



## Learners with Special Education Needs (LSENS) Strategies for Answering Essay Tests

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### Abstract:

The present study explored how the LSENS answer essay tests and their perceived difficulties. The participants were 5 LSENS. The researcher utilized qualitative method. Theme analysis was used to analyse the data that has been gathered. Based on the results of this study, majority of the learner-respondents are under the age of 16 years old, mostly males, mostly with autism spectrum disorder (high functioning) learning disability. The following emerging themes are developed: Essay Test Preparation on how the students prepare themselves for an essay test. Essay test preparation involves studying and practicing writing essays to improve one's skills and performance on essay-based exams; Structuring the essay coherently as difficulty in answering the essay tests. Structuring an essay coherently involves organizing its ideas in a logical and clear manner. This includes having a clear introduction, body paragraphs that support your statement, and a conclusion that summarizes the main points; Managing essay test anxiety in dealing with difficulties in an essay test. Managing essay test anxiety can be achieved through various strategies such as practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques, breaking down the essay into smaller tasks, creating a study schedule, seeking help from a tutor or counselor, and staying organized.

*Keywords:* Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN), answering, essay test

### Introduction:

Essay questions are inherently demanding, requiring learners not only to recall information but also to demonstrate their ability to analyze relationships and synthesize ideas cohesively. Beyond rote memorization, these assessments compel students to engage deeply with content, rearrange it meaningfully, and express their thoughts through logical arguments and structured writing. This complexity makes essay tests particularly challenging, even for typical learners. For students with learning difficulties, such as those identified as learners with special educational needs (LSENS), these tasks pose even greater challenges. LSENS often struggle with organization, time management, and memory, which are critical elements for effective test-taking and essay writing. Consequently, teachers play a vital role in developing strategies that enhance students' ability to manage and complete essay tasks efficiently.

Research shows that both students with and without disabilities encounter difficulties in producing expository texts, which are common in academic assessments (Englert et al., 2009; Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). This problem highlights the need for explicit instruction and guided practice in essay writing, especially for learners with disabilities who often require targeted strategies to build proficiency (Mastropieri et al., 2007; Hughes, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2005). However, effective preparation for essay assessments does not only rely on the learner's cognitive abilities but also on the instructional approaches used by teachers. This study investigates strategies employed to support students, including LSENS, in overcoming difficulties related to essay tests, with particular attention to how language, educational policies, and teaching practices impact writing proficiency.

In countries like the Philippines, where the education system integrates multiple languages under the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program, additional challenges arise in preparing students for essay writing. The complexity of learning multiple languages—combined with varying linguistic backgrounds—demands carefully designed interventions to ensure students are adequately prepared (Brunette, Punjabi, Pouezevara, & Cumminskey, 2019). This study also considers how sociolinguistic factors and classroom practices affect learners' writing skills and suggests pedagogical strategies to bridge existing gaps in students' performance.

### Literature Review:

For students with disabilities, composing expository texts involves multiple difficulties, including limited planning, generating content beyond basic knowledge, and revising beyond surface-level corrections (Englert et al., 1988; Englert et al., 2009). Similarly, mainstream students often struggle to achieve proficiency in writing. A 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress report revealed that only 33% of eighth- and twelfth-grade students achieved a proficient level in writing (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008).



These findings emphasize the importance of targeted interventions to improve students' essay-writing abilities across diverse learner groups. Mastropieri et al. (2007) further assert that students with disabilities benefit from structured instruction and practice, which helps them develop essential organizational skills for academic tasks.

The use of mnemonic-based strategies, such as the ANSWER method, has shown promise in improving students' essay responses. Hughes, Schumaker, and Deshler (2005) introduced the ANSWER strategy, a six-step approach designed to enhance students' ability to plan, organize, and review essay responses. This technique emphasizes explicit teaching, modeling, and think-aloud procedures, ensuring students can internalize effective writing practices. By focusing on strategies that promote both structure and creativity, educators can better support learners in meeting the demands of essay tests (Songlee, Miller, Tincani, Sileo, & Perkins, 2008).

In multilingual contexts, such as the Philippines, students' writing abilities are influenced by their familiarity with multiple languages. The Philippines' MTB-MLE framework introduces both opportunities and challenges in the development of essay writing skills.

Brunette et al. (2019) argue that the orthographic complexity of local languages can impact the ease with which students transfer literacy skills to a second or third language. Moreover, the varying linguistic characteristics across regions—such as differences in orthographic rules and dialectal variations—further complicate the design of assessments and instructional materials.

Studies by Pablo and Lasaten (2018) and Akram, Siddiqa, Nabi, Shahzad, and Rashid (2020) highlight the need for process-based teaching strategies that encourage creative expression. They suggest using peer discussions, oral presentations, and writing competitions to engage students in essay writing and enhance their skills.

Furthermore, these studies emphasize that rote learning, which often dominates classrooms, must be replaced with more dynamic teaching methods to foster deeper learning and mastery of essay writing techniques. This shift is particularly critical in high school, where students are expected to transition from basic to more advanced forms of academic writing.

Educational policies such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) play a crucial role in ensuring equitable assessment practices for students with disabilities. The ADA mandates that assessments reflect students' knowledge and skills without being influenced by their disabilities unless the disability itself is the focus of the assessment. This principle aligns with the need for inclusive education, where both students with and without disabilities receive the support necessary to succeed in academic tasks (Schumaker & Deshler, 2009).

Similarly, in the Philippines, the integration of English and Filipino as official languages in the curriculum presents both challenges and opportunities for essay writing development. Meneses et al. (2023) note that while English is predominantly used as the medium of instruction, students must also develop proficiency in Filipino to meet academic expectations.

However, as Cabigao (2021) points out, the heavy reliance on English can hinder students' ability to achieve fluency in Filipino, especially in higher grades. Thus, balancing language use in classrooms is essential to ensure students are well-prepared for academic writing in both languages.

Preparing students for essay writing assessments requires a multifaceted approach that addresses linguistic diversity, individual learning needs, and instructional strategies. Effective interventions, such as the use of mnemonic strategies and process-based teaching, can significantly enhance students' writing abilities. Additionally, educational policies and language frameworks must support inclusive practices that empower all learners to succeed in academic writing tasks.

### **Methodology:**

In trying to answer the indicated questions above, the researcher used the qualitative research design which states that qualitative research design is a research method used extensively by scientists and researchers studying human behavior, opinions, themes and motivations.

Qualitative research methods are probably the oldest of all scientific techniques, with the ancient Greek philosophers qualitatively observing the world around them and trying to understand and explain what they saw.

While qualitative methods are sometimes assumed to be "easier" or less rigorous than quantitative ones, the fact is that information of this kind can provide a depth of understanding about phenomena that cannot be achieved in other ways. In this study, it was utilized to investigate how the LSEs-participants prepare for essay test; the difficulties experienced by LSEs in taking essay test and how the LSEs-participants deal with the experienced difficulties in taking essay test. It also used comparative research method to determine the significant difference in their assessment when grouped accordingly.



The method of gathering data is through interview questionnaire, which is a product of a thorough reading of related literature and studies. After the construction, the questionnaire was validated by the experts and the researcher's colleagues and he asked the help of her former professors in the graduate school in the revision of the survey. Moreover, the last step in the validation was proposal defense where the comments and suggestions of the panel were included in the revision.

The participants of the study were five (5) LSEs, with different learning disabilities. They were chosen purposively. The locale was chosen because the researcher observed a need to strengthen essential strategies for the LSEs in answering essay test.

**Results:**

The findings were systematically presented, analyzed and interpreted following the sequence of the research questions as enumerated and explained in this section.

**Table 1  
Profile of the learner-respondents**

PROFILE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
<b>Age</b>		
10	1	20
12	1	20
16	2	40
18	1	20
Total	5	100
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	4	80
Female	1	20
Total	5	100
<b>Learning Disability</b>		
Autism Spectrum Disorder (High Functioning)	2	40
Language Disorder & Intellectual Disability	1	20
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	1	20
Intellectual Disability	1	20
Total	5	100

Table 1 shows that out of 5 learner-respondents, the majority were under the age of 16 years old (40%) followed by 10,12 and 18 years old (20%). Thus, most of the respondents who participated in the study were males (80%) rather than females (20%). Hence, many of the respondents learning disability were autism spectrum disorder (high functioning) (40%) and few were language disorder and intellectual disability, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disability (20%).

**Table 2  
How do you prepare yourself for the essay test?**

QUOTES	CODE	THEME
"I would go with my stock knowledge"	Prior knowledge in preparing essay test	Essay Test Preparation
"Having enough rest and a lot time for review and draft"	Time Management and workload in preparing essay test	
"I do not prepare; I leave it blank"		

**Theme: Essay Test Preparation**

Essay test preparation involves studying and practicing writing essays to improve one's skills and performance on essay-based exams. This may include learning how to structure an essay, develop coherent arguments, provide evidence to support claims, and effectively communicate ideas. Some tips for essay test preparation include:

- Familiarize yourself with the essay prompt and understand what is being asked.
- Plan your essay by outlining key points and arguments before you start writing.
- Use evidence and examples to support your arguments.
- Make sure to address any counterarguments or alternative perspectives.
- Proofread your essay for grammar, spelling, and clarity.



Prior knowledge in preparing essay tests for the respondents refers to the background information and understanding that students bring to the test. This can include knowledge of the subject matter, familiarity with the format of essay tests, and an understanding of how to effectively organize and present ideas in written form. When preparing essay tests, it is important to consider students' prior knowledge to create questions that are appropriate for their level of understanding. This can help ensure that the test accurately assesses students' knowledge and skills in the subject matter.

Time management and workload management experienced by the respondents are crucial when preparing for an essay test and should:

- Plan your time effectively: Break down the tasks involved in preparing for the essay test and allocate specific time slots for each task.
- Set priorities: Identify the most important aspects of the essay test that require the most time and focus on those first.
- Eliminate distractions: Create a study environment that is free from distractions to maximize your productivity.
- Take breaks: Don't forget to take short breaks during your study sessions to avoid burnout and maintain focus.

Essay test preparation can have a significant impact on a student's performance on exams. By practicing writing essays, students can improve their writing skills, critical thinking abilities, and ability to effectively communicate their ideas. Additionally, preparing for essay tests can help students become more familiar with the material and better understand key concepts (Golden, 2023).

**Table 3**  
**What are your difficulties taking an essay test?**

QUOTES	CODE	THEME
"Not knowing the topic nor familiar questions which is one of my difficulties"	Content knowledge difficulty in taking an essay test	Structuring the essay coherently
"Wording out my thoughts"	Clarity of expression difficulty in taking an essay test	

Theme: **Structuring the essay coherently**

Structuring an essay coherently involves organizing your ideas in a logical and clear manner. This includes having a clear introduction, body paragraphs that support your thesis statement, and a conclusion that summarizes your main points. In structuring your essay coherently one must:

- Start with a strong introduction that introduces your topic and thesis statement.
- Use topic sentences at the beginning of each body paragraph to introduce the main point of that paragraph.
- Use evidence and examples to support your arguments.
- Make sure each paragraph flows smoothly into the next, using transitions to connect your ideas.
- Conclude your essay by summarizing your main points and restating your thesis statement.

Some difficulties in taking an essay test include:

- Time management - It can be challenging to effectively manage your time during an essay test, as you need to plan and structure your writing within a limited timeframe.
- Organization - Creating a coherent and well-organized essay can be difficult, especially when you have a lot of information to convey.
- Clarity of expression - Clearly articulating your thoughts and ideas in written form can be challenging, particularly under pressure during a test.
- Content knowledge - Having a strong grasp of the subject matter is crucial for performing well on an essay test, as you need to demonstrate your understanding and analysis of the topic.

Nevertheless, difficulties in taking an essay test can be a challenging task for many students. Some common difficulties that may arise in this situation include:

- Time management: Students may struggle with managing their time effectively during the test, leading to rushed or incomplete responses.
- Anxiety and stress: Test anxiety can impact a student's ability to focus and perform well on an essay test.
- Lack of preparation: Insufficient preparation or understanding of the material can hinder a student's performance on the test.
- Writing skills: Some students may struggle with organizing their thoughts and ideas coherently in written form.

Content knowledge difficulty in taking an essay test refers to the level of understanding and familiarity a student has with the subject matter being tested. If a student lacks sufficient content knowledge, they may struggle to provide a well-developed and coherent response to the essay prompt. Some factors that can contribute to content knowledge



difficulty in taking an essay test include inadequate preparation, lack of study time, or misunderstanding of the material. Additionally, language barriers or cognitive limitations can also impact a student's ability to effectively demonstrate their knowledge in an essay format.

Moreover, clarity of expression difficulty in taking an essay test refers to the challenge some individuals face in clearly communicating their thoughts and ideas in written form during an exam. This can be due to various factors such as lack of understanding of the topic, difficulty organizing thoughts, or struggles with language proficiency. Here are some possible reasons for experiencing clarity of expression difficulty in taking an essay test:

- Lack of understanding of the topic or question
- Poor writing skills or grammar
- Difficulty organizing thoughts and ideas coherently
- Time pressure during the exam
- Anxiety or stress impacting writing ability
- To improve the clarity of expression in essay tests, it is important to practice writing regularly, seek feedback from peers or instructors, and work on improving language skills and critical thinking abilities.

**Table 4**  
**How do you deal with your difficulties taking an essay test?**

QUOTES	CODE	THEME
"Familiarizing or understanding more to the essay test"	Understanding the essay question	Managing the essay test anxiety
"Doing my best and stop for a while and take a break if the essay is sometimes difficult"	Time management in taking an essay test	
"Talk to the teacher"	Teacher's assistance for essay test	

Theme: **Managing the essay test anxiety**

Essay test anxiety is a type of test anxiety that specifically affects individuals when they are required to write essays as part of their exams. This type of anxiety can manifest in various ways, such as feeling overwhelmed by the task of writing, struggling to organize thoughts coherently, or experiencing physical symptoms like sweating or trembling.

Some common causes of essay test anxiety include fear of failure, perfectionism, lack of preparation, or negative past experiences with writing exams. It is important to address essay test anxiety as it can hinder performance and affect overall academic success.

Managing essay test anxiety can be achieved through various strategies such as practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques, breaking down the essay into smaller tasks, creating a study schedule, seeking help from a tutor or counselor, and staying organized. It is also important to stay positive and confident in your abilities.

Dealing with difficulties in taking an essay test can be challenging for many students. Some common difficulties include:

- Time management: Essay tests require students to write detailed responses within a limited amount of time. Managing time effectively can be difficult, especially for students who struggle with writing quickly.
- Understanding the question: Essay test questions can sometimes be complex or ambiguous, making it challenging for students to fully grasp what is being asked of them.
- Organizing thoughts: Writing a coherent and well-structured essay can be difficult for some students, especially if they have trouble organizing their thoughts and ideas.
- Managing test anxiety: Test anxiety can make it difficult for students to focus and perform well on an essay test, leading to decreased performance.

To help students deal with these difficulties, it can be helpful to provide them with strategies for time management, understanding essay prompts, organizing their thoughts, and managing test anxiety. Additionally, practicing writing essays under timed conditions can help students become more comfortable with the format of essay tests.

Understanding the essay question is crucial to provide a well-thought-out and relevant response. It involves carefully analyzing the question, identifying key terms, and understanding what is being asked. This ensures that your essay stays on topic and addresses the specific requirements laid out in the question. Here are some tips for understanding an essay question:

- Read the question carefully and multiple times to ensure you fully understand what is being asked.
- Identify key terms and phrases in the question that will help guide your response.
- Consider the scope of the question and any specific requirements or limitations mentioned.
- Think about the purpose of the question and what the examiner is looking for in your response.



- Plan your essay structure and argument based on your understanding of the question.  
When it comes to time management in taking an essay test, it's important to allocate your time effectively.

When taking an essay test:

1. Read and understand the prompt carefully: Make sure you understand what is being asked of you before you start writing.
2. Plan your time: Allocate a specific amount of time for each part of the essay (e.g., brainstorming, outlining, writing, and editing).
3. Outline your essay: Create a brief outline to organize your thoughts and ensure you stay on track.
4. Focus on the main points: Prioritize the key arguments or ideas you want to convey in your essay.
5. Manage your time during writing: Keep an eye on the clock and make sure you are pacing yourself effectively.
6. Leave time for editing: Save some time at the end to review and edit your essay for any errors or areas that need improvement.
7. Practice under timed conditions: Practice writing essays under timed conditions to improve your time management skills.

Teacher's assistance for essay tests typically involves providing guidance, feedback, and support to students as they prepare for and complete their essays. This may include helping students brainstorm ideas, develop a thesis statement, organize their thoughts, improve their writing skills, and revise and edit their work.

Some ways teachers can assist students with essay tests include providing sample essay prompts, offering writing workshops or tutorials, giving feedback on drafts, and discussing strategies for effective essay writing.

#### **Discussion:**

It also includes the conclusions and recommendations formulated by the researcher, which were based on the gathered and analyzed data.

Out of 5 learner-respondents, the majority were under the age of 16 years old (40%) followed by 10,12 and 18 years old (20%). Thus, most of the respondents who participated in the study were males (80%) rather than females (20%). Hence, many of the respondents learning disability were autism spectrum disorder (high functioning) (40%) and few were language disorder and intellectual disability, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and intellectual disability (20%).

The emerging theme: Essay Test Preparation on how the students prepare themselves for an essay test. Essay test preparation involves studying and practicing writing essays to improve one's skills and performance on essay-based exams. This may include learning how to structure an essay, develop coherent arguments, provide evidence to support claims, and effectively communicate ideas. Prior knowledge in preparing essay tests for the respondents refers to the background information and understanding that students bring to the test. This can include knowledge of the subject matter, familiarity with the format of essay tests, and an understanding of how to effectively organize and present ideas in written form. When preparing essay tests, it is important to consider students' prior knowledge to create questions that are appropriate for their level of understanding. This can help ensure that the test accurately assesses students' knowledge and skills in the subject matter. Time management and workload management experienced by the respondents are crucial when preparing for an essay test. Having these skills gives students the ability to plan and prioritize upcoming essay tests. This is an important factor in keeping students organized and avoiding procrastination which ultimately leads to academic success. Time management can be very useful in a student's hectic schedule.

The difficulty of taking an essay test emerging theme is Structuring the essay coherently. Structuring an essay coherently involves organizing your ideas in a logical and clear manner. This includes having a clear introduction, body paragraphs that support your thesis statement, and a conclusion that summarizes your main points. Content knowledge difficulty in taking an essay test refers to the level of understanding and familiarity a student has with the subject matter being tested. If a student lacks sufficient content knowledge, they may struggle to provide a well-developed and coherent response to the essay prompt. Some factors that can contribute to content knowledge difficulty in taking an essay test include inadequate preparation, lack of study time, or misunderstanding of the material. Additionally, language barriers or cognitive limitations can also impact a student's ability to effectively demonstrate their knowledge in an essay format. Moreover, clarity of expression difficulty in taking an essay test refers to the challenge some individuals face in clearly communicating their thoughts and ideas in written form during an exam. This can be due to various factors such as lack of understanding of the topic, difficulty organizing thoughts, or struggles with language proficiency.

The emerging theme of Managing essay test anxiety refers to dealing with difficulties in taking an essay test. Essay test anxiety is a type of test anxiety that specifically affects individuals when they are required to write essays as part of their exams. This type of anxiety can manifest in various ways, such as feeling overwhelmed by the task of writing, struggling to organize thoughts coherently, or experiencing physical symptoms like sweating or trembling.



Some common causes of essay test anxiety include fear of failure, perfectionism, lack of preparation, or negative past experiences with writing exams. It is important to address essay test anxiety as it can hinder performance and affect overall academic success. Managing essay test anxiety can be achieved through various strategies such as practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques, breaking down the essay into smaller tasks, creating a study schedule, seeking help from a tutor or counselor, and staying organized. It is also important to stay positive and confident in your abilities. Understanding the essay question is crucial to provide a well-thought-out and relevant response. It involves carefully analyzing the question, identifying key terms, and understanding what is being asked. This ensures that your essay stays on topic and addresses the specific requirements laid out in the question. Teacher's assistance for essay tests typically involves providing guidance, feedback, and support to students as they prepare for and complete their essays. This may include helping students brainstorm ideas, develop a thesis statement, organize their thoughts, improve their writing skills, and revise and edit their work. Some ways teachers can assist students with essay tests include providing sample essay prompts, offering writing workshops or tutorials, giving feedback on drafts, and discussing strategies for effective essay writing.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority of the learner-respondents are under the age of 16 years old, mostly males, mostly with autism spectrum disorder (high functioning) learning disability. The following emerging themes are developed: Essay Test Preparation on how the students prepare themselves for an essay test. Essay test preparation involves studying and practicing writing essays to improve one's skills and performance on essay-based exams; Structuring the essay coherently as difficulty in answering the essay tests. Structuring an essay coherently involves organizing its ideas in a logical and clear manner. This includes having a clear introduction, body paragraphs that support your statement, and a conclusion that summarizes the main points; Managing essay test anxiety in dealing with difficulties in an essay test. Managing essay test anxiety can be achieved through various strategies such as practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques, breaking down the essay into smaller tasks, creating a study schedule, seeking help from a tutor or counselor, and staying organized.

Furthermore, in dealing with essay test difficulty it is recommended that teachers teach learners to: Start by thoroughly understanding the essay promptly and what is being asked of them. Make sure to address all aspects of the prompt in their response; Take the time to brainstorm and outline your ideas before you start writing. This will help you organize your thoughts and ensure that your essay has a clear structure; Use specific examples and evidence to support your arguments. This will help strengthen your points and make your essay more persuasive; Take the time to revise and edit your essay before submitting it. Check for grammar and spelling errors, as well as clarity and coherence in your writing; and Practice writing essays regularly to improve your skills and become more comfortable with the format.

### **Conclusion:**

This study provided valuable insights into the challenges and strategies learners with various disabilities encounter when preparing for and taking essay-based tests. The findings revealed that the majority of respondents were male (80%) and under 16 years old, with high-functioning autism being the most common learning disability among them (40%). These demographic characteristics reflect the diversity of students' needs and experiences, particularly in test-taking contexts.

The study identified two key aspects of essay test preparation: reliance on prior knowledge and effective time management. However, some learners expressed challenges in preparing for the essay tests, including anxiety and the difficulty of managing their workload. A significant theme in the findings was the lack of preparation among certain learners, which led to incomplete or unattempted tests.

Regarding test-taking difficulties, respondents reported struggles with clarity of expression and limited content knowledge, emphasizing the importance of structuring essays coherently. Issues such as disorganized thoughts, poor writing skills, and test anxiety further compounded their challenges. These difficulties highlight the need for targeted support to enhance writing skills, foster better preparation, and reduce anxiety during tests.

In addressing their difficulties, learners employed various strategies, such as seeking better understanding of the essay questions, managing their time effectively, and consulting teachers for guidance. The role of teacher support emerged as essential in helping students navigate the complexities of essay writing and test-taking.

This study emphasizes the need for educators to adopt inclusive strategies that address both the cognitive and emotional challenges faced by students with disabilities. Providing structured essay-writing practice, encouraging time management, and fostering open communication between teachers and students are key strategies for improving students' performance on essay-based tests. These findings call for a more personalized approach to instruction and assessment, ensuring that all learners are equipped to succeed.



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