

FACTORS AFFECTING EFL LEARNERS' WRITING TASK 2 OF THE VSTEP

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Abstract: Academic writing is becoming an integral and required skill for EFL learners, especially when confronting written assignments, reports, and examination purposes. However, many Vietnamese students find it challenging to complete a writing task with success. The study investigated factors affecting EFL learners' writing performance in Task 2 of the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP). In this study, after writing a discussion essay, five participants were interviewed to figure out factors affecting their writing performance. The report also suggested implications for further research in teaching and learning essay writing.

Keywords: Academic writing, factors, VSTEP, writing performance

1. Introduction

Writing, especially academic writing, is one of the most essential skills for students. At the tertiary level, academic writing has long been regarded as the most challenging task in English learning for both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) undergraduates and graduates (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Bunton, 2005). In the process of writing, learners' writing performance might be affected by several factors. Al-Khairi (2013) revealed students' issues with grammatical mistakes, improper vocabulary selection, irregular verbs, inaccurate punctuation, and spelling. In the Vietnamese context, EFL learners also encounter many factors in academic writing. According to Dang *et al.* (2020), students struggled with linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, and coherence), the organization and creation of an argumentative essay, and critical thinking. Moreover, Phuong (2021) employed two questionnaires and an interview as the instruments to find out the factors influencing English majored sophomores' writing performance. The results indicated allotted time, background knowledge, idea organization, and mother tongue. Among these difficulties, "allotted time" was most problematic to the learners.

However, just a few studies have been conducted to investigate factors affecting EFL learners' writing performance, especially in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, this qualitative study was conducted to extensively discover the factors affecting EFL learners' writing performance in the VSTEP. To make that research aim realized, this study addressed one research question: "What are the factors affecting EFL learners' performance in writing task 2 of the VSTEP?"

2. Literature review

2.1. Definitions of writing

Writing is also a multi-step activity. Elbow (1973) demonstrates writing as a two step process. The first step is to determine the meaning, and the second is to translate that meaning into language. When learners begin to search for reasons to write and produce written sentences,

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they encounter challenges. Also, Rivers (1981) defines that “writing is conveying information or expression of original ideas consecutively in the new language” (p.294). Moreover, according to Brown (2001), writing is a cognitive process. He also mentioned that one might prepare the writing notion and make as many modifications before publishing.

2.2. Definitions of writing performance

Writing performance, according to Fernández and Gunashekar (2009), referred to learners' capacity to effectively transmit concepts into written words. To achieve good writing performance on an essay, a writer needs to meet the four elements, including task fulfillment, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. These factors must be presented in a five-paragraph essay. Oshima and Hogue (2006) proposed a three-part structure for an academic essay: an opening paragraph, a body paragraph, and a conclusion paragraph. The three sections were interrelated on a particular topic.

2.3. Assessing the VSTEP's writing performance

In this study, the four assessment criteria for a discussion essay were adopted from Nhat (2021) in A proposed revised version of the scoring rubrics of the VSTEP 3-5 levels). These fundamental criteria serve as the theoretical foundation for assessing the quality of EFL students' discussion writing in response to writing assessment tasks.

(1) Task fulfillment: Task fulfillment is the criterion for task 2 on whether candidates formulate an argument in response to the prompt in the task and the argument is supported by their knowledge, individual experiences, strong evidence, and concrete instances. Responses to statements or questions must be at least 250 words long.

(2) Organization is a criterion closely related to the clarity and fluency of the passage. Coherence is an important characteristic of an organization related to how each sentence and paragraph is logically linked. Coherence is concerned with adequately using cohesive devices (e.g., conjunctions, pronouns, synonym repetitions, conjunctions) to construct conceptual relationships and references between sentences and paragraphs.

(3) Vocabulary: Vocabulary criterion involves assessing the range of vocabulary used by the participants and the appropriateness of using the vocabulary in the context to respond to the given topic. Spelling is also evaluated in this criterion.

(4) Grammar: This criterion evaluates the range and accuracy of the participants' sentence-level grammatical usage, including the appropriate use of punctuation.

2.4. Factors Affecting EFL Learners' Writing Performance

When it comes to academic writing, a learner's academic writing performance can be hindered by several factors. Alfaki (2015) identified numerous factors influencing students' writing performance, which are listed below.

Lack of Practice

To master any skill in general, especially academic writing, learners need to practice what they have learned. According to Davies (1998), "Writing is basically a creative activity, and

successful writers must learn to express their ideas coherently to an invisible audience". Therefore, it takes writers a lot of practice to achieve their writing goals. In other words, the greatest approach to becoming a skilled writer is to write a lot. Furthermore, from Hedge's (1988) personal experience, a student has to spend a large amount of time writing to become an excellent writer. In addition, learning too many skills without allocating time for practice will make knowledge meaningless. And to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), writing is never instantaneous; rather, it requires effort and practice.

Lack of Learners' Motivation

One of the reasons for causing a lack of students' motivation is due to unfamiliar themes. As a result, students often become bored and have trouble writing. Students will be driven to write because they are interested in the subject, according to Davies (1998). Besides, allowing learners to pick their topic can boost their writing motivation (Silva, 1997). Furthermore, Byrne (1988) argues that most writers write less competently if they are forced to write about something they do not desire to write about.

Writing anxiety

Anxiety is the body's natural reaction to stress. According to Hamka (2016), anxiety was a complicated term influenced by not just one's sentiments or self-efficacy but also one's perceptions of possible and perceived risks. Anxiety significantly affects the learning process in general and writing skills in particular. Zhang (2001) and Hilleson (1996) claimed that students suffer significant anxiety when doing activities that demand productive skills. The origin of writing anxiety has long been a matter of concern by several scholars. Writing anxiety is caused by the intricacy of language and the difficulty of writing as a skill in particular (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000). As a result, learners who want to overcome this obstacle and succeed in writing should focus on self-expression, a fluid flow of ideas, fulfilling outer expectations, increasing confidence, and enjoying L2 academic writing (Baştürkmen & Lewis, 2002).

Lack of background knowledge

The term background knowledge can be explained in a variety of ways. Background knowledge is defined by Biemans and Simons (1996) as all knowledge learners have when they join a learning environment potentially relevant for gaining new knowledge. Another definition formulated by Brody (2001) is that "Background knowledge" relates to "concepts, experiences, facts, and text structures that are related to the text under study". In terms of academic writing, Knudson (1992) expresses his view that learners are expected to create an essay on a topic they are aware of. "A lack of background knowledge will lead to students making unsubstantiated statements that may or may not be logically related to the argument, warrant, or opposition," he added (p.176). From the previous definitions, it can be seen that background knowledge is an essential part of the quality of writing. Students who lack sufficient knowledge cannot convey their views or opinions on new topics or concerns and produce coherent essays.

2.5. Related studies

Numerous studies on factors affecting learners' writing performance have been conducted. Al Badi (2015) investigated academic writing difficulties and the factors that may cause these difficulties. The participants were 20 students of four nationalities studying at a university in Australia. The main factors were the lack of previous experience and knowledge about the conventions of academic writing and the expectations of the institution they were studying at.

Fanene (2021) investigated a study of the academic writing problems of New Zealand-born Samoan students in tertiary institutions. The instruments employed in the study were a written questionnaire, face-to-face interviews, and students' essay assignments. The findings indicated that the influence of variables such as low self-motivation and time management, poor reading skills, and a lack of knowledge and exposure to academic discourses were factors that the students at the tertiary level encountered in academic writing.

In the context of Vietnam, Quynh and Nguyen (2008) researched the challenges and practices of writing for Vietnamese students. The data collected from in-depth interviews revealed that the participants did not pay sufficient attention to grammar or spelling mistakes when writing essays.

Through these studies, it can be seen that academic writing is a massive challenge for students. Therefore, the current research will be expected to contribute to and enrich the factors affecting EFL learners' writing performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study was conducted and followed the descriptive design. The instrument used in the current study was semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to find out the factors affecting the participants' writing performance in writing Task 2 of the VSTEP.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this research were 5 English-majored sophomores majoring in English at a university in the Mekong Delta. All of them were in the same class, and their ages range from 19 to 20. Regarding gender, there were 3 female and 2 male students in the study. In terms of their English writing proficiency, all of them were at the Intermediate level based on the scores they gained after the two previous courses of sentence writing and paragraph writing. All the participants had learned how to write a discussion essay, so they were familiarized with this genre of writing. These five learners were chosen to take part in the semi-structured interviews to find out the factors affecting learners' writing performance in Task 2 of the VSTEP.

3.3. Data collection instruments and data analysis

Research instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used in the study to examine factors affecting learners' writing performance.

3.4. Data analysis

The data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed, using thematic analysis. The researcher first got familiar with the data by rereading it many times to look for key information and take initial notes. Next, the excerpts were coded by highlighting the text sections, which expressed the primary content for analysis. Then, the main themes and sub-themes were identified. Finally, the researcher interpreted and presented the data to find out the factors affecting learners' writing performance.

4. Results and discussion

The results from the semi-structured interviews indicated that the participants encountered several factors affecting their writing performance, including lack of background knowledge, lack of writing practice, writing anxiety, and lack of learners' motivation.

Lack of background knowledge

The lack of background knowledge was the most challenging factor for the interviewees. Kellogg (1987, p.256) believes that because knowledge is important in other tasks, it should also be a vital feature in writing. For discussion essays, learners need to understand social knowledge better, update current news to enrich the logic, and convince readers.

Khang (PV2) stated his point of view about the importance of background knowledge as follows.

I have a problem with my lack of background knowledge. That's why I frequently struggle and have trouble writing a short paragraph regarding the VSTEP format.

Similarly, Thinh (PV3) expressed how essential background knowledge plays in essay writing.

In my opinion, the lack of background knowledge is an important factor that affects how we will write the essay and we will not know how to arrange it appropriately and accurately.

Y (PV5) also viewed background knowledge as an essential factor affecting her writing performance.

I think the most important factor is background knowledge. Lack of this component results in poor connections among ideas.

According to the presented excerpts, background knowledge is extremely vital in writing an essay. Without background knowledge, writers will be unable to convey ideas on a topic and produce unlinked arguments. For a better discussion essay, learners need to understand social knowledge better, update current news to enrich the logic, and convince readers.

Lack of writing practice

In addition, the lack of regular writing habits was considered a barrier to improving essay quality. Not maintaining the habit of writing on a regular basis confuses the writer when asked to write an essay.

Thinh shared his views as follows.

As for myself, I don't have the habit of reading and writing, so when I start to write something, I don't know how to organize my ideas and refine my sentences so that they are good and appropriate, especially when asked.

An also stated the lack of writing practice as one of her most challenging when writing a discussion essay.

In my opinion, not having much practice is the biggest influence that I have when writing a discussion paper because when we practice a lot, our writing ability will improve and teachers will point out mistakes so that I can correct them for the next lesson even though I lack vocabulary.

Similarly, Vuong mentioned the reason why she encountered the factor.

In my opinion, the lack of practice is the biggest influence on the problems that I face when writing a discussion essay.

As can be seen in the excerpts, lack of writing practice causes many troubles and affects learners' writing performance. Lack of regular exposure to writing makes it difficult for learners to form correct and contextualized sentences in their essays. Therefore, the ability to write will be constrained.

Writing anxiety

One of the factors mentioned in interviews is the fear of making mistakes. Erkan and Saban (2011) describe anxiety in writing as "a person's tendency to avoid the process of writing-particularly when it is to be assessed in some way" (p.181). When students have an idea in mind, they do not dare to express it for fear of judgment, criticism from others, or fear of low scores. They often have the habit of carefully checking for grammar points after writing a sentence.

Y stated her view as follows.

Being afraid of making grammatical mistakes, so when I wrote, I had to think for a long time... not knowing what to use correctly.

Khang also encountered anxiety in writing in English, as demonstrated in his sharing below.

For me, the biggest problem is that I'm afraid to write in English because I don't have many ideas and don't know how to write them well. I find essay writing much more difficult with speaking skills because sentences have to be academic and coherent with one another. In addition, my vocabulary and grammar are also limited, so every time I face a writing test, I feel a bit more stressed than other students in the class.

Anxiety is regarded as one of the affective elements that have a significant impact on EFL writing. The main causes of this fear are often related to low self-esteem in grammar and vocabulary, as well as strict academic and coherence requirements.

Lack of motivation

The last factor affecting learners' writing performance is the lack of motivation. One of the manifestations of this problem is writing only when required or for exam purposes.

An expressed her opinion on motivation when writing essays.

I lack motivation because normally I focus a lot on listening and speaking until I have exam pressure to practice writing.

Khang shared his point of view on how the factor could be solved as follows.

To overcome this problem, I think I should find my own passion and interest to be able to learn this language well in the future.

Lack of motivation to write has a negative effect on learners' writing performance. Motivation can be generated when pressure approaches from writing tests or exams. To overcome this factor, learners need to find for themselves a passion for regular practice.

5. Conclusions

This study was conducted to find the factors affecting EFL learners' writing performance in Task 2 according to the VSTEP framework. Firstly, the lack of background knowledge poses a massive challenge to the participants in academic writing. In fact, without a solid foundation of background knowledge, students will encounter a variety of problems in expressing their thoughts, developing ideas, and organizing paragraphs appropriately. The second factor that hinders learners' academic writing is the lack of practice. To make a well-written text, learners need the opportunity to practice writing skills both in class and at home. Thirdly, the fear of writing also has a negative effect on essay quality. Making mistakes makes learners shy when it comes to academic writing. This factor adversely affects and gradually reduces the confidence of the writer. The last factor discussed concerns the lack of motivation of the learners. If no pressure from exams is approaching, learners will be demotivated to maintain the habit of academic writing

To make the results more generalizable, further studies should be conducted with a larger sample including students of different disciplines across cohorts of students. The obtained results will then be more convincing. Moreover, in future research, more research instruments such as observations should be used in writing skills classes to understand deeply and have a broader view of the factors that hinder learners' writing performance.

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CÁC YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN KẾT QUẢ BÀI VIẾT PHẦN 2 TRONG ĐỊNH DẠNG BÀI THI VSTEP CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH

Tóm tắt: Viết học thuật đang trở thành một kỹ năng không thể thiếu cho người học tiếng Anh như là một ngoại ngữ, đặc biệt là khi đối mặt với các bài tập viết, các báo cáo và mục đích kiểm tra. Tuy nhiên, nhiều sinh viên Việt Nam cảm thấy khó khăn trong việc hoàn thành bài viết thành công. Nghiên cứu đã điều tra các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến kết quả viết của người học EFL trong Phần 2 của Bài kiểm tra chuẩn hóa tiếng Anh dành cho Việt Nam (VSTEP). Trong nghiên cứu này, sau khi viết một bài luận thảo luận, năm người tham gia đã được phỏng vấn để tìm ra các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến hiệu suất viết của họ. Báo cáo cũng đưa ra một số đề xuất cho những nghiên cứu sau này về dạy và học viết luận.

Từ khóa: Viết học thuật, các yếu tố, VSTEP, hiệu suất viết