

INVESTIGATING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL ESSAYS FOR THIRD-YEAR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT DONG THAP UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Writing skill plays a vital role to English major students at Dong Thap University since it is one of the prerequisite requirements for them to get a B.A. degree. The research finds that most of the students have difficulty in using lexical words and academic vocabulary to enhance the quality of the written works. Some solutions are also proposed in order to facilitate students in writing such as following scaffolding instructions, making word meaning checklist and using POWER strategy. These can enhance the confidence and effectiveness of students in coping with writing tasks and writing for academic purposes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning writing skill plays a vital role to English major students at Dong Thap University since it has been the prerequisite requirements for them to get B.A. degrees. Being good at writing also facilitates students in learning other skills of English as well as accomplishing a variety of goals, such as writing report, essays or doing action research. At Dong Thap University, students have been encouraged to study writing skill since they were freshmen because writing is pivotal in studying English, which needs long term investment from the students and is one of the keys to be successful in college and university. However, many students haven't perceived the need of learning writing, so they spend little time practising this skill. That results in difficulties in organizing essay structures and ideas as well as using appropriate vocabulary and structure in response to the essay topics; they also lack effective strategies to improve their writing competence.

The research project aims to investigate what linguistic choices are used in English written products and to suggest strategies for improving essay writing skills for third-year English students at Dong Thap University. Also, interviewing the authors of essays is conducted to find their structural and linguistics choice in doing the essay writing, for example the types of cohesion and lexical devices across the texts. Three research questions are arisen: 1) How are the essays structured/ formatted and which linguistic choices in term of cohesion are commonly used? 2) Which linguistics choices in term of lexical choices are used? and 3) What strategies should be applied to improve students' essay writing? The findings of the study are intended to address the issues in relation to both teachers and students. To teachers, they have been facing difficulties teaching students use academic words and organising ideas in accordance with the topic's requirements. To students, they have many problems in organizing the essays, using lexical words to enhance their writing quality as well as arranging ideas reasonably and scientifically.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is an effective means to express and communicate with each other and relating to the interaction between cognitive and physical included. Moreover, writing is contributing to the development of emotional and cognitive as well as enhancing the popularity of society (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Writing is also a foundation for children literacy skills, it not only supports children's skills in general but it also facilitates their reading competence in particular. More importantly, writing is one of the compulsory subjects which need to be achieved in academic learning (Cole & Feng, 2015).

Students at universities often get unexpected results in writing skill because they spent less time practising writing and finding sample essays. Another reason for this trouble is that students usually have obtained many writing skill' assignments before getting into university's level and the further writing tasks are given gradually for each module of coursework and research' studies. These can increase students' stress level as well as reduce their ability of success in writing tasks. (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

Misra and Castillo (2004) also state that many students also spend much time practising their writing skills such as reading English newspapers, magazines or finding out some effective methods to enhance writing competence and increase confidence when dealing with essay writing. Moreover, students are supported with a variety of strategies and instructions for coping with English with responsibilities and efforts from the management of the universities. On the other hand, many universities also support student's learning by organizing workshop, group works as well as offering modern facilities, such as language labs, foreign languages' libraries and tutorials before they enroll on their programme of study and during their learning courses.

Cole and Feng (2015) carry out the research about effective strategies for improving writing skill for elementary students; they analyze students' written texts and conduct a survey to have better understanding about reality of students learning and the problems they have. The researchers also conduct interviews and survey with the teachers to get information about teachers' feeling, what areas and techniques they used to teach for students. Then they discuss together and suggest some strategies to help students in writing.

Borg and Deane (2011) identify that peer writing correction can be an effective way that helps students improve academic writing competence effectively and get better grade in dealing with assignments. Jackson (2009) also agrees that mentoring and peer learning can benefit students in improving idea organization, collegial relationship and team building. Sulliman and Tadros (2011) find that writing strategies given by teachers can facilitate students in coping with writing tasks and writing for academic purposes.

3. METHODS AND RESULTS

3.1. Research methods

3.1.1. Research questions

The study focusses on analyzing students' written texts and their opinions about learning writing essay in order to have an understanding of their linguistic choices in constructing their assignments and the difficulties they usually encounter in writing essay. Accordingly, the researcher suggests some strategies to improve their essay writing skills.

In this study, the researcher makes an effort to answer these following questions:

- 1. How are the essays structured/formatted and which linguistic choices in term of cohesion are commonly used?*
- 2. Which linguistics choices in term of lexical choices are used?*
- 3. What strategies should be applied to improve writing skills?*

3.1.2. Written texts

The study analyzes written texts from students to investigate their linguistic choice in essay writing, for example the cohesion and lexical relations across the texts. The topics are given to students and they are asked to finish writing in the classroom.

3.1.3. The questionnaire

The questionnaire in this study consists of four questions for students and five questions for teachers. The researcher conducts in-depth interviews with students whose written texts are collected. These interviews are recorded to analyze, and this is conducted after collecting the students' written works.

The researcher also carries out the interview with lecturers in order to have broader view about the reality of learning essay writing among students, the problems they usually encounter in writing essays. In addition, lecturers are suggested to give some strategies or solutions to help students improve their essay writing skills.

3.1.4. Methodology

The researcher decides to collect students' written works to analyze how they construct or format the essay, their uses of cohesive devices, specifically lexical words. In addition, the researcher also conducts interviews with the authors of essays as well as with the lecturers who are teaching writing skills at Dong Thap University. These would be a good opportunity to find out the ways students structured the essays, the cohesive devices and lexical words they used in their works. According to Cole and Feng (2015), they also carry out the research about effective strategies for improving writing skills for elementary students; they analyze students' written texts and conducted a survey to have better understanding about reality of students learning and the problems they have had. The researchers also conducted interviews and survey with the teachers to have deep understanding about teachers' perception on how students use cohesive devices, lexical words and problems they have in writing essays. Then they discussed together

and suggested some strategies to help students in writing skills. The data is divided into three main parts: the written texts, interviewing students and interviewing lecturers.

3.1.5. The framework for analysing the data

Basing on the research of Schooneveld (1973), the term Cohesion was seen as the relation obtaining among the sentences and clauses of the text. The relations are recognized by significant grammatical and lexical features such as anaphora, subordinator, and coordination, which are called Cohesive. They play the role of relating the clauses and sentences of the texts. The term “Cohesion” introduced by Halliday (1976) can be used as a device that connect various lexical features and grammatical categories of literary texts in the linguistics studies. He explains that lexical cohesion is carried by two or more occurrences, in close proximity and relate to the sense which is obtained by the same lexical set.

Halliday (1976, p.203) gives the list of categories under cohesion’s heading:

A. Grammatical:

1. Structural (clauses in sentence structure): dependence; linking

2. Non-structural:

a. Anaphora: deictics and submodifiers; pronouns

b. Substitution: verbal; nominal

B. Lexical:

1. Repetition of item

2. Occurrence of item from same lexical set

3.1.6. The informants

The participants are twenty students who are in class ĐHSANH17A at Dong Thap University. In order to guarantee the comparable data, my colleague chose these students with different learning level. The researcher decided to give students the same topic to have broader views about the similarities and differences in using cohesion and lexical choices in their essays.

There are also two lecturers who are teaching writing skill at Dong Thap University participating in the study. One has more than twenty-year experience in teaching English and another has five-year experience. Both of them are good at teaching and assessing writing skill and enthusiastic to join in the in-depth interview.

In order to have data for analyzing, the researcher has given the participants a topic related to sport education:

With an increasing overweight population, some people think university should make sport a compulsory module on all degree course. To what extent do you agree or disagree? (IELTS Liz, 2016).

3.2. Research results

3.2.1. Structure/format of the essay

It was found that all essays are structured/ formatted appropriate to the requirement of an essay writing with three main parts: Introduction, Body Paragraph and Conclusion. However, the number of paragraphs and words for each essay are different. Table 1 shows these differences:

Table 1. The number of paragraphs and words per essay

Number of Essays	Name of paragraph			Word counts
	Introduction	Body Paragraph	Conclusion	
4	1	4	1	around 420 words
4	1	2	1	around 480 words
3	1	2	1	around 250 words
3	1	4	1	around 400 words
6	1	4	1	around 230 words

It is clear that students have followed the standard of an essay with enough 3 parts for their writing, but the number of body paragraph are different and the number of sentences in each body paragraph is also diversified. For example, in essay 1, the body paragraph 1 has 2 sentences whereas the body paragraph 4 has 5 sentences. Another example is essay 4, the body paragraph 1 has 7 sentences while the body paragraph 2 has 3 sentences. Similarly, the introduction of essay 15 has 3 sentences whereas the conclusion only has 1 sentence. These show that students do not have solid

foundation about the structure and format of the essay. According to Norton et al. (2009), the essay should have five paragraphs and there should be three body paragraphs in each essay (p.11).

Besides, the difference in number of word counts of each essay also illustrates that students use too many words and sentences to explain their opinion. There are 11 essays including more than 400 words in total and there are 9 essays including 6 paragraphs. However, some students use short sentences to express an idea while they use long sentences. This shows that students meet difficulty in organizing opinions. These examples illustrate my observation:

1. *“Practicing sports is the good way for students’ health. It makes them physically and mentally strong, keeps them active, fit and healthy”* (Essay 4).

It is seen that student can combine these two sentences instead of separate them into different sentences although the latter can support the former: *“Practicing sports is the good way for students’ health which makes them physically and mentally strong, keeps them active, fit and healthy”*.

2. *“Secondly, when sport is seen as a compulsory module in university’s courses, children can be distract by attending sports and do not pay attention to studying or taking part in other activities in school. This not good for them”* (Essay 5).

Students use a long sentence to describe the disadvantages of considering sport as a compulsory module, but they conclude the idea with a very short sentence *“This not good for them”*. Instead, student can combine these sentences into one, such as *“Secondly, it is not good when seeing sport as a compulsory module in university’s course because students can be distracted by attending sports without paying attention to other activities”*.

This finding is similar to the research of Cole and Feng (2015) that students meet difficulties in organizing the ideas when writing their essays. In fact, students have various ideas and opinions about a matter in life, but their organization and arrangements of these ideas are not solid. This is one of the reasons why many students get low results in learning writing essay.

Table 2. The marks given by the lecturer

	Essays 1, 3, 7	Essays 2, 9, 13, 15, 16, 17	Essays 3, 4, 6, 8, 10	Essays 4, 5, 11, 12, 18	Essays 5, 14, 18, 20
Mark	7,5	7,0	6,5	5,5	5,0

As can be seen in Table 2, essay 5, 14, 18 and 20 get 5,5 marks from the teacher and she also commented that these students need to practise more in organizing ideas and opinions instead of going around the topic given. Many students are aware the importance of giving and defending opinion when dealing with an opinion essay but it is too hard for them to improve this skill in a short period of time. The teacher agreed that students meet difficulties in organizing ideas and expressing ideas because their ways of writing is affected by Vietnamese and the Vietnamese essays are structured differently from English essays. Moreover, the lack of vocabulary and grammar also affect student’s writing competences (interview question for student 4).

According to interview question for student 2, most students find difficulties in organizing the ideas. In this case, they used different ways to solve the problems as in Table 3. From the interview, some students believe that reading model essay carefully helps them have more ideas and understanding about the topic. Moreover, it should be better to list all the ideas according to the order of importance, then give detail and examples to support the writing task.

Table 3. Some solutions students use to solve problem of organizing ideas

Interview question 1					
<i>Did you meet difficulties in organizing ideas? What do you do to solve this problem?</i>	- Try to list the ideas and organize it by myself. - Ask friends for discuss to find a good way. - Meet teacher for help.	After having outline, find thesis statement and arrange supporting ideas.	- Before writing, find a model essay and read carefully, underline the ideas and the ways of organization. - Learn vocabulary, grammar structures and collocation. - Start to write and compare with the model essay.	- Search information on Internet about organizing ideas. - Meet teacher and ask for help.	List all the ideas according to the order of importance, then give detail and examples to support.

3.2.2. Cohesion devices

It was found that all students used a wide range of linking words and phrases to connect the paragraphs and the ideas of essays. This shows that they have perceived the importance of using linking words and phrases in writing essays. Actually, when the researcher asked students about cohesive devices, all of them know these are words or phrase that link paragraphs or sentences together in the essays. The main reasons they use cohesive devices in essays are coherent and fluent purposes. Moreover, all of them use these devices when dealing with the essay writing (interview question for student 1). Most of the students believe that cohesive devices play a vital role in writing because they can connect different clauses, phrases, paragraphs. This finding is similar to the research of Gopee and Deane (1992), most students have strong motivation in using the cohesive devices, particular is linking words and phrases because these increase the quality and meaning of an essay. Table 4 gives some linking words and phrases students use in their essays. It shows that some essays use wide range of conjunctive resources while others only use some to connect the ideas or statements. This leads to their low results in these essays (5,5 marks).

Table 4. Conjunctive resources in essays

Essay Conjunctive	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Listing</i>	First and foremost				Firstly, Secondly
<i>Concession</i>	However	However		However	
<i>Result/Consequences</i>	Therefore, so, so that			Therefore	So
<i>Reinforcement</i>	Not only...but also, moreover	Also, Moreover	On the other hand, also, moreover	Moreover, in addition, besides	On the other hand
<i>Summary</i>	In summary	In general, In short	Overall	To sum up	In conclusion
<i>Expressing ideas</i>			Personally		
<i>Reformulation</i>			In other words		
<i>Highlighting</i>		Especially		Especially	
<i>Addition</i>	And, moreover	And, also, moreover	And; moreover; also	And, also, moreover, in addition	And
<i>Replacing/ Contrast</i>	Or, not only...but also	But, or, instead of, besides	Or	Or, besides	Or
<i>Sequential</i>	First and foremost, at the beginning, before secondly, finally		To begin with, on the other hand	After	Firstly, on the other hand, secondly
<i>Time</i>	Nowadays, when	Nowadays, now, when, while			
<i>Causal</i>	Because, therefore, so, so that	As, in order to, so	As	Therefore, because	So, as
<i>Condition</i>	If	If	If	If	
<i>Concession</i>	However	However, in spite of, even		However	
<i>Restarting/ Reformulating</i>	Such as, in summary	Such as, in general, in short	Such, in other words	Like, to sum up	In conclusion
<i>Others</i>		Especially	Personally, as well as	Especially	

It can be seen from Table 4 that students use a wide range of cohesive devices in their essays. The linking words students use much in writing essays are *moreover, however, and, also, because, so, as, etc.* This similar to opinions of teachers about the linking words students use in writing essay (interview question for student 3), the teachers said that students use many linking words in writing different kinds of essays. From Table 4, we can see clearly that students use variety of conjunctive resources, such as *listing, concession, result/consequences, reinforcement, summary, reformulation, causal or condition, etc.* Using conjunctive within and between sentences and paragraphs helps to make writing flow logically.

3.2.3. Numbers of lexical choices in students' essays

Table 5. The number of lexical words used in essays

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs	Total
246	249	170	108	773

It can be seen from Table 5 that most students use various forms of lexical words. Most of them mainly use Nouns and Verbs in the essays whereas Adverbs are rarely used by some students. While the adjectives are also used a lot in the essay with some repeated words such as *important, pivotal, useful, nutritious, beneficial...* Among all essays, essays 4, 5, 11, 12, 18 use the least number of lexical words with the total is 54. According to Table 2 and feedbacks from teacher, these essays gets 5,5 marks because they used a narrow range of lexical words, so the essay can not do the given topic quite well and the ideas are too complicated. This shows that the students meet troubles in expressing ideas and using language, this can be described as "writing block" or being "in the zone" which are similar to the research of Jackson (2009) which showed that students met some challenges and barriers in responding an essay, such as being difficulties in using languages to illustrate ideas and opinions, writing block or being "in the zone" during the time of writing.

Most of the students try to use lexical words in their essay (according to interview question for student 3) because of some following reasons. First, these help the essay avoid mistake of repetition and become more academic and fluence. Second, using wide range of vocabulary is one of the most important criteria that examiner focus when grading the essay, for example:

Owing to the problems which obesity becomes a widespread disease, sport is supposed to be a must-have subject at tertiary education (Essay 3).

Some people think that the best way to deal with this issue is apply physical education module in the degree courses (Essay 5).

Due to the increasing numbers of obesity in adults at the present, applying popularly sport as an official module in university is an effective measurement to tackle the issue (Essay 13).

3.2.4. The difficulties students usually have in writing essays

In order to understand deeply about difficulties students encounter in the process of writing essay, the researcher finds some difficulties students meet when they deal with an essay:

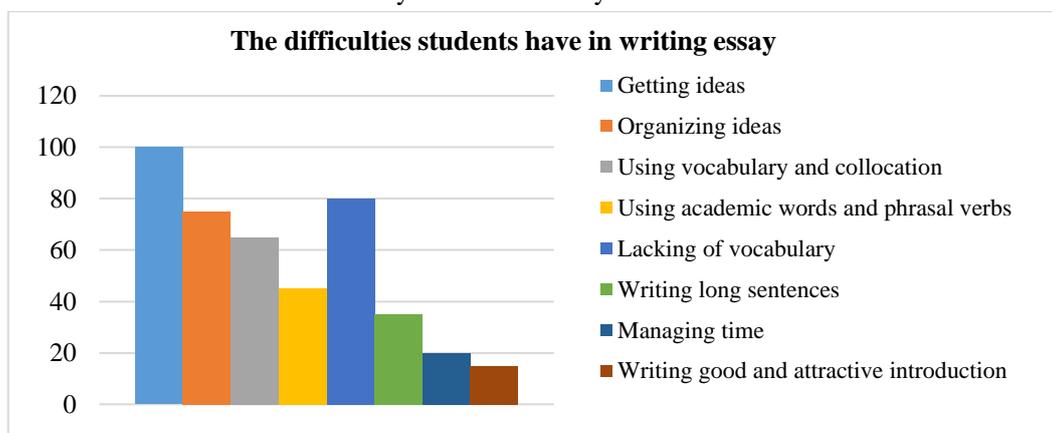


Chart 1. The difficulties students have in writing essays

Basing on Chart 1, it can be seen that all students meet difficulties in getting ideas for writing essay (100%), approximately 80% of students find lacking vocabulary is one of the big issues students face in writing essay; 14 students meet trouble in organizing the ideas (approximately 70%) whereas other students think using vocabulary and collocation, using academic words and phrasal verbs, writing long sentences and managing time are among the difficulties they usually have in dealing with essay writing. These can be the reasons why students got low results in the topic given (see Table 2). When I conducted the question about the difficulties students meet in writing essay, the teachers also agreed that students have problems in organizing ideas, lacking vocabulary and general knowledge (interview question for student 4).

3.2.5. Suggested strategies

Norton et al. (2009, p.62) states that reading books and journals are good ways to have a good essay writing because this helps develop students' understanding about the topic area. This is also an effective solution to increase general knowledge so that students can have better viewpoints as well as deeper understanding. Reading journal articles can benefit students in different ways. First, they can increase both quality and quantity of the argumentative thinking. Second, some reading's sub-skills such as skimming and scanning are also enhanced through this strategy because students have to read for specific and general ideas.

Cole and Feng (2015) suggests another strategy that can be used to support students' success in learning writing essay is Scaffolding instruction. This is a means teacher can build upon student's strengths. The strategy is mainly use step by step process in modeling the instructions and then lets students try to write by themselves. The instructor (teacher) plays an important role in directing, guiding and providing assistances when students need. According to Sulliman and Tadros (2011), this solution is extremely effective to learners of the second language because students have many opportunities to collaborate with one or many other students as well as teachers in producing written texts. Moreover, because of the similarity with pair work or group work, Scaffolding instruction can enhance the cooperation and relationship between students in the classroom.

Students who usually meet troubles in organizing ideas and constructing an essay can follow the strategy of New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2007, p.60), they illustrated that presenting headings prior to brainstorming is one of the solutions to increase students competence in organizing ideas. Presenting heading not only supports the arguments and ideas for writing but also keeps students in a suitable way in providing and demonstrating their opinions. Another solution is that teacher can facilitate students in making notes in order to explore and organize information in preparation for effective writing.

Jackson (2009) suggests a strategy which helps providing explicit instructions to students on writing, called POWER, which including Prepare, Organize, Write, Edit, Rewrite. The purpose of this strategy is to enhance students in practice the basic steps of essay writing. Among these steps, Prepare and Organize play an important role in writing an essay because they can contribute mostly to the success of an essay. This finding is similar to the investigation of Hughes et al. (2005), they also pointed out the ANSWER strategy which help students develop writing ability.

Also, during the interview, there are some suggestions from teachers to investigate some solutions to improve students' writing skill. According to teacher 1, she suggested that students need to read more articles and model essays to get the ideas, vocabulary and learn how to express ideas in English as a second language. Secondly, practising everyday is also a good solution to improve writing skill because students can enhance their competence in organizing ideas, increasing vocabulary and getting more knowledge. Teacher 2 suggested that teachers of writing skill should let students brainstorm prior to writing an essay because brainstorming is a good way that helps students develop ideas and outline of essay as well. Moreover, teachers should introduce students about how to write an outline and organize ideas in an essay. In addition, peer review and self correction after teacher's correction should be encouraged in order to enhance learner autonomy and independence.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Writing essay plays a pivotal role in learning English writing because this is one of the compulsory requirements that help the students get the university certificate. By analysing the data and through interview the students and the lecturers, the researcher has identified some following points:

Firstly, most of the students have followed the basic structure or format of an essay, but some of them do not have good background knowledge about essay structure. Moreover, most students aware of the importance of using

cohesive devices in writing essays and they used many kinds of devices in their written texts, for example: *addition, replacing/ contrast, sequential, time, causal, condition, concession, etc.* According to students' opinion, using cohesive devices in the essay enhances the coherence and fluence of the text. Also, the form and meaning of the text are more reasonable and scientific if students use cohesive devices in their essays.

Secondly, the students use a variety of lexical words, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs in writing essays because they want to make their works become more academic and fluent. Moreover, avoiding repetition and attracting readers' interest are also the reasons why students use many kinds of vocabulary in their essays.

Thirdly, the researcher has investigated that students meet many problems in learning and writing. The main problems are getting and organizing ideas in an essay, others including using vocabulary and collocation, lacking of vocabulary, writing long sentences and how to manage time. From these significant difficulties, the researcher suggested some strategies that help students overcome the problems. The strategies include reading journal articles and model essays, using Scaffolding instruction, presenting headings prior to brainstorming ideas, making the words meaning checklists and applying the POWER strategy. Moreover, there are some suggestions from teachers to improve writing skills of students. It is suggested that students need to read more articles and model essays to get the ideas, vocabulary and learn how to express ideas in English as a second language. Secondly, practicing everyday is also a good solution to improve writing skill because students can enhance their competence in organizing ideas, increasing vocabulary and getting more knowledge. On the other hand, it is vital to write an outline and organize ideas before writing an essay. In addition, peer review and self correction after teacher's correction should be encouraged in order to enhance learner autonomy and independence.

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