First-year English Majors' Perspectives on the Difficulties in Learning the Writing 1 Course

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ABSTRACT

Writing is one of the most challenging skills when learning English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Many language learners encounter difficulties during the writing process. The purpose of this study is to analyze students' difficulties in the Writing 1 course based on their perceptions. This study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. The instruments used are a questionnaire and an interview protocol. In this study, all participants' responses were coded and analyzed descriptively. The participants consisted of 268 first-year English majors at an educational institution in the Mekong Delta region. The questionnaire data were coded and categorized by the researcher. During the interviews, the data were recorded and transcribed. These data were then analyzed to answer the research questions of this study. According to the findings, students face difficulties in learning Writing, with Grammar identified as the most serious challenge, followed respectively by Vocabulary and Cohesion and Coherence. It is hoped that this study will help instructors develop suitable teaching methods for Writing 1 and mitigate the difficulties students experience in this course.

TÓM TẮT

Viết là một trong những kỹ năng khó nhất khi học tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ hai (ESL) hoặc tiếng Anh ngoại ngữ (EFL). Nhiều người học ngôn ngữ gặp khó khăn trong quá trình viết. Mục đích của nghiên cứu này là phân tích các khó khăn của sinh viên trong học phần Viết 1 học dựa trên nhận thức của học sinh. Nghiên cứu này sử dụng phương pháp định lượng - định tính. Công cụ được sử dụng là

bảng câu hỏi và quy trình phỏng vấn. Trong nghiên cứu này, tất cả các câu trả lời của người tham gia đều được mã hóa và phân tích mang tính mô tả. Đối tượng tham gia là 268 sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ Anh tại một cơ sở giáo dục ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long. Dữ liệu bảng câu hỏi được nhà nghiên cứu mã hóa và phân loại. Khi tiến hành cuộc phỏng vấn, dữ liệu được ghi âm và ghi chép lại. Những dữ liệu đó được phân tích để trả lời các câu hỏi nghiên cứu trong nghiên cứu này. Dựa trên kết quả nghiên cứu, các sinh viên gặp khó khăn khi học học phần Viết, cụ thể rằng khó khăn về "ngữ pháp" là nhóm yếu tố nghiêm trọng nhất theo đánh giá của sinh viên, các nhóm kế tiếp lần lượt là "từ vựng", "sự liên kết" và "tính mạch lạc". Nghiên cứu này hy vọng có thể giúp giảng viên phát triển các phương pháp giảng dạy môn Viết 1 phù hợp và giảm thiểu những khó khăn của học sinh trong môn này.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

English is a crucial global communication language, and writing skills play a key role in academics, careers, and social life. Writing not only helps individuals express their ideas but also enhances critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities. In academia, writing is essential for presenting research and sharing knowledge [26]. Additionally, in professional settings, strong writing skills improve communication efficiency, foster partnerships, and support business operations.

In the digital age, writing has become an essential tool on social media, blogs, and online forums, allowing individuals to build their personal brands and engage in community activities. Writing also contributes to lifelong learning and personal development, helping individuals reflect, clarify their thoughts, and achieve goals. More importantly, writing plays a vital role in civic life, enabling individuals to express opinions and contribute to society [21].

However, writing remains a significant challenge for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Unlike other skills such as listening, speaking, and reading, writing requires thorough preparation, causing anxiety for many students [7]. Students often struggle with organizing ideas, forming arguments, paraphrasing, and following grammatical rules. While previous studies have examined writing challenges in various countries, research on this issue in Vietnam, particularly in the Mekong Delta region, remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to explore the difficulties students face in Writing 1, a foundational course for English majors, and propose effective teaching strategies. The findings will not only help instructors refine their teaching methods but also support students in improving their writing skills for more effective learning. Additionally, this study serves as a foundation for future research to develop optimal solutions for teaching writing to English majors.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 Perspectives on writing skills

Perceptions of writing skills are influenced by self-assessment, external feedback, cultural factors, educational background, and digital technology. Individuals who are confident in their writing abilities tend to participate more actively in writing activities. Feedback from teachers and peers helps identify strengths and weaknesses during the writing process [15]. Additionally, culture shapes an individual's writing style. Formal education plays a crucial role in developing writing skills, especially for those who receive regular guidance and practice. The rise of digital media has created opportunities for content sharing while also influencing how writing skills are assessed in online environments [15].

1.2.2 Definition of (academic) writing skills

Writing skills encompass the ability to produce coherent, accurate text that is appropriate for its intended readership. According to [14], effective writing requires adaptation to a variety of contexts, ranging from academic to professional. Writing also demands critical thinking to analyze information and construct well-founded arguments due to the complexity of tasks [17]. Revision and editing are important steps to enhance the quality of written work. In the digital era, writing skills extend across multimedia platforms, requiring flexibility in content presentation. Practice and feedback are crucial factors in improving writing proficiency [14],15].

1.2.3 Academic writing skills

Academic writing requires formality, a tightly structured organization, and evidence-based arguments [3],[19]. It differs from creative writing and personal non-fiction. Academic writing involves developing ideas, accurately citing sources, and using academic language appropriately [12],[22]. [14] classifies methods of organizing academic writing according to linguistic structure, text function, topic, and context. Academic writing is vital for fostering critical thinking and achieving academic success [2],[25]. In addition, it supports communication skills, career development, creative thinking, and adaptation to digital technology [16].

1.2.4 Difficulties in learning academic writing skills

Students face various challenges in academic writing, such as mastering conventions, developing critical thinking, and accurately citing sources [9],[26]. International students often encounter additional language barriers and must learn how to write in academic English [15]. Moreover, they struggle with time management, incorporating feedback, and adjusting their writing style [5]. Motivation and self-regulation are also key factors determining improvements in writing skills [18]. Language barriers pose major challenges for learners of English as a second language, especially regarding accurate grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. Social and cultural factors further influence writing style and the ability to absorb new knowledge [2],[15].

1.2.5 Related studies

Numerous studies have identified factors that affect students' writing skills. [8] shows that giving students the freedom to choose their writing topics can boost motivation. [27] indicate that a lack of linguistic knowledge is the greatest obstacle for engineering students when writing academically. [12] identify key problems for Pakistani students as limited language

proficiency, writing anxiety, and a lack of ideas. [1] also highlights difficulties with language use, coherence, and source citation. [4] emphasize that limited practice and the influence of the mother tongue create significant obstacles for students.

In Vietnam, [23] determines seven main factors affecting students' academic writing skills, with limited time being the greatest barrier. [13] likewise observes that postgraduate students have trouble citing references, articulating ideas, and using appropriate grammar. [20] stress that limited vocabulary and poor information synthesis pose major challenges for students learning academic writing.

In short, writing skills, particularly academic writing, are influenced by multiple factors, including educational background, culture, external feedback, and the ability to adapt to digital technology. Despite the vital role of writing skills in learning and professional advancement, many students struggle to develop academic writing proficiency due to insufficient foundational knowledge, language barriers, and time constraints. Research indicates that providing clear guidance, motivation, and improvements in organizing content can enhance students' academic writing abilities. Further investigation into effective teaching methods and support for developing writing skills is essential to improve educational quality and academic communication.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) to gain both a broad overview and deeper insights into the research topic. The process was carried out in two phases. Phase 1 involved collecting student responses through a questionnaire, while Phase 2 utilized interviews to elaborate on and clarify the findings from Phase 1.

Quantitative research involves systematically collecting and analyzing numerical data to test hypotheses, uncover patterns, and derive generalized conclusions. It is commonly used in fields such as the social sciences, health sciences, and education, where standardized measurements and statistical techniques are vital. Researchers typically begin by formulating a concise research question or hypothesis, followed by data collection using tools like surveys, experiments, or secondary data analysis. These tools allow for precise measurement of variables and enable statistical analysis [10]. Qualitative research focuses on understanding complex social phenomena, human behavior, and experiences in natural contexts. Methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and content analysis allow researchers to gather rich, detailed data [11]. This approach values context, reflexivity, and an iterative process: the research design often evolves as fresh insights emerge.

Analysis usually entails identifying themes, patterns, or categories through processes like thematic analysis or grounded theory. Coding segments data into meaningful units for systematic interpretation. Qualitative methods are especially effective for exploring issues that are context-dependent or difficult to quantify, such as identity formation, cultural practices, and social processes [6].

2.2 Participants

A total of 268 first-year students from five English-major classes at Nam Can Tho University were invited to participate in a survey

questionnaire. Subsequently, 10 of these students will be randomly selected (from all five classes) to take part in an interview, including 2 students from class NNA01, 2 from NNA02, 2 from NNA03, 2 from NNA04, and 2 from NNA05. The reason for choosing first-year students is that they have completed the Writing 1 course in the first semester, and therefore are thought to have a concrete understanding of the difficulties encountered in learning Writing 1. In addition, the researchers are currently guiding these students directly, which should help the students feel more at ease in sharing information. However, one factor to consider is the potential influence of grading by the researchers, who are also the students' instructors [24]. To minimize this pressure, a commitment form ensuring students' rights in the classroom was prepared and signed by the relevant parties, with certification by the Head of the Department. The information about the participants is summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Information on research participants

Class (1st year)	Number of Students	Major	Age
DH22NNA01	54	English Studies	18–20
DH22NNA02	54		
DH22NNA03	51		
DH22NNA04	58		
DH22NNA05	51		
Total	268		

2.3 Research instruments

2.3.1 Questionnaire

In this study, the questionnaire was designed based on theoretical frameworks, past research, and the Writing 1 textbook content. It contained 21 questions grouped into 11 categories to pinpoint potential difficulties students might face while learning to write:

1. Background knowledge (2 questions)
2. Mother tongue (1 question)
3. Motivation (1 question)
4. Writing time (1 question)
5. Practice (1 question)
6. Teacher feedback (1 question)
7. Spelling, punctuation, capitalization rules (3 questions)
8. Grammar (4 questions)
9. Vocabulary (2 questions)
10. Cohesion and coherence (3 questions)
11. Prompt requirements (2 questions)

Students responded by choosing from five levels: 1 (completely untrue for me), 2 (untrue for me), 3 (unsure), 4 (true for me), and 5 (completely true for me).

2.3.2 Interview

Building on the questionnaire findings, the researchers developed a single open-ended question for interviews to gather more in-depth perspectives:

"Why do you believe that specific difficulty is the greatest challenge in the writing process?"

This question aimed to elicit qualitative insights that would supplement the survey data.

2.3.3 Writing one textbook

At Nam Can Tho University, English majors use the textbook From Sentences to Paragraphs, which covers:

- Lessons 1–4: Creating different sentence types (simple, compound, and complex)

- Lesson 5: Understanding the concept of a paragraph

- Lessons 6–7: Writing a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence

- Lessons 8–10: Applying present, past, and future verb tenses in writing

This textbook serves as the foundation for the students' Writing 1 course, helping them transition from constructing individual sentences to creating coherent paragraphs.

2.4 Data Analysis

After finalizing the questionnaire, it was initially distributed to 50 students to check reliability. Over the course of one week, these students provided feedback, and the data were analyzed using SPSS, producing a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78—indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. In the subsequent two-week period, the questionnaire was sent out to the larger group of selected students. Once the responses were returned, SPSS was employed again to analyze the results, focusing on (1) identifying specific difficulties students experienced in Writing 1 and (2) determining which of those was perceived as the most significant obstacle.

For the interview phase, 10 students were invited to participate in a more detailed exploration of the survey results. They provided written consent after being fully briefed on the study's content and purpose. Each participant was interviewed individually, responding in detail to the open-ended question about their greatest challenges in writing. Every interview session lasted approximately 20 minutes and was recorded for further analysis.

Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researchers then performed a thematic analysis as outlined by [6]. In this approach, raw data are systematically coded to identify recurring patterns or themes. For this study, the researchers concentrated on two focal points: (1) Difficulties students faced during the Writing one course; (2) Which specific difficulty was considered the most substantial?

The thematic analysis involved carefully reading and re-reading the transcripts, coding core ideas, and highlighting recurring themes. The aim was to understand why certain difficulties were consistently identified as more challenging than others. The 10 participants' comments were scrutinized to single out especially revealing remarks, which were then quoted or summarized to shed light on the reasons behind why one or two challenges might outweigh others in terms of perceived difficulty.

The current study aims to answer two questions: (1) What difficulties do students encounter when learning the Writing one course?; (2) Among these difficulties, which one is considered the most significant?

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Difficulties Students Face in the Writing 1 Course

First of all, results from the research show that students encounter difficulties when taking the Writing 1 course. Specifically, in Table 2 below, the mean score (Mean) of the questionnaire is 3.61 (M = 3.61).

Table 2. Average Value of Difficulties in the Writing 1 Course

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Difficulties in Learning Writing	3.61	0.49	2.75	4.54

Next, a One-Sample t-Test was conducted to verify whether the average score regarding students' difficulties in writing was significantly different from an acceptable test value of 3.41. Results from this test indicated a clear difference

between the mean score and the acceptable test value (t = 29.81; df = 298; p = .000). Thus, it can be concluded that students do indeed face difficulties when taking the Writing One course.

Table 3. One-Sample t-Test *(Test value = 3.41)*

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
29.81	265	0.000	0.62683	0.5966
				0.7681

3.2 Specific Differences Among Difficulty Groups (Stage 1)

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the Difficulty (Groups)

Clusters of Difficulties	N	Mean	SD
1. Topic Knowledge	268	3.31	0.78
2. Mother Tongue (L1 Interference)	268	3.57	0.69
3. Motivation	268	3.62	1.15
4. Time Constraints on Writing	268	3.11	0.46
5. Practice	268	3.28	0.55
6. Teacher Feedback	268	2.75	0.37
7. Spelling, Punctuation, Capitalization	268	3.42	3.47
8. Grammar	268	4.54	0.31
9. Vocabulary	268	4.21	0.65
10. Cohesion & Coherence	268	4.13	0.23
11. Understanding the Prompt	268	3.78	0.44

From the table above, and based on the accepted average value of 3.41, it can be seen that in the current study, there are a total of seven factors (groups) considered to cause difficulties for students during their writing process, with mean values higher than 3.41. Among these,

"Grammar" is evaluated as the most significant difficulty (M = 4.54), followed by "Vocabulary" (M = 4.21) and "Cohesion & Coherence" (M = 4.13).

Looking at other groups—(1) "Topic Knowledge" (TK) (M = 3.31), (2) "Time

Constraints on Writing" (TC) (M = 3.11), and (3) "Practice" (PR) (M = 3.28)—although they appear lower at first glance, the difference between their mean values and 3.41 is not substantial. Therefore, the research team continued to use a One-Sample t-Test to verify these differences statistically.

Table 5. One-Sample t-Test (Test value = 3.41)

	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
TK	15.672	265	0.071	0.07321	- 0.0693 0.1993
TC	9.525	265	0.000	0.24774	0.1767 0.3216
PR	11.448	265	0.063	0.05176	- 0.0476 0.1976

From the test results above, the Sig. (2-tailed) value for TK is 0.071 (> 0.05), indicating that the mean of TK is statistically equivalent to 3.41. Therefore, it can be concluded that students perceive "Topic Knowledge" to be a difficulty they face when learning to write (M = 3.31). Similarly, the Sig. (2-tailed) value for PR is 0.063 (> 0.05), indicating that the mean of PR is statistically equivalent to 3.41. Hence, it can be concluded that "Practice" is also a difficulty (M = 3.28). On the other hand, the Sig. (2-tailed) value for TC is 0.000 (< 0.05), showing that the mean of TC differs significantly from 3.41. Thus, it can be concluded that "Time Constraints on Writing" is not considered a difficulty for the students (M = 3.11). However, in the context of the current study, two (groups of) factors— "Teacher Feedback" and "Time Constraints on Writing"—are not difficulties that students encounter when learning writing, as analyzed above, with mean values of 2.75 and 3.11, respectively.

In summary, there are nine groups of factors identified in this study that cause difficulties for students in the Writing 1 course. The most serious difficulty is "Grammar," followed by "Vocabulary" and "Cohesion & Coherence." Notably, these factors belong to target language skills. The findings of the research team partly align with those of [20], whose results indicated that two of the main challenges faced by learners were limited vocabulary and restricted grammatical structures. These difficulties were also found in two other studies by [23] and [13] in the Vietnamese context.

Nevertheless, to explore the reasons behind these identified difficulties, the research team proceeded with Stage 2 of the study by conducting interviews.

3.3 Reasons for the Difficulties in Learning Writing (Phase 2)

Among the 10 purposefully selected students, 7 of them provided explanations for identifying the three greatest challenges in learning to write, namely "Grammar," "Vocabulary," and "Cohesion and Coherence." Several representative and clear responses are listed below.

Regarding the difficulty with "Grammar", three students noted that they struggle with using the simple present tense in the third-person singular. For instance, Student 4 commented:

"When constructing sentences, my biggest difficulty is that I often forget to add 's/es' for third-person singular subjects in the simple present tense. In theory, I remember to do it, but actually applying it in writing is another matter." (SV04)

Also looking at grammar, Student 5 shared that they struggle with maintaining balanced sentence structure:

"I'm not good at explaining, but here's an example that illustrates the problem I face: 'I like playing badminton and watch films in spare time.' I realized the mistake '…watch films…' should be changed to '…watching films…' thanks to feedback from my lecturer." (SV05)

Another grammatical error mentioned relates to the use of plural nouns, specifically:

"I get confused in some cases when a noun needs to be in plural form. In my case, the sentence 'I play game when I have free time' should actually be 'I play games when I have free time.'" (SV01)

This error was also noted by Student 4:

"Even though the lecturer has corrected me, I think I've made this error a few times: 'I watch film every Thursday evening.' Missing the 's' in the word 'film.'" (SV04)

With regard to "Vocabulary", two students shared related difficulties, as follows:

"Different topics require different vocabulary/sets of vocabulary. I feel there are too many words to remember, not to mention using them correctly in context." (SV07)

"I'm not sure if it's because I have a poor memory, but I'm not good at memorizing vocabulary. When writing, even if I have ideas to express, I can't recall the necessary words." (SV10)

Concerning difficulties related to "Cohesion and Coherence", two students offered comments:

"My lecturer often remarks that the connection between two ideas that should be linked is missing. I understand when I'm given feedback, but in reality, I frequently make this mistake when I write." (SV01)

"A recurring problem for me is using the linking words 'although' and 'because.' In practice, whenever I need to express ideas using these words, I tend to write 'Although…, but…' or 'Because…, so….'" (SV09)

In summary, the above statements detail the reasons behind selecting the three main difficulties students encounter in the Writing 1 course. These include: (1) Grammar, (2) Vocabulary, and (3) Cohesion and Coherence.

3.4 Discussion

In the present study, students acknowledged facing nine specific groups of difficulties in learning to write, with a statistical result of M=3.61. This finding is similar to that of a study conducted at South China University, which revealed that the difficulties engineering students face in academic writing in English revolve around three aspects: (1) content, (2) structure, and (3) language. Moreover, limited language knowledge was identified as the most serious problem for students when performing writing tasks, followed by difficulties in presenting content, and finally by challenges in establishing a coherent structure [20]. These same difficulties

were again identified in two studies by [23] and [13] in the Vietnamese context.

Through analysis of the collected data, the current research team found that the three greatest (groups of) difficulties for students learning to write are "Grammar," "Vocabulary," and "Cohesion and Coherence". Although, as noted above, previous studies have reported similar findings, in reality, other independent studies have yielded somewhat different outcomes. For example, [8] investigated students at the National Taiwan Normal University by collecting primary data from participants via open-ended questionnaires, writing assignments, and in-depth interviews. The findings suggested that teachers should give learners the freedom to choose topics that interest them. Additionally, teachers need to motivate learners in writing by fostering comfortable communication, ensuring they do not worry excessively about making mistakes.

In another case, [12] explored the problems and factors hindering Pakistani university students' writing skills. Their study identified core issues faced by students, including language proficiency, writing anxiety, lack of ideas, reliance on the first language, and lack of strategies for organizing written work. There were also several secondary challenges relating to teachers, teaching methods, the testing and evaluation system, inadequate practice, large class sizes, and lack of motivation and ideas. A particularly interesting comparison arises when examining the present study in detail alongside [23]'s research. Although both identify similar writing difficulties for students, Phuong's study revealed that "time constraints" posed the greatest challenge for them.

4. CONCLUSION

The current study identifies nine groups of factors that cause difficulties for students in the Writing 1 course, with "Grammar," "Vocabulary," and "Cohesion and Coherence" emerging as the most significant challenges, all related to target language use skills. Additionally, interviews with students provide further insight into why these three factors are perceived as the most challenging. The study emphasizes that each difficulty poses varying levels of challenges for learners, reinforcing the importance of integrating critical thinking and analytical skills into writing instruction.

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