



Learning EFL Writing in Vietnam: Voices from An Upper-Secondary School's Students

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Writing in English is difficult for multi-lingual learners, and this is not an exception for Vietnamese students who learnt English as-a-foreign-language (EFL). However, few studies have been conducted on how these learners learnt this skill at their up-secondary schools (U-SS). This study thus plans to explore how 335 Vietnamese students at a U-SS perceived the importance of EFL writing, how they learnt it and what difficulties and expectations/suggestions they had in making the learning of this skill effectively. Employing a 5-point Likert-scale survey, open-ended questions and a focus-group interview, the study found these learners' awareness of the significance of this skill for their future betterment. Moreover, similar to students in other EFL settings, these students learnt this skill for learning other language skills, and their teachers did not have enough time to teach and provide feedback on their writing. However, their positive attitudes and how to learn this skill were greatly influenced by their teachers and educational conditions. These findings are therefore expected to shed more light on learners' perspectives in learning EFL writing at the U-SS level so that relevant support can be provided to help the learning of this skill in Vietnam and in similar EFL contexts.

Keywords: Vietnamese learners, high-school students, English writing, learning writing, challenges

Introduction

EFL Writing: Significance and Challenges

Writing is "a flexible tool" that writers can use to meet a variety of goals in life (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 445). However, writing is considered to be the most difficult skill, especially writing in English, for EFL learners to master. It is because it requires them to have a certain amount of knowledge about the target language; namely, the rhetorical organizations and appropriate language use with which they would like to communicate to their readers (Matsuda, 2019). Harmer (2007) states that this skill should be taught to students because through the visual demonstration of how language is constructed, they will acquire the language and reinforce what they have learned. Due to the complex nature of English-writing and limited linguistic knowledge of EFL learners; however, teaching and learning English-writing in EFL contexts is a challenging process (Derakhshan & Shirejini, 2020; Ghoorchaei & Khosravi, 2019; Nguyen, 2021; Syafii & Miftah, 2020). It is true that besides learning the language, EFL learners need to learn how to develop their ideas in order to produce texts with the rhetorical features that they have never had in their first language (L1). Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020) also say that while L1 writers face difficulties in fluency of writing, EFL writers encounter challenges of linguistic aspects and writing strategies. As stated by Ghoorchaei and Khosravi (2019) and Nguyen and Suwannabubpha (2021), this challenge would



be compounded if students did not learn this skill in their previous schooling.

Several studies on teachers' and learners' difficulties in teaching and learning EFL writing in various EFL contexts were conducted. In Bangladesh, teachers' common problems in teaching EFL writing at secondary school levels were students' memorizing writing rather than producing it, large class size, short class duration, insufficient training for teachers and improper curriculum (Islam et al., 2019). Besides receiving no clear feedback from teachers, Bangladeshi students were reported not to have enough vocabulary and grammar knowledge and ideas for writing (Islam et al., 2019). Similarly, Sun (2010) noted that Chinese students found it hard to express their ideas and feelings freely and fluently, and they commonly made mistakes in using vocabulary and grammar in writing in English. In Thailand, U-SS teachers and students were identified having various personal and contextual problems in teaching and learning EFL writing (Nguyen & Suwannabubpha, 2021). Like Bangladeshi counterparts, Thai English teachers had time constraint, insufficient resources and poorly-motivated and mixed-ability students. Moreover, the national test structures and untrained teachers of English were also claimed to account for the challenges in teaching EFL writing in Thailand. Similar to the documented problems by Sun (2010), Nguyen and Suwannabubpha (2021) also found that Thai U-SS students did not have enough knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, resulting in their difficulties in writing in English. In Indonesia, grade-nine students were found to have problems with English and general intellectual skills to generate and organize ideas in coherent and logical ways (Syafii & Miftah, 2020). Like students in other EFL contexts (Islam et al., 2019; C. T. K. Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Suwannabubpha, 2021; Sun, 2010), these Indonesian lower secondary school learners were not competent in grammar and vocabulary use (Syafii & Miftah, 2020). In Vietnam, as reported by Nguyen (2009), writing teachers had problems in raising their students' awareness of the importance of EFL writing, teaching them to write in English, and assessing students' writing skills. Furthermore, in her research on Vietnamese U-SS teachers' difficulties in teaching EFL writing, Nguyen (2021) found that teachers' lack of time, heavy contents in the textbooks, the multiple-choice test formats, large classes, students' dislike of this skill and students' insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary challenged the teaching and learning of this skill at their schools.

Current Situation of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Vietnam

English is a compulsory foreign language subject to students from primary schools to tertiary institutions in Vietnam. According to the policy 'National Foreign Language 2020 Project' (hereby, the Project) proclaimed by Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), since 2008 English has been taught as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 in the mainstream national curriculum (rather than from Grade 6 as previously implemented). The aim of this Project is to enhance the quality of English language teaching and learning in the national education system (Hoang, 2016). In particular, the Project focuses on developing effective English language users who can function successfully across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Hoang, 2016; Tran & Tanemura, 2020). Consequently, a series of new English textbooks have been produced for use in schools nationwide since 2012 in order to cultivate students' communicative competence and prepare them to become global citizens. These textbooks are organized into themes/topics (units) with the focus on two oral skills (listening and speaking) at primary level and four macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) at upper-secondary level. Different linguistic elements (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar) and intercultural aspects are also included in each unit. The communicative competence levels from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) were used as important bases for these textbooks' development and the development of competence framework for each grade and each level of education (Le, 2019). As stated in the Project, students are required to achieve A1 at primary level, A2 at lower-secondary level and B1 at upper-secondary level. Besides training teachers to be able to exploit the textbooks effectively, standard teaching and learning facilities at school have been improved in order to meet the learning outcomes required by MOET.

Although MOET places a strong emphasis on the English language in the national curriculum, research on how this Project has been implemented tends to be scarce. Furthermore, a few studies were conducted

on how each language skill was taught and learnt at these basic educational levels while the Project aims to help all young Vietnamese people have a complete mastery of the language for their future communicative needs after leaving school (Parks, 2011). The study on U-SS teachers' influential factors and responses in terms of their pedagogies to this reform by Le and Le (2020) showed that students' levels, students' attitudes, and learning culture greatly influenced the teachers' practices in response to the government's ELT pedagogical reforms. Additionally, this study also revealed that teachers' time constraint and the incongruity between teaching approaches and the national exam in the reform movement resulted in their resistance to change. As found in Nguyen (2012) and Trinh and Nguyen (2014) and based on the recent test results from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), writing has been the most problematic to Vietnamese test-takers. This issue could be explained by the low quality of ELT in Vietnam (Le, 2019), the impact of Vietnamese cultures and testing and assessment on learners' EFL writing (Nguyen, 2009; Trinh & Nguyen, 2014). In a recent study on Vietnamese U-SS teachers' views, practices, challenges and expectations in teaching EFL writing by Nguyen (2021), it was found that these teachers were confident about their pedagogical and content knowledge (PCK), and they knew how to apply different teaching techniques to teach different writing genres. However, the multiple-choice test formats, the heavy contents in the new textbooks, their limited time, students' not learning ELF writing at elementary and secondary school levels and students' insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary were reported to challenge the teaching of this skill at the U-SS in the South of Vietnam (Nguyen, 2021). Furthermore, these teachers also suggested including the writing-skill section in all in-class assessment and national tests in order to encourage students to learn this skill.

The findings from these previous studies have provided us some insights into the challenges Vietnamese U-SS teachers faced and their expectations to ease the practical issues in teaching EFL writing at their educational contexts since the implementation of the Project. However, to the researcher's best knowledge, there tends to be the scarcity of research on how Vietnamese students at the basic educational levels in the national curriculum study EFL writing. This study thus attempts to explore how students of all levels/grades 10, 11 and 12 (G10, G11, & G12) at a U-SS in the South of Vietnam learn this skill. In particular, the study plans to investigate not only the difficulties faced by these Vietnamese U-SS students in learning EFL writing but also their views on the importance of EFL writing, their ways of learning this skill and their suggestions and expectations from their teachers to teach this skill at their U-SS school. The research questions (RQs) posited for this study are as follows:

- 1) What are Vietnamese U-SS students' views on the importance of EFL writing?
- 2) How do they learn EFL writing at school?
- 3) What are their difficulties in learning EFL writing at school?
- 4) What are their expectations/suggestions for making the learning of this skill better?

The answers to these questions are expected to shed more light on learners' perspectives, learning practices, difficulties and expectations in learning this skill at the U-SS level in Vietnam. Furthermore, understanding the challenges by EFL learners and their expectations should be one of a great source of information for teachers to make informed decisions on their teaching approach in appropriately developing this skill for their respective learners. The results of this study are hoped to provide some understanding for relevant and timely support from teachers for the effectiveness of teaching and learning this skill in the context of Vietnam and in similar EFL contexts.

Method

A descriptive qualitative research design by Creswell (2012) was employed in this study because its main subjects were students who learnt this skill at a U-SS school in the South of Vietnam. Through descriptive research, the researcher was able to fully comprehend the learners' views, learning practices,

challenges in learning EFL writing and suggestions/ expectations from their teachers in teaching them EFL writing.

Participants and Context

This study was conducted with all 335 students (208 females & 127 males) of G10, G11 and G12 from a small U-SS school in a Southern province of Vietnam. Their ages ranged from 15 to 17, and they learnt English as a foreign language since Grade 3 at their elementary schools. Because the educational system in Vietnam is centralized, based on MOET's guidelines, the Department of Education and Training (DET) in this province developed a detailed framework for the English curricula for all educational levels. This framework includes the number of tests, test structures and the time allocated to teach this subject for each educational level and each unit in the textbooks. According to the framework, the textbook series by Van et al. (2016) joint-published by the Educational Publishing House and Pearson Education were employed to teach students in the province. The books were reported to have adopted a theme-based curriculum approved by MOET. Each book contained 16 teaching and five review units to be taught over a period of 105 instructional hours, with three periods of 45 minutes each per week. Each unit contained various sections focused on developing students' linguistic knowledge, language skills and intercultural knowledge. To prepare G12 students for the national exam, their regular and end-of-term tests are required to be in the multiple-choice format while 40%-45% of the tests for both G10-11 students are in constructed-response forms in which students are asked to use correct tenses, rewrite sentences and write a certain text type (e.g., emails, paragraphs, job application letters) using given prompts. Because of the absence of the writing section in the national exam, this U-SS allowed teachers not to teach EFL writing to G12 students in order to save time for G12 students to do practice tests. In other words, teachers skipped the writing lessons in the textbooks when they taught G12 students.

Data Collection

The 5-point Likert-scale survey with 21 items (Tables 1, 2, 4 & 5) adopted from Nguyen and Suwannabubpha (2021) was employed to study these U-SS learners' views on the importance of EFL writing, their ways of learning, difficulties and expectations and/or suggestions on how EFL teachers at U-SS should help students learn EFL writing effectively. This was because their survey was developed to address the same objectives as those in the current study with a similar group of students who learnt English as a foreign language in Thailand. However, in order to learn how U-SS students in Vietnam felt and what actions they took about EFL writing when they did not study this skill at G12, five items about this aspect (Table 3) were added into the adopted survey, resulting 26 surveyed items in total. Another small modification to their survey was that it was written in both Vietnamese and English to ensure that the Vietnamese U-SS students in this study would fully understand each surveyed item.

With the permission of the school principal, the Google form was employed, and the survey was delivered to all students at the end of the school year. Similar to Nguyen and Suwannabubpha (2021), besides 26 5-point Likert-scale items, one open-ended question for each surveyed category was also included for the participants to add their own views, ways of learning, difficulties and expectations/suggestions if they were not listed in the survey. In order to better understand the findings from the survey, the focus-group interview with 40 volunteer students was conducted in Vietnamese language (See Appendix).

Data Analysis

To understand students' views, learning practices, difficulties and expectations/suggestions on how they learnt EFL writing at their U-SS, the mean scores of all items in the survey were calculated with the employment of SPSS. Their self-reported responses to the open-ended questions in each category were

independently read and classified into themes by the researcher and an inter-rater who is a university lecturer with a PhD degree in applied linguistics. For example, in their self-reports on the importance of EFL writing, “*study overseas*”, “*expand knowledge from reading online news*” and “*communicate on social media*” were classified into the same category/theme “*Doors to outside world*”. Discussion on the differences between the two coders was then conducted to achieve the complete agreement on the theme classification. Then, the findings from the surveys and the open-ended questions were interpreted together with the focus-group interview data. However, only the related information was translated and included in the manuscript for a better understanding of the research findings.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the survey (Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5) and the participants’ self-reports from the open-ended questions (Figures 1, 2, 3 & 4) on their views, ways of learning, difficulties and suggestions/expectations in learning EFL writing at their U-SS. These findings are organized in the order of the RQs. The discussion on the reported findings with the data from the focus-group interview with 40 students will be provided in the next section.

As recommended by Sullivan and Artino (2013) that a mean score is not a very helpful measure of central tendency of Likert-scale data, the percentages of students’ positive (strongly agree & agree), neutral and negative (strongly disagree & disagree) attitudes are also included in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. Moreover, Wiboolsri (2008) suggested that the mean score of 3.5 is considered as the acceptable value representing a positive attitude.

Students’ Views on the Importance of EFL Writing

As seen in Table 1, four out of five items (Items 1, 2, 3 & 4) received a mean score higher than 3.5, which indicated that these Vietnamese U-SS students’ agreements on the importance of writing. In particular, a majority of them thought EFL writing is important for their future jobs (82.1%) and almost 75% of them agreed that EFL writing helped them use English better. While more than two thirds of them shared the view that EFL writing assist them in learning other language skills (Item 3), 54.45% of the participants thought this skill is difficult for them as high school students. With the lowest mean score (3.18), Item 5 indicated that more than half of the participants did not think that EFL writing helped them think in English-thinking ways.

TABLE 1
Students’ Views on the Importance of English Writing

No	Items	Mean	Positive(%)	Neutral(%)	Negative(%)
1	English writing is important for my future jobs	4.15	82.1	12.2	5.7
2	Writing in English helps me improve my ability to use English	4.00	73.7	21.8	4.5
3	Writing in English supports me to learn other language skills	3.79	67.7	25.4	6.9
4	English writing is difficult for me	3.59	54.4	35.5	10.1
5	Writing in English helps me think logically and critically by organizing my ideas in English-thinking ways	3.18	42.2	19.7	33.1

Figure 1 below summarizes the participants’ self-reported views on the importance of EFL writing. Their answers to the open-ended questions in this category were consistent with their views on the surveyed items (Items 1, 2 & 3) as they reported that EFL writing helped them with jobs, international tests (IELTS & TOEFL), presentations and other language skills, and vocabulary and grammar improvement and acquisition (16.70%, 10.15%, 7.76% & 5.40%, respectively). Besides these, 4.18% of

them reported that this skill helped them think logically and build up their confidence while a small percentage of them (2.08%) believed that EFL writing could open their doors to the outside world.

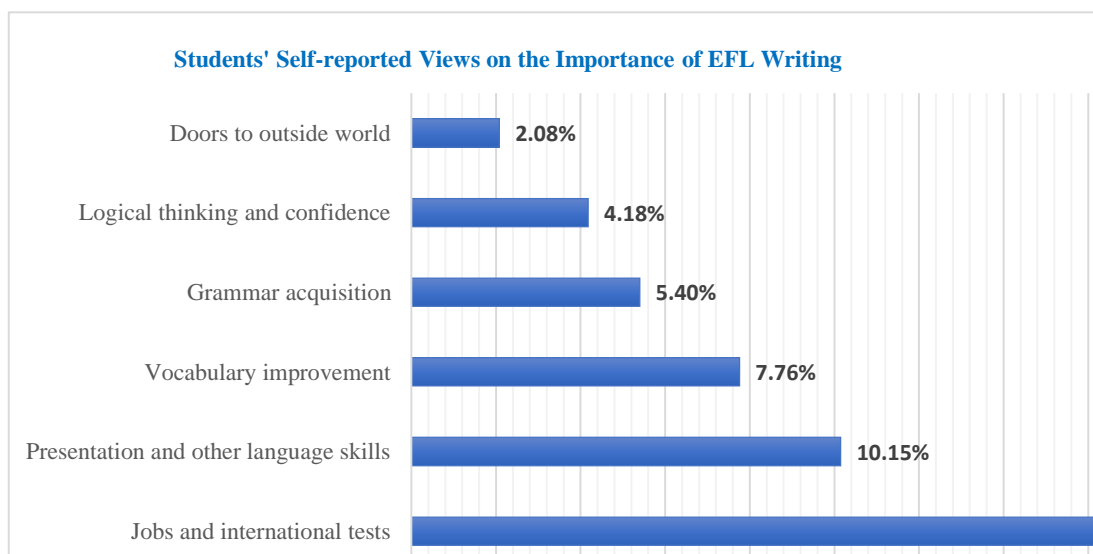


Figure 1. Students' self-reported views on the importance of EFL writing.

How Students Learnt EFL Writing at School

Table 2 shows these Vietnamese students' learning practices at their U-SS school. Among eight surveyed items in Table 2, only Items 1 (*I write in English to learn vocabulary*) and 2 (*I write in English when I do grammar, reading and listening exercises*) received a mean score higher than 3.5. With the mean scores of 3.35 and 3.30, Items 3 and 4 gained the agreement of around half of these learners (46% & 51.6%, respectively) while Items 5 to 8 received the mean scores lower than 3.0. In particular, there were only 6% of the participants agreed that their tests did not have a writing section (Item 8), and around 75% of them showed their neutrality and disagreement to Items 5, 6 and 7 which surveyed the ways their teachers taught this skill in class. It is generally accepted that most of the neutral comments apparently lean towards negative outcomes. The combined average percentages of their being neutral and negative to these items thus means that English writing was included in their tests (Item 8) and their teachers focused on teaching this skill in class to a reasonable extent (Items 5, 6 & 7).

TABLE 2
How Students Learnt EFL Writing at School

No	Items	Mean	Positive%	Neutral%	Negative%
1	I write in English to learn vocabulary	3.82	69.8	24.2	6.0
2	I write in English when I do grammar, reading and listening exercises	3.65	59.6	28.7	10.7
3	My teachers check all of my writing	3.35	46	36.1	17.9
4	My teachers teach me in detail how to write each writing task	3.30	51.6	23.6	24.8
5	In class, my teachers explain the writing quickly and ask me to do the writing at home	2.87	31.3	31.3	37.4
6	I don't learn writing because teachers do not teach me	2.54	29	18.2	52.8
7	My teachers do not focus on teaching English writing at all	2.12	9.6	25.4	65.1
8	English writing is not included in my tests	1.88	6	16.7	77.3

Besides the surveyed items in Table 2, these U-SS students also reported how they studied EFL writing. As can be seen in Figure 2, almost a quarter of them learnt this skill through listening to music on YouTube,

reading online newspapers, playing games and using online learning applications. Additionally, they also mentioned learning vocabulary and grammar frequently (19.40% & 14.03%, respectively) as their method of learning EFL writing. Self-studying at home and actively participating in class activities were also reported to be their strategies in learning this skill by 8.66% and 7.16% of these students. While 3.28% of them communicated with foreigners as their technique in learning EFL writing, 1.19% of them reported that they learnt this skill by translating from Vietnamese into English and having a passion for English.

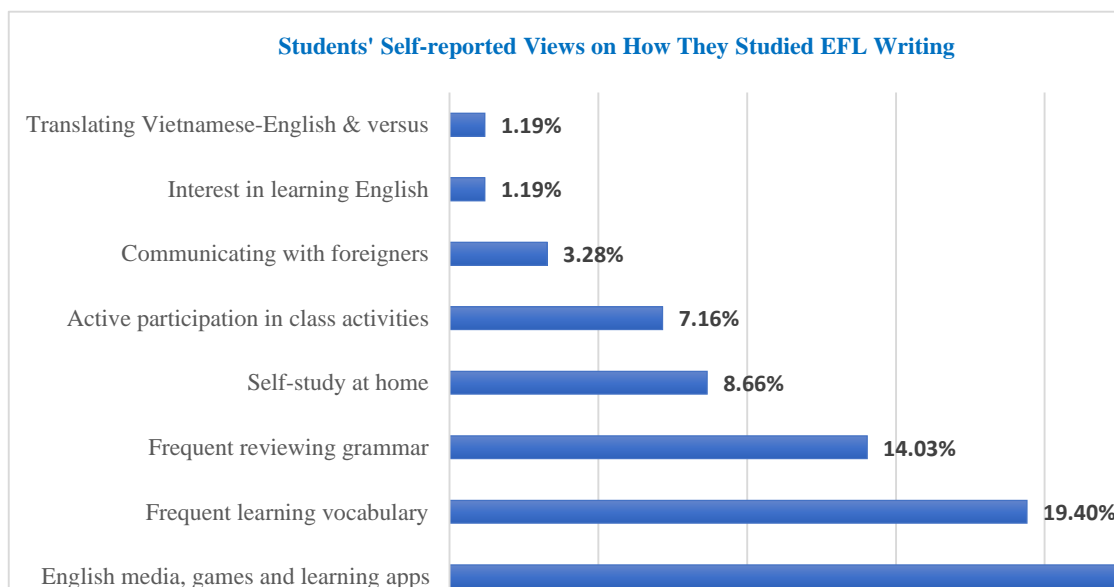


Figure 2. Students’ self-reported views on they studied EFL writing.

Students’ Feelings and Actions When Not Studying EFL writing at G12

As can be seen in Table 3, about two-thirds of these U-SS students showed their agreement to Items 1 and 2 which stated they kept learning grammar and vocabulary, and found the opportunities to write in English when this skill was not taught at G12. Moreover, 63.9% of them did not think it was good when they were not taught this skill at G12 because they believed this skill was important (Item 3). With the low mean scores (2.84 & 2.65) and very high percentages of neutrality and disagreement, Items 4 and 5 tend to show that these students wanted to study this skill when they were in G12.

TABLE 3
Students’ Feelings and Actions When They Did Not Study EFL Writing at G12

No	Items	Mean	Positive%	Neutral%	Negative%
1	I try to improve my English grammar and vocabulary to help me improve my writing	3.81	65.9	26.0	8.1
2	I try to find opportunities to write in English (like diary, messages to my friends, etc.)	3.73	64.5	26.6	9.9
3	I don’t think it is good because writing is an important skill	3.71	63.9	28.4	7.8
4	I feel good because I don’t have time to study this difficult skill	2.84	6.9	42.4	33.4
5	I feel happy because I don’t like writing in English	2.65	17.3	43.0	39.7

Students’ Difficulties in Learning EFL Writing

As can be seen in Table 4 and Figure 3, these students believed that their lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge was the main cause of their difficulty in learning EFL writing. In particular, with

the highest mean (4.08), Item 1 (Table 4) which stated “*I do not have enough vocabulary, and I am not good at English grammar*” gained 78.7% of their agreement. The same challenge was also self-reported by 45.97% and 31.60% of these learners (Figure 3). With the agreement of two thirds of them and with the mean higher than 3.5, Item 2 showed that the differences between English and Vietnamese writing styles made these U-SS students find this skill difficult. However, Item 3 (*I do not know the importance of writing in English*) tended to confirm their knowing the importance of EFL writing as it received a low mean (2.61) and a high combined percentage of neutrality and disagreement. In addition to these, 17.01% of these U-SS students also reported that their lack of ideas in writing made this skill hard for them to learn, and 5.37% of them noted that learning this skill was difficult because they did not have an effective way of learning (Figure 3). Moreover, 3.28% of the participants revealed that learning this skill required time, which made it challenging for them. Besides these, teachers’ insufficient feedback on students’ writing was reported to make the learning of this skill hard for this group of students, and this difficulty was claimed by 2.38% of them. Finally, 1.19% of these students disclosed that having no interest in learning English made their learning EFL writing difficult.

TABLE 4
Students’ Difficulties in Learning EFL Writing

No	Items	Mean	Positive%	Neutral%	Negative%
1	I do not have enough vocabulary, and I am not good at English grammar	4.08	78.7	16.2	5.1
2	I do not know how to write in English (differences in writing styles between Vietnamese and English languages)	3.75	66	22.7	11.3
3	I do not know the importance of writing in English	2.61	16.1	43	40.9

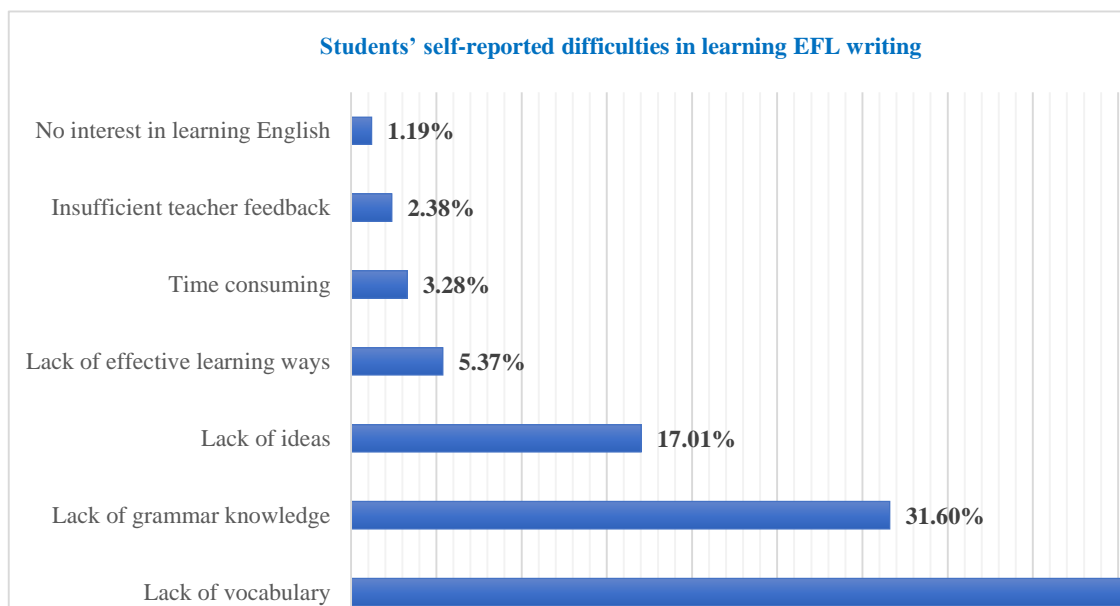


Figure 3. Students’ self-reported difficulties in learning EFL writing.

Students’ Expectations/Suggestions for Teachers to teach EFL Writing Effectively

In terms of these students’ expectations and suggestions, Item 1 (*Teachers should have good knowledge of teaching writing skills*) had the highest mean (3.73), followed by Item 2 (*Teachers should spend more time correcting students’ writing*). These two items gained the agreement of around two-thirds of the participants (Table 5). Another item receiving a positive attitude with a mean of 3.51 by 52% of these U-SS students was Item 3, which states that “*Teachers should organize writing activities in an*

interesting way”. This expectation was also disclosed by 17.90% of the participants in their self-reports (Figure 4). With the mean scores slightly lower than 3.5, Items 4 and 5 were supported by 43.4% and 42.3%, respectively. This tends to suggest that more than half of these students did not agree that more focus on teaching of EFL writing was needed in class (Item 4) and confirmed that their tests already had writing components (Item 5). However, as seen in Figure 4, 7.46% of them expected to have more time in class for them to learn and practice this skill, and 2.69% would like to have more extra activities outside the class. Similar to Item 2, 3.88% of the participants expected their teachers to give detailed and timely feedback on their writing (Figure 4). 3.28% of these students also suggested that their teachers should teach and check students’ vocabulary frequently while 2.08% of them expected their teachers to teach them grammar. Besides interesting class activities, detailed and timely feedback and teaching vocabulary and grammar, these U-SS students would like their teachers to give them practical writing topics (topics related to their daily life and of their interest) and allow them to choose their own topics for writing and do their writing at home (1.79% & 1.19%, respectively).

TABLE 5
Students’ Expectations/Suggestions

No	Items	Mean	Positive%	Neutral%	Negative%
1	Teachers should have good knowledge of teaching writing skills	3.83	65.6	29.9	4.5
2	Teachers should spend more time correcting students’ writing	3.73	62.7	31.9	5.4
3	Teachers should organize writing activities in an interesting way	3.51	52	30.4	17.6
4	Teachers should focus more on teaching writing skills in class	3.47	43.3	44.8	9.9
5	Tests should have writing components	3.36	42.4	41.3	16.3

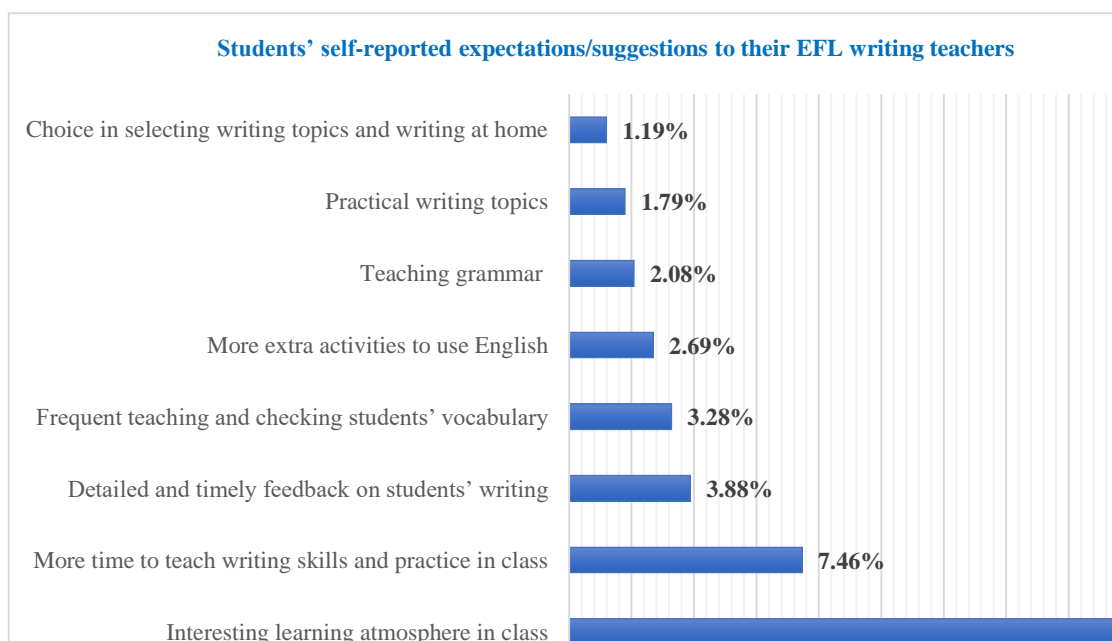


Figure 4. Students’ self-reported expectations/suggestions to their EFL writing teachers.

Discussion

The findings from the survey showed that these Vietnamese U-SS students recognized the importance of EFL writing. That was reflected through their agreement with the high means scores to the items surveyed on the importance of EFL writing (Items 1, 2 & 3, Table 1). Also, they did not feel good when they were not taught this skill at G12 (Items 3, 4 & 5, Table 3), and 84% of them showed their neutrality and disagreement to Item 3, Table 4 (*I do not know the importance of writing in English*). Their positive attitude to learning this skill was also seen in their answers to the open-ended question in this category (Figure 1) when they self-reported that EFL writing helped them secure future jobs, have good scores in the international tests (IELTS & TOEFL) and make good presentations. Although 54,45% of these Vietnamese U-SS students thought this skill is difficult for them as high school students (Item 4, Table 1), two-thirds of them believed that EFL writing helped them learn other language skills better, expand vocabulary and improve grammar knowledge. As revealed in the focus-group interviews, their teachers kept encouraging them to study this skill by telling stories of its importance in job application or securing a scholarship for overseas study. This information was also reported in Nguyen (2021) in her study of Vietnamese U-SS teachers' views on the importance of teaching EFL. Because of the problems faced by their graduate students, these teachers made the best efforts to teach this skill and encouraged students to learn it although they had limited time in class and knew that it was not tested in the national exams. Furthermore, with the Project's emphasis on improving the English level of young Vietnamese, good IELTS scores have recently been accepted as an entrance ticket to some good universities in Vietnam. This motivated these students to learn writing for this test in order to secure a place at their favorite university. Also, with IELTS scores, students would have a chance to get a scholarship to study overseas, and that was also explained in the interview on why they stated EFL writing helped to open the "doors to the outside world" in their self-reports. These findings tend to suggest that these Vietnamese U-SS students' positive attitudes towards learning EFL writing were greatly influenced by their teachers and the contextual factors. Such extrinsic sources of motivation could generate these learners' intrinsic motivation in learning this skill (Adugna, 2019; Stone, 2017). Besides this, due to the project-based learning approach their teachers followed in teaching English, these students also revealed that writing their scripts in English helped them do their group-projects presentation better.

Regarding how writing helped these Vietnamese U-SS students learn other language skills, improve vocabulary and learn grammar, their explanation was exactly the same as that of their Thai counterparts in Nguyen and Suwannabubpha (2021). When they learned this skill, their vocabulary and grammar was also consolidated, and with the newly-gained knowledge, they felt motivated and more confident to learn other skills and aspects of English. This can be seen from their self-reports on how they learnt this skill outside the class (Figure 2), and the survey on what they did when they did not study EFL writing at G12 (Table 3). In fact, these students reported to learn this skill in many ways (YouTube, online newspapers, games and learning applications, self-study at home) (Figure 2) and find opportunities to write in English (e.g., diary, messages to friends) (Item 2, Table 3) and kept learning vocabulary and grammar (Item 1, Table 3). Moreover, the findings from the survey (Table 2) and their self-report (Figure 2) indicated that in class they studied this skill as "a means" or "writing for learning" (Harmer, 2007, p. 34) because around two-thirds of them agreed that they wrote in English when they did grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening exercises (Items 1 & 2, Table 2). However, their way of learning this skill tends to be a common practice in most EFL contexts (Islam et al., 2019; C. T. K. Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen & Suwannabubpha, 2021; Sun, 2010; Syafii & Miftah, 2020).

Furthermore, although around two-thirds of these students agreed that their teachers taught ELF writing in class (Items 6 & 7, Table 2), only about half of them admitted that their teachers checked their writing timely and taught this skill in detail (Items 3 & 4, Table 2). This could explain why a high percentage of these students expected their teachers to spend more time teaching this skill in class and providing timely and detailed feedback on their writing (Items 2 & 4, Table 5; Figure 4). As explained by the teachers in Nguyen (2021), the heavy contents in the new textbooks and the multiple-choice test formats made them

cut the teaching time of writing short in order to complete the lessons within the allocated time and train students to do well in the tests. It is true that the mainstream school system in Vietnam has largely relied on high-stakes testing to measure the effects of teaching and learning (Le, 2019). Accordingly, as indicated in the provincial DET specifications/framework, the in-class assessment per semester includes one quiz, three regular 15-minute tests, two periodical 45-minute tests, one mid-term test and one end-of-term test. For G12 students, besides these tests, they have to take the national tests for their graduation, and their success was decided by the results of their graduation exams (Nguyen, 2021). Previous scholars (Imsa-ard, 2021; T. T. L. Nguyen, 2019b; Nguyen, 2020) thus claimed that in the examination-oriented education system like Thailand and Vietnam, the test-oriented teaching is commonly known to extensively practice.

In terms of challenges, the majority of these U-SS students agreed that their lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge made the learning of EFL writing difficult (Item 1, Table 4). The interviews disclosed their worries of wrong sentence-structures, misspelling of words and being unable to find the words to write. Their difficulty on vocabulary and grammar tended to be compounded with having no ideas to write in English (Figure 3). Furthermore, similar to Chinese, Indonesian and Thai students (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Suwannabubpha, 2021; Stone, 2017; Sun, 2010), these U-SS Vietnamese students agreed that the differences in writing styles between Vietnamese and English languages challenged their learning of EFL writing (Item 2, Table 4). This can be also seen in the disagreement of more than half of the participants who did not think that EFL writing help them think in English-thinking ways (Item 5, Table 1). It is true that Vietnamese language follow the circular, indirect and inductive patterns in thinking and writing (Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen, 2012; Trinh & Nguyen, 2014) while English is written in a clear and highly-organized order with clear topics and well-supported details. Therefore, it is challenging if Vietnamese EFL students are unaware of this difference. Moreover, if they are not properly guided by their teachers, they would find a mismatch when following their Vietnamese discursive patterns to English writing (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen, 2012). In addition to these, these learners also noted that not having an effective way of learning, lack of time and interest in English, insufficient feedback from teachers made their learning of this skill hard (Figure 3). As shared in the interview, these Vietnamese U-SS students stated that teacher feedback was necessary for them to know what was right or how/why their writing was wrong in order for them improve it. Additionally, some even claimed that the absence of teacher feedback on their writing was a big obstacle to learning this skill because they felt lost and demotivated. This interview information tends to confirm what Nguyen (2019a) reported to be one of the factors for the success of teaching writing to Thai students. In fact, teacher's quick returning of student writing with feedback was found to engage students in writing because what they wrote was still fresh in their mind, and on receiving teacher feedback, their knowledge was consolidated in an uninterrupted manner. Engaging EFL students in learning writing, therefore, requires teachers' time, strong commitment and patience.

Due to the challenges caused by insufficient teacher feedback, a large number of these Vietnamese students expected their teacher to spend more time teaching and correcting their writing in class (Item 2, Table 5 & Figure 4). Additionally, they required their teachers to have good knowledge of teaching this skill (Item 1, Table 5). These students' expectations seems to be contradictory with the findings by Nguyen (2021) who observed Vietnamese U-SS teachers' writing classes and reported that they had sufficient PCK to teach EFL writing, and the ways they provided feedback and corrected students' writing were effective. As explained by Le (2019) and Nguyen (2020), EFL teachers in Vietnam are pedagogically efficient because they all were trained in four years on their subject majors at pedagogical universities before doing the job. In the interview with these students, it was known that their teachers' frequent assignments on test practice rather than writing about a specific topic made them feel they did not know how to teach this skill. However, as revealed by the teachers in Nguyen's (2021), teachers in Vietnam spent little time teaching writing in class because writing was not tested in the national exams. Therefore, within three 45-minute periods per week and with various sections to cover in each unit in the textbooks, they chose to focus more on what was important for their students to do well in the tests. This

information could partly explain why these students expected to include writing-skill elements in the tests (Item 5, Table 5). In general, these findings tend to confirm the teaching-to-the-test effects when test results are considered as the main measures of the effectiveness of teaching and learning in Vietnam (Imsa-ard, 2021; Le, 2019; Nguyen, 2020).

Besides their expectations on teacher feedback and more time to teach EFL writing in class, some students also wished their teachers to frequently teach and check their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in helping them learn this skill better. A number of them also expected to have interesting class atmosphere, extra outside-class activities and practical topics for their writing tasks (Figure 4). The interview with the students showed their belief that the more vocabulary they had and the better they were at grammar, the better they were as EFL writers. As stated by Matsuda (2019), however, it is not sufficient for EFL learners when attention is given to the language and its structures. Although these linguistic elements facilitate EFL learners' language development, they would not be aware of the contexts, which enable them to understand and manage the complexity of the language in writing. These U-SS learners' misconception about the role of vocabulary and grammar in the success of their EFL writing could thus result from the traditional teaching methods they received at their elementary and secondary school levels (Hoang, 2016). This could also be because this skill was not taught at their lower educational levels where, as guided by the Project, the focus was on listening and speaking (Hoang, 2016; Nguyen, 2021). Moreover, as revealed in the interview, these students felt bored receiving teachers' writing samples for most of the writing tasks in the textbooks. Though learning these samples by heart helped them do in-class assessment tests well, they still did not know how to compose a proper text on their own. For extra activities and fun writing classes, these students would like their teachers to organize creative and cooperative writing activities which they could enjoy with their classmates. From the findings in Nguyen's (2021), this expectation is unlikely to be fulfilled due to several contextual constraints, namely; insufficient time to cover all required teaching units, big classes with 40-50 students of different English levels.

Conclusion

This study attempts to explore 335 Vietnamese U-SS students' views, learning practices, difficulties and expectations/suggestions on learning EFL writing. The 5-point Likert-scale survey with 26 items and an open-ended question under each surveyed aspect and the focus-group interview with 40 students were employed. The findings showed these Vietnamese learners' awareness of the significance of this skill for their future in securing a place at their favorite university, having good jobs and opportunities to study overseas, and improving other language skills. Their acknowledging of the importance of this skill was also seen in their responses to the survey items on their feelings when they did not learn this skill at G12. However, these students' positive attitudes towards learning this skill were found to be greatly influenced by their teachers and contextual conditions, which were believed to generate their intrinsic motivation to achieve the learning goals. Similar to the learning of this skill by other EFL learners (Islam et al., 2019; Nguyen & Suwannabubpha, 2021; Sun, 2010; Syafii & Miftah, 2020), these Vietnamese students learnt writing as a means for learning other language skills because they mainly used this skill to do grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening exercises. Furthermore, although their teachers kept encouraging them to learn this skill, they did not spend sufficient time teaching it and correcting students' writing, and they tended to opt for providing students with writing samples to learn by heart. Though these teaching practices were accounted by the heavy contents in the textbooks, big classes, students' different language abilities, multiple-choice test formats in the in-class assessment tests and the absence of this skill in the national tests, they are the causes of the challenges these Vietnamese U-SS students faced in learning this skill. In fact, besides their insufficient knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and ideas, which are similar to those by the EFL learners in China, Indonesia and Thailand in learning this skill (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Suwannabubpha, 2021; Stone, 2017; Sun, 2010; Syafii & Miftah, 2020), these Vietnamese students

added that they did not have an effective way of learning, enough time to study this skill in class and sufficient feedback from teachers. These contextual challenges were suggested to be solved by teachers' devotion more time to teaching this skill in class, providing sufficient feedback and creating a more interesting learning environment in class as well as extra activities outside the class. Although the Project suggests equal attention given to all language skills at upper-secondary level, this study found that this skill received little time and attention from the teachers who rigidly followed the provincial DET's framework. As test results are the main standard of the effectiveness of teaching and learning in Vietnam (Le, 2019; Nguyen, 2020), it is therefore necessary for the DET and the Project's leaders to include the writing-skill section in all in-class assessment and national tests in order to boost the proper learning and teaching of this skill at this educational level.

Despite this small-scale study with one group of U-SS students in Vietnam, its results are likely to provide MOET and the provincial DET some insights for relevant and timely support to teachers and students for the effectiveness of teaching and learning this skill in Vietnam. In the environment where large-group and exam-oriented teaching is popular in Vietnam, proper teaching and learning practices on EFL writing is not yet documented, future research on this topic in other EFL contexts/schools in Vietnam should also be conducted to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic and have insightful information regarding how to support EFL students in learning EFL writing successfully. Furthermore, similar studies on students' views, challenges and expectations other countries where English is taught as a foreign language is necessary. This could provide a general picture of EFL students' common difficulties and expectations in learning this skill so that effective strategic plans to enhance their writing ability can be developed.

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Appendix

Focus-group Interview Questions

1. Why do you think ELF writing is important for future jobs, to learn other language skills and open doors to the outside world?
2. How did your insufficient knowledge of vocabulary and grammar make it difficult for you to learn EFL writing?
3. How did insufficient feedback from teachers make your learning this skill hard?
4. Why did you expect teachers to frequently teach and check your knowledge of vocabulary and grammar in learning EFL writing?
5. Why did you expect the national tests to have writing components?
6. What did you expect teachers to do in order to have interesting writing classes?