Teaching English Paragraph Writing in EFL High School Contexts: Teachers' Perceptions, their Classroom Practices and Students' Voices

Thi Ly Kha Nguyen[1] & Bao Trang Thi Nguyen[2]

[1] Thua Luu High School, Hue, Vietnam

[2] Faculty of English, University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University, Vietnam

Correspondence: Bao Trang Thi Nguyen, Faculty of English, University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University, Vietnam. E-mail: ntbtrang@hueuni.edu.vn

Abstract

This study explored Vietnamese EFL teachers' paragraph writing instruction and the challenges students encountered in learning to write English paragraphs. The data were collected at five high schools in central Vietnam via questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations. In particular, 40 EFL high school teachers completed a questionnaire and five classroom observations were additionally made to five out of these questionnaire respondents to understand their actual classroom practices. The teachers were further interviewed at the post-teaching stage. In addition, 150 students from the participating high schools were surveyed for the difficulties they had with paragraph writing and five of them were interviewed for follow-up insights. The results uncovered that teachers reported a central focus on both global and local dimensions of a paragraph. In their teaching practices, they tended to employ a product-based rather than process-based approach by guiding students through the final end product of the written paragraph, followed by whole-class feedback. Time constraint and students' low motivation to write and revise were reported as main barriers to the classroom adoption of a process approach. In students' perceptions, starting a paragraph, generating and organizing ideas, and using appropriate sentence structures and lexical items were among the common challenges. The study suggests important implications for paragraph writing instruction and for future research.

Keywords: English paragraph writing, teachers' classroom practices, students' difficulties, Vietnamese EFL high school contexts

1. Introduction

Writing is an important productive skill that is often pedagogically built into many language programmes and materials for English as a foreign language (EFL) learner. According to Behizadeh and Jr (2011), it is "considered a fundamental aspect of communicative competence and literacy in modern societies" (p. 190). Yet, it is one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners, because "it requires a higher level of productive language control than the other skills" (Celce-Murcia & Ohstain, 2000, p.161). Indeed, writing is a complex process of putting our intentions and thoughts into a written text that requires the use of appropriate language resources to express intended meanings (González (2017). As such, it could be viewed as a test of memory, language and thinking abilities involved for idea formulation and text production (Kellogg, 2002). It also necessitates attention to details such as connecting ideas within and across sentences or paragraphs to achieve cohesion and coherence as well as displaying correct orthographic forms. Learners should also know the genre of the text in order communicate their written message effectively to the intended reader (Hyland, 2003). Given all these cognitive processes, writing in a foreign language could be arguably challenging for many students, especially when the writing genre is unfamiliar with them (Hyland, 2024). Together with individual differences, EFL learners could experience a wide range of difficulties in EFL writing (e.g., Ahmed, 2025; Rass, 2015; Wei et al., 2020; Wirantaka, 2016).

Targeted in the English curriculum for Vietnamese high school students are many types of EFL writing (MOET, 2018), of which paragraph writing is one important writing component that students are required to learn. Furthermore, paragraph is conceptualized "as the basic unit of discourse, the basic element of communication in English academic writing" (Gugin, 2014, p. 25). Given the importance of paragraph writing, it is timely to explore teachers' perceptions and classroom practices. In addition, as observed by the first researcher who has

taught in a Vietnamese high school context for an extended period of time, many of her students struggle with their EFL writing, and many do not know how to write an effective English paragraph. Understanding of teachers' writing instruction and the challenges students encounter is deemed highly necessary. Unfortunately, few studies have explored how Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive they teach and how they actually teach English paragraph writing, together with the difficulties that students experience, particularly in high school settings. The current research thus fills those gaps, as it aims to answer the following research questions:

(1) How do high school teachers teach English paragraph writing?

(2) What difficulties do high school students face when they learn English paragraph writing?

Understanding of the three dimensions of teachers' perceptions, classroom practices, and students' experiences will shed comprehensive light on how paragraph writing is taught and learnt. It is hoped that the empirical insights from the current study will inform writing instruction, feedback provision and assist students in overcoming the challenges and enhancing their writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining a Paragraph

There are various definitions of a *paragraph* but a paragraph can be generally understood to include a topic sentence and supporting sentences to clarify and justify the main idea (Omisha & Hogue, 2006). It is composed of a group of closely-related sentences which deal with and develop one main idea. In these authors' view, a paragraph is compared to a family in which all members (sentences) are related. Overall, a paragraph is a piece of coherent text that conveys one central message.

There are four essential elements that an effective paragraph should contain: unity, coherence, a topic sentence and sufficient development (Oshima & Hogue, 2006). Unity in the paragraph means "oneness" of idea. It could be achieved by the use of i) a topic sentence with its controlling idea ii) supporting details, and iii) a clinching sentence. The topic sentence of a paragraph introduces its message or main idea while coherence refers to the flow or connection of ideas within the paragraph so it is easily understood by the reader. For this reason, coherence is closely related to unity (Gugin, 2014; Karadeniz, 2017; RahmtAllah, 2020). To achieve coherence, idea relevance to the topic sentence matters while the paragraph needs to be sufficiently developed with supporting details and appropriate evidence. Thus, failure to provide sufficient information to explain the central idea indicates that a paragraph needs development.

2.2 Approaches to Teaching Paragraph Writing

There are two commonly-cited approaches to teaching writing in general and teaching paragraph writing in particular: a product approach and a process approach. The product approach is concerned with providing students with "standardized texts so that they can follow the model to write their own piece of writing" (Khan & Bontha, 2015, p. 96). This approach leads students to produce a final composition based on models provided by teachers. It focuses on imitating and modeling a text as well as employing specific phrases and sentences to complete the finished product. While it is useful, it "may also lead to a concern with textual products *at the expense of learning processes*" (Keen, 2017, p. 376, italics added). In this regard, Keen argues that the process approach provides more space for students to compose their writing in their own ways. It focuses on the composing process of writing where language learners attend to the process in which they compose their written piece rather than the final product (Alkhudiry & Ahdal, 2020; Hwang et al., 2014). In other words, the teachers and students co-construct a text (Özkul & Ortactepe, 2017). The process goes through multiple stages of *prewriting, writing, (re)drafting, and revising* before reaching a final product, so the focus is not on the final product but the process itself. Keen (2017) adds the element of "celebration" where students share their experiences, which motivates them to undertake future writings.

2.3 Previous Studies

Teaching English writing has been found to be challenging for teachers (e.g., Bingham, et al., 2017; Strobl et al., 2019). Many found it difficult to help students to communicate intended messages through EFL writing (e.g., Elola, & Oskoz, 2017; Liao, 2016). Although little research has examined the teachers' reported and actual practices of teaching paragraph writing, some studies have measured the effectiveness of the different approaches to teaching English paragraph writing. For example, the process approach to writing has been shown to benefit students (Marshall & Underwood, 2019). Other studies have investigated the use of the process approach in other contexts (e.g., Ng & Cheung, 2017; Xu & Li, 2018). In a recent study, Qarabesh (2020) revealed that the process approach was more advantageous than the product approach in developing EFL writing when implemented in the classroom. With a different focus, Fonkamo and Zeru (2022) explored the reflections

of teachers and found their English-majored university students had problems with capitalisation, punctuation and conjunctions in their paragraph writing. The question of how teachers teach English paragraph writing and which approaches they employ in their daily practice has yet to be examined, especially in the Vietnamese high school context.

In view of the difficulties learners encounter, research that has focused on analyzing errors in EFL writing demonstrated that vocabulary, grammar and misspellings were among the common challenges facing EFL students (e.g., Li, 2015; Llach, 2007; Pouladian, et al., 2017). Research on students' perceptions of the difficulties involved in EFL writing in general (e.g., Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Chen, 2002; Lam et al., 2020) has shown students encountered many problems such as lack of ideas to write, misspellings, grammatical and lexical issues. Another strand of research has examined learners' perceptions of the challenges they encounter in learning English paragraph writing. For example, by employing semi-structured interviews, Siddiqui (2020) recently found organizing ideas was challenging for EFL Arab students due to rote learning and little feedback from the teacher as well as too much attention to grammar. Focusing on a different group of learners, Palestinian Arab students who majored in English language teaching, Rass (2015) found that his learners had difficulty writing a good topic sentence, using linking words to write a cohesive paragraph. Bangladesh EFL students encountered problems with idea organization, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary (Afrin, 2016). Other research has found students faced similar challenges in EFL paragraph writing (e.g., Ahmed, 2025; Wei et al., 2020; Wirantaka, 2016).

A number of studies on writing difficulties experienced by EFL students in Vietnam have largely analysed errors in students' written texts of different types (e.g., H. Bui, 2022, Nguyen et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2024; Tran & Nguyen, 2023). There is some research on the challenges Vietnamese EFL students face when it comes to paragraph writing, yet they are in the form of unpublished MA theses (e.g., Bui, 2007; Phan, 2011). Limited research (e.g., Ly et. al., 2021) found that Vietnamese university students have grammatical and lexical issues in writing English paragraph. Another study focused on Grade 7 school students (Vo & Tran, 2024) and found that difficulties include a lack of practice and motivation to write as well as not knowing how to write English paragraphs. The results of these studies indicated various issues facing students such as how to organize their paragraphs, how to use appropriate word choice and punctuation.

Research that explores teachers' self-reported teaching English paragraph writing and their actual practice is scarce. Little research has investigated teachers' perceptions of paragraph teaching, their actual teaching and learners' difficulties in EFL classrooms within one single study in the Vietnamese high school context. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill these gaps by exploring how Vietnamese high school teachers teach EFL paragraph writing and the challenges students face in learning to write English paragraphs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study consisted of three groups. Firstly, 40 English teachers from five high schools in a province in central Vietnam completed a questionnaire on their teaching English paragraph writing. They were four male and 36 female teachers. They had from 5 to 22 years of English teaching experience at the high school level. Seven out of the 40 participants got a Master's degree and the remaining (33) Bachelor degree in English language teaching.

The second group of participants involved 150 students from these schools participated in a survey about the difficulties they encountered in learning English paragraph writing. They were from the three grades (grades 10, 11, 12), of whom 55 were male and 95 female; they were aged from 16 to 18. They had been learning English from six to ten years.

Five teachers and five students were further interviewed to obtain rich insights. Five classroom observations were additionally made to five out of the 40 EFL teachers to explore how they taught English paragraph writing in their classroom practice. All the participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

The data collection tools used in this study included questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations.

3.2.1 Questionnaires

The questionnaire for the teachers comprised two sections: The first section asked for the background information of the participants through open-ended questions. The second one aimed to understand teachers' practices of teaching English paragraphs which targeted i) focus of English paragraph writing lessons (6 items)

and ii) teaching procedures (11 items). In the form of a 5-point Likert scale, the items were categorized into two clusters: The contents teachers employed in teaching paragraph writing and the activities teachers used in teaching procedures. The questionnaire was designed based on the paragraph framework by Omisha and Hogue (2006).

The questionnaire for the students also consisted of two parts. Part 1 was to collect their background information including age, grade (class), time of learning English and school. Part 2 explored the difficulties they encountered in learning English paragraph writing, with 11 items which were adapted from Seyabi and Victoria (2014) in the form of a five-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 no idea, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree).

The questionnaires were in Vietnamese to ensure the participants' understanding. The respective questionnaires were piloted with 10 teachers and 10 students before official data collection. Both teacher and student questionnaires were delivered in a pencil-and-paper format. It took the teachers and students about 10 and 15 minutes respectively to complete their questionnaires.

3.2.2 Classroom Observations

In order to understand teachers' paragraph writing practices, class observations were employed. Five female teachers who had completed the questionnaire volunteered to be observed. Their background information is presented in Table 1. Each of the five teachers teaching grade 10, 11 or 12 were observed once in their writing lessons by the first author, who took notes in all the lessons about how the teachers delivered their lessons on paragraph writing in the three common stages: pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing. In total, there were five observations and each lasted 45 minutes. At the time of data collection, these teachers used the English textbooks (Tiếng Anh, earlier versions of those currently in use in Vietnam).

Table 1. Teachers' background information

	Writing lesson	Unit	Textbook	Grade	Gender	Age	Years of teaching experiences
Teacher 1	Write a paragraph about working for an international organization of your choice.	14. Internnational Organisations	Tiếng Anh 12	12	Female	38	12
Teacher 2	Write a paragraph describing the information shown in a column chart.	13. Women in society	Tiếng Anh 12	12	Female	40	14
Teacher 3	Write a paragraph Trinh Cong Son's profile.	12. Music	Tiếng Anh 10	10	Female	29	5
Teacher 4	Write a paragraph describing preparations for the upcoming Asian Games in Vietnam.	12.Asian Games	Tiếng Anh 11	11	Female	31	8
Teacher 5	Write a paragraph about your collection.	13. Hobbies	Tiếng Anh 11	11	Female	29	5

3.2.3 Interviews

The interviews were conducted with five teachers and five students who had completed their respective questionnaires. The interview questions for the teachers were conducted after classroom observations and aimed to further understand their concerns and beliefs regarding paragraph instruction. Student interviews probed into their experiences and the challenges they face in learning paragraph writing to seek further insights alongside the questionnaire data. The participants were interviewed individually and in the Vietnamese language so that they could share their full understanding and experiences. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and audio recorded with the participants' consent for subsequent data analysis. In this paper, the teacher and student interviewees were assigned name codes (e.g., T1, T2, T3, … for teachers; S1, S2, S3, … for students) to de-identify them.

3.3 Data Analysis

All data from the questionnaire data were analyzed and interpreted via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 20.0) in order to obtain using descriptive statistics such as mean values (M), standard deviations (SD), frequencies and percentages. The interview recordings were first transcribed, then categorized, synthesized and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They were analyzed in the language of the interviews (Vietnamese) to keep the intended meanings. Translated quotes are used in the present paper for illustration, the accuracy of the translation was double checked by an experienced researcher. Teacher and student codes (T1, S1, …) instead of their real names were used to de-identify them. The analyses were used for the purpose of complementing the questionnaire findings. The classroom observations were qualitatively analyzed to seek patterns and evidence of the teachers' paragraph writing instruction in light of the product-process approaches to writing and teachers' pedagogical actions in each stage of the writing lesson.

4. Findings

4.1 Teachers' English Paragraph Writing Practices

The questionnaire asked how high school teachers taught English paragraph writing and the self- reported findings are presented in Figure 1.
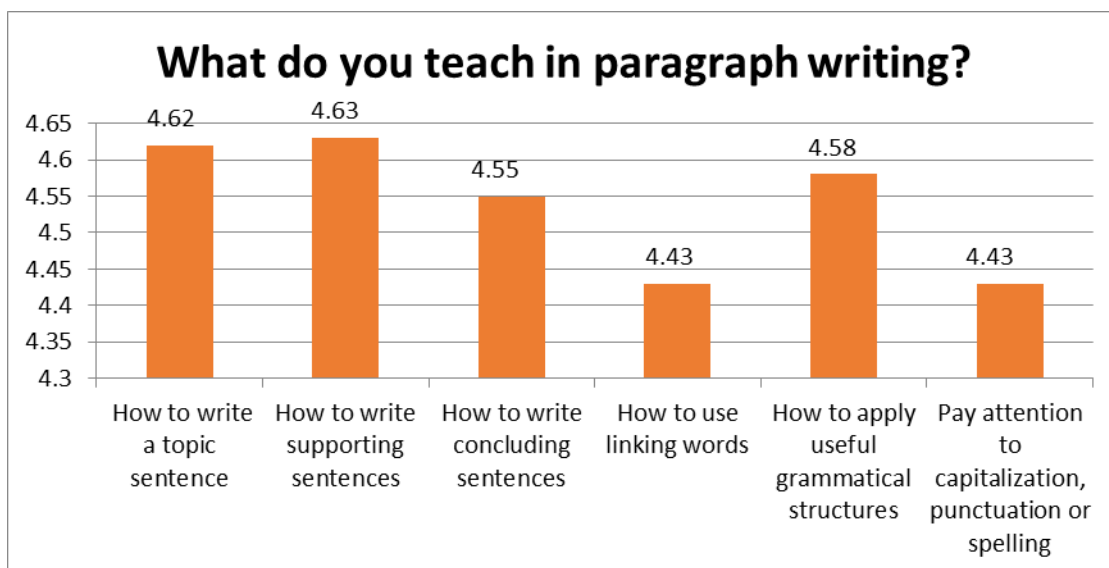

Figure 1. The contents teachers often taught in English paragraph writing lessons

As can be seen from Figure 1, the mean scores of six questionnaire items for teachers were high, more than 4. This indicated that teachers paid attention to teaching the structure of a paragraph including a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. In addition, teachers also attended to teaching students how to use linking words and apply grammatical structures. Furthermore, the teachers reported teaching capitalization, punctuation and spelling as additional instructional contents. These findings were further confirmed by the interview data with five of the teachers. Two teachers commented:

"*I often teach my students to write a topic sentence first. Then, they have to find ideas to write sentences to support the topic sentence; they may have sub- supporting ideas or examples for the main idea.*" (T1, Class 11A1)

"I ask my students to write correct sentences in English about the given topic and then group the sentences into three parts of a paragraph including introduction, body and conclusion according to the given outline." (T2, Class 10C3)

The focus of the lessons was centered around the structure of the paragraph, the topic sentence as the overriding message that guided the development of ideas within the paragraph. The teachers were also concerned about the accuracy of language use such as grammar and mechanical issues were additionally addressed:

"I also ask my students to use suitable grammatical structures, punctuation, capitalization, linking words and pay attention to spelling while writing." (T4, Class 12C)

The activities that the teachers organized in the different stages of their lessons are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Activities teachers often teach in paragraph writing lessons (N=40)

		Mean	SD
Pre-writing stage	I do brainstorm activities for Pre-writing.	4.60	.496
	After brainstorming, I ask students to make outline of a paragraph.	3.67	.917
	I provide students with main ideas for writing.	4.48	.506
	I provide students with vocabulary for writing	4.48	.506
	I provide students with grammatical structures for writing	4.48	.506
	I provide students with a writing model.	4.12	.686
While-writing stage	I ask students to write a paragraph individually.	4.30	.723
	I ask students to write a paragraph in pairs or groups.	4.53	.506
Post-writing stage	I ask students to read and evaluate their peer's writing.	3.60	1.008
	I correct one best writing with the whole class.	4.07	.616
	I correct some students' writing on the board.	4.25	.494
	I collect students' writings for correction at home.	4.53	.599

As can be seen from Table 1, the teachers reported employing these activities in teaching English paragraph writing. In the pre-writing stage, they prepared students for the content, vocabulary and structures (M= 4.48) and provided them with a model (M=4.12). In the while-writing, they asked students to write in pairs or groups (M= 4.53).

In the post-writing stage, the most popular practice was to collect students' writing for correction at home (M=4.53) or correct some selective papers(M= 4.25). Whole- class feedback on one best piece of writing and peer feedback were also adopted by many of these teachers (M= 4.07 and M= 3.60 respectively).

One item of the questionnaire asked to which extent the teachers agreed with the statement, "*I often provide students with a writing model and ask them to create a similar one*" and the results are illustrated in Figure 2. Clearly, a large majority of them followed this practice.
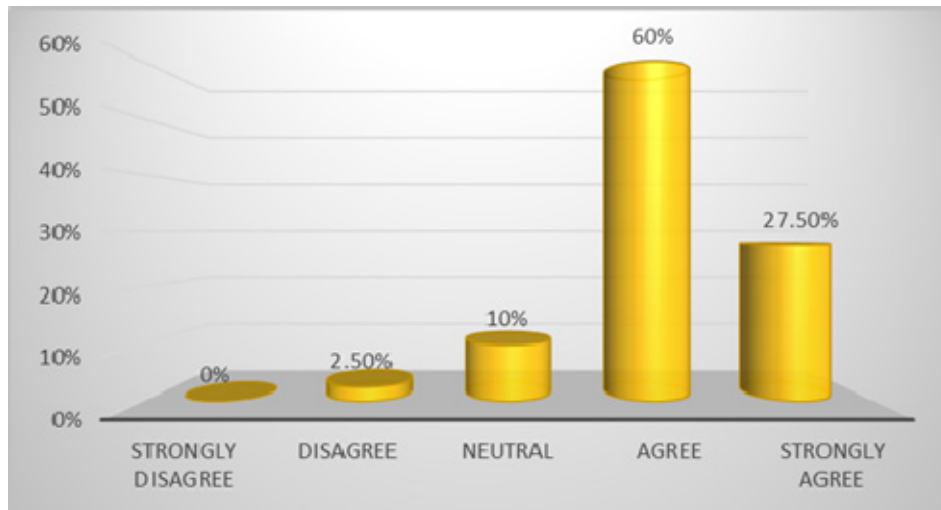
Figure 2. Asking students to follow a writing model

In the interviews, the teachers further elaborated that organizing writing instruction around the process-approach is challenging in their situation for two main reasons. Firstly, they cited the time-consuming nature of the process approach, and the given time available for each English period (45 minutes). They couldn't afford the time to provide feedback on multiple drafts of students' writing. Second, they narrated that their students were not motivated enough to write and rewrite, given that the national graduation exam for high school students does not target a focus on meaning-focused writing such as writing a paragraph. These factors prevented the teachers to adopt a process-based approach in their classroom practices.

That said, the teachers reported that they used many different activities that were suitable for their students' levels in the pre-writing and the while-writing stages. Three teachers preferred group work or pair work with a view to saving time and developing co-operation skills for their students. One teacher preferred individual work because they said it helped students to improve their thinking skills and self-expression. Furthermore, it helped them to better evaluate every student. The remaining teacher employed a mixture of groupings to motivate students. One teacher commented:

"*Individual work helps students to be active and creative; pair work helps students to share ideas together and it is easy to discuss, while group work motivates students to work together so that it creates a competitive atmosphere in class. Therefore, I use them for different units to avoid boredom.*" (T3, Class 11A8)

The results of class observations were consistent with those from the questionnaires and interviews. The five observed teachers employed brainstorming asking and answering, matching, discussing to activate students' topical knowledge. They additionally gave students useful structures and language and asked students to make an outline of the paragraph. In this stage, the teachers often provided students with some ideas about the topic they are asked to write about. In the observed lessons, all the teachers supplied an example paragraph as a model, analyzed it and drew students' attention to the different components of the paragraph such as the topic sentence, the supporting sentences and the concluding sentence. They additionally emphasised the correct layout and accurate language use of the final end product of the written paragraph, with a focus on both global and local aspects of a paragraph. Overall, the teachers followed a product approach by exposing students to a model paragraph first and required them to write based on the model text. This was a pervasive practice in all the observed lessons.

4.2 Difficulties Students Experienced in Learning English Paragraph Writing

The second research question examined the difficulties students encountered in learning English paragraph writing and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' challenges in learning paragraph writing (N=150)

My problem in English paragraph writing is	Mean	SD
deciding how to start a paragraph.	4.29	.816
not knowing how to write a grammatically correct English sentence.	3.62	1.053
having limited vocabulary	4.84	.465
choosing the right vocabulary to express their ideas.	4.27	.702
not having enough ideas about the topics that our teacher asks us to write about.	4.41	.646
not knowing how to organize a paragraph properly.	4.23	.883
not knowing how to link ideas together in a paragraph.	4.26	.746
not knowing how to use punctuation appropriately	3.86	1.056
having a lot of errors in spelling.	4.57	.698
not knowing how to use grammatical structures appropriately for the context.	4.11	.876

The results showed that vocabulary restriction was their biggest problem (M= 4.84) followed by having misspelt words (M= 4.57) and lacking topical ideas to write (M= 4.41). The other challenges reported by the students included how to start the paragraph, paragraph organization, idea connection, word choice and contextual use of grammar structure (all with a mean score of more than 4). Writing correct English sentences (M = 3.62), using appropriate punctuation (M = 3.86) were also problematic for them, though not as challenging as the other aspects.

In the interviews, students also narrated having numerous problems, of which vocabulary was the most challenging. Some students commented:

"I am not good at writing; I had many problems when learning writing. For example, I don't have ideas for the topic, I don't know how to begin an English sentence and my most difficult problem is that I don't have enough vocabulary to express my ideas. I try to learn by heart vocabulary a lot but I can't remember them and use them appropriately for my writing." (S1, Class 10C5).

"I have problems of vocabulary, grammar, spelling and organization of a paragraph. Among them, lack of vocabulary is my biggest problem and it can cause many other problems." (S4, Class 11C4).

Other students shared the same ideas that lack of vocabulary was the biggest problem in writing. For them, vocabulary restriction caused other difficulties such as problematic idea expression, thinking and writing constraints, and errors committed, among others:

"I have to translate from Vietnamese to English, but I don't know many vocabulary in English. I ask my teacher and my friend to translate before I write." (S3, Class 10A7*)*

"I can write in Vietnamese but I can't translate the words into English. There are many mistakes in my writing: using unsuitable grammar structures, wrong spelling." (S2, 12C5)

"I am afraid of writing lesson because I don't know how to write, I don't have any ideas for my writing topic." (S5, Class 10C3)

In general, most students were well aware of the difficulties that they had in learning paragraph writing. The challenges reported in the interviews corroborate the findings from the questionnaire that insufficient vocabulary was perceived to be the most intense challenge.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore how Vietnamese high school teachers of English taught English paragraph writing and the challenges students encountered while learning to write English paragraphs. The results indicated that the teachers focused on the global aspects of paragraph writing as such the structure of the paragraph, how to write its message in the form of a topic sentence, supporting sentences that develop that central idea. The local aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, sentence structures as well as spelling and punctuation were also attended to in their reported and actual practices.

A key finding of the present study was that the teachers taught all the basic elements of a paragraph such as how to write a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. They employed a product-based approach in their paragraph writing instruction. This could be explained by the way the writing activities are

designed in the English textbooks for these students. Other studies found similar results (Hussen, 2005; Nguyen, 2011)) indicating that teachers were concerned about the accuracy of the paragraph in terms of organization and language use. It could be that a process approach to teaching that involves multiple steps such as drafting, redrafting, editing, revising might be too time-consuming, as these teachers said in the interviews. Research (e.g., Bahanshal, 2013; Butler, 2011) has shown that large class sizes are one of the main factors inhibiting teachers from adopting the methods that they want to use. Given that they taught large classes with about at least 38 students per class, coupled with students' low motivation to learn English, this could be their major constraint.

It is also important to note that the students in the present study encountered a variety of issues in learning to write English paragraphs. The greatest challenge they reported was a lack of lexical knowledge to express intended meanings in their paragraphs. Additionally problematic were paragraph organization, lack of ideas, word choice and mechanic issues such as spelling and punctuation. These findings are broadly in line with those of previous studies on students' perceptions of the difficulties involved in EFL writing in general (e.g., Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Chen, 2002; Lam et al., 2020) and in paragraph writing in particular (Bui, 2007; Hussen, 2015; Nguyen, 2011). The findings of the present study are partially consistent with research on errors that students make in their writing of which vocabulary-related issues and misspellings were challenging for them (e.g., Li, 2015; Llach, 2007; Pouladian, et al., 2017).

6. Implications and Conclusions

The main purpose of the study was to investigate how teachers taught English paragraph writing and the difficulties that students faced when learning English paragraph writing. The results revealed that the structure of a paragraph, linking words, useful structures, capitalization, punctuation or spelling were all taught in the teachers' lessons. Notably, the teachers tended to employ a product-based approach to teaching English paragraphs. Providing students with a model paragraph that guided their writing was a common practice as reported in the questionnaire and as demonstrated in the observed lesson. Secondly, the study indicated that the students had a wide range of problems in writing EFL paragraph of which vocabulary restriction, lack of ideas, poor organization, errors in spelling were reportedly most problematic.

Based on the findings, several suggestions are drawn for teachers and students. Firstly, teachers might need consider using a process approach in their teaching practice to add variety. In addition, being aware of the challenges students encounter could further inform their instruction, especially their feedback practice to assist students in improving their paragraph writing. Moreover, teachers had better provide additional language-focused activities to help students improve their spelling, expand vocabulary as well as overcome cohesion issues. More importantly, they should train students to plan their paragraph, attending to each particular focus at a time (e.g., writing a topic sentence, giving examples) for low proficiency students and encourage extensive reading related to a wide range of topics in the curriculum to assist idea generation and content development. Last but not least, introducing automate writing evaluation (AWE) tools (e.g., Grammarly, Write and Improve) so that students can check their language use is very necessary for autonomous learning.

Equally important, for learners, "practice makes perfect". In particular, they should learn how to include the three parts of the paragraph: topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence in writing a paragraph. Spending time reading widely on a variety of topics would help increase topical knowledge that assists idea generation and content development. It is essential that they are aware of online tools available to edit and revise their writing. In this regard, self-practice is important and the opportunities depend on how students are introduced to relevant tools for improving their writing.

The present study has some limitations that point to a number of future research directions. First of all, the present study focused on one particular genre, paragraph writing, thus writing instruction on other types is worth future exploration. Furthermore, since our research explored students' self-reported difficulties, it is important to further examine the quality of students' paragraph writing (e.g., paragraph organization and their vocabulary and grammar use). How teachers provide feedback on students' written paragraph would also reveal useful insights into teacher pedagogies. Next, the strategies students employ to write an English paragraph would be another useful research direction. In addition, the present study targeted some high schools in one province in central Vietnam, so the results could not be generalized to other teaching contexts. Research in other high school settings in Vietnam and beyond is clearly necessary. Lastly, given the study's small sample size (40 questionnaire teacher respondents and 5 observed teachers), the findings might not represent the practice of the majority of the teachers in teaching English paragraph writing or the challenges facing students. Further research could involve a larger sample of data with more participants to allow more robust statistical analyses.

Despite these shortcomings, the study has provided rich insights into the paragraph writing instruction of Vietnamese EFL teachers, and the beliefs underpinning their practices and students' experiences. The evidence-based recommendations from the study are hoped to assist teachers and students to enhance their writing teaching and learning.

Acknowledgments

References

Afrin, S. (2016). Writing problems of non-English major undergraduate students in Bangladesh: An observation. *Open journal of social sciences, 4*(3), 104-115. https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2016.43016

Ahmed, A.-A. A. M. (2025). Challenges in writing paragraph among pre-university EFL learners: Teachers' perceptions. *Arts for Linguistic & Literary Studies, 7*(1), 610-625. https://doi.org/10.53286/arts.v7i1.2306

Alkhudiry, R. I, & Al-Ahdal, A. A. M. H. (2020). Analysing EFL discourse of Saudi EFL learners: Identifying mother tongue interference. *The Asian ESP Journal, 16*(1), 89-109.

Bahanshal, D. A. (2013). The effect of large classes on English teaching and learning in Saudi secondary schools. *English Language Teaching, 6*(11), 49-59. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n11p49

Behizadeh, N., & Engelhard Jr, G. (2011). Historical view of the influences of measurement and writing theories on the practice of writing assessment in the United States. *Assessing writing, 16*(3), 189-211. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2011.03.001

Bingham, G. E., Quinn, M. F., & Gerde, H. K. (2017). Examining early childhood teachers' writing practices: Associations between pedagogical supports and children's writing skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 39*, 35-46. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2017.01.002

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research, 3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bui, H. P. (2022). Vietnamese EFL students' use and misconceptions of cohesive devices in writing. *Sage Open, 12*(3), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221126993

Bui, T. P. L. (2007). *The first year language students' difficulties in paragraph writing and some appropriate strategies to solve these problems at the National Economics University*. Unpublished M.A thesis. Hanoi National University- College of Foreign Languages.

Bulqiyah, S., Mahbub, M. A., & Nugraheni, D. A. (2021). Investigating writing difficulties in essay writing: tertiary students' perspectives. *English Language Teaching Educational Journal, 4*(1), 61-73. https://doi.org/10.12928/eltej.v4i1.2371

Butler, Y. G. (2011). The implementation of communicative and task-based language teaching in the Asia-Pacific region. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 31*(1), 36-57. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190511000122

Celce-Murcia, M., & Olshtain, E. (2000). *Discourse and context in language teaching: A guide for language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.

Chen, Y. (2002). The problems of university EFL writing in Taiwan. *The Korea TESOL Journal, 5*(1), 59-80. https://mail.koreatesol.org/sites/default/files/pdf_publications/KTJ5-2002web.pdf#page=67

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539

Elola, I., & Oskoz, A. (2017). Writing with 21st-century social tools in the L2 classroom: New literacies, genres, and writing practices. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 36*, 52-60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2017.04.002

Fonkamo, D., & Zeru, A. (2022). Exploring the impediments on the application of reflective teaching in EFL paragraph writing classes. *Cogent Education, 9*(1), 2109648. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2109648

González, M. C. (2017). The contribution of lexical diversity to college-level writing. *TESOL Journal, 8*(4), 899-919. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.342

Gugin, D. (2014). A paragraph-first approach to the teaching of academic writing. *English Teaching Forum, 3*, 24-36.

Hwang, G. J., Hung, C. M., & Chen, N. S. (2014). Improving learning achievements, motivations and problem-solving skills through a peer assessment-based game development approach. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 62*(2), 129-145. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-013-9320-7

Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667251

Hyland, K. (2024). Genre-based instruction and corpora. *TESOL Quarterly, 58*(3), 1227-1234. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3273

Karadeniz, A. (2017). Cohesion and coherence in written texts of students of Faculty of Education. *Journal of Education and Training Studies, 5*(2), 93-99. https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v5i2.1998

Keen, J. (2017). Teaching the writing process. *Changing English, 24*(4), 372-385. https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2017.1359493

Kellogg, R. T. (2002). *A model of working memory in writing*. In C. M. Levy & S. Ransdell (Eds.), *The science of writing: Theories, methods, individual differences, and applications* (pp. 75-71). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Khan, K., & Bontha, U. R. (2015). How blending process and product approaches to teaching writing helps EFL students: A case study. In R. Al-Mahrooqi, V. Thakur, & A. Roscoe (Eds.), *Methodologies for effective writing instruction in EFL and ESL classrooms* (pp. 94-114). IGI Global Scientific Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-6619-1.ch007

Lam, A. T., Thai, C. D., Thach, C. D., Phu, T. H. C., Chau, T. N., Mai, B. T., & Phan, H. D. A. (2020). A study about EFL English- major students' challenges in writing argumentative essays at Soc Trang Teachers' Training College, Vietnam. *Proceedings of RSU International Research Conference,* 1544-1558.

Li, X. (2015). Analysis on lexical errors in writings of Mongolian English majors. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 5*(12), 2565-2570. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0512.18

Liao, H. C. (2016). Enhancing the grammatical accuracy of EFL writing by using an AWE assisted process approach. *System, 62*, 77-92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2016.02.007

Ly, T. T. M., Nguyen, T. T. H., Phan, T. M. U., Dinh, T. T. H., & Huynh, T. V. (2021). EFL student's problems with paragraph writing at Tay Do University, Vietnam. *European Journal of English Language Teaching, 6*(4), 108-130. https://doi.org/10.46827/ejel.v6i4.3778

Marshall, E. C., & Underwood, A. (2019). Writing in the discipline and reproducible methods: A process-oriented approach to teaching empirical undergraduate economics research. *The Journal of Economic Education, 50*(1), 17-32. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220485.2018.1551100

MOET. (2018). *National Curriculum for General Education: The English curriculum* (Chương trình Giáo dục phổ thông: Chương trình môn Tiếng Anh 2018-Bộ Giáo dục Đào tạo).

Ng, C.H., & Cheung, Y.L. (2017). Innovations in writing instruction in China: Metasynthesis of qualitative research for the period 2005–2016. In Reinders, H., Nunan, D., Zou, B. (eds) *Innovation in language learning and Teaching*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-60092-9_4

Nguyen, B.T.T., T. T. B. Nguyen., & Q. N. Phan. (2022). Vietnamese IELTS learners' perceptions of IELTS Writing Task 2 and their performance-based lexical resource. *IELTS Research Reports Online Series,* No. 5/22. British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia. https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.222111

Oshima, A., & Hogue, A. (2006). *Writing academic English*. Longman.

Özkul, S., & Ortactepe, D. (2017). The use of video feedback in teaching process-approach EFL writing. *TESOL Journal, 8*(4), 862-877. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.3

Phan, T.T. (2011). *An investigation into teaching English paragraph writing of grade 12 at Ngoc Hoi Ethnic Minority High School in Kon Tum Province*. An M.A thesis in TESOL at University of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Hue University.

Pouladian, N., Bagheri, M. S., & Sadighi, F. (2017). An analysis of errors in writing skill of adult Iranian EFL learners preparing for IELTS. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 7*(3), 85-96. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v7n3p85

RahmtAllah, E. A. E. (2020). EFL students' coherence skill in writing: A case study of third year students of

bachelors in English language. *English Language Teaching, 13*(8), 120-126. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v13n8p120

Rass, R. A. (2015). Challenges face Arab students in writing well-developed paragraphs in English. *English Language Teaching, 8*(10), 49-59. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n10p49

Seyabi, F. A., & Victoria, T. (2014). Writing problems and strategies: An investigative study in the Omani school and university. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 3*(4), 37-48.

Siddiqui, K. A. (2020). Analyzing factors influencing the paragraph organization in English language writing of intermediate students. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 32*(1), 99-106.

Strobl, C., Ailhaud, E., Benetos, K., Devitt, A., Kruse, O., Proske, A., & Rapp, C. (2019). Digital support for academic writing: A review of technologies and pedagogies. *Computers & Education, 131*, 33-48. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.12.005

Tran, N. Q. P., Nguyen, B.T.T., Hoang, T. L. G., Nguyen, V.Q.N., & Ngo, L.H.P. (2024). Use of lexical collocations from the task prompts in opinion essays by Vietnamese EFL students. *Taiwan Journal of TESOL, 21*(2), 65-100.

Tran, N. Q. P., & Nguyen, B.T.T. (2023). Vietnamese EFL Students' use of lexical collocations in opinion essays. *E-Journal of Inquiry into Languages and Cultures, 26*(2), 71-83.

Vo. T. A.D., & Thai, C. D. (2024). Secondary school EFL students' difficulties and solutions to learning English paragraph writing. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics Studies, 7*(2), 82-117. https://doi.org/10.46827/ejals.v7i2.552

Wei, X., Zhang, L. J., & Zhang, W. (2020). Associations of L1-to-L2 rhetorical transfer with L2 writers' perception of L2 writing difficulty and L2 writing proficiency. *Journal of English for academic purposes, 47*, 100907. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2020.100907

Wirantaka, A. (2016). Paragraph writing of academic texts in an EFL context. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, 1*(2), 34-45. https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.1212

Xu, X., & Li, X. (2018). Teaching academic writing through a process-genre Approach: A pedagogical exploration of an EAP program in China. *TESL-EJ, 22*(2), 1-21.