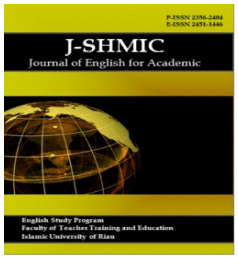

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Writing with Precision: How Filipino ESL Learners Navigate Technical Terms and Context Clues

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ABSTRACT

This study looked at how 25 Grade 10 ESL students in the Philippines use technical vocabulary and contextual clues in paragraph writing. Student writing was assessed using a four-point rubric covering terminology, contextual support, organization, and grammar, and analyzed through the framework of Miles and Huberman (1984). The results pointed to a clear tension between two things: students were surprisingly strong on technical vocabulary : three of the five groups scored at the excellent level but they struggled to actually build meaning around the terms they used. Groups that scored well did so by embedding technical terms within explanations that gave readers enough context to follow along. Groups that scored poorly used technical terms correctly but left them without support, so the words sat in the paragraphs without doing much communicative work. Grammar errors made this worse, particularly for students who were already struggling with contextual application. Scores ranged from 7 to 15 out of 16, with a mean of 10.8, which reflects how unevenly these skills were distributed across groups. The findings challenge the common assumption in ESL teaching that vocabulary acquisition is the first priority and that application will follow on its own. What the data actually show is that knowing technical terms and knowing how to use them strategically are two separate skills that need to be developed at the same time. These findings have direct relevance for ESL instruction in Southeast Asian contexts where English serves as the medium of instruction.

KEYWORDS
ESL, Technical Terms, Contextual Clues, Writing Skills, Philippines High Schools

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana 25 siswa ESL Filipina kelas 10 menggunakan kosakata teknis dan petunjuk kontekstual dalam penulisan paragraf. Tulisan siswa dinilai menggunakan rubrik empat poin yang mencakup terminologi, dukungan kontekstual, organisasi, dan tata bahasa, serta dianalisis menggunakan kerangka Miles dan Huberman (1984). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan ketegangan yang jelas antara dua hal: siswa ternyata cukup kuat dalam penggunaan kosakata teknis : tiga dari lima kelompok mencapai nilai sangat baik namun mereka kesulitan dalam membangun makna di sekitar istilah yang mereka gunakan. Kelompok yang berhasil mencapai nilai tinggi melakukan hal tersebut dengan cara menyematkan istilah teknis dalam penjelasan yang memberikan konteks yang cukup bagi pembaca untuk mengikuti alur tulisan. Kelompok yang mendapat nilai rendah

KATA KUNCI
ESL, Istilah Teknis, Petunjuk Kontekstual, Keterampilan Menulis, Sekolah Menengah Atas Filipina

menggunakan istilah teknis dengan benar tetapi tidak memberikan dukungan konteksnya, sehingga kata-kata tersebut ada dalam paragraf tanpa melakukan banyak pekerjaan komunikatif. Kesalahan tata bahasa memperburuk hal ini, terutama bagi siswa yang sudah mengalami kesulitan dalam penerapan kontekstual. Skor berkisar dari 7 hingga 15 dari 16, dengan rata-rata 10,8, yang mencerminkan betapa tidak meratanya distribusi keterampilan ini di antar kelompok. Temuan ini menantang asumsi umum dalam pengajaran ESL bahwa akuisisi kosakata adalah prioritas utama dan bahwa penerapannya akan mengikuti secara otomatis. Apa yang sebenarnya ditunjukkan oleh data adalah bahwa mengetahui istilah teknis dan mengetahui cara menggunakannya secara strategis adalah dua keterampilan terpisah yang perlu dikembangkan secara bersamaan. Temuan ini memiliki relevansi langsung untuk pengajaran ESL dalam konteks Asia Tenggara di mana bahasa Inggris berfungsi sebagai medium instruksi.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in a second language puts students in a difficult position from the start. They have to get the grammar and vocabulary right, but they also have to follow the conventions of academic writing at the same time (Silva, 1993). For ESL students, this becomes harder still they are trying to express more and more complex ideas while they are still building up the language tools to do it. Coordinating these demands is no small task: students need to organize their ideas, pick the right words, and keep their grammar accurate, all at once (Cumming, 2016; Fadillah & Dari, 2025; Kasih et al., 2024). As students move up in school, the stakes rise. Their written work has to show both that they understand the content and that they can use English well (Tirkashovna, 2024). Language, at its core, is how we share ideas and build shared understanding (Altun, 2023).

Technical vocabulary is one of the tools that makes academic writing sharper. When a student writes "scientific method" instead of "doing experiments," they are showing that they can use language the way their field uses it (Cerovac & Keane, 2024). The same applies to terms like critical thinking, time management, or collaboration. These words carry specific meanings tied to academic and professional contexts, and using them correctly signals real engagement with the material. The problem is that technical terms do not show up much in everyday conversation, so many ESL writers have not had enough practice with them. They may recognize the words but lack a deep enough grasp of how those words work in context (Mahapatra, 2024; Rahma & Fithriani, 2024; Sianturi, 2025). Research has found that vocabulary knowledge correlates with writing quality, but technical terms tend to appear in small numbers, their weight comes from precision, not volume (Lavigne et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2025).

Good paragraph writing is about more than correct grammar, though. A writer has to help the reader follow along, connecting sentences in a way that makes sense and giving enough context so that meaning is clear (Rafida et al., 2024). This gets tricky when a writer drops in a technical term the reader has not seen before. Effective writers handle this by repeating key ideas, using transitions, and spelling out connections between concepts (Ilter, 2022; Tuyen & Huyen, 2019). Think about the word "foul" in a sports context. A student reading about basketball might not know what it means at first, but if the surrounding text describes a player breaking a rule and the referee stopping play, the meaning becomes clear without a dictionary (Phuong, 2024). That kind of contextual reasoning is exactly the skill ESL students need to develop, using what is already on the page to unlock unfamiliar terms.

Putting these two skills together is where things get genuinely difficult. A student has to deploy a specialized term accurately while keeping the paragraph readable and well-organized. Existing research has looked at vocabulary challenges (Mahapatra, 2024; Rahma & Fithriani, 2024) as separate issues, but very few studies have looked at what happens when students try to do both at the same time. In a place like the Philippines, where English is the language of instruction across all subjects, this gap matters. Students are expected to use technical language across disciplines even while their English is still developing. Past work has focused on vocabulary learning on its own (Zeng et al., 2025) or on how paragraphs are organized (Tuyen & Huyen, 2019), but not on how hard it is to juggle both at once. Knowing a word does not automatically mean a student can use it well, there is a strategic side to it, a sense of when and why context needs to be built around a term. That is what this study set out to look at. This study addresses this gap by examining how students navigate the dual challenge of using technical terms accurately while maintaining paragraph coherence.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine how Grade 10 ESL students use technical vocabulary and contextual support in short paragraph writing. Mixed-methods research is appropriate when neither quantitative nor qualitative data alone is sufficient to address the research questions when numerical measurement needs to be complemented by interpretive analysis to produce a fuller understanding of the phenomenon (Fetters et al., 2013). That condition applies here.

The quantitative strand involved scoring each group's paragraph using a four-point analytical rubric across four criteria: structure, grammar, terminology, and content. This produced numerical scores that could be compared across groups and analyzed descriptively: capturing the range, mean, and distribution of writing performance. Descriptive statistics provided an overall picture of how well students performed and where the clearest strengths and weaknesses appeared.

The qualitative strand involved close textual analysis of the student writing samples themselves. Beyond what the scores indicated, the paragraphs were examined for how students integrated technical terms into their writing, whether they built explanatory context around those terms, how ideas connected within and across sentences, and what patterns distinguished higher-performing groups from lower-performing ones. This interpretive layer made it possible to explain why scores differed, not just that they differed.

The two strands were integrated in the analysis phase, following an explanatory sequential design (Creswell, 2018), quantitative results were generated first, and qualitative analysis was then used to explain and elaborate on those results. The analytical process followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model : data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing which provided a structured framework for moving between numerical patterns and textual interpretation. This mixed-methods approach is consistent with emerging practice in applied linguistics research, where combining measurement and interpretation produces more actionable insights for classroom contexts (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2015).

The study took place at Feliciano Yusay Consing National High School in the Philippines, a public school where English is used as the language of instruction across subjects. Twenty-five Grade 10 students took part, split into five groups of five. These students had reached a basic level of English proficiency as laid out in the Philippine K-12 curriculum, but they had known difficulties with academic writing, a common situation in Philippine secondary schools, where students are expected to write well in English while still developing their overall language skills. Participants were chosen on purpose rather than randomly. The selection looked for students at an intermediate level of English, students who had been exposed to academic vocabulary across different subjects, and students whose teachers had identified writing as an area needing work. Grade 10 was picked because students at that stage already have enough of a language base to attempt technical vocabulary, but they are also dealing with writing demands that are getting harder. All students gave informed consent, and their identities were kept confidential, they are referred to as Group 1 through Group 5 in this paper.

Furthermore, students were given a structured writing task. Each group had to write a paragraph of 150 to 200 words about a school activity or subject area. The task required them to include at least three technical terms and to provide enough context around those terms for a reader to understand them. All five groups did the task under the same conditions: a 45-minute time limit, access to a dictionary, and instructions given in both English and Filipino.

Student writing was evaluated using a four-point analytical rubric adapted from Miles and Huberman (1984), assessing structure, grammar, terminology, and content. Each criterion was rated from 1 (Limited) to 4 (Excellent), yielding total scores ranging from 4-16 points.

Table 1. Rubric Assessment

Criteria	Limited 1	Adequate 2	Proficient 3	Excellent 4
Structure	Poor organization of topic and sub-topic	Acceptable organization of topic and sub-topic	Satisfactory organization of topic and sub-topic	Excellent organization of topic and sub-topic
Grammar	Never uses correct grammar in statements	Sometimes uses correct grammar in statements	Often uses correct grammar in statements	Always uses correct grammar in statements
Terminology	Never uses precise technical terms	Sometimes uses precise technical terms	Often uses precise technical terms	Always uses precise technical terms
Content	Never presents concrete facts with evidence	Sometimes presents concrete facts with evidence	Often presents concrete facts with evidence	Always presents concrete facts with evidence

Source: Adopted from (Miles & Huberman, 1984)

Data Collection and Analysis

Student writing was scored using a four-point analytical rubric adapted from Miles and Huberman (1984). The rubric assessed four things: structure, grammar, terminology, and content. Each of these was rated on a scale from 1 (Limited) to 4 (Excellent), so total scores could range from 4 to 16. Two trained evaluators scored each group's work independently, and their agreement was measured at $\kappa = 0.87$, which indicates strong reliability. The analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1984) interactive model, which moves through four stages: collecting the data, reducing it to key points, displaying it in a way that makes patterns visible, and drawing conclusions.

After scoring, descriptive statistics were calculated : total scores for each group, the lowest and highest scores (range: 7–15), the mean ($M = 10.8$), and how scores were distributed. Results were organized in tables so that group performances could be compared side by side and trends in vocabulary use and contextual integration could be identified.

Data Analysis

This study employed a case study approach, with the data analyzed qualitatively. This paper explores an individual or group's in-depth activity and process in line with case study. The researcher utilized several techniques to produce the final reports of this study, applying thematic qualitative analysis through six phases as described by Creswell (Challob, 2021).To prepare and organize the data, the researcher typed and saved the data collected by the research instruments in Microsoft files. Additionally, the data and participants were labeled for easy identification and organization.

The initial data analysis phase involved collecting participant data and writing detailed memos. The researcher then interpreted the data, organized it into themes, and revised these categories. While describing findings and forming themes, the researcher reviewed the data multiple times, creating broad categories that integrated emerging themes. The identified themes were classified into primary and secondary themes, merging them into more comprehensive categories aligned with the research objectives. Finally, the researcher structured the final reports, presenting the findings and explaining the results clearly.

Validity and Reliability

This study used data triangulation through multiple sources, including previous related research. Multiple data collection instruments were used to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data. According to Denzin and Lincoln, triangulation contributes to verifying and validating qualitative analysis by checking the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods and data sources within the same method (2018). Through the comparative analysis of data from various sources, the researcher was able to identify emerging patterns and trends.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

How Proficient Are Grade 10 ESL Students in The Philippines in Using Paragraph Writing

Scores across the five groups ranged from 7 to 15 out of a possible 16, with a mean of 10.8. That mean suggests moderate proficiency overall, but it does not tell the whole story, the

gap between the highest and lowest scoring groups is wide enough that they might as well be at different stages of development. Group 3 stood out clearly, scoring 15 points and coming close to full marks across all four criteria. At the other end, Group 5 managed only 7, which pointed to real gaps in basic writing skills. The other three groups fell in between: Group 4 at 12, Group 1 at 11, and Group 2 at 9. That kind of spread is not unusual in ESL classrooms. Mahapatra (2024), found similar gaps among tertiary ESL students, which suggests that wide variation in writing ability is fairly normal at this level.

Table 2. Group Scores and Per-Criterion Means

Group	Structure	Grammar	Terminology	Content	Total
Group 1	3	2	4	2	11
Group 2	2	1	3	3	9
Group 3	4	4	4	3	15
Group 4	3	3	4	2	12
Group 5	2	1	2	2	7
Mean	**2.80**	**2.20**	**3.40**	**2.40**	**10.80**
SD	**0.84**	**1.30**	**0.89**	**0.55**	**2.86**

Note: Each criterion scored 1 (Limited) to 4 (Excellent). Estimated per-criterion scores are derived from the total scores and qualitative performance descriptions reported in the study.

The criterion-level breakdown reveals a clear pattern: terminology produced the highest mean score (M = 3.40), while grammar produced the lowest (M = 2.20). This distribution is significant, it runs counter to the typical assumption in ESL pedagogy that vocabulary is the primary barrier to writing quality. Three of the five groups (Groups 1, 3, and 4) scored at the Excellent level for terminology, indicating that these students had acquired a working command of relevant technical terms. Performance gaps were most pronounced in grammar (SD = 1.30), suggesting that grammatical competence was the most uneven skill across the sample.

In terms of percentage distribution across performance levels, three groups (60%) achieved total scores at or above the midpoint of the scale (≥ 10 out of 16), while two groups (40%) scored below it. No group scored at the maximum, and only Group 3 approached that ceiling. This distribution points to a cohort that has developed partial writing competence strong in vocabulary recognition and use, but not yet capable of consistently deploying that vocabulary within well-supported, grammatically accurate paragraphs.

Qualitative Interpretation of Score Patterns

The quantitative results present what happened; qualitative analysis of the writing samples explains why. The most striking finding is not simply that Group 3 outperformed the others, it is the nature of how performance differed. Group 3's superiority was not primarily a function of knowing more technical terms. Groups 1 and 4 also scored at the Excellent level for terminology. The difference lay in what Group 3 did with those terms once they appeared on the page.

Close reading of the samples revealed three distinct patterns of technical vocabulary use across the groups:

Pattern 1. Integrated contextual use (Group 3): Technical terms such as OFFENSE, DEFENSE, and FASTBREAK were embedded within explanatory sentences that gave readers sufficient information to follow their meaning. Terms were introduced, elaborated upon, and connected to other ideas within the same paragraph. The writing demonstrated what Nation (2001) calls productive vocabulary knowledge, not merely recognizing a word, but deploying it in context with full communicative intent.

Pattern 2. Accurate but under-supported use (Groups 1 and 4): Terms such as CRITICAL THINKING and SCIENTIFIC METHOD were used correctly but with minimal contextual scaffolding. The words appeared in appropriate positions within sentences, yet the surrounding text did not adequately build meaning around them. Readers familiar with these terms would understand the paragraph; those unfamiliar would not. This pattern reflects the distinction Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) draw between involvement load, the degree to which a word-learning task demands genuine engagement with meaning, and surface-level retrieval.

Pattern 3. Isolated lexical insertion (Groups 2 and 5): Terms such as POINT, FOUL, WAVE, and BANK were dropped into paragraphs without surrounding explanation. These were not errors of vocabulary knowledge, the terms were used in contextually appropriate domains but errors of communicative judgment. The writers appeared unaware that their readers might not share their understanding of those terms in that specific context. This aligns with Baharudin et al.'s (2023) finding that ESL learners frequently lack the prior knowledge needed to contextualize the terms they use, and with Cummins' (2000) distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills and the more cognitively demanding cognitive academic language proficiency that academic writing requires.

2. How Effectively Do Students Use Contextual Support to Sustain Paragraph Coherence?

Quantitative Results

Content scores (M = 2.40, SD = 0.55) and structure scores (M = 2.80, SD = 0.84) were both below the midpoint of the criterion scale, indicating that most groups had difficulty developing ideas with sufficient depth and maintaining coherent paragraph progression. Notably, the relatively low standard deviation for content (0.55) suggests that weak idea development was broadly shared across groups, it was not a problem confined to the lowest scorers.

Grammar scores showed the widest variation (SD = 1.30), with Groups 2 and 5 scoring at the Limited level (1 out of 4) while Group 3 scored at Excellent (4 out of 4). This variance is consequential: as the qualitative analysis below shows, grammatical weakness did not merely produce surface errors, it constrained the structural complexity students were willing to attempt.

Qualitative Interpretation

The gap between vocabulary performance (M = 3.40) and content performance (M = 2.40) is the study's most important finding. It establishes that technical vocabulary knowledge and the ability to deploy that knowledge within coherent, reader-oriented text are distinct competencies that do not automatically develop together. This distinction has direct

implications for how the study's findings are theorized, an issue taken up in the Discussion section below.

Qualitative analysis of cohesive patterns revealed that higher-scoring groups moved logically between sentences, used transitional expressions to signal the relationships between ideas, and returned to technical terms after introducing them in order to develop their meaning further. Lower-scoring groups typically introduced a technical term once and moved on, leaving the term to carry communicative weight it could not support alone.

Grammar errors in Groups 2 and 5 were concentrated at the sentence level: wrong prepositions, missing articles, tense inconsistencies rather than at the level of paragraph organization. This is a meaningful distinction. It suggests that these students understood the macro-structure of a paragraph (introduction, development, conclusion) but had not yet consolidated control over sentence-level grammar. Critically, the qualitative data also revealed a behavioral consequence of grammatical uncertainty: students who struggled with grammar consistently produced shorter, syntactically simpler sentences. They appeared to be managing cognitive load by reducing sentence complexity, a strategy that, while understandable, left little room for the kind of elaborated explanation that contextualizing a technical term requires. This finding extends Goldsmith and Sujaritjan's (2020) observation that grammar errors obstruct meaning, by showing that grammatical insecurity also shapes writing ambition, a dynamic not previously theorized in this literature.

Group 3's writing samples demonstrated that coherence in this context was achieved not primarily through cohesive devices (conjunctions, reference chains) but through the strategic embedding of technical terms within explanatory frameworks. This challenges Anindita's (2024) and Sanosi's (2024) emphasis on cohesive markers as the primary driver of ESL writing coherence, suggesting instead that genuine conceptual understanding of how a technical term builds meaning within a paragraph may be a more fundamental coherence-producing mechanism.

Discussions

The data from this study point to a problem that vocabulary-focused ESL instruction has not adequately confronted: knowing a technical term and knowing how to make it work in writing are not the same skill, and treating them as if they were produces students who can pass a vocabulary test but struggle to write a paragraph a reader can actually follow. The scores confirmed this pattern numerically. Groups 1 and 4 both reached the Excellent level for terminology, yet their total scores remained moderate because they could not sustain sufficient contextual support around the terms they used. Group 3 scored Excellent across nearly every criterion, not because they knew more words than the other groups, but because they understood what to do with those words once they appeared on the page. Group 5's writing illustrated the opposite condition: technically appropriate terms deployed without any surrounding explanation, leaving the reader to fill in meaning the writer never provided.

This pattern sits uncomfortably alongside Roche and Harrington's (2013) claim that vocabulary size is a strong predictor of writing quality. The assumption embedded in that claim is that acquisition precedes application, and that once students know enough words, coherent deployment will follow. What the writing samples in this study showed is that acquisition and deployment are distinct developmental trajectories. Lavigne et al. (2022) found correlations between vocabulary breadth and writing quality, but breadth alone did not produce quality

here. Groups 2 and 5 demonstrated functional command of their respective technical vocabularies; what they lacked was the capacity to build meaning around those terms in a way that served a reader. Nation's (2001) distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge helps frame this: the groups who struggled were operating at the level of retrieval, producing accurate terms in appropriate contexts, but they had not developed the productive, reader-oriented dimension of vocabulary use that effective academic writing requires. Laufer and Hulstijn's (2001) involvement load hypothesis adds a further layer to this interpretation. Tasks that demand high involvement from the learner, in the sense of genuine need to use a word, deliberate attention to its meaning, and productive effort to integrate it into a sentence, generate deeper and more transferable word knowledge than low-involvement exposure. The writing task used in this study required all three, yet the qualitative analysis showed that many students approached the task at a low-involvement level, inserting terms they had encountered in class without engaging with what those terms would mean to a reader unfamiliar with the context.

The grammar findings complicate the picture further. Grammar scored lowest across the sample (M = 2.20, SD = 1.30), and the qualitative analysis revealed that its consequences extended well beyond surface error. Students in Groups 2 and 5 did not merely produce grammatically flawed sentences; they produced shorter, syntactically simpler sentences than the task demanded. Grammatical uncertainty appeared to function as a ceiling on writing ambition: students managed their cognitive load by avoiding the complex sentence structures that contextualizing a technical term requires, which meant they never practiced building the elaborated explanations that would have raised their content and coherence scores. Goldsmith and Sujaritjan (2020) documented that grammar errors obstruct meaning, but this study suggests a prior consequence that their work did not address. The obstruction begins before the sentence is written, in the writer's decision about how much complexity to attempt. This feedback loop, where weak grammatical confidence produces simpler writing, which in turn reduces opportunities to develop contextual scaffolding skills, may explain why some ESL students plateau at moderate writing proficiency despite continued vocabulary growth.

The coherence findings also push back on an established assumption. Research on ESL writing coherence has tended to locate the problem in students' insufficient command of cohesive devices: conjunctions, reference chains, lexical repetition (Anindita, 2024; Sanosi, 2024). Group 3's performance does not fit that explanation. Their paragraphs were coherent not because they deployed an impressive range of transitional phrases but because they understood how to build meaning cumulatively around a technical term. Each sentence added something to what the previous sentence had established. Terms like OFFENSE, DEFENSE, and FASTBREAK were introduced and then elaborated, connected to the activity being described, and woven into a paragraph that moved with purpose. This is a different kind of coherence than the one produced by correct conjunction use, and it suggests that the pedagogical emphasis on cohesive markers may be addressing a symptom rather than the underlying competency. Coherence of the kind demonstrated by Group 3 appears to be rooted in conceptual understanding of how a technical term builds meaning within an explanatory framework, and that is not what conjunction drills teach.

The Philippine EMI context shapes all of these findings in ways that deserve explicit attention. Filipino secondary students encounter technical vocabulary daily across content subjects taught in English, which means their exposure to terms like SCIENTIFIC METHOD

or CRITICAL THINKING accumulates through instruction long before they are asked to produce those terms independently in writing (Gonzalez, 2010; H. Said & Omar, 2023). Cummins' (1979, 2000) distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive academic language proficiency is directly relevant here. EMI creates conditions where students can develop a substantial passive store of academic vocabulary through subject-area instruction, yet this does not automatically produce the academic language proficiency needed to deploy that vocabulary in writing. The high terminology scores alongside weaker content and grammar scores in this study reflect that condition precisely. The students had absorbed the terms; the instructional environment had not consistently required them to practice using those terms in elaborated, reader-oriented writing. This is not a failure of the students. It is a structural feature of EMI schooling that writing instruction in the Philippines, and in comparable Southeast Asian contexts, needs to address directly.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative strands of this study produce a picture that neither strand could have produced alone. The scores established that a gap exists between vocabulary performance and contextual application; the analysis of the writing samples identified the mechanisms through which that gap operates. Vocabulary knowledge, grammatical confidence, and contextual awareness are not three independent skills that develop in sequence and then combine. They develop concurrently, and they constrain each other. A student who cannot yet construct complex sentences will not practice contextualizing technical terms. A student who has never been taught to think about what a reader needs from a paragraph will use technical terms as endpoints rather than starting points. These interactions are what integrated writing instruction needs to target, and they are only visible when researchers study vocabulary, grammar, and coherence as they actually appear in writing: together, in the same task, at the same time.

CONCLUSION

The study looked at how Grade 10 ESL students in the Philippines handle technical vocabulary and contextual support when they write short paragraphs. The results were clear enough, even if they were not what you might expect going in. Students knew their technical terms. Three of the five groups scored at the excellent level for terminology, which is not a small thing. The problem was not vocabulary, it was what students did, or did not do, with it once it was on the page.

Group 3 is the story of what works. When they wrote about basketball, terms like OFFENSE, DEFENSE, and FASTBREAK did not just appear, they were woven into explanations that gave the reader enough to follow along. The writing felt connected. Groups 2 and 5 tell the opposite story. They dropped words like WAVE and BANK into their paragraphs and left them there. The terms were used correctly, but nothing around them explained why they mattered or what they meant in context. The words were technically right but communicatively inert.

This gap between knowing a word and making it do something in writing turned out to be the main finding. It is not a new problem in ESL education, but it has not always been framed this way. Most writing programs treat vocabulary acquisition as the first step and assume that application will follow. The data from this study suggest that assumption does not hold. Contextual application is its own skill. It does not come automatically from knowing

more words. Students need to be taught both at the same time, not just what technical terms mean, but how to build around them so that a reader can actually absorb the meaning. Grammar mattered here too, and in a way that goes beyond surface accuracy. Students who struggled with grammar did not just produce harder-to-read sentences, they also wrote more cautiously. They avoided the kind of longer, explanatory sequences that contextualizing a technical term requires. Weak grammar, in other words, limited not just the quality of what students wrote but the ambition of what they were willing to attempt.

For teachers in the Philippines and in other Southeast Asian contexts where English is the language of instruction, the practical message is this: writing instruction needs to treat vocabulary, grammar, and contextual support as skills that are built together, not one after another. Paragraph writing tasks that explicitly ask students to explain their technical terms would be a direct way to start addressing that gap. Future research could test whether that kind of integrated approach actually closes the distance between what students know and what they can do on the page.

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