

AN INVESTIGATION INTO ENGLISH-MAJORED UNDERGRADUATES' DIFFICULTIES IN ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	31/7/2023	This research aims to investigate the difficulties faced by second- and third-year EFL students when learning English essay writing at An Giang University. The researcher used a mixed-methods design by distributing a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to 258 students majoring in English Linguistics and Literature and conducting semi-structured interviews with 13 students. According to the findings, students encountered many writing problems, most of which were related to vocabulary, grammar, lack of ideas, and motivation. When writing essays, most students lacked vocabulary and made errors in word choice. In addition, they struggled with complex grammatical structures or sentences. Some students were unmotivated to produce essays, while others were at a loss for ideas and stuck on a strange topic. The study is significant for teachers since it allows them to readily identify learners' writing difficulties and come up with alternative ways for improving their writing skills. The study also suggests some recommendations for future research on EFL students' challenges with learning English essay writing.
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KEYWORDS

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Students' perceptions
Writing difficulties
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University setting

KHÁM PHÁ VỀ KHÓ KHĂN CỦA SINH VIÊN ĐẠI HỌC CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TRONG VIẾT BÀI LUẬN TIẾNG ANH

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	31/7/2023	Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu thêm về những khó khăn mà sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh năm thứ hai và năm thứ ba gặp phải khi học viết luận tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học An Giang. Tác giả đã sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp bằng cách phân phát bảng câu hỏi với thang đo Likert năm điểm cho 258 sinh viên chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh và thực hiện phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với 13 sinh viên. Theo kết quả nghiên cứu, sinh viên gặp phải nhiều vấn đề về viết, phần lớn liên quan đến từ vựng, ngữ pháp, thiếu ý tưởng và động cơ học tập. Khi làm bài văn, đa số sinh viên còn thiếu vốn từ và mắc lỗi trong việc chọn từ. Ngoài ra, sinh viên còn đối mặt với các cấu trúc ngữ pháp hoặc câu phức tạp. Một số sinh viên lại không có động lực để viết bài luận, trong khi những sinh viên khác không có ý tưởng và bị vướng mắc khi gặp phải chủ đề lạ. Nghiên cứu này rất có ý nghĩa đối với giảng viên vì cho phép giảng viên dễ dàng xác định những khó khăn của sinh viên và đưa ra những phương pháp khác nhau giúp cải thiện kỹ năng viết của người học. Nghiên cứu cũng đề xuất một số khuyến nghị cho nghiên cứu trong tương lai về những thách thức của sinh viên chuyên Anh trong việc học viết luận tiếng Anh.
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TỪ KHÓA

Sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh
Quan điểm của sinh viên
Khó khăn trong viết luận
Viết bài luận tiếng Anh
Môi trường đại học

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1. Introduction

According to Silvia [1], writing is a complex and creative set of behaviors that are similar in their extensive outlines for first- and second-language writers when it also requires writers to present new ideas with precise and compelling arguments that contribute to a complete essay. As a result, writing has been claimed to be the most difficult skill to master in both the mother tongue and the second language. When there is no practical application for writing skills in EFL learning environments and English is a foreign language, the writing process becomes the hardest job for learners [2]. In fact, many students did not receive adequate writing lessons and specific instructional strategies and adaptations, in elementary school, which adds to their current writing challenges in higher educational levels [3].

Regarding EFL Vietnamese students, they are supposed to struggle with putting their thoughts into words and show little interest in writing, especially in a second language (L2). Additionally, Vietnamese instructors frequently discover that writing is an intricate skill to teach and gain fluency in, more or less. Although there have been many studies on writing skills in Vietnam, they have recently focused on teachers' views on writing problems, practices, or learner expectations [4] or used some applications and teaching methods, such as electronic peer feedback that they believe will develop EFL learners' academic writing and reflective thinking [5].

According to Jawas [6], essay writing is necessary academic writing for university students in which students are expected to develop an argument on a given topic academically. Writing, in general, has proven to be the least-cared skill [7] since the teaching of writing emphasizes more on writing theories and grammar [8]. Also, the development of academic writing in the university setting tends to be neglected in comparison to the other skills, therefore the undergraduates often face difficulties with producing error-free writing papers [9].

In the research context, despite students' heightened awareness of the importance of English essay writing, writing abilities of EFL students did not appear to have improved over time. As a result, this study was undertaken with a strong intention to figure out their writing problems. The aim of the study was to investigate the difficulties that second- and third-year EFL students face when learning English essay writing at An Giang University. Applying a mixed-methods approach that includes a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, the study's findings are expected to give EFL learners and lecturers an understanding of writing issues in general and English essay writing difficulties in particular.

This research was to answer the following question about L2 (English) writing issues:

“What are the principal difficulties that second- and third-year EFL students face when learning English essay writing at An Giang University?”

2. Research methodology

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted as part of a BA graduation thesis with a population of 397 English-major sophomores and juniors (N=397) enrolled in English essay writing courses at An Giang University, Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City, during the second semester of the academic year 2022-2023 and majoring in the English Language and Literature program in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. As a result, the cohort of second- and third-year students was chosen because it suited the research objective of identifying students' challenges in English essay writing. In order to obtain the data from the questionnaire instrument, the researchers employed the random sampling method, distributing the questionnaire to approximately 71% of the population (n=258), featured as the second- and third-year students. All students consented to participate in the study, which is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the questionnaire participants

		Frequency	Percent (%)
Years of learning	Second-year	147	57
	Third-year	111	43
	Total	258	100.0
Gender	Female	185	71.7
	Male	73	28.3
	Total	258	100.0

Additionally, the researchers used the purposive sampling method by conducting the online semi-structured interviews with 13 students who took part in the questionnaire survey. These 13 students were categorized into four groups in accordance with their cumulative general point average (CGPA), depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Description of interview participants

Students	Gender	Year of student	Current CGPA
1	Female	Second-year	Fair
2	Female	Second-year	Average
3	Female	Second-year	Average
4	Female	Third-year	Good
5	Female	Third-year	Good
6	Female	Third-year	Good
7	Female	Third-year	Good
8	Female	Third-year	Fair
9	Female	Third-year	Fair
10	Male	Second-year	Excellent
11	Male	Second-year	Good
12	Male	Second-year	Fair
13	Male	Third-year	Fair

2.2. Research instruments

2.2.1. Questionnaire

The close-ended questionnaire for this study was adapted from the studies of Alisha [10], Boonyarattanasoontorn [11], Kao [12] and Mohite's book [13]. The questionnaire included 25 five-point scaled items, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) to figure out students' difficulties in learning English essay writing. Because the participants were English majors and the researchers were present, the language used in the questionnaire was not translated into Vietnamese, thus certain easily confusing topics were clarified. The questionnaire was assessed for reliability and yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .842, indicating that it was trustworthy.

2.2.2. Semi-structured interview

The researcher conducted online semi-structured interviews to obtain information from 13 respondents who currently have CGPAs ranging from 2.0 to 4.0 and have an "average", "fair", "good," or "excellent" CGPA. There were two leading questions designed to elicit more information about the writing issues students faced when writing English essays. According to Opdenaker [14], online semi-structured interviews are appropriate for gathering qualitative data conveniently and efficiently due to the gains in time and convenience for the interviewees.

2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

For data collection, the participants were given printed questionnaires to complete, which took about 30 minutes. The objective of the study and the questionnaire was explicitly described to all participants before they accepted or declined to participate. To get permission for the interview,

emails were sent to selected individuals in advance. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes, was recorded using the “Voice Recorder” app, and was documented in the researcher’s notebook.

For data analysis, the collected data from the questionnaire was analyzed using the statistical application IBM SPSS Statistic 20 and Excel software. In addition, the interviews were thematically dissected to analyze obtained information from the participants.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Findings from the questionnaire

To answer the research question, the researcher analyzed the collected data using Excel software. The findings indicated that EFL sophomores and juniors encountered five common types of English essay writing difficulties. Among 258 participants, 43% (111 students) had to face the problems of essay organization when learning this skill; 53.5% (138 students) were involved in grammatical issues; 56% (145 students) lacked motivation; 58% (149 students) had trouble with time; and the highest number of participants in agreement was 76.7% of participants considering vocabulary the most difficult (184 students). The data is shown in Figure 1.

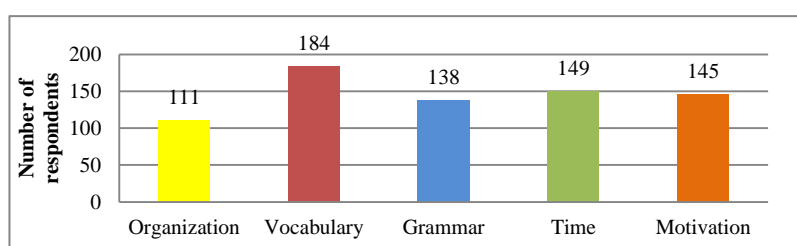


Figure 1. Types of EFL students' English essay writing difficulties

The findings for each of the categories presented in terms of mean scores were derived from descriptive tests, which demonstrates students’ difficulty in writing English essays, illustrated in the Table 2.

Table 2. Description of EFL students' writing difficulties

Writing difficulties	No of items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Vocabulary	5	3.67	4.00	3.90	.13266
Time	4	3.46	3.75	3.60	.14154
Motivation	6	2.87	4.4	3.59	.60301
Grammar	5	3.17	3.77	3.46	.22978
Organization	5	3.16	3.42	3.25	.10025

As seen from Table 2, the most challenging writing issue for most students was vocabulary, which was followed by other aspects such as time, motivation, grammar and organization. The comprehensive analysis of each aspect is described in the next section.

3.1.1. Difficulties in organization

According to Table 3, respondents were unsure whether the shared ideas were a problem because “you feel the ideas that you shared in the essays are unclear and disorganized” ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .897$), followed by “there was no coherence between paragraphs of the essay you wrote” ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .891$). Furthermore, Items 3 and 5 yielded the same findings ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .998$) and ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .987$), demonstrating that *structure* and *idea* were two elements in which students became stuck. Item 5 states that, “You rarely pay attention to the sequence of the sentences in each paragraph” ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .975$) was the least significant issue. The five items listed above are all presented in the neutral level of agreement since the running one sample t-test revealed an important two-tailed p -value ($p = .000$, Test Value = 4), which is less than the standard value of 0.05. In general, EFL students seldom struggled with essay organization.

Table 3. EFL second- and third-year students' difficulties in organization

Items	Organizational problems	Mean	SD	Agreement level
1	You do not understand about generic structure, so you rarely pay attention to the structure during writing the text.	3.21	.998	Neutral
2	You feel the ideas that you shared in the essays unclear and disorganized.	3.42	.897	Neutral
3	The ideas that you shared in the essays are hard to understand.	3.21	.987	Neutral
4	There was no coherence between paragraphs of the essay you write.	3.25	.891	Neutral
5	You rarely pay attention to the sequence of the sentence in each paragraph.	3.16	.975	Neutral

**agreement level conformed by One Sample T- Test*

3.1.2. Difficulties in vocabulary

As seen in Table 4, the item regarded as the most problematic was “You often make some mistakes in choosing the word” (M = 4.00, SD = .915). Students' challenges were also because of the reason stemmed from Item 7 (M = 3.97, SD = .952), followed by Items 8 (M = 3.95, SD = .885) and 9 (M = 3.91, SD = .964), with their two-tailed value being greater than 0.05. Moreover, EFL students did not always use a dictionary when writing in English (M = 3.67, SD = 1.049), as the two-tailed *p*-value was .000, test value = 4. As a result of their carelessness in word selection, lack of vocabulary, word repetition, and simple word use, EFL students usually experienced vocabulary issues. They would, however, be in no danger if they had a dictionary with them.

Table 4. EFL second- and third-year students' difficulties in vocabulary

Items	Vocabulary problems	Mean	SD	Agreement level
6	You often make some mistakes in choosing the word.	4.00	.915	Agree
7	You get difficulties in expressing the ideas because you lack vocabulary.	3.97	.952	Agree*
8	You often repeat a word writing paragraph.	3.95	.885	Agree*
9	You always use the simple words in writing the paragraph.	3.91	.964	Agree*
10	You feel you always need a dictionary when writing in English.	3.67	1.049	Neutral

**agreement level conformed by One Sample T- Test*

3.1.3. Difficulties in grammar

As regards grammar, in Table 5, the majority of respondents reported having difficulty with grammar when learning English essay writing due to a lack of ability to construct a good and correct sentence (M = 3.77, SD = .994). Following this item, the EFL sophomores and juniors remained neutral on Items 13, 14, and 15 with the similar results (M = 3.53, SD = 1.044; M = 3.31, SD = 1.107; M = 3.52, SD = .935; respectively), showing their agreement in encountering verb-tense-related issues. In addition, Item 12 (M = 3.17, SD = 1.023) indicates that “not paying attention to using connectors in writing” is not frequently faced by EFL students. In general, as compared to the organizational concerns, the English-majored undergraduates also considered grammar to be a significant challenge in learning English essay writing. The two-tailed *p*-value was displayed with *p* = .000 and test value = 4.

Table 5. EFL second- and third-year students' difficulties in grammar

Items	Grammatical problems	Mean	SD	Agreement level
11	You always face difficulties in making a good and correct sentence because of the lack of ability in grammar.	3.77	.994	Neutral
12	You don't pay attention to using connectors in writing.	3.17	1.023	Neutral
13	You often make some mistakes in using the action verbs in past form.	3.53	1.044	Neutral
14	You seldom pay attention to the aspect of grammar.	3.31	1.107	Neutral
15	You always face problems in the tense that will be used.	3.52	.935	Neutral

**agreement level conformed by One Sample T- Test*

3.1.4. Difficulties in time

In terms of time, most students indicated a lack of ability to utilize time efficiently and in checking time in writing (3.70, SD = 1.002; M = 3.75, SD = .975; respectively). Other students reported difficulty with the introductory or concluding part of an essay (M = 3.51, SD = 1.048), while other complained about the insufficient time allotted for drafting an essay and finishing it on time (M = 3.46, SD = .896). Overall, EFL undergraduates did not appear to find it difficult to write an essay but lacked time to check it, with the two-tailed *p*-value being .000 and test value being 4. Table 6 summarizes the findings.

Table 6. EFL second- and third-year students' difficulties in time

Items	Time problems	Mean	SD	Agreement level
16	You do not know how to use time for writing effectively.	3.70	1.002	Neutral
17	You spend a plenty of time on the introduction or conclusion.	3.51	1.048	Neutral
18	You do not have time to check your writing.	3.75	.975	Neutral
19	The time, which is given for writing an essay, is inappropriate to finish it in time.	3.46	.896	Neutral

**agreement level conformed by One Sample T- Test*

3.1.5. Difficulties in motivation

Table 7 showed that the majority of students acknowledged the importance of learning writing (M = 4.40, SD = .846), but found it difficult to learn (M = 4.23, SD = .887). The statistics also revealed that many students (M = 3.59, SD = 1.037) felt overwhelmed when writing. Other challenges with writing motivation were discovered to be that they were "not interested in the given topic" (M = 3.29, SD = .993) and did not receive from teachers and peers (M = 3.21, SD = 1.041). Aside from that, students appeared to be unconcerned by the lack of writing examples (M = 2.87, SD = 1.078). Following the analysis, it can be seen that students' attitudes about writing skills were fairly favourable to assist them master this skill. The two-tailed *p*-value showed that *p* was .000 and test value was 4.

Table 7. EFL second- and third-year students' difficulties in motivation

Items	Motivation problems	Mean	SD	Agreement level
20	You are not interested in the given topic.	3.29	.993	Neutral
21	You feel overwhelmed when writing: You don't know how to start, how to develop your ideas and how to conclude.	3.59	1.037	Neutral
22	Your writings are not corrected and provided feedback from teachers or friends.	3.21	1.041	Neutral
23	You are not given the writing examples.	2.87	1.078	Neutral
24	Learning writing skills is very important.	4.40	.846	Agree
25	Learning writing skills is very difficult.	4.23	.887	Agree

**agreement level conformed by One Sample T- Test*

3.2. Findings from the interviews

Thematic-based analysis was used to examine the data from 13 students. According to the findings, two major themes about students' writing difficulties emerged: a lack of vocabulary and grammatical issues. Furthermore, just a few students noted other issues such as essay structure errors, a lack of feedback, and a lack of time management. Table 8 depicts the themes that arose.

Table 8. Students' difficulties in English essay writing

Emerg ed themes	Frequency	Percentage
A lack of vocabulary	13/13	84.6
Grammatical issues	8/13	61.5
Essay structure errors	2/13	15.4
A lack of feedback	2/13	15.4
A lack of time management	1/13	7.7

A lack of vocabulary. All respondents (13/13 students) admitted to having vocabulary issues because they could not think of appropriate words quickly, used numerous simple words, or repeated a word several times. The following are some extracts from interviews.

It is too difficult to find and think of appropriate vocabularies (S2).

My knowledge of vocabulary is a bit limitedSo, I get trouble with finding appropriate words to express my ideas. (S7).

I tend to repeat a word many times..... (S4).

The data from the interview was clearly compatible with the data from the questionnaire, which revealed that students ranked vocabulary as the most serious concern while writing. As a consequence, the questionnaire findings were validated since the majority of students reported having vocabulary challenges, and a lack of vocabulary generated difficulty in their word choice and repetition, idea generation, and the need for a dictionary. The findings are congruent with Pratiwi's study [15], which found that participants struggled with language use and vocabulary in essay writing. Although it is widely acknowledged that vocabulary is important for learners in order to produce effective pieces of essay writing paper, most students demonstrate limited vocabulary usage, or their vocabulary repertoire is insufficient to improve their writing ability, which is a problem for most EFL students.

Various grammatical issues. Eight students out of a total of thirteen struggled with grammar when singular and plural verbs were frequently mixed up, and simple sentences and structures were preferred over complex ones in their essay writing, which may result in their poor writing outcomes. The following are some examples of excerpts:

It is not easy to apply all structures quickly, correctly, and effectively (S2).

Sometimes I forgot to make compound or complex sentences..... (S3).

I always get mistakes in choosing singular or plural verbs. As you can see, when I make a sentence with the subject "The sand", I often write the verb "are", instead it should be "is". So, I accidentally get a minus point in writing. (S13)

/ - h e a r t

These findings contradicted the data obtained from the questionnaire because the questionnaire revealed students' concerns about vocabulary and time allotted for writing, which interfered with learning of essay writing; additionally, students considered grammatical issues at the neutral level, implying that it did not significantly contribute to students' poor writing ability. The findings of the interview data, on the other hand, suggested the reverse when grammatical problems were actually crucial in their writing challenges. This can be explained by the fact that the majority of students who reported grammatical writing problems were "average" or "fair" students - those with low academic performance; as a result, their grasp of grammar in writing may be restricted. In addition, the interview findings were inconsistent with Enneifer's study [16], because punctuation and essay organization were highlighted as important obstacles for EFL students in this study. However, the findings considerably matched those of Boonyarattanasoontorn [17] and Ly et al. [18], who emphasized grammatical issues as the most prevalent concern for EFL university students in Thailand and Vietnam, respectively.

Other writing issues. Aside from the challenges in writing that most students described, relatively few students note issues in grasping essay structure (S1 and S3), missing feedback from teachers and friends (S8 and S10) and managing writing time properly (S7). Examples of students' responses are:

..... there are plenty of types of essays..... I and the others easily make mistakes in the types of essays, particularly their structure..... (S1).

I will not have motivation no one shows me my weaknesses and strengths (S8).

I spend almost all my time thinking of what I will write (S7).

4. Conclusion

The study was conducted to investigate EFL sophomores and juniors' English essay writing

issues. The data revealed that EFL students faced a number of challenges when learning English essay writing, notably those connected to vocabulary, grammar, time, and writing motivation. Among these concerns, the most difficult for EFL students was a lack of vocabulary. According to the findings, institutions should address their students' current writing problems by emphasizing the challenges in writing an English essay. Furthermore, both EFL students and lecturers may profit from instructing their pupils to expand their word repertoire in order to improve their writing abilities. This study may be used as a reference for future research into designing instructional approaches to assist learners in overcoming essay writing difficulties.

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