

The Impact Of Descriptive Writing Difficulties And Student Expectation On Efl First-Year Student At Quang Nam University, Vietnam



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Abstract: The most popular and in-demand language in the world is English. As a result, studying English has grown into essential to the process of learning. One of the most important abilities for English language learners has been shown to be the ability to write well. Nonetheless, individuals face numerous difficulties when writing in a variety of environmental and personal circumstances. With a focus on descriptive paragraphs, the primary goal of this study is to investigate the writing difficulties encountered by first-year English studies majors. An online questionnaire was used to gather information from 40 first-year English majors at Quang Nam University in Vietnam. The questionnaire's first section sought to determine the obstacles that prevent students from writing descriptive paragraphs, while the second section included open-ended questions that let students share their more in-depth ideas and expectations for their writing development from lecturers. The analysis's most striking findings suggest that similes and inventiveness seem to have the biggest effects on pupils' writing abilities. Additionally, language-related components are an essential component of the writing process. The study concludes with recommendations for lecturers' teaching methods, syllabus design, and autonomy for learners in order to solve these issues, based on the examination of self-reported responses.

Keywords: *descriptive paragraphs, instructional strategies, lecturers' teaching methods, writing difficulties.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It has been asserted that writing is the most difficult aspect of acquiring the English language for students [1, 2]. It is argued that writing is essential for developing additional abilities as well, and that improving students' writing proficiency is one of the ultimate aims in the field of EFL [1, 2]. Writing exercises are more likely to help students expand their vocabulary and improve their speaking, listening, reading, and grammatical skills, according to Deti et al. [3]. Furthermore, writing needs the mastery of several linguistic, cognitive, and social skills, which means that learning it takes more time and effort, according to Barkaoui [2]. According to Zen [1], who shares this view, writing helps kids develop their writing skills as well as their language, cognitive, and general learning throughout time.

Vietnam shares some characteristics with many other nations when it comes to learning English in general and writing in particular [4, 5]. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that some kids find writing difficult and disappointing. The writing skills of Vietnamese university students have been shown to be deficient [4]. Previous studies have so far examined a wider range of topics, including students' general writing performance [6, 7] and other genre-specific writing styles, such as argumentative style [8]. This paper's context comes from the fact that the pupils are freshmen at the university. This suggests that the experiences from these students in acquiring a new L2 writing style are probably going to differ.

Furthermore, despite the fact that numerous studies have examined various aspects of EFL writing generally, there is a dearth of literature on first-year students' difficulties with the L2 descriptive genre of writing. Consequently, the subsequent questions are the focus of this paper:

1. When writing a descriptive paragraph, what challenges do first-year EFL students face?
2. How do EFL students want their lecturers to support them in honing their writing abilities?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Using academic writing in an EFL setting

Various definitions of writing have been found in the literature. Writing is a talent that helps people communicate their thoughts and feelings, which, in turn, facilitates communication by allowing one to share viewpoints and experiences. This is one of the numerous ideas that stands out from Hidi et al. [10]. In addition, written language is the most common form of communication utilised by individuals worldwide to perform daily tasks. Writing skills are consequently essential for producing written materials. Writing and interactions with others therefore require mastery of this ability [11].

According to Topuzkanamis [12], writing can be seen as a language that the individual has constructed to convey mental creations including ideas, emotions, ambitions measurements, experiences, and emotions. Consequently, this illustrates how good

communication via words is a result of concise and efficient writing, which in turn helps satisfy constantly shifting social as well as academic needs. Therefore, it is crucial for a language learner to understand that writing is deemed precise whenever it includes proper letter formation, spelling, writing that is apparent vocabulary that is appropriate, grammar, sentence construction, and the correct utilisation of paragraphs [13]. For students in the writing class, such subskills are rather complicated. Additionally, it is suggested that the development of writing abilities is slower than that of other talents since writing calls for a particular amount of sophisticated structures, comments, rectification, and evaluation methods [6, 14].

B. Paragraphs

Writing is categorised into many styles in academic circles. According to the research article by Ly et al. [5], there are three types of paragraphs: argumentative, contrastive, and descriptive. Consequently, Ameri [13] divides writing styles into five categories, which consist of:

- (1) A description is a type of writing intended to provide the reader an impression of things, concepts, locations, or phenomena that the researcher wants to share.
- (2) Writing that aims to describe the occurrence of a phenomena is known as narrative.
- (3) Writing that tries to clarify, communicate, or characterise something that can broaden or add to the reader's understanding or opinions is known as exposition.
- (4) Writing that presents and conveys an idea or concept with the goal of persuading the reader is known as argumentation.
- (5) Writing that seeks to change the readers' views and outlooks regarding a specific topic or issue is known as persuasion.

Based on these viewpoints, it can be concluded that one of the most important genres for undergraduate students to become proficient in in order to meet their academic requirements is descriptive writing [15].

C. Descriptive writing texts

Definition

According to Hyland [16], academic writing is recognised as being crucial to students' academic achievement and university admittance. It is commonly asserted that descriptive writing is important for acquiring both ordinary skills and various forms of exams. A descriptive paragraph utilises an appeal to describe a picture, a person, a place, or an action, according to Oshima et al. [16]. Above all, these experts stress the need of demonstrating senses, which describe how something appears, feels, tastes, smells, and sounds. The following can be clarified through the fact that a

descriptive paragraph's main objective is to ensure that readers can conceptualise what the author is attempting to convey and form an image in their minds [19].

Challenges with producing descriptive texts

It is thought that writing in a foreign language exposes students to an appropriate amount of difficulty. Numerous research on the difficulties faced by students when writing classes have been conducted. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons why students struggle to write well is linguistic in nature. Utilising suitable syntax and lexical materials is the most common issue among these [20–22]. Students must make up for the lack of a variety of frameworks in order to convey meaning, which makes writing more challenging than oral communication. This implies that students must make sure they can independently analyse written materials employing vocabulary to link concepts and complete, grammatically correct structures of sentences.

Creation of content and genre organisation rank second in terms of difficulty [15, 23]. Students are said to struggle with coming up with and developing ideas for the subject they are writing about. Students have trouble coming up with ending sentences, subject sentence structure, and supporting sentences [24]. Students' inability to organise their thoughts due to interference from their first language and a lack of reading and writing experience may help to explain this [21, 25]. Inadequate opportunities for practicing writing both within and outside of the classroom are another factor contributing to this challenge [26]. This limits students' exposure to writing about a variety of subjects. Additionally, emotional variables are one of the significant causes of young people's writing challenges. According to Byrne [21], psychological issues are the emotional and mental barriers that pupils may encounter. The primary adversaries may be students' block, insecurity, or worry associated to writing.

Expectations of students

Several studies demonstrate what freshman EFL students anticipate from their instructors in terms of their contribution to their writing development. The importance of a safe and nurturing educational setting with committed instructors who provide in-depth feedback is emphasised by these students. A friendly environment and constructive criticism are important, as demonstrated by Hattie et al. [26]. Additionally, students prefer specific constructive remarks since it clarifies their places of shortcoming and provides clear guidance on how to improve [27]. Song et al. back this position. Freshman year EFL students in this survey also place a high value on an accepting and encouraging classroom that is supported by their teachers. They contend that their

desire and ability to develop their writing abilities is significantly affected by this type of setting [28]. By analysing the students' challenges with writing that is descriptive employing genre-related and other prevalent components, the researchers hope to close the gap left by earlier studies and offer an improved comprehension of the fundamental issues with descriptive written form texts. In addition to examining this viewpoint, the study aims to draw attention to useful techniques and what students should anticipate from teachers in order to enhance their descriptive abilities in writing.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study involved 40 first-year students enrolled in Quang Nam University's English Studies program, located in central Vietnam. These students had completed a 45-period "Foundation to Writing 1" course, which aimed to develop their descriptive writing skills. At the end of the first semester, an online survey was administered as the research instrument, which combined both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather comprehensive insights. The questionnaire, adapted from Khatib et al.'s Analytic Rating Scale for EFL Descriptive, included two open-ended questions. The first question explored how students planned to enhance their writing skills independently, while the second focused on their expectations for lecturer support in this process.

To analyze the data, SPSS software was used for quantitative analysis, providing a numerical foundation to assess trends and patterns in student responses. In parallel, thematic analysis was applied to the open-ended responses, allowing for a deeper, qualitative exploration of student attitudes and perceptions. According to Creswell [9], combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches can provide a more nuanced understanding of educational phenomena, as the former captures broad trends and the latter delves into personal experiences and meanings. This mixed-methods approach aligns with the views of Johnson and Onwuegbuzie [18], who argue that triangulating data from different sources strengthens the validity and richness of the findings. By integrating statistical data with thematic analysis, the study effectively captured both the breadth and depth of students' perspectives, offering valuable insights into their self-directed learning strategies and their expectations for pedagogical support. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive evaluation of the students' developmental needs in their writing education.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A.Results

The report on the length of time students have studied English is included in Table 1.

Table 1: English learning year of participants

| Years of learning English | Number of participants | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| >= 10 | 16 | 40 |
| 6-9 | 14 | 35 |
| <= 5 | 10 | 25 |

Students were asked to estimate how long they had been learning English on their own. The number of participants by years of English language proficiency was shown in the table. According to their experience learning English, the participants were distributed in a variety of ways. Even though the students in this study were freshmen, it can be claimed that their backgrounds in years of English language education varied. Most of those in attendance have been

engaged in learning English for a long time, and 40% of them have been learning the language for more than ten years on average. Thirty-five percent, or 14 individuals, have been learning English for 6 to 9 years. Finally, eight participants, or 25% of the total, have been learning English for five years or fewer. The wide diversity of experience levels among participants is demonstrated by this distribution.

Students' difficulties when writing an English descriptive paragraph

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of challenges faced by participants

| Attribute | Criteria | Mean | Std.Deviation |
|---|-----------------------------|------|---------------|
| Lexical resource appropriateness | Language-related components | 3.64 | .853 |
| Appropriate tenses | Language-related components | 3.59 | 1.155 |
| Numerous grammatical constructions | Language-related components | 3.56 | 1.084 |
| Brainstorming/ outlining concepts | Organisation and content | 3.53 | .894 |
| Numerous lexical resources | Language-related components | 3.48 | 1.180 |
| Utilising the five senses (taste, touch, hearing, smell, and sight) | Genre-related components | 3.38 | 1.026 |
| Spelling | Mechanics | 3.35 | 1.147 |

| | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|------|-------|
| Logical order | Organisation and content | 3.33 | 1.119 |
| Cohesive devices (soon, firstly, nevertheless, in addition, therefore, etc.) | Language-related components | 3.33 | 1.119 |
| Creativity | Genre-related components | 3.30 | .985 |
| Similes | Genre-related components | 3.27 | 1.132 |
| Sentences of introduction | Organisation and content | 3.25 | .999 |
| Comprehensive descriptive information | Organisation and content | 3.25 | .914 |
| Ending sentence | Organisation and content | 3.17 | 1.129 |
| Capitalisation | Mechanics | 3.04 | 1.198 |
| Punctuation | Mechanics | 3.00 | 1.066 |

The information in the table provides a thorough summary of the various difficulties participants encountered when composing a descriptive text. Participants struggled with selecting appropriate grammatical structures, cohesive devices, lexical resources, and tenses in relation to language-related components. Choosing the right words for the text appears to be the most difficult aspect, followed by tenses and structures, as indicated by the mean scores, which ranged from 3.33 to 3.64.

As we move on to issues of content and organisation, participants reported that coming up with brainstorming/ outlining concepts was the most difficult ($M = 3.54$). The mean scores for other categories, such as how to arrange ideas in a logical order, how to write introductory sentences and comprehensive descriptive information, and the ending sentence, were lower ($M = 3.33$, $M = 3.25$, and $M = 3.17$, respectively).

Problems with creativity, similes, and the use of sensory elements were all included in the genre-related issues. Although participants gave the challenging use of the five senses in writing a higher score ($M = 3.38$), there was a significant difference between the other two aspects ($M = 3.30$ and $M = 3.27$). Finally, the table's data reveals that participants struggled with mechanics-related abilities, particularly spelling, punctuation, and capitalisation. Capitalisation came in second with a

mean score of 3.04, while punctuation had the lowest mean score of 3.00 among these skills. It's interesting to see that spelling received a significantly higher mean score of 3.35, indicating that individuals were more proficient in spelling than in capitalisation and punctuation. According to Ur [30], students frequently struggle with the creative parts of writing, such as using similes, figurative language, and sensory elements. She notes that although students may be able to write simple descriptive texts, the cognitive work needed to create unique and vivid imagery frequently makes it difficult for them to use sensory aspects and make creative analogies. This is mirrored in the current study, where participants' somewhat lower mean scores demonstrated difficulties with similes, creativity, and sensory utilisation.

Students' methods for enhancing their English writing

The methods that students used to improve their writing abilities were asked to be self-reported. They have displayed a wide variety of techniques for improving their writing abilities on their own, with a particular emphasis on important topics like expanding their vocabulary and grammar, writing exercises, reading exercises, and using technology to improve their writing. The table contains examples that were taken straight from the responses.

Table 3: Writing improvement techniques used by students

| Strategy | Examples |
|------------------------------|--|
| Study grammar and vocabulary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + By concentrating on word diversity and tenses, I am honing my writing abilities. + Practise both basic and advanced grammar while learning a lot of new words. + To enhance my writing abilities, I'll practise using descriptive English techniques and pick up more vocabulary and sentence patterns. + Study fundamental skills like grammar and vocabulary. |
| Writing practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Write more and keep the outline in mind. + Compose short stories and diaries. + Try to write in the journal on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. + Practice writing essays or paragraphs. + Write various types of questions, practise utilising the right sentence structure, and become comfortable with the writing process. |

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| | + Write frequently to fix errors. |
| Reading | + Practice and consulting English-language articles are crucial, in my opinion. + I frequently search internet for articles to hone my writing abilities. + Reading journals, books, papers, and other materials. |
| Employing technology | + Discover further English-related applications or websites + Through apps like Duolingo and 4English, I am improving my English. + Use YouTube to practise listening + Listen to music or watch films. + Pay attention and imitate |

Expectations of students on improving their writing from lecturers

In their quest to become better writers, students have communicated a wide range of expectations to their instructors. A number of important themes have surfaced from the comments, including the need for efficient teaching strategies, interesting

language-improvement exercises in the educational setting, constructive criticism and correction techniques, and the establishment of a nurturing learning atmosphere. The examples offered in the table below are taken straight from the answers. The table's examples are taken straight from the responses provided by the participants.

Table 4: Expectations of students regarding improving their writing from lecturers

| Perspectives | Examples |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Efficient teaching strategies | + I'm hoping the teachers can start with basic concepts and work their way up to more complicated ones. + In order to help students expand their imaginations, I hope that the instructor will cover a wide range of fascinating topics. You can then write about a variety of subjects and expand your vocabulary. + Provide more detailed examples. + Describe the theory in detail. + The instructor can offer direction and an outline. |
| Language improvement activity | + Teaches a lot of new grammar rules + I would like additional practice exercises covering a variety of subjects. + A quick and effective technique to generate ideas + I think teachers can assist students in writing about a wider range of novel and varied subjects. + I'm hoping the teacher will demonstrate how to properly construct sentences in an essay. + To provide us with other paragraph examples + Give students concepts to think about |
| Feedback/Correction | + Assiduously edit students writings and identify errors to make their subsequent articles better + Provide feedback on tasks + Since we are all at different levels and require different care, I anticipate them to provide us with detailed individual attention. + Edit my writing |
| Classroom support | + The first quality I look for in a lecturer is friendliness, gentleness, and cheerfulness. I think that learning in a supportive setting with guidance from teachers is a good way for me to get better at writing. + Must be committed to the field and mentor students more + Commitment and instruction can draw students in. |

B. Discussion

The challenges faced by first-year EFL students while crafting a descriptive paragraph

According to the findings of the study, students struggle with nearly every aspect of writing a descriptive paragraph, even though the majority of them have been pursuing English for a decade or longer. Particularly, when producing descriptive

texts, language-related factors are thought to be the biggest obstacle. Teachers' guidance and assistance in the classroom may be the cause of this outcome. Instruction regarding how to further develop particular language-related features is seen to be unnecessary because teachers often assume that their students have long-lasting English language acquisition experiences. As a consequence, this lack

of targeted instruction impairs students capacity to write efficiently. Their "input" is insufficient to generate their "output." Additionally, students could struggle to use the right vocabulary resources. Teachers should provide more focused guidance on language-related skills in order to assist students overcome these challenges and improve their descriptive writing abilities. This result is in line with the challenges Alka [3] noted while writing descriptive texts and the issues Fareed et al. [21] found with the writing abilities of ESL students. It is confirmed that the majority of students battled with grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, and that the plurality of undergraduates had trouble writing in linguistics abilities, notably their grasp of grammar, syntax, and lexical materials.

The results, nevertheless, contradict Sholeha et al. [22] in that the majority of participants do not seem to have issues with organization-related issues. The outcomes were similar in that most participants were able to compose opening lines, detailed descriptive details, and closing sentences. This disparity might result from variations in the backgrounds of the participants or in the ways that they are taught. Additionally, the two learning environments may have different task requirements and assessment criteria.

This paper's novel conclusion is that genre-related factors hinder students' writing skills. Students often struggle to compose descriptive texts utilising the five senses. The following can be explained by their insufficient exposure to and skill with sensory elements in their writing. Students can improve their descriptive writing abilities and get past these obstacles by participating in sensory writing tasks and being given the chance to experiment with different sentence patterns using the five senses.

Strategies for self-improvement in writing by first-year EFL students

Several methods for helping pupils develop their writing abilities were found by compiling their responses. By mastering vocabulary, grammar, structure of sentences, and descriptive techniques, students are trying to improve their writing abilities. In order to fix mistakes and enhance their writing abilities, they are also practicing writing daily, reading articles online, utilising learning applications like Duolingo as well as 4English, and viewing films or listening to music on YouTube. They make no mention of leveraging instructor and peer comments to improve their writing, though. Learning is an activity that involves others and according to Vygotsky's sociocultural hypothesis [32], social interaction can significantly enhance outcomes for learning. According to this approach, integrating instructor and peer evaluation can offer insightful advice for continued writing skill development. They

appear to understand that in order to get better at writing, they need to put in more practice. They are aware of the various resources at their disposal, but adding input from others—like their teachers or peers—could offer insightful criticism and direction for future development of their writing abilities. In order to help students discover their areas of weakness and make the required corrections to improve their writing proficiency, instructors should advise them to ask classmates and professors for helpful criticism and ideas.

Expectations for instructors to support the development of first-year EFL students' writing abilities

In terms of how their instructors may help them improve their writing abilities, first-year EFL students have specific expectations. Students first highlight the importance of a friendly and encouraging learning environment led by the committed lecturer in charge, according to the self-reported responses. They feel that creating such an atmosphere is essential to developing their writing skills. Students believe that cultivating this kind of environment is crucial to improving their writing. The findings of the study by Song et al. [29], which indicate that first-year EFL students place a high importance on a classroom environment established by their teachers, are consistent with this. This kind of environment, they believe, has a significant influence on their motivation and capacity to improve their writing skills.

The second is that students want thorough explanations of writing theories as well as individualised advice and writing structure recommendations. They perceive outlines and learning new grammar rules as essential components of improving their writing and look for hands-on help in these areas. Students also stress how crucial it is to get thorough criticism and corrections on their writing difficulties. To improve their writing skills, they believe that constructive criticism is essential for seeing and fixing mistakes. Hattie et al. [27] who has underlined the significance of getting detailed, helpful feedback, support this. Students are able to comprehend their errors and improve when they receive feedback that is clear and actionable. By solving their writing deficiencies, students can improve their abilities and become more skilled writers in general.

In conclusion, the expectations of first-year EFL students about the establishment of a constructive learning environment with instructors who are supportive are summarised. They also look for in-depth advice on writing hypotheses and useful abilities, such as outlining strategies and grammar principles. In order to properly correct their writing shortcomings, students also place a high value on getting comprehensive criticism. These

requirements demonstrate students' readiness to advance their writing abilities with instructors' help and direction.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of the current study is to investigate two topics: the barriers that prevent students from completing descriptive paragraphs and the detailed thoughts and expectations that students have of their lecturers on the development of their writing. The study's main conclusions were gathered via an online survey.

It has been shown that language and genre-related issues are the primary causes of students' difficulties when writing descriptive paragraphs. It is possible to infer some instructional implications from the study's outcomes. Regarding genre-related issues, it has been discovered that students struggle with similes, creativity, and the use of sensory elements. Instructors should thus concentrate on giving students chances to practise writing with imaginative language, similes, and sensory elements. Students can also gain a better knowledge of how to organise their writing by being guided in the study of well-written descriptive paragraphs. In terms of language-related barriers, it is evident that a growing number of participants encountered difficulties using suitable cohesive devices, a range of grammar rules, acceptable lexical resources, and right tenses. This result implies that teachers should think about adding more grammar instruction. Additionally, peer review lectures should be taken into consideration so that students can collaborate with their peers to enhance writing skills and get feedback on their descriptive paragraphs.

When educating, teachers should also take into account the expectations of their students to improve their writing skills. The majority of participants underlined how crucial instructor advice and tailored feedback are to helping students advance their writing abilities. A healthy amount of critique can help students become better writers. Instructors must thus inform pupils of their accomplishments as well as areas for improvement. To make the experience of learning more interesting and efficient, teachers are also encouraged to include real-world examples and hands-on exercises in their writing classes. Some recommendations have been made for more research that will look into how various forms of feedback affect students' writing development and how using real-world examples in the classroom can improve learning results. Teachers can better tailor their educational approaches to the diverse needs of their students and foster a more engaging and effective learning environment by concentrating on these areas.

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