

## STUDENTS' LEARNING NEEDS FOR ENGLISH PARAGRAPH WRITING

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	13/6/2022	This research aims to discover students' learning needs for English paragraph writing; a compulsory subject taught in the first semester of the school programs for English majors in a high-quality program at the English Department, School of Foreign Languages. In order to achieve the results, the authors surveyed by asking 36 first-year English majors in the high-quality program to answer a questionnaire about their learning needs for this subject. The questionnaire survey was implemented online on an application called Google forms. It could be seen from the results that although most of the respondents experienced learning how to write an English paragraph, nearly all of them encountered difficulties in learning this subject. In addition, lacking vocabulary and problems using proper sentence structures are two obstacles preventing them from writing English paragraphs smoothly. These are highlighting features that the authors and materials designers should consider when designing teaching and learning materials for them.
Revised:	30/6/2022	
Published:	30/6/2022	
KEYWORDS		
Paragraph writing		
Obligatory		
English majors		
High quality program		
Learning materials		

## NHU CẦU HỌC TẬP CỦA SINH VIÊN ĐỐI VỚI MÔN VIẾT ĐOẠN VĂN TRONG TIẾNG ANH

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	13/6/2022	Mục đích của nghiên cứu này là để tìm hiểu nhu cầu học tập của sinh viên đối với môn viết đoạn văn tiếng Anh - một môn học bắt buộc dành cho sinh viên năm nhất trong chương trình đào tạo cử nhân Ngôn ngữ Anh chất lượng cao của khoa tiếng Anh, Trường Ngoại ngữ. Để đạt được kết quả nghiên cứu, các tác giả đã tiến hành một cuộc khảo sát đến 36 sinh viên năm nhất, chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh chất lượng cao. Những sinh viên này được yêu cầu trả lời một bộ câu hỏi về nhu cầu học tập của họ về môn học này. Bảng khảo sát được tiến hành trực tuyến thông qua ứng dụng Google forms. Kết quả khảo sát cho thấy, mặc dù hầu hết tất cả sinh viên đã từng học viết đoạn văn tiếng Anh trước đây, họ đều gặp khó khăn khi viết thể loại này. Thêm vào đó, hai trở ngại lớn nhất mà sinh viên thường gặp phải khi viết đoạn văn tiếng Anh là việc thiếu từ vựng và thiếu kỹ năng sử dụng các cấu trúc câu phù hợp. Đây là những kết quả quan trọng giúp các tác giả, đồng thời là người thiết kế tài liệu giảng dạy, có những cân nhắc đúng đắn khi thiết kế tài liệu giảng dạy cho môn này.
Ngày hoàn thiện:	30/6/2022	
Ngày đăng:	30/6/2022	
TỪ KHÓA		
Viết đoạn văn		
Bắt buộc		
Sinh viên tiếng Anh		
Chương trình chất lượng cao		
Tài liệu học tập		

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34238/tnu-jst.6150>\* Corresponding author. Email: [hoangtrang.sfl@tnu.edu.vn](mailto:hoangtrang.sfl@tnu.edu.vn)

## 1. Introduction

Writing is one of the language skills, while in doing it, the students need to gather the ideas and then put them in the form of written words. By performing writing, the students deliver their thoughts and show their language ability [1]. Meanwhile, a paragraph, by definition, is a group of closely related sentences that develop one single idea. It is considered a basic unit for any type of writing; However, some students said that they had never been taught to write well before entering college, so they found it difficult to express their ideas in written forms [2]. Therefore, the researchers felt the need to survey students' learning needs for paragraph writing. The results of the survey help provide concrete information about what students would like to learn as well as problems they might cope with when learning this subject. As a result, the researcher, as well as the material designers, could compose good teaching and learning materials for students.

Various authors have discussed the different meanings of needs. As stated by West [3], need analysis or identifying students' needs, is a crucial initial step in developing an appropriate learning model. Furthermore, need analysis means a plan for gathering information to make decisions about priorities [4]. Need analysis is perceived as the most appropriate method as it can tell a lot about the nature and content of students' target language needs [5]. It can establish key learning outcomes and requirements in the design and delivery of a course or learning activity [6].

### *Learning needs*

According to Hutchinson and Waters [7], it is always inadequate to base a course design simply on the target objectives; however the needs, potential, and constraints (learning situation) of the route must also be considered. Learning needs concern the route between the starting point (lacks) and the destination (necessities). For example, learners may be significantly motivated in the subject or work but may completely lose interest because of the long, dull, and old teaching material. The concept of "learning needs" put forward by Hutchinson & Waters and their analysis of "learning needs" have been proved to be fairly valuable for practice. Course designers need to analyze the learners' learning needs according to their motivation, the conditions of the learning situation, and their existing knowledge and skills [8].

Besides, product-oriented needs and process-oriented needs are the counterparts of target needs and learning needs respectively put forward by Hutchinson & Water, in which the former emphasizes the requirement in learning in the target situation and is situation-specified and result-oriented; at the same time, the latter attaches more importance to the whole process [7].

The model of needs analysis applied in the present study was suggested by Hutchinson and Waters, who offer two concepts of needs: "target needs" and "learning needs" [7]. Target needs refer to the learners' "necessities," "lacks," and "wants" for functioning effectively in the target situation. Necessities are determined by the requirement of the target situation, in which the learner must master the language for the purposes of practical function. Learners' lack comes from comparing the target proficiency and the existing proficiency, which will help the language learning institution decide whether or not (or to what extent) the instruction should be given to learners. Wants are learners' subjective needs, which have no direct relationship with the objective needs perceived by the teachers and course designers. Learning needs, however, are how learners learn the language. According to Hutchinson and Waters, it is always inadequate to base a course design simply on the target objectives, just as it is not enough to think that a journey can be planned solely in terms of the starting point and the destination [7]. The needs, potential, and constraints (learning situation) of the route must also be taken into account.

In reference to material and task development, Nunan [9] defines task as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language. There are six components of task: goals - general intentions behind any learning task providing a link between the task and the broader curriculum; input - the spoken, written and visual data that learners work with in the course of completing a task; procedures in which

learners will actually do with the input that forms the point of departure for the learning task; teacher and learner roles - the parts that teachers and students are expected to play in carrying out learning tasks as well as the social and interpersonal relationships between the participants; and setting - the classroom arrangements specified or implied in the task.

This research aimed to design English paragraph writing materials for English students in the high-quality program at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. Primarily, it aimed to address the following research question: What are the students' needs for English paragraph writing?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

The present study was conducted to investigate the students' needs as a base for designing English paragraph writing materials for English students in the high-quality program. The participants of the study consisted of 36 first-year English students in the high-quality program at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. Concerning its research aim and question, this research employed a quantitative approach in which quantitative data from the need analysis questionnaire was collected before this subject was taught. In terms of data analysis, data from the questionnaire was analyzed through the Google Forms application for descriptive statistics.

### 2.2. Participants

The participants were 36 first-year students, including 6 boys and 30 girls. They were in their second semester of the school year 2020-2021 at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, and their English proficiency was supposed to be at the intermediate level (B1). They were asked to do a questionnaire about their learning needs for English paragraph writing. All the participants have 30 periods in total for each subject, with two periods of 90 minutes weekly in class.

### 2.3. Data Collection Instrument

In the current study, a questionnaire and an interview were employed to gather information about students' backgrounds, target needs, and learning needs.

A needs analysis questionnaire adapted from Hutchinson and Waters [7], and Nunan [9] was utilized as a major instrument to gather data. The questionnaire was designed to ask about students' learning needs for English paragraph writing. The questionnaire was comprised of 7 questions asking about students' target needs and learning needs for the subject.

## 3. Findings and discussion

### 3.1. Target Needs

#### 3.1.1. Necessities

As seen in Table 1, 66.6% of the students agreed, and 22.2% strongly agreed that they needed materials to gain a deeper insight into concepts related to English paragraph writing. Also, 66.6% agreed, plus 25% strongly agreed that these materials were of necessity to improve their writing skills so that they could communicate effectively in the target situation.

**Table 1.** Students' demands for learning English paragraph

No	Questions	Scales (%)			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Q1</b>	<b><i>The materials for English paragraph writing should</i></b>				
Q1.1	help me to attain an understanding about the concepts related to a paragraph (e.g., definition, structure, or organization)	0	11.1	66.6	22.2
Q1.2	help me to better my writing skills so that I can communicate in English successfully	0	8.5	66.6	25

### 3.1.2. Lacks

Nearly 90% of the students agreed that materials for learning English paragraph writing were unavailable to the learners; therefore, they were unable to practice writing well. Specifically, 44.4% of the students showed strong agreement, and 41.6% showed their agreement on the unavailability of the coursebook which was considered necessary for them (58.3% agree, plus 25.5% strongly agree).

**Table 2.** *The materials for learning English paragraph writing*

No	Questions	Scales (%)			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Q2</b>	<b><i>The materials for English paragraph writing are</i></b>				
Q2.1	unavailable for me; therefore, I am unable to learn how to write a paragraph effectively	0	13.8	41.6	44.4
Q2.2	necessarily developed for the first-year students like me	2.9	13.8	58.3	25.5

In reference to the difficulties in learning English paragraph writing, a vast majority of the students who participated in the research responded that they had encountered many difficulties in writing paragraphs. Table 3 shows the specific problems students encountered while performing the tasks, and the majority of students reported having problems with lexical resources and grammar. 77.7% agreed and strongly agreed to being unable to use correct words, which led to difficulties in writing word definitions (66.6%) and expressing ideas clearly (61%); moreover, 61.1% of students agreed and strongly agreed that they had trouble using proper sentence structures, so they were unable to write sentences quickly (80.4%). However, 58.3% stated that they could finish in-class writing tasks on time. Also, paragraph coherence and cohesion are challenging as a majority of the students considered organizing ideas (91.6%) and linking ideas (58.3%) complex tasks that they faced. In addition, around 63.8% of students also responded that supporting ideas with details and examples was challenging for them. However, the writing topics were reported to be attractive among 61.1% of students, so the topics were not their concern.

**Table 3.** *Students' difficulties in learning English paragraph*

No	Questions	Scales (%)			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Q3.</b>	<b><i>Difficulties I have encountered when writing a paragraph is that</i></b>				
Q3.1	I cannot use the correct vocabulary when I write	0	22.2	66.6	11.1
Q3.2	I cannot organize information in a paragraph	0	8.5	41.6	50
Q3.3	I do not know what the reader expects when I write	22.2	25	50	2.8
Q3.4	I cannot write definitions of words easily	2.9	30.5	55.5	11.1
Q3.5	I cannot link ideas effectively	5.5	36.1	36.1	22.2
Q3.6	I cannot write sentences and paragraphs quickly	11.1	8.5	63.8	16.6
Q3.7	I do not finish my in-class writing assignments on time	58.3	27.7	13.8	0
Q3.8	I cannot describe my ideas clearly	11.1	27.7	47.2	13.8
Q3.9	I cannot support my ideas with clear details and examples	5.5	30.5	50	13.8
Q3.10	I am not interested in the topics I write about in class	61.1	19.4	19.4	0
Q3.11	I can not use grammatically correct sentences	2.9	36.1	50	11.1

### 3.1.3. Wants

Table 4 revealed that almost all of the students reached an agreement on their wants in materials for learning English paragraph writing. Over 90% of students wanted to be provided with writing materials so they could generate, organize and link ideas smoothly with proper sentence structures. Meanwhile, over half of the students agreed, and around 30% strongly agreed to improve lexical aspects in order to use appropriate vocabulary, and write a good introduction and conclusion. Additionally, 53% stated their agreement, and 36% stated their strong agreement on developing materials that could enable them to communicate successfully in real life.

**Table 4.** *Students' wants in learning English paragraph types*

No	Questions	Scales (%)			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Q4.</b>	<b><i>The materials for English paragraph writing that I want should make me be able to</i></b>				
Q4.1	generate ideas well	5.5	2.9	69.4	22.2
Q4.2	organize ideas logically	5.5	8.5	53	33
Q4.3	write a proper conclusion sentence	8.5	5.5	61	25
Q4.4	write an interesting introductory sentence	5.5	13.8	53	27.7
Q4.5	link ideas smoothly	5.5	2.9	63.8	27.7
Q4.6	use appropriate vocabulary	8.5	2.9	53	36
Q4.7	use proper sentence structures	5.5	2.9	55.5	36
Q4.8	communicate successfully in real situations.	5.5	5.5	53	36

### 3.2. Learning Needs

#### 3.2.1. Inputs

According to table 5, theories of paragraph writing were agreed upon by a majority of the students (69.4%), followed by some reviews of complex vocabulary, which made up 63.8%, and the others being around 55%. Moreover, 33.3% of the students strongly agreed that tasks with examples were necessary, and a third of the students showed strong agreement on additional tasks relevant to the theories of paragraph writing. Around 13% to 19% of students strongly agreed that they wanted to be provided theories and vocabulary in order to perform the tasks.

**Table 5.** *Students' preference on kinds of input for paragraph writing materials*

No	Questions	Scales (%)			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Q5.</b>	<b><i>Kinds of inputs for English paragraph writing practice that I want are</i></b>				
Q5.1	some of the theories of paragraph writing	8.5	8.5	69.4	13.8
Q5.2	tasks that are relevant to the theories of paragraph writing	5.5	8.5	58.3	27.7
Q5.3	tasks with an example provided.	5.5	5.5	55.5	33.3
Q5.4	tasks with glossary provided (difficult vocabulary on the texts)	8.5	8.5	63.8	19.4

As indicated in Table 6, almost all the students wanted a wide range of proposed tasks for their paragraph writing materials. Around 70% up to 90% of the students agreed that all tasks should be included in the book for their learning.

**Table 6.** *Students' preference on kinds of tasks for English paragraph writing*

No	Questions	Scales (%)			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Q6.</b>	<b><i>Kinds of enrichment tasks that I want are</i></b>				
Q6.1	Categorizing	5.5	11.1	72.2	11.1
Q6.2	Identifications and descriptions	5.5	11.1	69.4	13.8
Q6.3	Multiple choice questions	5.5	25	52.7	16.6
Q6.4	True / False	5.5	13.8	63.8	16.6
Q6.5	Matching	2.9	11.1	69.4	16.6
Q6.6	Gap-fill	5.5	5.5	66.6	22.2
Q6.7	Short answer questions	5.5	16.6	58.3	19.4
Q6.8	Free writing	5.5	5.5	58.3	30.5
Q6.9	Brainstorming	11.1	11.1	47.2	30.5

#### 3.2.2. Students' roles

In terms of the students' role, 83.2% of them claimed that they preferred to discuss and be actively involved in an investigation to solve problems and do the tasks (Table 7). Moreover, more than two-thirds of the students preferred to use their creativity in doing the tasks and propose their questions and opinions. Around half of the students want to do tasks individually.

**Table 7.** *Students' view on roles they expect to play*

No	Questions	Scales (%)			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Q7. In the enrichment tasks, I prefer to</b>					
Q7.1	discuss and actively involved in the tasks/activities to solve problems and do the tasks.	8.5	8.5	63.8	19.4
Q7.2	individually investigate and do the tasks.	13.8	27.7	38.8	19.4
Q7.3	use my creativity in doing the tasks.	5.5	16.6	55.5	22.2
Q7.4	propose my questions and opinions.	8.5	16.6	50	25

### 3.2.3. Teachers' roles

Regarding the teacher's roles, Table 8 shows that over 90% of the students agreed and strongly agreed on the teachers' roles before, during and after writing, except for Question item 8.2 (monitor every step of finishing the tasks), which were disagreed by nearly half of the students.

**Table 8.** *Students' view on roles they expect the teacher to play*

No	Questions	Scales (%)			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Q8. In the enrichment tasks/activities, I prefer the teacher to</b>					
Q8.1	facilitate and help you in the process of doing/finishing the tasks.	5.5	2.9	58.3	33.3
Q8.2	monitor every step of finishing the tasks.	41.6	41.6	8.5	8.5
Q8.3	give advice, correction, and comments in the result of your work.	0	8.5	55.5	36.1
Q8.4	give examples before you do the tasks.	5.5	2.9	58.3	33.3

In summary, the findings of the needs analysis questionnaire revealed that the students needed material for gaining a deeper insight into the concepts concerning English paragraph writing and enhancing their writing skills as they found this subject rather challenging for their acquisition and retention. Regarding the material inputs, they wanted some theoretical reviews, a variety of task types with examples, and a glossary covered in the book. Moreover, they preferred to use their creativity in doing the tasks, individually investigate and do the tasks and propose their questions and opinions. Besides, they needed to be facilitated and helped in the process of doing/finishing the tasks and to be given advice, correction, and comments in the result of their work.

## 4. Conclusion and discussion

The primary significance of this research was to investigate the need analysis as a base to design a coursebook of paragraph writing for the first-year students in the high-quality program at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. Through this material, it is expected that the students can consolidate their knowledge of paragraph writing, enrich their writing skills outside the classroom and be autonomous learners.

The research was started by conducting the needs analysis survey in 2022. In the needs analysis process, there were 36 students in the high-quality program at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. The students were given a needs analysis questionnaire covering the target and learning needs. For the questionnaire, the items were developed following the principle of target analysis proposed by Hutchinson and Waters [7] and the task components proposed by Nunan [9].

According to Hutchinson and Waters [7], there are three critical aspects of target needs: necessities, lacks and wants. The results of the target needs were considered as the basis for developing the course contents for students' in-class learning purposes. Meanwhile, according to Nunan [9], the learning needs cover some aspects, such as input, learner role and teacher role. Inputs refer to any data that learners work with within the process of completing a task. The data might be spoken, written or visually presented. In reference to the inputs, the analysis showed that the required inputs were some theoretical reviews, a variety of task types, and a word list

covered in the coursebook. Therefore, in the developed material, these inputs were presented with a glossary at the book's end. For the learner and teacher roles, the analysis indicated that the students preferred their creativity in doing the tasks, individually investigated and proposed their questions and opinions. Besides, they needed to be facilitated and helped in the process of doing/finishing the tasks and to be given advice, correction, and comments in the result of their work. Finally, all the students needed their teacher to provide examples before doing the tasks.

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