




English essay writing proficiency in Grade 9 at selected public schools in Gauteng in the modern era



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Background: Despite essay writing being a highly discussed topic, a growing body of writing knowledge gathered from various approaches can inform teachers and learners about revision efforts. Emphasis is placed on the significance of error analysis in English essays, given that English is a widely used language in business, facilitating communication among diverse racial groups. This underscores the importance of developing fluency in English essay writing.

Objectives: The main objective was to identify specific language-related challenges in essay writing among Grade 9 learners in selected Soshanguve schools.

Method: A mixed-methods approach was used to garner information on learners' perceptions and performance when writing English essays. Interviews and error analysis were used.

Results: When comparing the findings, it emerged that the findings of the qualitative semi-structured interviews reflected the problems that the learners encountered in their writing.

Conclusion: The analysis revealed that learners had difficulties with capitalisation, irregular verbs, contractions, concord, conjunctions, and sentence construction when writing English essays without the help of technology.

Contribution: The study found that language proficiency is important since learners use technology to assist them but when they must write on their own, they experience many writing challenges.

Keywords: English; essays; writing proficiency; Grade 9; teachers; learners.

Introduction

In view of new technological developments, it is essential to determine how learners perform when writing English essays of their own accord. Even though essay writing is a topic much discussed and written about (Dorji 2021; Mailula & Mogoeppe 2022), a developing corpus of knowledge on writing accumulated from a set of diverse methodologies can inform teachers and learners about the process of revision and writers' revision efforts with a special focus on the importance of error analysis (EA) of learners' English writing. According to Deane (2018), English writing has a significant impact on the entire system of education, from primary to tertiary education.

According to Statistics South Africa (2022), South Africa recognises 12 official languages. This multilingual context presents significant challenges for learners engaged in essay writing, as English is often an additional language rather than a home language.

A direct consequence of South Africa being a multilingual country with 12 official languages (Republic of South Africa [RSA] Stats 2022) is challenges for those who engage in essay writing, since it is an additional language in South Africa. The Department of Basic Education (DBE 2011) emphasises that all learners have the right to be taught in their mother tongue. This study explored the teaching and learning of English in a South African classroom in Soshanguve, Gauteng, focusing on Grade 9 English essay writing.

Problem statement

This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) *What are the experiences of Grade 9 learners in developing proficiency in English creative essay writing?* (2) *What errors are commonly found in the essays of Grade 9 second language learners?*

Teachers and learners in South African schools often face challenges when using English in the classroom because they have limited proficiency, as English is a second language for many. Furthermore, teachers who are not home language speakers of English themselves experience difficulties and find it challenging to help learners with their linguistic and cognitive development (Ngubane, Ntombela & Govender 2020). Allman (2018) states that few learners can read and write efficiently.

With the advancement of technology, generative artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a potential tool to assist learners and teachers in academic tasks such as idea generation, essay evaluation, narrative development, and feedback. However, while AI can provide support, it does not exempt learners from acquiring a solid understanding of English grammar to write independently. Studies on the application of AI to improve students' essay writing skills are still limited (Jen & Salam 2024). In addition, Eagar (2024) points out that AI induces copycat writing and stunts the writers' creativity. It underscores the importance of studying learners' creative writing and finding ways to promote English proficiency especially in the case of English as a second language.

Furthermore, there is a challenge with multilingualism in South Africa with regard to teaching English essay writing. The Constitution of South Africa (RSA 1996) clearly stipulates that all people have the right to receive education in the language of their choice. In addition, Barkhuizen and Gough (2018) posit that it is important that all South African languages must be promoted, rather than just English and Afrikaans, yet English is preferred by many parents as language at school, since it affords learners study and job prospects (Ngcobo & Barnes 2024). Currently, South African learners in township schools have an African language as their home language and English as their first additional language. The poor English writing proficiency is confirmed by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS; RSA 2021) as it was found that learners are still battling to write English well. It follows that since learners in primary school have poor reading and writing skills, the problem surfaces once they are required to produce more advanced essays in secondary school and even at the tertiary level (Sultana 2021). In addition, the use of AI has brought new concerns regarding independent creative writing (Eagar 2024; Jen & Salam 2024).

Literature review

Theoretical background: Second language acquisition and social constructivism

Krashen (1982) maintains that learning a language is a conscious process. It is done deliberately. When in the process of learning, effort is required. Learners go to school to learn a language; for instance, in this study, the learners learn English so that they can know its grammar and language rules.

Learners who do not achieve proficiency in the language of instruction often struggle to master academic content. This makes it difficult for them to learn effectively in school when English serves as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), leading to poor academic performance in subjects such as mathematics and science. Learners can struggle to follow instructions and understand instructions and it can hinder them to fully engage with the content. Furthermore, the language barrier can make it difficult to grasp complex concepts.

Krashen (1987) wrote extensively on second language acquisition, emphasising how language proficiency can influence overall learning success. When learners are proficient in the language of instruction they can understand lessons better and participate in discussions which can also facilitate comprehension.

Communication in second language learning develops in two ways. This is in the form of language learning and language acquisition. Language learning involves explicit ways in which a language is learnt with instructions given to the learners. In contrast, language acquisition involves how children acquire a language. Learners will be able to acquire a language when the input is comprehensible which will enable them to understand and develop. Krashen (1982) emphasises that providing natural, communicative input is essential when designing a syllabus. According to his Input Hypothesis, learners develop language skills most effectively when exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current level of linguistic competence, a concept he refers to as 'i + 1'. This means that the new input should be understandable but must still introduce language elements that challenge learners and promote further development.

Creative essay writing

Prasanna (2020) explains that a creative essay reflects the ideas of the author or writer on a piece of paper related to a specific topic. The process writing approach includes several stages that proficient writers go through when they write (Hyland 2019). McNamara et al. (2018) define essay writing as a process surrounding text production that includes social interaction with a text and people, both of which are important sources of learning how to write in a specific way. This study focused on the English writing proficiency of Grade 9 learners and how they honed their writing skills.

Lea and Stier (2000) define essay writing as the mastery of text organisation, usage, and grammar. In the South African education system, English is taught as a first additional language (EFAL), meaning it is not the learners' home language but serves as a primary medium of instruction in many schools. Mpiti (2016) asserts that learners doing EFAL often produce texts that indicate a lack of thought; this means that the learners cannot brainstorm ideas and proper planning for writing texts. Fawcett (2010) conceptualises essay writing as a group of paragraphs about a subject, mainly with an introduction, body, and conclusion.

English constructionist still tend to focus more on the older ways of teaching writing that are teacher centred. Another approach to writing is the social-constructionist approach that focuses on learner support according to individual needs, which is more viable than the older traditional grammar-focused product approach to writing (Likaj 2015). Learners are also increasingly experiencing fear of writing due to grammatical challenges (Jarak et al. 2024). This study intended to bridge the gap of addressing additional challenges with essay writing and intended to promote essay writing by studying errors committed in Grade 9 essay writing.

Language attitudes

Albarracin and Shavit (2018) agree that an attitude is an evaluative reaction to an object. Gibbons (1987) states that language can be spoken, written, and signed. However, extant research has almost exclusively focused on language attitudes. Brown (2020) characterises a language attitude as the degree of emotional involvement in a language, such as feelings and relations in the community. A learner with a positive attitude towards English may become successful in the language and may enjoy essay writing.

Language proficiency

English proficiency refers to the level of mastery of a language. Singh (2020) contends that language and literature are two words that appear similar; they are interrelated. When a person can apply the rules and components of a language, that person is referred to as being proficient and can thus engage in essay writing (Rao 2019; Rubio & Hacking 2019). This study, therefore, focused on the English writing proficiency of Grade 9 learners in Gauteng.

The role of artificial intelligence in influencing learners when writing essays

Written text can significantly be improved by using AI writing tools such as ChatGPT. They can assist in eliminating grammatical errors, improving sentence structure, and ensuring that the text is readable and engaging. For instance, writers can improve their work by receiving instant feedback from AI-based grammar checkers and style editors. This not only improves the essay but also aids in the development of writers (Balch 2023). The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS; DBE 2011), however, prescribes essay writing for test purposes without the use of AI when writing for marks as part of the assessment. It implies that the learners' grammatical language proficiency must be up to standard to pass the essay writing question. Thus, while AI can assist learners, they must still be able to demonstrate their ability to use the language effectively when writing essays, especially when AI support is not permitted.

Method

Design

This study employed an exploratory case study design to assess learners' English essay writing skills in two selected

township schools. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques (Fouché & Strydom 2023). This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the learners' English writing proficiency. One key aspect of this analysis involved conducting an EA, which is briefly explained in the following section.

Error analysis

Error analysis is a process used to identify, classify, and understand the linguistic errors made by second language learners (Pasaribu 2021). It examines writing errors, investigates their causes, and provides insights into learners' underlying language systems.

Corder (1971) distinguished between errors – which result from gaps in learners' knowledge – and mistakes, which occur when learners struggle to apply grammatical rules consistently. In this study, an EA was conducted on 50 essays, with 25 essays selected from each school.

Pasaribu (2021) defines EA as the identification of the frequency, kind, causes, and sequences of errors. He underscores that errors committed by learners or users in their oral or written production of the target language (L2) involve deviation from the norms or rules of the L2. These are described and systematically explained by EA. Error analysis looks at the errors committed in writing, highlights the causes of the errors that occur in writing by learners and analyses the errors that are made. Error analysis was proposed by Corder (1971); he states that errors in writing occur because the learners have gaps in their English knowledge, whereas mistakes happen when the learners are not yet able to master the grammatical aspects of a language. An EA was conducted of 50 essays, 25 per school.

Population sampling

The study focused on 10 Grade 9 learners and two teachers, who were selected through purposive and convenience sampling.

Fifty English creative writing essays written by Grade 9 learners were analysed using EA. The learners attended two township schools in Gauteng and spoke various mother tongues: LP1f: Xitsonga; LP2m: Northern Sotho; LP3f: Tshivenda; LP4f: isiXhosa; LP5f: Setswana; LP6f: Northern Sotho; LP7f: Setswana; LP8m: isiZulu; LP9f: Tshivenda; LP10m: Xitsonga. All participants were African, each with a distinct linguistic background.

Regarding the teachers, T1F, a 52-year-old female, had over 10 years of experience teaching English as a second language in township schools and her mother tongue was Setswana. T2F, a 32-year-old female, spoke Xitsonga as her mother tongue. Both teachers held a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree (with specialisation in English language teaching.)

Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and an EA. Semi-structured interviews provide reliable, comparable data, allow the participants to have the freedom to express their views, and they also allow the necessary changes to be made based on the initial results, unlike the case with a questionnaire, and it is more personal as compared to standard interviews. Furthermore, themes were identified using open coding which refers to coding of data by breaking these down into smaller segments to identify emerging themes (Schurink, Schurink & Fouché 2024). The reason for choosing semi-structured interviews is for the learners and teachers to be as comfortable as possible and give responses.

Data analysis

The act of composing texts in English as second language learners creates problems for the learners. The learners at the two selected Soshanguve schools were given the opportunity to write essays. The teachers marked the creative writing essays. These essays are analysed using EA to identify learners' writing errors. The topic was a creative writing essay on 'The day I will never forget'.

Error analysis is described as a process used to classify and analyse learners' errors when writing; it is used primarily for learners writing using a second language (L2). The components to look out for in writing when errors are analysed are spelling embracing omission, addition, misformation, and sentence order (Bialystok et al. 1982). The following steps were considered when interpreting the errors made by learners in academic writing. The researcher must first collect the samples of the student's written essays, then identify the students' errors, then describe, and explain and evaluate them. In this study, the researcher asked the two teachers to provide the marked scripts of the 50 essays the learners wrote to analyse the errors made. The essays or documents were analysed so that the research question could be answered. The results are discussed below.

Ethical considerations

Permission was sought from the Gauteng Department of Basic Education (GDE) to conduct research at two selected schools in Gauteng. Before commencing with the research, it was approved by the Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee. Learners were given informed consent forms for parents or guardians to sign as they were under 18. The participants were informed that they would be anonymous and could withdraw at any time they wished to do so.

Results

Participant responses according to themes were introduced and the grammatical errors grouped together as themes. The following themes were identified and will be covered in the next sections: grammatical errors, the use of AI, reading and

writing, steps in essay writing, and learners and teachers' attitude towards EFAL writing.

Theme 1: Grammatical errors

Two teachers and ten learners were interviewed. One teacher from School A and another teacher from School B, five learners from School A and another five learners from School B. The teachers and learners gave their views on teaching and learning EFAL at the selected township schools. The responses from the face-to-face interviews with the participants are given below. Four themes surfaced: grammatical errors, the use of AI, steps to write essays and attitudes towards writing essays.

The teachers were first asked to answer questions about different punctuation and spelling errors they encountered when marking EFAL essays. Both teachers outlined the errors that learners often make in their writing such as typical spelling errors (e.g. the double l in 'beautiful'), and subject-verb agreement errors, such as using singular verbs for plural forms and vice versa. Then, learners were also asked whether they knew how to spell and use the correct punctuation when they were writing essays and replied that they sometimes miss the typical full stop at the end of the sentence. They reported that the focus was on facts more than on how the facts were communicated. They seemed to lack confidence in their writing. The following responses present the answers the learners and teachers provided during the semi-structured interview:

'Teaching learners how to write English is challenging. It needs practice and requires them to write even when they are at home.' (Tf1, female, Grade 9)

'I always ensure that I give learners different words in English to enrich their vocabulary and help them produce written texts in EFAL. I make them write at least a paragraph on every chapter we have covered. Most of the paragraphs that the learners submit have many errors, which I believe can be avoided if they had more knowledge or knew more words.' (Tf2, female, Grade 9)

'Writing is very challenging for me. I struggle too much with spelling [clapped their hands]. The more I write, the more errors I make; writing essays in English is challenging. I also struggle with punctuation; I sometimes forget to put a full stop at the end or start a sentence with a capital letter.' (LP2m, male, Grade 9)

'I cannot spell English words well, so my essays are always disasters. Sometimes, I wonder why I am doing this subject. It is hard for me. Bad writing leads to poor other marks.' (LP7f, female, Grade 9)

'If I could spell words and punctuate correctly, I would get better marks. My spelling mistakes and punctuation errors are costing me marks.' (LP8m, male, Grade 9)

Ivanova, Arupova and Mekeko (2022) conducted research on English essay writing proficiency. They found that technology can assist students to enhance their English writing. They also claimed that punctuation was an important aspect of writing since it affects the intonation of spoken words. It also enhances the text organisation and readability. T1f and T2f in this study indicated that they taught learners the proper use

of punctuation. However, the learners made various errors that hampered the clarity of their essays:

'Spelling is a major factor as well. Learners cannot spell properly, which poses challenges. They use slang language and number homophones because of the influence of WhatsApp. Even the word "you" is spelt as "u" to shorten it. They use "aint" for "are not" and commit concord errors. Learners use "gonna" and "wanna" instead of going to and "want to".' (T1, female, 57 years)

'The teachers always tell us to plan, draft and edit, but to be honest, I don't. I don't mind losing a few marks for planning and editing.' (LP10m, male, Grade 9)

The use of slang was also prominent, and words such as 'ain't' and 'kidding' surfaced in the essays. The detection of slang emerged as an essay writing style, showing a preference for informal language even though creative essays were written; the essay topic used was 'The day I will never forget'.

Matias (2023) states that slang in essay writing is impacted using technology. She elaborates that social media has altered academic terminology by preventing learners from distinguishing between social and academic writing by relying on slang or social media jargon for convenience. When writing, they must avoid using slang and carefully use proper syntax, punctuation, and word choice. She pertinently noted the frequent use of 'gonna', 'wanna', emoticons and symbols such as 'xoxo' (hugs and kisses) and 'LOL' (laughing out loud). Slang language (e.g. *ain't*) was also a problem in the Grade 9 learners' essays.

Doyle (2014) discusses the use of 'ain't' as slang and states that the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics of the word 'ain't' are widespread in English. A small-scale study was done to investigate the use of 'ain't' in rhetorical issues. It was found that non-English speakers would struggle with the unclear polarity of 'ain't' and related inquiries. Most responders were able to cope thanks to their pragmatic sense. Learning English or living in an English-speaking culture, however, does not ensure proficiency in dealing with idioms such as 'ain't'. Paying attention to pragmatics, especially the context of the circumstance, can help.

Collectively, the teachers indicated that learners need to use formal academic language in their writing so that they can produce comprehensible essays. Teachers said that they struggled when it came to assisting the learners to write well, as they continued to commit many errors even after grammar teaching. It was reported that grammatical errors were a huge challenge as was appropriate vocabulary and spelling especially without the use of technology. The learners admitted that they did not plan or edit their work most of the time.

Theme 2: The use of artificial intelligence in essay writing

Participants except LP3f agreed that Google Translate can help improve learners' EFAL writing proficiency. Therefore, technology can assist struggling learners when they must

produce comprehensible texts. The participants gave many reasons why they chose the statements in the see Table 1 in their responses:

'I chose to use a cross for all the statements on the table because I believe they can help to improve the English writing proficiency of learners in township schools. The major problem is the lack of resources and the fact that we, as teachers, are not trained in digital literacy. I fear that my level of electronic proficiency is low.' (T1f, female, 57 years)

'Technology is a good tool, but the resources are not there. Who is going to pay for all the technology?.' (T2, female, 32 years)

'I once accessed an English app at home, and that English is on another level; it is too advanced for me. What about those who do not have smartphones? Is the school going to offer them tablets?.' (LP8m, male, Grade 9)

'I type so slow; won't that slow me down? The auto corrector helps when one is typing using incorrect spelling and punctuation.' (LP4f, female, Grade 9)

Both teachers confirmed that technology is a useful tool that can assist with the writing process for the learners, although they felt that there were limited resources, and they were undertrained to use technology. They reported that technology even ChatGPT can be used to help them but that it must be used responsibly. Online dictionaries are essential in expanding vocabulary and assisting with correct spelling when they are required to do independent creative writing. The learners were also not convinced about the idea of technology to improve their English writing proficiency.

Many learners used ChatGPT to improve their written text, and the benefits and disadvantages focused attention on the fact that it was a new way of changing a written text that must be considered and taught responsibly, since those learners who can access AI would use it, yet the requirement to write an essay independently, as outlined in CAPS (DBE 2011), also implies the ability to write without relying on AI tools.

Theme 3: Reading and writing

Reading and writing play a significant role in education. This theme also emerged from the participants' responses on how learners learnt English in the classroom. Essay writing communicates ideas and information to the readers of the written text. The written work must be grammatically correct and intrigue the reader. The writer, which in this case is the learners when they are writing their English essays, must ensure that the produced text is well structured. Essay writing is formal. Therefore, the essays written must reflect formal language. The teacher must collect the essays that show or have some features of academic writing to facilitate progress and improvement in the learners' writing. From data collected during semi-structured interviews, it emerged that teachers do not receive well-constructed essays from the learners. Fang (2021) also states that writing is crucial for academic learning and disciplinary activities. However, many undergraduate and graduate students and early career

researchers struggle to understand and write academic and disciplinary texts. Language is one of the primary causes of this conflict. This refers to a lack of understanding of language patterns. Learners and researchers sometimes struggle with grammatically correct writing due to the many errors:

'The learners struggle with the stages of writing. Instead of prewriting, planning their work, writing the first draft, revising, and editing, they write a single draft. They do not follow the writing process cycle, which is evident in their work. They admit using the online vocabulary but when writing the essay under supervision for marks technology is not allowed.' (T1f, female, 57 years)

'Learners have the ability to write, but they are just not getting it right; maybe, as teachers, we have to go back to the drawing board. The learners plan their work, draft, edit and proofread their work, yet the essays produced are still not well-written. I motivate them to practise writing and to have positive attitudes.' (T2, female, 32 years)

Theme 4: Steps in essay writing

When writing essays, the learners must first identify the type of essay that they are writing, brainstorm, do some research based on the topic, and outline the work. All teacher participants understand the importance of teaching learners the steps of essay writing:

'I teach the learners how to write an essay. Firstly, they need to choose a topic they understand and be able to tell whether it is descriptive, narrative, or so forth.' (T1, female, 57 years)

'Learners understand what they must do before they write an essay. Picking a topic you are familiar with is the way to go.' (T2f, female, 32 years)

'I have a weak vocabulary. I just choose any topic that I come across. I don't even know whether it is argumentative or what. I guess that is how I lose marks.' (LP6f, female, Grade 9)

'Writing essays is just hard. You cannot get it right.' (LP8m, male, Grade 9)

All the teachers agreed that it was important for the learners to know which essay they were writing so that they could plan and produce a comprehensible text. The learners had mixed views, and they stated that writing essays was hard; some learners (LP3f, LP4f, LP5f, LP7f and LP8m) admitted that they lacked enough vocabulary to write correctly the way the teachers wanted them to write. To write an essay, learners need to have an adequate English vocabulary. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that mastering English requires sound vocabulary skills. Students may have trouble with both the written and spoken language. Vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of literacy skills. To generate language, new learners should understand and increase their vocabulary skills. Learning a word involves multiple components of vocabulary comprehension. Learning vocabulary entails taking cognisance of the context in which vocabulary is used, learning how to use combinations of words, and using speaking and writing as complementary methods (Samsidar, Sharmila & Patak 2022).

Both teachers encouraged the learners to write, although T1 encouraged them to write at school and at home. It was acknowledged that the teachers followed the guidelines from the Department of Education of how they should teach essay writing to the learners. Learners committed many errors when writing in English, and most errors were made without them being aware. T2f alleged that most of the learners struggled not only with writing but also with reading. The learners who were interviewed revealed that they did not plan or edit their work. Gillis (2021) is of the view that learners struggle with the types of essays when they are supposed to write EFAL. The teachers noticed that when these learners were writing essays, they did not fully understand the topics that they had chosen.

Theme 5: Learners and teachers' attitude towards writing in English as a second language

This theme responds to the first objective and the main research question of the study. When teachers are positive when they are teaching, the learners also become positive about what they are taught; this might make the classroom enjoyable. This might result in an improvement in their writing skills. Furthermore, the teachers indicated that they were aware that they could assist learners in having a positive attitude about learning English by emphasising its benefits for the corporate world and furthering their studies:

'A positive teacher results in positive learners. If they enjoy the class, then they will be positive in English, which might improve their writing skills.' (T1, female, 57 years)

Learners added that:

'I enjoy writing informal essays; they are more fun to write, and the teacher is not strict at all when marking the essays.' (LP2m, male, Grade 9)

'Writing is fun when we are not limited to several words that we can use.' (LP6f, female, Grade 9)

The learners stated that when they are writing, they tend to enjoy being free and expressing themselves. When teachers and learners are positive, learners can express themselves through their writing. The goal of positive language education is to help students discover their own strengths and develop resilience while also establishing a learning environment that not only focuses on traditional school subjects but also encourages student psychosocial development that can impact their attitudes to writing (Sandholm et al. 2023).

During interviews with the participants, it emerged that learners became positive in their writing tasks when the teacher is positive. This supports the statement made by Snell (2017:65–83), who claims that a teacher's positivity leads to successful classroom learning and teaching.

Document analysis: Error analysis

The essays were scrutinised for errors, and the frequency of each type of error was recorded, as shown in Table 1.

The table indicates examples of errors extracted from the 50 Grade 9 EFAL essays.

The spelling words listed in Table 1 indicate the incorrect use of letters by omission, addition and incorrect spelling. It was also clear that learners spelt words the way they would pronounce them and used vowels and consonants incorrectly. Reasons for incorrect spelling are identified by Fitria (2020) who mentions omission, substitution, transposition of letters, insertion and addition as causes of incorrect spelling. Fitria found in her study that omission was the cause of the most spelling errors. It corresponds with this study's findings since omission was also the main cause of errors as indicated in Table 1.

Teaching the verb forms in accordance with the infinitive, past tense and participle remains an important task of equipping learners with the needed verb lists which they must study in order to use verbs grammatically correctly in their essays (Fajarina & Bahtiar 2022). It was clear from the above examples that learners battled with the correct verb forms. This tendency to use the incorrect verb forms was also noted by Fajarina and Bahtiar (2022), as 52% of the learners committed errors of misformation. Learners did not know the English verb forms of all verbs and irregular verbs. English language learners must possess sufficient knowledge of the present and past tenses to produce efficient sentences when expressing their ideas in writing or speaking, as these tenses are crucial components of the predicate of sentences. Still, most learners struggle to comprehend the present and past tenses. It is evident in Table 2 that learners use the incorrect form of the past tense. The findings of this study indicate that when children commence writing their own sentences, they encounter significant difficulties, as it emerged that they do not know the correct verb forms for all tenses.

Table 3 indicates pronoun errors and explanations as extracted from the learners' essays.

Using gender pronouns correctly is essential for respecting people's identities. When using the correct pronouns experiences are validated and acknowledged. Misusing pronouns can cause discomfort and marginalisation. Asking for the correct pronoun fosters and inclusive and supportive environment. When referring to the belongings of a man, male, or boy, the correct pronoun to use is 'his' and for a female it is 'hers'. When an individual refers to something that belongs to her or him, they use the pronoun 'mine' and not 'mines'.

Challenges with correct contractions are listed in Table 4.

The incorrect use of contractions also surfaced in the EA. There are several ways in which EA can be conducted (Gass & Selinker 2008). It was clear that learners did not know the basic grammatical spelling of contractions.

Babanoğlu (2017) conducted research on the incorrect use of contractions and found that learners use contraction forms considerably, including negative ones more than English native language speakers. Purwanti (2013) states that the learners have a problem with vocabulary, and they have insufficient English words to express themselves when they are writing. It emerged from the findings that spelling of contractions were also a problem. Contractions are more associated with an informal writing style. Learners are encouraged at school to use formal English.

Subject-verb agreement

Errors related to subject-verb agreement were among the most prominent issues identified in learners' writing. These errors typically involved incorrect use of verb forms with singular or plural subjects, as well as confusion in compound sentence structures. Table 5 presents examples of such errors extracted from the essays.

TABLE 1: Examples of errors extracted from the Grade 9 English First additional language essays ($N = 50$).

Error or correction	Learners	Error count	Learners who made errors	
			#	%
The word 'righting' → writing	LP 5–38	47	7	14
Aknowledge → acknowledge	LP 4–35	47	7	14
Been → being	LP 1–28	30	7	14
Absense → absence	LP 3–37	40	12	24
The word is spelt incorrectly; a second 'c' and 'l' have been omitted	LP 6–29	25	7	14
Receeve/Riceive → Receive	LP 4–9	10	7	14
Immediate → Immediate	LP 4–33	32	7	14
Disapear → Disappear	LP 1–15	17	13	26
Scarey/scari → scary	LP 5–11	12	8	16
Belive → Believe	LP 17–25	8	7	14
Comited → Committed	LP 2–20	19	6	12
Consious → Conscious	LP 10–12	3	10	20
Haras → Harass	LP 3–8	5	7	14
Scarid → Scared	LP 1–4	7	10	20
Prefeable → Preferably	LP 1–12	13	9	18
Emberes → Embarrass	LP 2–8	6	14	28
Princepel → Principle	LP 14–15	3	7	14
Hait/ Heit → Height	LP 13–15	5	14	28
Complitly/completel → Completely	LP 6, 14–16	4	11	8
Alltho → Although	LP 7–16	9	7	14
Absense → Absence	LP 3–37	40	12	24
Holidei → Holiday	LP 5–30	34	11	22
Acidentaly → Accidental	LP 6–29	25	7	14
Aint → Are not	LP 6–21	10	10	20

LP, learner participant.

TABLE 2: The use of incorrect verbs ($N = 50$).

Errors and corrections	Participant	Frequency of errors	Learners who made errors	
			#	%
Eated → Ate	LP 1–45	47	5	10
Shaked → Shook	LP 14–19	27	5	10
Ranned → Ran	LP 4–45	34	5	10
Telled → Told	LP 14–50	64	5	10
Broked → Broke	LP 18–50	33	5	10
Buyed → Bought	LP 2–37	39	5	10

LP, learner participant.

TABLE 3: Pronoun errors identified in learners' essays ($N = 50$).

Sources of errors	Nature of the errors committed	Participant	Frequency of errors total	Learners who made errors	
				<i>n</i>	%
She → His	Gender pronouns are confused. His can only refer to a boy's possession. Errors were noted in the use of possessive pronouns, with learners misapplying 'his' in contexts where a different possessive form, such as 'hers' would have been grammatically appropriate.	LP 1–47	50	5	10
His	Gender pronouns are confused. His can only refer to a boy's possession. Errors were noted in the use of possessive pronouns, with learners misapplying 'his' in contexts where a different possessive form, such as 'hers' would have been grammatically appropriate.	LP 3–40	43	6	12
Mine → Mines	Mistakes were observed in the use of possessive pronouns such as 'mine', indicating difficulties in correctly expressing possession in English sentence construction.	LP 6–38	46	5	10

LP, learner participant.

TABLE 4: Examples of contraction as extracted from participants' written essays ($N = 50$).

Source of errors	Nature of error	Participant	Frequency of errors total	Learners who made errors	
				<i>n</i>	%
Would not → Wouldn't	In academic writing, there are no contractions; all words must be written in full sentences.	LP 1–34	37	4	7
They will → Won't	The use of contractions is used incorrectly in this instance.	LP 16–40	43	22	44
Should not → Shouldn't	The use of contractions in formal writing is grammatically incorrect, the learners might have committed this error not knowing that it is incorrect.	LP 2–39	45	19	38
Must not → Musn't	The use of mustn't is grammatically unacceptable in formal essay writing. Furthermore, it is spelt incorrectly. The learners seem to make this frequent error as they are not clear and precise.	LP 13–48	39	4	7
Could not → Couldn't	Couldn't is acceptable in conversation, but not in formal writing. Learners use this in their writing as they could not be aware that it is not allowed in academic writing. This error might have been caused by overgeneralisation.	LP 1–50	55	4	7

LP, learner participant.

TABLE 5: Subject-verb agreement errors identified in learners' essays ($N = 50$).

Sources of errors	Participants	Frequency of errors	Learners who made errors	
			<i>n</i>	%
I knows the teacher → I know the teacher	LP 1–50	67	20	40
The teacher, as well as the principal, are present → The teacher, as well as the principal, is present	LP 1–30	40	20	40

LP, learner participant.

While analysing the essays, it was observed that the learners' sentences lacked correct subject-verb agreement.

Forty per cent (20 out of 50 learners) of the errors came from incorrect verb-subject agreement. The sentences were poorly constructed, and the subject and verb had no agreement. Subject-verb agreement comprised the highest percentage of errors committed in the learners' essays. These findings agreed with previous views that concord is a severe problem in the learners' writing.

Discussion

When comparing the findings, it emerged that the findings of the qualitative semi-structured interviews reflected the problems that the learners encountered in their writing. The thematic analysis centred on spelling, the use of grammar, and both teachers and learners agreed that they were struggling with spelling the words correctly and the use of AI. The EA revealed the additional challenge of learners not knowing the verb forms. The semi-structured interviews revealed the challenge caused by a lack of vocabulary, which was also echoed by the EA conducted since learners lacked knowledge of the necessary words, as evidenced in the many incorrect verbs. Furthermore, spelling words correctly as part of learning orthographic patterns and using the language

appropriately also became evident. Subject-verb agreement also surfaced as a serious challenge and must be taught by teachers in detail, even though it was not mentioned in the interviews. The errors committed by the learners could be due to misformation, mis-ordering or addition.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to the DBE, learners and teachers:

- The DBE should implement early interventions to address the low levels of English proficiency among primary school learners.
- Teachers should receive additional support to teach English. The teacher can have the school assign a student assistant who can assist learners with English after school.
- More workshops should be conducted for learners to attend for them to engage with their peers, have debate competitions and have them participate in reading aloud trials.
- Curriculum developers should review and revise the EFAL curriculum to better support learners' language development and promote more effective learning.
- Learners should take advantage of the 21st century's applications such as online apps that correct spelling, grammar, and pronunciation. This can assist the learners with their English; some of these apps are freely accessible online.
- Learners must be taught how to use technology to assist them.
- Learners should be encouraged to visit the school library regularly, where they can access books that support grammar and vocabulary development.

Conclusion

Grade 9 learners struggle with writing English essays, which can hinder their learning as they do all their subjects in English. It also emerged that public schools have limited resources in their schools. The DBE has not implemented any strategies to aid struggling learners with EFAL. Many schools across South Africa do not have the necessary resources (Bantwini & Moorosi 2018). The problem of English proficiency is an ongoing one and it needs urgent attention. The use of technology can assist learners, as it has unlimited information. The contribution of the participants in the study highlighted the educational gaps that exist in township schools. Unlike learners from Model C schools, learners in township schools do not have access to technology that can make learning easier for them. Lutz (2019) postulates that the digital divide is the result of unequal access to telecommunications, which is because of the distance in nations that have technology and those that do not have it. The findings suggest that learners struggle when they must compose well-formulated essays. Table 1 provides the spelling errors that learners commit in their writing, whereas Table 2 indicates the incorrect usage of verbs. Pronoun errors are evident in Table 3 and subject-verb agreement errors are evident in Table 4. Learners are struggling with English, and with learning all their subjects in a second language and not having sufficient resources to ensure that they succeed in learning EFAL. The EA revealed the deficit in vocabulary, spelling problems and the lack of knowledge on verbs in all tenses. The use of AI tools can be beneficial in that exposure to correct grammar can guide them to use correct forms that may become entrenched in the long run, but when writing tasks are done by learners of their own accord, the challenges still surfaced and emerged in the EA conducted. It underscores that learners need to pay attention to grammar and more specifically spelling as when they need to do sit-down essays without using the help of AI tools, they show a lack of having mastered grammatical rules. Teacher support remains critical in learners' successful essay writing tasks.

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Authors' contributions

P.K. contributed to conceptualisation, methodology formal analysis, writing, investigation, software, validation, data curation and resources. C.R. contributed to project administration and supervision. C.G.S. contributed to visualisation, project administration, writing and supervision.

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Data availability

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