

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

SOME DIFFICULTIES IN THE FIRST-YEAR AND SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS' ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS (SAI GON UNIVERSITY)

NGUYEN QUANG MINH TRIET*

ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to identify first-year and second-year students' writing problems in English language and to suggest ways of solving these problems at Sai Gon University. A random sample of 100 students was selected for this research. The results indicate that the students encounter diverse difficulties when writing including limited vocabulary, inadequate writing skills, and difficulty expressing themselves in English. Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed, including encouraging students to create outline or draft before writing English paragraphs or essays.

KEY WORDS: writing skill; first-year and second-year students; difficulties; techniques.

RECEIVED: December, 19th, 2023.

EDITED: May, 10th, 2023

1. Introduction

English writing skill is a critical aspect of academic success, both for native speakers and for students learning English as a second or foreign language. However, many students struggle with writing, leading to low scores, errors, run-on sentences and incoherent paragraphs. This is especially true for first-year and second-year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Sai Gon University. Despite efforts to encourage creativity and organization, many students do not take writing seriously and fail to consider all the necessary elements of good composition such as vocabulary, mechanics, grammar, organization and content.

Many students have learned in high school to camouflage their lack of reading and writing skills, so it is often difficult for teachers to identify their weaknesses until students hand in papers or take exams. Due to the requirements that academic writing demands to students when delivering an English composition in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, it was necessary to carry out an investigation, showing whether or not students had strong difficulties in writing essays and summaries, or the skills that they are able to apply when asked for compositions, especially first-year and second-year students. In order to address these issues, it is important to understand the difficulties that students face in their writing skills. This study aims to investigate the challenges encountered by first-year and second-year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Sai Gon University. Specifically, the study will answer two research questions: (1) What are the difficulties that first-year and second-year students face in their writing skills? and (2) What are some effective strategies to help students overcome these difficulties? By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by students in developing their English writing skills, and to offer practical recommendations for educators and students alike.

2. Literature review

Throughout history there have been many cases of this situation and this problem happens not only in our country but also in many others around the world. In the United States in 1874, 97% of the nation's high school graduates entered college. Although they were native speakers of English, their writing skill was poor. First, remedial writing course at the University of California at Berkeley, subject A (a pre-freshman English course) began in 1898. At that time the University required high schools to take subject A, a non-credit composition course. There have been many disputes about the

* Dr; Sai Gon University; Email: nqmtreeiet@sgu.edu.vn

course and its effectiveness; however, the decline in essay writing scores of college students provided more objective evidence that the writing skill was getting worse. There was a significant increase in errors involving awkwardness of expression, run-on sentences and incoherent paragraphs. There were more poor writers and their scores were lower than in other years.

Moreover, Albert R. Kitzhaber, (1963) surveyed composition courses in four- year colleges and concluded that their quality and content were exceedingly diverse. He punished composition instructors and their approaches with phrases that ring true today: "Teaching young people to write well has always proved so frustratingly difficult and the methods used so time-consuming and laborious for teachers and students alike". In other words, no one approach has solved the problems nor does it seem likely that any strategy or philosophy will provide remedy. "Each method helps some students and fails with others. Writing needs to persist; teachers must teach composition if students want to develop effective writing skills", Kitzhaber added.

The problems that colleges face today in developing and maintaining effective programs for poorly prepared students must be viewed in the context of the changes. This is occurring in higher education in this country, the individual institutions' standards and goals, the diverse expectations and characteristics of the students themselves, and the attitudes, teaching strategies, and expectations of the faculty. Fiscal realities and the shrinking pool of highly qualified recent high school graduates who choose to attend college are other significant influences on the kind of programs colleges offer and their effectiveness.

The main problem is that the students who received high grades in high school may be unaware of their poor writing. Consequently, students entering college with good grades in English composition may have not been required to write in high school and may have minimal skills. According to Byrne (1988), the product approach of writing is an accuracy- oriented approach that focuses on the control of mistakes in order to eliminate them from written works. Raimes (1983) writes "in the control approach of teaching writing students are given sentences to copy and manipulate grammatically and correctly with very limited opportunity of making mistakes".

Finally, James A. Berlin (1987) presented a model that suggests that all complete rhetorical theories and approaches to teaching composition must include the writer or knower, the audience or reader, reality and truth, and the sources of language in written texts. By considering these elements, instructors can help students develop effective writing skills that will serve them well in college and beyond.

Causes of learner's problems in writing

(i) *The Nature of Writing Process:* Writing is a complex process because it requires the mastery of grammatical devices, conceptual thinking and judgmental (have purpose and activating) elements Byrne 1988, Heaton 1990. Raimes (1983; 13) thinks that: "*Writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously. At the sentence level these include control of content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation and letter for action. Beyond the sentence, the writer must be able to structure and integrate information into cohesive and coherent paragraphs and texts*". Similarly on the difficulty of writing Skill, Ur (1996; 163) says: "*Much higher standard of language is normally demanded in writing than in speech: more careful construction, more precise and varied vocabulary, and more correctness of expressions in general. Ur further states that writing is a messy business which requires passing through a number of untidy drafts before reaching a final version*".

(ii) *Lack of Learners' Motivation:* According to Zamel (1997) the writing class should take into account the learners' purposes for writing. Writing tasks can be developed rapidly when students' concerns and interests are acknowledged, when they are given numerous opportunities to write and when they are encouraged to become participants. Byrne (1988; 2) believes that most writers write less well if they are obliged to write about something that they do not want to write about.

(iii) *Inadequate Time*: Hedge (1988; 11) states that the idea of the time needs to be given attention because writing activities by nature have different stages which need ample time. Learners need time for gathering ideas, organizing their ideas, writing drafts, proofreading and re-writing. Raimes (1983; 25) thinks that time is a crucial element in the writing process and an element that distinguishes writing from speaking. Time may also be a key factor in producing a text full of control over organization and coherence. In addition, many students and teachers feel that writing under time pressure is a very unnatural situation and perhaps cannot lead them to produce compositions that are truly representative of their capabilities.

(iv) *Lack of practice*: Grabe and Kaplan (1996; 6) believe that writing does not come naturally but rather gained through continuous effort and much practice. Moreover, learners must take the responsibility for their learning if meaningful learning is to take place. He also adds that the best way to learn any skill would be to practice it. To become a good driver, the best way is to drive. Similarly, to become a proficient writer, the best way is again to write a lot. Furthermore, Hedge (1988; 11) states that “my own experience tells me that in order to become a good writer, a student needs to write a lot”.

(v) *Teachers' Feedback*: Zamel (1985; 79) states that teachers' feedback can be effective if teachers respond to students writing as genuine and interested readers rather than as judges and evaluators. Similarly, Byrne (1988; 29) thinks that if we are to be true readers rather than judges, we should perhaps look not so much at what they actually succeeded in doing. This might help students writers to appreciate receiving comments and use them in their revisions. Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990; 155) said that the teachers' feedback is unclear, inaccurate and unbalanced. As a result, the feedback given does not help students develop their writing skills.

3. Method

This study about some difficulties in writing skills of first-year and second-year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages began from middle September 2021 to April 2022. One hundred first-year and second-year students, who came from the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Sai Gon University, were selected randomly to participate in the research. Although participants were from varied educational backgrounds, most of them had difficulties with English writing skills.

The test instrument in this study was a survey with 15 questionnaires. It consisted of a set of one hundred plates, each of which contained eight questions.

After choosing the research topic, we set an expected completion date in order to make sure that work would be on schedule and done smoothly. Certainly, work began by finding the related materials and references from different sources. It could be a research paper on the internet or books, newspapers, magazines... Additionally, the relative documents should be arranged in alphabetical order. After that, the findings were synthesized and we selected the suitable one. Consequently, we had twenty findings for the research.

With the subject about the difficulties in English writing skills, we wanted to know clearly the real opinion of the university students about this problem; therefore, we tried to find the answer to the problems and started to write some questions. The person who was responsible for making questionnaires, offered a list of questions. We also had an agreement with our teacher on choosing the eight best questions to make a questionnaire.

Having the complete questionnaires, the survey was conducted. We came to KLF self-study area of Saigon University, schoolyard and classroom to hand out first-year and second-year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. They could choose only one option with each question by ticking on their choices or writing their personal comments in the empty line on the questionnaire. Most of them were very interested in our research; they answered the questions enthusiastically and truthfully so that we could get the clear results about this problem. The questionnaire just took about two to five minutes for each student to finish.

As soon as the survey was accomplished, the questionnaires were collected and sent directly to the member who was responsible for data synthesis. Eight charts, which were based on the statistical data, were drawn in Microsoft Excel. Finally, we began to analyze the data and advanced a research conclusion found on the charts.

4. Data collection technique

- **Interview:** We employed the interview as the instrument for collecting data from the students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. It provided important information not only from the conversation with them, but also from their gestures, facial expressions and pauses. We made use of the interview because it was completely necessary to get as many details as possible in relation to the major and what students think about it in order to know the areas in which they show problems.

- **Survey:** We selected the survey as the instrument for collecting from the students; it was addressed to first-year and second-year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. We also used Google Docs to make an online questionnaire and posted on Facebook to collect data from Facebook users who are first-year and second-year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Sai Gon University.

- **Content Analysis:** This research technique was applied for examining the results of the instruments addressed to students. The technique was selected due to the fact that through this research it became extremely necessary to analyze in a deep way the content provided by the data which made easier the process to understand the way students write English essays and paragraphs and they expected to be improved in the future. The application of the instruments took place in different figures. We looked for the students already selected in order to pass a survey which would reveal essential information about the topic under study. This instrument was really important because of the information acquired.

4. Results and recommendations

4.1. Results

It can be clearly seen that the majority of students have weak English writing skills. Among the total participants, 91% were first-year and second-year students, and less than 10% of them considered themselves not to be good at English writing skills. Therefore, their overall level of writing skill remained a significant problem.

First-year and second-year students who often encounter difficulties in their English writing skills. The results show that 100% of the surveyed participants face difficulties when writing essays or paragraphs in English. No proportion of students reported having no difficulties in their writing competence.

The difficulty that first-year and second-year in the faculty of Foreign Languages confront the most when they write academic English, measured in percentage. Vocabulary was the biggest problem that constituted over half of the total percentage surveyed students (52%), while grammar just accounts for the smallest proportion. To be more specific, the most considerable portion of the difficulty was vocabulary with 52% during which grammar made up 12%, more than four times as smaller compared to vocabulary. The second smallest among the four difficulties was sentence structure with 16% and the remaining was language use with 20% - just under vocabulary. In conclusion, the findings indicate that most of the students participating in this survey thought that vocabulary was their major problem when writing academic English.

Moreover, the percentage of students who are careful about punctuation when writing English essays or paragraphs among the surveyed students. As shown in the chart, it can be seen that most of the surveyed students were careful about punctuation when writing English essays or paragraphs. When asked about their care regarding punctuation, 97% of the subjects under study expressed that they always take punctuation into consideration when writing. Only 3% of them answered that punctuation is not important to them. The data reveal that the subjects under study are very careful

about punctuation as shown by their answers. This is very significant, because only 3% of them do not care about this fact. Clearly, punctuation is not a really big trouble for first-year and second-year students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages when they write essays in English. Besides, how many percent of the surveyed students know how to create an outline before writing English essays. It can be clearly seen that the majority of students knew how to build an outline before writing English with 76% while the remaining 24% of students reckoned did not know how to build an outline. Clearly, a large number of students participating in this survey knew how to set up an outline which is a quite important step for perfect writing while 24% of them still have problems in relation to that topic.

In addition, the percentage of the surveyed students who are aware of the type of words and phrases they should avoid when writing. Since the students were first-year and second-year students, their vocabulary range was weak. 73% of total students did not know which type of words and phrases they should evade during their writing English, while there was only 27% of the surveyed students were aware of their use of vocabulary. In conclusion, the use of English words and phrases was still a big trouble for most of the students taking part in this survey. The percentage of the students taking part in this survey who think that writing techniques are essential for successful writing. It can be clearly seen that most of the surveyed students (83%) believed that writing techniques are important factors which help create perfect and successful writing. On the other hand, there was 17% of the surveyed students who thought that writing techniques are not really important to them. Overall, writing techniques are needed for most of the surveyed students to create successful writing.

Finally, the best solution for the surveyed students to improve their English writing skills is concentrated on building productive vocabulary and the use of English words and phrases, which 63% of participants chose. The percentage of paying much attention to writing techniques and using them effectively and spending more time reading in English is nearly similar at 18% and 19% respectively. There were not only students who proposed other solutions for improving their English writing skills. Overall, the most effective solution to enhance English writing skills is building productive vocabulary and the use of English words and phrases.

4.2. Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented in the previous sections, this thesis recommends several effective solutions for first-year and second-year students at Sai Gon University to overcome difficulties in their English writing skills and to practice and improve their abilities.

First and foremost, First-year and second-year students should apply the writing techniques by practising. It will be helpful to keep them to forget any important points at the time of creating their paragraphs. Additionally, students should attend English conversation clubs in order to enrich their vocabulary, knowledge and fluency to better organize their ideas at the moment of making a composition about a specific topic.

It is also recommended that students should read their pieces of writing many times before delivering any composition or essay in order to clarify their ideas about the message they want to give to the reader and correct some possible mistakes. In addition, Students should try to make every day the workbook exercises in order to practice what they have learned in classes, if they do not have a workbook, they must read the textbook to better understand each topic.

Furthermore, students should not be afraid of asking any question to the teacher. He/she is the one that will help them to understand the different topics and clarify doubts. Finally, Students should look for more information in magazines, books or the internet if the explanation about a specific topic was not clear enough; there is a lot of teaching material and websites related to writing that will be very helpful for them.

Overall, these recommendations are intended to help students achieve better results in their writing skills.

5. Conclusions

It can be said that the most difficult aspect that was found in the students' writing is the language use and vocabulary aspects, and conversely they found no difficulties in grammar and sentence structure. Students' problems in writing may occur because of many factors. One of the causes for the challenge might be the complex nature of the writing skill itself. Byrne (1988; 4) states that certain psychological, linguistic and cognitive factors make writing a complex and difficult discourse medium for most people in both native and second language. So, this study is an attempt to identify problems that university students face when they write in English, and suggest ways of overcoming those difficulties.

REFERENCES

1. Albert R. Kitzhaber. (1963), *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: Teaching of Writing college*: New York.
2. Andrew D. Cohen, & Marcelo C. Cavalcanti. (1990), *Feedback on compositions: Teacher and student verbal reports*. In *Second Language Writing: Research Insights for the Classroom*. Ed.B.Kroll. Cambridge: CUP,155-77.
3. Ann Raimes. (1983), *Technique in Teaching Writing*: Oxford University Press, New York.
4. Berlin A. James. (1987), *Rhetoric and reality: Writing instruction in American colleges*. books.google.com.
5. Donald Byrne. (1988), *Teaching Writing Skills*. London: Longman Press.
6. Judith Bell, and Burnahy, B. (1984), *Handbook for ESL Literacy Toronto*: OISE Writing Oxford University Press.
7. Tricia Hedge. (1988), *Writing*: Oxford University Press.
8. Vivian Zamel. (1985), *Responding to student writing: TESOL*. Quarterly 19: 79-101.
9. William Grabe, and Robert B. Kaplan. (1996), *Theory and Practice of Writing: An Applied Linguistic Perspective*. Longman, New York.

Một số khó khăn trong kỹ năng viết của sinh viên năm thứ nhất và năm thứ hai (Trường Đại học Sài Gòn)

Tóm tắt: Mục đích của nghiên cứu này là xác định các vấn đề về viết bằng tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm thứ nhất và năm thứ hai và đề xuất cách giải quyết những vấn đề này tại Trường Đại học Sài Gòn. Một mẫu ngẫu nhiên gồm 100 sinh viên đã được chọn cho nghiên cứu này. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên gặp nhiều khó khăn khi viết bao gồm vốn từ vựng hạn chế, kỹ năng viết chưa tốt và khó diễn đạt bằng tiếng Anh. Dựa trên những phát hiện này, một số khuyến nghị được đề xuất, bao gồm khuyến khích học sinh lập dàn ý hoặc bản nháp trước khi viết đoạn văn hoặc bài luận tiếng Anh.

Từ khoá: kỹ năng viết; năm thứ nhất; năm thứ hai; những khó khăn; kỹ thuật.