

From Thought to Text: A Psycholinguistic Study of Students' Language Processing in Creative Writing Class

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ABSTRACT

Writing is a complicated psycholinguistic task that changes thoughts inside your head into ordered words. In EFL situations, this process necessitates meticulous coordination of cognitive and linguistic resources, frequently resulting in challenges in lexical retrieval, grammatical encoding, and idea development. This study examines the cognitive processing of language by students when they create imaginative texts inspired by visual stimuli. The study, based on Levelt's (1999) Model of Language Production, examines the processes of conceptualization, formulation, articulation, and self-monitoring in students' writing. Thirty-five English Literature students from class B 2022 at Universitas Negeri Makassar took part in the creative writing exercise. Five students with the fewest errors and five students with the most errors were chosen for in-depth semi-structured interviews. The results show that students who do well have better conceptual planning and self-monitoring skills, while those who do poorly have trouble with formulation, especially with choosing words and structuring sentences. The study underscores the significance of psycholinguistic awareness in enhancing EFL creative writing training, focusing on tactics that bolster cognitive control and linguistic accuracy.

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1. Introduction

Writing is among the most intricate and intellectually challenging abilities in second language acquisition. Writing necessitates deliberate regulation of several linguistic and cognitive processes, including idea production, lexical selection, grammatical structuring, and discourse organization, in contrast to speaking, which frequently occurs spontaneously (Hyland, 2019; Manchón, 2022; Yaumi et al., 2023; Faisal et al., 2025). For EFL students, writing in English requires not just linguistic accuracy but also cognitive transformation—the capacity to translate internal thoughts into coherent textual expression (Wang & Wang, 2025). Creative writing is the hardest type of writing because it needs imagination (Ramet, 2011), emotional involvement, and stylistic flexibility (Earnshaw, 2014), which makes the cognitive and psycholinguistic load heavier (Gero et al., 2023).

In the setting of EFL, students often find it difficult to express their thoughts clearly and accurately since they do not have a lot of vocabulary, their first language interferes with their grammar, and they do not process language automatically as well (Barkaoui & Hadidi, 2020). These issues indicate fundamental psycholinguistic systems that affect the language production process. Psycholinguistics, which looks at how the mind processes and produces language, is a useful way to understand how students go from thinking to writing. It investigates the influence of cognitive processes—such as conceptualization, formulation, and monitoring—on language production, as well as the modulation of these processes by affective and contextual factors (Papafragou & Grigoroglou, 2019; Stutterheim & Nüse, 2003). In this theoretical framework, Levelt's Model of Language Production (1999) offers an exhaustive elucidation of the genesis of linguistic output from cognitive purpose, delineated through four principal stages: conceptualization, formulation, articulation, and self-monitoring.

Utilizing Levelt's model in writing contexts, particularly in creative writing, enhances understanding of the cognitive process students engage in before to and during production. The model is based on Levelt (1994), and Menenti et al. (2012). Boxes stand for processing parts, and ellipses stand for the results and inputs of the processing parts.

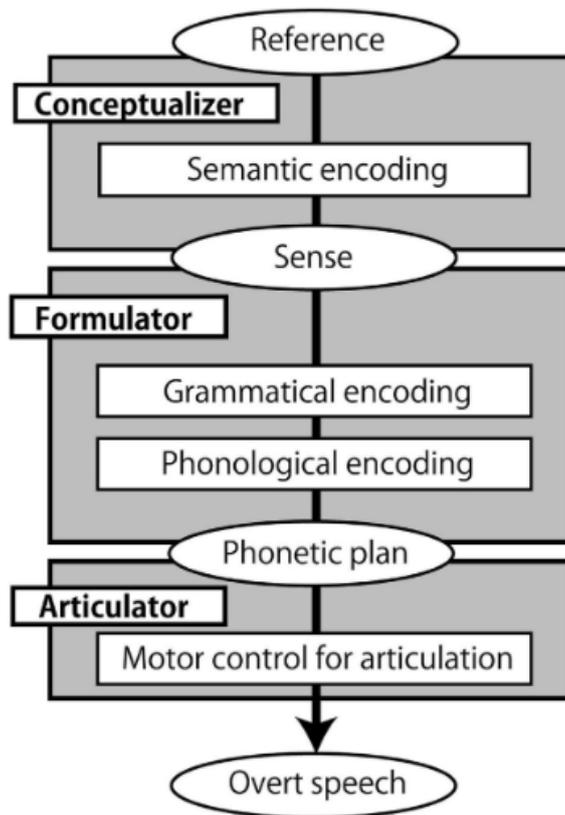


Figure 1. Levelt's Model of Language Production

The diagram shows Levelt's Model of Language Production, which describes how a writer (or speaker) turns thoughts into words. The process starts with the Conceptualizer, where concepts are created and encoded in a way that makes sense. The writer chooses what to say based on what they want to mean or allude to. The outcome of this phase is a mental "sense" conveyed to the Formulator, which manages the transformation of abstract concepts into verbal expression. Grammatical encoding puts words into syntactic frameworks, and phonological encoding tells us how they sound in writing (or how they seem in speech). The resulting phonetic plan is then sent to the Articulator, which controls the muscles that make writing happen (or the act of speech in a text adaption). Finally, the message turns into speech that can be heard, which is the observable output. This model was first made to describe how people speak, but it has been widely used in writing research. In this context, "articulation" means the mechanical act of putting words together, and the whole process is watched through feedback loops that let writers or speakers plan, formulate, and revise all the time.

When writers have good emotional attributes like motivation, confidence, and relaxation, they are better able to keep track of their own work. Motivated writers are happy to review their drafts, think critically about them, and make changes that will make them clearer and better in style. When people are confident, they are less anxious, which lets them look at their work objectively and take creative risks when they change or rearrange ideas. A calm emotional state helps you stay focused and keeps your mind from being too full, which makes it easier to get into the rewriting process. On the other hand, if the self-monitor is afraid of making mistakes or doesn't feel confident in their abilities, they may become too cautious or lose interest, which leads to little revision or only surface-level corrections. The interplay between self-monitoring and affective elements influences the overall quality of writing feedback: emotional equilibrium enhances metacognitive awareness, whereas anxiety or diminished motivation undermines it, resulting in less coherent and refined output.

During conceptualization, students come up with ideas and plans depending on a topic or stimuli. In formulation, students put these thoughts into words by choosing the right words and sentence structures. During the articulation stage, authors put their ideas into writing, and during self-monitoring, they can make changes and fix mistakes. When these steps are interrupted, writing errors manifest—not only as superficial mistakes but as indicators of cognitive failures during processing (Levelt, 1999; Rahimi & Mosalli, 2025; Dalyan et al., 2025). Consequently, examining students' writing

performance from this psycholinguistic perspective might elucidate the interplay between cognition and language in EFL composition.

Even though there is more and more research on writing mistakes and learning a second language, most of it is about surface-level error analysis, like grammatical categories, lexical choice, or syntactic deviations. These studies do not look at the cognitive and psycholinguistic processes that lead to these mistakes (Halim & Halim, 2024; Liu, 2008). Prior studies have effectively categorized prevalent error types but have seldom linked them to the cognitive processes, planning, and language processing employed by students during writing. Furthermore, there exists a scarcity of studies examining creative writing, which contrasts with academic or expository writing regarding cognitive flexibility, emotional engagement, and personal expression (Healey, 2009). The lack of psycholinguistic perspectives in creative writing research is a significant deficiency, given that this genre necessitates both linguistic accuracy and imaginative cognition, which test the cognitive processing abilities of EFL learners.

To fill this gap, the current study utilizes Levelt's Model of Language Production as the principal theoretical framework to examine students' language processing during creative writing. This research examines how students conceptualize, develop, and monitor language while creating creative pieces in English, in contrast to previous studies that concentrate exclusively on linguistic faults. The research comprises 35 English Literature students from Universitas Negeri Makassar (UNM), who engaged in Creative Writing class utilizing visual prompt. Five students with the fewest errors and five with the most errors were chosen from this group to take part in in-depth semi-structured interviews. This method integrates text-based analysis with introspective data, enabling the researcher to discern the variations in cognitive efficiency, lexical retrieval, and self-monitoring between high- and low-performing students.

The originality of this research is in its amalgamation of psycholinguistic theory with practical creative writing application. Previous research frequently separates writing products from cognitive processes; this study integrates them within a cohesive framework of language production. Using Levelt's approach, the study offers a comprehensive elucidation of how students' cognitive processes influence writing ability, whether successful or unsuccessful. The study also shows how cognitive control and linguistic awareness improve writing quality by comparing students who do well and those who don't. This psycholinguistic approach enhances theoretical comprehension of writing as a cognitive process and provides pedagogical insights for teaching creative writing in EFL classrooms, urging educators to prioritize the improvement of students' abilities in idea generation, lexical retrieval, and self-regulation.

This study aims to enhance the discourse on writing teaching by integrating cognitive theory with creative practice. Understanding how students transition from idea to text offers significant insights into the relationship between cognition and language, enabling educators to develop more effective tactics that promote linguistic precision, cognitive fluidity, and creative expression in EFL writing environments.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the psycholinguistic processes underlying students' creative writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. The design aimed to capture both the linguistic output and the cognitive mechanisms involved in producing written texts. Drawing on Levelt's (1989) Model of Language Production, the study focused on four major stages of language processing: conceptualization, formulation, articulation, and self-monitoring. By analyzing written texts alongside students' reflective accounts, the research sought to identify how cognitive operations, such as idea generation, lexical retrieval, and syntactic structuring, influence writing quality. This approach allowed for a rich interpretation of the relationship between thought and text—the transformation of mental representations into written language.

2.2 Participants

The participants were 35 undergraduate students enrolled in the Creative Writing class of the English Literature Study Program at the Faculty of Languages and Literature, Universitas Negeri Makassar, during the 2024/2025 academic year. All participants were from the 2022 cohort and had previously completed core writing courses, providing them with a sufficient foundation in English grammar and composition. The students were asked to complete a creative writing task, which served as the initial data source for this study.

The students were grouped based on the quantity and kinds of language mistakes found in their work. From this cohort, ten students were deliberately chosen for an in-depth psycholinguistic analysis: five exhibiting the least errors

(high-performing group) and five demonstrating the most errors (low-performing group). This selective sampling enabled the researcher to investigate divergent language processing activities across varied skill levels, yielding comparative insights into the functioning of cognitive stages in distinct performance circumstances.

2.3 Instruments

This study used two main instruments:

- a. Creative Writing Task – Each participant wrote a short descriptive paragraph based on a picture prompt. The image helped trigger ideas naturally and reduced reliance on memorized phrases, allowing a more authentic look at how their thoughts turned into written language.
- b. Semi-Structured Interview – The interview aimed to understand how participants thought and felt during the writing task. The questions focused on five areas:
 - 1) Writing Experience (e.g., feelings and preparation before writing),
 - 2) Cognitive Processes (e.g., vocabulary choice, translating ideas),
 - 3) Emotional Factors (e.g., confidence, nervousness),
 - 4) Social Influences (e.g., feedback from peers or teachers), and
 - 5) Self-Reflection (e.g., identifying mistakes and strategies to improve).

The interviews were conducted in both English and Bahasa Indonesia, depending on the participants' comfort, to ensure responses were natural and clearly expressed.

2.4 Procedures

The study was conducted in three main stages.

- a. Writing Stage:

All 35 students participated in a classroom writing session for Creative Writing class. They were shown one picture stimulus and instructed to write a descriptive paragraph in English within 30 minutes. The writings were collected and analysed for linguistic accuracy, coherence, and error frequency.

- b. Selection Stage:

We identified the five students with the fewest errors (best-performing) and the five with the most errors (least-performing). This evaluation was based on grammatical, lexical, and syntactic accuracy. These ten students were then invited to participate in the next phase of the research. Here the details for the selected participants.

Table 1. Results of Creative Writing Class's Prompt

No.	Participants	Total Mistakes in Paragraph Writing	in Details
1.	NR	2	Grammatical: 1 Sentence Structure: 1 Others: 0
2.	S	2	Grammatical: 1 Sentence Structure: 1
3.	JAP	2	Syntactic: 1 Sentence Structure: 1
4.	SW	5	Grammatical: 2 Syntactic: 1 Sentence Structure: 1 Clarity/Coherence: 1
5.	MS	5	Grammatical: 2 Syntactic: 1

			Sentence Structure: 1 Clarity/Coherence: 1
6.	AANA	15	Grammatical: 8 Syntactic: 3 Punctuation/Capitalization: 2 Sentence Structure: 1 Clarity/Coherence: 1
7.	DEP	15	Grammatical: 9 Syntactic: 2 Punctuation/Capitalization: 2 Sentence Structure: 1 Clarity & Coherence: 1
8.	YC	16	Grammatical: 9 Syntactic: 3 Punctuation/Capitalization: 2 Sentence Structure: 1 Clarity/Coherence: 1
9.	NF	18	Grammatical: 11 Syntactic: 3 Punctuation/Capitalization: 2 Sentence Structure: 1 Clarity/Coherence: 1
10.	AN	15	Grammatical: 8 Syntactic: 3 Punctuation/Capitalization: 2 Sentence Structure: 1 Clarity/Coherence: 1

c. Interview Stage:

Each of the selected students participated in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 20–30 minutes. The interviews explored how the students generated ideas (conceptualization), selected words and structures (formulation), wrote and revised sentences (articulation and monitoring), and managed emotional or cognitive challenges. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated for analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis

The collected data consisted of two sources: (1) the students' written texts and (2) the interview transcripts. Both sets of data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

a. Textual Analysis: The students' writings were examined to identify linguistic errors and patterns that could indicate psycholinguistic difficulties, such as lexical retrieval failures or syntactic misformations.

b. Interview Analysis: The transcripts were coded according to Levelt's (1989) four stages of language production: conceptualization, formulation, articulation, and self-monitoring. Themes were generated to explain how students mentally processed language, and how these processes differed between the high- and low-performing groups.

c. Triangulation between textual and interview data ensured the validity and reliability of interpretation. The integration of both linguistic outcomes and cognitive reflections allowed the researcher to present a holistic understanding of students' psycholinguistic processes in creative writing.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Results

Examination of the ten chosen students' creative writing works and semi-structured interview transcripts disclosed significant disparities between the five high-achieving and five low-achieving participants. All students completed the same writing task, but their written work and self-reported writing experiences demonstrate that the quality of their writing was largely contingent upon their management of the psycholinguistic stages identified by Levelt—conceptualization, formulation, articulation, and self-monitoring. The identified mistake patterns, encompassing grammatical, syntactic, structural, and coherence-related aspects, provide definitive evidence of the efficacy of each stage in the creative writing process.

Table 2. The Analysis of Levelt's Components

Component	High-Performing (NR, S, JAP, SW, MS)	Low-Performing (AANA, DEP, YC, NF, AN)	Supporting Evidence
Conceptualizer	Coherent ideas, vivid imagery, pre-writing planning	Fragmented ideas, incoherence	Text analysis + interview quotes ("I imagined it first" vs. "I just wrote whatever came")
Formulator	Accurate grammar & syntax; fluent lexical retrieval	Frequent grammatical & syntactic errors	Concrete text samples show translation errors, L1 interference
Articulator	Fluent writing, consistent punctuation, automatic mechanics	Frequent punctuation/capitalization errors	Text structure differences + interview statements ("slow typing," "didn't notice errors")
Self-Monitor	Active revision, re-reading for clarity	Limited revision, fear of changing text	Direct participant quotes + persistent uncorrected errors
Affective Factors	Motivated, confident, relaxed	Anxious, uncertain, low self-efficacy	Emotional self-reports from interviews confirming cognitive inhibition

a. The Conceptualizer: Idea Planning and Thematic Coherence

The conceptualizer is in charge of coming up with, picking, and organizing ideas before they are put into words. High-performing students (NR, S, JAP, SW, and MS) displayed distinct topic concentration and coherent sequencing, indicating that they commenced the writing process with stable cognitive frameworks. For instance, NR's paragraph about a beach scene opened with a vivid conceptual frame — *"The waves hum softly as if whispering secrets to the sand."* She described her writing process as "imagining a picture before writing," demonstrating a conscious pre-verbal stage of idea planning. Similarly, S explained that she always "thinks of the story in her head like a short movie" before typing. Their written texts displayed smooth transitions and sustained imagery, with no abrupt topic shifts.

By contrast, the low-performing students (AANA, DEP, YC, NF, and AN) lacked coherence and focus. Their paragraphs often contained unrelated images or inconsistent temporal flow. NF's paragraph began describing a sunset but shifted suddenly to talking about school stress — an indication of a fragmented conceptual base. When interviewed, NF stated, *"I didn't plan; I just wrote whatever came to my mind."* DEP admitted that she "didn't imagine anything before writing" and just "typed directly." This unplanned process explains the clarity/coherence errors observed in their work. Levelt's model posits that incoherence indicates a failure at the message formulation stage, where concepts are either inadequately developed or poorly structured prior to linguistic manifestation. Consequently, the disparity in conceptual quality between the two groups is substantiated by textual cohesiveness and their respective metacognitive remarks.

b. The Formulator: Grammatical, Syntactic, and Lexical Encoding

The formulator transforms conceptual intentions into linguistic form through lexical selection, grammatical encoding, and syntactic structuring. Here, the difference between the two groups becomes more evident. High-performing students demonstrated smoother lexical retrieval and accurate grammatical structuring. For example, JAP's paragraph—*"The city sleeps while the rain writes its stories on the glass"*—shows syntactic control and metaphorical awareness. Her interview

reflected confidence: *"The words just come when I feel the image."* SW's text combined creative phrasing with correct tense usage: *"The wind carried the laughter we left behind."* Minor grammatical issues occurred, but they did not impede meaning. Their ability to express abstract imagery suggests a well-functioning formulator, where grammatical rules operate subconsciously, allowing focus on creative meaning-making.

In contrast, students who did not do well had a lot of problems with formulation, which was in line with the fact that they had a lot of grammatical and syntactic mistakes (8–11 per student). There were problems with subject-verb agreement, missing articles, and word order that didn't seem right in their writing. For instance, AN wrote, *"The bird fly and sing beautifully every morning,"* and DEP produced, *"The light of moon very bright make me feel alone."* These errors indicate insufficient grammatical encoding and direct interference from L1 syntactic patterns (Indonesian).

Interview data confirmed that formulation difficulties caused visible hesitation and cognitive strain. YC confessed, *"I think in Indonesian first, then translate to English. That's why sometimes my sentence is weird."* AANA admitted, *"I often forget which verb form to use."* These testimonials offer direct psycholinguistic evidence indicating that their formulation stage was excessively burdened by conscious grammar monitoring, hence constraining cognitive capacity for creativity. The mistakes made by the low-performing group are linguistic proof of a weak formulator, which means that lexical retrieval is delayed, syntactic encoding is unstable, and language output is broken up.

c. The Articulator: Written Realization and Mechanical Control

At the articulator level, writers physically realize their language through orthographic and mechanical accuracy. The high-performing students demonstrated fluency and control in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Their texts read smoothly, suggesting that orthographic encoding had become largely automatic. NR's and S's paragraphs contained no noticeable mechanical errors, while JAP's and SW's writing showed consistent punctuation and spacing. In interviews, they described writing as "flowing easily" and "not worrying too much about spelling." This indicates that their articulator functions automatically, freeing attention for content and creativity.

Conversely, low-performing students frequently produced punctuation and capitalization errors and disjointed sentence boundaries. For example, YC wrote sentences such as *"the moon bright i remember my mother crying that night"*—lacking capitalization and end punctuation, which disrupted readability. When asked about these mistakes, YC explained, *"I didn't notice it until you told me."* This response demonstrates low automaticity at the articulatory level and insufficient attention to mechanical encoding. DEP and NF both mentioned typing slowly and backspacing frequently to fix small mistakes, confirming that they allocated cognitive energy to surface form rather than meaning construction. Such over-attention to mechanics reflects a diverted articulatory focus, consistent with reduced fluency.

d. The Self-Monitor: Revision and Reflective Awareness

The self-monitor stage enables writers to evaluate their output and correct discrepancies between intended meaning and produced text. High-performing students demonstrated robust self-monitoring behavior. MS explained, *"After finishing, I always read again and change some words that don't sound right."* SW described revising multiple times "to make the story feel smoother." Their willingness to revise both grammar and content reflects a mature understanding of writing as a recursive process. Their limited errors are evidence that self-monitoring effectively caught and corrected early mistakes.

Low-performing students, however, showed minimal or passive monitoring. AANA admitted, *"I read only once to check spelling, not the meaning."* AN said, *"I was afraid to change because it might be wrong again."* These remarks demonstrate weak metacognitive regulation: the self-monitor either failed to identify problems or was suppressed by anxiety. In their texts, uncorrected grammatical errors and incoherence confirm this lack of revision. In Levelt's terms, the feedback loop between production and monitoring was either underdeveloped or interrupted by affective interference. The persistence of errors across multiple categories (grammatical, syntactic, and coherence) thus serves as textual proof of a malfunctioning monitoring system.

e. Affective and Cognitive Factors: Motivation, Confidence, and Anxiety

The interviews revealed that affective and cognitive states powerfully influenced performance at every level of the model. High-performing students displayed intrinsic motivation and emotional engagement. NR and JAP expressed enjoyment in "playing with words" and "imagining pictures in English." Their positive emotions correlated with fluency and willingness to revise. Their calm, confident approach likely facilitated smooth conceptualization and formulation, as supported by psycholinguistic evidence linking motivation to working memory efficiency (Dörnyei, 2021).

In contrast, low-performing students exhibited high anxiety and low self-efficacy. NF admitted feeling “nervous because my English is not good,” while DEP described “worrying too much about grammar.” Such emotional tension visibly disrupted their writing flow. Their pauses, frequent corrections, and avoidance of revision all reflect the cognitive consequences of anxiety—reduced attention span and impaired lexical access. Thus, affective imbalance was not an external factor but a core psycholinguistic variable that influenced every component of language production.

3.2 Discussion

This study reveals a pattern that reflects, expands upon, and occasionally contests the outcomes of prior psycholinguistic and writing-process research. The high performers demonstrate the recursive, strategic control that correlate with expert production. Flower and Hayes refer to planning at the conceptual level when they say things like “seeing a movie” or “imagining pictures first.” This means that they create a mental picture before decoding it in language. In contrast, the low-performing group exhibits what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) refer to as knowledge-telling; they record whatever comes to mind without overarching objectives, resulting in weak coherence and sudden topic transitions in their compositions.

This is in line with Kormos's (2014) model of second-language production in terms of grammatical and lexical formulation. Students who depended on direct translation from Indonesian encountered retrieval delays and syntactic interference, indicative of less automaticity in L2 formulator functioning. Students who did well and said words “just came” fit the pattern of proceduralized grammatical control that Anderson, et al.'s skill-acquisition theory (1995) and de Bot's adaption of Levelt's model (2021) anticipate. “The rain writes its stories on the glass” is an example of a metaphorical phrase that shows how easy it is to write when we do not have to think about it. This shows how Kormos's results may be used to creative writing.

At the articulatory level, the difference in mechanical fluency parallels Kellogg & Young's (2008) observation that transcriptional automaticity frees working memory for higher-order tasks. The high-performing students' minimal punctuation and spelling errors demonstrate that the articulator stage has become automatized, whereas the low-performing students' frequent mechanical errors confirm that their attention remains trapped at surface level, slowing idea flow.

The self-monitoring behaviors in this study deepen earlier descriptions by Albarqi (2024) and Ariyani, et al. (2024). Students who do well review for clarity, imagery, and tone, which shows that they are monitoring their meaning. Whereas, students who do not do well only revise for spelling or do not do it at all because they are afraid, which shows how affect can stop metacognition. This link between worry and less monitoring adds an emotional level to Levelt's feedback loop that earlier research that looked at numbers typically missed.

These affective elements are similar to Dörnyei's (2021) motivating self-system where stated that delight and confidence keep focused, but worry makes “freeze” and avoid words. In creative writing, this effect is amplified; positive emotions expand associative range and promote metaphorical risk-taking, whereas fear constricts vocabulary selection. The creative-writing context shows how Levelt's components work in a genre that prizes imagination and emotional tone, which is different from the mostly expository assignments utilized in earlier studies. When formulation is instinctive, writers can play with figurative language and rhythm. When it is not, metaphorical aim turns into literal translation. The finding that motivation shapes not only persistence but also linguistic richness situates at the intersection of psycholinguistics and affective stylistics.

In general, the debate places this study in relation to and outside of previous models. It backs up Levelt's idea of cognitive sequencing, Flower and Hayes's idea of resource rivalry, and Dörnyei's idea of affective modulation, but it also adds a new layer by showing how these mechanisms work in writing that is imaginative and full of feelings. The comparison shows that good creative writing happens when cognitive and affective systems work well together at all four stages. This gives both theoretical support and practical advice for teaching students how to go from thought to text.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the incorporation of Levelt's Model of Language Production into the realm of creative writing demonstrates that proficient language processing necessitates the synchronization of cognitive and emotional mechanisms across four primary components: conceptualizer, formulator, articulator, and self-monitor. Students that did well showed good conceptual planning, fluent grammatical formulation, automatic mechanical control, and active self-

monitoring. These skills were all made stronger by positive emotional attributes including motivation, confidence, and emotional tranquility.

On the other hand, students who did not do well had problems at these stages, especially during formulation and self-monitoring. These problems were generally caused by fear and self-doubt, which made it hard for them to think clearly. The results show that writing well is not just about using the right words; it is also about how well your thoughts, words, and feelings work together. When the self-monitor works with positive affective elements, writers can edit meaningfully, think reflectively, and convey their ideas clearly and creatively. It is just as important to teach motivation, self-confidence, and emotional control in the classroom as it is to teach grammar or vocabulary. These emotional supports help students move quickly and confidently from thought to text.

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