

## Enhancing English Writing Skills Among University of Rwanda Students Through Morning Pages: Case of Gikondo College of Business and Economics, Rwanda

Speciose Ndimurugero Ngirabakunzi<sup>1</sup>

Eustache Hagenimana<sup>2</sup>

Gloriose Mugirase<sup>3</sup>

Estelle Kezimana<sup>4</sup>

Mediatrice Nsengimana<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>ngspeciose@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>hageneusta26@yahoo.fr

<sup>3</sup>gmugirase@gmail.com

<sup>4</sup>kezimanaestelle@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup>nsengimediata@yahoo.fr

<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>University of Rwanda, College of Arts and Social Sciences

### ABSTRACT

In recent decades, English has become a global lingua franca and has been adopted as the language of education in a number of countries all over the world. Rwanda, a country in Eastern Africa, followed this trend and declared English as the medium of instruction from primary school onwards in 2008. Despite this language-in-education policy, most university graduates in Rwanda have for years displayed limited proficiency in English, specifically low writing skills, which may have been enhanced by the country's linguistic landscape with a long French tradition and the use of Kinyarwanda by the majority of Rwandan citizens. This lack of students' communication skills in English, the target language, has for long been a real concern for the researchers who are lecturers of English at the University of Rwanda. Therefore, they decided to embark on the current study to investigate whether morning pages would contribute to improving their students' English writing skills. The research was carried out at the College of Business and Economics, Gikondo Campus. It involved third-year students enrolled in the academic year 2023-2024, and it made use of quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to select a sample size of 87 students out of 869. The data were collected through observations, a questionnaire, interviews, and document analysis for the sake of triangulation. For data analysis, quantitative data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), whereas qualitative data were grouped into typologies and analysed inductively. The findings revealed that the use of morning pages motivated the students and helped to develop their English writing skills. Hence, the researchers recommended that morning pages be given due consideration and, thus, be introduced in students' lives at all levels of education in Rwanda.

**Keywords:** English, Morning Pages, Writing Skills

### I. INTRODUCTION

Because of globalisation and internationalisation, there has currently been a move towards the use of English as a medium of instruction around the globe. In Europe, for example, some higher learning institutions in countries such as France, Italy, Norway, Denmark, and Germany have adopted English as the medium of instruction to allow free movement of staff and students from one university to another (Hultgren et al., 2015; Lanvers & Hultgren, 2018). Asian countries like Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines adhered to the same trend and declared English the medium of instruction from primary school onwards (Bolton et al., 2023; Lei & Hu, 2022). English is also used as a medium of instruction in a number of African countries, namely Nigeria and Tanzania (Tom-Lawyer & Thomas, 2024), Botswana, Swaziland, Namibia, South Africa, and Zambia (Nqoma et al., 2017). In Rwanda, English was proclaimed the sole medium of education in 2008 (Mugirase, 2020; Sibomana, 2022), replacing French that was used before then. This shift occurred after some other changes had been made in the language-in-education policy.

Indeed, from the aftermath of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi until recently, there have been constant changes in the medium of instruction in Rwanda. The first main change took place in 1996, when the School of Modern Languages (Ecole Pratique des Langues Modernes [EPLM]) was entitled to offer students enrolled at the National University of Rwanda either a nine-month intensive English or French course, depending on their countries of exile. This program was introduced to reduce the cost of education in institutions of higher learning where lecturers used to teach parallel classes (one in French and the other in English) for the same course. It also aimed to help student returnees from exile develop skills in the medium of instruction so that they could follow courses taught either in English or French without difficulty. Each lecturer was assigned a group of not more than 40 students whose needs he or she

attempted to address. By the end of the training, students could follow mainstream subjects delivered in the language they had been trained in and generally did well academically. It can, therefore, be assumed that the newly introduced bilingual policy was successful at the National University of Rwanda.

The second major change in language education policy occurred in October 2008 with the introduction of a policy that made English the only language of instruction from the primary level to the university level, despite the linguistic landscape with a long French tradition and the use of Kinyarwanda by the majority of Rwandan citizens (Tabaro, 2015). The paradigm behind this change was that English is nowadays considered the language of commerce and that it would help Rwandan graduates compete in the national, regional, and international labour markets. Rwanda also followed the international trend as nations around the globe opted for the use of English as a medium of instruction (Tolon, 2014).

The implementation of the English medium became effective in all institutions of higher learning only a few months after its aforesaid promotion (Uwambayinema, 2019). As students had not been prepared for this change, English was maintained as a subject in their first and second years of university studies so as to boost their proficiency in the English language (HEC, 2007). However, despite this language support, students still left university with limited English proficiency. This gap led the University of Rwanda to devise and launch what they called the UR Language Management Scheme (Niyomugabo et al., 2018), which intended to make it an English hub. Due to the expressed need, decision-makers introduced the course English for Academic Purposes in year three too, but not much improvement was noticed. For example, in 2019 and 2021, the Government of Rwanda (GoR), through the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), organised boot camps in which its interns who could not meet job requirements were provided an intensive English course as well as soft skills.

Nevertheless, the issue of graduates' low levels of English, and particularly their lack of writing proficiency, remains a concern. Indeed, the researchers, who are also lecturers of English at the University of Rwanda, have noted that their students struggle to write accurate and meaningful sentences; thus, they fail to produce well-written theses and internship reports at the end of their academic studies. To remedy this situation, they thought of instilling a writing culture in their students and developing their thinking abilities through daily morning pages. Students were, therefore, requested to produce and submit seven morning pages every week. It is against this background that the researchers embarked on the current study to explore whether the morning pages helped the students boost their writing skills, so they could be promoted as useful strategies in English language classes.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

In Rwanda, students are expected to be proficient in English so that they can easily follow their courses and achieve their academic goals. However, studies have shown that a number of students in higher learning institutions in Rwanda suffer from a lack of proficiency in this target language (Asingwire et al., 2015; Hagenimana et al., 2024; Ndimurugero, 2015; Tabaro, 2015) and struggle to comprehend subject content. Students at the University of Rwanda are not spared. They also display low English skills and, specifically, limited writing skills in this foreign language. This causes them to encounter difficulties while writing their assignments and their exams; hence, they perform poorly in content subjects. Nevertheless, third-year students face more challenges as they are in their last year of studies and are requested to write bachelor's theses or internship reports. They also need to write job application letters after they graduate, and they must use good English to impress employers and likely secure jobs.

Lecturers of English have, therefore, endeavoured to devise various strategies to help enhance the University of Rwanda students' writing skills in English, but the aforementioned problem has persisted. The researchers assumed that the students' failure to develop writing skills was probably due to the fact that they were not assigned daily writing tasks. This is the reason why they thought of making the students write and submit seven morning pages once a week and exploring whether this strategy made the difference. In fact, morning pages are believed to promote students' writing skills, as this practice consists of authentic writing experiences (Nelson-Dittman, 2020; Tuan, 2010). Therefore, this research aims at investigating the impact that morning pages may have on students' writing skills in English and how they can be promoted among University of Rwanda students.

### 1.2 Research Objective

The main objective of this research is to analyse the contribution of morning pages in improving students' English writing skills. Specifically, the study sets out to:

- (i) Monitor the level of students' engagement with morning pages
- (ii) Distinguish any observable improvements in grammar, vocabulary and overall students' writing proficiency
- (iii) Gather information on how to better reinforce the morning pages activity among students

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

There seems not to be a comprehensible theory of second language writing, but process writing has been the most influential model (Atkinson, 2018). According to Atkinson, there has not been agreement on the theory that would guide second language writing, and multiple locally situated theories should be considered so as to generate new forms of knowledgeable practices. There is therefore no single theory of writing in a second language (Kroll, 2003, p. 6), and modern literature has mainly been marked by unconventional writing styles whereby individual writers are characterised by peculiar writing modes that give them unique identities (Sarwat, 2024). Therefore, as morning pages or brain dumps require individuals to write three pages of thoughts occurring in their minds regardless of whether they are connected or not, the present study was guided by the theory of transitive parts of the stream of consciousness. Stream of consciousness was introduced in 1890 by William James as an innovative psychological terminology in his *Principles of Psychology* (Khoshsafa, 2024) out of the concern to 'provide a satisfactory solution for the problems of the immediately experienced continuity of consciousness' (Gurwitsch, 1943, p. 449).

Stream of consciousness normally depicts individuals' endless flow of thoughts, feelings, and sensations (Zaki, 2024), since our mental state is considered to be a conscious state (Gennaro, 2024). According to Zaki, stream refers to a continuous flow like a river, and individuals' thoughts may jump from one thing to another and go back and forth between memories. Zaki goes on to say that the stream of consciousness provides unstructured thoughts as it lacks a linear structure. Furthermore, this writer argues that 'thoughts can meander, loop around, and go off on tangents, and memories can pop up in the middle of a current thought, or future possibilities can intrude on the present moment' (p. 66). The current study is, thus, congruent with the theory of transitive parts of the stream of consciousness.

### 2.2 Definition of Morning Pages

Morning pages are defined as written ideas that come straight from one's mind earlier in the morning before undertaking other activities (Cameron, 1997). They involve isolating the surface of the mind to access the deeper impulses and thoughts behind our everyday voice-over (Cameron, 2012). Cameron adds that morning pages are an apparently pointless process also known as brain drains or brain dumps. As for Zaman et al. (2023), morning pages are a daily practice that serves as a tool of creative recovery. In other words, morning pages are notes written consciously in the morning before engaging in any other tasks. The practice consists of writing any idea that crosses one's mind without holding anything back, and it does not require a high level of art or real writing.

### 2.3 Purpose and Methods of Writing Morning Pages

Morning pages play different roles in an individual's life, including boosting their writing skills. According to Zaman et al. (2023), morning pages enable people to express their feelings freely and to better understand themselves. One of their functions is brain drain as they help to find and retrieve one's creativity (Cameron, 2012).

Both Cameron (2012) and Zaman et al. (2023) are of the view that writers of morning pages should not be worried about what they are jotting down, but that they should just write whatever comes to their mind until they have three pages regardless of how perfect it is or will be. Zaman et al. (2023) argue that morning pages are considered as tools for developing one's critical thinking and sharpening one's mind. These brain dumps are a way of changing one's habit of learning that differs from the writer's cognitive thinking, and how they socially communicate and interact (Yagelski, 2009).

Furthermore, (Alt et al., 2022) contend that reflective journaling acts as an intervention to enhance engagement in writing and functions as a coping mechanism. According to their research, Hensley and Munn (2020) also assert that keeping a journal initiates crucial processes, including making immediate changes, inspiring action, and discovering the path to a transition. Besides, writing morning pages increases creativity and self-confidence in the writer (Cameron, 2012). To add more, Cameron (1997) holds that even though morning pages appear to have nothing to do with art, they often move those who write them to more artful lives prior to moving them to art itself. They are seen as a vacuuming process (p. 15).

As proposed by Silvia (2018), morning pages require consistency and repetitive practice instead of waiting for inspiration, which can hinder the writer's progress. By regularly engaging in practices such as morning pages, individuals can find inspiration and develop into skilled writers. Indeed, proficient writers do not possess unique talents or distinct characteristics; instead, they engage in more consistent writing practices and utilize their writing time more effectively (Silvia, 2018; Zaman et al., 2023). As a result, changing one's habits may not necessarily enhance the enjoyment of writing, but it will certainly increase speed and reduce the sense of burden when writing.

## 2.4 Advantages of Morning Pages in Language Classrooms

Morning pages are written outside the classroom, but they contribute to uplifting students' level of writing since they provide them with opportunities to write. Cameron (2012) posits that students who write every day and get feedback from their teachers have their brain naturally collect ideas and insights and consider morning pages as the best tool for making writing a daily discipline. According to Tuan (2010), the best way in which individuals can become good writers is by writing some ideas in English every day (Tuan, 2010). Cameron (1997) also contends that morning pages allow those who write them to dump all the stuff and make way for more constructive and creative thinking. Hence, morning pages enable individuals to easily generate ideas and take them to new levels.

Brennan (2023) viewpoint is that the act of writing leads to further writing. She suggests that the more individuals write, the more this process becomes effortless for them. Furthermore, Brennan (2023) emphasizes the power of writing consistently on a regular basis such as the practice of morning pages or journaling. As an illustration, Ionescu (2022) affirms to have been engaged in impromptu open-ended journaling on a daily basis for four weeks and that practice has improved her creative writing. Morning pages can then help remove students' creativity blockage and enable them to write spontaneously what comes to their mind.

In the study conducted on the use of brain dump, Handayani et al. (2021) found out that students who learned to use morning pages or daily brain dumps displayed more advanced skills in writing and even thinking than those who did not engage in this practice. Endorsing this idea, Agarwal and Bain (2019) affirm that brain dumps offer a straightforward way for students to enhance their confidence, particularly when they can compare an earlier brain dump with their most recent one. In this way, students have the freedom to articulate their thoughts without being restricted to a predefined set of questions. All in all, morning pages is an exercise that assists people to gain confidence in harnessing their creative talents and unblocking writing and thinking barriers.

## 2.5 Challenges Faced by Students and Ways to Overcome Them

According to Misbah et al. (2017), students encounter difficulties in developing writing skills due to their limited vocabulary. Moses and Muhamad (2019) emphasise the critical role of vocabulary in forming sentences, which is essential for effective writing. Therefore, as students rely on spoken language to convey their thoughts as well as writing to express their emotions, enhancing their vocabulary will help them express ideas clearly. Strategies such as using electronic dictionaries and engaging in more reading activities can, hence, assist students with vocabulary deficiencies.

Students also encounter difficulties while dealing with grammar, a crucial component of writing as it clarifies meaning and structure. Indeed, Fareed et al. (2016) have noted that students struggle with various grammar aspects such as subject-verb agreement and tenses, which leads to anxiety. Thus, various activities that focus on reading and grammar should be provided to improve students' grammar proficiency.

In addition, poor spelling was identified by Nyang'au (2014) as a hindrance to the development of writing skills. In fact, students often rely on phonetics, which results in misspellings. Nevertheless, correct spelling is integral to effective communication. Memorisation techniques are, hence, recommended to enhance spelling accuracy.

Lack of readiness is another factor that hampers students' ability to engage in writing tasks. However, student readiness, as highlighted by Li (2015) and Winarso (2016), is also essential for learning how to write effectively. That is to say that both physical and mental preparedness are required for effective learning. Motivating students and capturing their interest can, therefore, improve readiness (Li, 2015).

Furthermore, students' limited exposure to reading materials poses challenges in writing development, as indicated by Li (2015) and Moses and Mohamad (2019). Extensive reading is nevertheless believed to enrich vocabulary and provide ideas for writing. Li (2015) highlights the connection between reading and writing, underscoring the importance of exposing students to diverse reading materials.

Lastly, a lack of students' motivation is a significant barrier to learning (Gbollie & Keamu, 2017). That being so, motivational encouragement from teachers, such as praise and positive feedback, is required to enhance students' engagement and persistence in their learning process.

## III. METHODOLOGY

As stated by Goundar (2012) and Abuhamda (2021), research methodology is all about the whole process through which research is conducted. In addition, Bhattacharjee (2012) defines research design as a research plan about all steps in conducting research. These involve data collection methods and tools, sampling techniques, and data analysis procedures. Furthermore, Shukla (2020) describes population as a group of individuals from whom the information is collected.

This research focused on year three students enrolled at the University of Rwanda in the College of Business and Economics, Gikondo Campus, in the academic year 2023-2024. Within this research, a total number of population



equivalent to 869 students was considered. As quoted from Sharma (2021), in case the total population is not greater than 1000, a sample size of 10% can be applied. Through a purposive sampling method, a sample of 87 participants was considered as representative from different academic departments within the college. In that context, students were required to write one morning page a day which would totalize 7 pages every week for 2 trimesters. We decided not to continue with the exercise in the third trimester since we did not want to overload the students. As we had one session per week, they were to submit the work during the next class. A mixed-methods approach that included the distribution of structured questionnaires to harvest quantitative data and focus group interviews for qualitative data was used. Both questionnaires and interviews allowed for close/open-ended discussions. We also used observations and document analysis to monitor the students' involvement with the activity using covert research. These varied tools were used to enable the researchers to come up with valid and reliable findings (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). To analyse the data, SPSS and the inductive approach were applied.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1. Students' Levels of Engagement with Morning Pages

To gather information about how students were engaged in the morning pages activities, respondents were asked to appropriately tick in the correct box depending on their own views and on how they had proceeded. The information provided is summarized in the table below:

**Table 1**

*Level of Students' Engagement with Morning Pages*

Items	Always	Sometimes	Never
I write information straight from my mind	74	10	3
I copy information from the internet	12	24	51
I read and summarize information and write it	7	9	71
I report any story I have read or heard	18	7	62

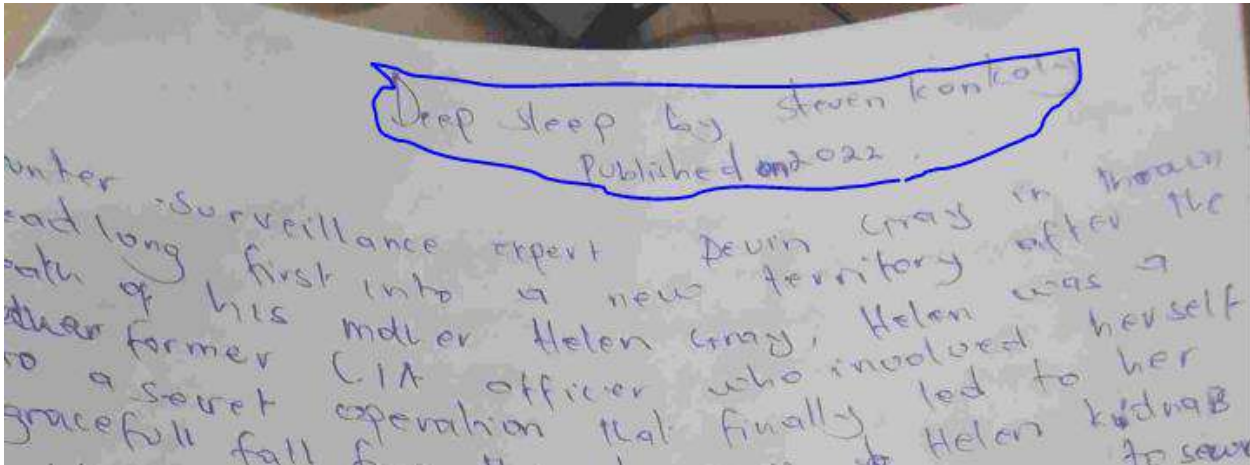
As presented in the table above, the majority of respondents (N= 74) indicated that they used information that came straight from their mind while writing morning pages. This information complies with Cameron's (2012) assertion that morning pages are written unconsciously by simply keeping the flow of ideas from one's mind.

On the other side, 12 respondents confessed that they copied information from the internet and submitted it as their own work. 7 respondents also read information and summarized it, then they submitted it as their own morning pages. Lastly, 18 respondents avowed they reported the story they had read or heard and made the lecturer believe it was theirs. From the above responses, it can be concluded that the last three practices are against the purpose for writing morning pages. In line with this, Tuan (2010) purports that morning pages help individuals to become good writers in the target language.

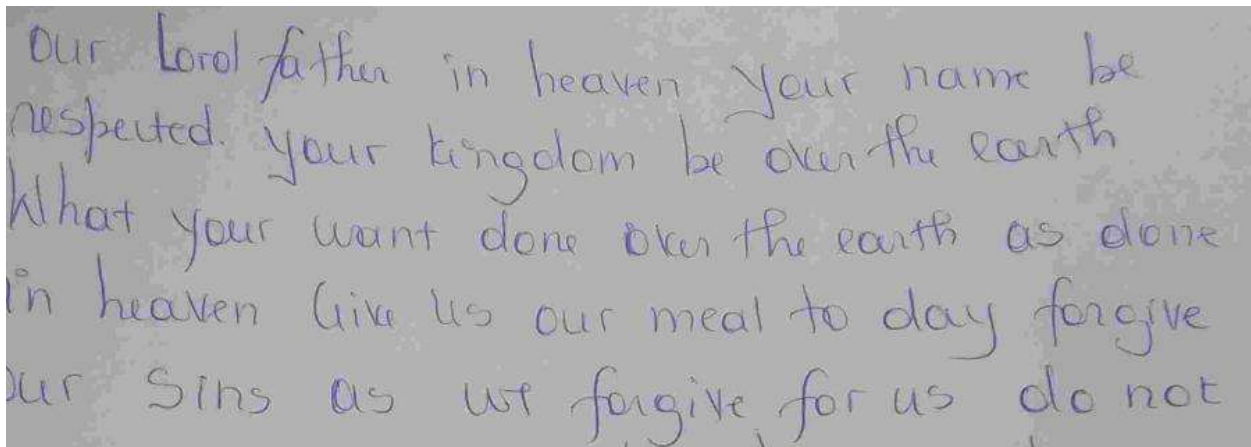
### 4.2 Findings from Observations and Document Analysis

To explore how students carried out the morning pages activity, the researchers conducted classroom observations during their teaching periods. They noted that 8 students out of 87 (approximately 9%) were writing morning pages in the classroom. In addition, through document analysis, the researchers randomly selected 25 copies, among others, by simply reading the headings. They observed that 6 out of 25 (approximately 24% ) had either copied songs or prayers like 'Our Father who art in Heaven'. However, they only decided to read the headings as it was against the practice guidelines to go thoroughly through the content (Manti & Licari, 2018). In fact, according to these authors, informed consent is not always necessary. As stated by Lugosi (2008), through covert research, some information from participants such as their professional identity and academic intentions cannot be fully known by researchers.

Based on the above findings, it was realized that some students plagiarized other people's texts and consequently failed to abide by the morning pages' instructions.



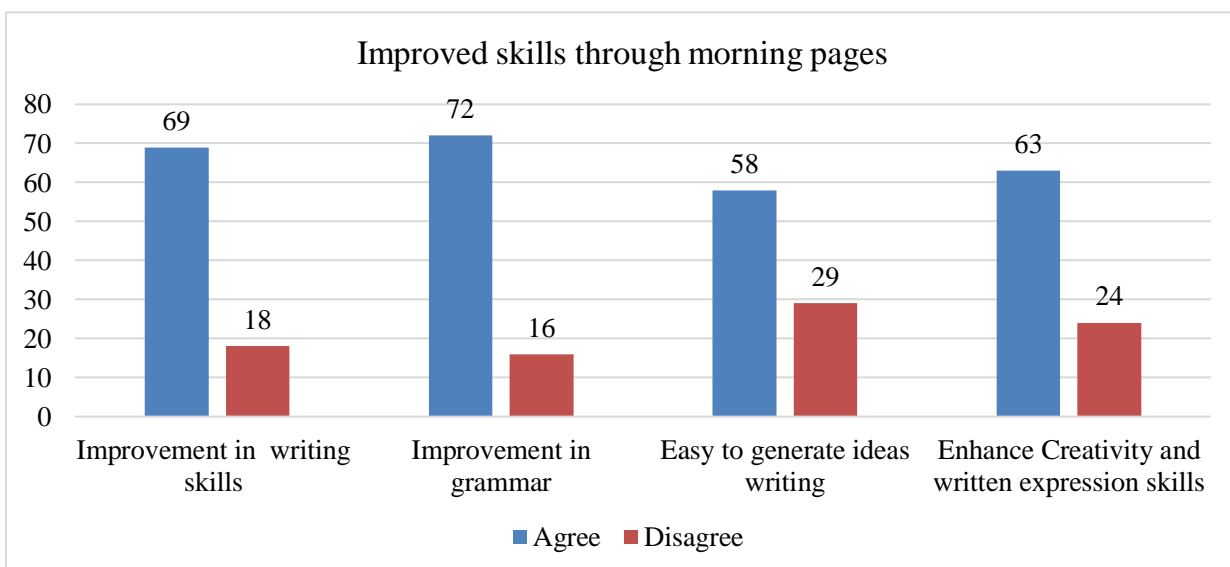
**Plate 1**  
Example of Observed Plagiarism Cases 1



**Plate 2**  
Example of Observed Plagiarism Cases 2

### 4.3. Improvement in Students' Writing skills

To ensure that morning pages have either contributed or not to the students' improvement in grammar and their writing proficiency, respondents were interviewed and their responses are presented in the figure below:



**Figure 1**  
Improved Skills Through Morning Pages



As presented above, students indicated that morning pages contributed a lot to various aspects of their English language skills. When asked if morning pages had helped enhance their English writing skills, 69 out of 87 respondents replied that their level of grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and text organization had improved. They added that this positive effect could be observed in different classroom tasks assigned to them, and it had also contributed to their academic success and readiness for future professional endeavors. This assertion is illustrated in the following excerpt from R1:

*This activity of writing morning pages has enabled me to improve my writing skills because I wasn't used to writing a lot of things, but since I engaged myself in this, I can write easily without hesitating.*

In addition, 72 out of 87 respondents showed that morning pages had improved their English grammar. For example, R23 declared

*From the time I started writing morning pages, I saw an improvement in my grammatical aspect. Before, it might take me a long time thinking about rules and how to write correctly, but now it comes automatically, and I am sure it resulted from the morning pages exercise.*

Furthermore, 58 out of 87 respondents indicated that morning pages enabled them to generate ideas without difficulty. This is evidenced in the following extracts from R10 and R45 respectively:

*From the time I became familiar with writing morning pages, ideas are really coming smoothly, and I can write without stopping or thinking much about what to write.*

*Today, I find myself in a situation where, during classroom activities, I no longer take much time to reflect on what to write or to say because the morning pages have improved the way I generate ideas and display them.*

Sweeney, Januchowski-Hartley, and Gilbert (2024) corroborate R10's and R45's affirmation that brainstorming ideas and noting them down without minding about the coherence of thoughts, whether sentences are accurate or words are spelt correctly helps enhance students' writing proficiency.

Lastly, 64 out of 87 respondents revealed that morning pages enhanced their level of creativity and written expression skills. According to them, writing morning pages was a free activity known for fostering an uninhibited writing style and having the potential to unleash creativity and self-written expression skills. These findings comply with Turkben's (2019) view that students might improve their written expression skills through regular writing practices and self-evaluation. The researchers also believe that practice makes perfect, reason why they introduced morning pages in their students' daily lives.

Moreover, some respondents stated that, through writing one's thoughts without censoring or worrying about grammar or structure, morning pages fostered a sense of liberation and empowerment in the writing process. The following excerpt from R78 illustrates this assertion:

*With the morning pages exercise, I improved my creativity in writing, and today, I really see the progress through my daily classroom activities.*

Therefore, this liberation from self-imposed constraints enables students to tap into their innate creativity, experiment with language, and explore new avenues of written expressions. According to Fulwiler (1982), free writing gives a room to students to practise their imaginative and speculative thinking skills.

To sum up, based on various views from the respondents, the practice of writing morning pages obviously helped develop their writing skills. This is supported by Ionescu (2022) who claims that morning pages enable students to enhance their creativity in writing.

#### 4.4. Reinforcement of Morning Pages Activity

After collecting information regarding the contribution of morning pages to the improvement of students' English skills, we asked the respondents about their views on how to better strengthen the morning pages exercise. The information provided is summarized in the table below:

**Table 2**  
*Ways to Reinforce the Morning Pages Activity*

Items	Respondents
Explain the role of morning pages to all students	79
Consider the exercise as worth doing and not tiresome	82
Follow-up regularly to enhance this culture among students	73

The table above summarises information provided by the respondents about how to better reinforce the morning pages activity among students. 79 respondents suggested that students should be explained the role of morning pages in improving their writing skills. They added that when students are prepared in advance and encouraged to get involved in an activity, they do it easily. Another suggested way is to consider the exercise as worth doing and not tiresome, as proposed by 82 respondents. Respondents argued that their fellow students should consider writing morning pages as an important activity that can help them improve their writing ability instead of considering it a burden. To add more, having a continuous follow-up may enhance the culture of writing morning pages among students, as highlighted by 73 respondents. From their points of view, if lecturers of English make a continuous follow-up on how students write morning pages, they will be motivated and will build on their lecturers' feedback. All the above-proposed strategies reinforce Brennan's (2023) claim that the more individuals write, the more this process becomes effortless for them.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. Conclusions

From the findings, it can be assumed that morning pages may have a great contribution to enhancing students' writing skills. Beyond academic and professional orientation, proficient writing skills also enable individuals to actively participate in various activities in their society. In fact, through effective written communication, people interact actively and exchange ideas. In addition, practicing writing morning pages strengthen students' inner thoughts, touch their feelings, and experiences. Moreover, through this process of self-exploration that influences their writing, students gain a deeper grasp of who they are and how the world works. As far as students engage in this daily practice, they also become more attuned to their unique voice and style, gaining greater confidence in their ability to convey ideas and emotions effectively through written communication.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Therefore, the researchers recommend that morning pages be introduced as a writing technique in English language classes to acquaint students with this useful practice. They also suggest that language-in-education policy makers and all education stakeholders value morning pages and help promote them at all levels of education.

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