



JEELS

(Journal of English Education and Linguistics Studies)

P-ISSN: 2407-2575 E-ISSN: 2503-2194

<https://jurnalfaktarbiyah.iainkediri.ac.id/index.php/jeels>

LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES AND ENGLISH WRITING PROFICIENCY AMONG SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN PORTOVELO

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Abstract: Writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) continues to pose significant challenges for senior high school students, primarily due to linguistic difficulties in writing skills. This study aimed to identify the linguistic challenges that affect students' writing skills and to determine the correlation between these challenges and their performance on an English writing proficiency test. By using quantitative correlational research, 81 third-year students from a public high school were instructed to fill out a 30-item proficiency test that assessed their writing proficiency and a structured questionnaire to assess their linguistic challenges. However, the correlation analysis showed weak relationships between linguistic challenges and overall writing proficiency. This indicated that although linguistic competence impacts writing, it is not the only factor affecting students' performance. Finally,

¹Citation in APA style:

Pupiales Chuquin, E. G., & Lizaldes E., O. V. (2025). Linguistic challenges and English writing proficiency among senior high school students in Portovelo public school. *JEELS (Journal of English Education and Linguistics Studies)*, 12(1), 355-375.

DOI: 10.30762/jeels.v12i1.4423

Submission: December 2024, Revision: April 2025, Publication May 2025

overcoming EFL writing difficulties requires a comprehensive teaching approach that supports linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. The implication of this finding is that writing instruction should not focus solely on correcting grammar or vocabulary errors but should include broader instructional strategies that address cognitive and contextual aspects of writing.

Keywords: *linguistic challenges, English writing skills, L1 interference, correlational analysis, EFL students*

INTRODUCTION

Writing skill is a fundamental ability that requires conveying thoughts and ideas effectively through written text. Writing skills in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) are complex for students in elementary schools, high schools, and universities. Moses and Mohamad (2019) affirmed “One of the biggest problems in teaching writing is that the students must have facts and ideas in order to write and that these must be manifested in the form of grammatical English sentences” (p. 3). The main linguistic challenges affecting my students’ writing skills are a lack of grammar knowledge, limited vocabulary, which hinders their ability to express ideas effectively, and interference from their mother tongue (L1) in writing skills.

Additionally, recent research conducted by Elbashir (2023) at a ‘Sharqiyah University in Oman identified problems in writing skills, such as punctuation, word choice, capitalization, spelling, and verb tenses when writing in EFL. The same author mentions several issues that can cause difficulties in writing skills, such as psychomotor problems, mechanical, linguistic, and cognitive ones. Teachers should apply the correct approach and students must read frequently to improve their grammar, and increase their vocabulary (Elbashir, 2023).

To strengthen these statements, many high school students struggle with writing fluently in English (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). Despite learning the language, they often find writing tasks

challenging, which suggests underlying linguistic difficulties that need to be addressed. According to Maggi and Quishpe (2021), "the students-related challenges include English language competency, Spanish language interference, and students' lack of motivation to write in English, whereas the teacher-related factors include several teaching practices"(p. 6).

Several researchers also have identified various linguistic challenges that affect language learning, including grammar, vocabulary, and interference from the first language (L1). Fareed et al., (2016) mentioned difficulties related to grammar, and syntax. Similarly, Dhuli et al. (2023) found that vocabulary posed a significant challenge in developing writing skills. Finally, Cabrera Solano et al., (2014) identified L1 interference in productive writing skills.

Lack of knowledge in grammar and vocabulary affects the learning of student's writing skills. Students have difficulties in grammar and syntax, they make a lot of mistakes in the use of subjects, pronouns, tense, article, and basic structure (Fareed et al., 2016). As a result, the research affirms that students have found some factors like the article challenging. Also, grammar instruction has been a big issue in writing activities for teachers and students in ESL/ EFL (Azizah & Budiman, 2017). Furthermore, learners face challenges in using the definitive article "The". They often omit it when referring to something already known or mentioned in a specific context; these mistakes indicate that they did not know the basic use of the English article (Puspita & Suswanto, 2023).

Moreover, a negative factor is insufficient knowledge of vocabulary in productive skills. Many learners struggle to convey ideas, opinions, and feelings in writing due to a limited vocabulary (Dhuli et al., 2023). It is useful for student learn a lot of vocabulary to write sentences, and paragraphs clearly.

Additionally, this issue is about from insufficient basic knowledge of countable and uncountable nouns, and a lack of comprehension among students regarding the rules for using quantifiers with countable and uncountable nouns. Students only

know basic knowledge about countable and uncountable nouns, but students do not understand the concept of using countable and uncountable nouns (Talibana et al., 2024).

The next linguistic challenge is language transfer from L1 to L2 which becomes a negative factor when applied to the writing skills. Students need to learn to think in English, and the use of L1 discourages them from doing so effectively. The interference of the L1 mother tongue is an inhibiting factor found in the development of writing skills in EFL, which produces a negative effect on the proper learning of the language (Cabrera Solano., 2014). The researcher stated that when learners mistakenly use a word from their native language when writing in English it often leads to a mental block in the process. Factors that contribute to confusion caused by false friends in the process of learning a target language can be particularly challenging due to various cognitive, linguistic, and educational factors (Khalil et al., 2018).

Facing linguistic challenges in language learning can be a difficult task but manageable using the right strategies. First, it is necessary to master the use of definite and indefinite articles. The error correction method is a useful technique as part of the learning process, focusing on teacher correction, self-correction, and peer correction. Self-correction is a practical technique for students to correct grammatical structures, articles (Puspita & Suswanto, 2023). Second, concerning vocabulary acquisition, an investigation suggested that teachers should focus on teaching vocabulary and that students should learn vocabulary in context (Dhuli et al., 2023). Overall, Cabrera Solano et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of addressing L1 interference in developing students' writing skills. They recommend that teachers adopt innovative strategies, methods, and activities to prevent the negative effects of first language (L1) interference in writing skills.

However, in a study by EF English Proficiency Index (2024) mentioned that "in the learning of English, Ecuador has a low proficiency level at 46. 7%. Moreover, the deficiency in writing skills affects English language development, with the cause detected as

focused on the use of inappropriate methods, techniques, and lack of motivation for writing activities and the lack of digital tools for practicing writing skills (Fajardo Rojas et al., 2023). Lack of effective writing skills can hinder English language development, interrupting the ability to express ideas clearly and accurately in a productive skill. With this initiative in place, it is necessary to carry out an investigation centered in identifying linguistic challenges that affect writing skills of the Ecuadorian students. Considering the existing literature as well as based on our experience with elementary public students, the relevant aspects to be explored are grammar deficiencies, vocabulary learning, and mother tongue interference. Consequently, this research attempts to analyze the linguistic challenges affecting learners' writing skills and the correlation between specific linguistic challenges such as grammar, vocabulary, and L1 interference with the proficiency levels of English writing skills among senior high school students

The present study is purely didactic in nature. Its importance lies in becoming a didactic reference for future teachers to help foster correct writing in secondary school students in Ecuador. Furthermore, the results obtained from this study will be used to intervene didactically to correct the difficulties related to grammar deficiencies, vocabulary learning, and mother tongue interference and thus obtain better results in the students' written production in EFL.

Finally, a researcher has mentioned that future studies could investigate whether enhancing learners' awareness of structural differences between their native language (L1) and the target language (L2) reduces errors related to L1 interference, like misuse of definite articles, incorrect verb conjugation, and improper word order (Kazazoğlu, 2020). Additionally, in our context, no investigation has been carried out that focuses on identifying linguistic challenges like definitive or indefinite articles, count nouns, and false friends that produce difficulties in writing skills.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between linguistic challenges and English writing proficiency among senior high school students.

Participants and Sampling

This research was carried out in a public high school in Portovelo, located in the Province of El Oro, Ecuador. This institution offers an educational environment, providing access to a defined student population. Portovelo is a small, mining-based city in a rural area, where socioeconomic conditions may vary. This public institution consists of students from lower to middle income families, with limited access to educational resources compared to urban settings. The students from this high school may face some challenges focused on resource availability, which influence their educational experience and English language proficiency.

Moreover, the population is made up of 180 students who belong to the secondary school of a public educational institution of the city of Portovelo. The sampling was done by has taking a cluster of 81 students by convenience because the researcher is the teacher in the research setting and the group of students is accessible.

The sampling method plays a critical role in carrying out quality research by supporting researchers in selecting more representative samples and research (Golzar & Tajik, 2022). The target group share similar characteristics regarding their English proficiency level and they are naturally homogenous groups that suit research model design.

Likewise, the participants were chosen from 3rd year of high school, specializing in Science and Computer Science. All students had been studying English for six years, which is ideal for identifying common challenges in writing skills. The participants are 16 years old. Students from non-science and non-computer Science specialization were excluded to ensure that the sample was homogeneous and relevant. The study includes both male and female students; gender is

not considered a primary factor in this investigation. The socioeconomic status may generally represent middle to lower income households.

Conversely, the recruitment involved selecting students from the 3rd year of baccalaureate at a public institution. First, the researcher identified the target group based on: age, grade level, and availability for the study period. The students were informed about the study's objectives, and the types of activities to be conducted. Second, the researcher asked permission from the high school director to ensure institutional support. After, receiving the director's approval, the researcher applied two instruments: a questionnaire designed to gather data on linguistic challenges faced by the students, and a proficiency test focused on assessing their writing skills. Finally, 81 students consented to participate, providing a diverse sample for data collection and analysis.

To protect the participant's confidentiality, all data collected through the questionnaire and proficiency test was coded. Names and surnames were not included in the instruments. Each student was assigned with a unique code to organize and tabulate all the information collected. Some researchers have emphasized that all participants involved in research must be treated with the highest level of respect and trust (Mirza, 2023). The process ensured that individual responses remained confidential, and only the final analysis was reported. All data was securely stored, with restricted access by the researcher. These ethical measures aimed to uphold participants' privacy and ensure that their data was handled responsibly and respectfully throughout the research process.

Instruments and Data Collection

This research employed two different instruments: a writing proficiency test and a linguistic survey. The writing proficiency test consists of 30 items. The first activity is on grammar (definite and indefinite articles) with 10 items, the second activity is about vocabulary (count nouns) with 10 items, and the last activity is 10 items

about L1 interference (false friends), where students must choose the correct answer. These exercises were adapted from two books: *Basic Grammar*, and *Focus on Grammar* and a research paper titled *New Insights into the Study of English False Friends*.

The second instrument was a linguistic survey in the form of questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to capture various aspects of students' linguistic difficulties faced when writing in EFL. The students completed a questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The instrument consisted of six close-ended items categorized into three dimensions: grammar (articles), vocabulary (count nouns), and L1 interference (false friends). Each dimension was measured using two items. Data collection was conducted over a two-week period, with the writing proficiency test administered in the first week and the questionnaire distributed in the second week.

Data Analysis

Considering the design of the study, it is important to mention that the researchers used the descriptive statistics to process and analyze the quantitative data. The mean, median, mode, and standard deviation describe the general characteristics of linguistic challenges and writing proficiency. The data was represented in tables and graphs using Microsoft Excel and Jamovi.

Furthermore, the responses from questionnaires were represented using frequencies and percentages to provide a clear view of the distribution of answers across categories. The data were represented in tables or graphs. Also, the test scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including the mean, median, and standard deviation. Finally, the Shapiro Wilk test for normality and the Spearman correlation coefficient were used to measure the association between variables (Schober & Schwarte, 2018). The next step involved obtaining scores for two variables of interest linguistic challenges and writing skills, and correlating the paired scores. The final step focuses on data analysis and interpretation, when two variables are correlated, the outcome is a correlation coefficient, which is a decimal number

ranging from -1.00 to +1.00. This coefficient shows the strength and direction of the relationship between variables (Gay et al., 2012).

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study, which aimed to examine the relationship between linguistic challenges and English writing proficiency among senior high school students. Descriptive statistics, normality tests, and correlation analysis were used to identify patterns in the students' responses and performance. The results offer insight into the extent of students' difficulties and the variability in their writing skills, which will be discussed in the following subsections.

Students' Writing proficiency

The data related students' writing proficiency was taken from the writing proficiency test consists of 30 items, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and L1 (Spanish) interference. The descriptive data of the result of student' writing proficiency test was depicted in Table 1.

Table 1.
The Result of Students Writing Proficiency Test

Category	Sample Size	Mean	SD
Grammar	81	5.17	2.2
Vocabulary	81	4.01	1.87
L1 Interference	81	4.57	2.34

Table 1 shows that the study presents 81 students, and the descriptive statistic provides the results of a proficiency test in writing skills into the linguistic challenges faced by students in three areas: grammar, vocabulary, and L1 interference. Grammar is the first indicator in writing proficiency test. The mean indicates (5.17) suggest that grammar proficiency is challenging, as the mean is just over half of the maximum score (10). The standard deviation (2,20) shows there is some variability in the grammar scores and the range (0-10) indicates that some students scored low, showings a wide gap in grammar

proficiency among students. Besides, vocabulary is the second indicator, the table indicates the mean is (4,01), and the scores are lower than the mean of grammar, indicating that vocabulary is a slightly large challenge in average.

Finally, L1 interference is the last indicator, the result from the table shows the mean is (4,57). This average indicates that L1 interference in writing skills is a negative transfer from the student's native language (Spanish) is a considerable challenge. The standard deviation is (2,34), is higher than for vocabulary, indicating that some students are more affected by interference issues than others. The broad ranges from 0 to 10 highlights that L1 interference varies widely, some students are heavily impacted by interference from their first language, while others are less affected.

Students' Linguistic Challenges

To further explore the students' linguistic challenges, a questionnaire was administered. This instrument was consisted of six close-ended questions. Two questions on grammar (Definite and Indefinite Article), two questions on vocabulary (Count Nouns) and two questions are on L1 interference (False Friends). The result of questionnaire was presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
The Result of Linguistic Challenges Questionnaire

No.	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
1.	I find it difficult to choose between "a," "an," and "the" when forming sentences in English.	12 (15%)	13 (16%)	32 (39%)	12 (15%)	12 (15%)	2.99
2.	I need to examine and oftentimes correct my	10 (12%)	14 (17%)	42 (52%)	10 (12%)	5 (6%)	2.83

	use of both definite and indefinite articles when writing in English.							
3.	I find it difficult to properly use count nouns correctly when writing sentences in English.	8 (10%)	12 (15%)	36 (44%)	15 (19%)	10 (12%)	3.09	
4.	I am not always sure when to correctly use singular or plural forms of count nouns in English writing.	11 (14%)	10 (12%)	35 (43%)	17 (21%)	8 (10%)	3.01	
5.	When writing in English, I often mix up English nouns.	17 (21%)	7 (8.6%)	29 (35.8%)	16 (19.8%)	12 (14.8%)	2.99	
6.	I find it challenging to locate and correct false friends (nouns) from Spanish when writing in English.	8 (9.9%)	15 (18.5%)	28 (34.6%)	19 (23.5%)	11 (13.6%)	3.12	

The data presented in Table 2, Item 1, concerning definite and indefinite articles indicate that the mean score for difficulties in choosing between **a**, **an**, and **the** is 2.99, reflecting a moderate level of difficulty among the respondents. This finding suggests that learners

frequently encounter uncertainty when selecting appropriate articles in English sentence construction. Although the difficulty is not extreme, the result reflects persistent challenges related to article choice, which may stem from the absence or different realization of article systems in learners' first language. Such difficulties can affect grammatical accuracy in writing, particularly in contexts requiring sensitivity to definiteness and specificity.

Item 2 yielded a mean score of **2.83**, representing a moderate but relatively lower level of difficulty compared to other items. This result implies that learners demonstrate a certain level of awareness regarding the need to examine and correct their use of definite and indefinite articles. However, the continued necessity for self-correction suggests that mastery of article usage has not been fully achieved. This may indicate that learners rely heavily on post-writing revision to address article-related errors rather than applying grammatical rules automatically during the writing process.

As shown in Table 2, Item 3, the mean score for difficulties in using count nouns correctly is 3.09, indicating a moderate to moderately high level of difficulty. This finding suggests that learners experience notable challenges in applying grammatical rules related to countability, which is a complex feature of English grammar. Errors in this area may arise from confusion over which nouns are countable or uncountable and how they interact with determiners and quantifiers. Consequently, these difficulties may negatively influence sentence clarity and grammatical precision in written English.

Item 4 produced a mean score of **3.01**, reflecting a moderate level of difficulty in determining when to use singular or plural forms of count nouns. This result highlights learners' ongoing struggles with number agreement in English writing. Such uncertainty may be attributed to insufficient internalization of pluralization rules or interference from learners' first language structures. As a result, inaccuracies in singular-plural usage may persist, particularly in more complex sentence constructions.

With a mean score of 2.99, Item 5 reflects a moderate level of difficulty associated with mixing up English nouns during the writing process. This finding suggests that learners occasionally experience lexical confusion, which may be attributed to limited vocabulary depth or semantic overlap among English nouns. Although the level of difficulty is not high, such confusion can still disrupt textual coherence and reduce overall writing quality, particularly when precise word choice is required. In addition, the results indicate that some participants frequently confuse false friends between English and Spanish when producing written English. For instance, learners may mistakenly associate “embarrassed” with *embarazada* (pregnant in Spanish) or “signature” with *asignatura* (subject in Spanish), as these lexical items share formal similarities across languages but differ in meaning.

Item 6 recorded the highest mean score (3.12), indicating a moderately high level of difficulty in identifying and correcting false friends (nouns) from Spanish when writing in English. This finding suggests that cross-linguistic interference plays a substantial role in learners’ writing challenges. Similarities in form between Spanish and English nouns may lead learners to assume equivalent meanings, resulting in inappropriate word choices. Consequently, false friends represent a significant source of error that warrants focused instructional attention. The most commonly confused false friends include “carpet” (English: floor covering) with *carpeta* in Spanish: folder, and exit in (English: a way out) with *éxito* (Spanish: success).

Normality Test

To gain deeper insight into the distribution of the data related to these linguistic challenges, a normality test was conducted using the Shapiro-Wilk method. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Test of Normality- Shapiro Wilk

Variable	Sample Size	W	p-value
Definite and Indefinite Article	81	0.936	< .001
Count Nouns	81	0.942	0.001
False Friends	81	0.944	0.001
Total	81	0.949	0.003

Table 3 presented the results of the Shapiro–Wilk normality test. The findings indicate that all variables – Definite and Indefinite Article ($W = 0.936$, $p < .001$), Count Nouns ($W = 0.942$, $p = .001$), False Friends ($W = 0.944$, $p = .001$), and the Total score ($W = 0.949$, $p = .003$) – significantly deviate from a normal distribution, as all p-values are below the .05 threshold. Therefore, the assumption of normality is not met for any of the measured variables. Accordingly, Spearman’s rank correlation was employed for subsequent analyses, as it is appropriate for non-normally distributed data.

Correlation Analysis

Following the descriptive and normality analyses, the next section presents an examination of the correlation between the two variables. This analysis aims to explore the extent to which writing proficiency is associated with linguistic difficulties, thereby providing a clearer understanding of the relationship between learners’ writing performance and the linguistic challenges they experience.

Table 4.

Correlation between Writing Proficiency and Linguistic Challenges

Proficiency Aspect	Article Difficulty	Count Noun Difficulty	False Friends
Grammar	-0.140	-0.105	0.060
Vocabulary	-0.025	-0.030	0.157
L1 Interference	-0.165	-0.165	-0.080

In contrast, the relationships between writing proficiency components (grammar, vocabulary, and L1 interference) and linguistic difficulties are generally weak. Grammar exhibits weak negative correlations with article difficulty ($\rho = -0.14$) and count noun difficulty ($\rho = -0.11$), suggesting that higher grammatical proficiency is associated with slightly lower levels of linguistic difficulty. Similarly, L1 interference shows weak negative correlations with article difficulty ($\rho = -0.17$) and count noun difficulty ($\rho = -0.17$), indicating a limited inverse relationship. Vocabulary proficiency demonstrates weak correlations with all linguistic difficulty variables, suggesting that vocabulary knowledge alone does not strongly predict grammatical or cross-linguistic challenges in writing.

Overall, the findings indicate that while linguistic difficulties are strongly interrelated, their associations with writing proficiency are relatively weak, highlighting the multifaceted nature of second language writing competence.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal several persistent linguistic challenges faced by senior high school students when writing in English. Among the most prominent are difficulties with the use of definite and indefinite articles, count nouns, and false friends, all of which contribute to a lack of grammatical accuracy and clarity in student writing. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting article usage as a major challenge for EFL learners, particularly in L1 contexts where articles function differently or do not exist at all.

As shown in Table 1, the students scored low on the proficiency test, particularly in their use of definite and indefinite articles in writing skills. These findings align with the results of Fareed and Ashraf (2016), who reported that students face significant linguistic challenges in grammar syntax, pronouns, and articles when writing in English. The findings are similar in writing skills, which suggests that both groups

of students struggle with grammar, which is crucial for accurate and coherent written communication.

In addition, the results indicate that students did not achieve satisfactory scores in the vocabulary section of the proficiency test. This finding aligns with previous research, which highlights insufficient vocabulary knowledge in developing productive skills, Dhuli et al. (2023) indicated that many students struggle to express ideas and opinions, due to a limited vocabulary for writing skills. These findings indicate the importance of vocabulary acquisition to produce coherent and meaningful written texts.

Besides, the finding presented in Table 1 presents a low level of L1 interference in the proficiency test results for English writing skills. This information is consistent with the information provided by Cabrera Solano et al. (2014) affirm "He provides various types of typical interference errors such as articles, gender, number, personal pronouns, relative pronouns, adjectives, prepositions, possessives, question formation, negation, verb tenses, passive voice, word order, and false cognates" (p.42). Thus, in addressing the research question about the main linguistic challenges in writing skills, the findings affirmed significant linguistic challenges such as grammar, vocabulary and L1 interference. These challenges are crucial in order to improve students' writing proficiency in language acquisition process.

In order to answer the second objective, the correlation matrix reveals weak relationship between linguistic challenges and student's performance on the proficiency test. There was no correlation with values lower than (0.183), which means that these specific problems do not seem to have a strong relationship on the overall writing scores. Similar findings were reported by Nation (2009), who stated that linguistic deficiencies alone do not explain poor writing performance in EFL learners, suggesting that other instructional and cognitive factors must also be considered.

An alternative explanation for the results could be that the student's struggles with writing may be due to a limited teacher instruction time and a lack of strategic focus on writing skills.

Furthermore, another alternative could be the low reading level, often linked to insufficient acquisition of vocabulary and poor grammatical structure. Moreover, the disconnection between reading and writing skills could be attributed to a lack of integration in instructional practices. Grabe and Zhang (2013) suggest that teachers and curricula need to focus attention on reading comprehension activities connected with the texts that students must use in reading/writing tasks.

This study also aimed to identify the linguistic challenges affecting writing skills among EFL students, with particular attention to grammar deficiencies, vocabulary limitations, and first language (L1) interference. A descriptive and correlational research design was employed to analyze both the prevalence of these challenges and their relationship with students' writing proficiency. The participants were third-year high school students from Portovelo, whose responses offered valuable insights into common difficulties encountered in English writing. These areas of focus align with Afroogh (2019), who highlighted grammar, lexical choice, and L1 influence as persistent barriers to writing proficiency among EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings from the questionnaire and the proficiency test, it can be concluded that the most significant linguistic challenge for the students in this research is vocabulary, as evidenced by the low scores on the proficiency test. Additionally, the findings highlight three linguistic challenges in the forms of grammatical issues on definite and indefinite articles, vocabulary related problems in count nouns, and false friend as a part of L1 interference.

Moreover, regarding the second research question, which focused on the correlation between linguistic challenges and the proficiency test, the findings indicate that student's perception of their learning process, as measured through a questionnaire, does not correlate with their performance on the English writing proficiency test. The data analyzed show a weak correlation between linguistic challenges and proficiency tests.

Thus, the researcher suggests that future research should investigate the correlation between reading comprehension and writing skills. It is also necessary to examine how students' level of reading comprehension influences their writing proficiency. Furthermore, future studies are encouraged to incorporate numerical variables to quantitatively measure specific aspects of both writing and reading knowledge.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

The authors declare that Artificial Intelligence was used in this research to improve language clarity and readability. The researchers have carefully edited and reviewed the content to ensure its accuracy and quality for the final version of the publication.

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