

# THE INFLUENCE OF VIETNAMESE ON DEVELOPING FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS AT THU DAU MOT UNIVERSITY

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## Abstract

The article is aimed at identifying the influence of first language or mother tongue (Vietnamese) on developing first-year students' English writing skills at Thu Dau Mot University. Analytical data was collected from 108 first-year students majoring in English Language at the Foreign Language Faculty. Research results show that most students are influenced by Vietnamese thinking and writing style in their writing activities. Of all the students surveyed, up to 57 (52.8%) always and 31 (27.7%) often do writing activities by thinking in Vietnamese and translating into English using Vietnamese writing style. The remaining 19.5% (20 students) said they got accustomed to doing English writing exercises by thinking in English at foreign language centers. The rest of the article proposes some solutions to help students overcome the above-mentioned barriers to develop their writing skills effectively.

**Keywords:** mother tongue, writing skills, students, Thu Dau Mot University

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## 1. Introduction

With the current trend of integration and globalization, English is becoming increasingly important and indefensible for many people; and it is a necessary means at any levels as well as professions. However, mastering the language, especially writing proficiency, is not easy for everyone. In addition to students' self-training efforts, the influence of their mother tongue (first language) also causes many difficulties in their process of writing practice. One of the worst impact of Vietnamese is that students often think in Vietnamese and then translate it into English, using Vietnamese writing style. As result, students make many errors in English sentences in terms of grammar, sentence structure and word usage. A written output with such writing style makes it impossible for readers to understand and for the writer to produce correct English. Therefore, avoiding the writing style based on Vietnamese thinking and translating into English can help students write correctly in English, and help readers understand the the information as well as the writer's opinions and views. Some studies show that, with a variety of effective writing exercises, learners can naturally penetrate native English and can practice writing without first language interference. Even though studying in the same class and environment, the basic impact on each student's writing output is quite different. Therefore, a survey conducted to point out the characteristics of mother tongue's influence on students' writing activities. Ultimately, the article is aimed at helping students overcome the difficulties so as to develop their writing skills effectively.

## 2. Literature review

Writing is an indispensable activity that people need to do a lot in their daily life. It is a means of communication that is widely used in many areas of human life, work and business. Additionally, writing is a language skill that is compulsory not only in academy but in various professions as well. For an English learner, writing is one of the four language skills in order of listening, speaking, reading and writing that they need to practice during their leaning process.

Larry Selinker (1972) regarded the “teaching perspective, one might very well write a methodology paper which would relate desired output to know inputs in a principle way, precribing what has to be done by teacher in order to help learner achieve learning... and the learning perspective, one might very well write a paper describing the process of attempted learning of a second language, successful or not: teaching, textbooks, and other external aids would constitute one, but only one, important set of relevant variables”.

Presented by Stephen Bailey (2003), the work takes a refreshing approach to the academic writing course, providing easily understandable language set within a clear structure. This format allows students to improve their writing without slowing their progress with complex vocabulary. Material is divided into short, easily manageable sections allowing teachers and students the flexibility they need to emphasise certain aspects or when time is short.

As stated by Jeffrey R. Wilson (2022), writing is a foundational course in most schools because it is a language skill which is usually understood as the expression of thought: Writing is thinking.

Language students need to do a lot of writing activities to enhance their communicative skills and prepare for their their future careers. However, writing with incorrect structure, grammar and vocabulary usage leads to misunderstanding and causes serious consequences. It is because language learners commonly encounter difficulties in writing activities due to interlingual influence of their mother tongue or first language (L1).

According to Ghazwan S. Mohammed (2021), the negative impact of L1 is caused by the negative transfer of the linguistic system from L1 to L2 (second language); and this leads the learners to form wrong sentence structures in L2 because the linguistic system in L2 is not the same as that of L1. Scott & Tucker (1974) examined the English errors in writing Arabic; and their findings suggested that the students’ errors were termed as mistakes of performance, mother tongue interference, or false interlingual analogy.

Ridha (2012) investigated the English essay writing errors in the works of EFL learners and specified the errors committed by the Iraqi EFL learners, revealing that the major cause of errors is none other than L1 transferring. This is reinforced by the fact that the majority of the learners depend on their L1 when expressing their ideas or feelings in L2. The study proved that different kinds of errors could be detected in the writing output of the learners' essays but out of the types of errors, the grammatical errors were considered to be the most frequent and serious ones.

According to Abisamra (2003) most of the syntactic errors made by EFL learners in their written production because of the influence of their first language. The negative transfer from L1 is due to dissimilarities between L1 and L2. Al-Khresheh (2010) reported that Jordanian EFL learners committed a large number of syntactic interlingual errors with regard to word order within simple sentence structure and that these errors were due to the transfer of L1 habits.

In order to write correct English, Ridha (2012) suggested that teachers give more attention to interference/influence or transfer phenomena among students. It is important that students think and write in English, not in their mother tongue or first language. As specified by Gabby Wallace (2024), by thinking in English, learners do not have to translate. When a student thinks in English without translating, he/she gets to understand the language naturally and no longer needs to think about it. Tom Wilkinson (2020) suggested basic steps that students can utilize to change their way of thinking and stop translating words before writing. First, they need to read English texts as much as possible. The more they read, the better their writing will become. On reading, students learn different styles of writing, pick up the natural good English, and learn how to use vocabulary,

grammar, and punctuation in context. Secondly, students keep writing regularly. The more they practice, the better they will become at writing. Reading helps to build the skills, but actually starting to write something is the most important step. The third tip is keeping a diary, which force students to write everyday and allow them to see their improvements over time. Finally, students need to find a key pal or language exchange partner to exchange emails. When they have a key pal, they have a specific and regular audience for their writing.

### 3. Methodology

The article's data is mainly the survey of first-year students at Thu Dau Mot University in April 2024, using a 20-question questionnaire and random interviews with 20 collaborators to collect qualitative data for the article's research purposes. In the sample, the total number of participants is 108 students (46 men and 62 women) majoring in English language at the Foreign Language Faculty.

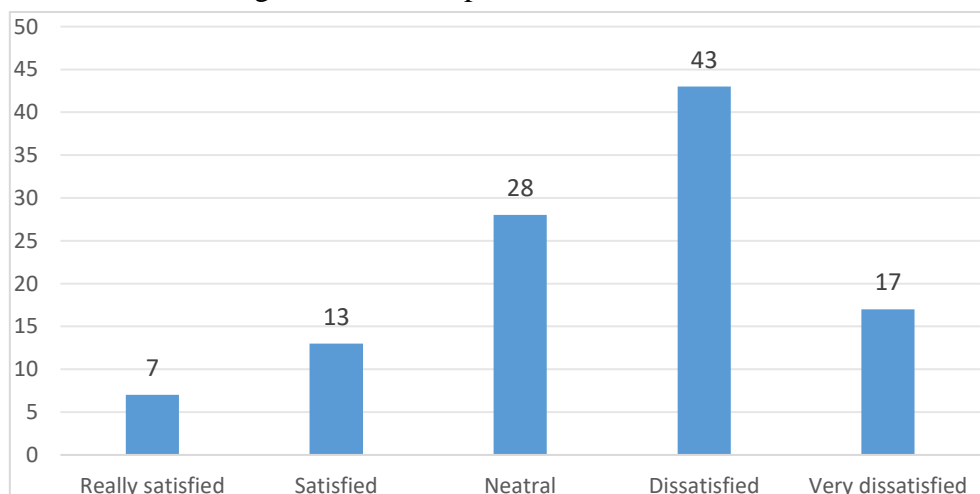
The goal of the article is to accurately and objectively point out which negative influence of mother tongue on the students' English writing activities. Therefore, the author designed a questionnaire (survey) for students. The survey was conducted to collect main data for the research.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Students' self-assessment of their English writing proficiency

The learner's subjective self-assessment of the results he or she has achieved during the process of practicing written English. It is acknowledged that enhancing writing ability is a long journey with the resonance of many factors from student's own efforts, course books, given writing activities and teacher's instructions. Most of the 108 students surveyed revealed they started learning English from junior high school to senior high school. However, high school teachers in Vietnam commonly teach English to their students exerting to the grammar translation method in which they explain grammar rules and and meanings of words to students and then ask them to translate English texts into Vietnamese. As result, students find it difficult to write correct English when they learn it as a university major.

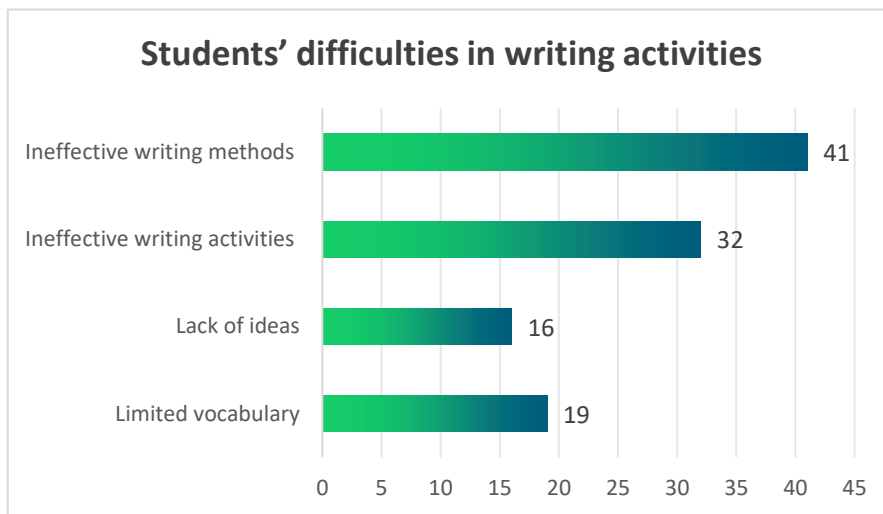
The percentage of students who are satisfied with their writing proficiency is only 6.5% (7 students) (see Figure 1). At the same time, 28 of them, accounting to 26%, had a neutral level of satisfaction with their current English writing ability. When randomly interviewed, some of them confided they did not find writing tasks very easy or very hard, and they did not encounter any serious problems in writing activities in class or in doing home assignments. The percentage of the participants feeling dissatisfied with their writing ability occupies 41% (43 students); and 17 students (15.7%) found their English writing ability too dissatisfying. Both of the two last groups stated that they made a lot of errors in their English written outputs in accordance with their lecturers' feedback.



**Figure 1.** Students' Satisfaction with current writing ability

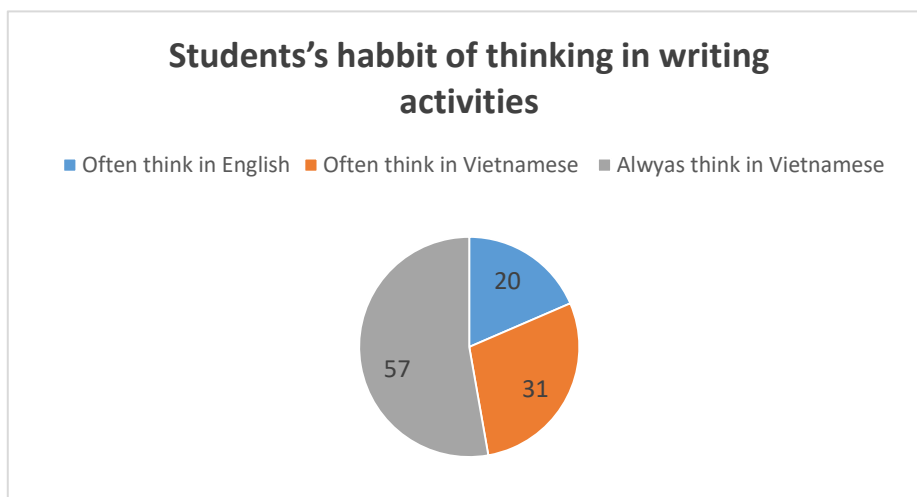
**4.2. Students' difficulties in English writing activities**

During their first year at Thu Dau Mot university, English-majored students take several writing courses to develop their writing skills. Nevertheless, they encounter certain difficulties that hinder them in enhancing their writing proficiency. The survey results (Figure 2) show that the number English-majored freshmen who cope with problems in English writing activities due to their limited vocabulary is 19 (53.80%); and the ones who lack ideas is 16, occupying the lowest percentage (15.80%). The participants finding writing activities boring and ineffective account 29.60% (32 students). This proves that course books play an important role that greatly affect students' writing outputs. Finally, the number of students facing ineffective writing methods is 41, accounting the highest percentage. It is proven that 37.96% of the students participating into the survey are deterred by the ineffective learning methods. It is apparent that nearly 40% of the students participating in the survey were not instructed how to use appropriate and effective writing methods. When asked in random, some of them intimated their lecturers did not teach them the right techniques to writing, which did not motivate them to get involved in writing activities effectively.



**Figure 2.** Students' difficulties in writing activities

**4.3. Students' ways of thinking in writing activities.**



**Figure 3.** The students' ways of thinking in writing activities

On the basis of the above results (Figure 3), we see the interlingual impact on Thu Dau Mot University's first-year English-majored students' writing outputs. It is obvious that just 20 students have the habit of thinking in English on doing writing activities, that accounts only 18.5% of all the participants surveyed. When randomly interviewed, some of them confided they took English courses, especially on International English Language Testing System (IELTS) at English centers

and were guided to think in the target language on do writing tasks and apply effective writing methods. Otherwise, the percentage of the students facing difficulties in writing activities by thinking in L1 (Vietnamese) *often* is 28.7% (31 students). Figure 3 also indicates that over half of the participants in the survey (57 students) always think in L1 before translating their ideas into English, which accounts 52.80%.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

Writing is a crucial activity for any language users in their daily life, work and business transactions, especially for Thu Dau Mot University's first-year English-majored students in the extent of this article. Therefore, producing correct written English is accordingly mandatory in any aspects of their life. However, in the process of practicing English writing skills, students encounter a big barrier by thinking in their mother tongue (Vietnamese) and translating into English combining word by word at a time. As result, students make many linguistic errors because of the dissimilarities of the two languages. Once the learners have the habit of thinking in L1, it is impossible for them to enhance their writing proficiency. Survey results have shown that, regardless of the type of influence of mother tongue is resolved, students are unable to enhance their writing skills if teachers do not focus on creating effective writing activities.

To improve first-year English-majored students writing skills, some recommendations are suggested to help them avoid their ways of thinking and apply productive writing methods. First, students need to read as much English texts as possible. In this way, they are able to gradually penetrate English and do not think about the language any more. Secondly, it is recommended that lecturers facilitate students to improve their written English more effectively, and teach them how to think and write in English without translation. Finally, it is compulsory that students practice writing regularly. The more they practice, the more proficiently they can develop their English writing skills.

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