

CHALLENGES AND SOME SOLUTIONS OF VSTEP WRITING TEST FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS

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Abstract: *Passing the VSTEP exam is a compulsory requirement for non-English major students at universities in Vietnam to be eligible for graduation. However, many students encounter significant challenges in the writing section of the VSTEP test. This study was conducted to investigate the specific difficulties that non-English major students face in the VSTEP writing test, uncover the root causes of these challenges, and suggest possible solutions to help them improve their performance. The research involved distributing questionnaires to 270 non-English major students from the Faculties of Information Technology, Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Economics, and Garment Technology and Fashion Design, along with interviews with five teachers from the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education (UTEHY). The results indicate that students struggle with writing self-study due to a lack of practice resources, difficulties in managing study time, and unfamiliarity with the test format. Based on these findings, several solutions have been recommended to assist students in passing the writing section more effectively, such as building a stronger vocabulary, practicing grammar skills, and maintaining a calm and confident mindset during the test.*

Keywords: *Non-English major students, VSTEP writing test, Hung Yen University of Technology and Education.*

I. Introduction

Writing is regarded as one of the most essential skills for effective communication and academic success. However, students often face many challenges in writing English, particularly in written exams. Most students, regardless of their

proficiency, experience stress and anxiety when tackling English writing tests. For non-English major students at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education (UTEHY), the writing test is especially challenging due to their limited English skills. In the past, these students took the

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B1 exam, but starting from the academic year 2022-2023, they are required to take the “Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency” (VSTEP), a 6-level competency framework specifically for Vietnam. This transition has added further difficulty, as the VSTEP writing test demands a clear structure, a wide range of vocabulary, and advanced grammatical skills, which many students struggle to meet. In the context of English language learning, final-year non-English major students at universities often face various challenges when preparing for the VSTEP writing test. Therefore, the project “An investigation into challenges and solutions of VSTEP writing test for non-English major students” is conducted to investigate students’ attitudes toward VSTEP writing tests, their common learning methods, as well as the difficulties they encounter. The project also suggests strategies to help students improve their writing abilities to adapt to VSTEP writing requirements. As a teacher in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, the researcher hopes that the findings of this project will provide valuable insights and recommendations on effective strategies for students and teachers to enhance writing skills in the English language.

II. Literature review

Writing skill is a critical component of English proficiency that poses unique challenges for students, especially within structured tests like the VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency). According to Nguyen Thuy Lan (2020), the implementation of VSTEP standards has significantly impacted English teaching and learning, bringing to light various obstacles students face in meeting the new requirements.

For non-English major students at institutions like Hung Yen University of Technology and Education (UTEHY), the VSTEP writing test is especially challenging due to their limited vocabulary, grammar, and familiarity with the exam format. Nguyen Thi Mai Huu (2021) analyzed the cognitive processes of candidates taking the VSTEP and found that the sequence of thought required during the test can vary according to each student’s English proficiency level, highlighting the complexities non-English majors face. The main barriers students encounter in the VSTEP writing test include anxiety over expressing ideas clearly, difficulty structuring essays, and a lack of diverse vocabulary.

As Akbari (2016) suggested, inadequate vocabulary, limited grammar knowledge, and insufficient exposure to structured English writing hinder students from achieving higher scores. In addition, students often lack the appropriate learning strategies to prepare effectively for the VSTEP test. These limitations are exacerbated by limited practice opportunities and the absence of tailored support that fosters confidence in their writing abilities.

Sokip (2020) emphasized the role of educators, curriculum design, and teaching materials in supporting language development. Teachers who adopt a supportive and encouraging role in the classroom can greatly impact students’ learning outcomes. For writing, a dynamic approach involving practical exercises, structured feedback, and targeted vocabulary development can assist students in building the necessary skills for the VSTEP test.

In conclusion, students face various challenges in the VSTEP writing test due to

limited vocabulary, grammar knowledge, and exam-specific preparation. Research on the difficulties in the VSTEP writing section remains limited, highlighting the need for further study. This research aims to examine these challenges more closely, identify their causes, and propose strategies to improve students' performance in the VSTEP writing test. Participants in this study include fourth-year non-English majors from the Faculty of Information Technology, Faculty of Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Economics, and Faculty of Garment Technology and Fashion Design. The study also includes experienced teachers from the Faculty of Foreign Languages, who provide insights into effective teaching strategies for improving writing skills in non-English majors.

III. Research methods

Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the study about the VSTEP writing test sought to address the difficulties university students have in this important measure of English proficiency. Its purpose was to roughly map and then clarify these headaches by proposing some remedies that may ultimately enliven life on campus.

The qualitative approach, drawing on interviews and open questions, went deep into students' experiences about the psychological and cognitive aspects that their students have to deal with. This understanding is of great significance in recognizing where students struggle. Accordingly, the quantitative aspect used numbers to classify and enumerate the difficulties faced by students. It provided strong evidence for research purposes. The combination of both approaches

gives an overall picture that reveals the issues in the VSTEP writing test. The survey was divided into three parts. Part I concentrated on the problems (questions 1-3). Part II traced causes (question 4). Part III discussed possible answers (questions 5, 6). This structured inquiry tried to capture a wide range of difficulties, from structural problems to external pressures. The third data collection instrument was the interview. Three teachers were chosen to answer the interview questions. Through these interviews, the author aims to delve into the individual perspectives, strategies, challenges, and recommendations that can significantly enrich our understanding of the VSTEP writing test.

Finally, the author employed data analysis techniques to process both the questionnaire and interview data, aiming to yield the most precise results for this research.

IV. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Results on Students' Evaluation of the VSTEP writing test

Results of students' evaluation of the VSTEP writing test are summarized and presented in Chart 1.

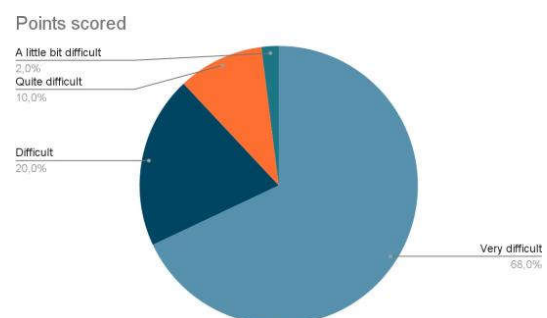


Chart 1. Students' evaluation of the difficulty of the VSTEP writing test

As shown in Chart 1, 68% of students believed that the VSTEP writing test

was very challenging. Additionally, 20% agreed that the test was difficult, while 10% considered it somewhat difficult. Only 2% of the students indicated that the VSTEP writing test was only slightly difficult and none of them reckon it is not difficult at all. This suggests that the VSTEP writing test is indeed a considerable challenge for students.

4.1.2. Results on students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test

When asked about difficulties in practicing writing independently, students' responses revealed key issues, summarized in the following table 1:

Table 1. Students' difficulties when practicing English independently

Students' Difficulties in Writing Practice	Number of students agreed	Percent
Confused about the test structure	210/270	77.78%
Lack of resources for writing practice	245/270	90.74%
Difficulty in self-correction	163/270	60.37%
Limited English-writing environment	198/270	73.33%
Trouble finding suitable materials	238/270	88.15%
Rarely practice writing alone	145/270	53.70%
Easily distracted during practice	95/270	35.19%
Poor time management for self-study	115/270	42.59%
Lack of motivation to practice writing	239/270	88.52%

According to table 1, it shows the main challenges that 270 students face while preparing for the VSTEP writing exam. The biggest issue, affecting 90.74% of students, is not having enough resources for writing practice. Close behind, 88.52% of students lack the motivation to practice writing on their own. Additionally, 88.15% of students struggle to find suitable materials for their level. Confusion about the test structure is a problem for 77.78%, and 73.33% report a limited English-

writing environment. Self-correction is difficult for 60.37% of students, and 53.70% say they rarely practice writing independently. Other challenges include being easily distracted (35.19%) and poor time management for self-study (42.59%). These results suggest that students face both internal and external obstacles in their writing practice.

In addition, students face specific difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test, as summarized below in table 2.

Table 2. Students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test

Students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test	Number of students agreed	Percent
Nervousness and anxiety during the test	270/270	100%
Lack of confidence in answering	270/270	100%
Limited vocabulary for expressing ideas	245/270	90.74%
Struggles with grammar	252/270	93.33%
Unfamiliarity with question contexts	215/270	79.63%
Difficulty organizing ideas coherently	212/270	78.52%
Frequent pauses and disjointed thoughts	207/270	76.67%
Poor analytical skills for interpreting prompts	225/270	83.33%

The table displays the main challenges faced by 270 students during the VSTEP writing test. All students (100%) reported feeling nervous and lacking confidence when answering questions. Additionally, 90.74% struggled with limited vocabulary for expressing ideas, and 93.33% had difficulties with grammar. A significant number of students (79.63%) were unfamiliar with the contexts of questions, which made it harder for them to respond effectively. Organizing ideas coherently was also a challenge, with 78.52% of students finding it difficult. Furthermore, 76.67% experienced frequent pauses and disjointed thoughts while writing, and 83.33% had poor analytical skills, making it challenging to interpret prompts accurately. These issues highlight a range of challenges, from language skills to test-taking confidence, that affect students' performance in the VSTEP writing test. Furthermore, based on the interview results, teachers identified several

common issues that students encountered during the writing test. Firstly, students often felt nervous and anxious, which affected their ability to organize and express their ideas confidently. Secondly, their vocabulary was limited, making it difficult for them to articulate their thoughts clearly and develop their ideas effectively. Additionally, many students lacked an understanding of the test format, which left them unsure of how to approach and respond to the prompts. These issues significantly hindered students' performance, preventing them from achieving good results on the writing test.

4.1.3. Results on the causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test

Through the survey, the authors determined that many reasons cause difficulties for students when taking the VSTEP writing test. These causes are summarized and shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test

The causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test	Number of students agreed	Percent
Lack of motivation to practice writing	220/270	81.48%
Insufficient writing resources	198/270	73.33%
Limited in-class practice opportunities	270/270	100%
No VSTEP-focused materials in coursebooks	270/270	100%
Limited class time for writing skills	233/270	86.30%
Lack of encouragement from teachers	195/270	72.22%

Table 3 outlines the main causes of students' difficulties in taking the VSTEP writing test. It reveals that a lack of motivation to practice writing is a significant issue, with 81.48% of students acknowledging this challenge. Insufficient writing resources affect 73.33% of students, making it difficult for them to find appropriate materials for practice. All students (100%) reported limited in-class practice opportunities and the absence

of VSTEP-focused materials in their coursebooks, showing a clear need for better preparation resources. Additionally, 86.30% of students indicated that limited class time for developing writing skills is a problem, while 72.22% mentioned a lack of encouragement from teachers. These factors highlight both personal and institutional challenges that hinder students' writing development, emphasizing the need for more structured support and resources.

4.1.4. Results on some solutions to help students do the VSTEP writing test better

The results of solutions to help students achieve higher scores in the VSTEP writing exam are described in detail in Tables 4 and 5 below:

Table 4. Students should do themselves to get better speaking results

Solutions for Students	Number of students agreed	Percent
Intensive study of vocabulary and grammar	270/270	100%
Daily writing practice with peers or individually	230/270	85.19%
Participation in writing-focused courses	195/270	72.22%
Joining English clubs or writing groups	150/270	55.56%
Thorough preparation for tests	270/270	100%

Table 5. Students' expectations for the teacher's support in the learning and revision process

Students' expectations of teachers	Number of students agreed	Percent
Clear explanations of the VSTEP writing format	270/270	100%
Detailed guidance on structuring answers	270/270	100%
Provision of practice topics	258/270	95.56%
Extra time for feedback on grammar and vocabulary	215/270	79.63%

Teachers' interview

To comprehensively understand the answer to the research question, the researchers conducted interviews with three teachers. The following is the presentation of the interview results.

First, regarding question 1, "What is your students' attitude toward learning and practising writing skills for the VSTEP test?", most teachers observed a positive attitude among their students toward developing writing skills. Teacher 1 stated, "...my students seem to recognize the significance of writing proficiency for their overall success on the VSTEP exam," while Teacher 2 mentioned, "...some students approach writing tasks with enthusiasm and a willingness to improve." Teacher 3 noted, "...my students generally view writing practice with a constructive mindset, understanding its role in their language proficiency."

The researchers also obtained valuable insights for question 2, "Do your students often find difficulties in

practising writing skills for VSTEP?". Teacher 1 explained, "Students often struggle with organising their ideas and ensuring coherence in their essays, which may stem from limited practice in formal writing contexts." Teacher 2 pointed out difficulties with expressing complex ideas concisely, adding, "Some students tend to write excessively or struggle with precision, highlighting the need for targeted practice in concise writing." Moreover, Teacher 3 noted, "Students frequently seek assistance from peers or engage in collaborative writing exercises, which helps them overcome these challenges by creating a supportive learning environment."

For question 3, "What are the common obstacles students face in developing and retaining effective writing skills?", Teacher 1 recommended "incorporating more real-world writing exercises, such as analysing articles and essays, to broaden their understanding of effective writing." She further suggested, "...providing regular practice through

structured activities like writing prompts, feedback sessions, and group discussions can significantly enhance their writing skills.” Teacher 2 emphasised the role of “interactive tools and resources like grammar apps and online writing platforms in making writing practice more engaging,” as well as the importance of “creating a positive learning atmosphere that encourages students to experiment with new writing techniques.” Teacher 3 added, “Providing additional resources, such as writing guides, reference materials, and recommended readings, offers students more avenues for skill enhancement. Implementing group-based writing tasks also facilitates shared learning experiences and knowledge exchange.”

For question 4, “How do you encourage students to actively participate in writing-focused activities both inside and outside the classroom?”, the researchers received constructive feedback from teachers. Teacher 1 explained, “In class, I integrate collaborative exercises where students practise writing in group settings, presentations, and interactive discussions. I also encourage students to practise writing outside class by maintaining a journal, reading English articles, and engaging in writing forums or clubs.” Teacher 2 shared, “I incorporate engaging activities like writing workshops, peer review sessions, and simulated VSTEP writing tasks. Additionally, I recommend resources like podcasts and articles that allow students to continue honing their skills beyond the classroom.” Teacher 3 highlighted the value of “collaborative learning through group projects and discussions that require students to apply their writing skills actively. Outside class, I encourage students to set

personal writing goals, maintain a writing portfolio, and participate in online writing communities.”

In general, each teacher emphasised the importance of fostering an environment that supports student engagement, incorporates interactive writing activities, and provides real-world applications for writing development. Recommendations for activities outside the classroom include leveraging technology, engaging with online writing communities, and maintaining consistent writing practice.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Students’ difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test

Based on the results of questionnaires and interviews, two main challenges that students face in the VSTEP writing test can be identified.

Firstly, students encountered issues during study and practice time before the test. They struggled with a lack of resources to practice writing, insufficient vocabulary, and limited general knowledge, which affected their ability to generate and develop ideas on a topic. Many students were uncertain about selecting appropriate resources for their writing level, and they did not have a supportive environment to improve their writing skills. Additionally, students found it hard to identify and correct their own mistakes, and many were easily distracted or had difficulty managing time for self-study. Most of them were unfamiliar with the VSTEP writing test structure because they had no prior experience or introduction to it. This lack of familiarity left many students feeling confused and unsure about the test requirements.

Secondly, students faced difficulties during the actual writing test. Almost

all of them reported feeling nervous and anxious upon beginning the exam. Some students felt overwhelmed and struggled to organize their thoughts clearly. Moreover, they lacked the necessary vocabulary and grammar skills to express their ideas effectively, making it challenging to develop and elaborate on their answers. These factors hindered their ability to perform well in the VSTEP writing test, as they could not fully showcase their writing abilities.

4.2.2. The causes of students' difficulties when taking the VSTEP writing test

Based on the questionnaire results and interviews, two main reasons were identified as the causes of students' difficulties in the VSTEP writing test.

The first reason is a subjective factor. Many non-English major students have a low level of English proficiency and often lack the motivation for self-study and improvement in writing skills. In writing classes, they fear making mistakes and are hesitant to practice their skills. Some students are easily distracted and do not focus on the lessons, choosing instead to do personal activities, which limits their progress in writing. They lack the habit of reading and researching topics, resulting in a lack of ideas and difficulty in developing content. Additionally, they often overlook practicing essential skills like vocabulary building and sentence structure, leading to a loss of confidence and increased anxiety during the test.

The second factor is an objective reason. Due to the large class sizes in non-specialized English courses, with around 35 to 40 students per class, teachers have limited time to address each student's writing challenges individually.

Across four years at the university, students typically receive only seven English credits, or about 105 periods in three semesters, which restricts the time available for focused writing practice. Furthermore, the course materials do not include VSTEP writing formats, so students are unfamiliar with the test structure. Some teachers prioritize vocabulary and grammar over writing practice and do not encourage students to actively practice their writing skills or correct their errors.

These factors create significant obstacles for students in achieving good results on the VSTEP writing test. To improve their performance, students need to overcome these challenges and commit to practicing consistently.

4.2.3. Some solutions help students improve their scores in the VSTEP writing test

Improving students' performance in the VSTEP writing test requires effort from both students and teachers. Students need to work diligently on expanding their vocabulary, refining their grammar, and practicing writing every day. Engaging in regular practice, whether individually or with peers, can help students feel more confident in their writing abilities. They should also consider joining writing-focused courses or English clubs to enhance their skills and gain more experience. Additionally, preparing thoroughly before the exam, including getting adequate rest, can help students remain calm and focused during the test, which is essential for achieving their best results.

Teachers play an essential role in supporting students as well. In the classroom, teachers should provide clear explanations of the VSTEP writing test

format and offer guidance on how to structure responses effectively. Giving students a variety of practice topics and dedicating time to provide feedback on grammar and vocabulary will further enhance their skills. Teachers can also encourage students to express their ideas freely, practice self-correction, and develop logical answers to build their confidence. With these strategies, students can overcome their writing challenges and feel more prepared and self-assured when taking the VSTEP writing test.

By studying hard and applying these methods, students will find the writing test more manageable and less daunting, helping them meet their language proficiency requirements for graduation.

V. Conclusion

My research topic, “Challenges and Solutions in the VSTEP writing test,” offers a fresh perspective by focusing specifically on the difficulties faced by candidates during the writing exam and proposing practical solutions to overcome these challenges. Unlike previous studies that primarily analyze assessment criteria or common errors, my study aims to identify specific issues such as time pressure, lack of writing skills, and difficulties in organizing ideas. Additionally, it will explore the psychological factors affecting students, such as anxiety and lack of confidence. By conducting surveys and interviews with test-takers, I will gather real-life data to inform my findings and suggest supportive programs, such as training sessions and online courses, to help candidates improve their performance. This approach not only enhances our understanding of the challenges in the VSTEP writing test but also provides valuable strategies for candidates to succeed.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to

the completion of this study, “Challenges and some solutions of VSTEP writing test for non-English majors at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education.

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THÁCH THỨC VÀ GIẢI PHÁP ĐỐI VỚI KỶ THI VIẾT CHUẨN ĐẦU RA VSTEP CHO SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH

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Tóm tắt: Việc vượt qua kỳ thi VSTEP là một yêu cầu bắt buộc đối với sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh tại các trường đại học ở Việt Nam để đủ điều kiện tốt nghiệp. Tuy nhiên, nhiều sinh viên gặp phải những thách thức đáng kể ở phần viết của bài thi theo định dạng VSTEP. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm điều tra các khó khăn cụ thể mà sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh phải đối mặt trong bài thi viết VSTEP, làm rõ nguyên nhân gốc rễ của những thách thức này và đề xuất các giải pháp khả thi để giúp họ cải thiện hiệu suất của mình. Nghiên cứu bao gồm việc phát bảng câu hỏi cho 270 sinh viên không chuyên Anh thuộc các Khoa Công nghệ Thông tin, Điện và Điện tử, Cơ khí, Kinh tế, và Công nghệ May và Thiết kế Thời trang, cùng với các cuộc phỏng vấn với năm giảng viên từ Khoa Ngoại ngữ tại Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ thuật Hưng Yên (UTEHY). Kết quả chỉ ra rằng sinh viên gặp khó khăn trong việc tự học viết do thiếu tài liệu luyện tập, khó khăn trong việc quản lý thời gian học và không quen với định dạng bài thi. Dựa trên những phát hiện này, một số giải pháp đã được đề xuất để hỗ trợ sinh viên vượt qua phần viết hiệu quả hơn, chẳng hạn như xây dựng vốn từ vựng mạnh hơn, luyện tập kỹ năng ngữ pháp, và duy trì tinh thần bình tĩnh, tự tin trong suốt kỳ thi.

Từ khóa: Sinh viên không chuyên ngữ, thi kỹ năng viết theo chuẩn VSTEP, Trường Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ thuật Hưng Yên.

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