



# Difficulties of Vietnamese Students in Learning Academic Writing

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## ABSTRACT

*Writing is consistently regarded as one of the most challenging language-learning abilities. This paper investigates the challenges Vietnamese students face in learning academic writing in English. Ninety-five students from grades 6 to 12 who have been studying English for several years were surveyed using a questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 14 Likert-scale statements and one multiple-choice question to determine their interests, habits, and perspectives toward learning English. Most participants expressed a keen interest in learning languages but felt that their writing skills in English were not up to par, attributing this to inadequate time spent practicing. As a result, it is suggested that secondary school students in Vietnam increase their writing practice time in English and alter their learning routines and habits accordingly.*

## INTRODUCTION

Academic writing plays a vital role in fostering critical thinking, communication skills, and intellectual development among students. However, despite its significance, many students worldwide encounter challenges when acquiring proficiency in academic writing. For example, [Phuong \(2021\)](#) notes that Vietnamese students frequently encounter difficulties when studying academic writing in English, which may impede their writing ability and academic success. The cultural and linguistic differences between Vietnamese and English present one such difficulty and may impact students' writing in terms of grammar, structure, and cohesiveness ([Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022](#)). In addition, the negative mindset of students toward writing, such as worry and insecurity, may potentially impair their writing abilities ([Akhtar, 2020](#)). The practical problem investigated in this study pertains to Vietnamese secondary school students' difficulties in learning academic writing. Academic writing requires students to demonstrate proficiency in various aspects, such as organization, grammar, vocabulary, and critical thinking. However, several factors, including language barriers, limited exposure to academic writing genres, and inadequate pedagogical support, can impede students' progress in this area. Finding efficient methods to instruct Vietnamese secondary school students in academic writing in English is crucial for overcoming these obstacles. Recent studies have shed light on ESL students' challenges in academic writing. [Kulusakli \(2021\)](#) claims that the frequency students write in English during their spare time positively correlates with how much they love learning the language. Therefore, teachers might add enjoyable and engaging activities into their writing lessons to boost students' interest in and motivation for learning academic writing in English. [Nguyen \(2021\)](#) examined the role of cultural influences on Vietnamese students' writing practices and highlighted the need for a learner-centered approach to address their specific needs. Another study by [Nguyen and Nguyen \(2022\)](#) explored the impact of vocabulary knowledge on writing proficiency and emphasized the importance of vocabulary instruction in academic writing.

Additionally, students' perceptions of their English writing skills improving depend greatly on teachers' direction and feedback ([Wahyuni, 2017](#)). According to [Wahyuni \(2017\)](#), students who received individualized and helpful teacher feedback performed much better on writing tasks than those who did not. Therefore, teachers should give them personalized criticism and guidance to help students write better and feel more confident. Despite these contributions, the existing literature still has limitations in providing a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties faced by Vietnamese secondary school students, particularly about their enjoyment of learning English, the influence of teachers' guidance and feedback, and the most typical challenges they encounter. Although recent studies have shed light on certain aspects of academic writing difficulties among Vietnamese students, there remains a gap in understanding the connections between students' enjoyment of learning English and their frequency of writing in English in their free time.

Additionally, the influence of teachers' guidance and feedback on students' perceived improvement in their English writing skills requires further investigation. Furthermore, there is a lack of research exploring the students' perspectives on the most typical challenges they face while trying to master academic writing in English. Bridging these gaps will provide valuable insights into the factors hindering students' progress and contribute to developing effective pedagogical strategies. The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive exploration of the difficulties faced by Vietnamese secondary school students in learning academic writing, considering various aspects such as students' enjoyment of learning English, teachers' guidance and feedback, and the students' perspectives. By addressing these research questions, this study aims to provide valuable insights to educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers, enabling them to design effective interventions and support mechanisms to enhance students' academic writing skills.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Writing Skills***

According to [Alanazi \(2017\)](#), regardless of one's initial language, writing is perceived as a challenging task. He also acknowledges that becoming a competent writer involves making mistakes and errors. [Nguyen \(2021\)](#) states that writing is the process of conveying thoughts and ideas, widely recognized as a challenging skill to attain proficiency in. [Kwak \(2017\)](#) suggests that learning to write involves explicitly acquiring the mechanics, correct usage, and standard features of academic writing. Finally, [Behizadeh and Engelhard \(2011\)](#) explain that writing involves three main steps: planning, drafting, and revising, and writers must learn how to approach each phase to complete a paper successfully.

### ***Academic Writing***

Vietnamese students, for whom English is a foreign language, may find academic writing particularly challenging due to its requirements for clear structure, concise language, and authentic evidence ([Hyland, 2002](#)). [Hyland \(2002\)](#) also notes that students may view academic writing as an unfamiliar and impersonal communication designed to convey factual information. Additionally, academic writing requires coherence and logical organization to guide readers to the main argument. However, academic writing has various styles and genres, each with specific features such as vocabulary, tenses, and structures. [Porter \(2017\)](#) defines academic writing as the style commonly used in scholarly papers, essays, and journal articles, making it an important skill for students to master.

### ***Roles of Instructions in Learning Writing***

According to [Brumen \(2014\)](#), many English language learners find writing difficult, and their teachers may not always be equipped to help them. Besides, students may struggle with understanding writing structure and organization and feel too shy to ask for help ([Maznun et al., 2017](#)). It can lead to low motivation and focus in writing ([Ying, 2018](#)). Therefore, effective writing instructions can help address these issues by creating a literate classroom environment, using motivation strategies, providing instruction covering a broad range of skills and strategies, and integrating writing across the curriculum ([Graham et al., 2001](#); [Wray et al., 2000](#)). Second-language and foreign-language learners may struggle with grammar and vocabulary at the sentence level ([Paltridge, 2004](#); [Reid, 2006](#)), and the term

"hedge" should not be used as a catch-all term for various features of academic writing ([Crompton, 1997](#)).

### ***Learning Habits***

Good study habits in language learning are crucial for students' success. [Ebele \(2017\)](#) emphasizes that success cannot be achieved without good habits and that students' attitudes toward studying significantly impact their academic achievements. Therefore, students must adopt good study patterns and habits to succeed academically. [Ebele \(2017\)](#) further states that students must strive to change bad study habits to good ones to achieve their academic goals.

### ***Common Mistakes in Writing***

Writers often encounter numerous errors that can be difficult to recognize or classify ([Chaleila, 2019](#); [Junaid & Santaria \(2022\)](#)). These typical mistakes comprise spelling errors, the omission of commas after introductory elements, comma splices, improper word usage, and various others. By avoiding these errors, students can improve their writing skills and academic achievement, as emphasized by [Ebele \(2017\)](#). However, [Sang \(2017\)](#) notes that students' limited proficiency in English writing, including skills, strategies, and perceptions, can negatively affect their academic learning, social interactions, and career development. To summarize, writing is necessary for students to succeed academically and professionally. However, writing can be challenging, especially for second-language learners who may struggle with grammar, vocabulary, and organization. Effective writing instructions and the development of appropriate study habits can assist students in overcoming these obstacles and improving their writing skills. In addition, writing errors such as spelling, grammar, and inappropriate word usage can be rectified through practice and feedback. Understanding the specific issues that Vietnamese students encounter in academic writing is critical to provide focused support and guidance. Students can improve their writing abilities and achieve their academic and professional goals by recognizing these problems and offering appropriate support. Despite the numerous articles and research on writing difficulties, there is a lack of investigation into the specific challenges Vietnamese learners face in academic writing. Therefore, this paper explores why academic writing is challenging for Vietnamese students beyond the identified general difficulties.

## **METHODS**

### ***Research Design***

The current study took a quantitative approach and employed a survey research design. It was held in Vietnam during the 2021/2022 school year at the International Pacific School - Dong Nai (IPS - Dong Nai).

### ***Participants***

A sample of 95 students from grades 6 to 12 was selected. The age range of the participants was between 12 to 18 years, with an average age of 15 years. All participants studied English at IPS Dong Nai for approximately 4 to 6 years.

### ***Instruments***

A questionnaire was used to collect data from secondary school students. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items, with the first three aimed at understanding students' impressions of learning English, especially writing skills, and item 4 aimed at assessing their writing habits. The next three items focused on how teachers guide their students in writing, and the final item aimed to gather the participants' perceptions of their progress. Additional items were included in the questionnaire to explore the difficulties faced by students in learning academic writing based on their perceptions. The questionnaire also included a multiple-choice question regarding the frequency of exposure to English to understand the participants' level of interest and commitment to learning the language.

### ***Procedure***

The questionnaire was distributed to the students during school time, and teachers supervised them while they completed it. Before participating in the study, each student received two consent forms

requiring parental agreement. Then, the teachers spent 5 to 10 minutes observing the participants and collecting the completed questionnaires. All information was kept securely, and it took two days to gather all the data from grades 6 to 12.

### **Data analysis**

The raw data collected from the participants were coded by SPSS, with "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree" being assigned values of 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Descriptive statistics were then used to summarize relevant characteristics and highlight students' common issues with academic writing. Finally, a quantitative method was deemed the most suitable approach for conducting and analyzing the results, given the age and proficiency level of the participants.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Perceptions and habits of respondents regarding their English writing skills.***

**Table 1. Interests and habits of students in learning English writing skills.**

<b>Content question</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Totally Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Totally Disagree</b>
I love to learn English.	1.63	0.74	52.6%	31.6%	15.8%	0.0%
I like writing in English.	1.94	0.60	0.0%	15.8%	63.2%	21.1%
I am good at writing.	2.21	0.69	0%	36.8%	47.4%	15.8%
I often write in English in my free time.	2.32	1.03	26.3%	31.6%	26.3%	15.8%

Table 1 presents the attitudes and behaviors of students toward learning English, a compulsory subject in school. The results showed that most participants strongly agreed or agreed (with a mean score of approximately 1.63) that they were interested in learning English. More than half considered English their favorite subject, while around one-third liked it, and 16% disliked it. Despite the high interest in learning English, the results of item 3 indicated that almost half of the participants disagreed with the statement that they were good writers in English, and 15.8% totally disagreed. No one claimed to be a master in writing. However, 36.8% believed they could write well in English. The results of item 2 showed that more than 63% of students did not enjoy writing in English, with over one-fifth strongly disliking it. Only a small percentage (15.8%) of students enjoyed writing in English. In general, English was a favorite subject of the participants, but item 4 showed that they did not spend much time practicing writing. Therefore, it is recommended that students develop good habits of writing in their free time, as this can help them improve their writing skills significantly.

### ***Significant roles of instructors in guiding students***

**Table 2. Roles of Instructors to Students' learning writing in English**

<b>Content question</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Totally Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Totally Disagree</b>
My English teachers ask me to write a lot.	1.95	0.61	21.1%	63.2%	15.8%	0.0%
My English teachers often help me with my writing.	1.63	0.67	47.4%	42.1%	10.5%	0.0%
My English teachers always collect and fix my writing.	1.684	0.73	47.4%	36.8%	15.8%	0.0%

Teachers and instructors are essential in guiding students to learn writing in English effectively. According to the data collected from question number 5, most participants (63.2%) stated that their

teachers assigned them to write in English frequently, with 21.1% strongly agreeing with this statement and only 15.8% disagreeing. The mean of the responses was 1.947368421, indicating that most students agreed with the statement.

Additionally, almost 90% of the students agreed that their teachers made efforts to guide and support them in learning writing in English, with 47.4% totally agreeing and 42.1% agreeing. The mean of this question was 1.631578947, indicating that most participants strongly agreed with this idea. However, only a small % of students (about 10%) did not acknowledge their teachers' efforts. Furthermore, nearly 50% of students believed that their teachers always provided feedback on their writing assignments, while only 15.8% disagreed with this statement, based on question number 7. In conclusion, despite the students' self-perceived lack of writing skills in English, their teachers demonstrated great dedication and support to help them improve their writing abilities.

### ***Students' Perceptions and difficulties faced by Students in learning academic writing***

**Table 3. Students' Perceptions and Difficulties in learning academic writing**

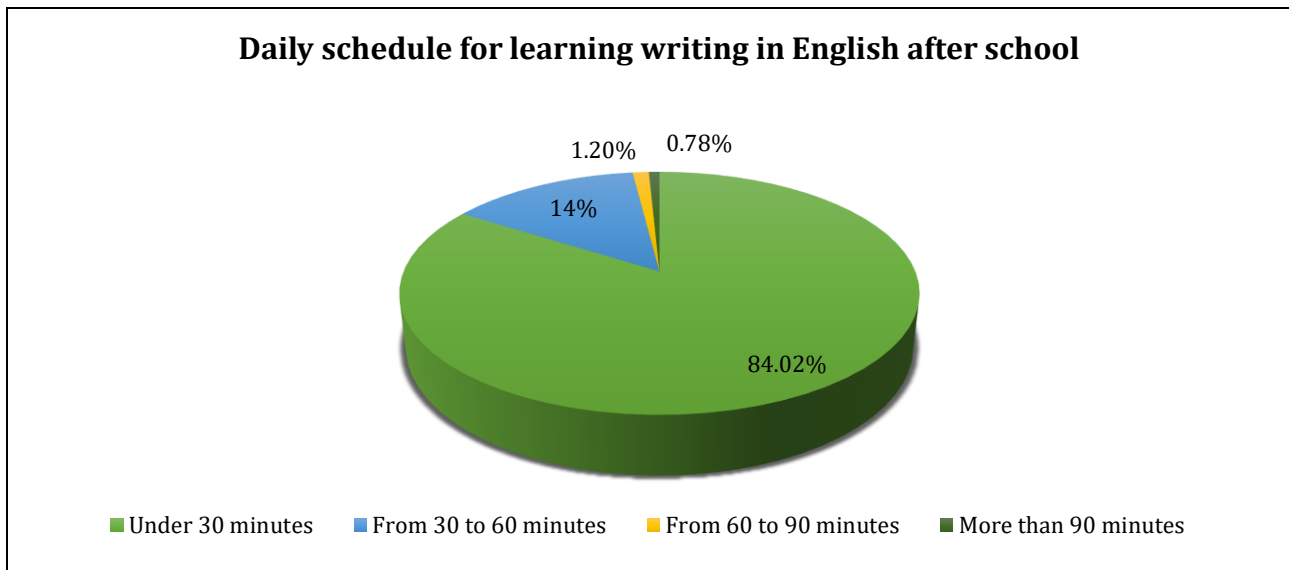
<b>Content question</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Totally Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Totally Disagree</b>
My writing skills have improved a lot.	1.90	0.72	31.6%	47.4%	21.1%	0.0%
Grammar is always a difficult aspect of academic writing.	1.79	0.61	31.6%	57.9%	10.5%	0.0%
I always proofread my assignments before submitting them.	1.63	0.67	47.4%	42.1%	10.5%	0.0%
I know how to use tenses and choose them correctly in academic writing.	2	0.8	31.6%	36.8%	31.6%	0.0%
I know how to arrange my sentences logically to express my ideas in academic writing.	1.95	0.69	26.3%	52.6%	21.1%	0.0%
I easily demonstrate connections among the sentences in a paragraph to make it coherent.	2.21	0.69	10.5%	63.2%	21.1%	5.3%
I always outline writing.	2.11	0.97	31.6%	36.8%	21.1%	10.5%

In item 8, it was evident that a majority of participants experienced an improvement in their English writing skills. Specifically, 47.4% of students reported enhanced writing abilities, with over a third strongly agreeing with this statement. Only 21.1% of participants indicated they struggled to improve their writing. Although some students had not shown improvement, the majority had made progress, with an average rating of 1.894736842 on a scale of improvement. Item 9 revealed that grammar was perceived as the most challenging aspect of English writing. It was strongly agreed upon by 31.6% of participants, and 57.9% agreed with the statement. However, it is worth noting that 10.5% of the participants, considered good students, believed that grammar was not as difficult as others claimed.

Interestingly, the same number of students who found grammar challenging also reported never proofreading their writing assignments before submitting them. Almost 89.5% of students read their writing assignments multiple times before submitting them. In the next items, it was revealed that 68.4% of participants knew how to use tenses effectively, whereas only 31.6% struggled with tenses (M=2). On the other hand, most participants claimed they knew how to express and organize their ideas logically and coherently. However, 10.5% of students never double-checked their work before submitting it. In conclusion, most students demonstrated an ability to arrange their ideas logically and



coherently, having learned English for several years. However, some still found grammar to be a challenging aspect of English writing.



**Figure 1. Daily schedule for learning writing in English after school**

According to Figure 1, most participants reported spending approximately 30 minutes per day practicing writing in English, while only 0.78% spent more than 90 minutes writing. It suggests that many participants may not be dedicating enough time to practice writing in English, despite the popular saying "practice makes perfect."

**DISCUSSION**

A set of statements was compiled to address why Vietnamese students find academic writing challenging. These statements primarily reflected the opinions and experiences of Vietnamese learners regarding their English writing learning process and leisure writing habits. These sentences provided valuable insights into the reasons for the difficulty of academic writing. Most respondents in the first three questions expressed a positive attitude towards learning languages, which can significantly contribute to achieving their goals. [Ebele \(2017\)](#) suggests that having a positive attitude toward learning is crucial for success.

Interestingly, most participants enjoy learning English and writing in English, and with a positive attitude, many believe they are good at it. However, [Ebele \(2017\)](#) also notes that bad habits can limit students' success, and there is a correlation between attitude and habit. Those with positive attitudes towards language learning tend to have effective habits that help them achieve their goals easily. Based on the results of the first four items, most participants interested in learning to write in English have effective habits that aid their progress. [Brumen \(2014\)](#) notes that teachers' instructions may differ from what students need to know, causing confusion and making writing instruction difficult. [Maznun et al. \(2017\)](#) support this idea, stating that unclear instructions make it difficult for students to follow. Poor instruction by teachers can create a significant gap in the class, making it challenging for weaker students while being too easy for stronger ones. Most participants in this survey agreed that their teachers often assign much writing and help them correct their mistakes based on a common mistake list, improving their writing performance. In conclusion, having a positive attitude and effective habits toward language learning significantly contribute to improving writing skills. Additionally, under the influence of effective instruction, writing performance increases considerably.

To summarize the findings from sentences 9 to 14 in the results section, most participants had an unusual perspective toward writing in English. Although they claimed to possess knowledge of proper tense usage, logical arrangement of ideas, and coherence between sentences, they still struggled with writing, particularly with grammar. However, those who developed good habits, such as proofreading

and creating outlines before writing, reported achieving better scores in writing. Nevertheless, some students have yet to adopt these habits. In the final question, most respondents indicated that they spent less than thirty minutes practicing writing in English.

Upon analyzing the results, it became evident that learning to write in English can be challenging due to various factors. Firstly, students' negative attitudes and beliefs toward language learning increased their stress levels, causing them to view writing as daunting. Secondly, students' bad habits, such as not outlining their writing or not proofreading, led to mistakes in their work. Additionally, complex instructions made it difficult for students to grasp lesson concepts. To overcome these challenges, students should alter their negative perspectives towards writing in English and maintain their interest. They should also replace bad habits with better ones, such as outlining and proofreading. Finally, teachers should guide students in these habits to help them identify and correct mistakes, allowing them to learn and avoid repeating past errors.

## **CONCLUSION**

Learning academic writing in English can be challenging for learners due to the complexity of the task itself and their perspectives on the subject. Many students believe they cannot write assignments and homework effectively, despite understanding sentence coherence well. Insufficient practice and poor writing habits further hinder the development of writing skills, leading some learners to believe that English learning is an insurmountable task. Students should not be excessively pressured when learning languages to address these issues. The questionnaire analysis revealed that most participants felt confident writing, such as using tenses correctly, organizing sentences logically, and establishing coherence within paragraphs. Therefore, maintaining a positive attitude can significantly facilitate studying English writing, as attitude plays a crucial role in learning.

Additionally, students should strive to replace bad writing habits with good ones, with the support and encouragement of family members, instructors, or friends. Instructors should also pay close attention to explaining difficulties in writing to their learners, as what may be easy for some students could pose challenges for others. Effective English writing learning requires a partnership between learners and instructors. Furthermore, the research indicates that although students enjoy learning languages, they may not dedicate sufficient time to practice challenging aspects such as grammar. Students with positive attitudes and productive habits will find language learning, particularly English, much easier than those who do not invest enough time in practice. Frequent interaction and guidance from family members, instructors, and friends are crucial to encourage learners to change their habits. They can engage in activities like reading books or writing in English during their free time after school.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The data were collected from only one international school in a small city in Vietnam, which may not represent all secondary-school students. Moreover, the number of international schools in Vietnam is limited, so the findings may only apply to similar institutions seeking to implement academic programs. Nevertheless, this study provides valuable insights into learners' motivation for studying English. The questionnaire should be administered in a broader range of Vietnam schools to enhance future research's reliability.

Additionally, statistical tests such as T-tests can shed light on the role of habits and attitudes in learning English writing. In conclusion, this research contributes to the existing body of scientific knowledge by highlighting the difficulties faced by learners in mastering English writing. Furthermore, it emphasizes the significance of maintaining a positive attitude and cultivating good writing habits. However, caution must be exercised when generalizing the findings due to the study's limitations. Further research should explore different types of schools in Vietnam to increase the generalizability of the results. Additionally, investigating the impact of habits and attitudes through statistical analysis would deepen our understanding of their influence on English writing proficiency. Lastly, it is important to note that the questionnaire used in this study was specific to the author's school and may yield varied results if employed in other settings.

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