

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING: A NEEDS ANALYSIS OF EAP IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: *Despite the growing demand for academic writing instruction of EFL/ESL learners and the pivotal role of needs analysis in curriculum development, limited research as a needs analysis of EAP writing courses at tertiary level has been conducted in Vietnam EFL context. This research aims to investigate the perceptions and needs regarding EAP writing among ELT-major students at a university in Vietnam. The study employs the mixed method design with a survey of 42 students, followed by semi-structured interviews with 5 students from the same group. The findings reveal the students' insufficient understanding of academic writing, particularly in terms of academic genres, citation styles, and reading-related skills. In addition, when writing academic assignments, the students encountered several issues such as lacking vocabulary, inappropriate word choice, lacking ideas, and writing incoherent paragraphs, which were partially addressed by the IELTS writing courses they took and self-studying. Reading and engaging with academic literature were also deemed challenging by the students, yet hardly was a measure taken to enhance the skills. These results suggest that the English Department should develop a separate EAP writing course following the IELTS ones. The EAP writing course will focus on unique features of academic writing, academic vocabulary and structures, the relation between reading and writing, as well as the skills of reading and working with academic literature.*

Keywords: *EAP, English academic writing, needs analysis, ELT-major students*

INTRODUCTION

Among four major communication skills, writing is considered a difficult one since written work often varies greatly in terms of purposes, audience, and genres (Archibald, 2004). Producing a piece of writing in a second language is further complicated owing to the dependence

on writers' proficiency in their first and target language and differences in culture and rhetorical approach to the text (Archibald, 2004). Hyland (2003) claimed that instruction is essential in helping students develop writing proficiency, and teaching writing is a central expertise ability of a language teacher.

Possessing many conventions regarding writing styles and genres, English academic writing (EAW) is a particularly challenging skill for both English native and non-native learners (Dong, 1997, as cited in Paltridge, 2004). The skill is deemed essential for undergraduate and postgraduate students when it comes to accessing international knowledge resources or studying abroad (Giridharan, 2012). This triggers a special need for teachers' comprehensive instructions; nevertheless, the teaching of the skill was not given sufficient attention, especially in countries where English is the second or foreign language.

In Vietnam, several studies on the teaching and learning of academic writing have been carried out such as Nguyen's (2009) study about strategies that university teachers can use to teach EAW, the study by Nguyen et al. (2022) which scrutinized the difficulties with word choice in EAW of university students, and Do's (2022) study which investigated the utilization of flipped classroom in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing course at a university. However, students' perceptions of EAW, particularly their understanding of its features and their challenges in writing academically have not been examined thoroughly.

The English Department at a university in Vietnam has developed two English writing modules in the form of IELTS writing training for English Language Teaching (ELT) major students in their second academic year. This is because a minimum IELTS score of 6.5 is one of the graduation requirements for those students. The students also need to pass all assessments for different ELT-related modules which are in the form of academic writing such as essays, reports, and graduation theses. However, only IELTS writing training is given to the students,

and there is no official EAP course nor EAP writing module offered by the English Department to train them to write academically.

According to Hawkey (2006, as cited in Green, 2007), IELTS writing tasks bear certain resemblance to academic written work, which is of benefit to students in their academic study. Daller and Phelan (2013), nevertheless, argued that there still exist controversies over the relation between IELTS writing training and academic writing gain. Given those controversies as well as the necessity of comprehensive instruction for academic writing, the extent to which students understand and develop academic writing skills after attending IELT-based writing modules is worth finding out.

The aforementioned points have provided the rationale for this study as a needs analysis of EAP writing to explore the understanding of EAW of ELT-major students at a university in Vietnam, particularly their challenges when writing academically and what can be done to help them develop academic writing skills needed for their assessments. By the end of this study, both instructors and course developers are equipped with the insights needed to enhance the quality of instruction, enabling students to overcome writing challenges and thrive in their academic writing endeavors.

As a needs analysis, this study has the general purpose of finding out the students' needs and perceptions of EAW, as well as what can be done to enhance their academic writing skills. This purpose can be obtained through four research questions:

1. To what extent do students understand the concept of English academic writing?
2. What challenges do students face when writing academically?
3. What measures do students take to deal with those challenges?
4. What improvements would students like to see in their English writing modules?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Writing

Academic writing is a form of writing and a way of communicating with fellow human beings who are students, professors, examiners, or scholars in educational and academic settings (Gillett et al., 2009). Certain genres of academic writing may seem more suitable to certain disciplines than others. For instance, subjects relating to people, society, and cultures under Social Sciences disciplines such as Literature, Philosophy, and Languages might commonly employ an essay, a critique, or a research article.

Hyland (2006) differentiated general and specific features of written academic work. While the former can be seen across all disciplines and includes the use of a thesis statement and supporting arguments with specific data, the latter involves discipline-specific elements such as the use of terminology. However, regardless of the genre and discipline, academic writing is required to be clear, and concise, with appropriately referenced ideas (Gillett et al., 2009). Academic writing also consists of the ability to fashion and support complex ideas based on the reading of a text or analysis of data, “analyze an argument, and sustain a focused and coherent discussion” (Rosenfeld et al., 2004). Moreover, students will be exposed to differing views while reading, thus required to be advised to write critically by carefully thinking, questioning, analyzing, and comparing sources (Gillett et al., 2009).

As a result of these conventions of academic writing, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners may face profound challenges in EAW (Paltridge, 2004). Poor EAW skills, according to Zhu (2004), account for the failure of ESL students in meeting the literacy expectations of their educational institutions. Equipping tertiary English major students with knowledge of EAW is, therefore, deemed essential (Nguyen, 2009).

English Academic Writing and IELTS Academic

With a dual aim of developing both students' English language proficiency and English for academic purposes, many institutions offer English courses which prepare students for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic test. IELTS writing preparation equipped students with the ability to write paragraphs, introductions, and conclusions, which was helpful in their postgraduate study (Clark & Yu, 2021). This idea is agreed by Hawkey (2006, as cited in Green, 2007), who stated that the IELTS academic writing test requires candidates to produce an academic essay and a report, thus being relevant to academic writing and meeting the needs of intending undergraduates and postgraduates.

Although IELTS writing displays some resemblance to written university assignments, an IELTS score does not necessarily guarantee sufficient language and knowledge to succeed in an academic environment (Daller & Phelan, 2013). Indeed, many students who achieve high IELTS scores still face considerable challenges when entering university due to some discrepancies between the nature of IELTS writing tasks and academic writing for university degree courses (Rea-Dickins et al., 2007; Jenkins, 2013). Specifically, on the one hand, university written assessments are rarely spontaneous and have different genres; opinions are objectively supported by valid evidence taken from research findings, books, or the authoritative statements of scholars. On the other hand, IELTS writing has a typical form of essays and requires spontaneous expression of subjective opinion which is grounded by prior knowledge, personal experience, or public views (Moore & Morton, 2004). More importantly, whilst critical thinking is a crucial and complex element in academic writing, these skills are not practiced thoroughly during IELTS preparation since students are not required to critically evaluate, appraise, or oppose opinions (Clark & Yu, 2021).

Needs Analysis

According to Richards (2013), needs analysis (NA) is an informal process used by educators to assess the current skill level, attitudes, prior educational background, challenges in learning, and preferences of learners regarding topics and learning methods. By exploring students' needs in a specific context, teachers can provide effective courses and lessons which can engage and motivate students in learning (Macalister & Nation, 2020). Generally speaking, NA is crucial in the course design process, especially when creating a well-rounded syllabus that aligns with the requirements and preferences of those involved (Brown, 2016). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) developed a comprehensible framework for students' needs which are classified into three components: (1) necessity which can be understood as the requirements of the target situation, (2) lacks which refers to the gap between the necessary proficiency for the target situation and the current level of learners, and (3) wants which are aspects learners desire to learn.

Previous Studies

A body of research has been conducted on students' needs and learning of EAW. Cai's (2013) small-scale need analysis on 50 Masters of Arts (MA) Chinese students in English indicated that students often lacked knowledge of specific generic features in academic papers and expressed a desire to learn appropriate academic writing styles and language use.

Similarly, the study by Paing (2024) entitled "Academic Writing Needs of EFL Students in Myanmar" revealed that students struggled with writing paragraphs coherently and using proper academic styles and vocabulary. Most students want to learn academic language and how to write research paper sections such as the introduction, methodology, and discussion.

Besides difficulties in academic language use and coherence, Bram and Angelina (2022) found that Indonesian tertiary education students also struggled with paraphrasing, in-text referencing, and compiling reference lists. To address these issues, the study suggested that lecturers

should receive training in various writing strategies and provide detailed feedback on students' strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, students should focus on enhancing their language proficiency, organizational skills, critical thinking, paraphrasing abilities, and understanding of referencing conventions.

In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen et al. (2022) investigated problems students encountered when writing academic English. The findings indicated that although students could recognize academic words and their basic features, they struggled to understand the words and use them appropriately in different contexts. Evans (2019) also pointed out some writing challenges of Vietnamese postgraduates in terms of writing genres, academic vocabulary, and critical thinking, thus suggesting English writing instructors follow a genre-sensitivity pedagogical approach.

Regarding students' strategies, paraphrasing, as found out by Tran and Nguyen (2022), could help students improve their formal written work, particularly in terms of task fulfilment, structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and citation. Being a beneficial learning strategy, paraphrasing should be introduced and integrated into academic writing courses.

Examining an EAP program in Vietnam, Duong (2007) found that "students' needs were assumed by the course designers, suggested in informal exchanges with students, or based on teachers' personal observation and experience". Do (2023) bridged the gap by exploring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students' writing needs to design a writing task-based course. He conducted a survey and written test to explore students' writing errors and difficulties as well as interviews to find out students' wants and attitudes toward the writing course. His study showed that grammar and idea development are major problems that students face and proposed a writing task-based course which offers more writing tasks including planning ideas, writing, and giving feedback. Although Do's (2023) NA was systematic and comprehensive, his proposed writing course focusing on writing paragraphs was part of the General English program instead of an EAP one.

Up to the present, despite the increasing need for academic writing instruction and the essential role of NA in course design, no NA of EAP programs, particularly EAP writing courses has been conducted in Vietnam EFL context. In addition, students’ understanding of English academic writing and the development of their skills during IELTS writing preparation courses has not been thoroughly investigated. To fill the research gaps, the present research aims to examine the understanding of third-year and fourth-year ELT-major students of academic writing, the difficulties they face when writing academic English, their strategies to deal with those challenges, as well as any changes they wish to see in their writing modules.

As a needs analysis, this study adopted the framework of learners’ needs proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). The diagram below displays the framework for students’ perceived needs for EAW instruction, specifying their necessity, lacks, and wants of EAW under the impacts of IELTS academic writing training. The framework clearly represents the research aims and aids in shaping research questions.

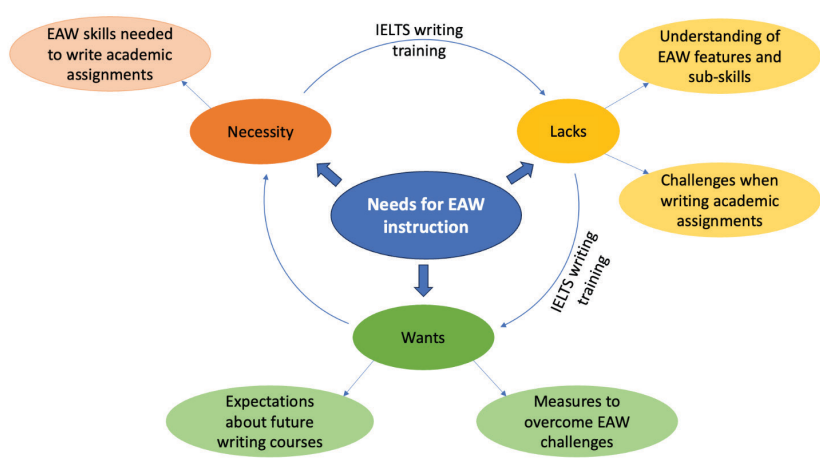


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Students’ Perceived Needs for EAW Instruction

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Samples

This research adopted a mixed methods design. Questionnaire and interview were the two data collection instruments.

The target population is 92 ELT-major students who are in their third year and fourth year at a university in Vietnam. There has been no EAP course offered for those students in this university. Instead, they attended 2 IELTS-based academic writing modules during their second year and are currently doing final assignments for ELT-related modules. Those assignments are in the form of academic writing, specifically report, research proposal, and thesis.

42 out of 92 students were available at the time of the study and agreed to participate. They completed an online questionnaire about their understanding of academic writing, their difficulties when composing academic written assignments, their strategies to overcome those challenges, and their suggestions for future writing courses. Besides, the researcher conducted online one-to-one semi-structured interviews with 5 voluntary participants to gain in-depth answers to the research questions.

Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaires

Google Forms was utilized to perform the online questionnaire for its user-friendliness and convenience. The process in which all responses were automatically stored and synthesized into a spreadsheet was also significantly more time-saving and accurate compared to the manual coding process (Cohen et al., 2018).

The questionnaire had three main parts. The first part consisted of two multiple-choice questions and a checklist item asking the students about their academic writing experience, which was believed to greatly influence their perceptions of and needs for academic writing.

The second section focused on the students' perceptions of EAW and their difficulties in writing. In this section, two five-point Likert-scale questions followed by an open-ended item were employed. The first question required the participants to choose one among five options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree to 19 statements about their understanding of EAW characteristics. These statements were originally generated based on the literature about EAW by Gillett et al. (2009) and Rosenfeld et al. (2004). The second question explored the students' perceptions of their difficulties with EAW skills by rating 18 academic writing subskills (adapted from Evans & Green, 2007) from very easy to very difficult. This was followed by an open-ended item asking the participants to specify other difficulties they have, which gathered more personalized answers.

The third part deals with the students' opinions towards their future writing modules. It included a checklist question asking the participants to choose 5 out of 18 skills (similar to the set of skills in section 2) which should be focused more on in future writing courses. There was also an open-ended question about any changes or improvements the participants wished to see in future academic writing modules. The combination of both close-ended and open-ended questions could allow greater freedom of expression, enhance the response objectivity, and yield richer data when it comes to exploring the participants' opinions (Dörnyei, 2007).

The questionnaire was concise, and all questions had their own essential role in gathering necessary data for the research. Simple language was adopted, and questions were divided into sections to enhance clarity and intelligibility, thus encouraging a higher return rate. The surveying stage was followed by interviews to increase the reliability and richness of the responses.

The questionnaire was piloted by four volunteer participants to identify ambiguous question items. The respondents raised questions on the meaning of the words "genres" and "synthesize" since the words were

new to them. The researcher decided not to replace these words because they are academic terminologies; instead, Vietnamese translations were provided for long statements and questions to enhance their comprehensibility.

Semi-structured interviews

In-depth interviews were carried out to attain insights into the students' perceptions of EAW and needs for EAW instruction, as well as to enhance the reliability of the research. To increase the informants' freedom of expression, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were chosen. All interviews were conducted online for distance reasons. Zoom application was utilized since it is familiar to both the participants and the researcher, and it has an audio recording function.

Instead of random sampling, 10 participants were invited to take part in the interview for two reasons: (1) they provided prominent and/or ambiguous answers to the questionnaire and (2) they left their email addresses at the end of the questionnaire. After sending the consent letter to 10 participants, the researcher received the acceptance to take part from 5 of them. In the interviews, the informants were asked to clarify their answers in the questionnaire, explain the reasons why they had certain difficulties in academic writing, as well as justify their opinions about the writing courses. The interviews therefore helped to seek further explanation on the relation between the students' perceptions of EAW and needs for EAW instruction.

All interviews were done in Vietnamese to avoid possible misunderstandings. All interviews were recorded, and main points were also noted to support data analysis.

Data Analysis

Since the study adopted mixed methods research design, it utilized both descriptive statistics and content analysis methods to analyze data.

Firstly, the descriptive statistics method was employed to synthesize data collected from the questionnaire. Specifically, data was first

classified according to the related research question and then calculated in numerical form using Microsoft Excel program. The questionnaire items employed numerical Likert scale and checklist, so the frequency of each option was calculated in mean and percentage forms which are the most common descriptive measures (Dörnyei, 2007) before being illustrated in tables and a bar chart to assist data comparison and generalization.

Secondly, qualitative data from the questionnaire open-ended questions and the interviews was analyzed using the content analysis method. The analysis procedure comprised four main steps namely transcribing, coding, growing ideas, and interpreting data (Dörnyei, 2007). Besides, so as to provide evidence for some points, the researcher also quoted the interviewees' expressions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter was devoted to answering the research questions regarding students' understanding of EAW, their challenges in EAW and suggestions for future writing courses based on the data gathered from the questionnaire and interviews.

Students' Understanding of EAW

EAW characteristics

The analysis of questionnaire responses revealed students' varied understanding of EAW characteristics and subskills. The overall mean score for EAW characteristics was 3.57, indicating a moderate level of knowledge. As shown in Table 1, the highest agreement rates were related to understanding the structure of academic writing (76%, $M=3.88$) and the importance of clarity and conciseness (71%, $M=3.90$). Students also demonstrated awareness of EAW style, coherence, and objectivity, with agreement rates between 64% and 67%. However, only 38% of participants indicated familiarity with different EAW genres ($M=3.12$), and an even smaller proportion (21%) reported knowledge of citation styles ($M=2.83$).

Table 1: Perceptions of EAW Characteristics

Statements	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Mean	SD
I understand EAW style (formal vocabulary and structures).	5	28	67	3.69	0.78
I understand the importance of clarity and conciseness in EAW.	10	19	71	3.9	1.08
I know different EAW genres (e.g., essays, reports, projects, research proposal, articles, etc.)	29	33	38	3.12	0.86
I understand the structure of an academic piece of writing (e.g., introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion).	10	14	76	3.88	0.94
I understand the concepts of logic and coherence.	7	26	67	3.86	0.98
I understand the importance of maintaining objectivity in EAW.	10	26	64	3.71	0.94
I know different citation styles (e.g., APA, MLA, Harvard) and their formatting requirements.	38	41	21	2.83	1.01
Overall mean score M=3.57					

Scale: 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree

EAW subskills

Regarding EAW subskills, students scored slightly higher, with an overall mean of 3.76. As seen in Table 2, high agreement rates (86%) were observed for skills such as using topic sentences and thesis statements (M=4.19), linking ideas with transitions (M=4.12), and using evidence to support arguments (M=4.12). In contrast, skills related to summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing information received lower scores, with agreement rates ranging from 26% to 48%. These

findings suggested that while students recognize the importance of foundational EAW skills, they struggle with more advanced techniques for working with source texts.

Table 2: Perceptions of EAW sub-skills

Statements	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Mean	SD
I understand the use of topic sentences and thesis statements.	9	5	86	4.19	0.99
I understand the use of transitions and linking words to connect ideas and sentences.	5	9	86	4.12	0.86
I understand the importance of using evidence in supporting arguments.	7	7	86	4.12	0.92
I understand the importance of searching for and reading relevant academic literature and information.	7	14	79	4.05	0.96
I understand the importance of evaluating information from the sources I read.	17	24	59	3.74	1.15
I know the direct quotation technique to mention information from the sources I read.	14	38	48	3.43	0.86
I know the technique of summarising information from the sources I read.	26	38	36	3.12	0.99
I know the technique of paraphrasing information from the sources I read.	17	45	38	3.29	0.83
I know the technique of combining ideas.	29	45	26	3.05	0.88
I understand the importance of citing and referencing sources in EAW	2	17	81	4.14	0.78
I understand the importance of revising and editing written work.	12	9	79	4.14	1.09
Overall mean score M=3.76					

Scale: 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree

Challenges in English Academic Writing

Results from questionnaires

Students reported varying levels of difficulty with general writing skills and language skills, with mean scores of 3.08 and 3.16, respectively. Among general skills in Table 3, writing coherent paragraphs was identified as the most challenging ($M=3.33$), followed by evaluating information while reading and combining ideas ($M=3.31$). In contrast, writing introductions and conclusions were perceived as less difficult, with mean scores below 3.00.

Table 3: Perceived Difficulty of General Writing Skills

General Writing Skills	Easy (%)	Neutral (%)	Difficult (%)	Mean	SD
Planning written assignments	19	52	29	3.1	0.69
Writing an introduction	33	50	17	2.88	0.80
Writing thesis statements	28	36	36	3.07	0.89
Writing coherent paragraphs	17	38	45	3.33	0.82
Providing examples or evidence	36	28	36	3	1.01
Searching for appropriate academic literature and information	24	36	40	3.21	0.95
Evaluating information while reading	12	48	40	3.31	0.72
Combining ideas or information	17	40	43	3.31	0.81
Citing or referring to sources	31	45	24	2.95	0.88
Writing a conclusion	36	50	14	2.76	0.73
Writing references	26	45	29	3.02	0.84
Revising written work	24	45	31	3.07	0.84
Overall mean score $M=3.08$					

Scale: 1=very easy, 5=very difficult

Regarding language skills, paraphrasing (M=3.31) and summarizing (M=3.24) were the most challenging, followed by using academic language and linking sentences smoothly (M=3.21). Interestingly, grammar usage was perceived as relatively easy, with only 17% of participants reporting difficulties in this area (M=2.86).

Table 4. Perceived Difficulty of Language Skills

Language Skills	Easy (%)	Neutral (%)	Difficult (%)	Mean	SD
Using proper academic language and vocabulary	14	48	38	3.21	0.84
Using proper grammar such as correct tenses, agreements, reporting verbs, and prepositions	28	55	17	2.86	0.72
Summarising	24	33	43	3.24	0.88
Paraphrasing	17	45	38	3.31	0.87
Linking sentences smoothly	21	41	38	3.21	0.84
Proof-reading written assignments	21	46	33	3.14	0.87
Overall mean score M=3.16					

Scale: 1=very easy, 5=very difficult

Results from interviews

The interview findings revealed that vocabulary limitations were a significant barrier, with three participants citing difficulty in recalling advanced terms and using synonyms appropriately: “When I write, I often lack topical words to express my thoughts” (S1); “I struggle to recall simple words’ academic or advanced counterparts and their collocations” (S2); and “I diversify my vocabulary usage by replacing a word with its synonym but sometimes the word and its synonym can’t be used interchangeably, such as “reduce” and “decrease” (S3). In addition, despite a relatively low mean score, grammar issues, particularly in complex sentences, were noted in the interviews, often

attributed to word-by-word translation from Vietnamese. S1 and S3 also shared their difficulties in using grammar accurately due to “the habit of translating word by word from Vietnamese to English”. These findings were parallel to those of Evans (2019), Nguyen et al. (2022), and Do (2023), who found that Vietnamese learners encountered lexical shortage and misuse problems. In Nguyen’s (2021) study, it was found that the primary cause of grammatical errors in the English writing of Vietnamese students is the influence of their native language.

Three participants also expressed concerns with idea generation and organization, especially for unfamiliar topics. They remarked: “I struggle to find ideas and organize them in long essays. My limited vocabulary also sometimes makes it hard for me to express my ideas, so I can go off-track easily.” (S3); “It is difficult for me to find examples or evidence to support my arguments in the essays, especially when I express personal opinions” (S5). The idea-related issue was recognized as a common writing problem among EFL students by various researchers in other EFL contexts (Do, 2023; Evans, 2019; Generoso & Arbon, 2020; Ratnawati et al., 2018). They found that students usually focus on the surface level (grammar and lexis) and neglect the deep level (organization, contents). In line with questionnaire findings, it seemed that the participants encountered problems with both language and content of academic writing.

All interviewees also admitted struggling with summarizing and paraphrasing techniques due to “the lack of vocabulary” and structures as well as the difficulty in grasping writers’ ideas. This was demonstrated through S4’s claim that “To paraphrase something, I need to both understand the writer’s ideas and have adequate vocabulary and structures.” This finding was correlated with those in the study by Bram and Angelina (2022), revealing challenges in paraphrasing. Chi and Nguyen (2017) also found that limited ability to comprehend text and lack of vocabulary were two common problems of Vietnamese university students in paraphrasing practice.

In general, the participants' problems and challenges in academic writing were interrelated and affected one another, thus needing to be addressed simultaneously to best enhance the students' EAW skills.

Students' Measures to Deal with the Challenges in EAW

Results from the interviews revealed that attending English writing classes and self-studying are the two methods that the participants adopted to deal with the ideas and language challenges in academic writing.

All informants displayed a positive attitude towards their previous IELTS English writing classes. S2 and S5 reported that the classes equipped them with knowledge about academic writing, particularly the paragraph and essay structure, and the techniques of brainstorming ideas and editing written work. Meanwhile, S3 believed that the courses helped enhance language formality and expand lexical range: "My teacher always reminded us to avoid informal structures such as contractions or imperative clauses and upgrade our vocabulary. For example, we can use "extremely" instead of "very" or "desire" instead of "want"." Since the participants' assignments were mostly essays which bore some resemblance to IELTS writing tasks, their previous IELTS writing courses benefited their subsequent academic writing (Clark & Yu, 2021).

Regarding self-study, reading IELTS samples, practicing writing as much as possible so that it can "become a habit such as writing diaries" (S3), and analyzing errors when revising written work were the ways the participants self-studied. They believed that these techniques could allow them to "pick up advanced vocabulary" (S1), "avoid translating from Vietnamese to English" (S3), and "know the mistakes and learn from them" (S2). No matter in what forms self-study takes place, it plays an important role in writing and autonomy development (Clark & Yu, 2021).

It can be inferred that both the English writing courses and self-study helped the students deal with their content and language problems in writing to some extent. However, no measure was taken by the participants to practice reading academic literature and improve critical thinking. This can be reasoned by the lack of explicit training in these skills during English writing classes which led to the participants' vague understanding.

Students' Desired Improvements in Writing Courses

Results from questionnaires

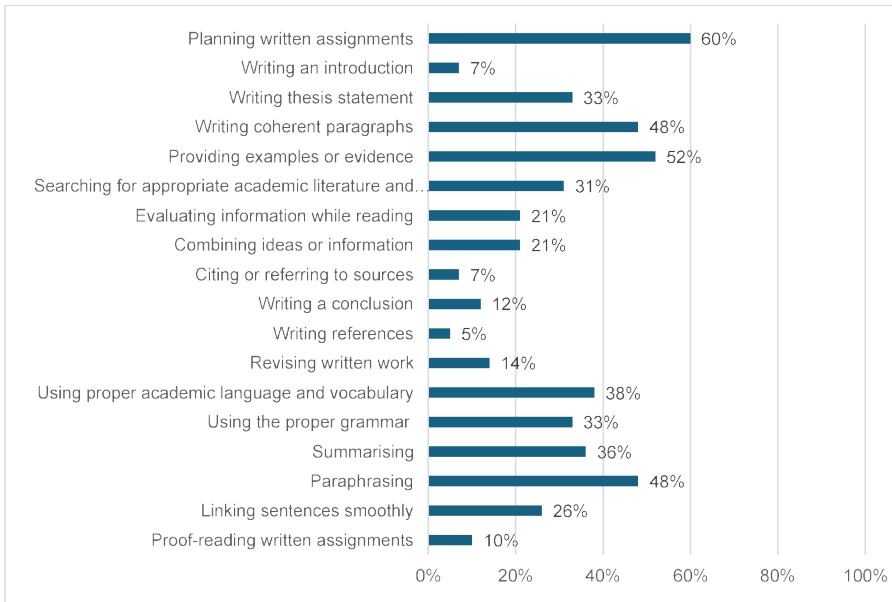


Figure 2: The Sub-skills Which Should Receive Greater Emphasis

As seen in Figure 2, students prioritized planning written assignments (60%), providing examples or evidence (52%), paraphrasing (48%), and writing coherent paragraphs (48%). Interestingly, despite its perceived difficulty, summarizing was chosen by only 38% of participants, suggesting that students may not fully recognize its importance in EAW.

Results from interviews

In open-ended responses and interviews, students expressed a desire for more guidance on planning and developing ideas. Student 1 suggested, “Teachers can organize group activities for us to brainstorm ideas and discuss how to develop them. Then teachers can check our ideas and give us feedback.” Clark and Yu (2021) emphasized that EAW focused on content and its objective was to convey a clear message grounded in reading rather than demonstrating language skills. Indeed, ideas are extremely important in EAW, and EAW differs from IELTS writing in the way that it uses reading to inform writing. Because of this, the skills of planning and developing ideas are closely related to the skills of reading and evaluating source texts.

Other recommendations from the interviews included offering more practice with academic vocabulary and paraphrasing (S2, S3 and S4), giving more constructive feedback and focusing on revising and editing (S4 and S1), and increasing the duration of writing courses to allow for deeper learning (S5). The findings corresponded with existing literature. Cai’s (2013) needs analysis of EAP in China revealed that students would like a writing course which explicitly taught them academic language and provided them with linguistic resources needed to write academic papers appropriately. The participants in the study by Do (2023) and Bram and Angelina (2022) also hoped to receive more thorough feedback from their teachers.

Interestingly, S5 suggest that “teachers should suggest reliable sources for students to read”. It might be inferred that the participant started to be aware of the skill of reading academic literature as well as its importance in constructing content for their writing.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, this study has achieved its aims of discovering the students’ needs for EAW and what can be done to enhance their academic writing

skills. Through thorough analysis and discussion of the data, significant findings have been revealed and are summarized below.

Firstly, regarding the participants' understanding of EAW, they seemed to possess basic knowledge of EAW features and sub-skills. The students were most familiar with the concepts of clarity, conciseness, organizational structure, and coherence, as well as the skills of writing thesis statements and topic sentences, using linking words, and providing examples or evidence to support arguments, which might have been acquired during their previous IELTS academic writing modules. On the contrary, the participants had the least knowledge about different writing genres, citation styles, the skills of finding and reading academic literature, together with engaging with source texts such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing.

Secondly, all of the students found EAW challenging. The major challenges they encountered when writing academically included the lack of vocabulary, inappropriate word choice, lack of ideas and examples, and incoherent paragraphs. In addition, due to their vague understanding and the aforementioned language-related problems, the students also found reading and working with literature challenging, which indicated problems in terms of critical thinking. By attending the IELTS academic writing courses and self-studying, the students could partly deal with their writing difficulties in both language and content levels. However, no measure was taken by the participants to address the challenges in engaging with academic literature and improve critical thinking.

Finally, the findings seemed to disclose a relation between the students' perceived challenges in EAW and their suggestions for future courses. The participants would like more guidance and practice in developing ideas and academic language, specifically discussing and planning ideas for written assignments, providing examples or evidence, writing coherent paragraphs, paraphrasing, and using proper academic language and vocabulary. Additionally, the students hoped to receive more frequent, detailed and personalized feedback together with opportunities to revise

and upgrade their written work. One participant would like teachers to suggest reliable sources to read, which might indicate his/her awareness of the role of reading literature in academic writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the scope of this study, it becomes evident that an IELTS academic writing course, while undoubtedly valuable, falls short in providing students with a comprehensive understanding of EAW and the mastery of associated skills. To address this challenge effectively, it is advisable for the target university to consider developing a dedicated EAP writing course that operates separately from the IELTS writing training. This separation not only acknowledges the unique nature of EAW but also allows students the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of its features and the development of essential skills.

The IELTS writing training course will remain with a focus on enhancing lexical resources and general writing competence as well as preparing students for the IELTS exam to meet the graduation requirements. Meanwhile, an additional EAP writing course should be developed, delving deeper into essential aspects of academic writing. The EAP writing course should include a comprehensive focus on:

- Academic vocabulary and structures, ensuring that students are well-equipped with the linguistic tools necessary for effective scholarly communication.
- The close connection between reading and writing, guiding students through a meticulous writing process that involves stages from reading literature, evaluating sources critically, generating ideas, carefully planning content, crafting coherent paragraphs to refining their work through revising and editing.
- The skills to efficiently engage with academic literature, including both teacher-provided and self-researching materials.
- The skills to work with source texts including summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing information to integrate seamlessly into their own academic writing.

- Critical thinking and argumentation, encouraging students to assess the credibility of materials, identify biases, construct well-reasoned arguments, and develop independent perspectives in their academic writing.

In both IELTS and EAP writing courses, clear marking rubrics should be designed, based on which teachers can mark students' written work and construct their feedback. Students should be provided with detailed feedback on their work, thereby being able to grasp their writing strengths and identify areas where they can refine their skills. Through this iterative process, students will be guided toward becoming more proficient and confident writers, equipped with the skills necessary for success in both academic and IELTS writing contexts.

To maximize students' learning experience, instructors should also encourage students to adopt a variety of self-study strategies. Beyond classroom instruction, students should be encouraged to take initiative in their own learning journey, dedicating time to self-study activities like extensive reading and writing practice.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study as a needs analysis are the small number of participants consisting of 42 ELT-major students and the reliance on their perceptions, thus displaying potential biases and restricting generalizability. It is important to acknowledge that a larger and more diverse pool of participants would have strengthened the findings while a more comprehensive examination of the participants' actual writing products and instructor perspectives could have yielded more accurate and reliable findings regarding the students' grasp of EAW and their difficulties.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the results of this study as a needs analysis, a comprehensive EAW course could be developed. Once the course has been designed and

pilot-tested, further research is necessary to examine its implementation and effectiveness.

Given the context-specific nature of needs analysis, the results of this research cannot be generalized to other majors or universities in Vietnam. To build upon this research, future studies may consider investigating the EAW needs of students across various disciplines, encompassing both undergraduate and postgraduate levels for a more comprehensive perspective.

Additionally, similar needs analyses could investigate students' needs for other academic skills - speaking, listening, and reading - or take a broader approach by assessing an entire EAP course. A large-scale study of all four skills would offer valuable insights for developing well-rounded EAP programs.

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