Areas of Strengths and Weaknesses**

The areas of strengths and weaknesses in the writing skills of NTA Level 4 students pinpoint aspects of essay writing that require further attention.

### **Potential Factors Influencing Writing Proficiency**

A significant factor affecting writing proficiency is the language barrier which results in struggle among students to express themselves effectively in writing. Another factor is limited vocabulary and poor sentence structure and the lack of exposure to reading materials which would help expand vocabulary. Similarly, outdated teaching methods that focus on rote memorization rather than critical thinking and creativity can impede students' writing development. Also, in overcrowded classrooms, it is difficult for teachers to provide individualized feedback and support, leading to gaps in students' writing abilities. Finally, without clear writing standards and consistent monitoring of student progress, there lacks accountability and motivation for improvement of the much-needed proficiency.

## **Discussion**

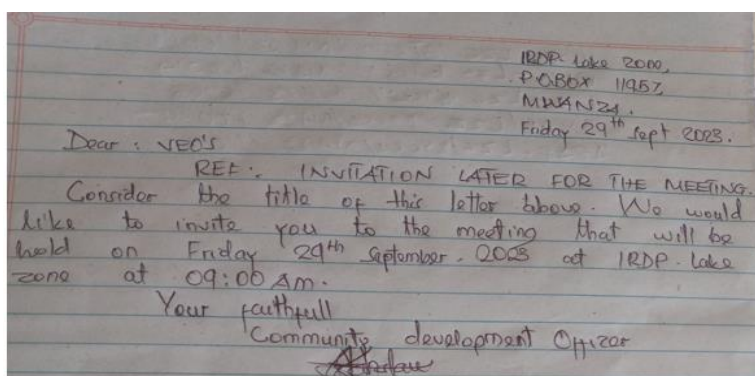
### **Strengths and Weaknesses Identified in the Writing Proficiency of NTA Level 4 Students**

Two questions were given to NTA level 4 students. One question required them to write an invitation letter for the Village Executive Officers (VEOs) and Ward Executive Officers (WEOs) meeting, while the other question focused on writing an essay about climate change and its effect on the environment. This task was to assess the clarity, coherence, punctuation, language mechanics, and relevance of the responses to the given questions. Through this assessment, areas of strength and weakness were identified.

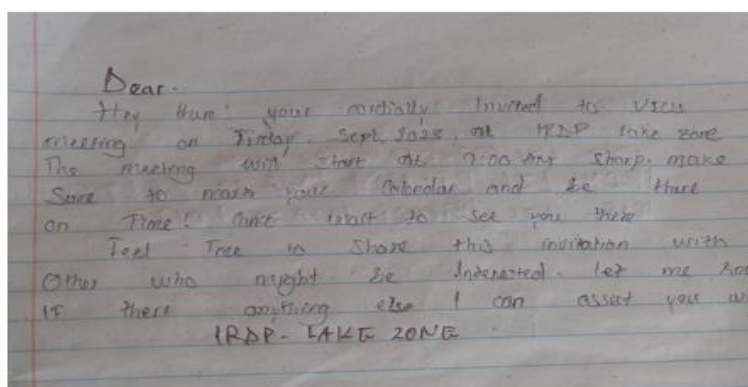
### *Areas of Strengths*



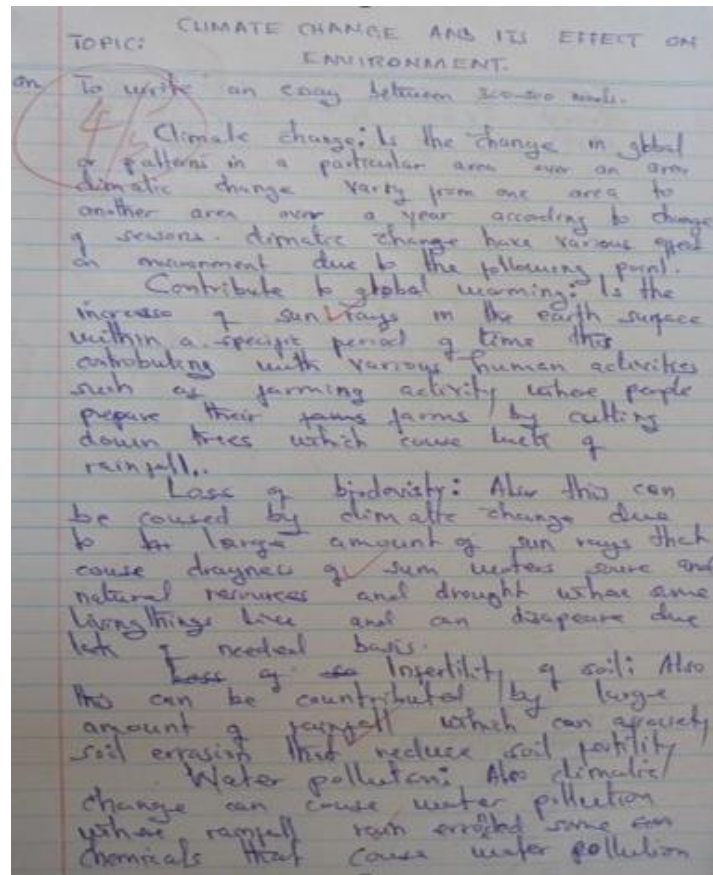
Understanding basic essay structure. Most students understand the basic structure of the essays such as introduction, main body, and conclusion as one of the students during FGD said, "We understand the main parts of the essay like introduction, main body then conclusion, but we differ in writing efficiently", (S20, 22/9/2023). Some groups for example, groups 3 and 4, were able to understand the focus of the questions and were able to write letters in a reasonable format whereas group number twelve (12) was also able to tackle the need for climate change and its impact on the environment where the logical sequence of ideas was followed and the group obtained ninety percent of the total score. However, the issues with grammar, coherence, and mechanics persisted in all groups implying the varying writing proficiency among students regarding their experience and background in language mastery as shown in the figures below:



Source: Group 3 assignment, writing an invitation letter, 22/9/2023



Source: Group 4 assignment, writing an invitation letter, 22/9/2023



Source: Group 12 Essay on Climate Change 22/10/2023

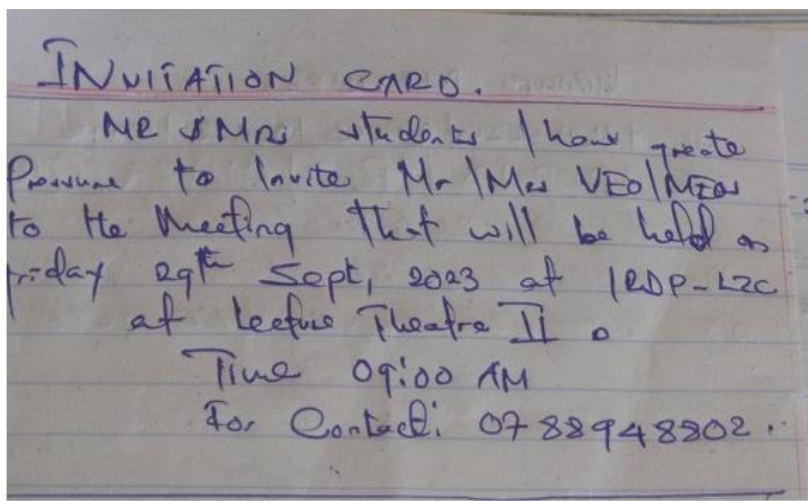
### Areas of Weaknesses

Most students encountered diverse challenges in essay writing such as poor punctuation, grammar, and spelling. This was attributed to lack of enough vocabulary to manage writing in English. A student may struggle to write because English words get lost, so they encounter difficulties in developing arguments and giving examples. During a FGD, student number five (S5) commented "It's hard to describe it using English words and give relevant examples" (S5, 22/9/2023).

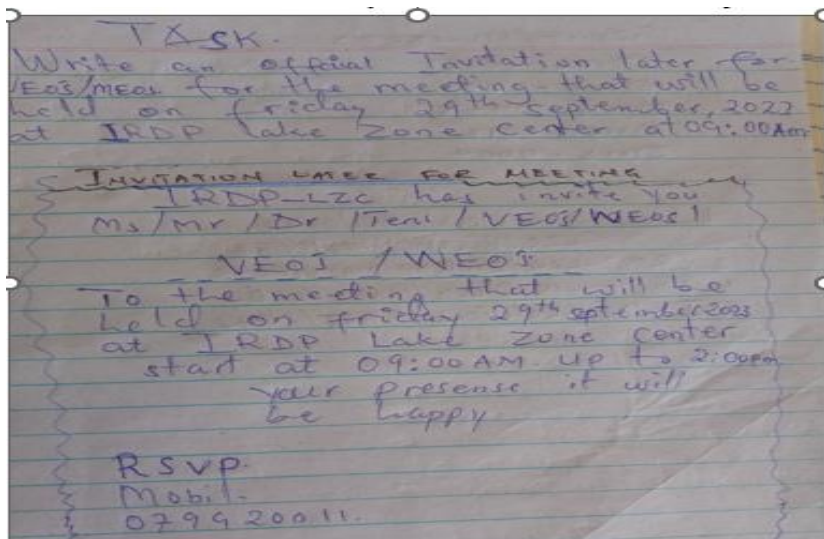
One implication is the importance of understanding and interpreting essay prompts correctly. In this case, students in group eight failed to grasp the specific task of writing an invitation letter and instead produced content for an invitation card. This mismatch between the question and response

indicates a lack of critical reading skills and the ability to discern the specific requirements of the assignment.

Another implication is related to critical thinking and problem-solving abilities in essay writing. Effective essay writing goes beyond surface-level corrections such as grammar and punctuation; it involves deep analysis, synthesis of information, and logical reasoning. The analysis of the letter indicates that some students struggle with identifying the core purpose or theme of an essay prompt, leading to inaccurate or irrelevant responses as seen in group eight and group ten below.



Source: Group 8 assignment, writing an invitation letter, 22/9/2023



Source: Group 10 assignment, writing an invitation letter, 22/9/2023

The table below identifies significant variations in students' writing styles and shows the kinds of difficulties they encounter as well as the areas where they still need to improve regarding the invitation letter writing assignment.

**Table 1.** Features of essay writing proficiency variation among learners in their respective groups

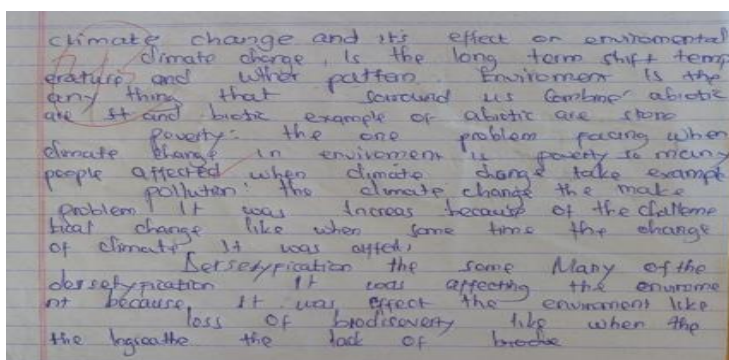
Title	Spelling errors	Shortening	Punctuation	Poor of capitalization	Lack of cohesion	Unnecessary words	Tense	Format
Group 10								
Invitation later	Later	IRDP-LZC	No, any punctuation mark	friday To	Your presence it will be happy	Ms/Mr/Dr/Terru RSVP	Has invite you. Your presence it will be happy	Card
Group 8								
Invitation card	greate pressure	IRDP-LZC Sept Mr. & Mrs.	Sept No full stop	Invite	Mr. & Mrs. students			Card
Group 3								
Invitation later	later faithfull community development	IRDP		lake zone			will be hold	Letter

Source: FGD 22/9/2023

### Issues with Paragraph Structure and Transitions

Inability to follow writing guidelines. There seems to be no adherence to "clarity, concise and completeness" guidelines. In summary, while students grasp basic essay elements, weaknesses exist in language proficiency, sentence construction, and applying technical writing skills due to limitations with the English language vocabulary. For example, in the figure below, in the last but second paragraph, it becomes very difficult to discern what the students were intending to write because the words have no concordial agreement such as, "poverty: the one facing problem when climate change in environment is poverty so many people affected when climate change takes an example". The quoted paragraph has no clear cohesion between words and eventually, it loses the focus and the meaning.

There are no transitional words throughout the essay, only a listing of the points and explanations has been used mostly. Paragraph transition all through Taking another example in the last paragraph of the essay in the same assignment states that “Dersetyfication of the some Many of the dersetyfication it was affecting the environment because it was effect the environment like loss of biodiversity like when the the Ingicatte the lack of brode”. In the excerpt above there are full of grammatical errors like “dersetyfication”, the use of “some” and “Many” concurrently, repeated “the” and the use of unknown words like “Ingicatte and brode”. The cited challenges verify the significant weakness in the essay writing proficiency that NTA level 4 students have at the Brilliant Institute. The challenge in writing proficiency led the group to score low marks as indicated in the excerpt where they scored only two out of five. Thus, poor writing proficiency has clearly been shown to be one of the factors contributing to poor academic performance among NTA level 4 students.



Source: Group 12 assignment 22/09/2023

### Roadblocks to Writing Proficiency Levels of NTA Level 4 Students in Tertiary Institutions.

The most critical factors that have emerged as barriers to the writing proficiency levels of NTA Level 4 students are explored through the analysis of interview data. This section provides insights into the factors that contribute to or hinder students' writing development.

#### Language Barrier

The language barrier seems to significantly influence writing proficiency levels. Many students mentioned facing challenges with English being their second language. Similarly, learners in Asian contexts encounter challenges such as language barriers, inadequate early instruction and practice,

insufficient guidance, and distractions from technology (Akbari, 2015; Rahman, 2020; Rashid et al., 2017; Sarwat et al., 2021). Thus, the language barrier has acted as the principal barrier among students at Brilliant Institute, for example, one student said "The English language is a great challenge to me because I and most of us don't have a good foundation in it. There are times I fail to write because English words get lost even those you think are very simple." Another said "You can understand the point, but the challenge is how to describe it using English words and give relevant examples. This means that you can write a correct point, but you confuse it in the course of its elaborations."

### *Lack of Reading Culture*

The data indicated that students do not make effective use of library resources, affecting their writing. For example, the proper use of libraries among undergraduate students in the United States has contributed to the development of critical thinking skills, analytical skills, and writing skills (Soria et al., 2017). This reveals the reality that effective reading results in effective writing. A student said "Very few people attend the library for self-studies. We are also privileged to have the resource of language (English), though it challenges us to read due to the lack of vocabulary." One of the lectures also said, "We need to establish assignments that require writing summaries of books, newspapers, or magazines from the library or articles from online to build vocabulary and gain experience in creating sentence structure." In this regard, writing skills development needs frequent effective reading of various publications like books, journals, newspapers, and magazines and practice writing summaries from the read information.

### *Traditional Teaching Methods*

Reliance on lectures alone without practical writing lessons was cited as one of the challenges. A student said "We listen to our lecturer to the procedures that he takes us through and the examples that are relevant to the topic. He instructs us to go to the library to read books though most of us use smartphones to google the same information from the internet. Therefore, most of the time we don't have hands-on activities." Consequently, the lack of hands-on activities creates limited opportunities for students to practice writing skills. An effective teaching strategy to equip writing skills to NTA

level 4 students is inevitable for improving language proficiency and the level of academic performance in various modules.

### *Large Class Sizes*

Many students lack individual support, as noted by one lecturer. "The good and required system is meeting with students as individuals to solve their writing issues not to address them as a group (Lecturer 2, 22/9/2023)." Meeting with students individually allows lecturers and educators to provide specific feedback tailored to each student's writing abilities and areas for improvement. This personalized approach can address individual needs more effectively than generic feedback given to a group. Therefore, by prioritizing one-on-one interactions and personalized attention, lecturers can better address students' writing challenges and facilitate meaningful improvements in their writing skills.

### *Lack of Standards and Monitoring*

There were no writing benchmarks set to be used at the institute as the reference point for students and lecturers while writing proficiency. One of the lecturers who acted as a critical friend in the study admitted by saying that

"There are no benchmarks set for essay writing to NTA level 4 students, however, there is a need to propose specific standards of essay writing through the Department of Communication Skills and ask the lecturers and students to follow them effectively for improving writing proficiency", (Lecturer 2, 22/9/2023).

Lecturer 2 added "We are preparing them for further studies from the early stages. If we don't prepare them effectively at this stage, we can make them mess up in writing their reports, and proposals and may fail to make good academic writing in the upper levels of their studies. They may eventually fail even to write application letters for job opportunities. So, they will not express themselves in writing because they are not well prepared".

This impacts the assessment of writing proficiency levels because there is no point of reference when it comes to the issue assessing of writing skills. Therefore, the absence of benchmarks and monitoring at the institute has been one of the factors leading to the lack of clarity and consistency in writing proficiency among students.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The study found that NTA Level 4 students face numerous challenges in essay writing, including affective, cognitive, and linguistic problems. Affective problems arise from students' and lecturers' attitudes towards teaching and learning Essay Writing Course. Cognitive problems emerge from difficulties in writing viewpoint, transferring language, and the writing process. Linguistic problems are related to lexico-grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of the essay. The lack of writing proficiency can lead to poor communication skills, limited critical thinking, reduced academic performance, and limited research skills. Moreover, the abrupt shift of language from kiSwahili to English in secondary schools can create a weak base for producing language skills like writing.

### **Implications for Writing Instruction**

The study recommends addressing essay writing proficiency to NTA level 4 students to improve their communication skills, critical thinking, academic performance, and research skills. Writing proficiency should be emphasized throughout the training to ensure effective communication among the graduates. Writing activities play a crucial role in academic performance since there is a positive relation between the student's abilities in their writing and their Grade Point Average (GPAs). Therefore, it is essential to provide proper guidance and support to students in essay writing to help them develop their writing skills.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Further research is needed to explore the current writing proficiency levels of NTA Level 4 students in essay writing in different tertiary institutions in Tanzania. Additionally, research is needed to identify the best practices and strategies for improving writing proficiency among NTA Level 4 students. Moreover, research is needed to examine the impact of writing proficiency on students' academic performance and their ability to meet academic requirements like coherence, grammar, and punctuation.

### **Conclusion**

Effective writing skills are crucial for academic success and professional development. However, NTA Level 4 students at Brilliant Institute face numerous challenges in essay writing that may lead to poor communication



skills, limited critical thinking, reduced academic performance, and limited research skills. Therefore, it is essential to address essay writing proficiency to NTA level 4 students to improve their communication skills, critical thinking, academic performance, and research skills. Writing proficiency should be emphasized throughout the training to ensure effective communication among the grandaunts. Proper guidance and support should be provided to students in essay writing to help them develop their writing skills. Lastly, further research is needed to identify the best practices and strategies for improving writing proficiency among NTA Level 4 students and to examine the impact of writing proficiency on students' academic performance and their ability to meet academic requirements like coherence, grammar, and punctuation.

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