



Some Difficulties In Writing Skills of English Majored Freshmen at Tay Do University, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

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There is no denying that English is playing an important role in most regions of the world and is playing a leading role in the education and future careers of students. Moreover, writing skills are one of the indispensable skills in the developing society in general and in the integration process of Vietnam in particular. However, in the learning process, English learners, in general, the English major students of Tay Do University in particular face many obstacles in mastering writing skills. Therefore, the study *“Some difficulties in writing skills of English majored freshmen at Tay Do University”* is conducted to identify the challenges facing freshman students. The survey participants are 45 students randomly selected from class A, B, and C majoring in English Language Course 15. The survey tool used to collect the data is the questionnaire. The study will identify the challenges in writing faced by English majored freshmen at Tay Do University such as vocabulary, grammar, and background knowledge.

Keywords: writing skill, difficulties, English majored freshmen, university

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rational

In the 21st century, English has become a global language, a means of communication, and has been being widely used in the world. So a lot of huge study materials from major educational institutions and universities are written in English. More than half of websites on the Internet are also written in English, such as newspapers, Internet tools, and services. As long as you know the English language, you will have access to an endless source of information.

Moreover, English appears a lot in everyday life: on product packaging, names of famous corporations. It can be said that the more life develops, the more this language is ingrained in all aspects of life. It is true to say: Learning English will make life more luxurious.

Nowadays, while people are still much fuss about newfangled 21-century skills, one very aged skill that seems to be only growing in value is writing. Writing is an essential ability and a significant part of communication. It makes us become better readers, better thinkers, better speakers, and better listeners.

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Through writing, we will inform, explain, argue, entertain, and encourage. Moreover, good writers can convey their message most clearly and easily to a large audience than through live chats or over the phone. Of course, a well-written CV or resume without spelling or grammatical mistakes is tremendously essential.

Mastering writing skills is not simple for English learners. Many Vietnamese students overall and students at Tay Do University, in particular, have suffered many challenges when changing thoughts from mother language to English for various factors, including vocabulary, grammar, and background knowledge.

Therefore, the study *“Some difficulties in writing skills of English majored freshmen at Tay Do University”* is conducted to point out the problems that lead to those situations, then the researcher can provide reasonable solutions.

1.2 Significance of the study

This study is designed to help find the causes of difficulties for first-year students with writing. For these reasons, there will be effective methods to help students overcome difficulties.

1.3 Organization of the thesis

The research consists of four chapters including:

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Chapter 2 - Literature review

Chapter 3 - Research aims - research questions - hypothesis

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of writing and its importance

2.1.1 Definitions of writing

The concepts of writing have been discussed by numerous researchers in the area with different perspectives. It resulted in a considerable amount of definitions describing the term, some of which were mentioned below.

According to Rivers (1981:294), “*writing is conveying information or expression of original ideas consecutively within the new language*”. Brown (2001: 336) claims “*writing may be a thinking process*”. Furthermore, he states that writing is often planned and given with a vast number of revisions before its release. Also, Elbow (1973) in Brown (2001: 336) also says “*Writing may be a two-step process*”. The first process is deciding the meaning and therefore the second process is putting the meaning into language. Writing represents what we think. It is because the writing process reflects things, which stay within the mind. Students who are reluctant to write things down often suffer from this activity. The students find difficulties once they start trying to find some reasons to write down and producing written sentences.

Nunan (1989) says that “*writing is not a regular activity*”. Physically and mentally, normal people learn to talk a language. Norrish (1983) also says that “*The most significant problem is that writing is more complicated which examines a person’s ability to use a language and the ability to declare opinions, and writing requires a person to write not only coherently but efficiently.*”

Moreover, Zulfani (2001) defines that “*writing can help students to make stronger by adding more grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary, as the important thing in learning a language*”. Nevertheless, Pincas (1998:56) states that “*Writing may be a way of communicating a message to a reader for a purpose. The purpose of writing is to precise one’s self, to supply information for one’s reader, to influence one’s reader, and to make a literary composition.*”

In brief, those definitions above have shared the same meaning that writing is a medium of human communication that involves the representation of a language with symbols. Writing systems are not themselves human languages (with the debatable exception of computer languages); they are means of rendering a language into a form which will be reconstructed by other humans separated by time and/or space.

2.1.2 The importance of writing

The written language has nowadays an important social and educational function and its status has a high social prestige (Urbanova and Oakland, 2002: 31). They also state

that “*The written communication has a crucial social and academic function, and its status features a high social prestige*”.

Indeed, writing can be a life skill, a work-related skill since it is often the idea that others value your learning, values, ideas, and contributions to society. Regardless of your career, good writing skills are essential for success in the workplace. Whether it is an email, a project report, or a sales proposal, content full of spelling errors, grammatical errors, and poorly constructed sentences suggest a similar attitude toward work. It is not just a term but an immense ability. If someone masters this skill, that person can become successful in the writing world. Writing gives you words that help you to expose who you are as a person. It can help you to express yourself comfortably. Moreover, writing is involved in every area and every aspect of life. Whether you have a creative field, job field, or business field, without it, you can’t come up with original, new ideas, and it helps you to put your imagination into words. Writing provides a structure to your vision and creativity. Besides, this skill allows students to learn all the rules and how to organize their ideas using language better and more coherently.

In short, writing skill is the ability to express ideas, emotions, and thoughts in written form using grammar strictly, appropriate word choice, and logical idea arrangement.

2.2 Difficulties of writing

Writing is considered to be one of the most challenging aspects of language learning. In general, they are facing the problem of using a foreign language to express their thoughts effectively. In this skill, the difficulties affecting the development of ideas as well as being able to display all of their thinking are vocabulary, grammar, and background knowledge.

2.2.1 Vocabulary

Vocabulary acts as a significant role in language learning. Vocabulary is an indispensable ability for learning to read, speak, and especially in writing. The first challenge freshman students face in writing is vocabulary. According to Richards and Renandya (2002: 255), “*Vocabulary is a central element of language proficiency and contributes much of the basis for how students speak, listen, read and write.*”

In the writing process, a lack of vocabulary will cause many obstacles. One of the challenges is choosing the appropriate words for the context. McMahon, Carolyn, Warrick, and Peggy (August 2005) states that “*Word choice as the use of rich, colorful, precise language that communicates in a way that moves and enlightens the reader. In good descriptive writing, well word choice will paint pictures in the reader’s mind.*” Indeed, in writing, a good essay, even if it is a small paragraph, polymorphic words are unavoidable. However, these words can only appear in appropriate contexts. For that reason, students find it very confusing to choose words, and

lead to using familiar words in the paragraph makes it less interesting.

For example: *"Love you like a love song" là một bài hát với giai điệu hay, bắt tai và tình cảm.*

→ *"Love you like a love song" is a song with a good melody and affection. (lack of word choice)*

→ *"Love you like a love song" is a great catchy melody song and full of love lyrics. (having word choice)*

Lack of vocabulary is also an obstacle in expressing ideas and makes the text not fully conveyed. Indeed, when writing essays, vocabulary is considered to be the bridge of the ideas in the passage. Students will have to use knowledge and vocabulary to put sentences together to form a complete paragraph or lesson. Due to limited vocabulary, students have to abuse familiar words, which will make sentences boring, less attractive, and possibly lose the fluency of writing.

In short, vocabulary plays a significant role in writing because a lack of vocabulary will lead to unstable ideas in sentences. Therefore, students need to improve their vocabulary capacity to make the paragraph more attractive.

2.2.2 Grammar

Grammar is the second challenge that students face in writing. According to Hirai (2010), *"Grammar is a way to organize the sentence and create a good language."* Vietnamese grammar is simple, so, when writing, students are easy to apply. On the contrary, when switching to English grammar to be able to apply it fluently, it is a big challenge because students need to pay attention to a lot of small details such as tense and word order.

The first difficulty that students face with grammar is the usage of tense. In the process of writing Vietnamese, it becomes very easy to use it, just with the words like "sẽ", "đã" or "đang", the reader can imagine the circumstances or event being mentioned. On the contrary, the use of tenses is a challenge to match the context in English, sometimes the tenses are alternating, making students feel confused. Due to a lack of the basics of grammar knowledge, using tense will grow a difficult obstacle.

The second difficulty in grammar is the words order in sentences. Each language has its own rules about word order, and learners must respect and obey. In the process of learning a foreign language, the mother tongue has a lot to do with thinking and using the target language. The English word order is not stable, it changes flexibly, and that will create a completely different meaning. Most Vietnamese students often forget or do not know the rules of English word order, so that they use the Vietnamese word order to apply in writing.

For example, with the sentence *"Hai chiếc xe hơi màu đỏ đầu tiên"*; due to the influence of their mother tongue, students would write *"The two red cars first"* instead of *"The first two red cars"*.

The compound and complex sentences using in English writing can also be the last difficulty for students. Usually, they are accustomed to using single sentences. However, to be

able to write better, even if it is only a short paragraph, it requires 1-2 complex or compound sentences, to be able to write these sentences, students must master the structural rules to be able to use those kinds of sentences.

In short, grammar is the second essential thing in the writing process. Failure to master sentence structures, tense, and word order easily leads to many difficulties as well as discourages students. Therefore, students need to master basic grammar to avoid those problems and to write better.

2.2.3 Background Knowledge

Besides grammar and vocabulary, background knowledge is also a massive difficulty in the writing process of students. It is also viewed as previous knowledge that someone has experienced, perceived as their way. An, S. (2013) defines *"Background awareness as previous knowledge about a subject. Background knowledge can influence someone's ability to understand the meaning of texts."* When they encounter certain circumstances or they know this before, they become aware of the meaning of topics easily.

Indeed, background knowledge also influences the writing process quite a bit. When a student has a strong and broad background, exposure to unfamiliar or out-of-curriculum topics will not or may cause little hindrance in developing ideas. On the contrary, when the background knowledge is limited to the curriculum or the background knowledge is not wide enough, it will cause many obstacles. Especially, the written test in IELTS or Toeic exams requires candidates to have enough or wide background knowledge to be able to build into a complete essay and attract examiners.

Lack of background knowledge also affects psychology. The importance of what students have memorized or learned plays a significant role. Marzano (2004) reports that *"There is a close relationship between prior knowledge and how children do well in school."* In teaching English, Nation (2006) concludes from his research that *"Learners need to know about 98% of the words in the written or spoken language to be able to understand what they hear or read well."* Through Marzano and Nation, it can be seen that students who already have known or have learned about a topic are more likely to contribute ideas better, while students who do not have background knowledge or do not know about the topic will not be able to do well.

In short, background knowledge is a prerequisite for students to develop ideas. Due to that reason, students both in urban or rural areas have to widen their knowledge through the internet or books.

2.3 Related studies

It is undeniable that students have many challenges in the writing process. There are many studies on this issue conducted by many students from various universities, at the same time they also found out the reasons for this situation. Here are some researches on this topic.

The first one is the study **"A study on common errors in writing paragraphs of English- majored freshmen at Tay**

Do University” conducted by Vo Nguyen Phuong Linh. The purpose of this study is to analyze and understand common errors and writing paragraph of English-majored at Tay Do University. The method used in this study was the survey to conduct research. The participants are 30 freshmen of course 14. The common errors are Errors of using article, Errors of using adjective and adverb, Errors of using tenses, etc.,

The next one is the study **“Common Errors in Writing Journals of the English-Major Students at Ho Chi Minh City Open University”** conducted by Pham Vu Phi Ho, Pham Ngoc Thuy Duong. The purpose of the current study is to investigate the common written errors on students’ writing journals and to see whether the extensive writing helps enhance students’ writing fluency. The population of this research is 115 first-year English-major students participated in this study. The study pointed out four most common errors frequently occur in students’ writing journals are relating to tenses, collocations, spellings, and verb forms

The last one is the study conducted by Thai Cong Dan, Vuong Minh Duc and Phu Thi Hong Chau. The survey was **“An Investigation into Common Mistakes in Paragraph Writing of the First-Year English-Majored Students: A Case Study in Can Tho University, Vietnam”**. The present study focuses on common mistakes in writing paragraphs of the first-year students majoring in English at Can Tho University, in the academic year 2013-2014. The relevant data for the study was collected from the students’ written products and the in-depth interviews. The students were asked to write a free paragraph about “Your new life in Can Tho University” in English in 30 minutes and least 120 words. Difficulties encountered in this study are “Word Formation”, and “Word Choice” mistakes in participants’ writing were the most serious or frequent, whilst the least commonly made mistakes were “Subject/Verb Agreement”, and “Word Order”.

In this study, the researcher aims to find out the difficulties that students face when learning to write paragraph, then give some advice and solution for both student and teacher to improve their study-style better, also provide for the teacher to make teaching more and more effective.

3. RESEARCH AIMS-RESEARCH QUESTIONS-HYPOTHESIS

3.1 Research aims

This study aims to find out the difficulties that English majored freshmen at Tay Do University face in writing especially in paragraph writing and then proposing methods to improve their writing skills.

3.2 Research questions

The study is conducted to deal with the following questions:

1. Do English majored freshmen at Tay Do University have difficulties in writing paragraph?
2. What problems do English majored freshmen at Tay Do University face paragraph writing?

3.3 Research hypothesis

Based on the literature review and the questionnaire, it can be hypothesized that English majored freshmen can face three main difficulties in paragraph writing such as vocabulary, grammar, and background knowledge.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The research is carried out to find out the challenges freshman students face in the writing process. To both achieve the purpose as well as the answer to the question raised in chapter 3, the questionnaires are provided to students to examine their opinions. The research is quantitative because its tool is a questionnaire. The data of the questionnaire will be investigated and concluded. Based on the results, the researcher can find difficulties in the writing process of freshman English majors.

4.2 Participants

The participants in this research are 45 English majored freshmen randomly chosen from class A, B and C of Course 15 at Tay Do University. Most students are at the age 17 to 19. The reasons for choosing these participants were based on they are learning in writing skill, the length of their English learning, their competence in English as a foreign language, and their age. Their ages and learning process are nearly the same, so they have the same ways of thinking and have faced some similar difficulties.

Participants will be given questionnaire to get information about the difficulties in writing skill of English majored freshmen at Tay Do University.

4.3 Instruments

The instruments of this thesis are questionnaire to figure out students’ obstacles in writing.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire includes six questions and fifteen statements and it is classified into the following group:

GROUP	GROUP STATEMENT'S SUMMARY
A. From 1 to 6	Participant’s information
B. From 7 to 9	The importance of writing
C. From 10 to 13	Difficulties in vocabulary
D. From 14 to 17	Difficulties in grammar
E. From 18 to 21	Difficulties in background knowledge

5. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

English majored third-year at Tay Do University have faced a lot of troubles in mastering translation skills, particularly

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problems in vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge, and cultural gap.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is one of the top challenges facing language majors or amateurs. As expected, due to the limited vocabulary, students have many difficulties writing. Lack of vocabulary or limited vocabulary affects the choice of words suitable for the context when writing. In addition, the lack of vocabulary also affects the word development process, making the sentence of the paragraph not fully developed, which can immediately lose interest when reading.

Grammar

In addition to the lack of vocabulary, the lack of basic grammar knowledge seems to be the next barrier affecting the writing process. At first, the students seemed to have difficulty arranging word order. When the words are not correctly arranged in the correct order or structure, the student is unable to convey the full meaning, and worse, they render the sentence meaningless. Next is the matter of choosing tense. Choosing tense to match the topic of the article takes time and when choosing the wrong one will greatly affect the article. Finally, there is the emergence of compound and compound sentences. It is easy to see that, students mainly trace with simple sentences, often avoid compound sentences and compound sentences because they do not understand or remember the structure. This will make the paragraph simple, less attractive, and lack clarity.

Background knowledge

Background knowledge is also a significant factor associated with practical knowledge and learning in school and is also one of the barriers affecting writing because background knowledge is also related to vocabulary. As expected, when exposed to familiar topics, students feel light, developing ideas very easily. But when it comes to topics other than school or beyond their ability, students feel confused, which in turn leads to difficulty in developing ideas, often using common words instead of using specialized words, and taking a lot of time to have a complete paragraph.

In brief, doing this research, the researcher hopes to find the difficulties in writing of English majored freshmen at Tay Do University, and this research can help students recognize their weaknesses in writing process so that they can have effective learning directions.

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