

EFL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN WRITING VSTEP ESSAYS

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Abstract. This paper reports the results of a study on the challenges Vietnamese English-major students face in academic writing. The study investigated students' problems, especially with writing discussion essays in the Vietnamese Standardization Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP), and the internal factors causing these problems. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this study. The participants' writing performance (n = 40) was examined against four criteria of the VSTEP writing test: task fulfillment, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. The internal factors causing writing problems were identified through semi-structured interviews with five students. The results indicated that the participants struggled most with organizing ideas, task fulfillment, and lexical employment. The least challenging criterion was grammar. In addition, four key factors were found to be the sources of writing problems: limited background knowledge, lack of writing practice, high writing anxiety, and low motivation. The study also suggests pedagogical implications for improving the quality of teaching and learning academic writing in Vietnam and similar contexts.

Keywords: Academic writing, EFL students, Influential factors, Problems, VSTEP.

1. Introduction

In today's globalization and integration contexts, English is an essential tool for communication and interaction across cultures. English is widely used in many fields, such as education, tourism, engineering, business, etc. The need to communicate in English is evident because English is officially utilized in international education, aviation, meetings, conferences, and other contexts [1].

Among the four language skills, writing holds particular importance, and different scholars have defined it in various ways. Writing is, in essence, a way of communication, and good writing conveys thoughts from one individual to others without losing or distorting ideas [2]. However, writing in English is a challenging skill. It is not a simple cognitive activity but a complex psychological production that requires careful thought, discipline, and concentration [3]. Additionally, students must brainstorm and arrange their ideas, which is the greatest challenge: transforming them into coherent English texts [4]. Writing involves conscious mental work since we "think out" sentences and examine ways to combine and arrange them. Moreover, writing has

become an increasingly important skill in promoting learners' awareness of a second language. It requires much work, practice, knowledge synthesis, and writing strategy use [5, 6, 7, 8].

At the tertiary level, academic writing is a common requirement. Researchers have indicated that the genre of discussion essays is the most challenging type of writing. Student writing in this genre must present arguments for and against rigorous statements. Forming an argument involves examining for genuine proof to support a claim or a thesis statement. However, EFL students find it challenging to create a strong argument because it involves supporting a position with facts to persuade readers to take a particular action or embrace a specific viewpoint based on a debate [6].

In Vietnam, academic writing instruction has been a priority and has become a requirement for many university majors. Learners need to take courses regarding academic writing and take standardized tests like the VSTEP to meet their university's graduation standards. Consequently, learners at the tertiary level also encounter problems in academic writing. Challenging areas include linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, and coherence), organization and creation of an argumentative essay, and critical thinking [8, 9, 10, 11].

However, the findings of most previous studies seem inadequate in covering all of the difficulties in academic writing or cannot provide an in-depth understanding of internal factors that learners encounter in academic writing, especially in writing discussion essays. Therefore, the current research attempted to gain practical insights into teaching and learning academic writing, especially discussion essays, based on the VSTEP framework. It is argued that examining the learners' challenges and possible causes as revealed in their performance and reports, in a contextualized setting, focusing on VSTEP-oriented discussion essays, is worthwhile.

The study's primary purpose was to investigate the problems and the perceived factors causing those problems in academic writing faced by EFL learners at the tertiary level. The researchers attempted to answer the following questions:

RQ1. What problems do Vietnamese students encounter when writing VSTEP essays?

RQ2. What factors are perceived to be associated with the students' challenges?

2. Content

2.1. Methodology

2.1.1. Research Design

To achieve the research aims, the study followed a descriptive design. It was designed as a mixed-method research study combining quantitative and qualitative methods, including an essay writing test and semi-structured interviews. Integrating quantitative and qualitative methods would be a reasonable attempt to provide a more thorough knowledge of the problem than just applying a stand-alone method [12].

The essay writing test was administered to students to examine their difficulties in writing VSTEP essays. Besides, semi-structured interviews were performed to detect the internal factors causing the participants' problems in academic writing.

2.1.2. Participants

This research involved 40 English-majored sophomores (25 females and 15 males) from a university in the Mekong Delta. The inclusion of participants was random, and the participants were at that time studying in an intact class taught by one of the authors. All participants were studying in the same class and were between 19 and 20 years old. Most participants were expected to have an English writing proficiency equivalent to the intermediate level because they had previously studied two courses in their freshman year: Writing One and Writing Two on sentence and paragraph writing, respectively. At the time of this study, the students also completed the

course Writing Three, which concentrated on essay writing. Moreover, all the participants had learned how to write a discussion essay, so they were familiar with this genre of writing.

Five participants (20% of the study's sample) were selected for semi-structured interviews, conducted after completing the writing test, with the test scores having been released. The selection of these interviewees was based on convenience and voluntariness.

2.1.3 Instruments

The study used two instruments: (1) a VSTEP writing test and (2) semi-structured interviews.

Writing test

In the writing test, students were required to write a 250-word essay presenting their point of view on the tendency to live alone nowadays. The participants' writing performance was scored using the VSTEP framework, which includes four criteria: task fulfillment, organization, vocabulary, and grammar.

Two experienced (not the authors of this article) VSTEP writing teachers were asked to mark the participants' tests to obtain objective and reliable results. Each rater was trained and asked to score the essays independently, with clear grading instructions and the VSTEP marking rubrics consisting of four criteria: (1) Task fulfillment, (2) Organization, (3) Vocabulary, and (4) Grammar (see details in Appendix). The inter-rater reliability was ensured by comparing the scores, where the cases with differences larger than 'one' necessitated communication between the two raters and the involvement of a third rater to reach a compromised final score.

Semi-structured interviews

The study used seven open-ended questions developed by the researchers for interviews. The primary reason for conducting the semi-structured interview was that the researchers intended to explore the potential factors that lead to problems when writing VSTEP essays. In addition, some questions were also designed to remind the participants of the challenges they encountered while taking the writing test. Furthermore, a final question was about students' perceived solutions and suggestions to help minimize and overcome issues related to VSTEP writing.

The interviews lasted around twenty minutes each. All interviews with participants were fully audio-recorded and transcribed. The questions were asked in Vietnamese to make the interviewees feel comfortable and confident in delivering as much information as possible.

2.2. Results and Discussions

2.2.1 Writing Test Scores

A descriptive test was run to check the minimum, maximum, and mean scores of the four criteria performed by the participants on the essay writing test. Table 1 displays the results of the test.

Table 1. Learners' performance in the writing test (N=40)

Test Criteria	Min	Max	Mean	SD
TASK FULFILLMENT	3.0	7.0	5.00	1.27
ORGANIZATION	3.0	8.0	4.60	1.37
VOCABULARY	3.0	8.0	4.94	1.29
GRAMMAR	3.0	8.0	5.21	1.43
Overall average score	3.0	7.80	4.94	1.28

As can be seen from Table 1, the mean score for grammar ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.43$) is the highest. This result indicates that this criterion is the least difficult to meet. In contrast, the mean score of the criterion organization ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 1.37$) is the lowest. This means that the participants encounter problems when organizing ideas for writing a discussion essay. Task

fulfillment and vocabulary are two criteria with relatively high mean scores, indicating that these areas are not challenging for the students.

Table 2. Comparison between the two genders

	N	Mean	t	p
MALE	15	4.56		
			-1.46	0.15
FEMALE	25	5.17		

For additional information about the performance of male versus female students, which may be helpful in terms of pedagogical practice, we made a comparison based on gender. Specifically, an independent samples t-test was run to analyze the difference in the mean scores of the two gender groups regarding their test grades. The result (see Table 2) indicates no statistically significant difference between the two mean scores ($t = -1.46$, $p = 0.15$). Thus, it can be seen that the participants' test performance was the same, regardless of gender.

2.2.2 Insights from Interviews

The interviewees' responses revealed the following causes of their writing problems: lack of background knowledge, little practice, high writing anxiety, and low motivation.

Lack of background knowledge

The interviewees reported that a lack of background knowledge was their most challenging factor. This is in congruence with Kellogg's ideas that expertise is essential in language tasks, especially vital for writing [13]. For discussion essays, learners must possess social knowledge and updated news to support their arguments, enrich logic, and convince readers.

Interviewee 2 indicated his awareness of the importance of background knowledge, saying
... The problem that I encounter is a lack of background knowledge. That is why, when I start writing a short paragraph in English, I often struggle and do not know where to start writing.

Interviewee 3 shared a similar opinion: background knowledge is essential in essay writing.
In my opinion, the lack of background knowledge is an essential factor that affects how we write an essay. Without it, we will not know how to arrange it appropriately and accurately.

Interviewee 5 also viewed background knowledge as crucial to her writing performance.
I think the most crucial factor is background knowledge. A lack of background results in inauthentic, unrealistic writing and ideas that are not persuasive, even if they exist.

The excerpts above show that the students are aware of background knowledge as vital to writing an essay. Without background knowledge, writers cannot convey ideas on a topic and produce irrelevant arguments. For a better discussion essay, learners need to understand social knowledge better and keep up with topical issues to enhance the vigor of their writing.

Lack of writing practice

In addition, infrequent writing was considered a barrier to improving essay quality. Failing to maintain a regular writing habit can confuse students when they are asked to write an essay.

Interviewee 3 shared this view, stating
I don't have a habit of reading and writing often, so when I start writing, I struggle to organize my ideas and refine my sentences to be reasonable and appropriate.

Interviewee 1 also agreed that the lack of practice was her biggest challenge when writing a discussion essay. She said,

Lacking practice is the most influential factor in my writing when I write a discussion paper. Our writing ability improves with practice, and the teachers point out mistakes so I can correct them for the next lesson, even though I lack vocabulary.

Interviewee 4 mentioned she encountered the same challenge: “The lack of practice significantly influences my problems when writing a discussion essay.”

As seen in the excerpts, a lack of writing practice causes many troubles and affects learners’ writing performance. Limited exposure to writing makes it difficult for learners to sharpen sentences correctly and in context. Therefore, the ability to write will be constrained.

Writing anxiety

One of the factors mentioned in interviews is the fear of making mistakes. For instance, anxiety in writing is described as students’ tendency to avoid the process, especially when they know that they are to be assessed in some way. When students have an idea in mind, they do not dare to express it for fear of judgment, criticism from others, or fear of low scores. This anxiety hinders writing fluency, and students tend to be worried about making grammatical mistakes.

Interviewee 4 stated her view as follows.

[...] being afraid of making grammatical mistakes, so when I wrote, I had to think for a long time, not knowing how to use words correctly.

Interviewee 2 also encountered anxiety in writing in English:

My biggest problem is that I am afraid to write in English. I find essay writing much more complicated than speaking skills because sentences have to be academic and coherent. So, whenever I face a writing test, I feel a bit more stressed than other students.

Anxiety is regarded as one of the affective elements that significantly impact EFL writing. The leading causes of this fear are often related to low grammar and vocabulary self-esteem, and strict academic and coherence requirements.

Lack of writing motivation

The last factor affecting learners’ writing performance is the lack of motivation. One manifestation of this problem is a delay in writing or writing only when required or for exams.

Interviewee 5 expressed her opinion on motivation when writing essays.

I lack motivation because I usually focus on listening and speaking until I have exam pressure to practice writing.

Interviewee 3 shared his point of view on how the factor could be solved as follows.

[...] To overcome this problem, I think I should find my passion and interest in learning this language skill well in the future.

Lack of motivation to write contributes significantly to learners’ writing performance. Motivation can be generated when pressure from writing tests or exams approaches. To overcome this factor, learners must find a passion for regular practice.

Students’ responses revealed that academic writing, in general, and discussion essay writing in VSTEP, in particular, caused many difficulties for EFL learners at the tertiary level. First, organizing ideas for an essay was the students’ biggest weakness, as seen in the writing test performance. On the one hand, the students were stuck with ideas. They could not come up with sufficient ideas to write about due to a lack of background knowledge on the given topic. On the other hand, some students had ideas to write but failed to organize them logically and adequately. Therefore, the results of the essay were poor because the writing content was not rich, and the information was not effectively presented. Secondly, the students were challenged by a lack of vocabulary knowledge and fluency. Without sufficient vocabulary, not much can be conveyed. As a result, they could not fully, accurately, and flexibly convey their ideas and messages to their readers. Thirdly, many of the written texts of students did not meet the task fulfillment. In other

words, all aspects of the topic were not fully answered. In addition, most essays were short, with less than 250 words as required, leading to the main ideas not being fully developed. Finally, a few students showed limited grammatical competence, which was also a hindrance to effective writing. The students tended to write incomplete sentences, use inappropriate conjugation, and lack cohesive devices, which resulted in low accuracy and coherence.

To sum up, the learners in the study reported encountering the obstacles above due to several factors such as a lack of background knowledge, a lack of writing practice, a fear of making mistakes, and a lack of writing motivation. Regarding the lack of background knowledge, students lacked sufficient ideas and thoughts about the topic. As such, essays were often sketchy due to the lack of relevant evidence and vaguely supported ideas. Similarly, many learners lacked writing practice. They only wrote for exams and did not learn to form a regular writing habit. This lack of practice may lead to their writing style being heavily characterized by spoken language. Besides, learners also had a fear of making mistakes when writing. The writing challenges encountered by students were, nevertheless, basically similar across different types of test formats: academic and VSTEP-oriented. However, writing in VSTEP is more likely to be demanding and still unfamiliar to the students. This suggests a need for teachers' intensive facilitation and practice opportunities to get learners familiarized with this new test orientation.

3. Conclusion

Academic writing, in general, and writing VSTEP essays are considered challenging tasks for EFL learners. At the tertiary level, discussion essays are at the core of the writing curriculum. This study investigated challenges in academic writing encountered by EFL English majors and the significant factors causing these challenges. The results revealed that EFL students struggled with organizing ideas, followed by task fulfillment, vocabulary, and grammar, while writing discussion essays. The results also indicated several internal factors causing these challenges, among which a lack of background knowledge was considered the primary source of writing problems. In light of the research findings, several pedagogical implications were drawn for university-level teaching and learning discussion essays.

Learning academic writing, including writing with VSTEP, requires much effort, time, commitment, and support. Inexperienced learners and those with limited exposure to the genre of discussion essays should consider the implications mentioned below to enhance the quality of their essays. The study's results clearly show that the lack of background knowledge causes the biggest obstacles for learners. Therefore, a recommended strategy for learners is to regularly update their understanding of social issues from newspapers, television, social networks, and other sources on the Internet. In addition, reading sample essays from VSTEP preparation books, essays from friends, instructors, and online websites can help develop and organize ideas reasonably and coherently. The more they read, the more critical they can become, and so the learners can develop their evaluation skills, which is extremely useful when practicing writing a discussion essay.

Another factor that contributes significantly to the quality of essays is the accuracy and variety of vocabulary used. Generally, learners with low scores often make repeated mistakes owing to limited vocabulary and inappropriate use of context. To improve this, students should not only practice reading essays on social and daily life topics but also develop methods to memorize vocabulary deeply, such as spaced repetition, paper flashcards, or online and mobile applications.

Good grammar is also a mandatory requirement to evaluate essay quality. As with the vocabulary criterion, raters will rely on rationality and various grammatical structures to determine the scale of the essay. Therefore, learners need to improve their grammar skills through the support of teachers, friends, and more proficient people. In addition, reading and then

imitating what has been learned through writing and speaking also helps students inculcate the learned structures.

Teachers should be aware of the problems that learners face when writing discussion papers. They should constantly update their teaching methods with the latest writing techniques to increase their effectiveness. In addition, argument-focused activities such as debates should be encouraged in writing classes and English clubs to create opportunities for students to present and defend their views and enhance critical thinking, which is essential in academic writing.

This study had limitations that need acknowledgment. The number of participants was insufficient to achieve a broader generalizability of the findings. Only five students participated in the interviews. Therefore, the study's findings cannot be fully applied to all students at the tertiary level in Vietnam. The current research just focused on the problems faced by English major sophomores from a learner perspective. Further research should incorporate instructors' viewpoints for a holistic understanding of the issue.

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Appendix – VSTEP Writing Criteria / Rubrics

Task Fulfillment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assessing the candidate's ability to perform tasks as required by the question. Candidates are assessed on their ability to understand and respond correctly to the questions and requirements of the question.• Candidates need to present their opinions and arguments clearly and convincingly, closely related to the question and the required scope.• The clarity and completeness of the written content will be assessed, ensuring that there is no digression or jumping to unrelated topics.
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assessing the candidate's ability to organise and structure their writing in a structured and logical manner. Ideas, stories, and arguments in the writing should be organised in a coherent and connected manner.• Coherence between ideas and arguments should be established to ensure clarity and ease of understanding for the reader.• Candidates should use organizational techniques such as paragraphs, stories, or comparisons to clarify ideas and arguments, ensuring effective communication of information.
Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assessing the candidate's ability to use appropriate, varied, and rich vocabulary. Vocabulary choice reflects the candidate's linguistic ability and vocabulary wealth.• Candidates need to use vocabulary accurately and in the proper context to convey ideas, arguments, and detailed descriptions.• Creativity and flexibility in the use of words will be assessed, ensuring the variety and accuracy of vocabulary in the writing.
Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assessing the candidate's ability to use English grammar accurately and flexibly. Correct use of grammar is essential to communicating ideas, arguments, and information clearly and effectively.• Candidates are required to use correct grammatical structures, including tenses, sentence forms, comparative structures, conditionals, inversion structures, and clauses.• Accuracy in the use of grammar will be assessed, ensuring accuracy and logic in communicating ideas and arguments.

(Source: Testing Center, University of Foreign Languages, VNU)