



A Descriptive Study on the Difficulties that EFL Students Encounter in Writing Essays at a University in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Ly Thi Tra My¹, Nguyen Thanh Hung², Nguyen Thi Tuyet Minh³, Lam Thi Thuy Tien⁴, Le Ha Lan Phuong⁵, Au Xuan Sam⁶, Duy Tuan Tran⁷

^{1,2,3,4,5,6} Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Can Tho City, Viet Nam

⁷Tay Do University, Viet Nam

ABSTRACT

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Nowadays, it goes without saying that English has become the most popular language in the world. However, a lot of English learners in Vietnam, especially in the Mekong Delta sub-region have to face serious problems in writing skills, especially essay writing. For this reason, the study was conducted to figure out common obstacles in writing English essays encountered by EFL sophomores. The research participants were 62 second-year students of English at a university who finished their essay-writing courses already. To achieve the desired aim of this study, the researcher combined both qualitative and quantitative methods, using questionnaires and interviews as the main instruments. The SPSS version 22 was used to analyze data from the questionnaire and thematic analysis was adopted to treat the qualitative data. The results showed that these participants had various problems with their English essay writing including vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge, and idea organization. From the findings of this study, some suggestions were given to help teachers and learners in order to improve their English writing and learning experience.

KEYWORDS:

English writing skills, difficulties in writing English essays, EFL sophomores.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

During recent decades, English language has played a vital role in worldwide civilization. As the most popular international language, people use English to work, educate, and communicate with others. Unsurprisingly, English has indeed become an indispensable part of daily life's aspects including science, education, business, culture, technology, tourism, etc.

Along with speaking, writing is a very essential skill that needs to be developed thoroughly. Furthermore, proficiency in writing will provide university students with worthy benefits in handling higher forms of writing, such as articles, research, essays, or theses. However, writing is often considered a very challenging part, as well as a major concern

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of numerous learners (Graham & Mason, 2005). For example, students sometimes struggle to write down their ideas and content related to certain topics and genres. Some even can not apply English writing competently in practice even though they have studied it for a long time (Phuong, 2021). Therefore, this study hopes to address this problem and establish an understanding of the difficulties that EFL students often have when they attempt to write English essays.

1.2 Significance of the research

Understanding the difficulties that EFL students encounter when they write English essays is important to help remedy the situation and thus improve students' writing competence. As a result of this study, EFL teachers can pave the way to help their students' learning of English essay writing better. Moreover, students will get to know their deficits in writing English essays so that they can work on them to improve their writing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of writing

There are several intelligible and uncomplicated definitions of writing stated by informative sources and authorities.

Ly Thi Tra My et al, A Descriptive Study on the Difficulties that EFL Students Encounter in Writing Essays at a University in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Walter and Wolf (1996), for instance, defines writing a form of human communication that involves the representation of a language through a system of represented symbols. Denise (2008) also state that the systems of inscriptions (written language) can complement and extend the capacities of any language by enabling the creation of durable forms of speech that can be transmitted across space and stored over time.

Another definition of writing skill is also pointed out by Lannon (1989) who believed that writing is the process of transforming the material discovered by research inspiration, accident, trial and error, or whatever into the message with definite meaning.

In brief, writing is a medium of human communication. By using readable letters, people can express their thinkings, feeling or any interesting ideas existing in their mind and share them to others across space and over time. Writing requires not only grammatical structure but also other aspects of written language such as vocabulary, background knowledge, and the way to organize ideas. Moreover, writing has made a significant contribution to human labor. It is a valuable skill in a variety of contexts including daily life, education and workplace, etc.

2.2 Definitions of essays

There are many outline formats for the definition of an essay by different researchers and authors. For example, Langan (2004) shows a simple definition of an essay by comparing between “a paragraph” and “an essay”. The author claims that an essay does the same thing as a paragraph. However, a paragraph is a series of sentences about one main idea or point, while an essay is a series of paragraphs about one main idea or point called the central idea. Another definition proposed by Phillips (1979) is that an essay is a series of paragraphs that develop a topic and express a writer's opinion about that topic. Typically, essays include an introduction, the body, and the conclusion parts. Essays are commonly used as literary criticism, political manifestos, learning arguments, observations of daily life, and reflections of the author (Derek, 1996) and include many forms such as argumentative, expository, narrative, and descriptive essays (Caulfield, 2020)

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

The study employed a mix-methods approach to get data for analysis

3.2 Research question

What difficulties do English majored sophomores encounter in writing English essays?

3.3 Instruments

Questionnaires and paper interviews for both teachers and students were used as the instruments in this study. The questionnaire was useful because it allowed researchers to

collect significant amount of data from a large number of people in a reasonably inexpensive, quick, and efficient manner. As a result, the questionnaire was utilized to determine the problems encountered by freshmen in learning English and to speed up the data collection process. Furthermore, the interview questions for students and teachers would provide additional information and confirm the data in the questionnaire.

3.4 Data analysis

As for the questionnaire’s data analysis, the SPSS version was used. In that case, the five-point Likert scale was transferred into five values as demonstrated below:

Strongly agree=5; Agree=4; No idea=3; Disagree=2; and Strongly disagree = 1. Then, the Descriptive analysis with the Mean, Min, Max, and SD was run.

Qualitative data were arranged into themes and then analyzed.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Results of the questionnaire

4.1.1 The influence of linguistic factors

Vocabulary

Items	Descriptive statistics				One-sample Test (test value = 4)		
	Min	Max	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Item 1	1	5	3.53	1.020	- 3.61	61	.001
Item 2	1	5	3.68	.919	- 2.76	61	.008
Item 3	1	5	3.61	.894	- 3.41	61	.001
Item 4	1	5	3.65	.889	- 3.14	61	.003
Item 5	1	5	3.55	1.002	- 3.55	61	.001
Item 6	1	5	3.44	1.034	- 4.30	61	.000

From the table, it can be seen that students firmly concurred with the difficulties related to vocabulary when writing English essays. This led to Item 1 it was hard for students to express their ideas effectively (mean=3.53, SD=1.020, t= - 3.61, df=61, p=.001), Item 2-students repeated some words too frequently in their writings (mean=3.68, SD=.919, t= - 2.76, df=61, p=.008), Item 3-students felt that choosing right words in specific contexts was really complicated (mean=3.61, SD=.894, t= - 3.41, df=61, p=.001), Item 4-students had difficulty utilizing technical and specialized terms (mean=3.65, SD=.889, t= - 3.14, df=61, p=.003), Item 5-students encountered problems in using word groups such as phrasal verbs and collocations in their essays (mean=3.55, SD=1.002, t= - 3.55, df=61, p=.001) and Item 6-spelling mistakes (mean=3.44, SD=1.034, t= - 4.30, df=61, p=.000).

Ly Thi Tra My et al, A Descriptive Study on the Difficulties that EFL Students Encounter in Writing Essays at a University in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Grammar

Items	Descriptive statistics				One-sample Test (test value = 4)		
	Min	Max	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Item 7	1	5	3.44	.969	- 4.59	61	.000
Item 8	1	5	3.47	1.067	- 3.93	61	.000
Item 9	1	5	3.55	.881	- 4.04	61	.000
Item 10	1	5	3.39	.947	- 5.10	61	.000
Item 11	1	5	3.55	.953	- 3.73	61	.000

Grammar affected students' essay writing to the point that they wrote wrong word order (Item 7, with mean=3.44, SD=.969, $t = -4.59$, $df=61$, $p=.000$), it was hard for students to express their ideas and connect sentences by using various and more complex structures (Item 8, with mean=3.47, SD=1.067, $t = -3.93$, $df=61$, $p=.000$), they often made mismatches between nouns and verbs in their sentences (Item 9, with mean=3.55, SD=.881, $t = -4.03$, $df=61$, $p=.000$), and wrong application in parts of speech (Item 10, with mean=3.39, SD=.947, $t = -5.10$, $df=61$, $p=.000$), and finally they had problem in using English tenses (Item 11, with mean=3.55, SD=.953, $t = -3.73$, $df=61$, $p=.000$).

Problems with background knowledge

Items	Descriptive statistics				One-sample Test (test value = 4)		
	Min	Max	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Item 12	1	5	3.50	.937	- 4.20	61	.000
Item 13	1	5	3.40	.949	- 4.95	61	.000
Item 14	1	5	3.55	1.019	- 3.49	61	.001
Item 15	1	5	3.53	.953	- 3.86	61	.000

In terms of background knowledge, there is no doubt that students had problems with limited background knowledge to many new writing topics-Item 12 (mean=3.50, SD=.937, $t = -4.20$, $df=61$, $p=.000$). Moreover, students run out of topic so often due to this type of difficulty-Item 13 (mean=3.40, SD=.949, $t = -4.95$, $df=61$, $p=.000$). Students' limited background knowledge hindered them from developing their ideas and essay in depth – Item 14. (mean=3.55, SD=.1.019, $t = -3.49$, $df=61$, $p=.001$). Evidently, their ideas were often repetitive and redundant-Item 15 (mean=3.53, SD=.953, $t = -3.86$, $df=61$, $p=.000$).

Problems with idea organization

Items	Descriptive statistics				One-sample Test (test value = 4)		
	Min	Max	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Item 16	1	5	3.55	.935	- 3.80	61	.000
Item 17	1	5	3.56	.917	- 3.74	61	.000
Item 18	1	5	3.55	.881	- 4.04	61	.000
Item 19	1	5	3.60	.949	- 3.35	61	.001
Item 20	1	5	3.55	.986	- 3.61	61	.001
Item 21	1	5	3.50	1.098	- 3.59	61	.001

According to the statistics, students had problems in organizing ideas in their essays. Specifically, students' essays were not well constructed with the ideas students got-Item 16 (mean=3.55, SD=.935, $t = -3.80$, $df=61$, $p=.000$). Furthermore, it was too difficult for students to arrange the topic sentence and supporting ideas perfectly-Item 17 (mean=3.56, SD=.917, $t = -3.74$, $df=61$, $p=.000$). On the other hand, students encountered problems in making connection between ideas, sentences paragraphs in their writing-Item 18 (mean=3.55, SD=.881, $t = -4.04$, $df=61$, $p=.000$). Noticeably, students forgot to use linking words -Item 19 (mean=3.60, SD=.949, $t = -3.35$, $df=61$, $p=.001$). As a consequence, most students agreed that their supporting ideas were not well-related well in paragraphs of the essays-Item 20 (mean=3.55, SD=.986, $t = -3.61$, $df=61$, $p=.001$). These could result from the fact that students rarely prepared an outline or plan for their essays-Item 21 (mean=3.50, SD=1.098, $t = -3.59$, $df=61$, $p=.001$), leading to their problems in idea organization.

4.2 Results of the interview

4.2.1 Results of teachers' interview

The teachers' interview questions were conducted to three lecturers who had a lot of experience in teaching essay writing.

In question 1 "Do you think writing essays is a difficult subject for second-year students? Why or why not?", the teachers strongly agreed that writing essays was one of the most difficult parts of learning English, because, with each different type of writing and each different type of essay, it required different format, different knowledge and different ways to give the hook and ideas, etc.

In the second question "What problems do your students usually have when they are doing their writing tasks?". The teachers revealed that the incorrect format, spelling, and grammar structures were the major problems which limited their students and occurred very frequently in their writings. In addition, the teachers assumed that a group of students also lacked a connection between their ideas. This issue usually resulted in the lack of coherence and cohesion in their essays as well as their idea delivery.

To sum up, the findings of the teachers' interview was completely consistent with the results of the questionnaire and the students' interview. Students primarily encountered problems in their writing essays due to their lack of vocabulary, their incorrect grammar, and their confusion in idea organization.

4.2.2 Results of students' interview

Ten students (five male and five female students) were randomly selected to answer interview questions.

In the first question "What are the main problems that you usually face when you write English essays?". Most of the students had similar answers when sharing that they met difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, and idea delivery. Among the participants, 70 percent of them considered the

Ly Thi Tra My et al, A Descriptive Study on the Difficulties that EFL Students Encounter in Writing Essays at a University in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

lack of vocabulary and incorrect grammar as the major problems which limited their writing competence generally and their idea expression during essay writing particularly. Furthermore, the arrangement of topic sentences and supporting ideas was another element that decreased their writing efficiency. Three out of the ten interviewees affirmed that even though they made remarkable progress in vocabulary and grammar, their writings were not really accomplished at idea development and idea organization. They sometimes placed their ideas in the wrong position, and the ideas themselves sometimes did not get along well together in the paragraphs as well as support the main topic effectively.

In the second question "In your opinion, what are the main reasons why you cannot write successfully?", 90% of students explained that limited vocabulary and lack of grammatical knowledge were two initial factors affecting their overall language skills, especially in writing. Specifically, most of the participants conceded that there were too much vocabulary and grammar for them to remember and apply in their writing. In addition, a few students share the same opinion that the lack of practice was another noticeable reason for their poor writing efficiency. Some of them strongly believed that they did not spend enough time practicing writing essays, or they did not have enough experience in writing different types of essays and topics. Therefore, they could not adapt their writing successfully to satisfy the requirements of each writing task.

5. DISCUSSION

By triangulating two instruments in this research comprising the questionnaire and the two interviews, it was revealed that there are four main causes, i.e. vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge, and idea organization which prevent students from succeeding in writing English essays.

Firstly, most students faced a lack of necessary vocabulary when writing. It is the initial reason why they can not express their thoughts and feelings effectively. This confirms the previous findings of Richard and Renandya (2002).

Secondly, students often have grammatical issues in their essays. This is completely consistent in the questionnaire and interviews. Evidently, this is the type of common problem mentioned in the outcome of Pawatcharadom's (2007) research.

Thirdly, the outcomes also prove that lack of background knowledge is a serious difficulty in writing essays of many majored English sophomores. Accordingly, students' essays sometimes run out of topic when they have to face unfamiliar topics. Nevertheless, their ideas are often repetitive and redundant due to the lack of appropriate background knowledge, impeding them from developing their ideas and essays in-depth. This indicates that students' essays hardly acquired the expectations of providing essential information

and important evidence which has been confirmed by Davis and Winek (1989).

Finally, idea organization is also a noteworthy problem that numerous students face in writing English essays. They often write paragraphs of the essay with a wrong or even without a topic sentence, or with the lack of connection between their ideas. In many cases, the lack of coherence and cohesion showed up in the whole essay when students forgot to use linking words in their paragraphs. Our experiments are highly consistent with previous results of Grabe & Kaplan (1996).

6. CONCLUSION

During the last decades, English has become the lingua franca in many fields including education, business, politics, science, technology, entertainment, etc. Besides speaking, writing in English is extremely important in communication and information transmission, as it not only helps people express their thoughts but also conserves significant information. However, there have always been opinions that writing English is not easy for any learner, especially with writing essays. Hence, this research has highlighted the difficulties EFL students met in writing English essays which account for vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge and idea organization. The results are expected to let students understand the drawbacks in their writing, learn from their problems and thus be able to produce better English essays.

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Ly Thi Tra My et al, A Descriptive Study on the Difficulties that EFL Students Encounter in Writing Essays at a University in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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