



## DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING ESSAYS OF ENGLISH MAJORED SOPHOMORES AT TAY DO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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### Abstract:

Writing skill is an important part of communication, which helps people express ideas, experiences, and feeling exactly. Good writing skill allows them to communicate their message with clarity and ease to a far larger audience than through face-to-face or telephone conversations. However, students often face some difficulties when writing. This survey research presents the process of the study of *"Difficulties in writing essays of English majored sophomores at Tay Do University"*. It was conducted to find out some difficulties in learning writing of 53 sophomores from 12A and 12B classes at Tay Do University. The questionnaire, interview questions, and essay samples were instruments of this research. The results showed that sophomores had many difficulties in writing essays such as vocabulary, grammar structures, idea arrangement, background knowledge, and others. Basing on the research results, students could recognize their difficulties and find ways to overcome them.

**Keywords:** writing essay, difficulty, English majored sophomores, university

### 1. Introduction

Chapter 1 shows the rationale, significance, and organization of the study.

#### 1.1 Rationale

Language plays an important role in life because it is one of the main ways to help people communicate, interact with others around them. English is an example; it is the global language and has become the most important language to people in many parts of the world. It is most widely used in communicating around the world, also it is spoken as the first language in many countries. English as a lingua franca in many fields, including business, politics, science, technology, learning, and entertainment, etc. English is also

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the working language of many international organizations, like NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union), WHO (World Health Organization), and it is easy to see that most advertising posters and slogans of famous brands in the world often use English. It is also the most-used language of the Internet. Learning English is a way that helps people get access to a broader range of information, connections, and opportunities.

In the last 20 years, English is considered an important foreign language, especially for the Vietnamese young generation. It is included in the curriculum of most schools and universities. Therefore, if wanting to have a good job with a high salary in international companies after graduation, students need to improve their English skills. However, English is not an easy learning skill for students, especially writing skills. This is a skill that requires a lot of practice to improve. According to Klein (1985) *“Writing is the ability to put pen and paper to express ideas through symbols. This way, representations on paper will have meaning and content that could be communicated to other people by the writer”*. Writing is considered a way to express ideas, experiences, and emotions in written form. Writing is powerful. The influence of words is known as no limits. *“Communicating by written language is a good way to allow you to express your message, your idea with clarity and ease to a far larger audience than through face-to-face or telephone conversation”* Cited said (2005). Students can be good at speaking or listening skills but writing is a great challenge for them.

From the study *“Difficulties in writing of English-majored sophomore at Tay Do University”* conducted by Nguyen Thi Thu Thao – course 8 in May 2017, sophomores faced difficulties because of many reasons. First, lacking vocabulary made them unable to accurately convey their ideas and thoughts. Second, grammatical errors made their essays lacking incoherence. They had many interesting ideas, but they did not know how to organize ideas that led to long and redundant essays. Besides, when faced with unfamiliar topics, they felt confused due to a lack of background knowledge in many fields. Therefore, the survey *“Difficulties in writing of English majored sophomores at Tay Do University”* was carried to check whether the current second-year students faced these difficulties in learning writing essays.

## **1.2 The aims of the study**

The purpose of this study is to find some difficulties encountered by English majored sophomores in writing essays. The implication of the findings contributes to the understanding of students’ writing difficulties, besides, the obtained information helps students have appropriate solutions to overcome difficulties and have good essays. The study was conducted to deal with the research question:

- What are the difficulties in writing essays of English majored sophomores at Tay Do University?

### 1.3 The significance of the study

This study shows that writing is an important skill in many contexts in life that needs to be cultivated. Moreover, students face many difficulties in writing, but they do not recognize the causes. Therefore, the research helps them to find common mistakes when writing.

### 1.4 The organization of the study

This thesis is presented in five chapters including:

- Chapter One is the introduction of the study which states the rationale, the purpose, and the significance, as well as the organization of the research.
- Chapter Two includes the definitions and the importance of writing. The next part indicates the definition and types of writing essays. The last part indicates the difficulties of sophomores in Writing.
- Chapter Three focuses on the research methodology which consists of participants, instruments, and the procedure.
- Chapter Four is the results and discussion.
- Chapter Five includes conclusions, limitations, implications, and recommendations.

## 2. Literature review

This chapter presents the definition of writing, the definition of essay-writing and types of essay, and the importance of writing. It also consists of difficulties during the process of writing (vocabulary; grammar structures; ideas arrangement and background knowledge and others).

### 2.1 Definition of writing

*“Writing as a productive skill is one of the four basic skills of the English language. Writing is a comprehensive ability involving grammar, vocabulary, conception, rhetoric, and other parts of the language”* according to Zhang and Chen (1990). Therefore, in the process of writing, the writer focuses on producing language output rather than receiving it. Writing is the creative ability of students in forming a message through creating some signs (commas, slashes, quotation marks, etc.), forming letters and words, and then linking them together to create sentences in an essay. Just like speaking, writing is a way of communicating a message to others; however, when writing writers can edit the text many times according to their thoughts until they feel satisfied and not under pressure as when speaking. Writing is a means of expressing thoughts, ideas, and feelings in written form. Thanks to writing, writers can relieve sadness, thereby finding empathy from readers and give their thoughts, ideas, share experiences, or feelings.

Writing is considered an act of coding ideas, thoughts, reflections, it is a process of converting thoughts into words. This skill requires the writers to arrange ideas and words to exactly convey their messages. Also, writing is more rigorous than speaking

because it is required for learners to practice and experience. Also, writing is more rigorous than speaking because it requires learners to practice, experience, and have a wide vocabulary to be able to use the right word immediately. The writers also need to understand the meaning of many words and situations that they are used to. The writers also have to know how to construct sentences in an essay, so the essay becomes coherent and linked through rhetoric measures. Brown (2001:335) stated *“Written products are often the result of thinking, drafting, and revising procedures that require specialized skills, skills that not every speaker develops naturally”*, and also drew conclusions, *“Students should learn how to generate and organize ideas coherently, how to revise text for clearer meaning, and how to edit text for appropriate grammar”*. Hence, it is considered a difficult skill to acquire for students. Furthermore, Richards and Renandya (2002:309) said that *“written language is complex at the clause level”*, it includes many components such as content, organization, originality, style, fluency, accuracy, or using appropriate rhetorical. Gower, Philips, and Walters (2008:113) also argued that *“Writing involves many different aspects which include spelling, punctuation, sentence construction, organization, cohesion, and register/style”*.

In short, writing is a means of conveying messages into written form through vocabulary, grammar, rhetorical measures, and background knowledge.

## 2.2 Definition of essay

An essay often has a particular subject such as argue an issue or advance a specific idea or describe something. Besides, Wikipedia defines *“An essay is, generally, a piece of writing that gives the author’s argument – but the definition is vague, overlapping with those of a paper, an article, a pamphlet, and a short story. The essay has traditionally been sub-classified as formal and informal”*. Essays are not fictional but may be subjective opinions of the individual. Essays can be literary criticism, perspective on a certain issue, describe daily life, recollections, and reflections of the author. The basic structure of an essay is usually three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

The introduction is the first paragraph of the essay which introduces the topic to be discussed and the central idea or the thesis statement of the essay. It is the first impression the readers receive and explain the main point of the paper. The introductory paragraph usually ends with a thesis statement that is one sentence that sums up the one, main point that the essay is making about its topic.

In the second part, the body is at the heart of an essay. It is the longest and most important part of the essay because its purpose is to provide ideas and support for the thesis statement. This support can come in the form of examples, facts or statistics, short narratives about the personal experience of the author, or simply more details explaining what you mean. The body supports the main ideas of the thesis statements. The body of an essay usually contains at least three paragraphs and often more. Each paragraph discusses one idea that supports the thesis statement.

The conclusion is the last paragraph of the essay. It completes the essay by summarizing or repeating the most important ideas. The conclusion can also include an opinion, a prediction, or a solution to a problem.

### 2.3 Types of essay

Having good writing skills in different types of essays is very useful and necessary for learning as well as in life. Essay writing is a popular school exercise, part of the standard test and requirements for college applications. To distinguish between the types of essays, we need to identify the writer's purposes such as personal experience, describe something, share knowledge, explain a problem or convince readers to accept a mandate certain points. There are many types of essays, so students are easily confused. However, there are four main types of essays, with variations forming the rest.

Firstly, a Narrative essay is a story about a real-life experience. The essay requires the students to think and write about themselves. In writing a narrative essay, writers should try to involve the readers by adding sensory or emotional details to make the story more vivid and attractive. The narrative essays engage the readers by the feeling of experience and immersion in the story. A good narrative essay should be developed towards drawing a conclusion or making a personal view.

Secondly, a Descriptive essay describes a person, place, object, or even special significance memories. This type of essay communicates a deeper meaning through the description. In the essay, the writer should show, not tell, through the use of colorful words and sensory details.

Thirdly, an Expository essay explains or defines a topic, using facts, statistics, and examples. The expository essay can be the comparison and contrast essay, the cause, and effect essay. Expository essays are based on facts, not personal feelings, and are concise. The writers do not show their emotions and write in the first person.

Lastly, a Persuasive essay is to convince the readers to accept the writer's point of view or recommendation. The writers have to build a case using facts and logic, as well as examples, expert opinion, and sound reasoning. The writers give all sides of the arguments but have to be able to communicate and without equivocation why a certain position is correct.

Expository and Argumentative essays are usually required in academic writing to English majored sophomores at Tay Do University.

### 2.4 The importance of writing

Galuh (2008) stated that: "*Writing is one of language skill with the help given an important contribution to human work*". Writing is an important skill in many contexts of life such as schools, workplaces, and communities. Good writing skill helps people to deliver their message with clarity and ease. The better the writer writes, the more easily readers can understand. Writing can be considered as a tool to express oneself and convince others, also, the skill helps writers put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form and to mentally interact with the message.

Furthermore, writing is the ability to compose text effectively for various purposes. Writing is a tool for communication and learning that allows people to collect and circulate detailed information. People might be called upon to write a report, plan, or strategy at work; a well-written CV or résumé with good spelling or grammatical

structures is essential if wanting a new job. Having a good command of English will greatly increase the opportunities for a well-paid and interesting career. Being able to speak and write in English solves one of the communication barriers between people from different countries. Being able to speak and write in English solves one of the communication barriers between people from different countries. Having a good command of English will greatly increase the opportunities for a well-paid and interesting career. English writing is important in future career because when dealing with international clients and suppliers, the company will rely on the employee who knows how to speak and write in English to interpret the day-to-day operations, also, when working in an international company it is a need for communication through emails written in English.

In universities, students have to construct essays, project reports, and thesis in English. In academic writing and foreign references are often written in English. Thanks to writing skills, students at Tay Do University can expand their vocabulary, master the grammar structures, and be able to express their ideas and thoughts exactly, also, students will learn how to make a logical argument.

Therefore, students need to understand clearly the importance of writing and improve their writing skills.

## **2.5 Difficulties in writing skill**

When speaking can not prove to be clearly or directly, writing becomes more effective to express thoughts, feelings. However, some people especially students face many difficulties in process writing. English majored sophomores at Tay Do University do not have good essays because they lack the vocabulary, grammatical structures, background knowledge about various fields. Moreover, they do not know how to organize ideas.

### **2.5.1 Vocabulary**

Richards J.C. and Renandya (2002: 252) stated that: *“Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners listen, speak, read and write. Without an extensive vocabulary... learners often achieve less than their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language”*. Vocabulary is an important component to have good essay writing. However, students often lack the necessary vocabulary when they write, this is a reason why they cannot express thoughts clearly and understandably. Thornbury (2002) said that *“without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”*. Lack of large vocabulary is one of the most difficult things that students face, they do not have enough vocabulary to express ideas, thoughts, feelings exactly, they just keep them inside. The knowledge meaning of the word is large, students have to know the meaning and understand how to use it. Lack of vocabulary makes them be confused when demonstrating a topic. So before writing an unfamiliar topic, students have to find new words and search the topic to write better.

Moreover, the students also do not know how to choose appropriate words in contexts. It is easy to see that a word often has more than one meaning and many

synonyms, so students are easily confused in choosing words to write correctly. *"Vocabulary knowledge is considered as having two main dimensions such as breadth and depth"* Read (1988, 1989). The meaning of the word sometimes depends on the situation so it is very important to choose the right words for each context. The wrong choice of words can lead to misunderstandings or not express the author's thoughts clearly. The choice of words will make the sentence a beautiful one. Thus, students need to have a rich vocabulary to express what they think.

Besides, the students have to keep in mind collocation. A collocation is made up of two or more words that are commonly used together in English such as "get a job", "make a promise". Using collocations in writing makes the sentences more natural and easier to understand. There are many collocations to remember the meaning and they have no clear rules and no specific regulation to follow. Therefore, students do not know exactly what the collocations mean, the way words go together, and the meaning. This is one of the difficulties that students often faced.

In short, having a large vocabulary is a good way to express ideas more attractive and the essay will be understandable and successful.

### **2.5.2 Grammar structures**

Grammar plays an important role in having a good essay. As Jame (2005) said, *"Grammar is a study of the structure of the language and describes the way of putting words together to make meaningful sentences"*. Grammar is very important in writing skills because it provides information that helps the reader's comprehension. It is the structure that conveys precise meaning from the writer to the audience. Eliminate grammatical errors from our writing, and reward our readers with clear communication. Good grammar is one of the ways to express knowledge.

English tenses are tools helping the writers to express time in the language. There are three main tenses: past tense, present tense, and future tense. It is necessary to determine various aspects in terms of English verbs, such as the state of being, continuing action, or completed action. Using appropriate tenses helps to express ideas clearly and effectively and allows the readers to comprehend accurately what has written using tenses. It is necessary to know how to conjugate verbs properly by focusing on the structures of tenses and modal tenses to create exact and effective sentences. When students are weak grammar, their sentences can be ambiguous that makes readers unable to understand what they want to write or the sentence can be changed in meaning. Therefore, if the students want to have a successful essay, they have to understand how to use appropriate tenses.

Moreover, part of speech is a great challenge when writing. All words in the English language can be classified as one of the eight different parts of speech. Understanding the different parts of speech is important in understanding how words can and should be joined together to make sentences that are both grammatically correct and understandable. An understanding of the parts of speech is also important for knowing how to correctly punctuate sentences. The eight parts of speech are nouns,

pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections. If the students do not know the functions and rules of part of speech, they can misuse the function of the word that makes the readers cannot understand or the sentence is wrong meaning.

Finally, the subject-verb arrangement is also a difficulty for students. The subject-verb agreement simply means the subject and verb must agree in number. This means both needs to be singular or plural. However, students often do not know that the subject is singular or plural so there is no subject-verb arrangement will lead to the fact that their sentences are ungrammatical. Some words when acting as subjects can confuse students such as Compound Subjects, Collective Nouns, Inverted Subjects, Indefinite Pronouns, etc. Thus, students should pay attention to grammar because grammar is important in writing skills.

### **2.5.3 Ideas arrangement**

Idea arrangement is also a problem for students in writing the essay. Interesting and logical ideas will attract readers, but it is not easy to organize and develop ideas when writing. If the students have no idea or do not understand the topic clearly, they may be getting out of the topic or failing to convey the main message. Besides, developing ideas and arranging information in a certain way can help to keep the readers centered on the focus of the essay.

Students do not know how to arrange ideas logically or lack the main idea or topic sentence in paragraph and essay. Also, sometimes they have too many ideas when writing that lead to sentences that are long, redundant, or unnecessary. Thus, the essay uses the correct grammar, rich and natural vocabulary is not enough because if students make mistakes about how to organize and develop the ideas, the essay will be long, confused, and unattractive.

### **2.5.4 Background knowledge**

Background knowledge is very essential when writing. The most obvious being is that it improves the flow of the essay, creates interest and helps readers understand the points to express. If the students want to have a good essay, they need to have a rich knowledge of various fields. Poor knowledge makes them unable to understand the topic or unable to organize their ideas well. They will feel nervous when they face unfamiliar or hard topics because they do not have practical experiences in social life.

### **2.5.5 Other difficulties**

Besides the above difficulties in process writing, students sometimes make mistakes with other problems.

First, orthography including punctuation, spelling, and contraction are difficulties, which students often face. Marks of punctuation play a very important role in giving intended meaning to the language. Using the wrong punctuation or even the



wrong placement of the mark of punctuation can change the meaning of the sentence completely and sometimes even convert the sentence to complete nonsense.

Second, misspelling a word might seem like a minor mistake, but it can reflect very poorly on a writer. It suggests one of two things neither the writer does not care enough about his essay to proofread it nor knows his topic well enough to properly spell words related to it. Either way, spelling errors can make readers less likely to trust the writer so that if the students want to write good essays and make sure they get their meaning across clearly, it is important to get their spelling right.

Third, contractions in English have two types; negative contractions (isn't, don't, etc.) and verb contractions (I'm, they've, etc.). Contractions are used mostly in speech and informal writing, and most teachers discourage using them in essays, so they are not used much in formal writing, such as a business letter, business email, or essay. However, due to the habit of speaking, the students do not understand that essays need to be in the right form, they often use contractions in essay writing.

Finally, time is also a problem for students. They have to complete an essay of about 250 words in class in a short time that makes them feel stressed and nervous because sometimes the topic is unfamiliar and they have no idea to write. This is also one of the reasons why they do not get good marks, do not have good essays. Also, students have rarely spent time practicing writing skills at home because it is a difficult skill and they have no passion so that they cannot write well.

To sum up, four main reasons made students face difficulties when writing an essay are vocabulary, grammar structures, idea arrangement, background knowledge, and some other difficulties.

### **3. Research methodology**

This chapter presents the design, participants, and procedures of the research.

#### **3.1 Design**

The research was carried out to find out the problems that the sophomores had faced in learning English writing. The researcher used the survey method to collect data. The reliability and validity of the research results were based on the instruments as questionnaire and interview questions, and essay samples. The main key to this research was participants. They were fifty-three English majored sophomores who would be delivered the questionnaire to get the information about their difficulties in writing. This survey was a combination of quantitative and qualitative research.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants of this study were 53 sophomores of 12A and 12B English majored classes at Tay Do University. There were 39 females and 14 males. They ranged from 19 to 21. Most of them have been learning English for 8 years and a few had 11, 13 years of learning. The reasons for choosing these participants were based on the subject they are

learning, the length of their English learning, their competence in English as a foreign language, and their psychological age. Their age and learning process are nearly the same, so they have the same ways of thinking and have faced some similar difficulties, therefore it is easier during the process of collecting data. Most of them said that they encountered some difficulties in writing English.

In the first year, Writing 1&2 provided English majored freshmen with the ability to develop ideas from paragraphs into an essay with kinds of different essays such as argument (advantages and disadvantages), compare and contrast, the descriptive and narrative essay. Besides, students were practiced skills to write the thesis statement in the opening paragraph, how to write the introductory paragraph to attract more readers, how to develop ideas, and outline each type of essay. They worked in pairs or individuals, the length of the passage was unlimited. The curriculum was Book *Pavlik, C., & Segal, M. K. (2007). Interaction 2 Writing. Mc Graw- Hill*. There were chapters such as *Overview of an essay, Global Connections, Language and Communication, etc.*

In the second year, sophomores would learn Writing 3, the curriculum was Book *Blass, L. and Pike-Baby, M. (2007). Mosaic 1 Writing Silver Editor. McGraw- Hill*, there are many chapters in it; however, the researcher only chose three chapters as examples to analyze such as *Money, Heath, and Leisure, Immigration*. They learned how to present an essay, how to look for and develop ideas, and how to write a standard outline of the essay. In each chapter, students were given the topics then students would read essays related to the content of chapters such as “*Advantages and Disadvantage of having money*”, “*Effects of happiness on our health*”, and “*Why cities are becoming overcrowded*” and finally, they would do exercises to find ideas for topics that the teacher would ask them to write, while the teacher also provided some ideas and new words for students. The length of the essay was about 200-250 words. They would write the essays at home and returned them later, sometimes they had to complete the essay writing in class.

### **3.3 Instruments**

The instruments of this research were a questionnaire, interview, and 30 essay examples. The questionnaire is useful when collecting information from students as it helps to find out exactly the difficulties they encounter in writing. Besides, the interview was another helpful tool used for getting more specific details. Thanks to answering questions, students know their difficulties in writing and find ways to overcome them.

#### **3.3.1 Questionnaire**

The questionnaire is very important in this study because it clearly shows the difficulties students. It consists of 12 questions and 18 statements that divided into 3 groups.

**Table 1:** The Content of the Question Group

Group	Summary of the content of the question group
a. From 1 to 6	Students' background
b. From 7 to 12	Students' attitude toward writing
c. From 13 to 29	The difficulties in writing that students faced

### 3.3.2 Interview

The purpose of using interview questions is to understand students' attitudes when learning writing. The paper interview is a very useful tool when collecting information from students because when answering questions, they clearly expressed their difficulties, their attitudes towards difficulties and along with the researcher suggested some solutions. The research chose randomly six students (three girls and three boys) in a total of fifty-three sophomores to answer interview questions. The paper interview consists of five questions such as the first two questions are the attitude of students when learning writing, the following three questions are the difficulties students encounter, and propose some solutions to overcome.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the results obtained from questionnaires, interviews, and sample essays. The statistics are clear evidence to prove the difficulties in essay writing of English majored sophomores.

### 4.1 Results

This section presents the findings of sample questions, interviews, and essays. The results were analyzed based on the information and data collected from the second-year students divided into two result groups: the results of the question, essay samples, and the interview.

### 4.2 Results of the questionnaire

The finding of the questionnaire was divided into two main parts including students' background and students' difficulties when writing.

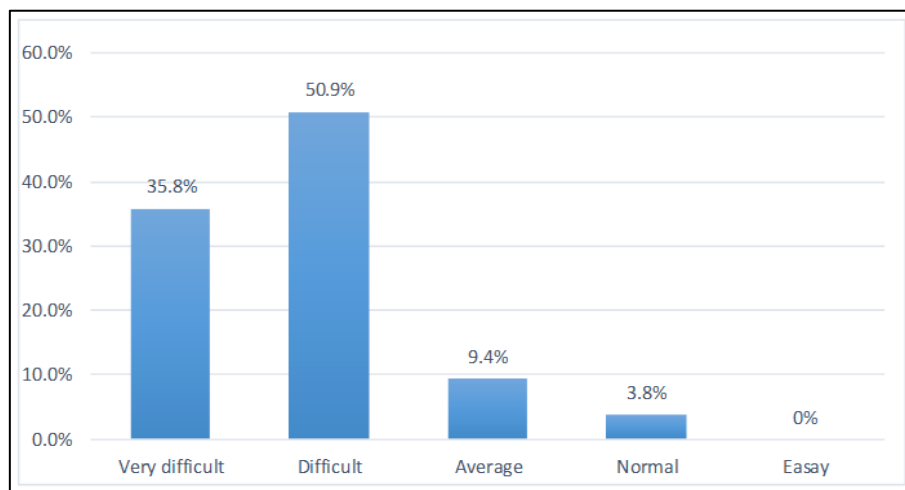
### 4.3 Students' background

Thanks to the survey about the time students learning English, the researcher can evaluate the basics of their abilities and knowledge during their writing. In question 1, "How long have you studied English?" there were 30 students have learned English for 9 years, constituting 57%, this shows that most of them learned English from grade 6 until entering the university. About 32% (17/53) of the students have learned English for 12 years. Also, the remaining students who have studied English for 14 years accounted for 11% (6/53). Most students have learned English for a long time so their English skills can

be good, especially writing skills. Early access to English can help them gain more knowledge and improve their writing skill.

Nowadays, most students try to improve their English skills because they have understood the importance of English as well as English writing. In question 2 about the importance of learning English, there were 84.9% (45/53) of them thought that English is important, 15.1% (8/53) of the remaining students believed that English is very important because if they want to find a good job with a high salary, travel to countries around the world or work at international companies, they should try to improve their English skill. In question 3 "What is your favorite subject?" about 43.4% (23/53) of the total students said that they like speaking skills, 32.1% (17/53) chose listening skills. Unfortunately, there were 17% (9/53) said that they like writing skill, it was a low percentage because many students thought that this skill was very difficult.

Most of the life contexts (schools, workplaces, and communities) need English writing skills but learning writing is not easy.



**Figure 1:** Students self-assess the difficulty level of writing skill

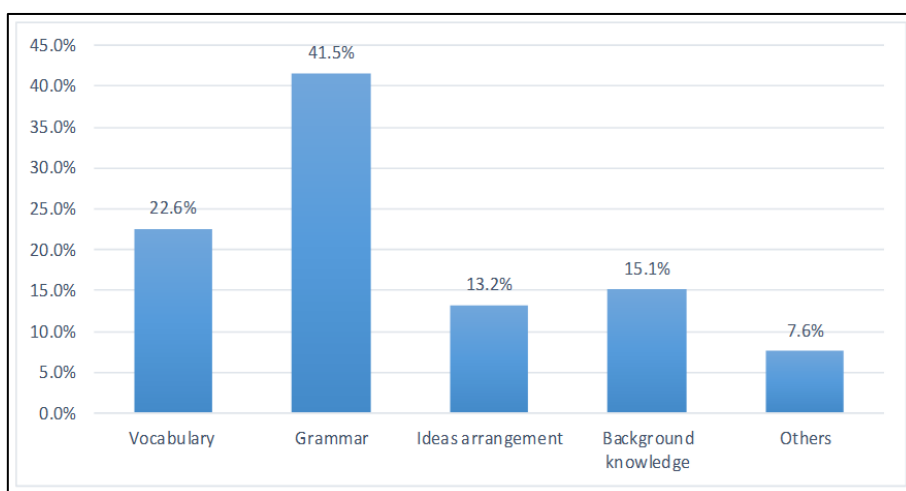
The evidence is in question 4 "What do you think about writing skill?", there were 50.9% of participants who thought that writing was difficult, 35.8% of them rated writing as very difficult. Moreover, in statement 13 "You have faced difficulties in the essay writing", the percentage of students strongly agreed was 33.9% and agreed with 66.1%. Writing is a skill that takes a lot of practicing time to improve.

In question 5 "How often do you spend practicing English writing skill at home?" 50.3% of the sophomores admitted that they rarely practiced writing skills, it was a high percentage of the answer. Also, there were 37.8% of them who sometimes practiced writing at home. Unfortunately, 11.9% of the remaining students who usually practiced writing, no one always writing skills at home. Students often spend less time practicing it at home, so they faced difficulties when writing and did not achieve good grades. To have good essay writing, they should usually write at home and then thank teachers correct it so students could learn experience from errors.

Students were very honest when evaluating their writing skills in question 6 "How is your writing skill?" There were 19% of the participants thought their writing skill was good, 75% of them answered that they had an average writing skill. Besides, 6% of the remaining students admitted that their writing skill was bad. The chart showed that the percentage of "Average" and "Bad" were too high, which means that students have difficulties and their essay writing often makes many mistakes.

#### 4.4 The common difficulties of sophomores when learning English writing

Some common difficulties of sophomores in writing were vocabulary, grammar, ideas arrangement, background knowledge, and others. Let's see Figure 2 below.

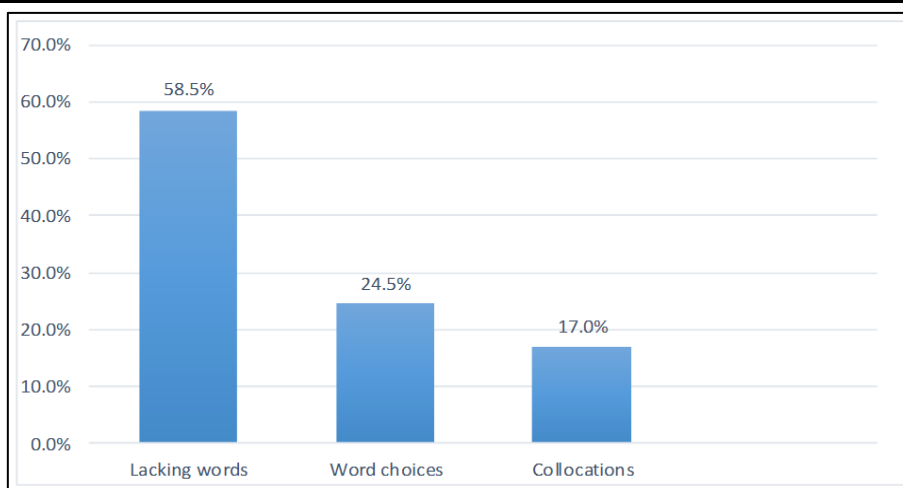


**Figure 2:** The common difficulties of sophomores when learning English writing

As can be seen from Figure 2, students who faced difficulties in grammar were 41.5%. It is the highest percentage that shows grammar is a great problem for students in writing. There were 22.6% of the participants admitted that they faced difficulty in vocabulary. Besides, students who claimed that they were not good at idea arrangement with 13.2% percentage. About 15.1% of them chose difficulty in background knowledge. Moreover, 7.6% of the remaining students had other difficulties in the process of writing. In general, the rate of difficulties does not have too much difference, but the percentage of grammar is quite high. Therefore, they cannot have good essays because they faced many difficulties in writing such as vocabulary, grammar, idea arrangement, background knowledge, and others. It is also the main purpose of this research; the researcher needs to find out their mistakes and helps students improve their writing skill.

#### 4.5 Vocabulary

Vocabulary is an important component to have good essay writing. However, students often faced difficulties in vocabulary when writing.



**Figure 3:** Difficulties in vocabulary

Vocabulary accounted for 22.6% of the difficulties in writing. Specific difficulties that students faced in vocabulary were lacking words, word choices, and collocation. The chart showed that the students lacked words were 58.5% (31/53) of them, it was the highest percentage. Besides, about 24.5% (13/53) of the total participants chose word choices and 17% (9/53) of remaining sophomores admitted that they made mistakes about collocation in vocabulary. Let's see table 2 below.

**Table 2:** Difficulties in vocabulary

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
14. Lack of vocabulary makes you cannot express your thoughts clearly and understandably.	28.3%	51%	20.7%	0%	0%
15. The knowledge meaning of the word is large and not easy, you do not know clearly the meaning and understand how to use it.	32.7%	54.7%	9.4%	3.8%	0%
16. You face difficulties in the way to choose appropriate words in contexts.	20.8%	32.1%	24.5%	22.6%	0%
17. You do not know exactly what the collocations mean, the way words go together.	18.9%	28.3%	39.6%	13.2%	0%

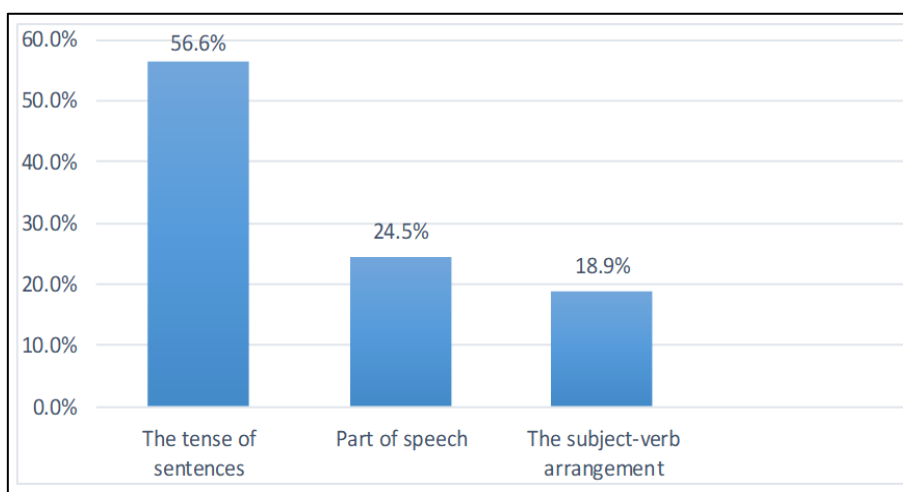
As can be seen from Table 2, students agreed with statement 14 "Lack of vocabulary makes you cannot express your thoughts clearly and understandably" was 51% and 28.3% strongly agreed. About 54.7% agreed and 32.7% strongly agreed with statement 15 "The knowledge meaning of the word is large and not easy, you do not know the meaning and understand how to use it", there were 3.8% (2/53) disagreed. Moreover, students agreed with statement 16 "Do not know how to choose appropriate words in contexts" about 31.2% and 20.8% strongly agreed. No idea accounted for 24.5%. In statement 17

“You do not know exactly what the collocations mean, the way words go together”, strongly agreed percentage was 18.9% and 28.3% agreed.

To sum up, sophomore faced some difficulties in process writing such as lacking words, wrong word choices, and collocation in vocabulary.

#### 4.6 Grammar structures

The grammar structure was also one of the common difficulties in writing that rated up to 41.5%. Some difficulties in grammar structures that students faced such as the tense of the sentence, part of speech, and the subject-verb arrangement.



**Figure 4:** Difficulties in grammar structures

The figure 4 showed that there were 56.6% of them made mistakes with the tenses in sentences, 24.5% of the sophomores had difficulty with part of speech. Furthermore, students who faced difficulty in the subject-verb arrangement were 18.9% (10/53). Let’s see Table 3 below.

**Table 3:** Difficulties in grammar structures

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
18. You do not know how to choose the appropriate tense in the sentence.	24.5%	56.6%	11.3%	7.6%	0%
19. Do not understand clearly the functions and rules of part of speech leading you to misuse the function of the word making the readers unable to understand or the sentence is wrong meaning.	17%	45.3%	28.3%	9.4%	0%
20. Your sentences are ungrammatical because you lack the knowledge about the subject-verb arrangement.	15.1%	41.5%	26.4%	17%	0%

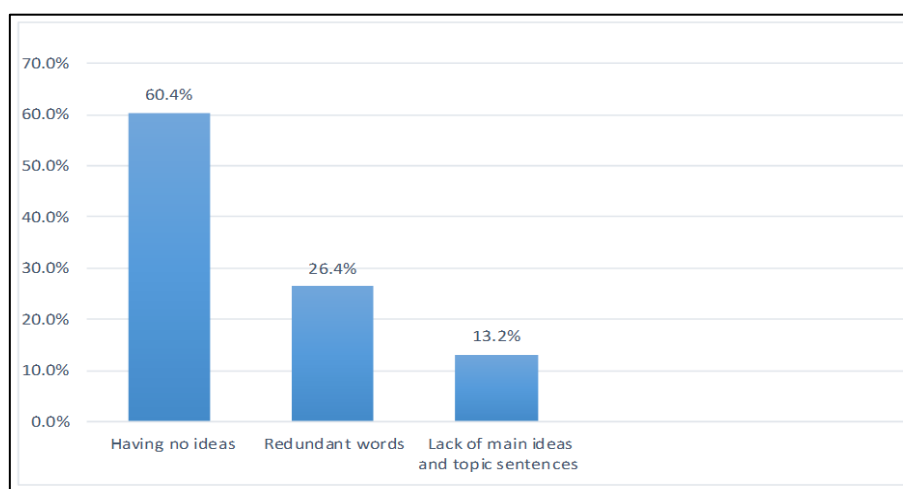
As can be seen from Table 3, there were 81.1% of the total participants strongly agreed and agreed with statement 18 "Do not know how to choose the appropriate tense in the sentence". Besides, students agreed with statement 19 "Do not understand clearly the functions and rules of part of speech leading you to misuse the function of the word making the readers unable to understand or the sentence is wrong meaning" with 45.3% and 17% strongly agreed. Students agreed with statement 20 "Your sentences are ungrammatical because you lack the knowledge about subject-verb arrangement" with 41.5% and 15.1% strongly agreed.

According to the analyzed data, the biggest difficulty in grammar for students was how to choose the appropriate tense in the sentence. They often did not understand how to use tenses in English clearly so that their sentences are ungrammatical or not meaningful. An essay needs a lot of sentences, all of the sentences must be well-organized and interlinked in tenses so that they were difficult.

To sum up, grammar is an important factor in writing so they should pay attention to grammar structures if wanting to have good essays.

#### 4.7 Ideas arrangement

A good essay needs not only exact grammar structure, the plentiful, natural vocabulary but also needs to have the arrangement of ideas logically and attractively.



**Figure 5:** Difficulties in ideas arrangement

Idea arrangement was also a problem for students in essay writing, it accounted for 13.2% of difficulties. The figure 5 showed that sophomores admitted that they had no idea in writing was up 60.4%. Their essay may be limited and unattractive to readers when there are not many ideas. The second difficulty in idea arrangement was redundant words that made up 26.4%. When they had too many ideas, their essay or paragraph would be long, redundant, or not be related together. The last one was the lack of the main ideas and topic sentences in writing accounted for 13.2%. Let's see Table 4 below.



**Table 4:** Difficulties in ideas arrangement

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
21. Your writing is not good enough because you have poor ideas or a few ideas.	28.3%	50.9%	17%	3.8%	0%
22. You sometimes write redundant words in the essay.	20.8%	45.3%	22.6%	11.3%	0%
23. You often lack the topic or main idea sentence when writing.	18.9%	37.7%	22.6%	20.8%	0%

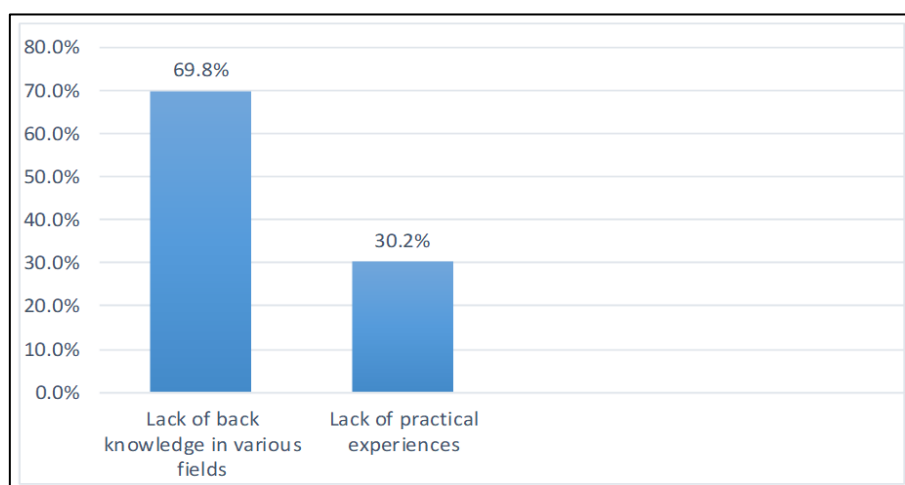
According to Table 4, about 50.9% strongly and 28.3% strongly agreed with statement 21 “Your writing is not good enough because you have poor ideas or a few ideas”. Furthermore, students agreed with statement 22 “You sometimes write redundant words in the essay” which was 45.3%, and 20.8% strongly agreed. There were 56.6% of the students strongly agreed and agreed with statement 23 “You often lack the topic sentences or main ideas when writing”.

According to the analyzed data from Figure 5, having no ideas was the greatest challenge for students in idea arrangement. With strange topics or practical experiences, students often had no ideas to write. When having no ideas, their essay could be so short and not have good marks.

In short, an essay using redundant words, lacking main ideas or topic sentences or not many ideas can be confusing for readers and out of topic. So, students should focus on ideas arrangement.

#### 4.8 Background knowledge

Background knowledge is very essential for students in writing.



**Figure 6:** Difficulties in background knowledge

From Figure 6, we can see that difficulties in background knowledge were up 15.1%. Look at figure 6, students lacked background knowledge in various fields with 69.8% and the students had no practical experiences with 30.2%. Let' see Table 5.

**Table 5:** Difficulties in background knowledge

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
24. Poor background knowledge makes you unable to organize ideas well.	26.4%	58.5%	11.3%	3.8%	0%
25. You feel confused when facing unfamiliar topics because you are not enough knowledge in different fields.	20.8%	69.8%	9.4%	0%	0%
26. You have no real experience in life around.	11.3%	49.1%	28.3%	11.3%	0%

There were 58.5% of the total sophomores agreed and 26.4% strongly agreed with statement 24 "Poor background knowledge makes you unable to organize ideas well". Also, statement 25 "You feel confused when facing unfamiliar topics because you are not enough knowledge in different fields" had 90.6% of the participants strongly agreed and agreed, it was a very high percentage. Next, another difficulty in the background knowledge was the lack of practical experiences in social life. 64.1% of them agreed with statement 26 "You have no real experience in life around" and 11.3% strongly agreed.

Students lacked background knowledge because they often disliked reading books and newspapers. So, they need practical experience to learn more. Real experience and knowledge can make their writing more insightful, interesting, and emotional. For example, when the topic requires writing about a landscape where they have never been to, they can only learn through pictures on books and social networks, their essay may be unattractive or accurate. Furthermore, if the essay requires students to talk about a person's creativity in many fields such as a business, singing, writer or the issues that are being noticed in today's society, but do not know or do not have much information about them, they will unable to write well.

Therefore, to have a good essay, students need to have rich background knowledge in various fields and have more practical experiences.

#### 4.9 Other difficulties

**Table 6:** Other difficulties

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
27. You make mistakes about orthography including spelling, punctuation, and contraction.	11.3%	37.7%	35.8%	15.2%	0%
28. You often place false punctuation marks that lead to unclear statements	13.2%	34%	33.9%	18.9%	0%

about meaning, sentences that are too short or too long.					
29. You have rarely practiced writing skill at home because this is a difficult skill.	26.5%	66%	7.5%	0%	0%
30. You feel anxious when you have to complete an essay in class for a short time.	18.9%	35.8%	24.5%	17%	3.8%

The first difficulty was orthography including punctuation, spelling, and contraction that were difficulties that students often faced. As for statement 27 "You make mistakes about orthography including spelling, punctuation, and contraction", there were 37.7% agreed 11.3% strongly agreed. Students often made mistakes about spelling because they did not pay attention, misspelling could make readers less likely to trust the writer. Contractions are used mostly in speech and informal writing so students should not use them in essays. Also, there were 13.2% strongly agreed and 34% agreed with statement 28 "You often place false punctuation marks that lead to unclear statements about meaning, sentences that are too short or too long". The second difficulty was "You have rarely practiced writing skill at home because this is a difficult skill" with 66% agreed, and 26.5% strongly agreed. Writing is a difficult skill but if having no passion and try to practice, they could write well. The last difficulty was "Writing time is short", about 54.7% of the participants strongly agreed and agreed with statement 30 "You feel anxious when you have to complete an essay in class for a short time". When facing unfamiliar topics and short completion times, students felt anxious and their writing might not be good.

To sum up, four main reasons made it difficult for students to write an essay are vocabulary, grammar structure, idea arrangement, background knowledge, and some other difficulties. Thus, to improve their writing skill, they should practice writing skills more and more to have a strong passion for writing, and especially they have to expand their knowledge about different fields in life.

#### 4.10 Results of the interview

Six students (three boys and three girls) in a total of fifty-three sophomores were randomly selected to conduct interview questions. The paper interview consists of five questions such as the first two questions are the attitude of students when learning writing, the following three questions are the difficulties students encounter, and propose some solutions to overcome. In question 1 "Do you like writing? Why or why not?" 4/6 students said that they like writing, specifically, a student said that "I like writing because I can show up my lexicon, my knowledge about the way how to use words". Moreover, two students also shared that writing can help them improve grammar and sentence structures. Another opinion was "I like writing because it is an important skill that can improve our ability of mentality in developing English skills". However, two students admitted that they did not like writing because they did not have many vocabularies and ideas.

In the second question "Do you think writing is a difficult skill when learning English? Why or why not?" All students (6/6) thought that writing was very difficult when learning English that requires them to master the grammar structures and have background knowledge in various fields. Similarly, a student said that "Writing is the most difficult skill. It needs to have a lot of obvious ideas, ways of using words, tenses carefully, and detailed with grammar well". Furthermore, students thought that writing was difficult because they often lacked vocabulary, background knowledge, ideas, and lexicons.

In the next question "What are difficulties that you face when learning writing skills?" Most students admitted that they did not have enough vocabulary and background knowledge when writing essays. Another student thought that he faced difficulties arranging ideas, structures of tenses, and how to use words. Besides, they did not know how to use correct grammar structures.

As for question 4 "In your opinion, what is the main reason that makes you cannot write successfully?" Four students thought that grammar structures and vocabulary because the grammar was very important for writing and the fact of lacking vocabularies made them unable to use words in the right way and incorrectly explain their ideas. So, they could not write well. Another student said that she had no many ideas and no background knowledge of different fields in life. The remaining student claimed that organizing ideas was the main reason that he could not write successfully.

The last question "Which solutions do you want to suggest for solving the difficulties?" Students should learn more new words to improve their vocabulary. Besides, they could read books, newspapers to expand the understanding of fields, events, and people in life.

To improve their writing skill, they should practice writing skills at home and ask teachers to correct the essays.

## 5. Discussion

Thanks to the survey about the time students learning English, the researcher can evaluate the basics of their abilities and knowledge during their writing. Most of them have studied English for a long time, ranging from 9 to 12 years, the remaining students have studied for 14 years. It can be said that their English is good, but not sure their writing skill is good. They might speak or listen well but faced many difficulties in writing. Students often focus on skills such as listening and speaking rather than writing because this is a difficult skill. Three-quarters of students rated that their writing skills were average, only 6% believed their writing skill was good. It is easy to see that they faced some difficulties in writing, especially writing essays. According to the research results, there were four main causes such as vocabulary, grammar structures, ideas arrangement, background knowledge, and other difficulties that made sophomores write unsuccessful essays.

Firstly, grammar is an important factor in writing. The most difficulty in writing essays was grammar structures. Using tenses in English wrongly could make readers confused or misunderstood about the meaning. Furthermore, students often did not know the functions and rules of part of speech so they could not misuse the function of the word that made the readers could understand or their sentences were wrong meaning. The subject-verb arrangement was also a difficulty for students leading to their sentences were ungrammatical.

Secondly, students often lacked the necessary vocabulary when writing, it was a reason why they could not express their thoughts and feelings clearly. They would feel confused when facing unfamiliar topics. Moreover, choosing appropriate words in contexts that were also a difficulty for students. There are many collocations to remember the meaning, they often have hidden meaning and no clear rules, no specific regulation to follow. So, students did not know exactly what the collocations mean, the way words go together. It was one of the difficulties that students often faced.

Thirdly, idea arrangement was also a problem for students in writing the essay. They had no idea or did not understand the topic clearly, they might be getting out the topic or failing to convey the main message. Organizing ideas logically or lacking the main ideas or topic sentence in paragraphs and essays were also difficulties for students. Also, sometimes they had too many ideas when writing leading to their paragraphs that were long, redundant, or unnecessary.

Next, poor background knowledge made them unable to organize ideas well. Therefore, they would feel confused when facing unfamiliar topics because they didn't have enough knowledge in different fields. Another difficulty in the background knowledge was the lack of practical experiences in social life.

Finally, students also faced some other difficulties. Orthography including punctuation, spelling, and contraction that were difficulties that students often faced. Time was also a problem for students when they had to complete an essay in a short time. Also, students have rarely spent time practicing writing skills. Teachers should encourage students to write articles in class, do writing exercises then giving the necessary instructions and vocabularies for students then they can have a more positive and proactive attitude when writing and understand the importance of English writing skill in life. Writing is an essential skill for students who should master in learning English. It is not only a means of communication where students can share their views and thoughts, but also it is actually a prerequisite to master other language skills because it is a difficult skill and they have no passion on it so that they cannot write well.

To sum up, English majored sophomores at Tay Do University faced many difficulties in writing such as vocabulary, grammar structures, ideas arrangement, background knowledge, and others. Students need to find out their difficulties and find appropriate solutions to get better in writing.

## **6. Conclusions, Limitations, Implications, and Recommendations**

This chapter includes conclusions, limitations, and recommendations of the research.

### **6.1 Conclusions**

English is most widely used in communicating around the world, also it is spoken as the first language in many countries. English has become the lingua franca in many fields, including business, politics, science, technology, and entertainment, etc. Speaking English fluently not only helps students work or deal with international companies and organizations around the world but also allows them to travel to different countries. Writing in English is important in future career as well. However, according to research results, students faced many difficulties in learning English writing such as vocabulary, grammar structures, idea arrangement, and background knowledge. Besides, orthography, time practicing, and short time writing are also other difficulties. If students want to have good essays, they should look for the difficulties they faced, find ways to overcome them and practice writing skills more often.

The purpose of the research "Difficulties in writing of English majored sophomores at Tay Do University" is to find out the difficulties students met, but they often do not know or pay attention and want to help them improve their writing skills.

### **6.2 Limitations**

Because the time was short, the research was only surveyed through 53 English majored sophomores at Tay Do University. Finding difficulties, collecting information from students by questionnaires and paper interviews carried out in limited time, therefore, despite careful preparation, the research also could not avoid limitations. If having more time, the research would be analyzed fully and more detailed. The short questionnaire and its results do not seem sufficient to prove the practical difficulties that students faced and their actual writing ability.

### **6.3 Implications**

The research has shown the importance of writing skills in learning and career future. It also helps students to realize their difficulties when writing through it to find out solutions to overcome the difficulties that help them improve their writing skills and write better. In detail, the sophomores often did not understand the structure and usage of the tenses clearly, they lacked the vocabularies to express their thoughts and ideas so they could only keep them in mind. Sometimes they did not know how to arrange ideas or have no idea when writing because they lacked background-knowledge in different fields. Also, based on the research results, teachers can find appropriate teaching methods and make it more effective that help students develop their writing skills.

#### **6.4 Recommendations**

Based on this research, other researchers can develop their research with other participants such as freshmen, junior, and senior who study English majors or other majors about their difficulties when learning writing. Also, when researching other difficulties in the process of learning English, researchers can refer to this study to supplement and develop their research. Through the results of the study, students can recognize their difficulties, and also find the appropriate solution to solve their problem.

#### **Conflicts of interest statement**

The authors whose names are listed above certify that they have no conflicts of interest, authorship, and disclosures in publication. They confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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