Dirección General de la Unidad de Estudios Posgrado
Área Académica de Humanidades
Facultad de Idiomas

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The Impact of Guided Writing in the English for Specific Purposes Classroom

Presenta: Nallely Rojas Jácome
Director del proyecto: M.A. Patricia Núñez Mercado

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ABSTRACT

Writing is one of the most sought-after skills among college students as a means to transmit their ideas. Writing embodies a continuous process where both learners and teachers work together in an enriching and continuous process in order to construct meaning. The aim of the present study was to help students at a private Mexican university to improve their descriptive writing skills by means of guided writing. Following an action research model, a writing problem was initially identified and then an action plan to tackle it was designed and implemented. The four-and-a-half week action plan focused on two main aspects: firstly, vocabulary learning strategies to provide the necessary lexicon for writing, and secondly a guided writing format which would serve both as a model and as a guide for students to compose descriptive paragraphs. The data that served as evidence in this research was collected through the following methods: a semi-structured questionnaire, students' texts, a pre-test, a post-test, a teacher's journal, and an end-of-the-cycle focus group interview. The data was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings revealed that the use of a guided writing format proved to be a useful tool for students' written descriptions. The content in their compositions improved notably. It was also evident that the paragraphs students wrote were better organized. Results also proved that the incorporation of vocabulary learning strategies, prior to the use of the guided writing format, helped to provide vocabulary that students could use in their descriptions.

Key words

English for Academic purposes, guided writing, descriptive paragraph, vocabulary learning strategies.
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<td>English for Specific Purposes</td>
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<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language</td>
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<td>Vocabulary Learning Strategies</td>
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<td>Second Language</td>
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Compared to speaking, writing is considered to be a fairly recent development, as the first written forms were found only 5,500 years ago (Harmer, 2004). Unlike speaking, which occurs naturally via exposition and response to stimuli, writing needs to be taught and learnt consciously, which makes it a longer and more complex process. In the EFL context, in particular, writing has often been disregarded as it has been considered time-consuming for both teachers and learners eager to communicate orally. At the end of the day, most modern EFL teaching theories advocate for communicative approaches, which place speaking as the most sought-after skill in learners. However, in a globalized era as the one we are currently living in, students of foreign languages are expected to be equally effective when communicating orally or in the written form. For this reason, the Mexican Minister of Education has fostered the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) since the early sixties, both in the public and private educational systems. However, English teachers throughout Mexico have generally focused their lessons towards the fostering of the speaking skill and the mastery of grammatical aspects of the language, while disregarding the writing skills. Consequently, the lack of writing instruction needs to be addressed and EFL teachers nowadays are faced with the challenge of efficiently teaching and assessing their students’ writing to help them become not only proficient speakers of a language, but also accurate writers.

In order to achieve these objectives, EFL teachers need to consider a number of situations related to EFL writing such as: the writer itself and the process he or she follows when writing, the teacher and his or her responses to students’ compositions, and finally the setting where the writing takes place (Kroll, 1990). These issues have been addressed by people in the ESL field in order to provide tools and strategies to help teachers and learners navigate their way through writing. Likewise, Brindley and Schneider (as cited in Lan, 2010) pointed out that
writing instruction should evolve by employing a more effective set of techniques and strategies that include modeling, shared writing, guided writing, and interactive writing. The relevance of guided writing is acknowledged by Lan (2010) when affirming that “it plays a very important role in the writing process and is beneficial for improving writing performance, especially in elementary writing activities” (p. 161).

However, writing strategies appear to be a neglected area in Mexican undergraduate EFL students’ education. For example, Davis (2009) maintains that, in Mexico, most students complete their university studies with very little command of the English language in general. Furthermore, the lack of suitable learning strategies for writing might result in low motivation for students (Yang & Chung, 2005, as cited in Lan, 2011). For this reason and considering the aforementioned views towards EFL teaching, specifically EFL writing, I considered it of major importance to carry out research on writing skills with undergraduate students in the Mexican context. This research may provide insights as to the relevance of writing instruction, and may also shed light on the impact that guided writing may have on Mexican university students’ descriptive writing.

1.1 Context
This research was carried out at a private university located in the capital city of the south-eastern state of Veracruz, Mexico. This university was the pioneer in establishing a BA in Promotion of the Arts, a MA in Artistic Production and Cultural Marketing, and a MA in Art studies. English is a mandatory course for undergraduate students at this university. Learners are expected to cope with the four skills of the language at the A2 level: reading, writing, listening and speaking by the end of the term. As an institutional requirement, English teachers are asked to relate, as much as possible, the contents of the English syllabus to art-related topics. Therefore, there is a strong focus on art-related vocabulary which makes this an English for Specific Purposes course. In addition, it is customary that pictorial and sculpture exhibitions take place at the facilities leading to a constant
exposure to paintings for the students to take advantage of during their different classes. Students of the Promotion of the Arts major are asked to write descriptive reports where they share their appreciation and sensitivity towards diverse forms of art. During their three-hour based English class, students follow the course syllabus without the aid of a course book. This allows the teacher to freely incorporate class resources and teacher-made materials to work with while covering all of the topics. Regarding the writing skill, students had been asked previously to complete a series of written tasks among which different types of paragraphs were assigned to students as homework. As a result, students dealt with them without in-class appropriate guidance, supervision and feedback.

1.2 Participants
Eight second semester students of mixed gender, 5 women and 3 men, participated in this research. Their level of English ranged from A1 to A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old. They belonged to the upper middle class and most of them had received the mandatory English classes that are listed by the Ministry of Education in Mexico throughout the middle school years. The classroom represented the main medium through which students practiced and put into practice their language skills.

1.3 Description of the problem
In contrast to their spoken performance in the English class, I observed that the students’ written performance was rather low, given that they obtained usually low marks in the written section of the previous term exams. Therefore, it was necessary for this study to carry out initial research to verify and confirm the actual existence of a problem, as well as the nature of its characteristics. The results obtained from the initial research showed that students struggle with writing because they lacked knowledge regarding the characteristics of paragraphs and they did not appear to follow a process when writing. Moreover, it was evident that insufficient vocabulary and some spelling mistakes in their compositions were affecting their written performance.
1.4 Objectives
This research had two objectives. The first objective was to prove the existence of an actual problem related to descriptive paragraph writing in this context and understand its nature. Once the problem was confirmed and understood, the second objective was to design an action plan aimed at helping students improve their descriptive writing by implementing a guided writing format, and vocabulary building strategies.

1.5 Research questions
Based on the objectives of this research, the aim of this study was to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the nature of students’ difficulties to write descriptive paragraphs?
2. How could guided writing affect the students’ written performance regarding descriptive paragraphs?

1.6 Rationale
Action research focusing on descriptive writing has been done before showing positive outcomes. In a study done by Prastihana (2013), the results of introducing animated pictures as prompts for descriptive paragraphs were described as positive. Similarly, an action research study conducted by Dyan (2010) successfully incorporated guided writing to improve students’ writing skills, as students’ sentences were correctly structured and a wider range of vocabulary was used in their compositions.

For these reasons, this problem was worth analyzing owing to the vital need to help students improve their descriptive compositions and develop vocabulary. Writing poses a daunting task especially at the beginner stages. However, similar to speaking or listening, writing is a skill that may improve as we practice it (Dossetor, 2012). Its challenging nature is outlined by Fauziah (2013) when affirming that the
“Written language is a highly complex form of communication. It is both skill and a means of self-expression. It integrates visual, motor and conceptual abilities and is a major means through which student's demonstrate their knowledge of advanced academic subjects”.

(para. 12)

Writing is then a skill that requires a great deal of practice and guidance so that students can master it and achieve their highest potential. I propose that if we provide the participants of this research with instruction and guidance as to how to write descriptive paragraphs, along with some strategies to help them build the necessary vocabulary for this purpose, they will be able to develop better descriptive compositions.

1.7 Map of the research report

A small-scale study with a group of students who presented difficulties with descriptive writing is reported in the present paper. It is divided into 5 chapters as follows:

The first chapter introduces the area investigated along with the rationale for carrying out this study. In addition, this chapter details with the nature of the context and the participants who took part in this research. Finally, the objectives and research questions are presented.

The second chapter focuses on the literature related to the grounds of the topic of this research. It also presents a review of different authors' views on topics such as English for Specific Purposes, descriptive paragraph, guided writing, vocabulary learning strategies, and assessment for writing.

The third chapter describes the methodology followed in this research, as well as the action research model on which it was based. The initial research findings are discussed and a plan of action to tackle the students' struggle with descriptive writing is described. The rationale for each of the activities included in the action plan is explained also by taking several authors’ viewpoints into account. In
addition, the implementation of the action plan is outlined. Finally, the chapter explains the data collection methods that were used in this study.

The fourth chapter presents the findings obtained from the data analysis. Following a mixed approach, the results of this study were analyzed qualitatively using categories, and quantitatively presenting tables and a graph to show students’ scores after the completion of the action plan.

The fifth and last chapter briefly summarizes the whole process, and it presents a discussion and reflection on the findings of the present research. It also addresses the limitations inherent to this study and the possible changes to be made the next time around in order to achieve better results. Furthermore, the conclusions and implications are outlined. Finally, recommendations for carrying out a further research cycle are mentioned.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter introduces relevant concepts related to the subject of this research. The information hereby presented includes concepts related to the teaching of English for specific purposes and its relation to a classroom with specific language goals. Then, the characteristics and nature of guided writing are introduced, as well as its relevance to this inquiry. In addition to this, the concept of descriptive paragraphs is explored as it is the specific type of paragraph that this research dealt with. Finally, some vocabulary learning strategies are listed and explained as a means to build up the necessary vocabulary to write compositions successfully.

2.1 English for specific purposes (ESP)

Swales (1992) defines English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as “the area of inquiry and practice in the development of language programs for people who need a language to meet a predictable range of communicative needs” (p. 300). In a similar fashion, Dudley-Evans (1998) asserts that ESP is

...defined to meet specific needs of learners. As well as it also makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves. Finally, it is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre

(p. 4)

Strevens (as cited in Knight et al, 2010) outlines that the contents of ESP revolve around the language needs of certain disciplines, occupations and activities; therefore, ESP focuses on the syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, and so forth, pertaining to them.

2.2 Guided writing

Writing is a complex skill. As affirmed by Dunigan and Kelly (2005), “writing integrates well with all subjects, but writing methods must be taught and all composition writing should follow a process” (p. 12). Guided writing becomes itself
a method for teaching writing. A guided writing lesson is one in which the teacher demonstrates to students, the process of writing a sentence or paragraph using proper English conventions. Students are then given the opportunities to show that they can use these strategies and conventions in their own work (Simpson & Krupp, 1998). Owing to its benefits “guided writing has been added to many classrooms as a practical way to improve writing of students who struggle the most” (Oczkus, 2007, in Oczkus, 2012, p. 170). Regarding EFL teaching, Lee (as cited in Lan, 2011), claims that pictures can be effectively used in guided writing in order to facilitate students’ writing process and improve writing proficiency. He points out the relevance of including pictures in guided writing when affirming that

...using pictures in a guided writing environment can assist beginning foreign language students to develop and improve their writing skills as well as lower their anxiety in terms of expressing themselves in the target language

(p. 148)

However, there are some considerations such as time constraints and the students’ language level when conducting guided writing in the classroom. Simpson and Krupp (1998) affirm that

...guided writing lessons take time to do and in the best of cases the skills and strategies that are taught during the guided writing process will be reflected in the students’ work

(p. 14)

Finally, Dunigan and Kelly (2005) affirm that a lesson using guided writing might take several classes to have a project completed. Regarding the students’ language level when undertaking guided writing, Simpson and Krupp (1998) add that the success of guided writing might hinge on the regularity of its use, and the readiness of students to take advantage of it:

If guided writing lessons happen with any consistency or regularity, the learners who are not ready at the beginning of the experience will still be able to pick up the skills when they are presented at a later time during their course.

(p.14).
2.3 The descriptive paragraph
According to Oshima and Hogue (2007) “the ability to describe people, places, or objects accurately is a useful life skill” (p.1). In a descriptive paragraph, the writer uses sensory details such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, and textures to create vivid images in the reader’s mind (Henry, 2008). As a consequence, Baker, Brizee and Angeli (2013) agree that descriptive writing allows for a great deal of artistic freedom. In an educational context, they emphasize the quality of this genre to “encourage the students’ ability to create a written account of a particular experience” (para. 1).

As true of all the different kinds of paragraphs, a descriptive paragraph is expected to follow a pattern and present certain characteristics. As regards the structure, Mayer (2011) affirms that descriptive paragraphs should contain:

…a topic sentence, which addresses the main point, details that help describe and support the topic sentence; and a concluding sentence that reviews what the paragraph was about by restating the topic in different words

(p. 5)

Regarding the process of writing descriptive paragraphs, Baker, Brizee and Angeli (2013) suggest that learners should follow a process which starts by taking time to do some pre-writing activities such as mind-maps or brain-storming, use clear and concise language, choose vivid language and finally use the senses as to the sensations the writer wants to appeal to.

2.3.1 The place, people and phenomena approach
When attempting to write a description, students can also be instructed in selecting the content to include in their paragraphs (Simpson & Krupp, 1998). This suggests that students might freely choose the features to focus on their descriptions as well as the order with which they will start describing a given space. To describe a place, for example, Henry (2008) proposes using a spatial order and sensory
details such as sights, smells, tastes, and so forth, to create a clear visual image of the scene being described. McCarthy (1998) points out that descriptive writing can consist of “story paragraphs that show people acting, speaking and feeling in ways that seem believable to the reader” (p.5). Finally, another proposal for writing a descriptive paragraph involves narrowing “a topic into a focused main idea by generating descriptive details that answer questions such as who, what, and where” (Henry, 2008, p.11).

2.4 Vocabulary learning strategies
Wenden and Rubin (1987) define strategies as “… language learning behaviors learners actually engaged in to learn and regulate the learning of a second language” (p.6). Likewise, Oxford (1990) claims that “learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations” (p.8). Taking into account these definitions, the incorporation of learning strategies as a useful tool for learning vocabulary is an important element to be considered in the development of any skill. Moreover, as affirmed by Thornbury (2002), “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (p.13).

One of the major features in descriptive writing is a comprehensive use of vocabulary. McCarthy (1998) emphasizes the necessity of vocabulary when affirming that “to use descriptive writing on its own, students need an ever-expanding vocabulary which might help them to precisely name events, feelings, and impressions” (p.5). In this way, the vocabulary learning strategies were used as an aid for students to tackle their lack of vocabulary when dealing with written descriptions. Vocabulary learning strategies are derived from the wider concept of language learning strategies.
2.4.1 Image word meaning
According to Schmitt (2000), image word meaning is classified among the memory strategies for vocabulary learning and it involves relating the word to be learnt with some previously learned knowledge by using some form of imagery. Furthermore, the addition of a visual cue or picture to a word is thought to aid comprehension and memory (Hibbing & Erikson, as cited in Stocking, 2010) as it can also trigger background knowledge and decrease the time of interpretation. Moreover, the image word meaning strategy has proved to be quite useful in the process of learning new words in target languages (Joklová, 2009). According to Armstrong (as cited in Hashemi & Pourgharib, 2013), this strategy might also help students in the learning and memorization of vocabulary. In the same way, Hashemi and Pourgharib (2013) also stress the importance of the use of images in teaching and learning English words as they act as facilitators for information to be stored in the long-term memory. Schmitt (2000) suggests this memory strategy “should be used for important words such as high-frequency vocabulary as well as technical words relevant to particular fields” (p.35).

2.4.2 Studying the spelling of a word
When attempting to learn vocabulary, there are many aspects that can help to achieve long-term learning and retention of new words. According to Ehri (1992 in Ehri and Rosenthal, 2007),

"...spellings of words become connected to their pronunciations and meanings in memory" making the study of a word’s spelling an interest and even necessary aspect to consider when dealing with vocabulary learning

(p. 392)

In this way, Ehri and Rosenthal (2007) point out the usefulness of spelling knowledge when claiming that “once the students become literate, they retain the spellings of words bonded to their pronunciations and meanings in memory” (p.389). Furthermore, as suggested by Simpson and Krupp (1998) good writing
lessons “include instruction in spelling, sentence structure, use of punctuation and capitalization, quotation marks and other English conventions” (p.1).

2.4.3 Saying a word aloud
According to Swift (2006), repetition drills should be carried out immediately after the introduction of new lexicon as they enable students to become familiarized with new vocabulary. Given that repetition is a controlled activity, it allows students to focus exclusively on the new language. In this way, Kramsch (2009) advocates a return to the basic ESL methodologies when affirming that “utterances repeated are also re-signified” (as cited in Thornbury, 2010, para. 2). Similarly, Lynch and Maclean claim that “repetition drills might be of help to improve accuracy in terms of phonology, vocabulary, semantic precision, and syntax” (as cited in Jong & Perfetti, 2011, p. 535).

2.5 Assessing writing
Little has been done in the field of writing assessment (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Instructors are faced therefore, with the challenge of choosing the most suitable tool to carry out accurate and timely feedback on students’ writing. For this reason, it is also important to consider the “various forms that a response to students’ work can take, such as conferencing or written comments on drafts. In the case of written response, rubrics can be used as tools to evaluate and classify individual pieces or portfolios” (Assessing Student Writing, 2016, para. 11)

In order to assess writing there are two main methods: formative and summative. According to Beard, Myhill, Nystrand and Riley (2009) formative assessment refers to the kind of assessment that students can receive while completing a writing task or project, whereas summative assessment is carried out at the end of a writing task or project. Whether it is formative or summative, certain criteria must be established in order to assess a written composition. Once the criteria have been determined, this according to the specific objectives to be attained regarding the
writing task or skill, a rubric containing the criteria must be developed so as to maintain the assessment of the compositions as objective as possible.

2.5.1 Rubrics for assessing writing

A rubric is a coherent set of criteria for students' work that includes descriptions of levels of performance quality (Brookhart, 2013). Rubrics can also be used for both summative and formative assessment, and they are helpful in making the assessment more objective. But this is not the only benefit; Atlee (1995) outlines that “rubric scoring provides teachers and students with authentic means of assessing how well the writer achieves purpose and clarity in communicating meaning to the reader” (p. 74). This suggests that rubrics also make it possible to provide more specific feedback, which may in turn help to improve the students' writing. There are two main types of rubrics: holistic and analytic, which can be developed according to the context and its expectations regarding the development of the writing skill.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodology used in this study. The initial research results are provided in order to understand the problem in this specific context. The action plan resulting from the initial inquiry’s findings and its rationale are also presented in this chapter. Likewise, the implementation of the action plan and the methods that were used and how they were employed to collect data are as well included in this section.

3.1 Action research

In the education field, action research specifically refers to a “disciplined inquiry done by a teacher with the intent that the research will inform and change his or her practices in the future” (Ferrance, 2000, p.8). Burns (2010) claims that action research aims to identify problematic situations or issues considered by the participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice. Similarly, some authors such as Johnson, Mertler and Charles, Mills, and Smuck agree that “action research is a process which improves education by incorporating new courses of action so that teachers can improve their practice while they take an active part in the research” (as cited in Mertler, 2008, p.18). Consequently, action research appeared to be the most appropriate form of inquiry for carrying out this research, as it would allow me to reflect on my practices and identify a problem to work on. Therefore, I proceeded to implement an action plan that could help students improve their descriptive writing by means of guided writing. Finally, the results of the implementation of the action plan were evaluated.

In this study both qualitative and quantitate methods were used when evaluating the results. Anderson (2006) outlines the distinctive nature of both approaches as follows:

…qualitative research is the one that collects, analyzes, and interprets data by observing what people do and say. Whereas, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things,
Qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things (p.1)

Thus a quantitative approach was employed to analyze the descriptive paragraphs by means of a rubric which allotted each of the compositions a score. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the students’ answers to the initial semi-structured questionnaire, and the final focus group interview.

3.1.1 The action research model

This study followed the systematic process proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) when carrying out action research. The model encompassed four major moments: (1) planning (2) action, (3) observation, (4) reflection. The model here presented was adapted given that only one cycle was completed.

![Cyclical AR model adapted from Kemmis & McTaggart (1988)](image)

During the first research cycle, a problem or difficulty within the research context was identified. This was followed by an initial inquiry to gather information in order to understand the nature of the problem. The problem identified showed that students struggled and had difficulties when writing descriptive paragraphs,
therefore, a plan of action was designed in an attempt to provide a solution to this problem. The action plan was then implemented and monitored over a 4.5 week period and data was gathered by means of different techniques. Thereafter the effects of the intervention were analysed. Finally, the outcomes were reflected upon.

3.2 Understanding the problem

In order to understand the characteristics of the descriptive writing problem an initial research was performed. In order to gather data during the initial research, some techniques were used such as students’ records, an initial semi-structured questionnaire, and a pre-test.

The first technique was the analysis of documents, namely the students’ records. This non-observational technique proved to be useful because according to Burns (2010) this kind of tool “results in data that invite personal and individual accounts of events, attitudes and beliefs” (p.117). Students’ exams from the previous semester were analyzed and they revealed that most of the students presented low marks in the written section of their final exam. The written section of their exam could add up to 15 marks of the value of the exam and 6 out of 8 students had obtained marks lower than 6.

The second tool employed was a semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix A). The purpose of using a questionnaire was to explore the students’ perceptions regarding written tasks in the classroom. According to Burns (1999) questionnaires are a non-observational method for doing action research as they ask students what they actually think about any given matter. Furthermore, according to Gillham (2008) the semi-structured questionnaire features various advantages as they “allow people to be more economical than when they talk because writing makes people get to the point” (p.22). Gillham (2008) also states that semi-structured questionnaires are helpful to the researcher as “they provide a lot of information for the expenditure of only little effort, provided the previously identification of relevant topics to approach” (p.22).
The suitability of semi-structured questionnaire was therefore useful for this research. The questionnaire was drawn up in Spanish so as to ensure that basic level students of English would be able to understand thoroughly the items, and that the information obtained was thus dependable. It is worth mentioning that the semi-structured questionnaire was piloted in the same institution with a group that held similarities with the one in question for this research. Afterwards, it was administered to the actual participants of this study. It consisted in five closed-ended items and three open-ended questions which aimed at discovering whether students considered that writing tasks presented a difficulty, as well as exploring the possible causes that they thought were hindering their written performance. Moreover, the questionnaire asked students about their knowledge of the writing process (see appendix A).

In order to triangulate the information provided by the semi-structured questionnaire, a pre-test was used. Tomal (2010) affirms that “it is a common practice for teacher-researcher to administer a pretest, implement action and then administer a post-test” (p. 94). Tomal (2010) suggests also that there be a substantial time interval between administering both of the tests. The pre-test asked students to write a descriptive paragraph of a given painting, in which they could include any sorts of details such as the physical appearance of the people depicted, the activities they could do there, the ambiance and so forth.

The information gathered through the analysis of students’ records, the semi-structured questionnaire and the pre-test confirmed the existence of an actual problem. The following categories account for the nature of the participants’ writing difficulties (see table 1). The learners’ words were translated into English for practical reasons.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Students’ perceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge concerning the characteristics</td>
<td>“I don’t feel I know what I need to write”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of a descriptive paragraph</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of a process being followed when writing</td>
<td>“I just feel lost when I have to start. I think that I don’t know how to write a paragraph”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of vocabulary</td>
<td>“I always want to write more but I don’t seem to find the word I want in English”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling mistakes</td>
<td>“I usually misspell words”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>“I get frustrated because I don’t know what to write or how”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Findings of the initial research

The aforementioned categories outline the students’ struggle when it came to writing. The reason why students wrote rather poorly-structured paragraphs was owing to their lack of knowledge concerning the nature of the paragraph itself. In addition to this, the lack of having a process when writing caused students to feel lost when undertaking and approaching a written description. Finally, the lack of vocabulary, and spelling mistakes were also obstacles when writing descriptive paragraphs.

3.3 Action plan

Upon consideration of the results provided by the initial research, a plan of action was then proposed. The scope of the action plan was intended to target two major problematic areas: lack of vocabulary and lack of knowledge of the writing process. Therefore, the action plan firstly focused on vocabulary learning strategies and then it incorporated a guided writing format to model and guide students’ writing process. The action plan was designed to be implemented 3 hours per week, during 4.5 weeks.
The first week focused on providing the students with an overall introduction on the nature of descriptive paragraphs. The second week dealt with vocabulary learning strategies, since the vocabulary was pointed out by students as a major obstacle when undertaking the class. Finally, the last two weeks were devoted to the introduction and full practice using the guided writing format adapted from Harford (n.d.) (Appendix K). According to Tyner, guided writing might take place in “an instructional writing context and its aim is to teach the writing process through modeling, support, and practice” (as cited in Lan, 2011, p.149). Additionally Reid (1993) claims that today some ESL writing classes, particularly at the lower levels of language proficiency, successfully use guided writing techniques to build vocabulary, sentence structure knowledge, and self-confidence. As stated by Tyner (2004) guided writing may include “graphic organizers, charts, lists, or short written pieces and it proves to be a great venue for demonstrating writing processes” (p.19).

Throughout the implementation stage, students were asked to work in groups, pairs and finally on their own. The reason for this relied on the concept of scaffolded lessons. Scaffolding allows the teacher to help students transition from assisted tasks to independent performances (Bliss & Askew, 1996; Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Palincsar, 1998 in Vernon, 2001). This concept finds its grounds when Vygotsky (1962,1978) and other (e.g. Bruner, 1974; Wells,1986; Wertsch,1985 in Carrasquillo, Kucer and Abrams 2004) proposed that “the learning of complex cognitive activities, in this case writing, is first developed in social, collaborative contexts” (p.45).

3.3.1 First vocabulary learning strategy: saying new words aloud
The first vocabulary learning strategy made use of was saying words out loud also called repetition drills. During the second week of the implementation, I introduced the vocabulary necessary to write the descriptions, and students repeated out loud the new words to be learnt during the session. The appropriateness of this
strategy, although avoided by many teachers nowadays, is based on Kramsch’s assertion (as cited in Thornbury, 2010) regarding the fact that utterances being systematically repeated acquire a newly-found significance.

In addition, Lynch and Maclean state that oral repetition is thought to be “helpful to improve accuracy in terms of phonology, semantic precision and syntax” (as cited in Jong & Perfetti, 2011). Finally, a game was employed in which the students had to remember and say out loud a new word by being shown a picture of it for a couple of seconds. Thus by vocalizing the recently presented words, students’ memory skills and pronunciation were improved.

3.3.2 Second vocabulary learning strategy: image word meaning
As part of the present study, and given the information obtained from the initial research, the incorporation of one of the most common vocabulary learning strategies, image word meaning (Schmitt, 1997), was selected. Imagery was incorporated in this study in the form of constant visualization of new words. For this purpose, there was a cardboard with words and their images hung on the wall for students to see at all times. This word wall contained adjectives that could be used for describing places and people, as well as some verbs for describing the actions in the paintings.

Constant visualization of vocabulary items helped students to store new words and provided a tool to work with when doing oral drills for reinforcement purposes. In addition, imagery and saying words aloud were simultaneously employed in a game. The game consisted in a race in which a person facing the class showed students a picture for them to name. Then, two students at a time rushed towards the front of the classroom, pushed a buzzer and shouted the item being shown. Finally, imagery strategy was also incorporated in the form of the popular game Pictionary, where students took turns in drawing on the board reviewed words while the rest of the class guessed them. This popular game has long been used,
and according to Napthine and Daniel (2011) and Epstein and Ormiston (2007) it represents a successful way to learn and develop new vocabulary.

3.3.3 Third vocabulary learning strategy: studying the spelling of a word
This strategy employed two different activities. The words that students worked with were the ones displayed on the cardboard with vocabulary items, that is to say the word wall. During the first game, the students saw a display of different pictures whose word or definition had been covered so they could not see it. After a couple of minutes, students were asked to note down as many words of the pictures they had seen as possible. This activity was meant to assist students’ in memorizing new words’ spelling, since “once the students become literate, they retain the spellings of words bonded to their pronunciations and meanings in memory” (Ehri and Rosenthal, 2007, p.389). The second activity consisted of a dictation. Dictation was included since it is thought to help both spelling and comprehension. At the end of the activity students interchanged their notebooks with a classmate to have the words checked.

3.3.4 Guided writing format
For the purpose of the present research, a guided writing format proposed by Harford (n.d.) was used. The aim of this format was to serve as a model to help students formulate a step-by-step process for descriptive paragraph writing. The Follow the footsteps format allows the learners to make decisions as they construct their paragraphs. By means of clear instructions and an impressionist picture as a trigger, students were asked to complete a series of steps by means of which their ideas were fully developed into a descriptive paragraph (see appendix K).

One of the initial steps of the guided writing format consisted of a brainstorm. In this step students were asked to focus on certain features in the painting: the description of the place, the description of the people in the paintings and the description of the phenomena, that is, the actions going on in the paintings. Describing the phenomena in the painting responds to the fact that
…description also may include or suggest time order because a person, place, or object usually appears in a situation, or an incident usually occurs or suggests a scene

(Henry, 2008, p. 4)

The incorporation of these three features as a guide for students' compositions finds its grounds on the fact that, as asserted by Henry (2008), “getting a mental picture of the person, place, object, scene, or situation helps a writer discover his or her point about the subject being described” (p.5).

### 3.3.5 Analytic rubric

The rubric implemented to assess the participants’ descriptive writings responded to the needs and difficulties that emerged in the initial research, as well as the activities carried out during the implementation of the action plan to tackle them. The designing of this rubric contained three main aspects: content, organization and grammar, and sentence structure. That is, the content students included in terms of describing the place, people and phenomena in a painting; how the student went about the arranging of the parts of a paragraph; and finally, the grammar and sentence structure according to English language conventions.

According to Boye (n.d.) “a rubric is a scoring tool that outlines important criteria in a written piece” (p.4). Analytic rubrics seem to meet the focus of this research since, as affirmed by Boye (n.d.), they

…break down the various criteria into separate components and often assigns some sort of individual value or weight to each element. They can be then useful for precise and fair assessments (p.4)

Moreover, Brookhart (2013) states that analytic rubrics in which each criterion or trait is evaluated separately might be easier to link to the instruction performed in the classroom.
### 3.4 Implementation

The present section presents in detail the design and organization of the action plan. The chart below explains the kind of activities carried out, as well as their order and timing. This action plan addressed the problems that emerged from the initial research results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schedule</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 1</strong>&lt;br&gt;The nature of a descriptive paragraph</td>
<td><strong>Tuesday</strong>&lt;br&gt;*Individually&lt;br&gt;- Ss wrote a description of place as a pre-test.&lt;br&gt;*As a group&lt;br&gt;- T Presentation of a descriptive paragraph&lt;br&gt;*In trios&lt;br&gt;Ss ordered a set of sentences to form a paragraph using connecting words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Week 2</strong>&lt;br&gt;Vocabulary Learning Strategies</td>
<td><strong>Image word meaning and Say a word aloud</strong>&lt;br&gt;*As a group&lt;br&gt;- T shows Ss pictures with their concepts. Ss say the concepts aloud&lt;br&gt;*Individually&lt;br&gt;- T shows Ss the picture covering the word below. Any S rushes to push a buzzer and say the word in English&lt;br&gt;*As a group&lt;br&gt;- The Ss, one by one, draw a recently learnt word on the board and the rest of the class say the concept</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Week 3
#### Guided Writing

*As a group*
- T introduced the guided writing model. T introduced the Place, People and Phenomena approach for describing a picture.

*As a group*
- T asked Ss to form complete sentences using the describing words emerged during the brainstorm

*Individually*
- Ss write their first descriptive paragraph by using the guided writing model. T monitors the activity.

### Week 4
#### Guided Writing

*As a group*
- T displays some of the guided writing formats and as a class Ss discuss what some of their classmates could have done differently

- Ss reviewed the vocabulary learnt during previous sessions. For this activity, T projected some images for students to name the vocabulary items.

*Individually*
- Ss write their second descriptive paragraph using the guided writing format. (Post – test)

### Week 5
#### Results

*As a group*
- T showed students the rubrics and commented on them.

- T conducted a focus group interview

---

**Table 2: Action Plan**

**Week 1: Tuesday**

This session started by addressing some of the students’ concerns about writing. Some of the answers from the questionnaire were mentioned to foster reflection. After that, I handed students a sheet of paper on which they had to complete a pre-test (see appendix C). The pre-test asked students to describe the painting in question: *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* by Georges Pierre
Seurat (1886). They were asked to describe the scene, the people, the activities, and any other details they wanted to mention about it. When students finished I collected their samples.

After the pre-test, time was devoted to the introduction of the paragraph and its characteristics. I elicited students’ background knowledge about the nature of a paragraph. I showed them a presentation regarding topic, support and concluding sentence(s), as well as connecting words (e.g. and, also, because, however). As an additional aid, I made use of the well-known hamburger paragraph model cited in Rog and Kropp (2004, p.99). By using it, students could easily distinguish what a topic, supporting and conclusion sentence was. I also stuck on the wall some of the common connecting words so students could see them at all times during this implementation (see appendix D). I also provided examples of the way they could be used in a sentence.

After the presentation, students worked in trios on a further practice exercise. I handed each group 2 sets of sentences, students proceeded to order them by identifying what each of the sentences represented in the paragraph using the hamburger template (see appendix E). Finally, students wrote their final paragraph draft.

Week 1: Thursday
The second session also revolved around the nature of a paragraph. As an initial activity, each of the students took out their activity from the previous class. I asked students to sit in a circle and comment why they had decided to arrange their paragraphs in the way they did. I showed students’ two versions of different paragraphs, and they commented if they looked like the ones they had ordered. Students also commented on their experience working with the hamburger style format. Later that day, I handed students a second exercise in which they worked in pairs. In the activity, students read sets of sentences and linked them together using connecting words (see appendix F). I collected students’ worksheets and explained the last activity of the day. For this activity students worked in pairs to
create topic sentences by joining together pairs of sentences so that they ended up with a sense-making and coherent topic sentence (see appendix G). I monitored and helped students as needed.

**Week 2: Tuesday**

Vocabulary learning was the focus of the second week. I introduced verbs, nouns and adjectives that could be used to describe the paintings that we would be working with later on during the implementation stage. I showed students a picture with the term below and students repeated the word out loud for 3 times as a chorus (see appendix H). Then, students stepped back as I covered the word below the picture. Then, students rushed to push a buzzer and say the word for the picture shown. Finally, I handed one S at the time a small card with the same pictures being studied and he or she played Pictionary by drawing a given word on the board and having the rest of the class guess the word.

**Week 2: Thursday**

The second session of this week was focused on exploring and practicing some spelling exercises. For both of the activities students worked in pairs. In the first activity, students were shown an array of vocabulary terms from the previous class. Then, I covered them up, and students wrote a list of as many words as they could remember. Then students switched notebooks with their classmates, and they checked each other’s work. We repeated this exercise 3 times.

The second activity consisted of a dictation. For this dictation, a native speaker recorded a second round of words using a mobile phone. I played the cell phone voice message to the students and they proceeded to write them down as they listened. Students swapped their notebooks with each other to check the answers.

**Week 3: Tuesday**

Once students had developed a better understanding of a paragraph, and had managed to learn the necessary vocabulary in order to write descriptive
paragraphs, they were introduced to Harford (n.d.) *Follow the footsteps* guided writing format (see appendix I). The first part of the format called for a brainstorming, so I explained to them how to do it which I called the three P’s brainstorm (see appendix J). Each of the p’s stood for people, place and phenomena. The impressionist painting *Bather’s at Asnières* was chosen to carry out this activity. First, I directed students’ attention towards the people in the painting and elicited words that could describe the people in the picture. Then, I did the same for the place and students came up with words or phrases for it.

Finally, I asked students what was happening in the picture, what the people were doing and how. Focusing on those three aspects, students had to brainstorm words, especially adjectives, and phrases related to the picture. Afterwards, I elicited some ideas regarding how to write complete and grammatical sentences by using the words that had emerged during the brainstorm, and I wrote them on the board for all to see. Students went on to provide more ideas for sentences and then copied them in their notebooks so as to check them later on. It is important to notice that up to this stage of the implementation, students had practiced with the first three out of seven steps included in the *Follow the footsteps* guided writing format.

**Week 3: Thursday**

For the first part of this session, students sat in trios and discussed whether they had found difficulties carrying out the brainstorming and sentence creating steps of the format. During the second part of the session, students were given the *follow the footsteps* format, and this time they worked individually to complete each step and produce a descriptive paragraph. In this lesson, students worked again with the painting *Bathers at Asnières*, but this time they completed all the steps on the format on their own (see appendix K). I also told the students that I would be using a rubric to check their writing, and I explained what each section of the rubric was focused on (see appendix L). Finally, I let students concentrate to fulfill the task while I played some “white-noise” music.
**Week 4: Tuesday**

In this class, I asked students to stick their worksheet formats on the wall around the classroom. Students walked around the classroom and read and checked their classmates’ paragraphs, and asked questions. At the end, I asked students what they had noticed in their classmates’ paragraphs. I projected a rubric and asked them how they would grade their own final paragraph.

During the next activity I devoted some time to go over the vocabulary we had seen during the second week of this action plan. Students requested to be allowed to review their notes to refresh their knowledge before the activity. After some minutes of reviewing their notes, I projected some pictures on the board and students named the vocabulary items. It is worth mentioning that I was warned that this class would be shorter due to a previously scheduled event to be held by my students.

**Week 4: Thursday**

This was the last time the class met to work on the action plan. The class started with a brief reminder of the whole writing process and how to complete each step contained in the guided writing format. In this class I handed students a blank piece of paper with the *follow the footsteps* format and showed them the painting to be described (see appendix B). This was considered to be the post-test. I allowed them to do it in the classroom and students handed it in by the end of the session.

**Week 5: Tuesday**

During this session a focus group was conducted. Before the focus group session, I asked students to sit in a circle and copy some of the questions projected on the board. I handed out a sheet of paper and every pupil noted down the answer for each of the questions asked. I had students note down their thoughts and answers before the discussion. I had to do this because I was not allowed to record anything within the school’s facilities, and therefore, that was the only way I could
have some physical record of what was discussed during the focus group. For this activity, I asked the students to use different colored ink so as to differentiate every person’s writing. Then, the students were asked to share their opinions and thoughts with the class. They were also asked some follow-up questions and I took some notes down for further analysis and discussion.

3.5 Data collection techniques
Action research calls for a number of different data collection techniques in order to analyze the results of the implementation of the plan. There were three different techniques used in the present research: observation in the form of the teacher’s diary, an end-of-the-cycle questionnaire, and post-tests. The present section elaborates on the reasons for choosing them and the way they were used. The analysis of the data was qualitative in the case of the teacher’s diary and the questionnaire, whereas it was quantitative in the case of the post-tests.

3.5.1 Teacher’s diary
Burns (1999) explains the nature of diaries when defining teachers’ journals and diaries as “regular dated accounts of teaching/learning plans, activities and events, including personal philosophies, feelings, reactions, reflections and explanations” (p.79). She also affirms that as an “observational technique, diaries are an excellent way to systematically raise awareness on teachers’ practices as well as to provide a sound basis for answering the research questions” (Burns, 1999, p. 80). The diary spanned the first 4 weeks of the action plan implementation. Field notes were taken during the class and they were later typed on the computer once the class was over (see appendix M).

3.5.2 Focus group interview
According to Hinchey (2008), in a focus group interview “relevant participants are brought together to explore their various thoughts on a specific topic” (p.82). The usefulness of focus group interviews has long been recognized. Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996) affirm that “they are a tool that can be used alone or with other
methods to bring an improved depth of understanding to research in education and psychology” (p. 33). The suitability of this technique relies on the fact that students are surrounded by peers which decreases anxiety and favors lively discussion and opinion sharing.

The focus group interview for the present study was carried out at the end of the cycle. In order to free students from language constraints, it was decided to conduct it in Spanish. The focus group interview inquired about the usefulness of guided writing and the changes the participants had experienced during the implementation of this action plan. It also delved into the feelings that students experienced while carrying out the diverse tasks of the action plan.

3.5.3 Post-test

The participants of this research sat a pre-test during the initial research stage. After the completion of the action plan, students carried out a post-test in order to compare the results before and after the implementation of the action plan. The tests were evaluated using an analytic rubric (see appendix L). In order to provide a more reliable approach, the writings from students were analyzed following this formula:

\[
M = \frac{\sum fx}{N}
\]

Where

\(M\) = mean score
\(\sum fx\) = sum of the score
\(N\) = sum of the individuals

The resulting mean score revealed whether or not the teaching-learning process to write descriptive paragraphs using artworks resulted in an improvement of the participants’ writing ability.

3.5.3.1 Success Indicator
During the cycle a total of 8 students participated in this research project. According to the standards of their university, mid-term and final exams include a writing section where 15 marks are the maximum score for the section. A rubric was designed in order to assess the participants’ scores in the pre-test and post-test. Therefore, this research was considered to be successful if, on a scale from 0 to 15 marks, the post-test scores showed an improvement in comparison to the pre-test score. See table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scoring Rubric for Descriptive Paragraph Writing</th>
<th>Max. Score</th>
<th>Actual Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONTENT AND VOCABULARY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paragraph fully describes the place.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paragraph fully describes the people.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paragraph fully describes the phenomena.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary use is sufficient and appropriate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ORGANIZATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The text begins with the identification</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GRAMMAR &amp; SENTENCE STRUCTURE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimate a grammar and sentence structure score</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Rubric for pre-test and post-test assessment

The rubric encompassed the main issues identified during the initial research, and each of the sections was aimed at reflecting the impact that the action plan made on students’ writing. The rubric was divided into three main sections: content, organization and grammar, as well as the sentence structure of the paragraph.
The content of the paragraph dealt with the PPP approach explained in the literature review which encouraged students to focus on specific features of the image being described such as the place, people and phenomena. The content section also gauged how much of the vocabulary reviewed during the lessons was used in their descriptions. The organization section identified whether or not students included a topic sentence which identified the paragraph as a description. Finally the grammar and sentence structure revised the overall paragraph grammatical structure and the spelling of words.

The present chapter explained the suitability for action research in this study. Likewise, this chapter contextualized the results provided by the initial research, placing, descriptive paragraph writing and vocabulary shortage as a struggle faced by the students who participated in this research. Therefore, an action plan to tackle vocabulary building and spelling in order to improve descriptive paragraph writing was designed. A detailed explanation of the action plan activities and rationale was also included in this chapter. Finally, the data collection techniques used to analyze the data were presented along with the reasons for choosing and implementing them. All the aforementioned processes rendered the researcher with enough tools to look into and analyze the gathered data so that a pertinent interpretation of the findings would be discussed in chapter four.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter explains the evaluation that was used in this research. Data collected through students’ writing tasks and the data collection techniques is analyzed and interpreted in this chapter, assessing whether or not the action plan turned out to be effective and useful.

4.1 Evaluation

The evaluation focused on the data collected through different tasks completed by the participants in this research. To evaluate the data, an analytic rubric was used. In order to gather the necessary data, students were administered 2 main tasks. The first one was a pre-test, where the learners’ pre-existing writing ability was explored, and the second one was a post-test. The post-test examined whether students were able to show any progress after the implementation of the action plan using guided writing. All of the information obtained from these three tasks was triangulated for comparison purposes.

In order to delve into the nature of the students’ descriptive paragraphs and provide a further insight into the figures showed by the rubric, categorization was incorporated as part of the evaluation. In this case there were three main categories used when analyzing students’ paragraphs: first, the results of the pre-test, second the results of the post-test, and these aspects led to a third category that showed the impact of the action plan on the learner’s beliefs. On the one hand, the first and second categories looked into the results obtained from the pre-test and post-test regarding the aspects established by the rubric: content and vocabulary, paragraph organization and grammar and spelling. On the other hand, the third broad category considered how students’ learning beliefs had changed owing to the implementation of the action plan. Finally, a fourth category emerged as a result of a discovery derived from the implementation of the aforementioned action plan.
4.2 The pre-test results
At the beginning of the implementation, a pre-test was carried out. Its results were evaluated using the aforementioned rubric (Appendix L) which analyzed different aspects of writing such as content, vocabulary, organization and spelling. The findings obtained from the pre-test are presented below.

4.2.1 The results of the pre-test regarding the content of a descriptive paragraph
When the participants in this study carried out the initial pre-test most of them were not able to complete the task, writing instead a couple of sentences only. The content usually fell short to fully provide a description. There were various kinds of mistakes, as well as lack of coherence. The following pre-test samples illustrate this. Students switched to Spanish because they did not know the words they needed to describe the painting in English.

“This place is with grass. The trees I like it very much. The people is friendly because they have friends, women and men. It is the place for pasar a good time. (Student 1 pre-test)"

4.2.2 The results of the pre-test regarding vocabulary
Vocabulary shortage was a common feature among students' descriptive paragraphs. Students struggled to find the adjectives and noun phrases needed to complete their descriptions. In general, students left out many details displayed in the painting and many of them were unable to retrieve words that they had once learnt. The following sample from one of the students exemplifies this situation.

“This is a big place because people can you can live moments involvidables. The dogs are big and small. The green césped and the girls play. También flowers and the mothers are with the girls. (Student 3 pre-test)."
4.2.3 The results of the pre-test regarding organization

The pre-test showed that most students ignored the paragraph’s characteristics. That lack of coherence and identifiable parts of a paragraph became evident to the researcher. In most cases, sentences failed to follow an order and seemed to have been randomly chosen.

“The women are walking on the grass. The men look at the water in the afternoon. Other men are ^ the lake. Many trees in this place, maybe a park. It is very interesting to watch. But is better the lake with little ships. I love the green trees and the animals. (Student 2 pre-test)

4.2.4 The results of the pre-test regarding spelling

For many of the participants of this research, spelling was a problem. In some of the pre-tests, students seemed to have identified the word they wanted to use; yet it was misspelled. Sometimes, they wrote the word they needed to use in Spanish. A sample of that is provided below.

I think this is a park maybe in France because the women have dresses for that time. The men go with the wives for the afternoon. The other women walk with the little girl. I like it for the beautiful lake and the animals playing. The tall trees and the families go for a walking. You can see people in that place. (Student 4 pre-test)

4.3 The post-test results

At the end of the fourth week of the implementation stage, students were asked to complete their final task. The post-test measured students’ ability to write descriptive paragraphs after the action plan had reached its climax and the implementation had been concluded. For this final task, students were asked to follow the format for guided writing and complete each of the steps’ instructions in
order to present a descriptive paragraph on George Seurat’s impressionist painting “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte” (appendix N).

4.3.1 The results of the post-test regarding descriptive paragraph content and vocabulary

The content of the descriptive paragraph referred to the comprehensive description of the place, the people and the phenomena displayed in the painting, in other words the so-called PPP approach for the initials of each of these aspects. For this purpose, the participants in this study were instructed on how to approach those features in a painting in order to describe the painting. Similarly, in order for them to fully address the PPP, vocabulary use was paramount. For this reason students learnt and practiced different vocabulary-related activities, which made it easier for them to store new words and retrieve them when necessary. A variety of verbs and adjectives was shown in most of the cases. Table 4 shows a list a vocabulary items that students were exposed to during the action plan phase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>People</th>
<th>Phenomena</th>
<th>Connectors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-park</td>
<td>-Wear period dresses</td>
<td>-Have lunch/ Eat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-grass</td>
<td>-Wear hats</td>
<td>-Take a walk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-lake</td>
<td>-Use/hold canes</td>
<td>-Hold hands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-afternoon</td>
<td>-Tall</td>
<td>-Play around</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-sailing boats</td>
<td>-Thin</td>
<td>-Hold umbrellas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-blue sky</td>
<td>-Girls and boys</td>
<td>-Row</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-tall tree</td>
<td>-Women and men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-pensive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Relaxed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Happy/ joyful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Because</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>So</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>And</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Also</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table:4 Target vocabulary reviewed on the action plan
The following paragraph exemplifies one of the participant’s progress and underlines the use of such words.

“This painting shows a big area to relax, maybe is a park. The women are wearing period dresses and some men are using canes. In the place there are many trees and a large area of green grass. There are some sailing boats in the lake. It is a sunny day with a blue sky. The people are seated on the grass. They are eating, talking and walking around the place. Some women are holding umbrellas. Also some dogs are running and playing. It is a beautiful scene painted by Seurat”. (Student 3 post-test)

4.3.2 The results of the post-test regarding organization
The organization of the descriptive paragraph dealt with the way students arranged their paragraphs. A topic sentence, detail sentences and a concluding sentence were the components of a paragraph reviewed during the implementation of the action plan. Most of the students were able to clearly present the parts of the paragraph when drawing up their post-test descriptive paragraph. The following paragraph illustrates this.

The painting is beautiful because represents a magic place. The women are using period dresses and the men are using hats and cane. There is a sailing boat in the lake and animals and many trees in the grass. The people are walking and eating. They enjoy the landscape and relax at the same time. In conclusion, this impressionist painting represents a very pretty place.” (Student 2 post-test)

4.3.3 The results of the post-test regarding spelling
Spelling mistakes were a common mistake when students carried out their first pre-test. Furthermore, during the initial research questionnaire they expressed that
spelling was one of the aspects that they struggled with the most when writing in English. The action thus developed a series of activities in order to engage students so they could improve their spelling. The following descriptive paragraph shows few spelling mistakes and it can be compared with the same person’s pre-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student 4 pre-test</th>
<th>Student 4 post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think this is a park maybe in <em>France</em> because the women have <em>dreses</em> for that time. The men go with the <em>wifes</em> for the <em>afternon</em>. The other women walk with the little girl. I like it for the <em>beutiful</em> lake and the animals playing. The <em>toll</em> trees and the families go for a walking. You can see <em>peopol</em> in that place.</td>
<td>“This is a great and <em>beautiful</em> park scene because there is many people and a pretty lake. <em>People</em> can relax in the place. The children can play with the family. A girl has flowers. There is grass, trees and flowers. There is also a big boat and a small dog. The women wear period dress and umbrellas. The men wear suits and a cane. The people can swim, walk or eat and talk for hours. The painting shows a great park for have an extraordinary day with the family.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4 The quantitative results of the pre-test and post-test according to the rubric
As previously discussed, students in general developed a great deal of writing skills by means of the instruction provided during the action plan stage. The progress attained through the implementation of the action plan demonstrated a better understanding of the content and organization of the descriptive paragraph, as well as the vocabulary use, and the grammar and spelling necessary to write a description. Apart from the examples provided by previous sections of this chapter, there was an overall analysis which rendered the final scores obtained by every student’s work in both the pre-test and the post-test. It is important to remember
that the maximum score of 15 was considered so as to match the criteria followed by the exams students take every term, where the writing task amounts to 15 marks of the total marks in the exam. As presented in table 5, students’ mean scores increased showing that 100% of students benefited, to a certain extent, from the incorporation of guided writing format. Guided writing seemed to have been helpful for the participants of this research. The pre-test and post-test scores are summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post- Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td><strong>13.5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>67</strong></td>
<td><strong>103.5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean score</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>12.9</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Mean score showing student’s progress in descriptive writing

The details of the pre-test mean score are detailed as follows:

Pre-test Mean score = \( \frac{\sum fx}{N} \)

Pre-test Mean score = \( \frac{\sum 67}{8} \)

Pre-test Mean score = 8.4

Where
\( \sum fx = \text{sum of the score} \)
\( N = \text{sum of the individuals} \)
The details of the post-test score are detailed below:

\[
\text{Post-test Mean score} = \frac{\sum fx}{N} \\
\text{Post-test Mean score} = \frac{\sum 103.5}{8} \\
\text{Post-test Mean score} = 12.9
\]

The increase in the students' scores as a result of the implementation of the action plan on how to write descriptive paragraphs using guided writing is clearly summarized in the following graph:

```
Mean Scores' increase

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Test</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

In the first column, all of the students' mean scores amounted to 8.4 out of 15 possible marks. In comparison, the second column presents all of the students' mean scores which this time amounted to 12.9 as an overall grade. According to the figures in Graph 1, there was an increase of 4.5 marks.

4.5 The learning benefits of the action plan on the learners

As a result of the implementation of the action plan, students showed development of different areas of their written compositions. These results are presented in the following sections.
4.5.1 Developing vocabulary through imagery

A number of different activities contributed to vocabulary building which proved to be useful for students to write descriptive paragraphs. Working with images and their meanings enhanced students’ retention and enabled them to retrieve the reviewed words when writing their descriptions. Regarding this, one student claimed “it was good to have the images and their meanings below because the paintings had some strange things that we did not know how to say in English”. Similarly, another participant confirmed the usefulness of image-meaning: “for me, using images is the best tool because it is easier to remember the new words when you see a picture”. Similarly, another student wrote “when we did the Pictionary activity and we saw the drawing on the board, we already knew what the word was and I think that helped me learn new words”. In addition to these opinions, another student pointed out how the learnt terms helped him write his paragraph “when I saw the painting again, I thought “Oh, that word! “period dress”, for example, we saw it during the teacher’s presentation, so it was easier to use it for my description”.

4.5.2 The benefits of guided writing to write descriptions

During the initial research, participants mentioned that they did not follow a process to write a description. Indeed, they mentioned that they did not follow a process whatsoever when writing paragraphs. Guided writing was then incorporated as a guide for them to follow and help them to write a description of a painting. One of the students agreed that the guided writing format had played an important role in his post-test paragraph “I think that the format is quite clear, it tells you what to do at every step and in the end you just revise and write the final paragraph”. Additionally, another student stressed how the first step of the guided writing format was key to write her paragraph (see translation as follows):

…the first part was the most difficult for me but I liked it. I remember how the teacher taught us to divide the painting in three
aspects and that was really helpful. I came up with describing words for the place, then for the people, and finally for the actions in the painting. Once I had finished the brainstorming, the following parts seemed very easy.

Similarly, another participant emphasized how the format made her aware of the fact that writing is always a process:

...back in the day, when the teachers assigned a writing, I would just sit and write whatever came to my mind just to get it done; yet, it usually took me a while. However, when I saw this format I thought that although it seemed long at first, it was way easier to do every step of it and end up with a decent paragraph.

Guided writing also raised students’ awareness regarding paragraph structuring. When asked about the ordering sentences practice, one of the participants stated that “before the exercises, it was more difficult for me to check that all my sentences followed an order but the teacher showed us how to do it”. Another student commented how it became clearer for him to dissect the paragraph so he could clearly see the topic sentences and the supporting sentences in the format and go back and edit them before writing the final paragraph: “now I know that it is very important to have the topic sentence and the supporting sentences, otherwise my paragraphs look like a salad.”

4.5.3 Improvement in the spelling and grammar

Spelling and grammar were areas in which learners faced difficulties in their pre-test results; thus, the action plan devoted time to do spelling practice exercises. The spelling of the recently introduced words was improved yet it is important to mention that when the post-test paragraphs were analyzed, the overall spelling of the paragraph was taken into account. As a result, spelling appeared to have had a more discreet improvement. This was acknowledged by a student who affirmed “I tried hard not to misspell words in my last paragraph but to be honest I think that I still make some mistakes”. Likewise, a girl commented:
...when we did the dictation in the classroom I had most of the words correctly written, but then when I was writing the final version of my paragraph, I forgot some words and still made small mistakes in other words that we did not see in the class but I wanted to add.

4.6 Drawbacks

Although the objective of the action plan was to provide useful insight in the workings of descriptive paragraphs by using guided writing and vocabulary learning strategies, there was a particular incident regarding the third step of the guided writing format, which was related to sentence formation. The nature of the event is discussed in the following section.

4.6.1 Sentence creation from mind map

It was shown that many students managed to improve the structure of their sentences when they had a clear starting idea (noun, adjectives, noun phrases) emerging during the mind map step. However, this did not necessarily translate into a grammatically correct use of those words or phrases in sentences, which was a common mistake. One example of this is that one student who brainstormed the term “period dress” and “cane” used it in his paragraph as follows “…The women wear period dress and the men wear canes”. In this case, use or hold could have been used instead of wear.

Similarly, the use of connecting words still presented some difficulties for the participants. This excerpt shows how another student used the connecting term “so”: “some of the women are taking a walk, so the men are taking a look at the lake”. This indicates a lack of cohesion even when the actions are being described and they are using the learnt vocabulary.

4.7 Reflections

This research was planned to gradually lead students into descriptive writing by means of guided writing. The findings suggest that the students’ descriptive
paragraphs had presented a gradual improvement. The results of this study suggest that the guided writing format appeared to have helped students who struggle with descriptive paragraph writing in aspects such as organization of their ideas as it served as a guide to follow in order to write a descriptive paragraph. Oczkus (2007, in Oczkus, 2012) makes a reference to this when affirming that “guided writing has been added to many classrooms as a practical way to improve writing of students who struggle the most” (Oczkus, 2012, p.170). Moreover, the results of this research suggest that guided writing proved to be useful since it served as a model for students providing them with specific and clear instructions at every step. This finding is in agreement with Phillips and Larsons’ (2015) claim regarding guided writing as a “teaching and learning structure that meets writers where they are and moves them towards independence by providing “just right” instruction and feedback” (p. 152).

However, not all students improved to the same extent and at the same pace. Some of the students who presented most difficulties with writing were not able to practice enough using the guided writing format due to a number of factors, forestalling their progress. This suggests that learners who still present low scores and problems with their descriptive paragraphs could use more practice until they fully master descriptive writing. In accordance to this, Simpson and Krupp (1998) consider that practice with guided writing plays a key role to its success when claiming that:

If guided writing lessons happen with any consistency or regularity, the learners who are not ready at the beginning of the experience will still be able to pick up the skills when they are presented at a later time during their course

(p.14)

The implementation of certain activities during the action plan reported a number of benefits. One of them was related to the discussion and feedback after the completion of the first guided writing task. To this respect, the students reported
that sharing their work with their classmates promoted critical thinking and provided them with useful feedback. One of the learners mentioned:

…when a peer read my description in the guided writing format, she made some comments about my topic sentence and that helped me a lot for the next time we did the same exercise.

This is supported by Harris (2003) who emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for peer input and feedback as a way to explore, challenge and elaborate meaning from a variety of angles.

The results of this research also showed the favorable impact of vocabulary strategies on students’ descriptions as students developed vocabulary and were able to incorporate the learnt repertoire of words into their descriptive paragraphs. The activities that involved imagery, such as image-word meaning, and saying the word aloud, seemed to have actively engaged students and may have contributed to vocabulary building and retrieval of new words to be used in their descriptive paragraphs. Regarding the use of images, Hibbing and Erikson’s point out that the addition of a visual cue or picture to a word is said to aid the comprehension and memory (as cited in Stocking, 2010). Similarly, Hashemi and Pourgharib (2013) make a reference to the importance of the use of images in teaching and learning English words as they act as facilitators for information to be stored in the long-term memory.

Lack of vocabulary was also an anxiety-inducing factor for students when writing paragraphs. When pictures were used to learn new words and practice was provided before using them in their descriptions, anxiety seemed to decrease and students benefited from a newly-found self-confidence. This seems to confirm Lee’s claim that:
…using pictures in a guided writing environment can assist beginning foreign language students to develop and improve their writing skills as well as lower their anxiety in terms of expressing themselves in the target language (as cited in Lan, 2011, p.3)

The majority of students claimed that having pictures all around the classroom helped them keep the new words fresh in their memory. One of them mentioned:

I liked that the pictures with meanings on the walls so I kept on seeing them every session, and when I had to do the guided writing format, I felt more relaxed because I knew that I remember many words.

On a different note, participants in this research also mentioned the activities that they had enjoyed and/or disliked the most. Students reported that the topic sentence creation activity was a little bit demanding for them. One participant weighed in with his thoughts by saying “…the topic sentence was a new concept to me. At first I was not sure if what I had come up with was O.K. but the teacher always helped us”. Despite the widespread opinion regarding this activity, the rest of the exercises carried out during the action plan seemed to have contributed to the students’ improvement of descriptive writing. In accordance with this, one of the youngsters commented “I think that all the activities were useful and we had fun, especially with the vocabulary games”. Similarly, another student commented on the relevance of most of the activities and emphasized how knowing how to link sentences together was something he learnt throughout this course, she noted:

…all the activities and games that we did at first were useful at the moment of filling in the steps in the format that the teacher gave us. For me the words that connect sentences or ideas were something new and I think I was able to use them when I completed my description of the painting.

Finally, the one aspect that all the participants in this research agreed on was the relevance of bringing the Impressionist paintings into the English class. Intertwining
art related topics into a different subject helped them to further appreciate, assimilate and, more importantly, reinforce concepts such as impressionism. Regarding this, one of the students said:

I loved that we got to work with paintings for the English class. Here in the major we are often asked to write reviews and descriptions of artworks and this project helped me a lot for doing better homework.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a summary of the whole action research process, as well as the implications derived from the findings. In a similar fashion, the limitations of the research are also addressed. In addition, some changes for the next time around are proposed, as well as some ways forwards for a possible second cycle of action research. Finally, this chapter concludes by providing a brief reflection about my personal experience during this research project.

The present action research was envisioned to be carried out over two stages. First, there was an initial research which aimed at verifying the existence of a suspected problem within my teaching context. Once the initial questionnaire shed light on the occurrence of an actual problem, an action plan was designed as an attempt to provide a solution to the problem. This research had as a main objective to help students improve their descriptive writing skills of paragraphs by implementing guided writing in their lessons. This guided writing process used impressionist paintings as prompts which were directly linked to the students’ learning field. The implementation of the action plan lasted four weeks.

5.1 Conclusions and implications

The outcomes of this study proved that the use of guided writing led to an improvement in the students’ descriptive writing skills of paragraphs. The goal of guided writing was to act as a framework to guide and structure students’ ideas so as to help them to produce a descriptive paragraph at the end. The use of Harford’s (n.d.) adapted format *Follow the footsteps* made it easier for students to comprehend the process of writing at every level. This may be because, as affirmed by Dunigan and Kelly (2005):

> …employing powerful techniques of guided instruction replaces vague writing experiences with strong scaffolding needed for students to learn, master, and enjoy the craft of writing

(p. 5)
Equally, this research showed how timely and clear instruction favors students’ written performance which otherwise may never take place. Gibson (2008) addresses this situation when affirming that beginner writers:

…do need explicit scaffolding, constructed within expertly delivered instructional conversations that address the language, knowledge, and strategies required for problem solving in writing (para.1)

Therefore, it can be assumed that improvement in the students’ writing skills, at least at a basic level, may partly hinge on appropriate teacher’s instruction, as writers will not improve only on teachers’ request to do so (Englert, as cited in Gibson, 2008).

The results of this enquiry indicated how the Follow the footsteps (Harford, n.d.) format resulted most useful for the participants of this study who are usually asked to write descriptions of paintings, sculpture, and curated exhibitions occurring in their work field. This fact leads to the assumption that such a format may be incorporated in other lessons by different teachers and it will probably help students who struggle to get their ideas on paper. This concurs with Harford’s (n.d.) statement that “the format can be employed as an aid to help students write descriptive and detailed paragraphs without being repetitive (p. 11). Furthermore, it could also help students to start off their paragraphs and continue them “by showing them how and when each decision in the process is made” (Harford, n.d., p.12).

Apart from the above mentioned points, this research proved that paragraph awareness brought about by explicit instruction during the implementation stage resulted in paragraphs that more precisely and thoroughly depicted the elements. This finding leads to the assumption that in order for students to master any writing task, compulsory paragraph foundations should be provided regardless the students’ actual level of the second language. Teachers from other contexts could
use this information in order to avoid taking for granted the students’ actual knowledge on the characteristics inherent to a certain type of writing.

Regarding vocabulary use, it is a well-known fact that vocabulary plays a crucial role when writing descriptions. The results of this inquiry showed that the image word meaning strategy promoted longer retention and retrieval of lexicon which enabled students to write detailed descriptions. Regarding this, Barcroft (2015) claims to have found that “mnemonic techniques, concurrent visualization of L2 words and their pictures as well as repeating words yielded higher levels of performance” (p. 47). This concurs with the well-known fact that “an item studied as a picture will be better remembered than an item studied as a word” (Oates & Reder, 2010, p. 2). Furthermore, because a lack of vocabulary prevented students from writing complete descriptions, the learning and retrieval of new words enhanced their written performance. This echoes Henry (2008) who emphasizes that precise word choice may help to convey exact meaning thus giving rise to the creation of strong mental images in the reader’s mind.

Another aspect of vocabulary that benefited from the vocabulary learning strategies was spelling which is said to be paramount to the learning and use of new words. Concerning this, Treiman (1993) affirms that

> …even though we live in a much more automatized world, the correct spelling, that is to say the ability to spell words easily and accurate, remains an actual need for being a good writer

(p.3)

Taking into consideration that a number of vocabulary learning strategies were implemented during the action plan of this research, it can be assumed that they worked together in order to foster and improve students’ writing skills. This finding leads to the assumption that one sole strategy may fail to fully cover the spectrum encompassed in the learning of new words, making it advisable for teachers to continuously seek for complementary techniques and strategies when dealing with vocabulary building.
It is also worth mentioning that the whole process of the action plan promoted a more relaxed atmosphere among the students. Anxiety levels decreased as students experienced informal feedback rather than only teacher-based marking. As learners reflected on others’ work, they became aware of their own mistakes and made an effort to improve their performance in further exercises. Consequently, motivation kept rising as students continued to make progress, which boosted students’ confidence.

In general, the outcomes of this research verify that the objectives set at the beginning of this research were successfully achieved. The use of guided writing along with vocabulary learning strategies proved to have been beneficial for students’ descriptive writings. Vocabulary learning and retrieval was apparent in the students’ rich descriptions. In addition, organization and paragraph structure gradually improved throughout the implementation of this study. The descriptions presented more details such as sensory and spatial details leading to more quality content in the students’ paragraphs.

Despite its limitations, teachers working in varied educational contexts can find this research to be useful for students who struggle with writing tasks. By reading this inquiry, they could realize the importance of a simplistic yet effective tool to guide writing. The incorporation of vocabulary learning may also be fostered by teachers aware of its importance for writing. Similarly, different games and fun activities could be used as a part of classroom activities as means to introduce the vocabulary needed to employ in later written work. As a side perk of this course of action, anxiety may have been reduced because of the relaxing atmosphere promoted by games. In this way, teachers could plan comprehensive lessons according to their students’ needs.

Finally, this research may help teachers to understand how guided writing is a process that can positively impact students’ writing skills by means of detailed and timely instruction. Although students can start experimenting with guided writing as a whole class, autonomy will be developed over time as practice is encouraged.
This study could also raise awareness of the fact that learners do need instruction in order to improve a skill such as writing which needs constant monitoring, and teachers’ feedback. In addition to this, the present inquiry could be useful for teachers to explore some vocabulary learning strategies that worked and enhanced students’ lexicon. Therefore, by incorporating vocabulary learning games and peer work, teachers could shape and change their students’ attitudes. That is, the present study could be useful for teachers to realize that anxiety towards writing could be considerably reduced by taking into consideration students’ opinions and by implementing scaffolded writing lessons. As a result of it, teachers may find in this research some ideas for activities and exercises that could be easily adapted to varied educational contexts.

5.2 Limitations of this study
The main limitation in this action research may be its uncertainty to obtain the same results in case the study was replicated regardless of the similarity in the context. As action focuses on providing solutions to problems originated in specific circumstances, every teacher should reflect on their own difficulties and verify if the present research is feasible to replicate. In the same way, time and resources should be ensured in order to carry out a research of this nature.

Another limitation of the present study was the students’ actual command of basic concepts necessary for the development of writing skills. Although it is true that an initial research perused students’ records and questioned students about their writing difficulties, the best results and improvement were observed in those learners who had already mastered the concept of sentence, as well as its elements and workings. For this reason, this research may be carried out only with those individuals whose understanding of the grammar of sentences has been already achieved.

Another constraint of this research was its specific focus: the descriptive paragraph. Naturally, the variety of paragraphs needs to be approached differently. For example, an argumentative paragraph will need a different approach than a
descriptive paragraph, as in the latter it is not necessary to present arguments and/or make a stand. Similarly, a narrative paragraph would call for specific sequence markers and vocabulary may require to be tackled differently than in the case of descriptive paragraphs. Also, it is important to mention that this research may work effectively for students with a basic to intermediate command of the L2. However, other types of paragraphs may demand greater complexity in the use of a L2 which is yet to be achieved.

Finally, another limitation posed by this research was the lack of continuity in the case of some students. Absences were common in some specific cases. Some students did attend classes, but would show up late and missed some of the initial activities. This situation sometimes held the class up and reduced the working time as some explanations needed to be repeated. Furthermore, the late comers interrupted the pace of the class and caused distraction and noise.

5.3 Changes next time around
In order to make next time around a better experience, some changes are presented as follows. First of all, there would be more attention paid to the transition from the brainstorm to sentence formation. This stage was crucial because students transitioned from noun phrases, nouns, verbs and adjectives to complete sentences which represented a struggle in some cases. Instead of leaving students figure out how to form sentences from these words by themselves, I would be monitoring and assisting them more closely to help them structure sentences from those words. Also, more practice related to sentence creation would be necessary. A simple Stop game might be an option, giving students a prefix and asking them to write the noun, the verb, or the adverb. One example of this might be the word: relax so they would practice with relaxing, relaxation, and relaxer in sentences which could also contribute to lessen grammar mistakes. This action could be carried out right after students had finished the first step of the mind map and before they start creating the sentences from the brainstormed words.
In order to ensure a richer brainstorming process, vocabulary increase strategies would be given more emphasis. This means, that a lot more words could be taught as vocabulary items for describing paintings. A quiz to check the students’ progress could be implemented as well. This would benefit students because the more lexicon they possess the more accurate and vivid descriptions they could write.

In addition, a different approach could be added: the spatial order. This means that students could be encouraged to analyze a given picture by focusing on different areas of it. Transition words to signal visual description include: “above, right, middle, at the top, at the bottom, across, beneath, far away, close to, among others” (Henry, 2008, p.9). The freedom of exploring the picture in different ways could be favored by using the spatial order description.

Special attention should be given to another flawed situation for students: the use of connecting words. An adjustment could be practicing with error identification exercises that use connectors in wrong places, and have the students identify the mistake. This would raise awareness not only on the meaning of the connecting words, but also on their appropriate use in a sentence.

Apart from the points aforementioned, the use of electronic devices could help a great deal when completing some of the steps of the guided writing format. In this inquiry, students wrote all the in-class activities by hand. However, as a participant mentioned “It would have been easier if at least at some part we had been able to use our laptops because sometimes I want to have it finished faster”. This could prove to be time-saving and consequently that time could be devoted to analysis and peer discussion.

5.4 Ways forward
The approach employed in this research, emphasized the cross curricular use of artistic elements together with a specific writing tool such as guided writing format to promote the improvement of the writing skill. It would be interesting to analyze
how the use of art could be incorporated to other areas of general language learning such as speaking and listening. Another possible path could be to give students the choice of working on different works of art such as sculpture or theatre. This would boost autonomous work. Some of them might be attracted to more abstract images which, because of their inherent nature, might represent a challenge as to how to describe them.

Moreover, a future project focused on the description of artistic works might be carried out in actual scenarios such as exhibitions. In this case, students could provide the audience that attends the exhibitions with not only written, but also oral descriptions too. As it is customary, museums display their works of art with short labels at the foot of their pieces. This could be a good chance for students to play a more prominent role in their field as paintings, photographs and sculptures and diverse paraphernalia are usually exhibited at the facilities of their University.

To conclude this chapter, I want to voice a personal reflection on what this process has been like. This experience was definitely the first of its kind for me. It was completely different to the process of doing and writing research during my undergraduate program. Never before had I been determined nor attempted a solution to a problem within my own teaching context. This certainly added a sense of responsibility to help my students and find a solution that would help them to grow academically. To my surprise, the growth occurred on both sides, as we learnt from one another along the way. The challenges did nothing but help me become a more involved teacher in this topic and a more responsible person for the sake of my teaching practice. I have become a more secure professional now that I know what all this process entails.

This research project also provided the opportunity to pay closer attention to details that sometimes go unnoticed owing to our daily work routine. Every lesson, there might be some new unexpected data arising which we as teachers should pay close attention to. It is our responsibility to be receptive to the signs that go one way or the other during our practice. Furthermore, this project also taught me that,
as in every context, some students need more of a helping hand than others and also some others can serve as coaches for their own classmates. I tended to feel that they were not always prepared to help others, but this project showed me otherwise. I managed to get to know myself and my students better and as a consequence be prepared to tackle problems and meet their needs.

Finally, this project definitely provided me with the opportunity to be more involved with recent research and put it into practice by devising ways to help students improve their learning. I have gained experience which will be useful in my future professional practice. Even though, there were some drawbacks, it was a worthy experience which I am looking forward to sharing.
REFERENCES


Brindley, R. & Scheneider, J. J. (2002). Writing Instruction or Destruction: Lessons to be learned from Fourth-Grade Teachers’ Perspectives. Teaching Writing. Journal of Teacher Education, 53, 328-341. DOI: 10.1177/0022487102053004005


APPENDICES
INITIAL RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS
Appendix A: Initial semi-structured questionnaire

Nombre:__________________________________________
Edad:_____________ Semestre_________________ Fecha:________________

Instrucciones: Marca con una (X) la respuesta que mejor te describa.

1.- En general, disfruto del aprendizaje del idioma Inglés
Mucho_____ Regular_____ Poco_______ Nulo___________

2.- Independientemente del nombre del curso, ubicaría mi nivel de inglés como:
Principiante ____ Intermedio ______
Pre-intermedio ____ Avanzado ______

3.- Calificaría mi desempeño en tareas de escritura en inglés como:
Excelente_____ Bueno_____ Regular
Deficiente

4.- Se me dificulta el escribir en español
Mucho_____ Poco_____ Regular_____ Nada_______

5.- Se me dificulta el escribir en inglés
Mucho_____ Poco_____ Regular_____ Nada_______

6.- ¿Cuáles serían los problemas que encuentras cuando tienes que escribir párrafos en inglés?
________________________________________________________
7.- Describe el proceso o las actividades que realizas al momento de tener que realizar un escrito en inglés.

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

8.- ¿Consideras que es importante saber escribir en el idioma inglés? ¿Por qué?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Pre-test and Post-test painting

A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte. Georges Seurat, 1884.
Appendix C: Pre-test

Instructions: Write a short paragraph that describes the following painting.

The place is with grass. The trees I like it very much. Many people. The people is friendly because they have friends, women and men. It's a place for pass a good time.
Appendix D: Connecting words

**So** (así que, por lo tanto)

**AND** (y)  **BUT** (Pero)

**ALSO** (También)

**BECAUSE** (Porque)

**However** (Sin embargo)
Appendix E: Sentence Identification

Hamburger Writing

Main Idea: My friend has many likeable qualities because she is kindhearted and friendly to everyone.

Detail #1: She understands when I have a bad day. She listens to me so she can help me out.

Detail #2: She is very funny and makes everybody around laugh. She always knows how to use humor to motivate people without hurting their feelings.

Detail #3: She is also trustworthy and honest because she always tells the truth. She never lies to people because that causes greater damage.

Closing Sentence: I feel lucky to be her best friend because I know that I can count on her in many ways. Anna is the best friend I could ever wish for.

Super Teacher Worksheets - www.superteacherworksheets.com
Appendix F: Joining sentences using connectors

I. Combine the following sentences. You can use commas, or connector

She is funny. She is the kind of person who makes everybody around laugh. She always knows how to use humor to motivate people without hurting their feelings.

She is funny because she is the kind of person who makes everybody around laugh. She also knows how to use humor to motivate people without hurting their feelings.

II. Combine the following sentences. You can use commas, or connector

She is trustworthy and honest. The most important thing I like about Anna is that I know she will always tell me the truth. I feel lucky to have a friend like Anna because I know that I can count on him in many ways. If I have any problem, I know that she will always be there for me.

She is trustworthy and honest. The most important thing I like about Anna is that I know she will always tell me the truth, and I feel lucky to have a friend like Anna because I know that I can count on her in many ways, and if I have any problem, I know that she will always be there for me.
Appendix G: Topic Sentence Creation

Name: ________________________

Activity: The Descriptive Paragraph adapted from Henry (2008)

Practice creating topic sentences. The first item below presents a topic, the second one presents an opinion. Combine both ideas in order to create a topic sentence for a descriptive paragraph. If necessary, add a verb to the topic sentence you create. Follow the example.

Exercise 1

1. Topic (a favorite place): Grandmother’s kitchen
2. Opinion: a heaven of old-fashioned country warmth

Topic sentence: My grandmother’s kitchen offered a heaven of old-fashion country warmth.

Exercise 2

1. Topic (a favorite possession): a handmade desk lamp
2. Opinion: unique and a family treasure

Topic sentence: The/h our handmade desk lamp represents a unique family treasure.

Exercise 3

1. Topic (a cake): a dark chocolate cake
2. Opinion: delicious, popular dessert

Topic sentence: The dark chocolate cake is both a delicious and a popular dessert.

Exercise 4

1. Topic (a painting): an impressionist painting
2. Opinion: colorful, beautiful, and interesting people

Topic sentence: This is an impressionist painting very colorful and beautiful.

Exercise 5

1. Topic (a painting): an abstract painting
2. Opinion: indistinguishable objects, complex

Topic sentence: The abstract painting has indistinguishable and complex objects.
Exercise 6

1. Topic (a painting): a pop art painting
2. Opinion: bright colors, very common objects, very popular in today's world

Topic sentence: The pop art painting has bright colors with very common objects and is very popular in today's world.

Exercise 7

1. Topic (a painting): a romantic period painting
2. Opinion: sad-looking places, gloomy colors, depressing images

Topic sentence: The romantic painting shows sad-looking places, gloomy colors and depressing images.
Appendix H: Vocabulary introduction
# Appendix I: Guided Writing Format

Follow the Footsteps  
Adapted from Julia M. Harford (n.d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Choose your topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Brainstorm a list of words or phrases you could use to describe the picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Create sentences using some of the words/phrases you came up with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Put those sentences in order to form a paragraph that makes sense to you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Choose a sentence to begin your paragraph with, topic sentence (identification)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Write a closing sentence to your paragraph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rewrite the final version of your paragraph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J: Brainstorm with a focus: Place, People, Phenomena

People

What do they look like?

What do you see in the place?

Place

What are they doing?

Phenomena

Bathers at Asnières, 1884, Georges Pierre Seurat
Appendix K: Guided Writing format Bathers at Asnieres

Follow the Steps
Adapted from Julia M. Harford

Choose your topic

Painting of the impressionist period in the Arts

Brainstorm a list of words or phrases you could use to describe the picture.

- Boy
- Man
- People
- White
- Shot
- Thin
- Woman
- Lady
- Hat
- Pond
- Tall trees
- Bridge
- Grass
- River
- Boat
- Sit down
- Swim
- Get relaxed
- Sail
- Soil

Create sentences using some of the words/phrases you came up with:

- The river is very pretty.
- The dog is next to a man.
- There is a bridge.
- Grass and trees are tall.
- The man sits on the woman. The people get relaxed.
- Some people sail. A boy is swimming. The boat is sailing in the river.

All the persons are thin and white. All the boys are young and have shirts.

Put those sentences in order to form a paragraph that makes sense to you.

The river is very pretty because there is a dog and a bridge. Also, there is grass and tall trees. In the painting, a man and a woman sit down on the grass so they get relaxed. A boy is swimming and the boat is sailing. All the people are white and thin and they wear hats; however, the boy wears shorts.

Choose a sentence to begin your paragraph with: Topic sentence (identification)

This is an impressionist painting of a sunset called Bathers at Asnieres.

Write a closing sentence to your paragraph

The painting is very pretty for all the details that the painter put in it.

Rewrite the final version of your paragraph

This is an impressionist painting of a sunset called Bathers at Asnieres. The river is very pretty because there is a dog and a bridge. Also, there is grass and tall trees and dog. In the painting, a man and a woman sit down on the grass so they get relaxed. A boy is swimming and a boat is sailing. All the people are white and thin and they wear a hat; however, the boy wears shorts. This painting is very pretty for all the details that the painter put in it.
### Appendix L: Analytic Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scoring Rubric for Descriptive paragraph Writing</th>
<th>Max. Score to be achieved</th>
<th>Achieved Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content -------------------------------------10 points</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paragraph fully describes the place</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paragraph fully describes the people</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paragraph fully describes the phenomena</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary is appropriate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paragraph is coherent</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization -------------------------------2 points</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The text begins with the identification</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammar &amp; sentence structure----3 points</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimate a grammar and sentence structure score</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix M: Teacher’s journal sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Date: June 4, 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 2</td>
<td>Class’ Topic: Continuation of the study of a paragraph: connecting sentences in a paragraph and topic sentence creation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I entered the classroom at 9:00 sharp, however, I waited for the students to show up because they had previously told me they would have a meeting before my class at the school’s premises. In the meantime I arranged the chairs in a circle. Around 9:20 students showed up to the classroom and they sat in a circle. As we had been working with the hamburger style paragraph template, I asked students to pull out theirs and comment on why they thought every sentence was in the right place. Students were very quiet and hesitant at first until one female pupil raised her hand and explained that she remembered that the topic sentence should be related to the other sentences and she thought that the one she had chosen was the one that met that requirement. Other classmates agreed with her and another male student went on to add that the last sentence (the concluding sentence) was very easy to identify. Another pupil commented that first she read all the sentences because there were some words she did not know and it somehow got in the way for her to complete the activity as fast as other peers.

After the discussion, at around 9:35 I introduced the next activity. One student read the instructions. At this time there was some whispering so I had to call on two disruptive students before continuing. For this activity students read a set of sentences and linked them together using the connecting words previously reviewed. I gave students 15 minutes to have it finished. As I wanted the connectors to be visible at all times, I stuck them onto the wall for students to see them. This activity was carried out in pairs. Students socialized their thoughts with their partners and handed back the worksheet. Some of the students started to look around the classroom before actually starting to write. There was a 5 minutes break.

The last activity consisted on creating a topic sentence based on some prompts. I devoted some time to analyze the examples so that students really understood what was being asked. This was done individually but at the beginning some of the students started to look around in doubt. I approached some of them trying to help to figure out a simple way to join the sentences. Around 10:15 the activity was finished and I elicit students’ thoughts on it. A male student said that it seemed kind of easy when you have the “help” of the sentences. He implied that if they had to come up with the topic sentence from scratch it would be more difficult for him to create a good topic sentence. A female peer agreed and went on to add that because the worksheet specified ‘sentence’ and ‘opinion’, she had realized that the topic sentence may as well represent an opinion. Around 10:29 I dismissed the class.
Appendix N: Post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Choose your topic.</td>
<td>The best green area to relax</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2    | Brainstorm a list of words or phrases you could use to describe the topic you chose for your paragraph. | **PLACE**
- Umbrella
- Tree
- Sailing boat

**PEOPLE**
- Hat
- Eating
- Walking
- Women

**PHENOMENA**
- Cane
- Grass
- Lake
- Talking

| 3    | Create sentences using some of the words/ phrases you came up with. | • The women are wearing period dresses
• The men are wearing a cane
• The women are wearing a umbrella
• There is a lake
• There are some sailing boat |
Put those sentences in order to form a paragraph that makes sense to you.

The women are wearing period dresses and umbrellas.
The men are wearing a cane and hat.
There are some sailing boats in the lake.
There are many trees and an extensive area of green grass.
Some women are talking, but some men are seated in the grass.

Choose the best topic sentence from the choices in Footnote #2 or you can create a new topic sentence that "glues" all my paragraph.

The painting shows a green area to relax.

Write a closing sentence to your paragraph.

The painting shows a place with peace and friendly people.

Rewrite the FINAL version of your paragraph.

The painting shows a green area to relax. The women are wearing period dresses and the men are using a cane. (In this place, there are many trees and an extensive area of green grass, there are some sailing boats.) Some women are talking, but some men are seated on the grass. They are walking, eating, lunch and walking around the place. The painting shows a place with peace and friendly people.
Appendix O: End of the cycle Focus Group Interview

4. Recuerdas algunos pasos o actividades realizadas durante este tiempo para aprender a escribir un párrafo descriptivo?

- Sí
- Sí
- Sí
- Sí

2. Si respondiste sí, responde ¿cuál actividad fue la que más te gustó? ¿Por qué?

- Me gustaron sobre todo los juegos porque son educativos y me ayudaron a aprender palabras nuevas
- Los del Pictionary era divertido y también el de operar el botón que hace sonidos y repasar las palabras

3. El Pictionary y la otra donde ponían la imagen y teníamos que escribirla rápido en competencia.

4. Todos, había uno que veíamos las fotos y luego las cubrían y recordábamos qué palabra era. También uno que era el Pictionary y el de correr y postar el botón.

5. ¿Qué opinión tienes sobre el formato Follow the footsteps para escribir un párrafo descriptivo?

- El formato te ayuda porque va por pasos y cada paso te dice qué hacer aunque algunos pasos son más sencillos que otros.
2. Yo pienso que el formato es muy claro y te va diciendo qué hacer en cada paso, así solo recorrer y escribes tu párrafo final.

3. Para mí el vocabulario es mejor aprenderlo con imágenes porque es más fácil recordarlo cuando ves la figura (esta es la resp de la 5).

4. El formato es fácil aunque a veces me cansaba para llegar al final y terminar (es un poquito largo).

¿Qué cree que este curso te ayudó a aprender acerca de: a) la organización de párrafos descriptivos? Sí... Cómo? No

Sí, pues así mi párrafo lleva la topíca sentence y las supporting sentences (de apoyo) porque sino parece una ensalada.

Sí. A mí me sirvió en general para darme una idea de cómo planear mi párrafo o lo que voy a escribir.

Sí, porque el formato es útil y así sabes que tu párrafo va a tener todas sus partes como por ejem. la topíca sentence y así.
¿Crees que este curso te ayudó a aprender acerca de: b) el vocabulario en general? Sí... ¿cómo? // No

Si porque aprendimos palabras que no sabía y también vimos verbos

Fue bien que esbuvieran las imágenes con su significado abajo porque en la pintura había cosas que no sabía cómo se decían en inglés

Recuerdo que la maestra nos dijo que dividíramos la imagen en 3, y así comenzamos nuestra lluvia de ideas y pusieramos palabras para las 3 P. Creo que ya después de ese paso era más fácil hacer los siguientes pasos. (esta es la resp. de la 3)

Me acuerdo que al ver de nuevo la pintura pensé: ¡ah! esa palabra ya la vimos antes como "period dresses" y así era más sencillo hacer la descripción

¿Crees que este curso te ayudó a aprender acerca de: c) la ortografía? Sí... ¿cómo? // No

Cuando hacíamos los dictados me iba bien pero después en el formato se me olvidaban las palabras o ponía otras diferentes y las escribía mal.

Yo no tenía tanto problema con eso porque no me fallaba tanto la ortografía.

Yo le echaba ganas pero aun así en mi párrafo tuve algunos errócerillos :S

Sí, porque reparamos como escribir correctamente

¿Tienes alguna sugerencia para mejorar este curso?

Que hubiera juegos en todas las clases no solo el principio
Tal vez usar laptop porque hubiera sido más fácil, aunque sea en una parte del tizano usar la laptop ya que es más rápido escribir ahí.

Todo me gustó. La teacher lo hizo ameno :)

Usar la lap, porque me tarda escribiendo a mano.