

CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS IN DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH WRITING: A CASE OF EFL FRESHMEN AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract – *English is by far the most widely used and highly-demand language around the world. Therefore, learning English has become an integral part of the educational process. The ability to write effectively has turned out to be one of the vital skills among English language learners. However, individuals encounter various obstacles in their writing under various personal and environmental contexts. The main purpose of this study is to explore the writing challenges faced by first-year students majoring in English studies, with a focus on descriptive paragraphs. The study collected data from 38 first-year English major students at Tra Vinh University, Vietnam through an online questionnaire, which was designed with the first part aimed to identify the factors that hinder students from completing descriptive paragraphs, while the latter part consisted of open-ended questions that allowed students to express their deeper thoughts and expectations towards lecturers for the development of their writing. The most noticeable results of the analysis indicate that creativity and similes appear to be the most influential factors in students' writing performances. Besides, language-related elements rank as an integral part of the writing process as well. Based on the analysis of self-reported responses, the study ends with implications regarding lecturers' instructional strategies, syllabus design, and student autonomy to address these challenges.*

Keywords: *descriptive paragraphs, instructional strategies, student autonomy, writing challenges.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to learning the English language, it has been claimed that writing is expected to be the most critically challenging for learners [1, 2]. In the field of EFL, it is considered one of the ultimate goals to enhance students' writing competence; it is claimed that writing plays a vital role in strengthening other skills as well [1, 2]. Deti et al. [3] indicate that learners are more likely to enlarge their vocabulary and skills of speaking, listening, reading, and grammar through writing activities. Moreover, Barkaoui [2] points out that mastering writing demands more time and effort as it requires the mastery of numerous linguistic, cognitive, and social competencies. Sharing the same notion, Zen [1] expresses that writing is helpful in both fostering students' writing proficiencies and in the long term, language learning, cognitive growth, and overall learning.

Some common features of learning English in general and writing, in particular, have been shared by Vietnam with many other countries [4, 5]. Furthermore, it is shown that a certain number of students perceive writing as challenging and unsatisfying. It has been demonstrated that Vietnamese university students' writing abilities are lacking [4]. So far, earlier investigations have been carried out in broader aspects, focusing on students' overall writing performance [6, 7] and other specific genre-based writing styles, for example, argumentative style [8]. The context of this paper lies in the fact that the subject of students is first-year university. This implies that these students are likely to have different experiences of learning a new style of writing in L2. Moreover, even though numerous studies

have looked into different facets of EFL writing in general, the insufficiency of literature exists regarding first-year students' struggles with the L2 descriptive genre of writing. Therefore, this paper specifically strives to address the following questions:

1. What are first-year EFL students' difficulties when writing a descriptive paragraph?
2. What are EFL students' strategies to improve their writing skills?
3. What are EFL students' expectations from lecturers to help develop their writing skills?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Academic writing in the EFL context

In the literature, writing has been defined in different ways. Among many notions, one stands out from Hidi et al. [9], the authors say that writing is a skill that helps express people's thoughts and feelings and, therefore, facilitates communication by allowing one to express opinions and experiences. In other words, people around the world primarily use written language to communicate with one another to facilitate daily activities. Writing abilities therefore become crucial for creating written products. For this reason, proficiency in this skill is necessary for writing and interpersonal communication [10].

In the same vein, Topuzkanamış [11] states that writing can be viewed as a language created by the individual to transfer mental creations such as feelings, thoughts, dreams, observations, experiences, and sensations. This accordingly demonstrates that clear and effective writing brings out successful written communication, as a result, it helps meet persistently changing social and academic demands. Consequently, for a language learner, it is imperative to acknowledge that writing is considered accurate once it involves spelling, forming correct letters, clear writing, correct choice of vocabulary, using grammar, combining correct sentences, and using paragraphs correctly [12]. These subskills are quite complex for students in the writing class. Furthermore, it is argued that compared to other skills, the development of writing skills is slower

as writing requires a certain level of complex structures, styles of feedback, correction, and assessment [6, 13].

B. Paragraphs

In the scholarship of writing, it is classified into different styles. It's stated in Ly et al. [5] article that there are three different kinds of paragraphs, listing as argumentative, contrastive, and descriptive. Accordingly, Ameri [12] classifies writing styles into five forms, which include:

(1) Description is a form of writing that aims to impart impressions to the reader regarding objects, ideas, places, or phenomena, which the researcher wishes to convey

(2) Narrative is a type of writing that seeks to narrate the occurrence of a phenomenon

(3) Exposition is a form of writing that aims to explain, convey, or describe something that can expand or contribute to the reader's knowledge or views

(4) Argumentation is a type of writing that conveys and expresses an opinion or conception, with the intention of persuading the reader

(5) Persuasion is a form of writing that aims to influence the attitudes and opinions of the readers about a particular subject or issue

Drawing upon these perspectives, it can be said that descriptive writing is one of the most critical genres for undergraduate students to master to fulfil their academic requirements [14].

C. Descriptive writing texts

Definition

Hyland [15] states that academic writing is acknowledged to be important for students' academic success as well as their admission to universities. It has been claimed that descriptive writing is significant in both everyday basics and various types of exam learning. Oshima et al. [16] define that a descriptive paragraph appeals to describe a picture, a person, a place, or an activity. Most importantly, these researchers emphasize the importance of showing senses, which tell how something looks, feels, smells, tastes, and sounds. This can be explained as the ultimate goal of a

descriptive paragraph is to guarantee that readers can visualize what the author is trying to say and create an image in the reader's mind [17].

Difficulties in descriptive writing texts

It is believed that students are exposed to a certain extent of difficulty when they write in a foreign language. Several studies on students' challenges in writing classes have been carried out. One of the most cited that hinders students from producing a good writing text is related to linguistic factors. Among these, using appropriate grammar and lexical resources is the most frequently encountered problem [18–20]. It is explained that writing is more difficult than oral communication since students have to compensate for the absence of a wide range of structures to deliver the meaning. This means that students have to ensure that written texts are interpreted on their own with choices of complete and grammatical sentence structures and vocabulary to connect ideas.

The next most challenging factor goes to genre organisation and content development [14, 21]. It is reported that students find it hard to produce and develop ideas for the topic they are writing on. Students struggle with supporting sentences, constructing subject sentences, and closing sentences [22]. This could be explained that students get confused in organizing ideas due to the interference of their mother tongue and insufficient practice of reading and writing [19, 23]. Another cause of this difficulty is that there are insufficient chances to practice writing both in and outside the classroom [24]. This restrains students' ability to get familiar with writing with diverse topics. In addition, one of the affective reasons that cause students' writing difficulties is related to psychology. Byrne [19] states that psychological problems are the mental and emotional obstacles that students could have. The main opponents might include students' block, lack of confidence, or writing-related anxiety.

Students' expectations

Numerous studies show first-year EFL students' expectations about their professors' role in helping them improve their writing skills. These

students stress the value of a safe and nurturing learning environment led by dedicated teachers who offer thorough feedback. Hattie et al., for example, emphasize the value of a supportive environment and constructive feedback [25]. Furthermore, students like specific constructive feedback since it helps them recognize their areas of weakness and offers unambiguous advice on how to get better [26]. Song et al. support this stance. In this study, first-year EFL students also prioritize a friendly and encouraging learning environment facilitated by their instructors. They believe that this kind of environment has a significant impact on their motivation and capacity to improve their writing skills [27]. In this present study, the researchers attempt to fill in the gap of previous studies by examining the students' difficulties with descriptive writing through genre-related elements as well as other common elements, aiming to provide a deeper understanding of the underlying problems in descriptive writing texts. Besides exploring this perspective, the study also seeks to highlight practical strategies and students' expectations from lecturers that can help them improve their descriptive writing abilities.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants in this survey include a group of 38 first-year students. They are pursuing an English Studies programme at Tra Vinh University, located in the southern part of Vietnam. These students have experience learning descriptive writing through the module 'Foundation to Writing 1', which consists of 45 periods. The survey was conducted online at the end of the first semester of their first year.

An online questionnaire was employed as the research instrument in the current study. The questionnaire was developed based on the Analytic Rating Scale for EFL Descriptive, which was constructed by Khatib et al. [28]. Modifications were made to the questionnaire, including integrating an open-ended question to elicit students' strategies for self-improvement in writing skills and another open-ended question to ascertain students' expectations of lecturers in

assisting them in enhancing their writing skills. Statistical data were analysed using SPSS software, and responses obtained from open-ended questions were analysed following thematic analysis.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

Table 1 is the report on the number of years that students have learned English.

Table 1: Participants’ year of learning English

Years of learning English	No of participants	Percentage
>= 10	16	42
6–9	14	37
<= 5	8	21

Students were asked to self-report on the number of years that they have been learning English. The table provided details on the number of participants based on their years of learning English. This data indicates a varied distribution of participants based on their English learning experience. It can be said that although students involved in this study were freshmen, they showed different backgrounds in years of learning English. The majority of participants have been learning English for a significant period, with a notable percentage having more than 10 years of experience in the language, accounting for 42%. 14 participants have been learning English for 6 to 9 years, comprising 37% of the total. Lastly, the 8 participants who have been learning English for 5 years or less, represent 21% of the total. This distribution highlights the diverse range of experience levels among participants.

Students’ challenges in writing a descriptive paragraph in English

The data presented in the table offers a comprehensive overview of various challenges participants faced when writing a descriptive text. In terms of language-related elements, participants found it hard to opt for the appropriacy of lexical resources, correct tenses, variety of grammatical structures, variety of lexical resources, and cohesive devices. These challenges were reflected in mean scores ranging from 3.32 to 3.63, in

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of challenges faced by participants

Attribute	Criteria	Mean	Std. Deviation
Appropriacy of lexical resources	Language-related elements	3.63	.852
Correct tenses	Language-related elements	3.58	1.154
Variety of grammatical structures	Language-related elements	3.55	1.083
Brainstorming/ outlining ideas	Content and Organization	3.53	.893
Variety of lexical resources	Language-related elements	3.47	1.179
Use of 5 senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste)	Genre-related elements	3.37	1.025
Spelling	Mechanics	3.34	1.146
Logical order	Content and Organization	3.32	1.118
Cohesive devices (then, firstly, however, in addition, etc.)	Language-related elements	3.32	1.118
Creativity	Genre-related elements	3.29	.984
Similes	Genre-related elements	3.26	1.131
Introductory sentences	Content and Organization	3.24	.998
Elaborate descriptive details	Content and Organization	3.24	.913
Concluding sentence	Content and Organization	3.16	1.128
Capitalization	Mechanics	3.03	1.197
Punctuation	Mechanics	3.00	1.065

which choosing appropriate words in the writing text appeared to be the most challenging factor, followed by tenses and structures.

Moving on to content and organization challenges, participants struggled with brainstorming/outlining ideas the most (M = 3.53). Other items such as how to arrange ideas in a logical order, how to write introductory sentences and elaborate descriptive details, and concluding sentences received a lower mean score (M = 3.32, M = 3.24, M = 3.16, respectively).

Genre-related difficulties encompassed challenges related to creativity, similes, and the use of sensory details. While participants scored the difficult usage of the 5 senses in writing higher with M = 3.57, the other two elements showed close disparity (M = 3.29 and M = 3.26). Lastly, the data presented in the table highlights participants’ difficulties in mechanics-related skills, specif-

ically capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Among these skills, punctuation received the lowest mean score of 3.00 and capitalization followed closely with a mean score of 3.03. Interestingly, spelling got a slightly higher mean score of 3.34, suggesting that participants demonstrated better proficiency in spelling compared to punctuation and capitalization.

Students’ strategies on how to improve writing in English

Students were asked to self-report on the strategies they applied to develop their writing skills. They have demonstrated a diverse range of strategies for self-practicing their writing skills, focusing on key themes such as learning vocabulary and grammar, practising writing, engaging in reading activities, and utilizing technology to enhance their writing proficiency. Examples presented in the table are extracted directly from the responses.

Table 3: Strategies employed by students to improve their writing

Strategy	Examples
Learn vocabulary and grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am improving my writing skills focusing on vocabulary variety and tenses • Learn many new vocabulary, and practice basic grammar as well as higher grammar. • I will learn more vocabulary and sentence structures, and practice descriptive methods in English to improve my writing skills. • Learn basic knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar
Practice writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write more, remember the outline • Write a diary and small stories • Try to write daily or annual journals • Practice writing many types of questions repeatedly, practice using the correct sentence form and become familiar with the steps in writing • Regularly write to correct errors • I will practice my writing skills every day • Practice writing paragraphs
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my opinion, practice and referring to English articles is a key • I often look up articles online to improve my writing skills • Reading books, articles,...
Using technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn more apps or websites about English • I am learning more English on applications such as Duolingo, 4English,... • Practice listening on YouTube • Watch movies or listen to music • Listen and copy

Students’ expectations of lecturers on enhancing their writing

Students have conveyed a diverse array of expectations to their teachers in the pursuit of improving their writing skills. From the responses gathered, several key themes have emerged, including expectations for effective teaching methods, engaging language enhancement activities in the classroom, constructive feedback and correction styles, and the creation of a supportive learning environment. The instances provided in the table are directly derived from the responses given. The examples in the table are derived directly from the participants’ answers.

Table 4: Students’ expectations of lecturers on enhancing their writing

Viewpoint	Example
Effective teaching methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope the instructors can teach from simple things and then gradually increase to more complex things. • I hope the lecturer will give many vivid topics so that students can diversify their imaginations. From there, you can write about many topics and learn more vocabulary. • Give more specific examples • Thoroughly explain the theory • The teacher can guide and suggest an outline
Language enhancement activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaches many new grammatical structures • I want to have more exercises with diverse topics to practice • An efficient and faster way to brainstorm ideas • I hope teachers can help students practice writing on more diverse and new topics. • I hope the instructor will show you the right way to combine sentences to write an essay • To give us more sample paragraphs • Provide ideas for students to consider
Feedback / Correction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastically correct students’ articles and point out mistakes so that students’ next articles will be better! • Comment on assignments • I expect them will take care of us as individuals in detail because we have different levels so we need to have different care. • Correct my writing
Supportive classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly, gentle, and cheerful,... are the first things I expect from a lecturer. I believe that studying in a friendly environment and with the help of instructors is a favourable condition for improving my writing skills. • Need to be dedicated to the profession and guide students more • Dedication as well as teaching style can attract students

B. Discussion

First-year EFL students' difficulties when writing a descriptive paragraph

Concerning the students' difficulties when writing a descriptive paragraph, the research findings show that students have difficulties in almost all aspects mentioned although most of them have been studying English for more than 10 years. Specifically, language-related elements are perceived as the major barrier when writing descriptive texts. The reason for this result can be teachers' support and instruction in teaching. Teachers tend to take it for granted that their students have long-term English learning experiences, so guidance on how to improve specific language-related elements is believed not to be necessary. As a result, students' ability to write effectively gets hindered by this lack of focused training. They do not have enough 'input' to produce 'output'. Students may also have trouble using appropriate lexical resources. To help students deal with these obstacles and advance their descriptive writing skills, teachers should give more targeted direction on language-related skills. This finding corresponds to the difficulties in writing descriptive texts observed by Alka [14] and the problems with ESL learners' writing skills identified by Fareed et al. [19]. Specifically, it is affirmed that most undergraduates had writing difficulties in linguistics skills, specifically their knowledge of grammar, syntax, and lexical resources and that the majority of students struggled with grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics aspects.

However, the findings show that most participants do not appear to have problems with organization-related concerns, which is inconsistent with Sholeha et al. [20]. It shared the different findings that the majority of participants could write introductory sentences, elaborate descriptive details, and concluding sentences. This discrepancy may be due to differences in participants' backgrounds or teaching methodologies. It is also possible that the assessment criteria and task requirements between the two learning environments are not the same.

One new finding of this paper reveals that genre-related elements impede students' writing abilities. It is reported that students find it difficult to use five senses to write descriptive texts. This can be attributed to a lack of exposure to limited practice in incorporating sensory details into their writing. Providing opportunities for students to explore various sentence structures using the five senses and engaging in sensory writing exercises can help them enhance their descriptive writing skills and overcome these challenges.

First-year EFL students' strategies to self-improve their writing skills

By gathering students' responses, various strategies to self-improve their writing skills were identified. Students are working on enhancing their writing skills by learning vocabulary, grammar, sentence structures, and descriptive techniques. They are also practising writing every day, reading articles online, using learning apps such as Duolingo and 4English, and watching films or listening to music on YouTube, aiming to correct errors and improve their writing skills through daily practice and repetition. However, they do not mention using feedback from peers and teachers to refine their writing papers. Learning is a social activity, and interacting with people can greatly improve learning outcomes, as suggested by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory [29]. This theory suggests that incorporating feedback from peers and teachers can provide valuable insights and guidance for further improvement in writing skills. It seems that they realize that they need to practice more to improve their writing skills. They know to take advantage of the different kinds of resources available to them, but incorporating feedback from others, such as their peers or teachers could provide valuable insights and guidance for further improvement in their writing skills. Instructors should guide them to seek constructive criticism and suggestions from peers and teachers so that it can help them identify areas of weakness and make necessary adjustments to enhance their writing proficiency.

First-year EFL students' expectations from lecturers to help develop their writing skills

First-year EFL students hold distinct expectations regarding how their lecturers can assist them in enhancing their writing skills. Based on the self-reported responses, initially, students emphasize the significance of a welcoming and supportive learning atmosphere facilitated by the dedicated lecturer in charge. They believe such an environment is crucial in fostering their writing capabilities. Students think that creating such an atmosphere is essential to developing their writing skills. This is in line with the results of the paper conducted by Song et al. [27], stating that first-year EFL students place a high value on a classroom climate created by their teachers. They think that their desire and ability to advance their writing abilities are greatly impacted by this type of setting [27].

Secondly, students express a desire for comprehensive explanations of writing theories, along with personalized guidance and suggestions for structuring their writing. They seek practical assistance in developing outlines and mastering new grammatical structures, viewing these elements as fundamental to their writing improvement. Additionally, students highlight the importance of receiving detailed feedback and corrections on their writing weaknesses. They perceive constructive criticism as vital for identifying and correcting errors, thereby advancing their writing proficiency. This is supported by Hattie et al., and Dang, who have emphasized the importance of receiving specific, constructive feedback [25–26]. When feedback is specific and actionable allows students to understand their mistakes and make improvements. By addressing weaknesses in writing, students can enhance their skills and become more proficient writers overall.

In summary, first-year EFL students' expectations from their lecturers around the creation of a positive learning environment characterized by supportive lecturers. They also seek substantive guidance on writing theories and practical skills, including grammatical structures and outlining techniques. Furthermore, students prioritize re-

ceiving thorough feedback to address their writing deficiencies effectively. These expectations highlight students' willingness to improve their writing skills with the assistance and guidance of lecturers.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study aims to explore two issues: the obstacles that impede students from finishing descriptive paragraphs and students' in-depth ideas and expectations from lecturers for the advancement of their writing. Through an online questionnaire, major findings of the study were obtained.

It was documented that students' main problems in writing descriptive paragraphs are related to language-related and genre-related components. Based on the research findings, some teaching implications can be drawn out. As far as problems related to the genre are concerned, it has been found that students have difficulties with creativity, similes, and the use of sensory details. Therefore, instructors should focus on providing students with opportunities to practice using creative language, incorporating similes, and including sensory details in their writing. Additionally, guiding students in the analysis of well-written descriptive paragraphs can help them develop a better understanding of how to effectively structure their writing. Regarding language-related obstacles, it is clear that more and fewer participants found it challenging to use appropriate lexical resources, correct tenses, a variety of grammatical structures, and correct cohesive devices. This finding suggests that instructors may consider incorporating more grammar lessons. In addition, they should also consider peer review sessions to allow students to receive feedback on their descriptive paragraphs and improve their skills through collaboration with their classmates.

Students' expectations of their instructors to enhance their writing abilities should also be considered in teaching. Most participants emphasized the importance of personalized feedback and guidance from instructors to help them im-

prove their writing skills. Students' skills in writing can be improved thanks to a good proportion of feedback [24]. Therefore, instructors must tell students what they achieve and what they need to improve. In addition, it is expected that teachers should incorporate real-world examples and practical exercises into their writing lessons to make the learning experiences more engaging and effective. There are some suggestions proposed for further research aiming to investigate the impact of different types of feedback on students' writing improvement and how incorporating real-world examples into lessons can enhance their learning outcomes. By focusing on these areas, instructors can better adapt their pedagogical strategies to the varied requirements of their students and create an environment that is both more stimulating and productive.

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