



## SECONDARY SCHOOL EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES AND SOLUTIONS TO LEARNING ENGLISH PARAGRAPH WRITING

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### **Abstract:**

This research investigates the difficulties faced by secondary school students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, when learning English paragraph writing, and explores potential solutions to these challenges. The study involved 100 students from a secondary school, with insights gathered through questionnaires and interviews with 6 students and 4 EFL teachers. The aim was to understand the obstacles students encounter and the effectiveness of current teaching practices. Data were collected using questionnaires with a five-point Likert scale and analyzed through qualitative impressions rather than specific ratings for each criterion. The results indicated that students perceived their difficulties in learning paragraph writing as moderate. Common challenges included choosing appropriate writing styles for different contexts, insufficient practice in combining sentences, and limited feedback on sentence structures from teachers. Students also reported that the amount of writing practice provided in class was inadequate. To address these issues, the research suggests creating a collaborative learning environment, integrating vocabulary instruction with contextual topics, and focusing on sentence pattern practice. Students rated the strategy of collaborative learning highly, emphasizing the benefits of increased interaction between teachers and students. While students acknowledged their difficulties in paragraph writing, they also recognized potential solutions that involve more interactive and contextually relevant instruction. Teachers and curriculum developers should consider these findings to enhance

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writing instruction and better support EFL students in overcoming their writing challenges.

**Keywords:** secondary school, writing, difficulties, solutions, secondary students' challenges, teaching methods

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Rationale to the study

There are four skills in learning a language. Not even the English language is exempt. It includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Brown (2000) asserts that to understand the English language, students must be appropriately exposed to all four fundamental skills: hearing, speaking, reading, and writing. However, instructors and students see writing as challenging in English teaching and learning. In reality, students in Vietnam have studied English for numerous years, but they are still inadequate in the language, particularly in all areas of paragraph writing. Writing skills are the most significant of these four abilities. According to Barkaoui (2007), writing is one of the most difficult skills that second or foreign language learners are expected to acquire, as it requires the mastery of a wide range of "*linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies.*" Due to its significance and popularity, English is now a required subject in all public schools in Vietnam, having been introduced from the very beginning of mass education. Over a century ago, English as a foreign language (EFL) was taught in Vietnam (Wong, 2008). Karala (1986) and Mukattash (1990) found that the written performance of Jordanian pupils had a significant proportion of errors in their writing. This might be related to the complexity of the writing process. Despite the enormous growth in English language writing, teaching writing to students at Secondary schools in Vietnam remains a problem. This research describes the features of writing quality in the second semester at a secondary school, where students' English language competence is low since this talent was not taught effectively in school. The issue becomes apparent when children commit grammatical faults, including organization, spelling, etc.

Errors and blunders are inevitable throughout the process of English language acquisition. Therefore, mistake analysis has become a need in the area of language teaching and learning. These mistakes will give insight into the students' paragraph writing difficulties. Ellis (1997) found that the detection of faults aided in the diagnosis of learners' language issues at a specific level of learning, while another research showed that fixing students' grammatical errors would have minimal effect on their language proficiency (Kohlmyr, 2003, p.341). Similarly, assessing EFL learners' flaws in their written work may be of great use to instructors, who can then rectify students' inaccuracies and enhance their teaching efficacy. Watson (1980, p. 321) said, "*Knowing the causes of mistakes, the teacher might modify instruction to address the shortcomings.*" Michaelides (1990, p.30) agreed that the systematic study of student mistakes might be crucial for instructors to assist students in their development. Thus, the Error Analysis

Approach is applied in this study to identify the root causes of the issues and provide potential remedies.

### **1.2 Statement of problem**

Nowadays, final exams ask students to create a paragraph on a specified subject. Incongruously, these assessments had pretty poor results. In addition, these effects remained for consecutive academic years. Some pupils thought the exam's writing component to be quite challenging. Moreover, several students stated that the practice of remembering example texts given by their lecturers made it hard for them to finish the writing assignment when the subject was altered. Most secondary school pupils could not compose texts autonomously and practiced writing under constant supervision. Concerns have been raised regarding whether writing skill is "truly perceived" and "treated equally" with other language skills in a secondary school context and whether teaching activities and teacher roles undertaken in writing classrooms are genuinely beneficial to the development of writing ability among secondary students. Then, find out the difficulties students face when practicing writing skills such as task achievement, organization, grammar, and vocabulary. The study will develop solutions to help students improve their writing skills by understanding these difficulties and classroom practices.

### **1.3 Research aims**

The main aims of this study are to:

- 1) explore secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning English paragraph writing, and
- 2) investigate possible solutions to secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning paragraph writing.

### **1.4 Research questions**

This study attempts to find out the answers to the following two research questions:

- 1) What are secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning English paragraph writing?
- 2) What are possible solutions to secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning paragraph writing?

### **1.5 The significance of the study**

This research is intended to assist students at a secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in recognizing their writing problems. In addition, they identify the root source of these problems. In addition, based on the obstacles and reasons placed in this research, several helpful solutions will be proposed to assist secondary students in improving their writing. In addition, the findings of this research may aid students who want to improve their writing skills in identifying the challenges of writing and acquiring the abilities necessary to master writing.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Writing

#### 2.1.1. Definitions of writing

The study starts with a discussion of writing's definitions, which should aid the reader in conceptualizing what writing is. Coulmas (2002) asserts that there are six distinct definitions of "writing" that may be distinguished:

- 1) It is a method for capturing language using visual or tactile symbols.
- 2) Utilization is the process of putting a system to use.
- 3) Writing results from the exercise and the text.
- 4) Writing is the specific form of this outcome, a script style that includes block letter writing.
- 5) Writing takes artistic composition into account.
- 6) Writing is a respected career.

Daniels and William (1996) described writing as a system of a fixed number of marks that represent expression such that those markings may retrieve it precisely without expressing directly. In addition, Siti (2015) underlined that writing is a multistage, productive activity. First, discovering and communicating through writing ideas, cognition, and emotion. Second, undertaking many revision procedures to produce grammatically correct and well-organized content. The writing output takes the shape of comprehensible writing that should be relevant to all readers. In addition, he claimed that writing is one of the essential talents that students must learn since it helps them to think critically and thoroughly in order to produce outstanding writing. Writing is also a need for education, employment, and essential societal functions. He concluded that writing is a set of processes designed to produce a text that everyone can comprehend. Coulmas (1999) claimed that writing is the use of visible signals to systematically encapsulate aspects of language and to check messages that may be recovered by those who know the specified language and the rules for encoding this language in a writing system.

Writing is a talent that requires knowledge and expertise in several domains. It is a multifaceted ability. It is a complicated talent resulting from combining the writer's knowledge, experience, and abilities with the cognitive demands of the activity. Nuan (2003) stressed that the process of writing involves both physical and mental components. To exhibit the physical side of writing, words and thoughts on paper or in electronic correspondence are used. To the mental one, writing is shown by formulating ideas, organizing thoughts, and finding methods to express them effectively to the audience.

Writing is a lengthy endeavor. Kroll (1990) argued that writing is a complicated, repetitive, and creative process or collection of behaviors that are comparable in their general outlines for both first and second language authors. Writing is also a cognitive activity due to the effect of the task-environment and the writer's long-term memory on the writing process. Kellogg (2001) claimed that writing is a cognitive activity in which memory, reasoning ability, and linguistic command are evaluated in order to effectively

articulate ideas; thus, skilled production of a document implies successful second language acquisition. Therefore, learning to write has been regarded as the most important ability in the acquisition and instruction of language abilities.

Similarly, Nuan (2003) and Siti (2015) assert that writing is one of the most essential and difficult abilities. Writing is a productive talent that demands pupils to possess information and competence. Students are able to convey their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions via writing. Students may increase their knowledge since they must communicate a great deal of thoughts and facts. Writing cannot be denied to be a cognitive process. The students will relay our concept to others via memory. Teachers may convey their ideas in a variety of ways in order to obtain more success and acquire superior outcomes while writing essays. To explain the thoughts effectively, the teacher must have the intellectual capacity and linguistic mastery necessary. Writing is a kind of both speaking and writing. Through careful selection of words and concepts, students will be able to achieve more success and produce a better paragraph.

### **2.1.2 Writing in English**

Different scholars define the word "writing" differently. Sawsan (as reported in Al-Mutawa & Kailani, 1989, p.129) originally asserted that writing was a process consisting of simple copying and free expression. Kutz, Groden, and Zamel (1993) shared the same definition of writing: *"a creative discovery technique defined by a dynamic interaction between content and language: the use of language to explore beyond the known material."* From a different perspective, writing might be seen as *"a process that happens over time, especially when we consider the often lengthy periods of reflection that precede the creation of a first draft"* (Harris, 1993, p.10). In other words, being a skilled writer is a difficult process that requires time and effort. Essentially, these definitions have the same meaning, with the discrepancies stemming from how academics have formulated them.

### **2.2 Importance of writing English**

Writing is an important part of learning English. According to Rao (2007), EFL writing is beneficial in two ways: first, it promotes students' thinking, concept organization, and capacity to summarize, evaluate, and critique. Second, it enhances students' English language acquisition, thinking, and reflection. As students experiment with words, phrases, and bigger pieces of writing to effectively convey their thoughts and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they are learning in class, writing helps their language acquisition, according to Bello (1997; emphasis added). When pupils write, they have the opportunity to fully comprehend a language.

Writing also reinforces what children have learned, including vocabulary, word use, and grammatical structures, among others. In addition, writing provides pupils with the opportunity to embrace and explore a new language. Additionally, writing promotes kids' critical thinking, creativity, and commenting skills. Therefore, pupils will be able to explore and acquire additional abilities in a thorough and efficient manner if they possess strong writing skills.

## **2.3 English paragraph**

### **2.3.1 Definition of English paragraphs**

The relevant literature provides several meanings for the word paragraph. The following are just a handful of numerous possibilities. J.M. Red (1988) defines a paragraph as a succession of sentences that develops a single concept. It is a collection of sentences dealing with a particular subject. Together, the sentences in the paragraph illustrate the author's major point (the most significant point) about the issue. Typically, an academic paragraph consists of five to 10 phrases. Besides, "*A paragraph consists of around 150-200 words. It often comprises an introductory statement termed a theme sentence, followed by a succession of supporting sentences.*" (Langan, 2001).

In addition, according to Oshima and Hogue (2006), the structure of an English paragraph involves three essential components: the main phrase, the supporting sentences, and the concluding sentence. The subject sentence contains the broadest message. It describes the issue using generic concepts. It introduces the paragraph and explains to the reader what the paragraph will discuss. The subject phrase serves as a guide for both the author and the audience. It instructs the writer on what material to include and informs the reader on the topic of the paragraph so that they are better prepared to comprehend it. Typically, the subject sentence appears at the head of the paragraph, although it may occasionally appear elsewhere. The supporting sentences (major points) follow the theme phrase and strengthen it. These are sentences that discuss, explain, or prove the main sentence by supplying further information about it. The body of a paragraph consists of the supporting sentences and the supporting elements that they provide. The ending sentence (conclusion) is recognized as the end of a paragraph. It restates the paragraph's key point in fresh ways and informs the reader what you're writing about. In addition, it leaves the reader with key elements to remember, for example. On the other hand, paragraphs should include the elements listed below. First, a good paragraph is cohesive. A paragraph is unified when it has just one main concept that is elaborated upon by all of its sentences. The focus of the whole paragraph should be a single topic. The conjunctions create a single, full unit of those. Second, cohesiveness within a paragraph is unquestionably essential. It makes the text relevant and easy to follow. The example sentences are well structured.

In conclusion, a paragraph is organized around a primary topic. Every paragraph must have a subject sentence. The subject phrase expresses the central concept of the statement. It is also known as a controlling thought since it confines the paragraph's topic. In paragraphs with cohesion, each phrase explains the main sentence using facts, examples, and supporting views. Writing paragraphs is the gateway to other styles of writing.

### **2.3.2 Classifications of English paragraphs**

Paragraphs are the core style of writing taught to EFL students at all universities. According to Cheryl Pavlik (2006), there are three sorts of paragraphs: descriptive, contrasting, and arguing. A descriptive paragraph portrays an image, a person, a

location, an action, or anything else. According to Oshima and Hogue (2006), a descriptive genre is a kind of literature that describes how something looks, feels, smells, tastes and sounds so that the reader may visualize what the author has in mind. It ensures that a reader can comprehend and visualize what is written in a paragraph.

A comparison paragraph, on the other hand, compares how two persons, locations, sports, or objects are unlike. In addition, a comparison essay discusses the differences between two individuals, locations, sports, or items. This style allows us to identify the topic's pros and downsides. The third and last sort of paragraph is an argumentative one. The primary objective of argumentative paragraphs is to convince the reader to agree with the author's position on a contentious issue. These paragraphs include the author's arguments. The author provides defending or opposing perspectives on the matter. Argumentative paragraphs may enhance our understanding of everyone's perspectives. The writer must be able to persuade the reader to accept the writer's position, thus they must present their reasons effectively.

## **2.4 Writing English paragraph**

### **2.4.1. Descriptive paragraph**

A descriptive paragraph describes a person, location, object, or concept. Utilize terms connected to the five senses while writing a descriptive paragraph. Describe the sights, sounds, colors, scents, and sensations associated with the subject. This will let your readers feel as if they are present.

### **2.4.2 Narrative paragraph**

In a narrative paragraph, you describe an event from your own life. You attempt to draw your audience into the tale and keep them anticipating what will occur next. Be careful to add particulars that bring your experience to life.

### **2.4.3 Explanatory paragraph**

The primary objective of an explanation paragraph is to provide information about a topic. You may provide instructions, convey ideas, or describe how to do a task. A typical explanatory paragraph includes transitional phrases such as first, then, and ultimately.

### **2.4.4 Persuasive (argument) paragraph**

In a persuasive or argument paragraph, you express your perspective on a subject and attempt to demonstrate its value or importance. To do this, you must provide solid evidence and instances to support your position. Otherwise, you will not be persuasive.

## **2.5 The parts of a paragraph**

According to Kemper, D. Nathan, R. Sebrawek, and P. (2016). A paragraph comprises three major components. The theme phrase expresses the central notion. The sentences in the paragraph's body are all related to the primary theme. The concluding sentence summarizes the primary concept and concludes the paragraph. Take this as an example.

- *Topic sentence:* It is possible that trees are the most significant kind of plant life on Earth. Initially, trees enhance the scenery and provide refuge for animals. In addition, they offer wood, paper, food, medicines, and several other vital items.
- *Body sentences:* Additionally, tree roots reduce soil erosion and aid in water storage. Even though it is unseen, the most important thing trees do is assist clean the air. Trees absorb carbon dioxide and generate oxygen, which is essential for human respiration.
- *Ending sentence:* People have trees to thank for much more than shade.

### 2.5.1 Topic sentence

According to Kemper, D., R. Rathan, and P. Sebrank (2016). (Interesting subject) Trees may be the most significant kind of plant life on the planet (a specific focus).

### 2.5.2 The body

The sentences in the paragraph's body provide the reader with the precise information necessary to comprehend the issue. The following clauses include an abundance of particulars.

Trees beautify the area and provide refuge for animals, to begin with. Additionally, they supply wood, paper, food, medicines, and a variety of other valuable things. Consequently, tree roots contribute to soil erosion and water storage.

### 2.5.3 The Ending sentences

The ending or concluding sentence occurs at the conclusion of the paragraph and summarizes its major idea. People have much more to appreciate trees for than just shade! According to Oshina & Hugue, A. (2006). A paragraph is a collection of sentences that develops one primary concept, which is the paragraph's theme. Each paragraph is its own distinct entity. It is indicated by indenting the initial word of the paragraph from the left margin or by leaving additional space above and below the paragraph.

A paragraph consists of three types of sentences that build the core idea, viewpoint, or emotion of the author. These sentences are the (1) main sentence, (2) supporting sentences, and (3) conclusion. The author may provide a last statement after the conclusion. The first line of the paragraph labeled "River Rafting" that you just read is the subject sentence. It informs the reader of the topic of the paragraph: river rafting requirements. The following fifteen sentences provide information regarding river rafting. The conclusion is the seventeenth or next-to-last sentence. It concludes the subject and informs the reader that the paragraph has reached its conclusion. The last sentence provides the author's commentary on the topic.

## 2.6 The significance of writing English paragraphs at secondary schools

In the classroom, writing serves two separate yet complementary functions. First, it is a talent that requires the use of methods (such as preparing, reviewing, and rewriting text) to achieve a range of objectives, such as producing a report or presenting a viewpoint



with supporting evidence. Second, writing is a means of broadening and strengthening student understanding; it serves as a tool for subject matter acquisition (Key, 2000; Shanahan, 2004; Sperling & Freedman, 2001). Reading Next advocated that language arts instructors utilize content-area texts to teach reading and writing skills and that content-area teachers educate and offer practice in discipline-specific reading and writing.

Writing is one method for communicating thoughts or ideas to another. Writing is also an essential English skill that requires much effort from pupils. Many secondary school students are unaware of the significance of writing; thus, they devote less effort to it. False, since writing proficiency may help students learn other English skills more successfully. In addition, exercising writing skills will familiarize pupils with various sorts of writing and strengthen their writing ability. For instance, students learn writing skills from beginners to advanced levels. In seventh grade, students focus primarily on writing one paragraph or a short portion of an essay. Before learning writing projects in ninth grade, it offers pupils background information. Like 11<sup>th</sup> Grade writing assignments, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade writing assignments will give students essential skills to write effectively at a higher level. Writing in seventh grade plays a vital role since it allows for students with necessary skills, such as grammar, topic, and vocabulary, and teaches them how to write a paragraph or essay before focusing on their studies in eighth and ninth grade. Writing is also crucial to succeed in college and university nowadays. Most contexts in life (school, the job, and the community) need some writing ability. Each situation imposes overlapping but not identical requirements on skilled writers who can adjust their writing to the environment in which it occurs. Otherwise, almost all colleges and universities require their students to get foreign language certifications for graduation, and writing is an essential component of these examinations. The ability to write well may help students find a decent career. Currently, many overseas organizations need the assistance of individuals with superior writing skills to create English contracts and papers.

## **2.7 Learning and teaching English writing paragraphs at secondary schools**

### **2.7.1 Learning English writing paragraphs at secondary schools**

Writing is an essential and fundamental component of learning English. Paragraph writing is one of the abilities pupils must learn, and it is the most challenging skill for foreign language students to acquire. According to Muslim (2014), writing is more complicated and complex than other language abilities. The primary reason for this difficulty is that writing is a tremendously difficult process that requires the generation of ideas, their organization, and their translation into coherent prose. Thus, writing abilities are one of the means through which students may transmit information, express their ideas, thoughts, emotions, and views, and communicate with others.

Paragraph writing measures students' capacity to communicate information, ideas, thoughts, abilities, and emotions via writing. Depending on their writing success, pupils will either enhance their writing or not. In addition, Nunan (1999, p. 271) asserts that writing is perhaps the most difficult aspect of language. Also, learning writing is one

of the most important abilities in language acquisition and is utilized to convey the author's knowledge to the audience. Learning to write is a skill that requires study and exercise. Writing encompasses written materials and producing and encoding language into the text. One of the student's objectives in learning paragraph writing is to generate quality writing, known as their writing accomplishment. In addition, Aunurrahman, Hamid, and Emilio's (2016) research indicates that students find paragraph writing challenging. This shows that understanding the English language is often complicated in writing.

### **2.7.2 Teaching English writing paragraphs at secondary schools**

Teaching English as a second language is instructing pupils whose native tongue is not English. While language acquisition needs several talents, one of the language skills is writing, which begins with sentences followed by paragraphs of a certain length. According to Moore (2010), paragraph writing aims to develop basic paragraph-writing abilities. It needs proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence patterns. Writing is crucial for students because it allows them to communicate their ideas, thoughts, and emotions. In addition, it is a means of communication with individuals in different locations. However, writing becomes the most difficult task for language students. They sometimes find writing to be the most challenging task. The student's issues stem from their lack of writing expertise. Foreign language learners tend to translate their phrases into English without using the proper procedure. It results in sentences with no sense. In addition, they do not adhere to the writing process. This procedure is significant since it helps pupils organize and develop their thoughts into the solid paragraph. Additionally, language learners must be able to choose an appropriate writing subject. In the paragraph, the issue should be discussed thoroughly. To sustain the subject, the pupils must be able to organize their thoughts effectively. Additionally, they must read a variety of materials and novels. In addition, the instructor should be able to choose the most effective technique to teach paragraph writing to achieve the desired outcome, which is for students to articulate their thoughts and create paragraphs effectively. Since appropriate paragraph structure is required, a writing process may be followed.

## **2.8 English paragraph writing difficulties**

### **2.8.1 Difficulties in learning English paragraph writing**

#### **2.8.1.1 Lack of vocabulary**

Writing in English instruction is essential since it demonstrates students' overall language skills. The majority of pupils, however, have little experience writing English terms, which prevents them from using their language skills effectively while writing.

According to a number of studies, vocabulary is one of the most significant aspects of writing, and writing provides pupils with the chance to expand their vocabulary. Students' vocabulary competency may be enhanced and reinforced via writing (Muncie, 2002). The research by Muncie (2002) proved that it is challenging for authors with little vocabulary to compose in a foreign language. In addition, according to Krashen (1989),

attention on vocabulary is warranted since "*a broad vocabulary is of course required for language mastering*" and "*the lack of vocabulary is a serious issue.*" Obviously, vocabulary knowledge is a precondition for writing. Students with a limited vocabulary will struggle with writing fluency. If their vocabulary is restricted, their paragraphs will be brief. A proficient vocabulary will be a predictor of paragraph quality. Thus, increasing vocabulary may be one of the most effective approaches to composing an amazing English paragraph.

### **2.8.1.2 Word choice**

Choosing the appropriate words is one of the finest methods to communicate thoughts in a paragraph. Unfortunately, many kids do not read enough to develop a solid understanding of accurate and effective word use. "*One poor decision may totally alter the meaning of a statement,*" said Lauren (2004, p.22). There are numerous English terms that sound or seem almost similar yet have very different meanings, making it difficult to choose the correct one. Students may have difficulties recognizing the distinctions between nouns, verbs, and adjectives; as a consequence, they may employ them indiscriminately, causing confusion for the reader. Additionally, they may misinterpret terms with semantically related but not identical meanings. Alternatively, they may not comprehend the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. In summary, the most common types of word choice errors committed by pupils are incorrect connotations and misleading language.

### **2.8.1.3 Word order**

There are few endings in English that indicate person, number, case, and tense; instead, English depends on word order to indicate the connections between words. In addition, word order organizes independent words into sentences and suggests where to locate the subject, the predicate, and the rest of the sentence. The context and word order aid in determining the meanings of particular words. In addition to stating that word order is difficult to master, Odlin (1989) remarked, "*Language learners typically commit word order mistakes.*" Therefore, word order mistakes are prevalent in the output of language learners.

Moreover, "*Word order varies greatly across languages*" (Selinker, 1972). Students commit these mistakes because they seek to transfer to English writing structures that are proper in their home languages but incorrect in English. When students try to write straight from their original languages to English, they often commit these blunders. Thus, word order is significant because it illustrates the links between sentence components.

### **2.8.1.4 Grammar**

#### **2.8.1.4.1 Tense**

The tense of an English phrase, whether written or spoken, plays a crucial function. A verb form or verb phrase that expresses a temporal link is called tense. There are typically three verb types used to indicate temporal connections. They are the present, the past,

and the future. Students' usage of verb tenses is a significant source of grammatical difficulty. The inability to sustain tense continuity is a difficulty in this domain. Godfrey (1980:94) described preserving tense continuity as "*once a tense is utilized reflecting a specific temporal reference fundamental to the issue, the tense will persist until the topic linked with it is exhausted.*" When a new subject with a new temporal reference necessitates a new tense, the previous tense is ended, and a new one is introduced.

Furthermore, "*Students commonly use improper tenses in their writing, making it harder to read and comprehend.*" (1983, Chappell and Redby). Students employ verb tenses instinctively, yet when writing, they may use the erroneous form or switch tenses incorrectly. They may not comprehend whether the present, past, or future forms of a verb are appropriate. In the English language, verbs represent actions, and actions have a temporal link with their agents. Consequently, the use of tense is crucial in writing.

#### **2.8.1.5 Subject-verb agreement**

There are various grammatical rules in English. Subject-verb agreement, the most significant phenomenon in English grammar, is one of them. Subject-verb agreement indicates that the form of the verb relies on both the subject and the tense. In contrast, the subject and verb of a sentence must be of the same number. Students disregard this guideline, and as a result, they make a mistake. Even if they keep this criterion in mind, they may still commit a mistake if they are misled by anything other than the actual issue. According to Hodges (1998), "*verbs must agree with their subjects and any intervening words.*" In other words, pupils commit mistakes because they are unable to recognize the subject and, thus, utilize the incorrect verb form. Therefore, subject-verb agreement is seen as a frequent mistake. The most prevalent sort of mistake is a verb that does not agree with its subject.

#### **2.8.1.6 Preposition**

Lawal (2004) identified a variety of connections between words and phrases in sentences. The connection comprises those of time, points, location, and direction, as well as varying degrees of mental or emotional dispositions. While Agoi (2003) defined a preposition as "*a word or set of words used with a noun or noun equivalents to express the relationship between the noun it regulates and another word,*" the term preposition is more broadly employed. The usage of prepositions is difficult for English learners. Lawal (2004) emphasized, "*The right usage of prepositions often presents challenges for students.*" Different formulations in which prepositions appear independently must be learned by memory, he stressed, in order to circumvent the difficulties associated with their use. Preposition misuse is one of the noticeable faults in the pupils' English use. Utilizing a preposition after an adjective or a verb is the most usually misused preposition. Prepositions are the most troublesome word class for pupils. Students must thus learn when and how to utilize them.

### **2.8.1.7 Idea organization**

#### **2.8.1.7.1 Poor organization**

To compose an effective paragraph, students must produce and arrange ideas. Frequently, students choose not to prepare before writing, resulting in problems arranging their thoughts and poor organization. The capacity of students to produce and arrange ideas might impact the depth of their ultimate written product. Students must be able to get started, focus on the job, and check the quality of their work in order to effectively organize ideas.

Bad planning leads to poor organization. Organizing is not a simple undertaking. It is essential to organize all the information in a logical manner. Mkude (1980, p.62) expressed grave worry on this issue. *"They often fail to see the need of structuring linguistic content strategically in order to have maximum effect,"* he said. *"Again, this flaw is evident inside and between phrases."* Students must maintain focus on the material and not stray from it. If they don't arrange the facts correctly, their paragraph will be a jumble, and they will get a failing grade. Consequently, the organization must be organized and well-planned. Thus, it may be said that inadequate organization is responsible for pupils' failures in paragraph writing.

Writing a paragraph is a highly difficult and disheartening undertaking, and as a result, students grow discouraged and lose direction in their English studies, particularly in writing.

#### **2.8.1.8 Lack of coherence**

Coherence is the connection between paragraphs created by connecting the concepts offered in writing. Coherence is one of the hallmarks of a well-written piece since it ensures the continuous flow of ideas. Wyrick (2002) states that coherence in a paragraph necessitates that the ideas inside the paragraph be connected. In this sense, coherence is placing ideas or phrases in a paragraph such that they may relate logically to one another, as well as using certain linking techniques to explain links between concepts.

In addition, a lack of consistency challenges the reader and might hinder understanding, making your communication endeavor at best, useless. Students are to compose as many connected sentences as possible without arranging them logically. The thoughts are disorganized, resulting in confusion within the paragraph. When the links between sentences are evident, paragraphs are cohesive and flow from one phrase to the next without uncomfortable pauses in rhythm or meaning. This clarity is provided by coherence, which makes the text readily intelligible.

#### **2.8.1.9 Lack of unity**

A paragraph's unity derives from a guiding notion around which it is ordered; a paragraph without unity swings from idea to idea, subject to topic, without a clear sense of purpose. It is very difficult to comprehend the writer's goal since the major concept and its supporting example are put too far apart, and the reader cannot perceive the link between them. The two most typical unity issues are the absence of transitions to connect

the clusters of elaboration and the absence of a defined conclusion. Similarly, mistakes in paragraph unity were described as the absence of a controlling concept, the presence of many controlling ideas, or the presence of a subject phrase that does not effectively regulate all the ideas in the paragraph.

Therefore, each phrase in a paragraph should focus on the subject of the main sentence since cohesion is a crucial aspect of a successful paragraph.

## **2.9 Difficulties in teaching English paragraph writing at secondary schools**

Writing is a difficult talent to acquire. Heaton and Mickelson (2002) assert that teaching writing is difficult. Components of writing competency include grammatical, rhetorical, intellectual, and evaluative skills. They lack elemental talents in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Due to a lack of language, a student's writing abilities are shown through syntax, sentence structure, tenses, and spelling errors. Vocabulary is the foundation of superior writing. Students communicate both vocally and in writing. Writing involves proper grammar and provides information to aid comprehension. Students with grammar difficulties will struggle to develop acceptable sentences. According to Nyang'au (2014), a preposition is a standard student error; bad spelling is another obstacle for young authors. According to him, spelling is a crucial aspect of writing, yet ESL students often omit or add letters to their spelling. Students misspell words based on their pronunciation—inconsistencies in English spelling cause spelling mistakes in the English literacy of secondary pupils. The L1 influence results in linguistic faults. The absence of grammatically accurate language increases stress among ESL students. Myles (2002) asserts that pupils commonly interpret when writing. Myles (2002) cites Friedlander (1990) in stating that children utilize their native language to think and focus.

## **2.10. Solutions to English paragraph writing**

### **2.10.1. Solutions to EFL students' learning English paragraph writing**

Students are required to strengthen their writing abilities throughout their school years. Everyone must study and enhance their abilities. Even after completing school, pupils should continue to develop their writing abilities. There are several simple and accessible strategies to increase this ability.

#### **2.10.1.1 Developing an outline**

The most efficient technique to arrange thoughts and ideas is to create an outline before starting a paragraph. An outline, sometimes known as a hierarchical outline, is a sort of tree structure consisting of a list organized to illustrate hierarchical connections. It is often used as a rough draft or summary of the content of a document to showcase the essential points or issues of a particular subject.

An outline is important for all types of writing since it facilitates the organization of ideas in a logical or sequential fashion. According to Nguyen (1998), the majority of professional writers, seasoned reviewers, and talented authors still need a plan prior to

writing. An outline might be written on paper or imagined in the imagination of the author. Due to the fact that students are in the process of learning and practicing at school, it is vital to outline the paper before writing. In reality, the primary goal of creating an outline before writing a paper is to encourage authors to consider and generate ideas about the subject they want to cover. An outline makes writing more comfortable and straightforward for students by outlining the major elements and their relationships. Outlines are crucial for improved writing because they enable the addition, deletion, reorganization, and even whole revision of content as often and as often as required. According to Bean (2001), "*some authors arrange better before writing, while others organize better after attempting to write.*" It is helpful to demonstrate connections between the concepts and specifics. In addition, an outline is a framework for the paper that helps individuals organize and arrange their thoughts so that they are properly communicated to the reader and support the thesis statement.

Outlines need pupils to do two tasks. In the first place, it puts structure on writing (and, by extension, thought). Second, outlining forces to assess seriously which ideas and arguments are essential. As a result, developing an outline is also an excellent solution for students, as it enables them to articulate their thoughts concisely without being too mired down in specifics, precise grammar, or word choice too early in the writing process.

#### **2.10.1.2 Reading books**

Due to the rise of television, movies, and the Internet, books are now on the decline. In a time when technological improvements are progressively consuming the world's population, it is essential for people to read often in order to reap the numerous advantages of reading books. The most visible effect of a well-established reading habit is an expansion of one's vocabulary. Even if we do not grasp every new word we encounter when reading, we absorb something from the context that may enhance our knowledge the next time we encounter the term.

Additionally, pupils actively connect with the new language and culture as they read. The more children read, the more acquainted they get with the vocabulary, idioms, sentence patterns, organizational flow, and cultural assumptions of the language's original speakers. Students who read engage with a text authored by another person, allowing them to learn a great deal about writing in addition to the language and culture. They have direct and recurrent access to the product of a native speaker of the language (Raimes, 1983, p.50). In reality, reading is a crucial ability, and there are several benefits to reading books. Students are unable to increase their English level as a result of a lack of reading material, which results in a variety of negative outcomes, including a lack of vocabulary and improper structure utilization. Therefore, concentrating on and practicing reading helps individuals learn English and get the desired level of English language abilities in a more efficient manner.

### 2.10.1.3 Writing practice

Writing is an efficient means of communicating and expressing ideas, emotions, and viewpoints. Writing can be both enjoyable and engaging, and there are several ways to employ it in daily life. Even if pupils are not the best writers in the world, they may improve with practice. Workbooks and study resources that may assist students with their writing, reading, grammar, and vocabulary are available in bookshops and online. According to Wikipedia, "*Practice is the act of repeatedly repeating a behavior or participating in an activity with the goal of improving or perfecting it, as in the adage "practice makes perfect."*" In addition, it included "*Common applications of practice to enhance reading, writing, interpersonal communication, typing, grammar, and spelling.*" Moreover, according to Dana (2004), daily writing does more than inculcate the discipline to write at will, rather than just when inspiration strikes. It provides numerous other significant advantages:

- 1) it stimulates your creativity,
- 2) it raises your confidence,
- 3) it allows you to experiment with your writing skills,
- 4) it helps in overcoming perfectionism, and
- 5) it prevents writer's block.

### 2.10.1.4 Writing strategies

As stated before, several issues have emerged in students' paragraph writing, which poses a significant barrier to developing students' capacity to write flawlessly. Consequently, it is vital to investigate various faults and develop remedies. Sunthornwatanasiri (2011) concurred that it is crucial to discover treatments for writing defects since the findings of an investigation showed that the implementation of error analysis significantly improved students' English writing skills. Moreover, Zafar (2016) demonstrated that the approach of mistake analysis improved students' accuracy in using verb tenses in writing. Numerous research has been undertaken to discover remedies for pupils' writing errors. The solutions are centered on increasing the teaching effectiveness of writing skills by enhancing instructional approaches. In addition to these options, provide guidance depending on the student's skill improvement. Active learning is provided as the ideal technique for improving students' writing skills by this problem. Batool (2012), Altun (2015), and Parveen, Yousuf, and Mustafa (2017) discovered that cooperative learning led to more extraordinary academic achievement among students. In addition, Andrea and Caicedo (2016) demonstrated that collaborative learning may support the growth of teenagers' English writing abilities, and the results suggested that the participants' English writing skills improved. Cooperative learning may stimulate the development of students' English writing abilities, and the results indicated that students demonstrated more robust improvement (Andrea and Caicedo, 2016). Taraban, Box, Myers, Pollard, and Bowen (2007) supported the idea that conventional teaching was less successful in accomplishment and knowledge acquisition than active learning. Similarly, Dilmac (2016) found that function learning approaches assisted students in increasing their success rates, academic achievement, and positive attitude. Next, Amani, E, H, E,



and M. (2019) have provided a comprehensive and precise solution to this issue. (1) Teachers must encourage students to write coherent compositions; (2) Teachers must use constructive feedback and follow-up strategies to improve students' writing skill improvement; (3) Students should be brainstormed to develop essay writing skills; (4) Teachers should provide ample time, and opportunity for students to practice writing skills; and (5) Teachers should assign more diverse homework compositions and extensive expository writing assignments.

In addition, Fareed, Almas, and Bilal (2016) suggested that training instructors in a particular language competency is one of the most excessive remedies. Additionally, instructors should be instructed to practice correctly and offer constructive and positive comments. In addition, AlKhairy (2013) noted that educators must be competent, trained, and motivated. The amount of positive feedback teachers should be raised since it assists students in acquiring language skills, while the amount of criticism should be reduced. And writing contests should be developed to inspire students. Similarly, Nik, Sani, *et al.* (2010) supported that ESL students should be encouraged to enhance their writing abilities. Regarding the manner of teaching writing skills, the influence of additional aspects such as the teaching-learning situation, society, and culture on the student's writing ability is also significant. Before creating a subject, a guide, or feedback, instructors should evaluate the relationship between cultural and social issues. Moreover, the teaching-learning setting must be studied in depth (Fareed, Almas, and Bilal, 2016). In addition, Ahmed (2010) found that loud classroom conditions, overcrowding, and a lack of basic classroom amenities impede students' development of writing abilities.

Creating better writing, enhancing the efficacy of the teaching technique, improving the additional components to help students, and enhancing the students' linguistic abilities might be ideal methods. According to Fareed, Almas, and Bilal (2016), one of the most excellent strategies for students to enhance their writing is increasing their vocabulary. This method may be explained by the fact that when there are several vocabulary words, students can choose terms that are appropriate for a subject, they will grasp what they are going to write, and they will then write successfully. And to have an extensive vocabulary, one is required to read various materials. Words may also be taught to students, both incidentally and intentionally.

### **2.10.2. Solutions to EFL teachers' teaching English paragraph writing**

According to the mistake analysis of English writing conducted, grammatical, lexical, semantic, and writing organization faults are the most common errors in students' writing assignments. Regarding the improvement of pupils' writing abilities, instructors play a crucial role. To enhance writing instruction, it is necessary to investigate the language-learning process of learners to boost comprehension of their faults. In addition to examining the learners' mistakes, it is essential to evaluate the teaching goals, students' language skill, their emotional aspects, and the efficacy of error correction (Fang & Xue-mei, 2007).

Therefore, mistake analysis should be undertaken so that instructors can comprehensively understand their students' errors and provide remedial instruction accordingly. Scholars and academics who investigated the English writing problems of Thai university students have proposed a variety of solutions for correcting English writing errors.

For correcting grammatical faults, Krashen and Terrell (1983) proposed that learners' grammar abilities might be enhanced by extensive reading since they would get acquainted with the English grammatical structure.

In addition, the researchers from these examined papers proposed solutions to the mistakes made by pupils. The pupils should be taught the grammar rules (Likitrattanaporn, 2002; Lush, 2002), focusing on the uses of subject-verb agreement, tenses, parts of speech, word order, prepositions, determiners, and the omission of subjects, verbs, objects, and complements, as well as sentence structure.

Second, techniques for selecting acceptable terms in certain situations and teaching the proper usage of bilingual and English-English dictionaries (Bennui, 2008) are crucial for eliminating lexical mistakes. The use of transitional words should be stressed (Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007; Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008). Thirdly, the students should be taught how to create a conventional paragraph or essay, including composing a main sentence, supporting facts, and ending phrases. Consideration should also be given to pre-writing, writing, and post-writing techniques. Bennui (2008) also advised adopting a communicative strategy with extensive use of English as the teaching medium to improve students' writing abilities.

### **2.11 Related studies**

This section addresses prior research relating to EFL students' difficulties with paragraph writing.

Enhancing descriptive paragraph writing of secondary students through shared writing (Ayu & Zuraida, 2020) has the goal to determine whether or not secondary students who participated in shared writing instruction differed significantly from those who did not in their ability to write descriptive paragraphs. This study employed an experimental methodology. The pre-test and post-test nonequivalent group design was one of the quasi-experimental designs that the author utilized. Thirty-five Eighth Graders made up the study's sample; 18 of them were in the experimental group, and 17 were in the control group. The study sample was selected using a convenience sampling technique. The data was gathered using pretest and post-test. Content validity was utilized to preserve validity. The reliability of the outcome was then maintained by using two raters. Twelve meetings of shared writing instruction were used to instruct the experimental group. It is possible to draw the conclusion that the instruction of writing through shared writing enhanced the students' ability to write descriptive paragraphs. Students in the experimental group were successful in earning higher grades than students in the control group. Although both of these student groups improved, the control group's improvement in writing ability lagged behind that of the experimental

group. In other words, there was a clear distinction between the students who participated in shared writing instruction and those who did not. The author therefore assumed that the experimental group's descriptive paragraph writing scores had improved as a result of shared writing. When compared to the students in the control group, there was a more pronounced improvement in the experimental group's ability to write descriptive paragraphs.

Investigating Malaysian ESL Students' Writing Problems on Conventions, Punctuation, and Language Use at Secondary School Level (Ghabool et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to better understand the difficulties secondary school students and teachers have when it comes to conventions, punctuation, and language use (correct use of grammar). 30 ESL students from Form 1 to Form 5 in upper and lower secondary schools participated in this study as students, while 10 teachers participating as teachers of English at upper and lower secondary levels with various teaching backgrounds contributed data. The study's instruments consisted of a questionnaire and an essay test. The results showed that Malaysian ESL students struggle with writing activities, particularly when it comes to punctuation and language use (grammar). Their texts clearly showed the first language's influence. The study offers some doable solutions to deal with writing challenges.

Paragraph writing problems Encountered by EFL Sudanese Secondary School Students (Ibrahim, 2016). This study sought to examine the issues with paragraph writing that Sudanese secondary pupils faced. It was designed to elicit answers to the questions that would demonstrate how poorly pupils understood how to write paragraphs and how to use grammatical conventions, coherent devices, and punctuation. However, the study aimed to use particular passages from literary texts (Sudanese Short Tales) as a paragraph writing strategy. Using the use of the SPSS program, the descriptive analytic method was employed to analyze the data gathered from the students' tests and the teachers' questionnaires. Second-class students from Bait Almal Secondary School for Boys in the Omdurman Locality made up the study's samples, as did a survey of secondary school teachers in Khartoum and an interview with a few English secondary stage directors from those cities and the White Nile State. The study made the assumption that students needed to understand the fundamentals of writing and be familiar with paragraph-writing strategies, but it turned out that students had no notion of how to employ literature in paragraphs or how to apply the fundamentals of writing. The study advised practicing a lot of grammatical concepts. So, a course on utilizing short tales is beneficial for raising students' levels in paragraph writing techniques as well as in grammatical elements and mechanics.

In conclusion, the investigations have uncovered several frequent issues and challenges students encounter while writing paragraphs. There were issues with terminology, grammar, substance, mother tongue intrusion, etc. These previous investigations, which included a questionnaire, an interview, and tests, give the foundation and grounds for the present investigation.

## **2.12 Research gap**

Several research studies investigate the difficulties in learning to write paragraphs (Abdulkareem, 2013). There are few studies in the context of Vietnam (Anh *et al.*, 2022). However, they focus on difficulties, word choice, or grammatical errors. This study aims to investigate the broad field of difficulties in learning and teaching paragraph writing, including task achievement, grammar, vocabulary, and the problems students face when applying basic structures to their paragraph writing.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research questions**

The study covered the two following questions:

- 1) What are secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning English paragraph writing?
- 2) What are possible solutions to secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning paragraph writing?

### **3.2 Research objectives**

With the above questions, there were two objectives, respectively

- 1) to explore secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning English paragraph writing, and
- 2) to investigate possible solutions to secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning paragraph writing.

### **3.3 Research instruments**

This was a mixed methodology with a questionnaire to EFL secondary students (n=100) and semi-structured interviews with teachers (n=4) and students (n=6) about difficulties and suggested solutions to learning and teaching English writing paragraphs.

### **3.4 Research participants**

#### **3.4.1 Students**

This research investigated 100 Graders of 7<sup>th</sup> from Dong Khoi Secondary School in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, about difficulties when learning paragraph writing and difficulties teachers teach paragraph writing to students when for questionnaires. In addition, six of them were interviewed to answer some questions about difficulties in learning to write paragraphs. Participants were 13 years old and were studying Tiếng Anh (English) 7 Friends Plus- Student book. This book, "Tiếng Anh 7 Friend Plus- Student Book by Tran Cao Boi Ngoc, Vu Van Xuan, Tran Nguyen Thuy Thoai Lan, 2022" contains parts to improve essential English abilities, including Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Language concentration. It is presumed that these individuals have comparable English competence and academic backgrounds.

### 3.4.2 Teachers

In this study, 4 EFL secondary school teachers (one male and 3 females) out of 8 at a secondary school in the Dong Khoi Secondary school, aged 25-40, holding BA degrees in Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), (under ten years of teaching) were asked to join sets of a semi-structured interview, in which one was for EFL teachers to make sure their students 'difficulties and solutions with their guidance and teaching them English paragraph writing in Tiếng Anh Friends Plus 7 (Grade 7th) Student Book.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. The quantitative results of the questionnaire

The survey assessed difficulties and possible solutions to secondary school EFL students' difficulties in learning paragraph writing. These responses related to the research questions and objectives were collected and then coded for data analysis. Of these, 43 items were coded for data analysis. The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated, and the results showed that the reliability coefficient of 43 questions of 100 participants was relatively high, with  $\alpha = 0.92$ .

#### 4.1.2 Difficulties in writing English paragraphs in the Friends Plus 7 English program

##### 4.1.2.1 Secondary school students

Besides speaking, writing is one of the most difficult and challenging skills for English learners. Therefore, discovering the types of difficulties will help learners understand the origin of those difficulties. From here, they will have a better understanding of what to do to limit those challenges. Therefore, this part plays a very primary role in this thesis.

**Table 4.1:** Secondary students' difficulties in learning English writing skills

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Difficulties in learning English writing skills	100	1.00	4.50	3.13	.65
Valid N (listwise)	100				

Table 4.1 shows that the Mean score is 3.13. This means students are almost neutral in their opinion about their difficulties in learning English writing skills in increasing the effectiveness of learning writing skills. However, this score needs to be checked with 4 to ensure the students' level of opinion.

**Table 4.2:** Secondary students' challenges in learning English writing strategies

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Secondary students' challenges in learning English writing strategies	100	1.00	4.67	3.26	.72
Valid N (listwise)	100				

Table 4.2 shows that the Mean score is 3.26, meaning students were nearly neutral in their opinion about secondary students' challenges in learning English writing strategies. However, this score needs to be checked with 4 to ensure the students' level of opinion.

#### 4.1.2.2 Secondary school teachers

**Table 4.3:** Difficulties in teaching methods of writing English paragraphs of teachers

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Difficulties in teaching methods of writing English paragraphs of teachers	100	1.00	4.50	2.57	.73
Valid N (listwise)	100				

Table 4.3 shows the Mean score of difficulties in teaching methods of writing English paragraphs of teachers with 2.57, meaning students did not appreciate these difficulties. However, this score needs to be checked with 3 to determine the students' level of opinion.

## 4.2 Solutions for learning to write English paragraphs in the Friends Plus 7 English program

### 4.2.1 Secondary school students

Knowledge of paragraph writing techniques and writing skills plays a very important role. This almost absolutely determines the effectiveness of learning to write English paragraphs. The following table shows the results of secondary school students on this solution.

**Table 4.4:** Solutions for secondary students' learning English writing skills

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Secondary students' learning English writing skills	100	1.00	5.00	3.48	.77
Valid N (listwise)	100				

It can be seen in Table 4.4 that the Mean score is 3.48. This means students are almost neutral in their opinion about the application of writing techniques in increasing the effectiveness in learning writing skills. However, this score needs to be checked with 4 to ensure the students' level of opinion.

### 4.2.2 Secondary school teachers

Teaching methods contribute significantly to the process of solving the effectiveness of learning English paragraph writing. What is more, through students' views on current teaching methods, teachers can adjust the way of communication and teaching in secondary school.

**Table 4.5:** Solutions on teachers' teaching methods on learning to write English paragraphs

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Solutions through teachers' teaching methods on learning to write English paragraphs	100	1.00	5.00	3.48	.90
Valid N (listwise)	100				

The solutions on secondary students' learning English writing skills, Table 4.5 shows that the Mean score of solutions through teachers' teaching methods on learning to write English paragraphs is 3.48. This means students are almost neutral in their opinion about the application of teachers' teaching methods in enhancing the effectiveness of secondary students' learning writing skills. However, this score needs to be checked with 4 to ensure the students' level of opinion.

### 4.3 The results of semi-structured interviews

#### 4.3.1 Students' interview results

Analysis of interview results from six students revealed a consensus that acquiring writing skills in secondary school is essential. This viewpoint was underscored by Student 3, who stated,

*"I feel it's necessary,"*

and Student 6, who agreed,

*"Yes, I believe it's important."*

The students explained their need to learn English primarily due to its importance for the high school graduation exam. As Student 2 mentioned,

*"It can help me with writing tasks during the exam,"*

while Student 4 noted,

*"Excelling in grade 7 will build a strong foundation for grades 8, 9 and high school."*

Conversely, Student 1 believed that learning English was crucial for communication, saying,

*"Whether or not you attend university, knowing English is essential for communication."*

Additionally, students identified several challenges related to teaching methods, the differences between Vietnamese and English, motivation, and the lack of writing practice. Student 2 reported difficulties with the teaching approach, stating,

*"The teacher often just wrote words on the board for us to memorize or made us read the lesson."*

Student 4 highlighted the challenges posed by the linguistic differences between Vietnamese and English, explaining,

*"I often translate from Vietnamese to English, but since the languages differ, I frequently make mistakes,"* and provided an example: *"In English, 'beautiful girl' has 'beautiful' before 'girl,' whereas in Vietnamese, 'đẹp' (beautiful) comes after 'cô gái' (girl)."*

Student 3 also noted that a lack of interest and motivation hindered their learning, saying,

*"I didn't remember what was taught because I don't like studying English and don't see the need since I plan to work instead of going to college."*

Meanwhile, Student 1 pointed out that insufficient homework and practice contributed to difficulties in learning English, stating,

*"I rarely write or read, so when I do write, I'm unsure of what to write,"*

and reiterated,

*"Because I seldom write and read, I struggle with knowing what to write."*

A detailed review of the students' responses suggests that addressing these challenges requires improvements in teaching methods, enhancing understanding of the differences between Vietnamese and English, increasing motivation for learning English, and providing more opportunities for writing practice. For enhancing writing instruction, Student 2 recommended that teachers employ a variety of teaching strategies, saying,

*"We prefer new and more engaging methods."*

Student 5 supported this idea, adding,

*"Teachers should assign more writing tasks and use diverse methods to boost student interest."*



To better understand the linguistic differences, students believe that teachers should clarify these differences. Student 5 commented,

*"Teachers should provide more explanations about how English and Vietnamese differ to help us practice writing English sentences more effectively."*

Motivation also plays a crucial role and needs to be addressed, as Student 3 acknowledged,

*"I haven't fully realized the importance of motivation yet."*

Additionally, Student 1 emphasized that increased practice leads to quicker progress, stating,

*"More practice will make you proficient in writing and less likely to be caught off guard when composing a practical text."*

This participant also suggested,

*"I think there should be more homework and a wider range of topics, as we only write about a few familiar subjects in the book."*

#### **4.3.2 Teachers' interview results**

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the eighth week with four EFL teachers (one male and three females) selected through stratified sampling. The interview questions were available in both Vietnamese and English versions. During the interviews, which took place simultaneously with all four teachers, responses were given in Vietnamese. The interview data were translated into English with assistance from a supervisor.

All four teachers identified teaching English writing as their greatest challenge. This consensus was evident from their responses. For instance, Teacher 1 remarked,

*"I think writing skills are the hardest because this skill demands effective teaching methods."*

Similarly, Teacher 4 stated,

*"Writing is the most difficult for me to teach."*

The challenges cited included inadequate teaching methods, insufficient understanding of English culture, and the extensive time required for lesson preparation and correction. Teacher 1 noted,

*"Preparing and correcting writing lessons takes a lot of time, and students also need considerable time to learn and improve."*

Teacher 2 added,

*"It demands a deep understanding of English culture from both the writer and the teacher, but living in Vietnam limits my exposure to it."*

In the context of Grade 7, writing at the secondary school level, teachers unanimously recognize that this skill presents many challenges. They pointed out that the difficulties stem from issues with the curriculum, particularly the imbalance between the number of practical lessons and theoretical instruction, as well as a lack of motivation to learn English. The most significant and frequent challenge, however, is the difference in word and phrase order between English and Vietnamese. As Teacher 1 noted,

*"The teacher mainly teaches theory but provides little practice,"*

while Teacher 4 mentioned,

*"The primary challenge lies in the curriculum, where the ratio of practical lessons to theory is not appropriate. Practice accounts for only one-third of the theoretical study hours."*

Regarding the lack of motivation, Teacher 2 observed,

*"I've noticed that students are superficial and not paying much attention to learning English in general, especially their writing skills."*

Among the challenges, the improper use of English words or phrases posed the greatest difficulty. Teacher 3 illustrated this by saying,

*"The difference in sentence structure, vocabulary, or word order between Vietnamese and English is the biggest obstacle."*

Teacher 2 elaborated on this point, explaining,

*"The first difference relates to verb conjugation". For example, in English, people say 'I go to school,' where the verb 'go' must agree with the subject in terms of tense and number. In Vietnamese, however, people say 'Tôi đi đến trường,' where the verb 'đi' does not change based on tense or number. Another difference is the placement of demonstrative words. In English, the demonstrative word precedes the noun, as in 'this book,' while in Vietnamese, it follows the noun, as in 'cuốn sách này' ('cuốn sách' means 'book,' and 'này' means 'this')."*

In terms of solutions, teachers proposed various strategies to address the challenges. However, they generally emphasized improving students' English language skills, increasing their awareness of the differences between English and Vietnamese, enhancing writing instruction methods, and raising awareness of the importance of English in their lives. Regarding students' ability to use English, 3 out of 4 teachers believed that understanding the differences between English and Vietnamese in terms of word, phrase, and sentence usage was crucial. Teacher 3 affirmed this, saying,

*"I often provide vocabulary, grammar structures, and guidance on using the correct style of English. I always remind them to remember the differences between the two languages when writing."*

She also mentioned correcting students in various ways and encouraging them to practice writing and vocabulary because they often forget spelling. Similarly, Teacher 1 highlighted the value of sample papers, stating,

*"I see students refer to sample papers to understand and apply sentence patterns in letter writing in English effectively."*

Teacher 1 added that using sample papers helps students grasp and implement sentence structures more easily.

On the other hand, Teacher 2 believed that teaching methods play a significant role in students' English learning outcomes. According to this teacher, as teaching methods become more appropriate, students' learning results improve. The teacher supported the idea of increasing practice sessions, explaining,

*"I reduced the theoretical lectures and gave them more time for practice. I let them write in class, either with a partner or in groups."*

Another factor influencing students' English learning, according to Teacher 2, was their awareness of the need to learn English. This teacher noted that students often feel bored with learning English because they see it as unnecessary, indicating low motivation. To address this, the teacher suggested changing students' perception of English, stating,

*"I show them examples of successful people who speak English well—famous individuals with strong English skills—and tell them that learning English can lead to greater success."*

In addressing the challenges of teaching English writing, teachers also played a significant role. Most of them believed that while they had individual solutions, collaboration and learning from one another were beneficial. This was reflected in their

Vietnamese-language exchanges during professional meetings or discussions through platforms like Zalo, or Facebook, Teacher 1 emphasized,

*"At my school, we often bring up issues during the professional meetings at the beginning of the week and discuss them to find solutions."*

Teacher 3 shared a similar view, stating,

*"At my school, we frequently talk about difficulties in team meetings to find solutions, or we exchange ideas via Zalo."*

Teacher 2 agreed, adding,

*"I believe that meetings focused on innovation and experience-sharing can lead to many effective teaching methods and problem-solving strategies in the classroom."*

However, Teacher 4 had a different perspective, stating that each teacher has their own solutions and doesn't necessarily need to collaborate. He commented,

*"I think every teacher has their own way of solving problems, so there's no need to discuss with others."*

In summary, these responses highlight the teachers' perspectives on the challenges faced by secondary school students in English writing, as well as potential solutions, particularly in the context of the Grade 7 English textbook.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

The survey results showed that the students' answers were at the level of satisfied and agreed with the content of the questionnaire. Accordingly, students agreed that there were still many difficulties, such as learning and teaching methods focusing on learning English paragraph writing skills. In addition, they also evaluated the solutions for improving the effectiveness of learning writing skills.

##### **4.4.1 Difficulties of secondary school students in writing English paragraphs in the Friends Plus 7 English program**

###### **4.4.1.1 Secondary students' difficulties**

Participants had a neutral opinion about the difficulties they encountered in learning English writing skills. Among those difficulties, students often got stuck on choosing the right type of writing for the right situation. In addition, they reported that outline/format of an English paragraph, such as Topic sentences (Introduction), supporting sentences developing main points (Body), Conclusion sentences (Conclusion), word orders in

English sentences in the native language, and confuse the usage of the 3 articles (a, an, the) did not strongly affect students' ability to write English paragraphs.

As Mkude (1980, p.62) mentioned, students often fail to see the need of structuring linguistic content strategically in order to have maximum effect. They cannot make the right arrangement of the facts or details of the paragraph, therefore, their paragraph will be a jumble, and they will get a failing grade. The organization is usually under good preparation. Supporting this idea, Wyrick (2002) claimed that ideas in the paragraph are not arranged in the correct order, leading to confusion within the paragraph. This breaks the connection between sentences and paragraphs, reduces the flow and coherence between different phrases, and creates unpleasant breaks in rhythm or meaning.

#### **4.4.1.2 Difficulties in teaching methods of writing English paragraphs for teachers**

As mentioned above, teachers do little to give homework about different sentence structures, so it is difficult for students to combine sentences in an English paragraph. The practice time in writing class was not enough for students, so they lacked practice in writing. This was one of the biggest challenges in the passive writing class. The lack of time for practice activities also led to insufficient vocabulary provision. Students would have difficulty in completing passages if they lacked too much relevant vocabulary.

Using Heaton and Mickelson's (2002) words, one of the biggest difficulties in teaching English is teaching writing. Students usually lack of elemental talents in grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Syntax errors, which relate to sentence structure and tenses, become the big challenge. Writing involves proper grammar and provides information to aid comprehension. Students with grammar difficulties will struggle to develop acceptable sentences. Bored writing appears in writing classes, caused by the use of the mother tongue and lack of practice time. As Myles (2002) asserted, learners often use their mother tongue to think and apply it to paragraphs. The L1 strongly influence results in linguistic faults, and English writing paragraphs are no longer attractive enough for readers.

#### **4.4.2 Solutions for secondary school students in learning to write English paragraphs in the Friends Plus 7 English program**

##### **4.4.2.1 Solutions on secondary students' learning English writing skills**

Students value the factors outside the school more than the activities in the lesson. This means that current writing teaching activities are still boring and not very interesting for students. However, students lack reading and do not do enough writing activities before going to writing class. Current writing skills teaching activities are not as effective as expected.

In terms of reading and writing activities, the study's results are the same as Raimes (1983, p.50). Reading provides many benefits to students when writing English paragraphs. Students increase their connection with cultural knowledge and language usage in different environments. Students' life experiences and vocabulary are significantly increased. Students also absorb many different types of idioms, sentence

patterns, and organizational flows. Through reading, many new ideas are generated and it will help enrich the paragraph. Therefore, concentrating on and practicing reading helps individuals learn English and get the desired level of English language abilities in a more efficient manner.

Moreover, writing practice plays an indispensable role in improving students' paragraph writing skills (Dana, 2004). daily writing does more than inculcate the discipline to write at will, rather than just when inspiration strikes. It provides numerous other significant advantages:

- 1) It stimulates your creativity,
- 2) It raises students' confidence,
- 3) It allows students to experiment with your writing skills,
- 4) It helps in overcoming perfectionism, and
- 5) It prevents writer's block.

#### **4.4.2.2 Solutions on teachers' teaching methods for learning to write English paragraphs**

Students highly rate the strategy of creating a collaborative learning environment among students by teachers. The combination of teachers and students brings many benefits. Teachers must combine teaching vocabulary with topic and context and combine the sentence patterns to help students fully understand the content of the entire paragraph. To use Bennui's (2008) words, students are advised to adopt a communicative strategy between them with extensive use of English. This combination includes activities such as creating a conventional paragraph or essay, including composing a main sentence, supporting facts, and ending phrases. Students have more opportunities to practice pre-writing, writing, and post-writing techniques. What's more, techniques for selecting acceptable terms in certain situations and teaching the proper usage of bilingual and English-English dictionaries (Bennui, 2008) are crucial for eliminating lexical mistakes. Teaching student's other grammar points is also helpful. As Likitrattanaporn (2002) and Lush (2002) mentioned, focusing on the uses of subject-verb agreement, tenses, parts of speech, word order, prepositions, determiners, and the omission of subjects, verbs, objects, and complements, as well as sentence structure helps students enhance grammar ability.

## **5. Conclusions and Implications**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

This study aimed to identify the difficulties faced by secondary school EFL students at a secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, with English paragraph writing and to suggest possible solutions. Through questionnaires and interviews with students and teachers, the research uncovered that students struggle with several key aspects of writing, including selecting the appropriate writing style for different contexts, combining sentences effectively, and receiving adequate practice and feedback. The

findings reveal a moderate level of perceived difficulty among students, with particular challenges related to inadequate practice time and limited instructional support on sentence structures.

The research also highlighted several effective solutions. Students rated collaborative learning environments highly, suggesting that increased interaction among peers and between students and teachers could significantly enhance their writing skills. Additionally, integrating vocabulary instruction with contextual topics and providing focused practice on sentence patterns emerged as valuable strategies. These solutions underscore the importance of a more engaging and contextually relevant approach to teaching writing, which can help students overcome their current challenges.

In conclusion, addressing the difficulties identified requires a shift towards more interactive and supportive teaching methods. By incorporating collaborative learning, contextualized vocabulary instruction, and targeted practice, educators can better support EFL students in developing their paragraph writing skills. This research provides a foundation for improving writing instruction and highlights the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of teaching strategies to meet the evolving needs of students.

## **5.2 Educational implications**

The findings of this research have several important implications for education, particularly for EFL instruction in secondary schools. First, educators should consider adopting more dynamic and interactive teaching methods to address the identified difficulties in paragraph writing. The research suggests that collaborative learning environments, where students engage in peer review and group writing activities, can enhance their writing skills and provide meaningful practice. This approach encourages students to learn from one another, share ideas, and receive diverse feedback, which can lead to improved writing outcomes.

Additionally, curriculum developers should design writing instruction that integrates vocabulary teaching with contextual topics. This integration helps students understand and apply new vocabulary in relevant contexts, which enhances their ability to construct coherent and cohesive paragraphs. Teachers should also focus on teaching sentence structures and providing ample practice opportunities. By incorporating exercises that emphasize sentence combination and coherence, educators can address students' difficulties in these areas and support their overall writing development.

Moreover, the findings highlight the need for ongoing teacher professional development. Teachers should be equipped with strategies and resources to effectively support students' writing skills. Training programs that focus on innovative teaching techniques and the use of technology in writing instruction could be beneficial. Additionally, regular feedback and assessment practices should be implemented to monitor student progress and adjust instructional strategies as needed.

Overall, the implications of this research call for a more student-centered approach to writing instruction that addresses the specific challenges faced by EFL students and supports their development through interactive and contextually relevant practices.

### **5.3 Limitations**

This research has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the study was conducted within a specific geographic context—secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to EFL learners in different regions or countries, where cultural and educational factors might influence students' writing difficulties and instructional needs differently.

Secondly, the research relied on self-reported data from students and teachers, which can introduce biases and inaccuracies. Students' perceptions of their difficulties may not always align with objective assessments of their writing abilities, and teachers' reports might reflect their own teaching experiences rather than the full range of students' challenges.

Additionally, the study used qualitative impressions rather than quantitative ratings to evaluate the difficulties in writing. While this approach provided valuable insights into the general perceptions of difficulties, it lacked the precision that might have been offered by a more detailed rating system. This limitation means that the specific severity of different difficulties could not be precisely measured.

Lastly, the research did not assess the long-term effectiveness of the proposed solutions. The impact of the suggested strategies on students' writing skills over an extended period remains unclear. Future studies would need to address this gap by evaluating how well the proposed solutions work in practice and whether they lead to sustained improvements in students' writing abilities.

### **5.4 Further research issues**

First, this will be "Exploring the Impact of Collaborative Learning Environments on EFL Students' Paragraph Writing Skills: A Longitudinal Study." This study could investigate how sustained collaborative learning activities influence EFL students' writing skills over time, providing insights into the long-term benefits of peer interactions. Second, there should be "Integrating Vocabulary Instruction with Contextual Writing Tasks: Effects on EFL Students' Paragraph Coherence and Cohesion." This research would examine the effectiveness of combining vocabulary instruction with contextualized writing tasks, focusing on improvements in students' ability to create coherent and cohesive paragraphs. And, finally, it will be "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Technology-Enhanced Writing Practices in Secondary EFL Education: A Comparative Study." This study could explore how various technological tools and digital platforms impact EFL students' writing skills, comparing the effectiveness of technology-enhanced practices with traditional methods.



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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

Both authors strongly agreed on the publication of this paper and there was no contention or rivalry during finishing the work. In other words, the authors declare no conflicts of interest in this article. Both authors are fully and equally responsible for the benefits and harms after this article is published. The authors, moreover, declare that the material presented by us in this paper is our original work and does not contain any materials taken from other copyrighted sources. Wherever such materials have been included, they have been clearly indented or/and identified by quotation marks and due and proper acknowledgements given by citing the source at appropriate places.

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