



SOME COMMON PROBLEMS IN WRITING ESSAYS OF ENGLISH MAJORED SOPHOMORES AT A UNIVERSITY IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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Abstract:

Writing essays is said to be an indispensable part of English writing, which partly contributes to the success of learning English and real-life as well. It is also a basic skill in writing. However, learners usually have problems during their learning process. Therefore, this research, titled "Some Common Problems in Writing Essays of English Majored Sophomores at a University in the Mekong Delta," was conducted to figure out common problems in writing essays by students majoring in English. The participants of this research were 85 English-majoring sophomores at Tay Do University. The two main research instruments for collecting the data were the questionnaire and the interview. The findings of the research would point out the students' problems in linguistics, including grammar and vocabulary, writing styles, idea arrangement, background knowledge and other problems.

Keywords: common problems, writing essays, English majored sophomores

1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

Since English is widespread and useful, it has long been an international language. "English is the most important language in the world because it is the only language that truly links the whole world together" (Kumar, 2009). English has become an effective tool of

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communication for people from different first language backgrounds. Thanks to English, people on the Earth can understand each other, so they can exchange many materials and cultural and spiritual values from their own countries. Specifically, in Vietnam, English is widely used and it has been chosen as a compulsory foreign language in the education system.

In the English study process, it is necessary to master four skills, including writing, listening, speaking, and reading, especially writing. Writing is a specialized skill to express ideas and communicative aims by using written language and a standard of text. According to Carol (1990), "*The most important invention in human history is writing.*" It provides a relatively permanent record of information, opinions, beliefs, feelings, arguments, explanations, theories, etc. In particular, essay writing is one the important topics because it requires writers to have basic necessary knowledge and skills. The essay is also considered the standard form of writing for most students. The ability to write essays supports students in their studies, especially in getting scholarships.

However, essay writing is not an easy task. It is certain that essay writing is harder for writers who study English or a foreign language like Vietnamese. Most learners reveal that they always have problems with writing essays, especially with some problems related to linguistic knowledge, styles, background knowledge, and so on. In fact, they do not innovate in their study method and acquire their background knowledge. For example, learners are used to studying in a safe way, using the same structures and some vocabulary that they know or remember well. Moreover, learners' essays tend to be short and unconvincing because of a lack of knowledge related to topics. Another point is that there are some problems with the study methods of students. However, it is hard for students to recognize their drawbacks when approaching a writing subject.

Consequently, this current research was conducted to figure out the problems of English majors sophomores at Tay Do University in writing essays. Afterwards, students can realize their own problems and find some suitable solutions in order to improve their writing skills.

1.2 Research aims

This research aimed to investigate problems in the writing essays of English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University. Thanks to recognizing their own problems, they are able to find some suitable solutions for themselves.

1.3 Research question

The research was conducted to deal with the research question.

- What are the common problems in writing essays for English sophomores at Tay Do University?"

1.4 The significance of the study

This research was expected to help students realize their problems in English writing essays, particularly English-majored sophomores at Tay Do University. Thanks to this,

students can find some useful solutions or update some study methods to improve and innovate their writing skills.

2. Literature review

2.1 Overview of writing

2.1.1 Definition of writing

The concept of "writing" is defined differently in different research and even in same-topic research. Writing is a process of encoding (putting messages into words) with render in mind (Byrne, 1988). *"Writing is communicating. Good writing gets your ideas out of your head and into the reader's head without losing or distorting those ideas"* (Leki, 1976, p.4). According to Chakraverty and Gautum (2000), writing is defined as *"a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topic and to analyze and classify any background knowledge."* Then, writers need a suitable language to structure these ideas in the form of coherent discourse. To sum up, writing is an expression of the mental process and a means of communication as well. Writing helps writers use their own language to express, analyze, prove, or convince others about a specific topic in a structured form.

2.1.2 The importance of writing

"Writing can be considered as an effective tool for the development of academic language proficiency as learners are more ready to explore advanced lexical or syntactic expressions in their written form" (Warschauer, 2010:3). Bello (1997) indicated that writing, as a productive skill, plays an essential role in promoting language acquisition as learners' experiment with words, ideas, and large chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they learn in class. When students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learned to say and take risks. In addition, writing has always been considered an important skill in teaching and learning. It motivates students' thinking, organizes ideas, and develops their ability to summarize, analyze, and criticize. Moreover, it strengthens students' learning, thinking, and reflection on the English language.

2.2 Definitions of essays

An essay has been defined in a variety of ways. According to Faraj et al. (2008), essays can be about almost anything. They can be speculative, factual, or emotional; they can be personal or objective, serious or humorous. In order to develop in writing and vary the types of writing products, it is necessary to learn how to write a typical essay. A typical essay includes its elements: its beginning, body, closing, structure, and so on. An essay is very similar to a paragraph in its organization and order, but an essay includes more information and depth about the topic (from Great Paragraph to Great Essay, 2001). Brandon (2005) defined an essay as a group of paragraphs, each with the function of supporting a controlling idea called the thesis. In brief, an essay is a piece with several paragraphs written about a subject that is used to express an author's personal point of

view. The academic essay is one of the most common assignments English majors are asked to write at university.

2.3 Some common problems in writing essays

2.3.1 Problems in terms of grammar

Numerous studies about the problems in terms of grammar that students face in writing have been conducted. Some focused on grammatical range, and others paid attention to grammatical accuracy. It was found that grammar was extremely important in conveying accurate messages and key grammatical forms, including tenses, voices, modals, articles, nominalization, and logical connectors (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). The study of Kambal (1980) in three types of compositions written by first-year Sudanese university students focused on the errors in verb phrases and noun phrases. The findings of this study revealed that the third-person singular marker was used redundantly and the incorrect form of the verb "to be." A 1998-2002 study by Izzo noted that students' essays tended to contain grammatical features inappropriate for academic writing (i.e., inaccurate sentences and clauses or reoccurrences of specific mistakes). Besides, the variety of grammar points is also an obstacle for students in the learning process. They cannot remember which grammar point to use in specific situations. In some cases, students use incorrect structures because of the appearance of many grammar points. They misunderstand the usage of one structure for another structure. Moreover, the grammatical rules of the English language are not the same as those of Vietnamese grammar, which brings difficulties for students to use them proficiently. According to Nguyen (2013), "*the grammar of their mother tongue seems to be deeply rooted in their minds, so students tend to infer their mother tongue structure to the structure of the foreign language*". Therefore, students' bad grammar leads to unclear meaning in their writing performance in an academic style. In summary, as seen in literature, grammar is an element that cannot be neglected if students want to master writing skills, especially in essays.

2.3.2 Problems in terms of vocabulary

In a new language learning process, people must start learning the vocabulary of that language. Researchers have been studying the important role of vocabulary in academic writing for over twenty years. Most of them agreed that lack of vocabulary was the main problem learners had in writing skills, especially in essays, because "*without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed*" (Thornbury, 2002:33). Lack of lexical variety is also a remarkable problem students face in writing their papers. They did not add any new information to the text because they lacked the words to express their ideas (Zughoul & Husain, 1985). In addition, students often lack the necessary vocabulary when they start showing what they think in specific situations. As a result, students will be unable to express their ideas freely and accurately because of their limited vocabulary. Furthermore, they also experience difficulties in their ways of using words. Some words may have many meanings in the variety of situations mentioned, or there are some words that have the same meaning. It is hard for students

to choose the appropriate word in particular contexts. Vocabulary is various not only in its amount of words but also in its part of speech. Misunderstanding the parts of speech of words is a common problem. Moreover, students do not often review old words regularly, so they may forget some words they have learned. This is also the main reason why they make mistakes in spelling. In short, vocabulary is considered the major factor that affects the expression of thoughts by students during their writing essays.

2.3.3 Problems in terms of writing styles

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: *"In literature, writing style is the manner of expressing thought in language characteristic of an individual, period, school, or nation."* Writing style concludes with the choice of words, sentence structure, and paragraph structure used to convey the meaning effectively. There are some points that need to be mentioned in this issue. First of all, students usually make mistakes regarding formal and informal forms. There are a lot of words that can be used in a speaking context, but they are unsuitable in academic writing. For example, students use the word "really" instead of the word "very" and they also use slang in their writing. These words are informal in their writing skills. Next, students do not care that using contractions such as "isn't", "it's" and "they're" is not allowed in written form. Therefore, they may make both the wrong structural and grammatical mistakes in their writing. Last but not least, there are several types of writing whose requirements depend on each type of writing. When having many types of writing, especially types of essays accompanied by a range of forms, it is very difficult for students to remember accurately. As a result, their writings will be rejected because they lack standard form and outline. Academic writing style plays an essential role in well-structured essays in academic writing.

2.3.4 Problems in terms of idea arrangement

In learning English, particularly in learning to write, idea arrangement is also an obstacle for students. In fact, students have difficulties organizing their ideas in essays. They do not know how to distinguish between topic sentences and supporting ones. Therefore, they cannot construct a logical paragraph, and this leads to the dissension of the whole essay. Furthermore, students usually translate their ideas from Vietnamese sentences, so their essays have a lot of redundant and unnecessary sentences. To sum up, they cannot get good marks although their essays are too long. Thus, idea arrangement is the issue students need to pay more attention to improve their writing essays.

2.3.5 Additional problems

Apart from the three above problems, these five following problems can affect the quality of writing essays.

2.3.5.1 Background knowledge

This is the problem that makes students have difficulty in showing their opinions because of their lack of general knowledge. Background knowledge is essential to have good

writing skills. It consists of many aspects of practical life such as culture, society, customs and so on. With poor background knowledge, students do not know how to express what they want to say because they lack information about the new topics. Moreover, they cannot build good ideas to attract readers. Besides, students rarely read some materials to enrich their knowledge of various topics in the real world, so they are confused about how to show their thoughts when faced with unfamiliar topics. Thus, they often make readers bored because of their lack of background knowledge in their writing.

2.3.5.2 Learners' writing anxiety

This problem occurs when students are under pressure about their writing assignments. With unfamiliar topics, students tend to quit easily because they lack knowledge. They are afraid that they cannot handle the topic. Then, their minds go blank, so they cannot write anything. This problem is very harmful for learning writing process.

2.3.5.3 Mechanic errors including punctuation and capitalization

Students do not likely care much about these problems because they think they are not necessary. Actually, punctuation is a system of symbols or makings that writers use to clarify relationships between words and groups of words. It is a tool to make the sentences more meaningful and easier to read. There are many types of punctuation, such as apostrophe (’), comma (,), colon (:), full stop (.), question mark (?), and so on. Each punctuation mark has its own function to clarify the sentence. If students ignore these punctuation marks, the meanings of sentences will become unclear. This affects the order of the whole essay structure. Besides, students also capitalize the letters uncontrollably. These mistakes make their essays confusing because it is not recognized where the sentence ends. Uncontrolled capitalization is a bad habit in writing that needs to be changed if students want to enhance the quality of their essays.

2.3.5.4 References

In writing essays, finding information about the topic is very necessary. Students need to look for and choose some reliable reference sources to have an informative and convincing essay. In some cases, students do not find references from books or the internet; they only get information from their teachers or their friends. Then, they add this information into their essay without checking it again.

2.3.5.5 Time management

Students usually complain that they do not have enough time to write a good essay in class, although teachers always give them enough time to write. The reason is that they are unable to manage their time well. They do not know how to divide the time for each part of the essay. They often have trouble developing ideas, so they take a lot of time to think about at the beginning. When they have a few minutes before submitting their essays, they have a lot to write down. If students knew how to manage time well, their essays would be better.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Design

This research was designed with qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the research question stated in Chapter 1. More specifically, 85 English majored sophomores at Tay Do University would be delivered a questionnaire so that information about their problems in writing essays could be collected. Furthermore, twenty students from this sophomore class were randomly selected in order to answer the interview questions. Together, these problems that sophomores were facing were revealed, and some suggestions for dealing with them could be explored.

3.2 Participants

The target was that all English majored sophomores, including English 10A and English 10B, at Tay Do University participated in this research. In fact, there were 93 students; however, only 85 students participated because 8 students were absent. There were 27 males and 58 females. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23. They speak Vietnamese as their mother tongue, and English is considered their foreign language. They have studied English from 8 to 12 years. Their ages and English learning levels are nearly the same, so they shared nearly the same ways of thinking and solving problems. For academic writing 3, the main material for this writing was the book of Mosaic 2, a sliver edition by Laurie Blass and Meredith Pike-Baky, published by McGraw-Hill Education Holdings.

3.3 Instruments

The two kinds of instruments used in this research were (1) a questionnaire and (2) an interview. A questionnaire was used to find out the problems of sophomores in English writing essays because it provides an easy and practical way of collecting data from a large number of people in a short time. Along with the questionnaire, the interview was another helpful tool used to gain more insight into students' thinking.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire included two parts. Part 1 consisted of nine questions aiming to investigate students' backgrounds. They dealt with students' hometowns (rural or urban), students' years of studying English, their frequency of practicing English writing, their attitudes about writing, etc. In part 2 of the questionnaires, there were a total of twenty-nine statements listed in a table. Statements 1, 2, and 3 focused on some viewpoints about writing, especially in essays. In addition, the problems of students when learning to write essays were stated from 4 to 29. Specifically, from 4 to 14 were problems in terms of grammar and vocabulary. Problems relating to writing styles and idea arrangement were referred to in the next four statements (from 15 to 21). Other statements (from 22 to 29) were additional problems that also affected their ability to write essays.

3.3.2 Interview

The interview was constructed to get specific information from the sophomores about writing essays. It consisted of four questions which focused on the importance of writing in general and the problems of writing essays in particular. Students could be free to share their ideas in the interview. Therefore, this research tool helped understand the second-year English major students' attitudes toward difficulties in English writing essays.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

After collecting all the necessary information and ideas from 85 English-majored sophomores via the questionnaire and interview, the data was analyzed. The findings were divided into three groups, including the results of the questionnaire and the results of the interview.

4.1.1 Results of the questionnaire

The findings of the questionnaire were classified into three basic items. The first item was the students' background. The second item was students' attitudes towards English writing and English writing essays. The last one was students' problems with writing essays.

4.1.1.1 Students' attitudes towards learning English writing and English writing essays Students' attitudes towards learning English writing

Nowadays, everyone knows the role of English in our society. However, it cannot be denied the role of four basic subjects in learning English. These four subjects were combined together to help learners master English. In particular, English writing played a fundamental role in expressing thoughts effectively, and it was also a useful tool for getting a good job. Therefore, investigating students' attitudes towards the importance of English writing was helpful in this research. The following figure indicated how studying English writing was important according to students' opinions.

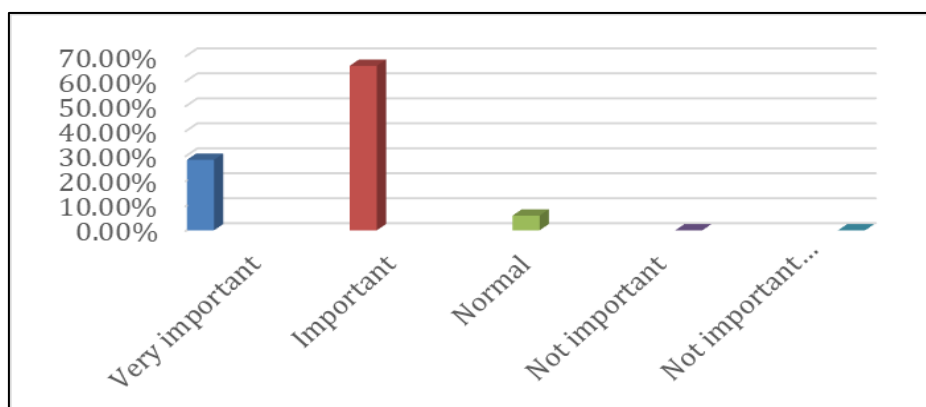


Figure 1: The importance of English writing

From the findings of the figure, there was no doubt that the percentage of the students who thought that English writing was important was up to 94.12% (65.88% of students chose importantly and 28.24% of students chose very important). In addition, none of them (0%) said that English writing was not important at all. The scale “not important” also got 0% in its percentage. This means that students’ awareness of English writing has been raised.

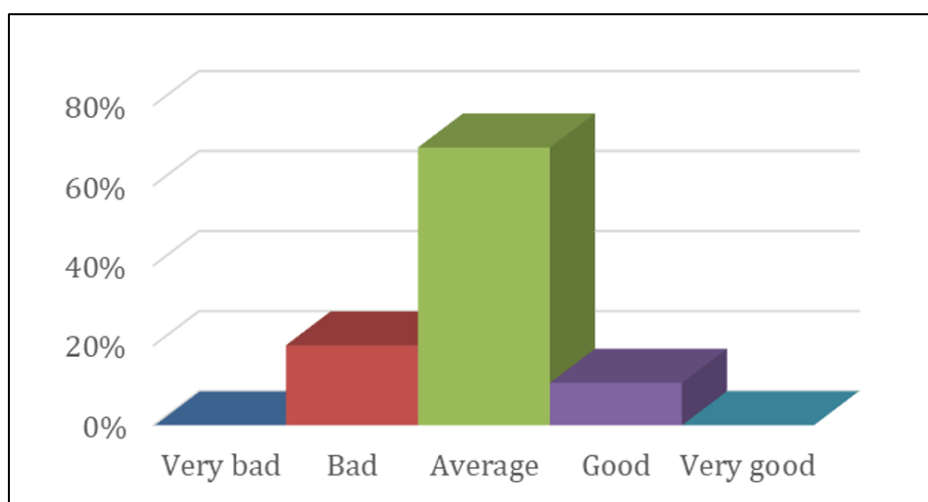


Figure 2: Information about students’ self-evaluation of their writing capability

When being asked "how is your writing skill?", 69.41% of the respondents said that their writing capability was average. 20% of respondents self-evaluated as having poor writing capability. Luckily, no one (0%) was very bad. However, there was also 0% at the very good level. Only 10.59% of respondents confidently evaluated their good capabilities in writing. In addition, from statement 1 below, a total of 72.94% of students (21.18% of students strongly agreed and 51.76% of students agreed) agreed that they were afraid of writing because they often made many mistakes in writing. 17.65% of students did not notice whether writing was difficult for them. The percentage of students who disagreed with this statement was low. In a little more detail, 8.24% of them confidently said that they were not afraid of their writing skills. Only one student (1.18%) strongly disagreed.

Table 1: Students’ attitudes towards English writing

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
1. Writing skill is the one that I am afraid the most because I often make many mistakes in different aspects.	21.18%	51.76%	17.65%	8.24%	1.18%

The next table shows another element affecting students’ listening skills. That was the students’ practicing time.

Table 2: Students' practicing time

Time (per week)	Percentage
5-15 minutes	5.88%
15 minutes-1 hour	35.29%
1-5 hours	43.53%
5-10 hours	9.41%
More than 10 hours	5.88%

The data from the table showed that the percentage of participants who spent from 15 minutes to 5 hours per week practicing their writing skills was higher than other scales in this table. Specifically, 43.53% of participants spent 1–5 hours per week on their practice. Next, 35.29% of them practiced for 15 minutes to 1 hour per week. Meanwhile, only 9.41% of participants spent their time writing for 5–10 hours per week. This percentage was very low. Furthermore, the percentages of students who spent 5–15 minutes per week and those who spent more than 10 hours per week were similar (5.88%). These figures mean that students seemed to realize the importance of the English writing subject and they did practice it regularly. However, they still encountered many difficulties in studying writing despite the fact that they did spend time on it.

4.1.1.2 Students' attitudes towards English writing essays

Essay writing is an important part of academic writing. It was not only a basic writing level but also a necessary part of English writing. If students created good essays, it was actually a great advantage to support them in other higher levels of writing. However, what students would answer when being asked "how do you think about English writing essays?" Take a quick look at Figure 7 to make it clear.

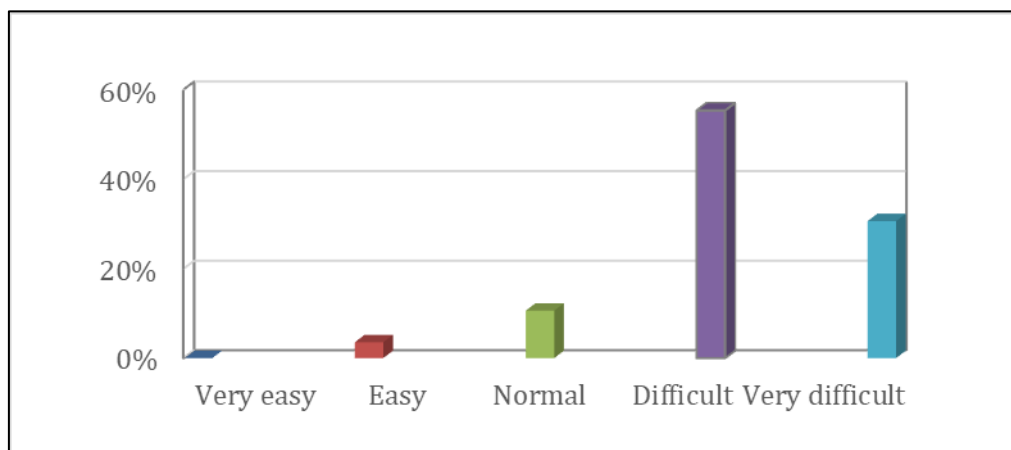


Figure 3: Students' self-evaluation of their writing essays

Obviously, this chart showed that all participants cared about writing essays, and over half of them (85.88%) realized that writing was a difficult part. There were 55.29% of participants who thought that writing essays were difficult, and 30.59% of them felt very difficult in this writing part. The remaining percentage was divided into normal and

easy scales, in which normal accounted for 10.59%. However, only 3.53% of participants chose the easy scale for writing essays. No one (0%) thought that writing essays were very easy. In this chart, the percentage of students who thought writing essays was difficult was higher than on other scales. It meant that second-year students majoring in English were facing difficulties in writing essays. In addition, the next table below will indicate some statistics which show some difficulties facing students as well.

Table 3: Students' attitudes towards English writing essays

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
2. I am able to write a well-structured essay easily with an introduction, a body and a conclusion.	4.71%	27.06%	31.76%	35.29%	1.18%
3. I have a thorough understanding of structuring an essay.	5.88%	29.41%	35.29%	29.41%	0%

Glancing at the table, the number of students who had no idea about these statements was high. It accounted for 31.76% in statement 2 and 35% in statement 3. There were 35.29% of students who said that they were not able to write a well-structured essay easily with three main parts. The percentage of students who agree with statement 2 was totaled at 32% (5% of students strongly agreed and 27% of students agreed). There was only 1 (1.18%) student who strongly disagreed with statement 2. Apart from "neutral" accounting for 35% in statement 3, there were up to 36% of students who agreed that they know how to structure an essay. 29% of students denied statement 3: "I have a thorough understanding of structuring an essay". No one (0%) strongly disagreed with statement 3.

There were 9 aspects which were supposed to affect essay quality, listed in the next table to investigate students' ideas. The table below (Table 3) shows the results of that.

Table 4: Aspects affecting writing essays

Aspects	Students
Grammar	71/85
Vocabulary	42/85
Background knowledge	56/85
Psychological factors	9/85
Idea arrangement	56/85
Mechanics	7/85
Styles	38/85
Time management	10/85

Among the 9 aspects listed in this table, a large number of students mainly chose 6 out of 9 aspects. In particular, 71/85 students supposed that grammar affected essay quality.

56/85 students voted for background knowledge and idea arrangement. The number of students who chose the vocabulary aspect was 42/85. 38/85 students thought that styles of essays also affected the writing of essays. There were three remaining aspects that had a lower percentage of students' choices. They were time management (10/85), psychological factors (9/85), and mechanics (7/85). However, these 9 aspects were all chosen. It meant that these second-year students faced many problems in writing essays.

4.1.1.3 Students' problems in learning English writing essays

a. Problems in terms of grammar

The first obstacle in writing essays was grammar. This part consulted 2 statements and Table 4 below presents the final findings.

Table 5: Problems in terms of grammar

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
4. There are so many structures that I get confused in usage.	17.65%	52.94%	21.18%	18.24%	0%
5. Grammatical points are too multiform for me to remember.	21.18%	67.06%	7.06%	4.71%	0%

In this table, no respondent (0%) selected "strongly agree" in both 2 statements. The first statement in this table stated that students got confused in usage because of many structures. The percentage of respondents who concurred was almost three-fourths (52.94% agreed and 17.65% strongly agreed). 21.18% of them did not have any idea and only 8.24% of them did not agree with this statement. For statement 5, 67.06% of students also admitted that grammatical points were too multiform for them to remember. Thus, students often made mistakes in using grammar. 21.18% of students strongly agreed with this statement. On the other hand, the students having the opposite thought were only 4 people (about 4.71%) and the students who did not give any idea were 6 people (about 7.06%).

b. Problems in terms of vocabulary

Moving to the problems of vocabulary in learning writing essays of English majored sophomore, this table including 7 statements (6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13) was presented as follows.

Table 6: Problems in terms of vocabulary

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
6. I am confident about my spelling in writing.	2.35%	12.94%	38.82%	43.53%	2.35%
7. Sometimes, I have some problems with collocations.	16.47%	62.35%	16.47%	4.71%	0%
8. I also use wrong prepositions because of the difference between Vietnamese and English.	10.59%	61.18%	16.47%	11.76%	0%
9. I cannot express completely my ideas because of lacking vocabulary.	17.65%	61.18%	12.94%	8.24%	0%
10. I am not used to looking up new words when writing.	1.18%	18.82%	24.71%	50.59%	4.71%
11. In my practicing writing, I usually meet difficulties in choosing appropriate words in specific contexts.	14.12%	61.18%	15.29%	9.41%	0%
12. I often misuse some words which have nearly similar spellings.	9.41%	51.76%	17.65%	21.18%	0%
13. I have never used incorrect parts of speech.	1.18%	5.88%	24.71%	51.76%	16.47%

Obviously, from Table 5, no one (0%) strongly disagreed with all the statements in Table 5, except for statements 6 and 10. In statement 6, only 15.29% of students agreed that they were confident in their spelling in writing. In particular, 2.35% of them strongly agreed and 12.94% of them agreed with this statement. In contrast, the number of students who were not confident in their spelling was very high. It accounted for 43.53% of the sum. There were 2 students (about 2.35%) who selected "strongly agree." 38.82% of students selected "neutral" for this statement. Next, statement 7 was about problems in using collocation. Over half of students (62.35%) admitted that sometimes they had some problems with collocations. 16.47% of students responded that they strongly agreed. Besides, the number of students who hesitated about choosing "agree" or "disagree" was the same percentage (16.47%) as for "strongly agree." Statement 8 mentioned using wrong prepositions in the vocabulary aspect. The percentage of students who consented was up to 71.77%, in which 10.59% of students strongly agreed and 61.18% of them agreed with it. On the other hand, 11.76% of students denied that they did not use prepositions correctly because of the difference between Vietnamese and English. The percentage of students who had no idea was 16.47%. The next difficulty was a problem in expressing ideas because of a lack of vocabulary. There were 78.83% of students (17.65% strongly agreed and 61.18% agreed) who totally agreed that they could not express completely their ideas, including 12.94% of them did not have any ideas and only 8.24% of them disagreed with this statement. In statement 10, it was stated about the habit of looking up new words. Over half of students (50.59%) denied that they were not used to looking up

new words when writing. It means that they always looked up new words when they started their writing assignments. 18.82% of the students admitted that they did not look up new words when writing. The other 24.71% of students gave no comment. Only 4.71% of the students strongly agreed with statement 10. Furthermore, in practicing writing, most students usually encounter difficulties in choosing appropriate words in specific contexts. The evidence was that 14.12% of students strongly agreed and 61.18% of them agreed with the statement 11. On the other hand, 9.41% of them did not think that they made these mistakes. There were 13 students who did not give their ideas (15.29%) in this statement. In addition, some words that had nearly similar spellings were also obstacles for students in writing essays (statement 12). In fact, 51.76% of students admitted that they often had these difficulties, and 9% of them entirely consented. However, 21.18% of students rejected that they did not have these problems like that. 17.65% of them gave no comment on this statement. Finally, the last statement had 51.76% of students who protested against the idea that "I have never used an incorrect part of speech." Moreover, the percentage of "strongly disagree" was high (16.47%). 5.88% of students were confident in answering "agree". Only one student (1.18%) selected "strongly agree." The remainders gave no indication in this statement (24.71%).

c. Problems in terms of writing styles

Continuing with another problem that did not belong to the linguistic branches above, 4 statements in the following table were used in order to check whether writing styles cause difficulty that sophomores often encountered.

Table 7: Problems in terms of writing styles

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
14. I do not care much about contractions in writing.	2.35%	11.76%	21.18%	50.59%	14.12%
15. In my essays, I sometimes use spoken language instead of a written one.	7.06%	48.24%	30.59%	12.94%	1.18%
16. In my opinion, all types of essays have the same structure.	2.35%	21.18%	25.88%	44.71%	5.88%
17. It is not necessary to follow strictly the rules of each written essay form.	3.53%	23.53%	40%	31.76%	1.18%

Referring to the table, these figures seemed to be distributed evenly among the 5 scales. There was no scale occupied at 0%. Starting with statement 14, 50.59% of students disagreed and 14.12% of them strongly disagreed that they did not care much about contractions in writing. Meanwhile, the number of students who agreed with this statement was low. In fact, 11.76% of participants agreed and 2.35% of them strongly agreed with this statement. 21.18% of participants had no opinion. With the statement "In

my essays, I sometimes use spoken language instead of written one" (statement 15), there were 7.06% of respondents strongly approved and 48.24% of them approving. 12.94% of the respondents disapproved and only 1.18% strongly disapproved. There were approximately 30.59% of respondents said that they did not know. Next, in statement 16, 44.71% of students thought that there was not the same structure in all types of essays. 5.88% of them strongly protested it. 25.88% of students gave no comment on this statement because they had no idea. Very few of them (2.35%) strongly agreed, and 21.18% of them agreed that types of writing essays had the same structure. In the last statement of this table (statement 17), when the problem was stated, there were 31.76% of students chose "disagree" and only 1.18% of them chose "strongly disagree". The number of students who agreed that they do not need to follow strictly the rules of each written essay form was less than the number of students who denied this idea. It was 23.53% of the total and 3.53% of the students strongly agreed. However, the percentage of students who gave no comment was up to 40%.

d. Problems in terms of idea arrangement

Another point was the obstacle of idea arrangement. To find out problems related to this element, 3 statements numbered 18, 19 and 20 were prepared. The table below showed the results of the statements.

Table 8: Problems in terms of idea arrangement

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
18. I am weak on distinguishing between the topic sentence and supporting sentences.	3.53%	24.71%	29.41%	41.18%	1.18%
19. I am able to arrange ideas logically.	0%	14.12%	18.82%	55.29%	11.76%
20. It is difficult to start ordering ideas.	3.53%	38.82%	37.65%	18.82%	1.18%

First, 42.36% of students (41.18% disagreed and 1.18% strongly agreed) said that they were not weak in distinguishing between topic sentences and supporting sentences (statement 18). In contrast, 28.24% of the students consented to this statement, of which 3.53% of them fully agreed and 24.71% of them agreed. Besides, there were also 29.41% of students who did not have any comments. The next statement mentioned the ability to arrange ideas logically. 10% of participants were confident in this issue. 14.12% of them answered that they had the ability to arrange ideas logically. Over half the of students did not know how to arrange ideas well. Specifically, the percentage of students who disagreed with this statement was up to 55.29%. There were 18.82% of students who had no idea. 11.76% of them said that they strongly disagreed. Similarly, the last sentence (statement 20) was also about idea arrangement. Because arranging ideas logically was

one obstacle for students, they obviously felt uncomfortable whenever they started ordering ideas. In fact, 38.82% of students agreed and 3.53% strongly agreed with this opinion. 37.65% of students did not know whether to choose "agree" or "disagree". However, 17 remainders rejected that ordering ideas was not difficult. It was approximately 19.82% of students chose "disagree" and 1.18% of them chose "strongly disagree."

4.1.1.4 Additional problems

Along with these above problems, the final part was referred to other problems which were supposed to be obstacles blocking students' writing essay ability. Five additional problems were divided into three small groups in order to be followed easily.

a. Problems related to background knowledge and learners' writing anxiety

The first group of this part was about background knowledge and learners' anxiety. All findings of these problems were shown in the following table.

Table 9: Problems related to background knowledge and writing anxiety

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
21. In case of lacking knowledge about some specific fields, I cannot write a convincing and informative essay.	22.35%	55.29%	14.12%	8.24%	0%
22. My mind often goes blank whenever I start to work on English writing.	11.76%	23.53%	35.29%	28.24%	1.18%
23. I feel uncomfortable with unfamiliar topics.	7.06%	36.47%	29.41%	25.88%	1,18%

Starting with statement 21, it was about problems of background knowledge. The number of students who absolutely admitted that they could not write essays well because of a lack of background knowledge was high. Specifically, 22.35% of students strongly consented and 55.29% of them agreed. Thus, the percentage of students who opposed this statement was low. It was 8.24% of the total. No one strongly disagreed. Besides, there were also 14.12% of students who had a neutral viewpoint on this statement. Two remaining statements in Table 8 were related to learners' writing anxiety. In statement 22, 23.53% of participants answered that they did not know what to write when they started writing. 11.76% of them strongly agreed with this problem. However, there were also students who had the opposite opinion. In fact, 28.24% of students disagreed, and 1.18% of them strongly disagreed. In addition, this statement had a high percentage of students who had no comment. It accounted for 35.29% of the sum. With the last statement, "I feel uncomfortable with unfamiliar topics," there were only 2.35% of participants said that they did not feel uncomfortable with unfamiliar topics. Also,

25.88% of them disagreed with this statement. On the other hand, 36.47% of students approved of feeling uncomfortable with strange topics. The percentage of students who strongly agreed was 7.06%. Finally, it was approximately 29.41% of the students were neutral on this statement.

b. Problems related to mechanics and references

The second group presented the problems relating to mechanics and references. Table 9 includes three statements which were listed to collect information about these problems.

Table 10: Problems related to mechanics and references

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
24. I master the usage of punctuation.	4.71%	32.94%	37.65%	23.53%	1.18%
25. I have capitalized the letters uncontrollably.	1.18%	7.06%	9.41%	58.82%	23.53%
26. Most of my reference ideas are mainly from friends and teachers because I do not look for necessary and interesting information from other sources.	4.71%	23.53%	14.12%	45.88%	11.76%

Looking at tables, statements 24 and 25 expose problems relating to mechanics. For the first statement, 32.94% of respondents said that they all knew the usage of punctuation well. 4.71% of respondents strongly agreed with this idea. Nevertheless, there were also 23.53% of students who had the opposite opinion and 1% of them strongly opposed it. Up to 37.65% of students did not have any ideas about this statement. The last statement in this table was about reference sources (statement 26). Most students denied that their reference ideas were not only from friends and teachers but also from other sources. In detail, 45.88% of students disagreed, and 11.76% of them strongly disagreed with this idea. 12 students did not give any ideas. It was approximately 14.12% of the participants. On the other hand, 23.53% of students consented and 4.71% of them fully consented to this statement.

c. Problems related to time management

The last group of this part only referred to time management. The following statements (27, 28, and 29) contained the findings of time management problems.

Table 11: Problems related to time management

Statements	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
27. I spend a lot of time practicing writing.	2.35%	35.29%	41.18%	18.82%	2.35%
28. I cannot complete my writing assignment given in class because I am under pressure to develop enough ideas in limited time.	8.24%	44.71%	24.71%	18.82%	3.53%
29. I do not know how to manage time effectively.	5.88%	35.29%	32.94%	21.18%	4.71%

Based on the responses of the students, more than thirty students spent their time on practicing writing (statement 27). Particularly, 2.35% of students chose “strongly agree” and 35.29% of them chose “agree”. The percentage of students who had no comment was up to 41.18%. The remainder was divided into 18.82% choosing “disagree” and 2.35% choosing ‘strongly disagree’. Continuing to statement 28, there were totally 52.95% of participants approved that they could not complete their writing in class because they were under pressure of developing enough ideas in a limited time. In detail, 8.24% of students strongly agreed and 44.71% of them agreed. The percentage of students who protested this statement was 18.82% and only 3.53% of them strongly opposed it. 16 remainders were dispassionate in this statement. The last statement mentioned managing time effectively. 35 students had an agreement with it (5.88% of students strongly agreed and 35.29% of students agreed). Yet, there were up to 32.94% of them hesitated to choose whether they should have agreed or disagreed. Nevertheless, 21.18% of students denied and 4.71% of them strongly denied this statement.

4.1.2 Results of the interview

After the data from the questionnaire were collected, the interviews were conducted on 20 English majors sophomores. This interview aimed to collect and gain insight into the participants’ thoughts and ideas. The results of this interview were in accordance with the results of the questionnaire. First of all, when asking the participants about the role of English writing skills in their studying process as well as in current society, all of them gave answers that met the researcher’s expectations. All of the students said that English writing skills were not only important but also necessary for them at some points. In their learning process, they believed that writing supported them a lot. Specifically, writing was a way of effectively applying their linguistic knowledge, which they had learned, into practical contexts. Students shared that writing was a basic tool for expressing their ideas or presenting some issues on paper. In addition, ten students thought that having a good ability to write helped them create impressive curriculum vitae. It would be a great advantage for them to get ideal jobs. In current society, students said that writing was a useful tool for indirect communication. It included writing letters, presenting or saving important information on paper that speaking could not do. Some of the students

thought that writing was a way of communicating between people in society and work. In addition, mastering writing skills could prove their ability. Second, when being asked whether writing essays was difficult for students, only three students thought that writing essays was not difficult. These students explained that they have been learning English writing for a long time, so they were able to write an essay easily. However, seventeen students answered "yes." There were several reasons given to explain this question. A statement from one student said, "Writing an essay was not simply writing ideas on paper. It required combining a lot of elements. In fact, students listed several obstacles blocking their ability to write essays. Using wrong structures and lacking vocabulary were stated at first. The next point was the difficulty in arranging ideas. They said that their essays were usually short and unconvincing because they lacked ideas about specific topics. Students found it difficult to find some reliable reference sources. For the third question, "What problems have you faced in writing essays?", 12/20 students mainly listed grammar and vocabulary as their main problems. In particular, they stated that they often used ungrammatical structures and they used some basic structures because of a lack of grammar knowledge. For vocabulary problems, they said that they had trouble choosing suitable words, using wrong parts of speech or wrong collocation, lacking vocabulary to express ideas, and misunderstanding the usage of prepositions. In addition, background knowledge, writing styles, and idea arrangement were also problems for students. Last but not least, question 4 in the interview investigated which was the most common facing problem based on students' opinions. Most students considered grammar as their most common problem. There were six students who noticed that they usually made mistakes in vocabulary. Besides, a few students often have difficulty arranging ideas and lack background knowledge. These listed problems were obstacles affecting students' learning processes, especially in developing their writing essay ability.

4.2 Discussion

Based on these results in this chapter, most of the English-major sophomores on course at Tay Do University were from rural areas, which brought many disadvantages to them. There was no rejection that they were not accustomed to the subject of writing since the study method in rural areas focused much on knowledge for examination. Thus, students were under pressure to write when they learned this subject at university. Although their awareness of the importance of writing, especially at essay level, was also raised (94%) and they practiced writing regularly, students usually have difficulties in writing essays. By combining 2 instruments in this research, comprising a questionnaire and an interview, it revealed that the problems of studying writing essays mostly fell on grammar, vocabulary, idea arrangement, writing styles and some other problems.

First, grammar and vocabulary were two of the top-ranking problems of English majored sophomores in writing essays. Students could not remember which grammar point to use in a specific situation. There were various structures in grammar that made students confused about using them. Also, the bad habit in their writing was translating

Vietnamese structures into English without re-arranging the order, so their sentences were not concise and meaningful. Besides, choosing suitable words was a big obstacle for students because they did not know what to choose among some words having the same meaning. Lacking vocabulary was one of the main reasons that made students unable to express their ideas. Furthermore, their essays were not impressive because they often used words that they were familiar with. As a result, one useful solution to these problems could be for students to improve their awareness of learning grammar and vocabulary so that they can remember and study grammar effectively. They also should do more and more exercises relating to English grammar in order to enhance their ability to write essays. Furthermore, students should be taught some new structures or new words that can be used before writing.

Second, based on the finding, it was recognized that idea arrangement was a problem affecting the quality of essays. Students sometimes wrote redundant sentences, which broke the order of their essays. They also had difficulty distinguishing between topic sentences and supporting ones. They tended to write what they thought without noticing the order of the essay and topic. Apart from idea arrangement, writing styles were supposed to be an obstacle for students' writing essays. Their mistakes in writing styles often had to do with contraction, rules of each type of essay, structure of an essay, and using unsuitable words or sentences in essays. Students seemed not to care much about the difference between oral style and written style, so they used unsuitable words or structures in writing essays. To overcome these problems, students should pay more attention to acquiring knowledge about writing styles and the ways of organizing ideas. They should make an outline of what they intend to write before they start. Also, their knowledge of the rules of writing, especially in each type of essay, needs to be improved. They had better learn more about the structures and words used in writing. Students should practice developing and arranging ideas depending on writing styles to get on well with essay writing.

5. Conclusion, Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

English writing skills are not only one of the basic skills in learning English but also an effective tool for recording information on paper. Good writing skills are a great advantage for students in their studies as well as in their future jobs. Besides, writing essays helps students express their attitudes towards a topic or an issue in a logical and convincing order. Therefore, writing essays is a basic writing level that is necessary to support other higher levels of academic writing. However, essay writing is not an easy task. Students encountered many difficulties, which blocked their success. After conducting this research by collecting important information given by these students, the researcher finally found out the most common problems that they had in writing essays. They were problems about knowledge branches, including grammar, vocabulary, and style; idea arrangement; and additional problems consisting of background knowledge,

learners' anxiety, mechanics, references, and time management. Thanks to precious information from the questionnaire and interview, the researcher could draw a conclusion that the problems were mostly from linguistic knowledge, idea arrangement and background knowledge. For example, difficulties in expressing ideas could be drawn from the fact that students lacked vocabulary to show their thoughts or lacked background knowledge about certain topics. Thus, they have to make a lot of effort to overcome their problems. They should spend time on self-study and should learn and use vocabulary regularly. In addition, they should find some ways, like reading newspapers, reading books, watching TV, etc., to gain knowledge of different fields in life to support their writing. Apart from these problems, there were other elements adversely affecting students' writing ability. They could be listed as learners' writing anxiety, time management, and references. Problems related to mechanics were also listed in this research. However, it seemed that students made very few mistakes in these problems. In brief, investigating the problems in English writing essays was a useful method to help English-majored sophomores learn writing effectively. From these mentioned problems, they could propose appropriate resolutions for their improvement. Finally, students appeared to make fewer errors in the remaining problems than in the previous problems. Lacking background knowledge obstructed the developing ideas of students in writing essays. Apart from vocabulary, it was another reason that made students have difficulty expressing their ideas. They could not write a concise and convincing essay. Additionally, other psychological elements had a remarkable influence on their writing. It was learners' writing anxiety. This problem also affected developing ideas. With unfamiliar topics, students who had this anxiety often gave up writing essays early. In addition, students thought that references were necessary for essays. However, some students often had trouble choosing reliable sources, so it was a disadvantage for them. Moreover, students could not balance between parts in their essays because they were not able to manage their time well. They spent a lot of time in the beginning, so that the time for other parts was limited. Therefore, it was necessary to have useful solutions to these problems. Students should update information about different fields in society to gain more and more knowledge to support their essays. Their anxiety will be reduced when they can develop ideas smoothly. In addition, students should have the habit of practicing essays to eliminate anxiety gradually. Practicing with unfamiliar topics was useful for improving background knowledge and strengthening psychology. In the results of this research, very few students made mechanical mistakes. Most of them seemed to know this aspect well.

The results of the questionnaire and interview showed that the most common problems students had were mainly in grammar, vocabulary, writing styles, idea arrangement, and background knowledge. These obstacles block students' ability to create good essays, which are very important to their studies and work. Therefore, students should innovate their study habits and find solutions to overcome the problems so that they can gain a better ability to write essays.

5.2 Implications

The findings of the research revealed that students had many problems in writing essays relating to linguistic knowledge, writing styles, idea arrangement, background knowledge, etc. The researcher hopes that students recognize their weak points so that they can find some suitable methods to enhance their writing essays and writing skills as well. Furthermore, this research is also useful for teachers who want to know what difficulties their students often encounter. From that, they can update some new teaching methods and offer their students suitable materials for learning.

5.3 Limitations

Although the research was instructed and supported enthusiastically by the supervisor and friends, there were still some limitations. In fact, some mistakes in the research are unavoidable because this is the first time ever a researcher has conducted such real research. Specifically, the limitations of this research were the lack of material references and limited knowledge of the topic. In addition, the reliability of this research can be affected because some participants did not focus on fulfilling the questionnaire. However, the researcher hopes that the research will be a valuable reference and useful to both the teachers and the students.

5.4 Recommendations

This research can be seen as a basis for further research in the future. Based on the results of this research, others should go into the details of a larger population consisting of both English-majored students and non-majored students. Additionally, as the researcher already completed the work of pointing out the common problems in writing essays for sophomores, Hopefully, in the near future, there will be some research about solutions to overcome these obstacles. The teachers are also expected to offer some methods to help their students improve their writing skills.

Conflicts of interest of statement

The author's whole names are listed immediately below to certify that they have no conflicts of interest, authorship and disclosures in publication. They confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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