

AN INVESTIGATION ON DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS AT DONG NAI TECHNOLOGY UNIVERSITY IN WRITING ACADEMIC ESSAYS

*Nguyễn Thị Diệu Huyền**; *Phan Thị Lam**

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Abstract: *University students in Vietnam are facing a growing demand to use English in their academic and future career endeavors. Among four skills, English writing is a significant challenge for students, particularly those pursuing a major in academic English language, as they are expected to demonstrate the proficiency in a diverse range of writing styles. Consequently, writing difficulties among students have consistently emerged as a primary concern in writing courses. Nevertheless, Dong Nai Technology University has not yet done any research study to examine this particular element. The objective of this study was to examine the challenges encountered by students when attempting to meet the criteria of an academic English essay. Subsequently, some solutions were applied to enhance the quality of students' essays. The author of this study employs a questionnaire and an interview to investigate the English-majored students' essay writing practice and challenges at Dong Nai Technology University. The survey was sent to a total of 140 students, and the findings revealed that students had not only a low frequency of writing practice but also encountered many barriers to meet writing criteria including task achievement, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, coherence and cohesion. In addition, the interview' results provided a more comprehensive picture of students' challenges in writing academic essays. The study also indicates the importance of teachers' feedback and students' reading and writing practice in enhancing students' writing proficiency.*

Keywords: *academic English writing; criteria of an academic English essay; writing difficulties.*

I. Introduction

Regarding English language skills, writing skills are especially crucial for anyone learning English. Developing a high level of proficiency in writing abilities enables learners to actively engage in the process of studying, researching, and performing their job duties. Research and work necessitate the sharing and storage of documents in written format, rather than solely relying on verbal communication. Proficiency in academic writing enables individuals to

* Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University, Bien Hoa City, Vietnam.

effectively comprehend and use research documents, scientific studies, analyses, and other scholarly materials for specified objectives.

Attaining proficiency in writing academic essays is a necessary objective for English learners, especially English-majored students. Composing well-written essays is one of the requirements that students have to meet. English-majored juniors at Dong Nai Technology University are required to achieve a B2 level of English competence, which encompasses the skill of writing English essays. While instructing the writing Skills module for Writing level 5 classes, the author observed that the students' essays exhibited a significant lack of quality, failing to match the exam criteria. In fact, some students were even unable to compose their essays. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the present conditions and challenges encountered by students in the process of essay composition. Subsequently, some remedies were presented to enhance the quality of students' essays.

Accordingly, the aims of the study are first to assess the constraints that students face when writing academic essays, second to identify factors that impact students' writing habits and last to suggest guidelines to help the students improve their academic writing abilities.

The following questions were prepared based on the issues:

1. What difficulties do the students in Writing 5 classes encounter when writing academic essays?
2. Do the students actively practice writing essays outside the classroom?
3. What potential measures can help the students improve their essay writing skills?

II. Literature review

2.1. Academic Writing

According to Marpaung (2017), most students find academic writing to be complex due to the requirement of language proficiency. Academic writing adheres to specific guidelines, including the use of a formal and systematic framework, employing formal language, and maintaining logical organization (Bailey, 2014).

Academic writing presents difficulties not simply because of a limited understanding of academic writing norms or a lack of writing routines, but also owing to the cognitive process involved. According to Choemue & Bram (2021), academic writing is characterized by a cognitive process. It requires cognitive processing and the capacity to demonstrate appropriate linguistic skills. Furthermore, students are required to write in English, which adds to the already intricate nature of academic writing and presents an extra challenge for them. Hence, students must exert additional diligence in order to achieve proficiency in writing and English language abilities.

2.2. Students' difficulties in writing academic English essays

2.2.1. Criteria for evaluating an academic essay

A scoring rubric serves as a mechanism for a teacher to assess the proficiency of their students. Additionally, students may benefit from utilising this approach to enhance their writing skills and achieve a high score in the writing course (Hima & Saputro, 2017). Academic writing

primarily emphasises the content, organization, grammar, and technical aspects of the text (Hafidz, 2021).

Students' essays in the study were evaluated according to The British Council essay evaluation criteria in which an IELTS score of 6.0 must satisfy four criteria, as outlined by the British Council et al. in 2019: Task Achievement, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range and Accuracy.

2.2.2. Students' writing problems

There are a number of reasons why essay writing is where most students struggle. Firstly, writing English essays for English learners is a complex skill that poses challenges in both learning and teaching due to the intricate nature of essay writing as a cognitive task, Grami (2010). One must engage in critical thinking, adhere to values, and maintain mental focus.

Secondly, learners faced challenges in effectively employing the English language in their written work. These challenges mainly include two sets of problems. The first set consists of different aspects English language competence in which writers' lexical resource remains restricted, thereby impeding their ability to effectively articulate the necessary ideas with precision in their work; writers' struggle to employ a variety of sentences and grammatical structures to accurately convey intended meanings; writers' unawareness of correctly utilizing punctuation marks in sentences is also frequently occurred, Younes & Albalawi (2015). The next set of challenges pertains to the background knowledge for essays. This is frequently demonstrated in students' writing through the repetition of concepts throughout paragraphs. The writer may struggle to give explanations, interpretations, or discussions in the paper due to a lack of awareness or familiarity with certain issues. One contributing factor to this issue is that learners exhibit suboptimal acquisition, retention, and recall of general knowledge, as well as specific areas of interest, as demonstrated by Ceylan's (2019). Also, writers often face the challenge of using ineffective approaches to compose an essay. Ceylan's (2019) study reveals that students have a deficiency in both the understanding and implementation of fundamental techniques for writing and essay composition. These techniques include creating an outline, summarising, and paraphrasing that students must not overlook in order to avoid difficulties when composing their assignments. These strategies assist authors in managing the writing process to prevent overlooking ideas, producing unsuitable thoughts, or presenting in a disorganized manner.

The aforementioned are prevalent challenges that English learners face when composing essays. This serves as the foundation for the author's study in the investigation of the academic writing challenges encountered by English major students at the university.

III. Research methods

3.1. Participants

The research was carried out using a sample of 140 third-year English majors from 4 classes of English essay writing level 5 which the researchers were in charge at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University, during the first semester of the academic year 2023-2024. The students were selected due to the fact that most of them scored low on the

previous writing course. Therefore, the researchers would like to identify problems faced by the students in English essay writing so that it would be possible to propose solutions to the problem.

3.2. Research instruments

The study used a mixed approach in which two main instruments employed were a questionnaire and an interview.

Firstly, the researcher delivered the questionnaire to a total of 140 students in order to collect the data on the frequency and methodologies employed by students in their essay writing practices, as well as their challenges encountered when composing English essays. Through this questionnaire, the researcher was able to identify the primary factors for designing questions for the later interview. The questionnaire comprises three sections: the first section encompasses inquiries regarding the frequency of engaging in essay writing outside of class, the second section inquires about the methodologies employed by students in their essay writing, and the third section addresses the challenges encountered by students. Each question is structured in a multiple-choice format for the respondents to select the proper option.

Secondly, according to Creswell & Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a methodical and systematic technique that is based on well-established methodological traditions. Its purpose is to understand and appreciate social or human problems. In addition, an interview is a suitable method for collecting qualitative data in a convenient and efficient manner, as they save time and offer convenience to the interviewees. For the aim of this study, a purposive sample of 20 students, 5 voluntary students from each class were selected to answer the interview questions which provide detailed description of students' writing difficulties.

In addition, each interview was structured as a dialogue between the researcher and the student, which was meticulously recorded. The researcher obtained additional information from this interview that the subjects did not provide in the previous questionnaire. As a result, the researcher could verify the previously obtained data once more to enhance the study's reliability.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Students' frequency of writing practice

The table 1 displays the outcomes derived from students' responses regarding the frequency at which they engage in self-practice for writing English essays. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of students, maybe as high as 25% of the surveyed students, do not engage in voluntary essay writing outside of class. The highest frequency at which essays are written is once per month, accounting for 48.6% of the total. The biweekly article authoring frequency constitutes 17.8%. The frequency of producing one item per week constitutes 7.1%. The frequency of two articles per week corresponds to a proportion of 1.5%. A lack of active writing practice among students might contribute to a decline in writing proficiency.

Frequency	Percentage
Never	25 %
An essay/month	48,6%
An essay/ 2 weeks	17,8 %
An essay/week	7,1%
Two essays/week	1,5%

4.2. Students' difficulties in writing academic essays

The researcher divided students' answers towards the questions of their writing difficulties in the questionnaire. Most of the students' problems were classified into the main four groups: Problems with Task Achievement; Problems with Grammatical Range and Accuracy; Problems with Coherence and Cohesion; Problems with Lexical Resource.

In order to address the study's inquiry, the investigator examined the gathered data utilizing Excel software. The results revealed that every student encountered difficulties in fulfilling four criteria of an academic English essay. Out of the 140 participants, 57% (80 students) experienced challenges with grammatical range and accuracy. Vocabulary issues affected 69% (97 students), while 78% (110 students) lacked knowledge in coherence and cohesion in writing. The highest number of participants, 86% (120 students), found task achievement to be the most difficult.

Figure 2 displays the data.

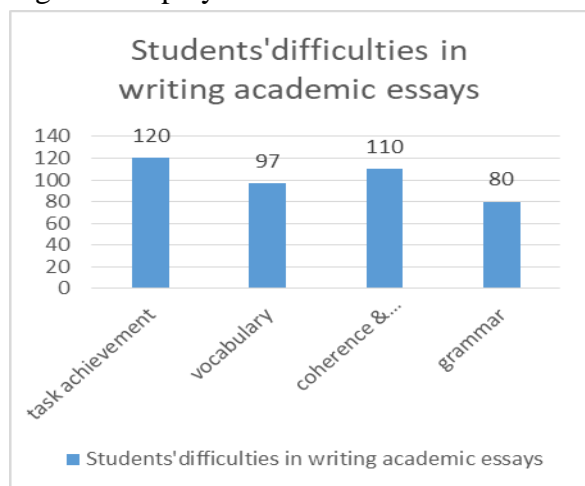


Figure 1: Students' difficulties in writing academic essays

4.3. Reasons for the students to avoid the writing practice

During the interview, when asked about the primary factor contributing to your procrastination in practicing English writing outside of the classroom, twelve students indicated that their inadequate English ability, particularly a deficiency in academic vocabulary and grammatical expertise, is the primary cause. They asserted the difficulty in distinguishing between spoken language and written language, as well as composing complex sentences. Three students attributed their inability to write outside of class to a deficiency in writing strategies. The

obtained results were highly consistent with the findings from the questionnaire. The absence of motivation among five students appeared to have a significant impact on their tendency to procrastinate. This can be attributed to the lack of feedback provided by teachers on their writing practice, which in turn demotivates students from making writing attempts.

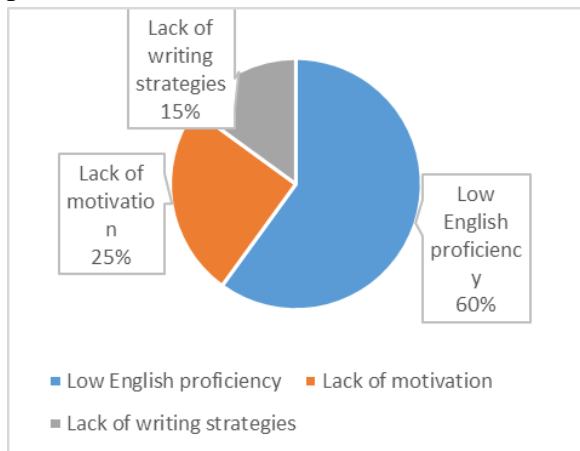


Figure 2: Reasons for the students to avoid the writing practice

4.4 Descriptions of Students’ difficulties in English essay writing

According to the questionnaire’s findings, two major themes about students’ writing difficulties were task achievement and coherence and cohesion.

4.4.1. Task achievement

An academic essay requires students to compose a concise essay with a minimum of 250 words, so exerting strain on several students. 8 out of 20 students reported that they occasionally include irrelevant ideas in their writing to meet the criteria of word count. The students appeared to face minimal challenges in planning their written work, as just 4 out of the total 20 students reported difficulty in generating ideas to express their viewpoint on a particular subject. Nevertheless, a majority of the interviewees (13 out of 20 students) expressed significant difficulties in locating suitable examples, experiences, arguments, or results to elaborate upon and substantiate their beliefs. Figure 3 displays the data

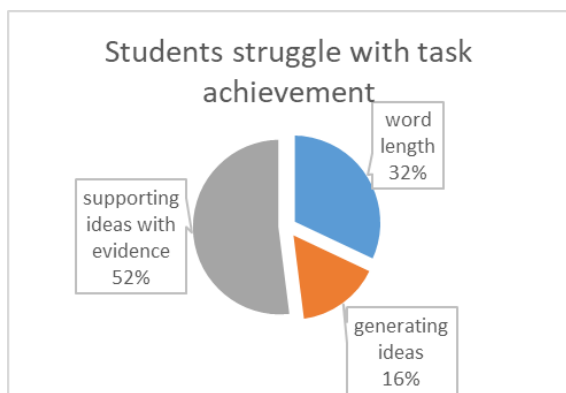


Figure 3: Students struggle with task achievement

4.4.2. Coherence and cohesion

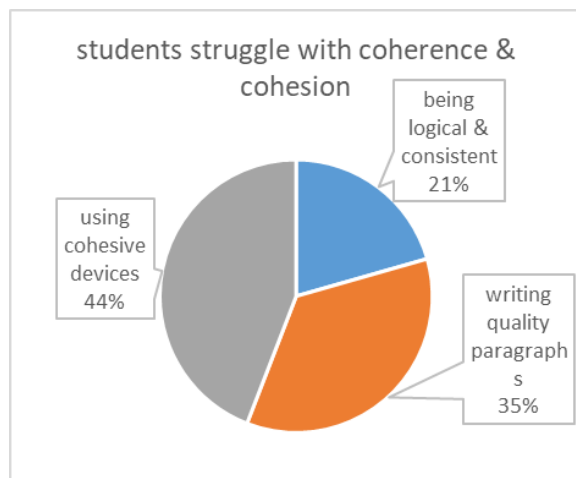


Figure 4: students struggle with coherence & cohesion

Paragraphs play a crucial role in academic articles. Students are required to include an introduction paragraph, followed by 1-3 body paragraphs, and finally a conclusion. Furthermore, the topic sentence serves a crucial function in establishing coherence within each body paragraph by presenting the idea included in the paragraph and illustrating its connection to the main issue. 12 out of 20 students reported occasional difficulty in formulating a high-quality main phrase, leading them to include off-topic ideas or unrelated content in their paragraphs. In order to maintain coherence, it is essential that the sentences inside paragraphs exhibit logical consistency throughout the essay, or that all concepts are interconnected. Seven out of twenty interviewees reported occasional difficulty in synthesising their numerous ideas. Finally, a significant proportion of students indicated their unawareness of employing cohesive devices, which encompass the many words and phrases utilised in writing to establish connections between sentences and ideas.

4.5. Recommendations for improving students' writing proficiency

Based on the above research findings and discussion toward the students' difficulties in writing, as well as considering the problem which somehow impacts students' writing practice, both teachers and students are advised to implement the following suggestions.

Firstly, teachers' feedback plays an important role in the success of students' written work. This can enhance the students' writing skills and motivation, leading to improved writing proficiency. According to Saavedra and Barredo's (2020) research, the insufficient motivation among students to write is a significant element contributing to the inadequate English writing abilities observed among Filipino students. They contended that the presence of a teacher's feedback can have a significant impact on students' motivation to acquire knowledge and enhance their linguistic abilities. In addition, it is imperative for teachers to provide comprehensive feedback to facilitate the students' skill development and enable them to acquire valuable experience, so enhancing their writing abilities.

Secondly, research has demonstrated that by actively enhancing their reading abilities, students can significantly influence the quality of their essay writing. Many students perceive

reading and writing as distinct topics, nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that without the ability to read and comprehend instructions, they would be unable to successfully complete a writing assignment. These two skills are interconnected and equally crucial for students' academic achievement. Ahn (2014) proposed the use of critical reading as a pedagogical writing strategy for English teachers in Korea, with the aim of enhancing their students' writing proficiency. Based on the study's findings, he asserted that critical reading is a constructive, efficient, and advantageous reading approach that Korean teachers can employ to enhance their students' expository essay writing. Moreover, reading not only exposes students to a diverse range of vocabulary and grammar, but also furnishes them with background knowledge. Increased reading among students enhances the likelihood of acquiring novel sentence structuring techniques and effectively conveying their thoughts. Alqadi and M-Alkadi (2013) conducted a study to examine the influence of extensive reading on the improvement of grammatical precision in the writing skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) freshmen. The study's findings revealed that prolonged reading significantly enhanced the grammatical precision of the first-year EFL students at Al-al-Bayt University. Essentially, teachers ought to furnish students with high-quality reading materials and instruct them to take notes while reading. Engaging in this practice not only enhances students' proficiency in comprehending texts at a profound level, but also positively impacts their writing abilities.

V. Conclusion

English-majored students in the study often have challenges when writing essays. Firstly, they struggle to write appropriate academic vocabulary for the fact that they are familiar with translating words by words from Vietnamese to English, and most of the time they use spoken language. Secondly, they experience lapses in specialized grammatical knowledge, particularly in constructing complex sentences. Thirdly, they are not equipped themselves with background knowledge of common occurring issues, which results in their inability to give particular examples to guarantee the persuasiveness as well as the word count requirement in an essay. Lastly, it is tough to ensure the continuity, and logical flow of writing pieces without being aware of employing cohesive devices, or transition words. Indeed, students possess knowledge and ability to use writing techniques before, during, and after composing their essays. Nevertheless, the truth is that students fail to consistently engage in writing practice, which consequently leads to difficulties in essay writing.

Composing an essay poses a challenging task for numerous students as it necessitates learners to not only acquire knowledge about English, but also develop critical thinking skills and the ability to effectively express and discuss ideas about various social and scientific matters. In order to enhance the efficacy of teaching and learning essay writing, it is imperative for every instructor to comprehend the unique challenges faced by each students and tailor their techniques accordingly. The investigation has yielded valuable findings. However, it is important to note that the research findings may not accurately represent the overall status of students at Dong Nai University of Technology due to the restricted number of subjects involved.

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NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CÔNG NGHỆ ĐỒNG NAI KHI VIẾT CÁC BÀI TIỂU LUẬN HỌC THUẬT

Nguyễn Thị Diệu Huyền[†]; Phan Thị Lam

Tóm Tắt: Ở Việt Nam, sinh viên đại học đang phải đối mặt với nhu cầu sử dụng tiếng Anh ngày càng tăng trong học tập và công việc trong tương lai. Trong số bốn kỹ năng, viết tiếng

[†] Khoa Ngoại Ngữ, Trường Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai, Biên Hòa, Việt Nam.

Anh là một thách thức lớn đối với sinh viên, đặc biệt là những bạn theo đuổi chuyên ngành tiếng Anh học thuật, vì họ được yêu cầu phải thể hiện khả năng viết thành thạo nhiều phong cách viết khác nhau. Do đó, những khó khăn khi học viết tiếng Anh mà sinh viên gặp phải luôn là mối quan tâm hàng đầu trong các khóa học viết. Tuy nhiên, tại Trường Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai vẫn chưa thực hiện nghiên cứu nào để kiểm tra vấn đề trên. Mục tiêu của nghiên cứu này là tìm hiểu những khó khăn mà sinh viên gặp phải khi học và thực hành kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh học thuật và đề xuất các giải pháp tiềm năng cho cả người hướng dẫn và sinh viên để cải thiện năng lực viết tiếng Anh của sinh viên. Tác giả của nghiên cứu này sử dụng một bảng câu hỏi và một cuộc phỏng vấn để tìm hiểu thực trạng thực hành viết luận và những thách thức mà sinh viên chuyên ngành Tiếng Anh tại Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai phải đối mặt. Cuộc khảo sát được gửi tới tổng cộng 140 sinh viên và kết quả cho thấy rằng sinh viên không chỉ ít luyện tập mà còn gặp nhiều khó khăn khi phải đảm bảo các tiêu chí của một bài tiểu luận học thuật. Nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra rằng việc giảng viên phản hồi bài viết cũng như sinh viên luyện kỹ năng đọc kết hợp viết giúp cải thiện trình độ viết của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: khó khăn khi học viết; tiêu chí đánh giá bài viết; viết tiếng Anh học thuật.