

## An Appraisal of Awareness and Perceptions of Prior Knowledge Strategies in Pre-writing: A Study of Undergraduate Engineering Students

**Ramya Devi Bommanaboina**

Ph.D. Research Scholar

**Rajakumar Guduru, Ph.D.**

School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Management

Indian Institute of Technology, Bhubaneswar

Odisha, India

[rb22@iitbbs.ac.in](mailto:rb22@iitbbs.ac.in)

---

---

### Abstract

The usefulness of prior knowledge strategies in pre-writing has direct impact on the students' writing performance in the actual-stage and the post-stage of writing. In the English as Second Language (ESL) context, it is imperative that learners at college level must be competent in academic writing. However, the process of acquiring competency in academic writing is a complex process for the low-proficient ESL learners especially First-Generation Learners (FGLs). These learners' overall academic performance in writing is average and poor due to lack of understanding of writing process, specifically prior knowledge strategies. For this purpose, to understand the students' current writing skills, and awareness of prior knowledge strategies, and perceptions on pre-writing, 20 undergraduate engineering students from different streams were chosen as a sample for the study. Data was collected through an essay writing test, a questionnaire, and informal student interviews. The study adopted a qualitative methodology for analyzing and interpreting the data. The findings revealed that majority of the FGLs are unable to generate ideas at pre-writing stage. They are unaware of the prior knowledge strategies and the positive role it in academic writing. In order to improve the writing skills of FGLs in the target language the study recommends a remedial strategy training.

**Keywords:** prior knowledge strategies; First Generation Learners (FGL); pre-writing; idea generation; academic writing

### Introduction

In the global context, English language is indispensable for learners achieving their personal, academic, and professional accomplishments. Hence, learners are expected to acquire English language proficiency which aids in learning the content knowledge of the subjects they study at college level. According to Van Dyk et al. (2009) proficiency in academic literacy

encompasses competency in listening, speaking, reading, writing skills and is the main reason for success or lack of academic success among university students. At college level, much of the formal communication is done in writing; therefore, students are expected to use writing skills for multiple purposes (e.g., e-mails, assignments, projects, letters, proposals, memos, reports, applications).

Writing, as a process, involves the following stages: prewriting, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing. In the process of writing learners required to use various cognitive and metacognitive skills like framing an objective, planning a layout, revising, analyzing and synthesizing (Klimova, 2012). The study of (Ridhuan & Lim, 2009) also emphasized the implementation of appropriate writing strategies for producing good piece of writing. Thus, we can understand that writing is a complex and challenging activity comprising a number of processes, skills, and strategies.

### **Significance of the Study**

The learners who hail from disadvantaged family backgrounds, where reading and writing are not integral part of their academic activities, have limited exposure to writing skills. Hence, this study aims at understanding the First-Generation Learners' knowledge of writing process and the writing strategies.

In writing composition tasks, it is observed that the first-generation learners are unable to think freely and generate ideas on the given topic. It is because these learners seem to be unaware that writing is closely associated with thinking process, so they lack knowledge of writing process, especially awareness of prior knowledge strategies such as brainstorming, questioning, listing, outlining, anticipating, free writing in the pre-writing stage. As a result, their writing lacks important elements of writing such as unity, coherence, cohesion, and adequate development of ideas. Furthermore, it is found that much of these learners' writing is irrelevant and inadequate on a given topic.

Therefore, this study is significant as it aims at understanding learners' awareness of pre-writing stage and knowing their prior knowledge strategies to integrate and organize the information in the process of writing. Such awareness, it is believed, could help in increasing the FGLs' academic achievement on par with the proficient learners, and also aids in their academic writing success.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of this study are to –

- understand the FGLs' awareness of prior knowledge strategies in pre-writing stage.
- know the FGLs' perceptions of prior knowledge strategies in pre-writing stage.

## Literature Review

Mogahed, (2013), opined that prewriting stage occupies prominent place in the writing process. It involves two components— invention and arrangement. Invention focuses on gaining more ideas and points through certain strategies like brainstorming, free writing, and listing. Whereas arrangement focuses on identifying and memorizing the structure of the essay. For example, graphic organizer, fishbone map and series chains etc. In the opinion of Karatay (2011) prewriting is the stage in which ideas are generated, topic is decided, and target readers are determined.

Researchers have elaborated on the benefits of prewriting. In particular, Poston (2009) claimed that prewriting is necessary since it helps motivate writers when a topic might cause confusion or if there is a block when composing. It is a way writers can play with their ideas and experiment with their senses and past experiences. Connor and Kramer (1995) believe that prewriting is helpful because it can guide the writer in the organization of his or her thoughts and in the construction of a plan that will, in the end, answer the questions asked.

The study of Yunus et al., (2018) examined the awareness and perceptions of students towards pre-writing stage. Through their study it was found that students were unaware of the writing process and the stages involved in it. Through their perceptions it could be observed that students strongly believe in the effective use of pre-writing strategies for enhancement of writing skills.

The study of Chien (2010) associated students' higher writing performance with their higher awareness of writing skills. Results shown that high and low achievers differed significantly in their strategies in generating ideas, in generating text, revising, and editing. Compared to low achievers, high achievers tend to be more conscious of advantages in certain writing strategies. They were able to generate and organize the ideas at pre-writing stage. Low achievers have less awareness towards brainstorming and free writing strategies which help in idea generation and recollection of stored information.

## Methodology

All the 20 subjects of the study were the graduate engineering learners who are the First-Generation learners in their family. Based on the socio-economic and educational backgrounds they come from, these learners can be said to have from lower-intermediate to intermediate level of proficiency in English. All the learners had their schooling in the regional medium and from the government schools.

**A task on essay writing** was given to all the learners to understand their awareness and use of prior knowledge strategies in the pre-writing stage. Keeping in mind the educational background and the level of English language proficiency of the learners, a writing task, a three-body paragraph essay on a topic, was designed and administered to all the students. They

were given 30 minutes to complete the task. Except for general instruction, no special instruction regarding the process of writing was given.

**The purpose of the questionnaire** was to understand learners’ awareness and perceptions of prior knowledge strategies and pre-writing. The questionnaire had 11 questions focusing on three themes representing learners’ awareness and perceptions of prior knowledge strategies and pre-writing (1-5 on idea generation; 6-8 on learners’ awareness on prior-knowledge strategies and pre- writing; and 9-11 on learners’ perceptions on prior knowledge strategies). For questions 1-5 learners had to mark the appropriate option on the Likert scale to specify their level of agreement to a statement in five points: (1) always; (2) very often; (3) sometimes; (4) rarely; (5) never. For questions 6-11 learners had to mark the appropriate option on the Likert scale to specify their level of agreement to a statement in five points: (1) strongly disagree; (2) disagree; (3) neutral; (4) agree; (5) strongly agree.

Informal interviews with five of the students were conducted. Learners expressed their views and concerns to the general questions asked about the process of writing and their competence in writing skills.

### Data Analysis

The data was gathered through the writing test, a student questionnaire, and informal interviews with students was analysed qualitatively through thick description.

IELTS TASK 2 Writing band descriptors (public version) which assesses learners’ writing from 0-9 levels based on four parameters such as *Task Response*, *Coherence and Cohesion*, *Lexical Resource*, and *Grammatical Range and Accuracy*, was chosen for analysing the learners’ written answer scripts. It includes personal information such as opinion statement or background information of learners. However, to understand learners’ awareness and perceptions, all the 20 written answer scripts were first by an external language expert who has 15 years of experience in teaching English as a subject and then by the scholar herself. Both the evaluations, by language expert as well as the researcher, are based on the IELTS TASK 2 Writing band descriptors (public version) with respect to ‘Task Response’ which focuses on learner’s answer, position, ideas, relevancy, and ability to develop ideas which are closely associated with pre-writing stage.

**Table 1: Essay Writing Task Evaluation Sheet ‘Task Response’**

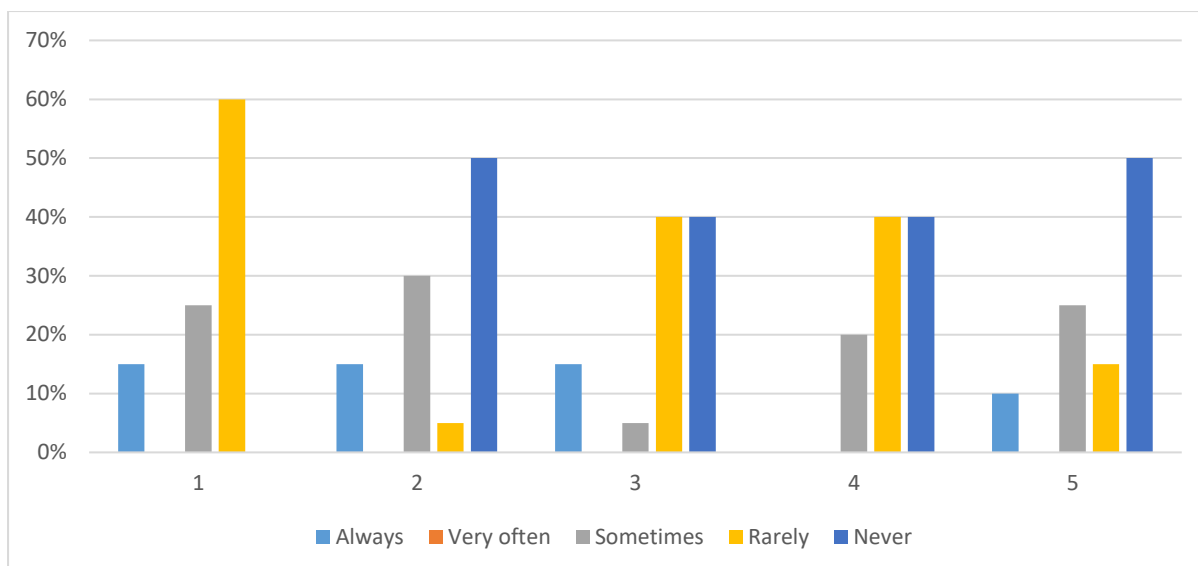
Students	Language Expert Evaluation 1-10 marks	Remarks/ Comments ‘Task Response’	Researcher’s Evaluation 1-10 marks	Remarks/ Comments ‘Task Response’
S.1	5	average	5	average

S.2	5	average	3	poor
S.3	3	poor	5	average
S.4	5	average	3	poor
S.5	3	poor	5	average
S.6	5	average	4	average
S.7	4	average	4	average
S.8	4	average	3	poor
S.9	3	Poor	5	average
S.10	5	average	5	average
S.11	5	average	5	average
S.12	5	average	4	average
S.13	4	average	3	poor
S.14	3	poor	4	average
S.15	5	average	5	average
S.16	5	average	5	average
S.17	1	poor	1	poor
S.18	3	poor	3	average
S.19	3	poor	4	average
S.20	4	average	2	poor

Form the table above we can see that the expert marked 13 students as ‘average’ and 7 students as ‘poor.’ On the other hand, the scholar marked 14 students as ‘average’ and 6 students as ‘poor.’ As many as 8 students were commonly marked as ‘average’ by both the expert and the scholar, but they differed with the rest of the 12 students.

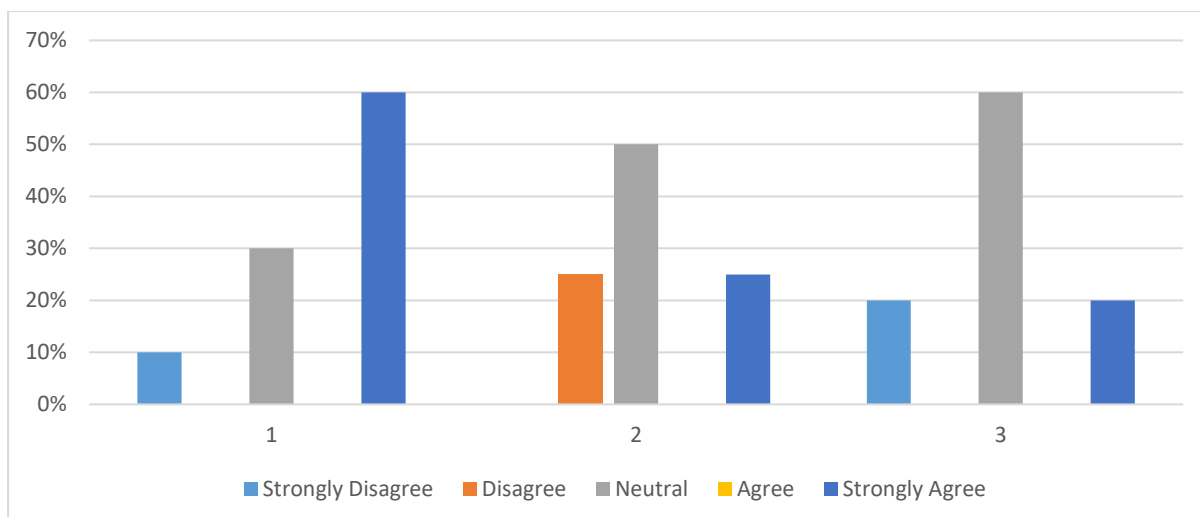
The questionnaire was designed with an aim to know learners’ ability to generate ideas, awareness on prior knowledge strategies and pre-writing, and perceptions on prior knowledge strategies. The theme wise analysis of the questionnaire is presented below:

**Fig 1. Learners’ ability to generate ideas**



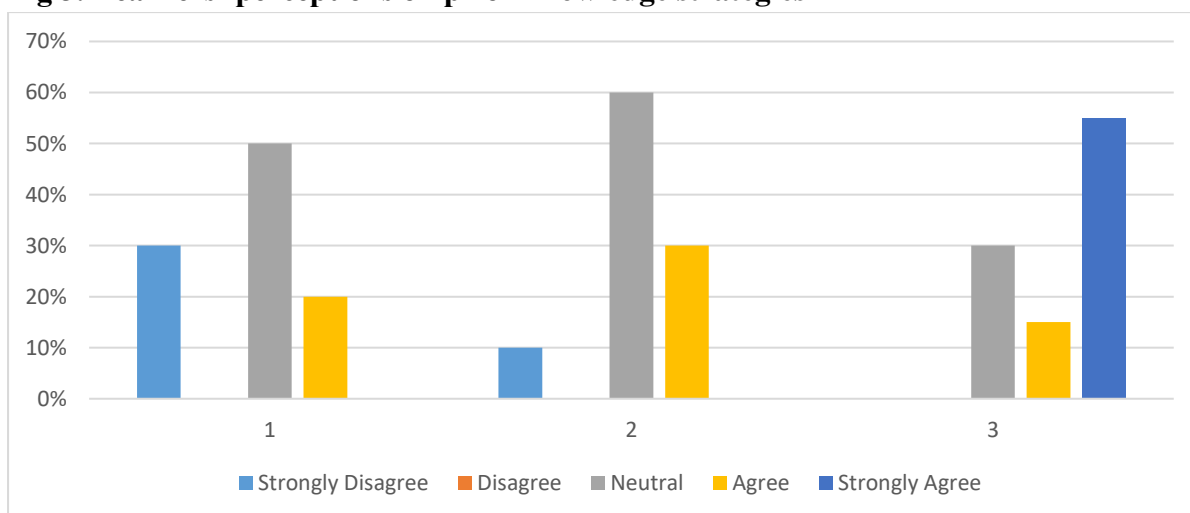
For *question no. 1* most of the students i.e., 12 (60%) out of 20 responded that they ‘rarely’ think about the topic before they start writing. Around 25 % of the students ‘sometimes’ ponder on the topic. Only 3 (15%) of students said that they ‘always’ reflect on the topic assigned to them before attempting it. For *question no. 2* about 50% of the students responded that they ‘never’ discuss about the topic with their peers. Around 30% (6 out of 20) of the students ‘sometimes’ share their opinions with their peer group. Only 15% of the students ‘always’ allot time to discuss the topic with others. One student responded that he/she rarely discusses about the topic. For *question no. 3* only 3 students (15%) ‘always’ frame some questions about the topic that they are going to attempt. Majority of the students i.e., 80% ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ uses the ‘questioning’ strategy in their writing process. Only one student ‘sometimes’ frame questions on the topic. For *question no.4* only 20 % of the students have the habit of noting down all the possible terms related to the topic. Around 80% of the students rarely or never write any key terms about the topic. For *question no. 5* around 10 students (50%) never attempted free writing strategy in their pre-writing stage. Only 2 students (10%) ‘always’ use this technique in their writing process. Around 5 students (25%) sometimes try to write all the ideas that they come across without bothering about the correctness in the language. About 15 % of the students ‘rarely’ use this technique during pre-writing.

**Fig 2. Learners’ awareness on prior knowledge strategies and pre-writing**



For *question no. 6* around 60 % i.e., 12 out of 20 students ‘strongly agreed’ that pre-writing must be done before the actual writing begins. Around 6 students are ‘uncertain’ about the idea of pre-writing. About 10 % of the students ‘strongly disagree’ that pre-writing is the stage that precedes actual writing. For *question no. 7* majority of the students i.e., 10 out of 20 responded ‘neutral’. Around 25 % of the students ‘disagree’ that pre-writing involves thinking and planning about the topic. Another 25 % of the students ‘strongly agrees’ that pre-writing includes idea generation and arrangement of ideas. For *question no. 8* majority of the students i.e., 60 % responded ‘neutral’. Four students out of 20 ‘strongly disagreed’ with the significant role played by prior knowledge strategies in writing process. In contrary, 20% of the students ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement.

**Fig 3. Learners’ perceptions on prior knowledge strategies**



For *question no. 9* majority of the students i.e., 50% responded ‘neutral’ about the positive role of prior knowledge strategies in academic writing. Whereas 30 % of the students strongly disagreed that prior knowledge strategies improve academic writing. Only 4 out of 20

students responded that prior knowledge helps in the improvement of academic writing. For *question no. 10* majority of the students that is 60 % are uncertain about the usefulness of prior knowledge techniques in efficient planning of the writing. Whereas 30% of the students agreed that prior knowledge techniques motivate the students to plan the writing well. In contrast, 10 % of the students totally disagreed that prior knowledge techniques help in the efficient planning of writing. For *question no. 11* majority of the students i.e., 11 out of 20 strongly agreed that writing is a complex process, and the hardest part of writing is getting it started. 15% of the students also agreed that it is not quite easy to write one's thoughts fluently. Around 6 students out of 20 responded 'neutral' which means they are not certain with the difficulties involved in writing process.

## Discussion

Analysis of the written answer scripts by both, the language expert and the scholar, as per the IELTS TASK 2 Writing band descriptors (public version) shows that all the learners are categorised as average and poor as they scored five and below on the 0-9 level scale. From the analysis of learners' answer scripts, it is strongly evident that answers were poorly written as the ideas were inadequately developed and presented. It was also observed that students were unaware of appropriate framework or structure for writing an essay, and their writing lacked topic sentences and supporting sentences. As a result, the students' writing is choppy and merely a random assortment of sentences lacking coherence and cohesion. From the issues presented above, we can say that there is close connection between the students' lack of knowledge of pre-writing strategies, and their performance in writing. Therefore, we can infer that students' lack of awareness and use of pre-writing techniques lead to their lack of ability to develop ideas on the given topic.

It was found that majority of the FGLs are unable to generate ideas at pre-writing stage (see figure 1). They were unaware of the prior knowledge strategies which aid in completing the task response. It indicates that these learners seem to lack awareness of pre-writing techniques such as group brainstorming, questioning, listing, and free writing. For *question no. 1* most of the students i.e., 12 (60%) out of 20 responded that they 'rarely' think about the topic before they start writing. It means most of the FGLs do not seem to adopt any suitable strategy to generate relevant ideas related to the piece of writing. For *question no. 2* about 50% of the students responded that they 'never' discuss about the topic with their peers. It means they are 'unaware' about the idea of 'group brainstorming' which helps them to think about the concept from various angles and perceptions. For *question no. 3* only 3 students (15%) 'always' frame some questions about the topic that they are going to attempt. A smaller number of FGLs responded that they use 'questioning' technique at the time of pre-writing stage. It means they are uninformed about the concept of questioning which helps in seeking more information about the topic. For *question no.4* only 20 % of the students have the habit of jotting down all the possible terms related to the topic. It means majority of the students don't give much importance to the expansion of ideas. As a result, they end up in producing underdeveloped or incomplete ideas. For *question no. 5* around 10 students (50%) never attempted free writing



strategy in their pre-writing stage. So, the learners are always conscious about the correctness of the language.

Most of the learners are aware that writing is a process, and it includes different stages (see figure 2). However, learners seem to lack knowledge of aspects or elements of each of the stages of writing. It shows that these learners seem to be unaware of pre-writing stage and also the importance of prior knowledge strategies. For *question no. 6* around 60 % i.e., 12 out of 20 students ‘strongly agreed’ that pre-writing must be done before the actual writing begins. It means that they seem to know about various stages of writing process. For *question no. 7* majority of the students i.e., 10 out of 20 responded ‘neutral’. It means they are uncertain that pre-writing stage involves inventing and arranging ideas. For *question no. 8* majority of the students i.e., 60 % responded ‘neutral’. It means they are not aware of the need for activating background knowledge for writing any piece of composition.

Majority of the learners are uncertain about the positive role of prior knowledge strategies in academic writing (see figure 3). In other words, learners were not sure that prior knowledge strategies actually help in the efficient planning of writing. For *question no. 9* majority of the students i.e., 50% responded ‘neutral’ about the positive role of prior knowledge strategies in academic writing. For *question no. 10* majority of the students that is 60 % are uncertain about the usefulness of prior knowledge techniques in efficient planning of the writing. It means they were uncertain about the importance of activating background information for improvement in learning process. For *question no. 11* majority of the students i.e., 11 out of 20 strongly agreed that writing is a complex process, and the hardest part of writing is getting it started.

From the informal interviews with students, it was found that their home environment was not suitable for improving English language skills as they lack learning facilities. These students have no parental support as their parents are mostly illiterates or school dropouts. They said that they had no hobbies like reading newspapers or listening to English programmes. From their responses it can be seen that students ascribe their poor writing skills to poor reading, listening, and writing skills at schools and at home. Further, students said that due to lack of motivation and educational support from family members they were unaware of the importance of English language skills.

## **Conclusion**

Writing skill is important in the academic context but is considered to be the most complex skill of all the language skills. All the first generation learners find it more difficult as they come from disadvantaged backgrounds lacking sound educational background. This study has attempted to understand the first generation learners’ awareness of prior knowledge strategies and their perceptions of pre-writing in the process of writing.

The study has found that the FGLs lack the awareness of prior knowledge strategies, so they do not seem to use any such strategies, for example thinking, concept mapping, brainstorming to generate ideas and planning, and outlining, when writing English essays in the pre-writing stage. The study suggested that the prior knowledge strategies used in the pre-writing stage deserve more attention. We have seen that prewriting involves energizing student participation in thinking, conversing, group interaction, and skeletal writing activities that become components of a writing task. The study recommends that ESL teachers can use pre-writing activities at early stages of instruction to help FGLs acquire good writing skills. This would facilitate the writing process of the FGLs so that they can focus on conveying the intended meaning rather than continuously searching for ideas while writing.

---

### References

1. Abdullah, Muhammad Ridhuan Tony Lim. (2009). The Writing Strategies used by *Engineering ESL Malay Learners. International Journal of Engineering & Technology IJET-IJENS, 11(2)*, (pp.1-9).
2. Bayat, Nihat. (2014). The Effect of the Process Writing Approach on Writing Success and Anxiety. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice, 14(3)*, (pp.1133-1141). [www.edam.com.tr/estp](http://www.edam.com.tr/estp) DOI: 10.12738/estp.2014.3.1720
3. Connor, U.M. & Kramer, M.G. (1995). Writing from Sources: Case Studies of Graduate Students in Business Management. In Belcher, D. & Braine, G. (Eds.), *Academic Writing in a Second Language: Essays on Research and Pedagogy*. (pp. 155-182). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
4. Demir, S. (2018). The Relation between the Awareness Level of Writing Strategies and Writing Self-Efficacy. *International Education Studies, 11(5)*, (p.59). <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v11n5p59>
5. Klimova. (2012). The Importance of Writing. *Paripex-Indian Journal of Research, 2(1)*, (pp.9-11). DOI:[10.15373/22501991/JAN2013/4](https://doi.org/10.15373/22501991/JAN2013/4)
6. Maarof, Nooreiny; Murat, Mazlin. (2013). Writing Strategies Used by ESL Upper Secondary School Students. *International Education Studies, 6(4)* (pp.47-55).
7. Mogahed, M. M. (2013). Planning out Pre-Writing Activities. *International Journal of English and Literature, 4(3)*, (pp.60-68). <http://www.academicjournals.org/IJEL>
8. Poston, M. R. (2009). *Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Prewriting Activities*. (Master's Thesis). Urbana University. Urbana, Ohio.
9. Shie Chieh – Chien. (2010). Enhancing English Composition Teachers Awareness of Their Students Writing Strategy Use. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, 19(3)*. DOI:10.3860/taper.v19i3.1851
10. Tobie Van Dyk, Helena Zybrands, Karlien Cillie, and Marisca Coetzee. (2009). On being Reflective Practitioners: The Evaluation of a Writing Module for First- Year Students in Health Sciences. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies 27(3)*, (pp.333-344). DOI:10.2989/SALALS.2009.27.3.10.944

11. Yunus, M. M., Hashim, H., Sulaiman, N. A., Sulaiman, W. S. M., Richmond, R. L., Jarail, S., & Royal, N. (2018). Students' Awareness and Perceptions towards "Pre-Writing Stage" as a Strategy in Writing Directed Essay. *Creative Education*, 09(14), (pp.2215–2223). <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2018.914162>

IELTS TASK 2 Writing band descriptors (public version)

([https://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/ielts\\_task\\_2\\_writing\\_band\\_descriptors.pdf](https://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/ielts_task_2_writing_band_descriptors.pdf))

---