



INVESTIGATING DIFFICULTIES OF ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS IN WRITING ACADEMIC ESSAYS

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to investigate the difficulties faced by English-majored students in writing academic essays. To collect the data for the investigation, the sample involved was twenty-seven English-majored students who have been studying English as their specialization at a public university in Vietnam. The instruments of this study conducted a mix-method as a qualitative and quantitative approach. To achieve the purpose of this study, the questionnaire was administered as the quantitative data collection and the semi-structured interview as the qualitative data collection. Then, five of the total participants were randomly interviewed to gain insight ideas of the difficulties that they face when writing academic essays in their writing course. The results of this study demonstrated that the majority of students had obstacles related to insufficient linguistic knowledge namely, lexicon-grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of sentences. The findings from the interviews also indicated that the participants had encountered linguistic knowledge difficulties. Based on the findings, both some recommendations and implications are presented.

Keywords: difficulties, English-majored students, writing, academic essays

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most crucial English skills that should be masterly skilled by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students as it is required for academic writing such as letters, essays, papers, articles, journals, project reports, and theses as well as written communication. Numerous previous studies have been undertaken to look into writing-related issues such as Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) found that Indonesian EFL university students experienced a wide range of difficulties with their writing, including the use of grammar, cohesion, coherence, paragraph organization, diction, and spelling problems. Additionally, Nasser (2019) identified other characteristics that the Iraqi EFL students

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struggled by writing performance, including the use of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting. And many other researchers like Hajeid (2018); Dalsky and Tajino (2007); and Jebreila et al., (2015) advocated the deployment of the major difficulties in students' writing performance as well.

More specifically, the researchers are particularly interested in learning further details about the specific issues that cause English-majored students' difficulties in writing essays. Although their writing skills were taught by English language teachers, they still lacked a thorough comprehension of the issues. With this problem as aforementioned above, it is important for researchers to investigate the writing difficulties of English-majored students in writing academic essays. The results of this study would be useful for English teachers as they are able to obtain further insights into the difficulties of their students so as to employ appropriate strategies in teaching writing skills. Furthermore, they would indicate that the students need to develop their writing performance. Hence, to answer the purposes aforementioned, the study merely endeavors to explore the following research question: What difficulties do English-majored students face in writing academic essays?

1. Literature review

1.1 Writing difficulties

Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the difficulties in writing skills follow as: Anwar and Ahmed (2016) revealed that students might be confronted by numerous challenges and issues at distinctive stages of their learning comprising, linguistic, psychological, and cognitive. While, Alfaki (2015) reviewed some linguistic difficulties and problems that EFL students faced through the writing process such as grammatical problems, mechanical problems, sentence structure, and diction problems. Furthermore, Mohammed (2018) said that the difficulties in writing cause Iraqi EFL learners to have been taken by problems in various substance errors areas like spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Farooq et al. (2012) described that students have confronted wide a range of troubles in writing the English language comprising a lack of vocabulary, poor spelling, L1 interference, and a poor understanding of grammatical structure.

1.2 Related studies

Toba et al., (2019) made investigation issues with students writing skills. The results of this study indicated that students had caused several issues like content, organization, vocabulary, syntax, and mechanics of when writing process. In addition, they also had personal reasons for experiencing these issues, including a lack of writing experience, a dislike of writing, writing anxiety, a poor perception of writing, a lack of writing motivation, a lack of time allocated for writing tests, and insufficient instruction from their lecturers regarding the writing process.

Bulqiyah et al., (2021) made an investigation into perspectives on the writing difficulties of essays. The research sample of this study was twenty-one, undergraduate students. To collect the data, the researchers utilized both questionnaires and semi-

structured interviews. The results of this study revealed that tertiary students' problems in essay writing courses are presented: Affective problems, which raise from students' and lecturers' attitudes while teaching and learning Essay Writing Courses. Cognitive problems are considered difficulties in the areas of writing viewpoint, transferring language, and the process of writing. Final, linguistic problems in the area of lexicon grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of the essay.

Rahmatunisa (2014) carried out the problems in writing argumentative essays faced by Indonesian EFL learners. The sample of this study was the second year of university Indonesian students. To have a collection data, the researcher used instruments through both writing tasks and interviews. The results of the data indicated that Indonesian EFL learners faced problems in three categories, those are linguistics problems, cognitive problems, and psychological problems. Similarly, students faced problems in linguistics related to grammatical structure, formatting words, word classes, errors in using words, and the use of articles. In terms of cognitive problems that are related to organizing paragraphs, difficulties in remaining word classes, getting lost in the generic structure, making a conclusion, and putting punctuation. Last, psychological problems which included laziness, egoism, bad mood, and difficulties to start writing also faced by Indonesian EFL learners.

Alisha et al., (2019) did a study on students' difficulties in writing English. This study used a case study with a qualitative design. The participants of this study were around 30 English- majored students who were purposively selected as the respondents of the research. To collect data, the researcher used a questionnaire as the instrument of the study. The result of the study indicated that the students had a significant problem in writing English. The findings revealed that the most significant problems were related to a lack of vocabulary mastery, language, and spelling.

Based on the studies reviewed above, it can be concluded that those studies have a one-track mind on difficulties in writing, so those studies are quite similar to this research.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were conducted by a group of the sophomore-students from an academic writing course consisting of twenty-seven English-Majored students who have been studying English as their specialization. Furthermore, they voluntarily engaged in both surveys and semi-structured interviews since, at the time of conducting the study, they all were taking an academic writing course. All of them were aged between 18 and 20 years old.

2.2 Instruments

To gain the data for the research question, the researcher would like to utilize a mixed approach namely, both qualitative and quantitative data in a separate process with two instruments. A questionnaire investigated the writing difficulties that were adapted from

the work of Ceylan, (2019). The questionnaire contained a total of 11 items that were asked about their difficulties in writing academic essays. These items were scored on a five-point Likert scale of numerical values as follows: Strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). The reliability analysis of the questionnaire about the writing difficulties was carried out using Cronbach's alpha. The results of the reliability analysis are described in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Reliability of the questionnaire about writing difficulties

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.789	11

Table 1 shows the value of Cronbach's Alpha of .789, which means that the reliability of the questionnaire was high. Therefore, the questionnaire was considered reliable.

2.3 Procedure

To collect the data, the following procedures were established. First, the researchers prepared the questionnaire and approach to ask for the participation of the students. After all of them agreed to join the survey, the researchers delivered the questionnaire to the students. Then, the researchers explained clearly the purpose of conducting this survey, which was to seek their difficulties in writing academic essays. After all of the participants responded to the questionnaire which took approximately 25 minutes. Furthermore, all the data collected were put into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Then, five participants were randomly chosen to participate in a semi-structured interview, and each student was interviewed for about 2 to 5 minutes in their own language, the Vietnamese language. Then, the information obtained from the interview was subsequently recorded, transcribed, examined, and then presented as a thorough description.

2.4 Data analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire was exported to Microsoft Excel and analyzed by the software SPSS version 22.

4. Findings

4.1. Difficulties in writing performance

As illustrated in Table 3, the participants' responses resulting from the questionnaire could be demonstrated in the form of the mean score and standard deviation of each item. The results of the descriptive statistics of all the items of the questionnaire are illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of difficulties in writing performance

No	Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std
1	I find most writing tasks difficult to do.	27	2.00	5.00	3.5556	1.05003
2	I do not have sufficient linguistic knowledge (lexicon-grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of sentences).	27	3.00	5.00	4.3333	.67937
3	I do not have sufficient content knowledge.	27	3.00	5.00	4.0741	.61556
4	I do not have enough general knowledge about the topics.	27	2.00	5.00	3.5185	.93522
5	I have low self-confidence in writing tasks.	27	2.00	5.00	3.8519	.94883
6	I have a great amount of anxiety when writing.	27	2.00	5.00	3.9259	.72991
7	I am unable to organize my thoughts while writing.	27	3.00	5.00	3.4444	.57735
8	I do not know enough writing strategies such as prewriting, drafting, or editing.	27	3.00	5.00	3.9630	.75862
9	I do not have enough motivation to write.	27	2.00	5.00	3.8148	.78628
10	I am unable to transfer writing skills from my L1 to the English language.	27	3.00	5.00	3.7778	.69798
11	I am unable to organize my thoughts while writing.	27	2.00	5.00	3.5926	.84395
	Average	27	2.45	5.00	3.8047	.78391

As can clearly be seen in Table 2, the mean values of this set of items range from 3.44 to 4.33, and the standard deviations range from 0.57 to 1.05, respectively. Furthermore, the mean score of the problems in writing performance as follows: Many students had difficulty with Item 2, I do not have sufficient linguistic knowledge (lexicon-grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of the sentence) caused difficulties in writing performance, stood at (M = 4.3333, SD = .67937). This mean score was considerably higher than the mean scores of the other ten items, followed by Item 3, I do not have sufficient content knowledge stood second place with (M = 4.0741, SD = .61556), compared to eleven out of nine items obtained the neutral response on a five-point Likert scale. However, in Item 7, I'm unable to organize my thoughts while writing accounted for (M = 3.4444, SD = .57735). This mean score was seen as the lowest mean score compared to those of the other items.

4.1.1. Semi-structured interview

To gain more insightful information about students' troubles in writing academic essays, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview to examine the participants' viewpoints while a wide range of potential issues related to the questionnaire cannot be explored. Then, this one-on-one interview was performed with five individuals who were chosen at random. The results of the interview exposed that most of the participants also obtained difficulties related to the student participants' linguistic knowledge issues that were found in the questionnaire such as lexicon-grammar and structures. Moreover, five out of three students were faced with vocabulary.

The results of the interviews of five students in the group randomly whose scripts were written are as follows.

Student 1 said, *"I face some challenges in producing thoughts, and I have got troublesome to making completed sentences."*

Students 2 and 5 shared, *"I have got several challenges, namely, generating ideas, connecting ideas, and using the wrong vocabulary."*

Student 3 stated, *"I have got problems in grammar, academic vocabularies, and generic structure of the text in each sentence when I write sentences."*

Student 4 noted, *"I got difficulties in grammar as I'm not able to use various structures which are suitable for topics"*

From the result of the interviews, the participants' responses match the results from the questionnaire. It means that their difficulties were insufficient linguistic knowledge such as lexicon-grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of sentences. The results could ensure that the data found in the questionnaire were reliable.

4.2. Discussion

From the findings of this study mentioned above, it is revealed that the majority of students encountered challenges in writing academic texts such as insufficient linguistic knowledge (lexicon-grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of sentences). It means that they frequently pay more attention to other elements of writing so they could not concentrate on linguistic knowledge. This result is in accordance with several previous studies namely, Bulqiyah et al., (2021); Rahmatunisa, W. (2014); and Alisha et al., (2019), who assessed students' struggles with the languages. They discovered that the students were having difficulty choosing the right word because of their limited understanding of how to form sentences grammatically and their limited vocabulary. By contrast, the result of Toba et al., (2019) added some of the difficulties like writing anxiety, a poor perception of writing, a lack of writing motivation, a lack of time allocated for writing tests, and insufficient instruction from their lecturers regarding the writing process.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that this present study purposed to investigate difficulties in writing academic essays, and the majority of the participants who responded to the questionnaire gained relative agreement ($M = 3.8047$). This could be because these participants did witness much on difficulties. The findings indicated that many participants faced challenges in linguistic knowledge and lexical knowledge. The students agreed that they could not organize ideas coherently and develop appropriate strategies.

5.1 Recommendations and Implications

From the results of this study, the researchers would like to propose some recommendations for both students and teachers. The students should spend enough time practicing. When writing, they should review carefully the vocabulary and structure of sentences. The teachers who are in charge of writing should provide their students with more linguistic knowledge to tackle their students' problems. They should enhance their writing ability by supplying several effective strategies. Finally, the limitation of this study is that it only explored students' difficulties in writing essays through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The small number of students is not

popularized. In spite of the limitation of the study, the results of this study help Vietnamese teachers consider more about the teaching of writing skills to their students.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interests

About the authors

Bui Thi Thu Trang and Truong Vinh Duy have been English lecturers at the School of Foreign Languages, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. They all have experienced teaching General English courses and some other courses for English-major students.

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