

IMPROVING ESSAY WRITING FOR ENGLISH MAJORS THROUGH AN INTEGRATED INSTRUCTION

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Abstract: *The assessment of academic writing classes revealed that students' writing skills remained below the expected standard, demonstrating that essay writing remains a challenging skill for university students. This study explores the impact of integrating reading and writing, alongside the use of a reading checklist to assist students throughout the writing process. This research identified methods of reading that may enhance writing skills and formulated them into a reading checklist. Sixty English-majored seniors participated in the study and were divided into two groups that read texts with and without the checklist. Data were collected via a pretest and posttest of essay writing, along with an in-depth interview. The findings indicate that the integration of reading and writing yields beneficial outcomes, and that the checklist facilitates students in effectively combining these processes. The most notable findings are (1) significant improvements in the post-test result of the experimental group; (2) students' confidence in the checklist's ability to enhance their essay writing skills, and (3) a report on students' positive experience with the integration.*

Keywords: *Checklist, essay writing, reading and writing.*

I. Introduction

Every year, at Dong Nai Technology University, several seniors majoring in English prepare for a postgraduate program that considers the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test results as part of the acceptance criteria. The students are expected to achieve a high standard of band score across the four component skills: speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Among the four English skills, numerous students consider writing to be a complex and particularly challenging aspect of the IELTS test. The IELTS Writing test comprises two

tasks: writing task 1 and writing task 2. In writing task 1, test takers are required to describe, summarise, or explain the information presented in a graph, table, chart, or diagram. In writing task 2, candidates must present relevant opinions that address a point of view, argument, or problem in a formal manner (Cullen, 2017). Consequently, writing task 2 appears to be more demanding, and many individuals characterise it as a laborious endeavour.

Moses and Mohamad (2019) also identify challenges students face in academic writing. They appear to struggle with organizing their ideas

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effectively for essay writing due to insufficient lexical resources, ideas, and structural frameworks. Scholars globally acknowledge the significance of mastering academic writing skills, leading to extensive research on effective methods for enhancing students' writing abilities (Lin & Morrison, 2021).

Recently, the significance of reading comprehension in enhancing writing ability has been recognised. Reading and writing possess unique characteristics; however, they are interconnected. A recent meta-analysis of extensive literature indicates that students proficient in reading comprehension typically excel in written composition and vice versa (Kim, Wolters, & Lee, 2024). Integrated teaching of reading and writing, as opposed to separate instruction, yields synergistic effects that enhance both skills (Graham et al., 2017). Similarly, teaching in an integrated manner is crucial, as challenges in one area can impact others; thus, high-quality integrated instruction can mitigate reading and writing difficulties (Kim, 2022).

Nonetheless, proficient readers do not invariably evolve into proficient writers. In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, numerous learners become highly proficient readers while their writing skills do not progress to the same extent. Consequently, reading behaviour and the knowledge acquired from reading may vary based on the attributes of a particular reading assignment. Integrating and implementing these features in reading education may provide learners with essential input for their writing. This research develops a checklist designed to enhance reading strategies that may foster writing proficiency, and empirically examines the checklist's impact on learners' English writing skills and their attitudes.

II. Literature Review

2.1. *Essay writing*

Essay writing represents a distinct category within academic writing. An essay comprises an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the challenges students face in essay writing. A majority indicated that students frequently encounter difficulties with grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. Cohesion and coherence are also regarded as challenging aspects for students when writing in English. They frequently encounter challenges in linking sentences within a paragraph, and include excessive sentences in a paragraph, some of which do not support the main idea (Alisha et al., 2019).

Therefore, individuals preparing for the IELTS examination must understand the construction of ideas and paragraphs within an essay to better their writing skills. In the IELTS examination, the evaluations of candidates' performances are conducted in accordance with the established band descriptors which encompass four criteria: task achievement (TA), coherence and cohesion (CC), lexical resource (LR), and grammatical range and accuracy (GRA) (Cullen, 2017). Each criterion is articulated on a scale from 0 to 9, with each band representing specific competencies of the candidates. TA pertains to the manner in which examinees articulate pertinent viewpoints and provide examples, all adhering to the prescribed essay length of no less than 250 words, addressing the subject matter with substantiated arguments. CC evaluates the overall structure of the essay. To elaborate further, coherence pertains to the interrelation of ideas, whereas cohesion focusses on the candidates' proficiency in employing cohesive devices. It is essential to systematically arrange their

viewpoints into distinct paragraphs, each dedicated to a singular principal concept through detailed explanations and pertinent examples. Ultimately, LR and GRA encompass the variety, accuracy, and suitability in the application of vocabulary and grammatical structures (Cullen, 2017). Grasping the assessment criteria can significantly aid learners in their preparation for the test.

2.2. The Reading & Writing Connection

The intrinsic and intimate relationship between reading and writing has been recognized in language acquisition and application (Grabe & Zhang, 2016). In the pedagogical setting, Krashen (2012) asserted that writing proficiency derives not from writing practice but from reading. A reader will inherently acquire vocabulary and linguistic structures by reading, enabling them to utilize these elements in their writing; hence, engaging with reading materials prior to writing is intended to enhance the quality of written content. Kuehner and Hurley (2019) highlighted the advantages of combining reading and writing, suggesting that this integration may enhance students' critical thinking by prompting them to interrogate the author's intent throughout reading. Consequently, numerous educators utilize reading to improve students' writing skills. They devise multiple techniques to integrate the two skills, aiming to concurrently cultivate a proficient reader and a competent writer.

However, Weigle and Parker (2012) posed the question of how source texts might serve as input for writing. Students may struggle to generate and synthesize ideas from sources in their writing. They may possess insufficient academic writing skills and are unable to paraphrase the texts effectively. Saxon et al. (2016) noted that reading tasks are typically time-

intensive, resulting in time constraints that hinder knowledge absorption from reading materials. In this context, students may succumb to the pitfalls of time management. They appear to allocate the majority of their time to reading, leaving inadequate time for writing. Furthermore, students indicate that reading texts can influence their beliefs when a model is presented (Khaki et al., 2013). Cooney et al. (2018) also noted that students encountered difficulties in writing from sources due to a lack of comprehension of the source material. Therefore, principles are necessary for the implementation of integrated reading-writing instruction.

2.2.1. Evaluating Reading Data to Guide Effective Reading Instruction

Teachers should possess a thorough understanding of their students' strengths and weaknesses. Assessment data is essential for obtaining insights into individual student profiles (Wixon & Valencia, 2011). If a student consistently produces written compositions with inadequate organizational structure, lacking a clear beginning, middle, and end, it indicates that their composition skills may require targeted instruction on text structure. Furthermore, if a student consistently utilizes basic sentence types and structures and shows restricted vocabulary or a concentrated emphasis on oral language, he would significantly need to enhance his overall growth in both language use and composition.

2.2.2. Making Reading-Writing Connections Visible

To enhance the synergistic effect of integrated reading and writing instruction, it is essential to make reading-writing connections visible and explicit (Kim, 2022). However, numerous students fail to recognize the relationship between their reading comprehension and their writing skills. High-quality integrated teaching

explicitly facilitates the recognition of connections between reading and writing, promoting the transfer of knowledge acquired in reading to writing and vice versa. Students are instructed to identify text structures and key information to enhance comprehension, and subsequently apply this information in their written compositions.

2.3. The reading checklist

The primary function of the checklist is to facilitate the reading process for learners, enabling them to acquire knowledge about English writing through reading activities. Cumming et al. (2018) emphasize the significance of cognitive modelling. Cognitive modelling, as described by the researchers, entails illustrating and engaging in specific thinking processes, enabling learners to recognize and practice complex mental activities. The quality of cognitive processes that learners engage in during reading influences both their reading and writing abilities. As a result, the primary function of the checklist should be to assist in cognitive modelling (Kim & Park, 2019). The checklist should contain a limited number of straightforward questions and directions (see Appendix 1).

Furthermore, understanding the factors that influence students' reading attitudes in the context of foreign language reading is essential. In Vietnam, high school students typically engage in intensive reading of short texts, primarily aimed at passing examinations for university admission. This may result in a negative attitude towards reading in English (Quan, 2022). Learning a novel language extends beyond the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. The significance of studying culture in relation to language learning has been emphasized. Effective language acquisition occurs when learners attain a sufficient understanding of the culture associated

with the target language (Hayati, 2014). Cultural knowledge is thought to activate background knowledge and connect new information to prior knowledge, thereby enhancing comprehension and motivation. Therefore, teachers should realize the importance of adopting cultural factors in reading material so that students enhance comprehension and motivation.

The fundamental approach is clear: utilize reading as a resource to improve writing assignments. This study investigated the effectiveness of a checklist during reading to enhance the academic writing skills of English-major seniors who struggled with essay writing in IELTS writing task 2.

III. Research methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research was carried out during the first semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. Sixty undergraduate students were divided into two groups, each following a similar course outline for the Advanced Reading–Writing course in their fourth year at the university. One group will function as the experimental group (EG), while the other will act as the control group (CG). Students in the EG were assigned a reading task accompanied by a checklist, whereas students in the control group undertook a reading task without the checklist. Writing tasks were administered before and after the reading task, functioning as pre- and post-tests in this study. All students had become acquainted with essay writing in accordance with the IELTS writing band descriptor.

3.2. Data collection tools

Quantitative data were collected through a pre-test and a post-test to compare the differences in students' writing skills before and after treatment. The tests were identical, requiring participants to complete an IELTS Task

2 essay within 45 minutes. the tests were evaluated using a rating scale derived from the IELTS band descriptor. Both researchers evaluated the tests to ensure the validity of the results. Qualitative data were collected via a semi-structured interview conducted exclusively with the EG to explore the students' attitudes regarding the treatment. Three open-ended questions were employed to facilitate more comprehensive talks with the participants.

Question 1: how does the checklist affect your reading behavior?

Table 1. Frequency table of the two group's pre-test results

Band score	Frequency of the pre-test results	
	EG	CG
4.0	5	5
5.0	10	7
6.0	12	15
7.0	2	2
8.0	1	1
Total	30	30

The obtained data show that the pre-test scores for both the CG and EG range from 4.0 to 8.0, while the post-test scores range from 5.0 to 8.0 only for EG. For EG, no more students scored band 4.0 in the post-test; the number of students who scored 6.0 and 7.0 increased by 3 and there was one more student who scored 8.0. These results show a significant improvement in the students' writing competency. For CG,

Table 3. Paired samples t-test statistics of the pre-test and post-test results between the control and experimental groups

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	EG-Pretest	6.33	30	.959	.175
	CG-Pretest	6.23	30	.898	.164
Pair 2	EG-Posttest	7.93	30	1.799	.328
	CG-Posttest	6.83	30	1.577	.288

Question 2: how does the checklist affect your writing behavior?

Question 3: how does the checklist affect your writing performance?

IV. Findings and discussion

4.1. The effectiveness of using a reading checklist in enhancing students' English essay scores

The following tables show the frequency data of the two groups' pre-test and post-test results.

Table 2. Frequency table of the two group's post-test results

Band score	Frequency of the post-test results	
	EG	CG
4.0	0	3
5.0	8	8
6.0	15	15
7.0	5	3
8.0	2	1
Total	30	30

the minimum score observed was still 4.0 (3 students); the number of students who scored 5.0 and 7.0 increased by 1; and there was still only one student who scored 8.0. These results show a very slight change in the students' writing abilities.

The following three tables compare the pre-test and post-test results of the CG and EG using paired-sample T-test analysis.

Table 4. Paired samples t-test statistics of the pre-test and post-test results between the control and experimental groups

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	EG-Pretest & CG-Pretest	30	.387	.034
Pair 2	EG-Posttest & CG-Posttest	30	.798	<.001

Table 5. Paired samples t-test result of the pre-test and post-test results between the control and experimental groups

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	EG-Pretest & CG-Pretest	.100	1.029	.188	-.284	.484	.532	29	.599
Pair 2	EG-Posttest & CG-Posttest	1.100	1.094	.200	.692	1.508	5.508	29	<.001

Though the median pre-test scores for both groups were nearly the same (6.33 and 6.23), the difference in post-test scores was noticeable, with the EG earning 7.9 and the CG 6.8. When comparing the pre-test scores of the two groups in Table 5, the value of p (sig. (2-tailed)) was found to be $0.599 > 5\%$. It is possible to conclude that the use of a checklist as a writing-supported tool during reading significantly enhances learners' essay writing skills.

4.2. Semi-structured interview

Regarding question 1, the checklist appears to have enhanced the students' reading comprehension. All of the students reported that the questions and directions in the checklist enhanced their text comprehension. Eighteen participants indicated, "Thanks to the checklist, I learnt how to proceed with the reading task"; "Because the reading process was divided into separate stages, I understood the text better." Ten participants indicated that the checklist enhanced their comprehension by focusing their attention on specific information at each stage. Two participants credited their understanding to the focus on organization and the thesis statement.

All participants indicated that this method of reading differed from their typical reading practices. Twenty individuals indicated that they typically read a text only one or two times. Ten individuals reported that they had never engaged with a text in anticipation of discovering useful expressions for future writing.

Regarding question 2, prior to utilizing the checklist, the majority began by contemplating the introduction, followed by considerations of the thesis rationale, and finally, the conclusion of the paper. A comparison of the first and second writings indicates that students in the EG utilized the input from the reading text more effectively and seamlessly in their writing. In the case of the second writing task, 25 out of 30 students in EG reported that it had become easier due to the availability of more content, expressions, and a structured format to follow. All students utilized terminology and expressions from the reading material, with twenty-eight of them employing content information to formulate ideas. Some observed that the structure of the reading text was well-organized. Some identified English expressions in

the reading material that they intended to incorporate into their initial essay. Nonetheless, a few students experienced an overload of textual information, resulting in poorer performance in the subsequent writing task. Fifteen students indicated that engaging with the text prompted them to juxtapose their ideas with those presented, resulting in a shift in their perspectives on the issue. This is in line with Khaki et al. (2013) who mentioned that reading texts can influence students' beliefs when a model is presented.

Regarding question 3, the evaluation scores from the pre-test and post-test were compared across groups. EG exhibited superior performance compared to CG. To be specific, no students scored band 4.0 in the post-test; the number of students who scored 6.0 and 7.0 increased, and there was one more student who scored 8.0. All of the interviewees expressed a positive attitude towards the integrated instruction of reading and writing, especially the presence of the reading checklist.

The results of the experiment highlight the significance of integrating reading and writing. The majority of students indicated that utilizing a checklist to write their thoughts on the issue after reading facilitated idea generation and enhanced their attention to the structure and expressions within the reading material. Furthermore, the majority of students, regardless of their groups, demonstrated improved performance in the second writing task compared to the first. In summary, utilizing a checklist during reading appears to positively influence learners' subsequent writing processes and outcomes. The findings from Graham et al. (2017) and Kim (2022) support the notion that an integrated approach to teaching reading and writing yields synergistic effects, enhancing both skills and mitigating difficulties in reading and writing.

V. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the effectiveness of a reading checklist in enhancing the English essay writing abilities of students within a Vietnamese university setting. The results indicate that combining the instruction of both skills with a reading checklist can enhance students' essay-writing abilities. Nonetheless, this study presents several limitations: 1) The sample size is relatively limited, which must be taken into account when generalizing the findings; 2) The impacts of the checklist require assessment through a delayed post-test following adequate practice. A delayed post-test was not performed in this study; 3) the thoroughness of the examination regarding the validity of the choice in the checklist remains incomplete. Further investigations with various items are necessary to enhance the understanding of validity. This study, despite its various limitations, clearly illustrated the significant impact of linking reading and writing, as well as the positive effects of the checklist on learners' understanding of English writing.

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Appendix 1

Checklist for reading

Survey the title and headings before you read and consider the following.

1. What is the text about? Refer to your background knowledge about the subject.

1st reading: To discover the general framework, go through the text paragraph one by paragraph.

2. Where is the thesis statement in the introduction?

3. What information do you have in each paragraph?

4. Discover a topic sentence and supporting sentences in every paragraph

5. What is the conclusion?

2nd reading: Read the text carefully in order to understand the details.

6. Read the text phrase by phrase. Check your understanding after each phrase.

7. Check your understanding after each sentence.

3rd reading: Take your time and check the language form.

8. Find the key words to understand the text.

9. Find words that show the development of the text and relationships between sentences.

10. Check for the word choice.

11. Check how the words are combined with each other (collocation).

After reading: Identify the rhetorical context of the text and your own reading.

12. For what purpose do you think the author is writing the text?

NÂNG CAO NĂNG LỰC VIẾT TIỂU LUẬN TIẾNG ANH CHO SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH THÔNG QUA GIẢNG DẠY TÍCH HỢP

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Tóm tắt: Qua việc đánh giá các lớp viết học thuật cho thấy kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh của sinh viên vẫn còn yếu kém, điều này cho thấy rằng viết luận tiếng Anh vẫn là một kỹ năng phức tạp đối với sinh viên đại học. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu tác động của việc tích hợp kỹ năng đọc và viết, cùng với việc sử dụng danh sách các câu hỏi khi đọc để hỗ trợ sinh viên trong suốt quá trình đọc viết. Nghiên cứu này đã xác định các phương pháp đọc có thể nâng cao được kỹ năng viết và vì vậy nên xây dựng chúng thành một danh sách. Sáu mươi sinh viên năm cuối chuyên ngành tiếng Anh đã tham gia nghiên cứu, được chia thành hai nhóm đối chứng và thử nghiệm. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua bài kiểm tra viết luận trước và sau khi áp dụng thực nghiệm, cùng với một cuộc phỏng vấn chuyên sâu. Các phát hiện chỉ ra rằng việc tích hợp kỹ năng đọc và viết mang lại kết quả có lợi cho người học và danh sách các câu hỏi khi đọc giúp sinh viên kết hợp hiệu quả quá trình này. Những phát hiện đáng chú ý nhất là (1) cải thiện đáng kể kết quả bài kiểm tra sau của nhóm thử nghiệm; (2) sinh viên tin tưởng vào việc áp dụng danh sách các câu hỏi khi đọc giúp nâng cao kỹ năng viết luận và (3) sinh viên trải nghiệm tích cực với sự tích hợp này.

Từ khóa: Danh sách các câu hỏi khi đọc, kỹ năng đọc viết, viết luận tiếng Anh.

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