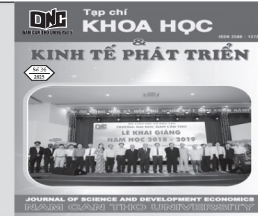




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Non-English Major Students' Perspectives on Difficulties in Paragraph Writing at Nam Can Tho University

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ABSTRACT

The advent of English has played an indispensable role in modern society, leading to the demand of developing four skills to meet the demand of the society. Amongst the four skills, writing is considered to be a challenging skill that require students in many aspects. Students find it hard to acquire this productive skill due to several factors. The research reports a descriptive study that explores non-English major students' perspectives on difficulties in paragraph writing at Nam Can Tho University. Data were collected from a 38-item questionnaire with 98 participants. The findings reported in the research provide insightful views into students' perspectives on difficulties they encounter when writing paragraphs.

TÓM TẮT

Tiếng Anh ra đời đóng vai trò không thể thiếu trong xã hội hiện đại, dẫn đến nhu cầu phát triển bốn kỹ năng để đáp ứng nhu cầu của xã hội. Trong bốn kỹ năng, viết được coi là một kỹ năng đầy thử thách đòi hỏi sinh viên ở nhiều khía cạnh. Sinh viên thấy khó có được kỹ năng hữu ích này do một số yếu tố. Nghiên cứu báo cáo một nghiên cứu mô tả khám phá quan điểm của sinh viên không chuyên ngành tiếng Anh về những khó khăn khi viết đoạn văn tại Đại học Nam Cần Thơ. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ một bảng câu hỏi gồm 38 mục với 98 người tham gia. Những phát hiện được báo cáo trong nghiên cứu cung cấp góc nhìn sâu sắc về quan điểm của sinh viên về những khó khăn mà họ gặp phải khi viết đoạn văn.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

In recent years, the advent of English as a global language has played an indispensable role in modern society as English is popularly used by both native speakers and non-native speakers (Hasman, 2004) [14]. In terms of education, English is believed to be a means to transfer knowledge meaningfully (Mahboob, 2014) [21]. In other words, English is spoken by people of all ethnic backgrounds and is recognized as one of the most widely used languages worldwide. The fast-paced development of English language use has necessitated competence in all of four aspects of language including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Since writing is a productive skill that requires significant effort, composing something in a foreign language or a second language (L2) becomes an even more challenging task (Gass & Mackey, 2012) [13]. A number of students deal with challenges in writing because it requires students to organize ideas to form a well-planned product of writing (Braine & Yorozu, 1998) [6].

In Vietnam context, the National Foreign Languages Project (VNFLP) launched by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has highlighted the urgent need to improve the quality of language teaching and learning foreign languages, particularly English, in order to meet the demands of students at all levels of schooling (Ministry of Education and Training, 2008) [22]. However, in the context of language teaching in Vietnam, developing writing skills is particularly challenging due to various factors like grammatical structures, vocabulary, writing conventions, and technical mechanics. These

complexities make writing one of the most difficult skills to master (Nguyen, 2019) [23].

In terms of students, they are witnessed to have low or inadequate writing skills due to many factors. Several students find it challenging to construct a topic sentence, develop supporting ideas, or compose a concluding sentence within a paragraph (Tustiawati & Marantika, 2023) [29]. Some non-English major and EFL students at universities struggle when they give a writing product (Ly, Nguyen, Phan, Dinh, & Vinh, 2021) [20]. For instance, Ly and her colleagues emphasize that students get used to writing single sentences focusing on grammar aspects, therefore, they encounter problems when they combine sentences to make a paragraph. What is more, students have few opportunities and allotted time to practice this skill in class, so they do not have much experience in writing skills. In this study, the difficulties of English-majored students at Nam Can Tho University and the causes of these obstacles will be figured out and clarified.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 Writing

Writing skill, a set of letters or written symbols as a means to communicate, has undoubtedly been considered one of the most challenging skills for students to master (Lombana, 2002) [18]. This view indicates that writing is a communication process in which written language is created to be read. Similarly, Schmitt (2010) [28] states that writing is the product of a language user's information perspective and communicative proficiency.

Nunan (1989) [24] describes writing as "an extremely complex cognitive activity in which

the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously” (p.36). Nunan (1989) [24] adds that writing involves “control of the content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and letter formation” (p.36). Writing skill requires the writers to be able to organize and connect the information into cohesive and coherent texts.

White and Arndt (1991) [30] state that “writing is far from being a simple matter of transcribing language into written symbols: it is a thinking process in its own right. It is a permanent record, as a form of expression and as a means of communication” (p.3). These authors further state that writing provides a means to express feelings, thoughts and experiences, making them visible and concrete.

Generally, it can be summarized that writing is viewed as a sophisticated process that demands the active engagement of an individual to communicate ideas to the intended audience. Therefore, writing assumes a significant role in English language teaching and learning skills.

1.2.2 Paragraph writing

Baker (1962) [4] describes a paragraph as a collection of connected sentences showing solid ideas organized smoothly. A paragraph is defined as a writing unit conveying one main idea and including two types of sentences: a topic sentence and a series of supporting statements (Rajatanun, 1998) [27]. It normally contains from five to eight sentences related to one main idea or topic. The supporting sentences aim to provide further details for the main idea and strengthen the key concept of the paragraph.

Jayakaran (2005) [17] stresses that “the basic unit of any writing, be it a composition, an essay,

an article of general nature, a short story or even a humor piece, is the paragraph” (p.7). A paragraph will combine all three types of sentences including simple sentences, complex sentences and compound sentences. Oshima and Houge (2006) [25] stress that paragraph writing is a principal unit of writing to organize related sentences including a topic sentence and supporting sentences. The number of supporting sentences is not permanent and depends on whether the numbers of sentences are sufficient enough to convey ideas.

Taken all above-mentioned views together, paragraph writing is a basic unit of writing which comprises different kinds of sentences. It contains three main parts including introduction, body, and conclusion.

1.2.3 Components of a good writing

Raimes (1983) [26] suggests that a writer must deal with the following points in order to create a successful piece of writing: content: relevance, clarity, originality, logic, and so on; the reason for writing; the writer's method; organization: chapters, subject and support, cohesion and cohesion; mechanics: handwriting, spelling, punctuation; grammar: rules for verbs, agreement articles, and pronouns; word choice: vocabulary, idiom, tone; and syntax: sentence structure, sentence boundaries, stylistic choices.

Furthermore, successful writing is one that (1) is based on the subject and does not contain extraneous or loosely related information, and is written in a clear and concise manner; (2) has an organizational pattern that helps the reader to follow the flow of ideas by providing a beginning, middle, and end, as well as acceptable transitional devices; (3) includes supporting ideas

that are created through the use of descriptions, examples, vivid expression, and mature word choice; and (4) follows to traditional written English conventions (i.e., punctuation, capitalization, and spelling) and includes sentence structure variation. Several components of a good piece of writing figured out were meaningful content, clear organization, and correct language use, various vocabulary and well-controlled mechanics. All of those components are undoubtedly necessary conditions for successful writing.

1.2.3 Some difficulties in paragraph writing

Difficulties in grammar:

According to Ellis (2006) [10], grammar is a vital component of second language acquisition, significantly influencing learners' ability to communicate effectively in both written and spoken forms. Grammar involves examining language structure and the way words are arranged to create meaningful sentences. However, common challenges in writing often derive from grammar-related issues. Although students are regularly exposed to grammar in English learning materials, they still struggle with choosing the correct grammatical structures for their sentences (Tustiawati & Wiguna, 2023) [29]. In other words, grammatical problems play a major role in students' perceived weaknesses in writing, often making their compositions less appealing and harder for readers to engage with.

Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) [9] stress the significance of grammar in ensuring precise communication. They identify essential grammatical aspects, including tenses, voices, modals, articles, nominalizations, and logical

connectors. Consequently, students face numerous challenges when writing in a second language. Additionally, differences between English and their native language structures create obstacles to using the language accurately.

Difficulties in vocabulary:

Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in language acquisition process (Harmon, Wood, & Keser, 2009) [16]. It is a fundamental factor in both speaking and writing since it conveys the ideas that we want to express. However, learners often struggle with a gap between their intended message and their actual ability to convey it due to a limited lexical resource. As a result, insufficient vocabulary restricts idea expression and leads to incomplete communication.

Ali (2016) [2] emphasizes that "Good writers are concise and precise, weeding out unnecessary words and choosing the exact word to convey meaning." This means students have to be selective to choose appropriate words to convey their ideas among different words. Besides, the influence of the mother tongue significantly impacts paragraph writing (Hajar, 2015) [15], leading to a fact that some paragraphs contain vocabulary errors and confusing lexical resource.

Difficulties in organization:

Paragraph organization refers to the sequencing and structuring of sentences to form a cohesive piece of writing. Writers should understand that the paragraph process involves explaining how to perform a task by outlining the necessary steps to complete an activity (Dorothy & Lisa, 2013) [8]. Oshima and Hogue (2006) [25] stated that there are three components of a paragraph: a topic sentence, a supporting sentence, and a concluding sentence. Lindner

(2005) [19] share the same view by stating that every good paragraph has to have unity and coherence, but it must also have organization. If you write a paragraph that contain three sections: an introduction, the body, and the conclusion, you have written a paragraph with good organization. While organization is important in writing, some students face challenges when they write a paragraph with the correct format. What is more, students lack awareness in this aspect, making the paragraph less attractive (Ali, 2016) [2]. Besides, students have a poor concluding sentence or even end the paragraph without any conclusion, leading the failure of composing a paragraph.

Difficulties in coherence:

Logical arrangement throughout a paragraph enables readers to grasp the presented ideas more effectively. Coherence is supported by cohesion, which involves linking one sentence to the next in a logical manner (Bex, 1996) [5]. Coherence is an essential requirement of a well-written paragraph, alongside unity, cohesion, and continuity. A coherent paragraph presents ideas in a logical sequence, allowing the reader to follow the flow of thought smoothly from one idea to the next idea. However, many students struggle with writing because they are unsure how to convey their thoughts clearly and persuasively. They often face difficulty in determining the appropriate sequence of ideas and fail focusing on the single main idea. Additionally, students lack sufficient knowledge to differentiate between the main idea and supporting ideas.

Difficulties in cohesion:

Cohesion primarily focuses on analyzing smaller units within a text. It refers to how a

speaker or writer utilizes the inherent relationships between words, phrases, and sentences to establish a sense of connection (Ammar, 2017) [3]. Cohesion refers to the methods used to connect sentences through different linguistic and semantic links. It has a close-knit relationship with coherence, showing the intangible glue to connect paragraphs. However, many students overlook the use of specific words or phrases, known as cohesive devices, which connect sentences by referring back to previous content. Consequently, students are unable to connect the text and ideas throughout their paragraph.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research design

This study aims to explore non-English major students' perspectives on the difficulties in paragraph writing. The quantitative methods which allow numerical data to be collected for the interpretation of some phenomena were employed in the study. The data were collected from the questionnaire with the participation of 98 non-English major students.

2.2 Participants

98 non-English major students at Nam Can Tho University participated in the survey. They are currently in the first and second year; and all of whom are taking the course of general English. The number of male and female participants are respectively 56 and 42. The information of the participants taking part in the survey was presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptions of participants for the questionnaire

		Frequency	Ratio (%)
Gender	Male	56	57.1
	Female	42	42.9
Course	1 st year	42	42.9
	2 nd year	56	57.1
	3 rd year	0	0
	4 th year	0	0
	5 th year	0	0
	6 th year	0	0
Language proficiency level	Beginner	66	67.3
	Intermediate	27	27.6
	Advanced	5	5.1

2.3 Research instruments

The study employed a questionnaire as the tool to collect quantitative data. The 34-item questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section aims to collect participants’ information including gender, course, major, and participants’ language proficiency level. The second part explores students’ perspectives on difficulties in paragraph writing with five clusters: vocabulary, grammar, organization, coherence, and cohesion. The questionnaire was adapted from Farooq and Wahid (2012) [12] and the results of previous studies presented in the literature review. The questionnaire was designed using a 5-point Likert

scale with options ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

2.4 Data analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS software version 20.0 to assess the instrument’s reliability. The results indicated that the questionnaire demonstrated a relatively high reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.97$). Besides, Descriptive Statistics Tests were used to measure the mean, min, max, and standard deviation of each cluster.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

Table 2. Students’ perspectives on the difficulties in paragraph writing (SD: Standard deviation)

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Overall	1,13	5,00	3,72	0,85
Vocabulary	1,00	5,00	3,75	0,96
Grammar	1,00	5,00	3,94	0,90
Organization	1,00	5,00	3,60	1,06
Coherence	1,00	5,00	3,61	0,88
Cohesion	1,00	5,00	3,66	1,02

The overall mean score indicated students' perspectives on difficulties in paragraph writing (M=3,72) was at a high level. The analysis revealed students' perspectives on difficulties in paragraph writing in five aspects including vocabulary, grammar, organization, coherence, and cohesion.

Table 2 shows that Grammar (M=3,94) was a significant challenge in paragraph writing for students. The participants reported difficulty in many grammatical points comprising tenses (67,4%), passive voice (69,7%), articles (51,3%), and subject-verb agreement (62,5%). Table 2 presented students' perspective on difficulties in vocabulary when writing a paragraph. Particularly, the mean score of 3,75, showed that non-English major students at Nam Can Tho University experienced a high level of difficulties in vocabulary in paragraph writing. Students had to repeat the words when they write (72,8%), used simple words to replace the difficult ones (72,7%), and needed to use translation from their mother tongue (69,7%). Besides, the analysis presented that the mean score of coherence was at a high level (M=3,61), indicating that students considered coherence as a challenge for them in writing. Most of students admitted that they did not know how to present a paragraph in its format (57,6%), could not arrange supporting ideas in logical sequence (57,6%), or had to deal with difficulties in maintaining consistency in ideas and themes throughout a paragraph (64,6%).

Table 2 presents students' perspectives on cohesion when they write a paragraph which was at a high level (M=3,66). Particularly, most of the participants got troubles using correlative conjunctions to connect ideas (60,6%), had

troubles using coordinating conjunctions to connect clauses(52,6%), had difficulties in using subordinating conjunctions to connect clauses (53,6%). Another issue when students write their paragraph was Organization (M=3,60). Specifically, students struggles in writing a topic sentence (52,6%), did not know how to present a paragraph in its format (57,6%) and had problems to structure a paragraph (59,6%).

3.3 Discussion

The current study aimed to examine non-English majored students' perceptions of the difficulties in paragraph writing at Nam Can Tho University. The overall mean score was 3,72, reflecting a high level of difficulty faced by the participants, proving that students had to deal with difficulties in writing a paragraph.

The mean score of vocabulary was 3,75, which was in a high level, indicated that vocabulary often posed greater challenges for students when they composed a paragraph. The study revealed that students had to repeat the words to express their ideas or needed to use dictionary or translation to write a paragraph due to the lack of relevant vocabulary. This is in line with a study by Bukittinggi (2021) [7], indicating that students encountered limited range of vocabulary, frequent errors of words/ words forms, or confusing words.

For organization, the mean score suggested a high level of difficulty among students. Students often got confused in producing a topic sentence and concluding sentence. Students faced difficulties in presenting the ideas in the correct format of a paragraph. This finding is aligned with a study by Bukittinggi (2021) [7], showing

that students got confused in developing ideas and logical sequencing in their writing.

Students considered grammar as a challenge for them when they wrote a paragraph, indicated in the mean score at a high level (M=3,94). The finding is aligned with studies by Ly, Nguyen, Phan, Dinh and Huynh (2021), showing that students made grammatical mistakes in subject-verb agreement, parts of speech, prepositions, plural/ singular nouns and tenses in writing skill.

Students also encountered problems in terms of coherence in paragraph writing. This is consistent with a study by AbiSamra (2003) [1] and Ly, Nguyen, Phan, Dinh and Huynh (2021) [20], revealing that students often had messy ideas arrangement or used irrelevant supporting ideas. Besides, students admitted that they lost track of the main ideas in their paragraph and faced challenges in maintaining consistency in writing a paragraph.

Cohesion was also a problem students faced in writing a paragraph. Students had difficulties in using conjunctions to connect the ideas. This is consistent with a study by Faradhibad and Nur (2017) [11], showing that students got confused about using a proper transition signal in their writing. Besides, the study added that students ignored using a proper spelling and punctuation.

The findings from the current study provide non-English major students' perspectives in difficulties in paragraph writing. In light of these findings, some implications are made for both teachers and students. With regard to teachers, it suggested that teachers should equip students with relevant elements of a paragraph including vocabulary, grammar, organization, coherence, and cohesion. Teachers should let students

identify the main idea and other supporting ideas to prevent students from getting out of topic. Besides, teachers should have students connect the ideas using conjunction before they write so that they can make their paragraph logical.

In terms of student, they encounter different challenges when they write a paragraph, resulting in the need to prepare ideas, review conjunction, and study the format of a paragraph before they write. Students should make use of both simple and advanced words to diversify the vocabulary in their paragraph. Besides, they should brainstorm ideas to avoid losing track when they compose a paragraph and learn to connect ideas using conjunctions to maintain the consistency throughout the paragraph.

4. CONCLUSION

The study emphasizes five crucial aspects in writing a paragraph: vocabulary, grammar, organization, cohesion and coherence, all of which contribute to the complex fabric of difficulties in paragraph writing. These insights provide significant implications for both teachers and students associated with writing skills. For students, they can realize obstacles when writing a paragraph to come up with solutions on these difficulties to improve their writing skills. Specifically, students admit that they deal with insufficient vocabulary as well as grammatical problems when composing a paragraph. Besides, students struggle in organizing a paragraph logically, and maintain cohesion and coherence. For teachers, they can adapt their teaching methods to facilitate writing lessons so that they can help their students write a paragraph more effectively. This study also contributes to research resources in this field investigating

obstacles in academic writing and possible solutions for school leaders, educators, and students. Thanks to this, a more effective learning environment may be created.

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