

## Challenges Encountered by the First-Year Students in English Writing Paragraphs

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### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** writing skills, EFL, challenging

By and large, writing plays a vital part in acquiring English proficiency. Especially in tertiary education, students usually experience various challenges and difficulties in writing English. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the significant writing challenges reported by first-year English major students at Van Lang University. The researcher can explore the writing challenges from the students' perspectives by employing the semi-structured interview using the qualitative method. Thirty Faculty of Foreign Languages students participated in the semi-structured interviews to collect data for the study. The findings reflected that the use of vocabulary was the most challenging factor for students from good to poor English writing competencies. Spelling and grammar were also significant challenges encountered by most students with low-level writing competencies. Meanwhile, punctuation was the students' least challenge when writing a paragraph. This study will make some important contributions to the deep understanding of the writing challenges struggled by EFL students. Identifying the major writing challenges enables the teachers to explore effective teaching methods and classroom activities to facilitate the students' writing processes.

### Introduction

English has become a universal language and a crucial means of communication all over the world. The increasing importance of English cannot be ignored, especially in Vietnam, where learning English has a great contribution to the country's development. According to Brown (2000), in order to master the English language, language learners must be proficient in four English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Of all four English skills, the importance of writing skills is addressed by Apsari (2017), who affirms that writing enables students to perform many activities, including listening and speaking. Likewise, Dantes (2013) holds the same view by explaining that developing writing skills will enable students to expand

other language skills, namely, listening, speaking, and reading skills. This view was supported by Phan (2023), who asserted that writing is a crucial skill that students should hone. Similarly, Alisha et al. (2019) state that writing skills are pivotal in learning English since they are necessary in the students' career paths.

Despite its important role, writing is considered the most complicated skill for English language learners to master. Therefore, acquiring this skill takes language learners time and effort (Ly et al., 2021). Likewise, learners require significant time to progress, especially in mastering all four language skills simultaneously (Vo, 2022). Although writing skills are difficult, especially for the majority of EFL students who face various problems in writing, it is the most important skill in acquiring the English language (Ilmu, 2016; Chicho, 2020). It cannot be denied that having good writing skills will benefit an individual's career and personal life Apsari (2017). There have been several attempts to investigate the challenges that EFL students have encountered when completing a writing task, including writing an English paragraph. Ramatunisa (2014) found that EFL students faced three main writing challenges: linguistics, cognitive, and psychological.

English-majored first-year students usually struggle with writing a complete paragraph in English. They face several major problems when constructing sentences and developing a paragraph. Their writing problems arise when they are asked to produce an English paragraph, even a simple one because they do not know how to express their ideas correctly in English. It is noticed that students who have low motivation for learning how to write and have low English proficiency always struggle with writing (Tukan, 2024). Their grammatical competencies, vocabulary retention, ideas development, and organization are poor. Thus, it leads to the difficulties that they usually face when writing English paragraphs of some specific kinds. The challenges that hinder students from mastering English writing skills are able to make them frustrated and lose motivation for learning (Al-Sawalha & Chow, 2012).

Therefore, this draws the researchers' attention to explore and find out the significant challenges that English-majored students at the tertiary level usually face when writing a short paragraph in English. By identifying the students' specific challenges in writing English paragraphs, teachers can better understand the root of the student's difficulties to enhance the effectiveness of teaching writing skills and assist students in improving their English writing competencies. This study makes some important contributions to understanding the major problems and challenges that English-majored freshmen usually face when writing. By understanding the problems, the instructors and teachers can modify and improve their lesson planning and curriculum to help the students overcome the challenges. The findings of this study will help provide insights into the common errors that first-year students commit when writing English paragraphs.

## Literature review

### *Challenges Faced by the Students When Learning Writing Skills*

Although English writing is the most crucial language skill that language learners have to master, students find it hard to write English effectively. The most common challenges when

writing include the students' poor competence in syntax, insufficient use of vocabulary, coherence, content selection, organization, and inappropriate use of vocabulary (Aburass, 2015). According to Mehrabi (2014), when compared with receptive skills like listening and reading, writing requires a thorough knowledge of grammatical structures. Furthermore, Ur (2021) asserts that during writing, it is essential to pay great attention to several aspects, including accurate spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and standard grammar. In a qualitative study conducted by Klimova (2010) on examining university students' writing abilities, the author reported that the most common mistakes that the students mostly committed involved sentences and the incorrect use of words and phrases. Additionally, Ahmadi and Reza (2018) found that for EFL learners, the influence of their first language (L1) and their limited language knowledge hinder them from writing English effectively. Sharing the same view, Williams' (2012) study revealed that the student's first language impacts the writing process, and this caused the students to encounter several challenges when writing. Furthermore, another study conducted by Riadil et al. (2023) raises the concern that although students face many challenges when writing English, they still do not know how to improve their writing competencies effectively. Hence, by conducting the descriptive method in qualitative research, these researchers found that English grammar was the area in which the students faced many problems. Meanwhile, the English-majored students encountered the least problems with writing organization and vocabulary. In contrast, Tanasy and Nashruddin's (2020) study found that most students believed vocabulary, including word choice, is a major writing difficulty. From the semi-structured interviews, they also admitted that they had committed many errors related to English grammar when writing. The use of punctuation was considered to be a minor factor contributing to the students' writing problems. Obviously, the studies on exploring the students' writing challenges are qualitative research with different methods, including semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and documentation observations. The findings from these studies provide insight into the writing difficulties that EFL students usually face by exploring their opinions and experiences regarding the writing process. The researchers investigate not only the students' writing challenges but also the factors that significantly impact their difficulties in writing.

### *Research Questions*

The theories and studies have encouraged the researcher to thoroughly investigate the writing challenges that English-majored freshmen at the tertiary level usually encounter. This study is expected to be a solution to overcome the major writing difficulties and identify the main factors causing writing problems for the first-year students majoring in English at Van Lang University and students at the tertiary level in Vietnam.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following question:

1. What are the common writing challenges that the English-majored freshmen at Van Lang University encountered when writing an English paragraph?
2. What are the main factors that have a great contribution to the students' writing problems?

## Methods

### *Pedagogical Setting & Participants*

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. All of the research subjects are freshmen from different classes majoring in English. Thirty participants for this study were recruited using a purposive sampling method (N=30). This method allows the researchers to locate participants with the same characteristics or who meet the criteria to join the research (Christensen & Johnson, 2020). The participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) They are all English-majored freshmen. (2) They had finished a ten-week course in the Writing 1 Module. (3) Their levels of English proficiency aligned with CEFR level, ranging from B1 to C1 level. These groups were categorized based on the scores of their writing task, which was a short paragraph related to their hometown. In other words, the researcher also relied on their writing scores to invite thirty participants to participate in the research study. The three groups of students are:

Group 1 consisted of ten students with poor writing skills (from Student A1 to Student A10). Their scores ranged from 2.0 to 4.9.

Group 2 consisted of ten students with average writing skills (from Student B1 to Student B10). Their scores ranged from 5.0 to 7.9.

Group 3 consisted of ten students with good writing skills (from Student C1 to Student C10). Their scores ranged from 8.0 to 10.

The students have finished the Writing 1 Module in the first semester. They were taught to develop a paragraph in English, and they knew how to write a short paragraph (about 100 – 120 words) of familiar topics, including hometown, introducing yourself, and describing a place. At the end of the course, they were asked to take a writing task which was designed based on the final exam format. The writing task aimed to test whether the students could meet the learning outcome of the Writing 1 course or not. The researchers categorized the students by their mid-term writing test results, in which they were asked to write a short paragraph on the aforementioned topics.

Before participating in the research, the researchers obtained consent from all participants. All of the participants agreed to take part in the study on a voluntary basis. They had the right to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt that the interviews had a negative impact on their emotions and feelings. The researchers explained the purpose of the research, how the researcher collected the data, and the techniques applied to the study. They were informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected from their responses. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, when coding and reporting the findings, the researchers referred to them by using pseudonyms such as Student A1, Student B1, or Student C1, etc, based on the groups that the researchers categorized.

### *Design of the Study*

By employing the semi-structured interview using the qualitative method, the researchers can identify the significant writing challenges reported by the students. Conducting interviews allows the interviewees to express their concerns and explain the issue in detail. Furthermore,

Deterding and Waters (2018) indicate that the semi-structured interview enables free responses from the participants.

### *Data collection & analysis*

This study utilized focus group interviews as a means to collect data for this study (See Appendix A for the interview questions). Barrett and Twycross (2018) consider interviews the most common method for conducting qualitative research. Additionally, Queiros, Faria, and Almeda (2017) affirm that a focus group interview is useful for investigating the participants' complex behavior, and these researchers also address that this technique allows the researcher to obtain the information more quickly than conducting individual interviews. The interview was semi-structured; therefore, the researcher was able to add extra questions during the interview to clarify the issue and collect more data from the participants (Roopa & Rani, 2012). Thus, it is practical and suitable for the interviewer to converse with the participants in-depth.

The researcher analyzed the results from the three semi-structured interviews with three groups of participants. The interviews revealed the perceptions and experiences of the students at different English levels towards the writing problems that they usually faced when writing a short paragraph. The researchers attempted to explore the students' views towards the writing problems related to five categorized factors: the use of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and expression of ideas, which had a great impact on the writing performance.

## **Results/Findings and discussion**

The data collected from three focus group interviews related to the writing challenges they encountered were synthesized and analyzed. The researchers classified the students' writing challenges into the categories of students' writing problems related to the use of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and expressing ideas.

### *The Use of Vocabulary*

#### **Group 01**

Most participants who had poor writing performances believed that using vocabulary when writing was a major challenge that usually hindered them from effectively expressing their ideas. Due to their limited vocabulary retention, the students reported using many basic and simple words in their writing. Specifically, Student A1 revealed, "I usually struggle to find the right words to express my ideas accurately." In other words, they were incapable of finding appropriate words to convey their ideas during the writing process. Furthermore, the students reported the frequent use of repeated words in their writing. Student A4 strongly agreed with this during the interview. "Expanding vocabulary is a major challenge, and I often rely on the same words." Most students claimed that they failed to avoid using the same word repeatedly, and they couldn't diversify their vocabulary.

#### **Group 02**

While group 1 reported many problems with the use of vocabulary, the group of students with average writing levels did not highlight the difficulties in finding words to express their precise

ideas. They were able to select the right words to convey their ideas during writing, but they also struggled with finding synonyms to enrich their writing. Specifically, Student B5 admitted that "I often struggle to find synonyms to vary my word choice and make my writing more engaging." Sharing the same view with Student B5, Student B8 agreed, "I have difficulty diversifying my vocabulary and finding more expressive words for my writing." Most participants found no problems using common English words to express their ideas, but finding synonyms to enrich their vocabulary was considered a writing obstacle.

### **Group 03**

For all the participants in Group 03 with good writing performances, lacking vocabulary when writing was not a major problem since they could diversify their vocabulary. However, the majority of them believed that although it was not a great challenge, they still emphasized the importance of expanding the vocabulary. Student C7 strongly agreed, "Expanding my vocabulary to add depth and precision to my writing is a constant goal." Only Student 6 admitted that sometimes he used some simple words to express similar meanings.

### *Spelling*

The interview from Group 1 revealed that the participants' poor spelling negatively impacted their writing performances. Most of them reported that they often forgot the spelling of many English words, even the basic ones. Consequently, this seriously affected their grades. Student A7 stated, "Spelling errors can be embarrassing, especially with common words that I should know." Another interviewee echoed this view: "It took me much time to recall the spelling of these common words, which partly led to the poor grade of my writing." The majority of participants agreed that they usually committed spelling errors while writing. When compared with Group 1, interviewees from both Group 02 and Group 03 rarely expressed their concerns about the problems of spelling errors that hindered their writing processes, especially Group 03 of students with good writing performance. Only a small number of the interviewees indicated that they had difficulties writing several new words' spellings. Student C2 from Group 03 said, "I am usually confused with the new or complicated words." Student B4 from Group 02 also stated, "The longer the words are, the more difficult for me to recall." Obviously, Group 02 and Group 03 participants found it difficult to write only complicated and long words.

### *Grammar*

Several interviewees from Group 01 reported that subject-verb agreement is their frequent grammatical. Specifically, Student A9 remarked, "I usually struggle with subject-verb agreement, particularly in longer and more complex sentences." They stated they were uncertain about choosing verbs that agree with some subjects like "everyone, every student, etc." Meanwhile, the Group 02 and Group 03 participants reported that they sometimes committed mistakes related to subject-verb agreement. These students with average and high levels of writing competencies explained that they were aware of how to conjugate the verb by the subject, but their mistakes were mainly because of their carelessness. Only a small number of the students indicated that they hardly made any mistakes in verb conjugations, but they emphasized consistent verb tenses in their writing. Student B2 admitted, "The inconsistent verb tenses make my writing ambiguous to the readers." This opinion was advocated by Student

C10, who stated, "This leads to confusion in my writing."

### *Punctuation*

For all of the participants, using punctuation is not a major challenge that causes poor grades when writing. However, a number of students from Group 1 revealed that they were confused about the functions of each punctuation and how to use them correctly in a sentence. Student A6 stated, "I am uncertain when using precise punctuations, so I usually use commas to break the sentences." They said they occasionally misused commas, leading to sentence structure issues. The other students from the same group reported the same problems. Further, they elaborated that they tend to use commas to separate sentences due to their Vietnamese (L1) interference. Consequently, Student B4 admitted, "The incorrect use of commas makes my sentences become ambiguous and unclear." Students with better writing performances (Group 02 and Group 03) could distinguish the use of punctuation like commas and periods.

### *Expressing Ideas*

Regarding the difficulties in expressing ideas, most of the students from Group 01 stated that they failed to express the ideas clearly and concisely in writing. They tried to use long sentences to fully convey their ideas but could not organize them logically. As a result, their writing was hard to understand, as Student A1 admitted, "My sentences are not well-organized, so I am unable to communicate effectively." Furthermore, most interviewees from Group 02 indicated that they face problems connecting sentences within a paragraph logically and consistently. Specifically, Student B7 revealed that "Conveying complex ideas in a clear, concise, and coherent manner is a common challenge for me." They also expressed that maintaining coherence when writing was a great challenge since they were confused about using transition words to link their ideas. For Group 03, the participants conveying complex ideas clearly, concisely, and logically is not a frequent challenge.

Nevertheless, most also expressed concerns about maintaining coherence when writing. Sometimes, they found connecting the ideas smoothly by using transition words and phrases quite challenging. Student C3 said, "To maintain the coherence, I did use some transition words, but the words were still simple and repeated." Most of them considered that the repeated use of some transition words and phrases also made the connection between sentences and the ideas' expression unnatural.

From the three focus-group interviews, it can be withdrawn that using vocabulary is the most significant challenge for all participants, even for students with good writing abilities. The limitation of vocabulary is a barrier that hinders the students from enhancing their writing competencies. Besides vocabulary, spelling is considered a major writing difficulty, especially for students with poor writing performances. It is obvious that students with better writing abilities experience fewer challenges in recalling how to spell out many common English words. They only encountered challenges when they had to write the spellings of some complex words. Moreover, grammar is one of the major difficulties that most students expressed concern about. While most of the students with low and average writing competencies admitted that the problems hindered them from writing a well-developed paragraph, all of the students with good writing performances did not consider it a problem when writing. The problems related to

punctuation are the least challenging for the students while writing. Several students are confused about the correct use of commas and periods, but no one considers it a significant writing challenge. In terms of the difficulty in expressing ideas, the majority of the students believed that conveying ideas in a logical and organized manner is a constant challenge. Specifically, students with good writing performances sometimes struggle with connecting ideas smoothly and naturally in a paragraph. Meanwhile, students with lower levels of writing skills usually face the problems of conveying complex ideas in a clear, concise, and coherent manner.

In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that while writing English, students are confronted with several challenges related to poor syntax, limited vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and expressing ideas (Aburass, 2015; Ahmadi & Reza, 2018; Klimova, 2010; Riadil et al., 2023). This study's findings align with Aburass' (2015) study, which found that writing challenges often stem from limited use of vocabulary for students. Furthermore, the finding is consistent with that of Klimova (2010), who asserted that university students frequently made sentence structure and word usage mistakes when writing. This is also in accordance with Tanasy and Nashruddin's (2020) study, which reported that students considered vocabulary and word choice to be significant difficulties, while punctuation was a lesser concern. However, this outcome is contrary to that of Riadil et al. (2023) who observed that despite these challenges, students had fewer issues with vocabulary.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides insight into some major challenges that English-majored freshmen usually encounter when writing paragraphs. The findings revealed that using vocabulary was considered the factor that makes students most confused when writing. Additionally, the student's English proficiency, the more challenges they encounter in using vocabulary. Meanwhile, the majority of students expressed little concern about using punctuation in writing processes. The findings also demonstrate that grammar-related factors also hindered the students' writing skill development.

However, this study focused only on first-year students who are majoring in English at a private university in Vietnam. Therefore, this study's results were impossible to generalize to other cases and students from different majors and universities. Despite its major strengths, the qualitative method also has some weaknesses. The data collected from interviews using the qualitative method is considered subjective and interpretive by Choy (2014). In other words, the researcher gathers, analyzes, and interprets the data. Therefore, this depends on the researcher's ability to interpret what the participants feel, see, or believe. Furthermore, in some cases, the same participant will provide different and contrastive interpretations of the same question. Another disadvantage of qualitative research lies in its generalization. Due to the small sample sizes, the study's findings cannot reflect the views or beliefs of the whole population (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

In spite of its limitations, this study will make some important contributions to the deep understanding of the writing challenges struggled by EFL students. Thus, identifying the major



writing challenges enables the teachers to explore effective teaching methods and classroom activities to facilitate the students' writing processes in the future.

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## Appendix A

### *Interview Questionnaire*

Dear Students,

The interviews are used as a constructive way to provide your opinions towards the challenges that you encounter when writing an English paragraph. Please take a moment and think through your responses to be as specific as possible so that the researcher can fully explore the students' problems and challenges in developing a good English paragraph.

Thank you for your participation and support!

Please note that the collected data was solely served the purpose of conducting this study.

The researcher ensures the participants' anonymity and the data confidentiality.

### *Interview questions*

1. According to you, what are your challenges that usually encounter when writing an English paragraph?
2. Does the problems that you mentioned affect your writing performance (grades, skill)?
3. Among the writing challenges that you reported (Vocabulary, Grammar, Expressing ideas, Punctuations), what are your significant writing challenges? Could you please specify more?

### **Biodata**

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