

Identity and Writing Skills in Higher Education: A Case Study in the University of Da Nang

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Abstract

Teaching English writing to Vietnamese learners, non-native English speaker, who come from different geographical location and cultural backgrounds is completely challenging and time-consuming. It is not an overnight success but it requires restless efforts and attempts from both teachers and learners. Writing letter is absolutely crucial as it is seen as a social practice in daily communication. This article is of great value for theoretical and practical purpose in teaching English writing as second language. It's worthy to raise the awareness of learners that the merits of teaching writing do not only lie on teaching grammar and vocabulary but introducing learners to convey messages to serve the primary purpose of communication in a social context in the real world and there is an emphasis on teaching writing and cognitive style as well as cultural and experiential models of English native speakers. The study reveals that translation "bilingual– their mother tongue" is the main source of difficulty in writing process. Teachers, therefore, should pass the concept of "root thought" and "choice of meaning" on to the learners to enable them to recognize the cognitive process of writing and the distinctive features between their first language and English. This study makes some great contribution to theoretical and empirical perspectives of teaching writing as second language acquisition.

Key words: *Writing skills, cognitive process, bilingual, second language acquisition*

Introduction

English has been a required subject in curriculum in Vietnam, a non-native English speaking country since the 1970s and the status of English has gradually gained its power because learners are driven to meet the demand of globalization and communication. In fact, communication process consists of receptive skills (listening and reading skill) and productive skills (speaking and writing skill). Of the four skills, writing is the most challenging but crucial for learners because it allows them to convey their ideas or messages, solve problems and reflect on real world. Unfortunately, (Nguyen 2022) suggests that to avoid grammatical mistakes, wrong word used and inappropriate genre styles, numerous learners imitate the models in the textbooks and mimic the sentences in the models in Vietnam schools. This imitating habit and practice prevent them from being independent and creative writers. The current issues reflect the reality of the challenges of learning a foreign language within the barrier of schools. According to Kasper and Rose (2001), unlike second language learners having tons of exposure to the target language, foreign language ones experience the deficiency of opportunities to be fully engaged into daily conversation which is crucial to recall their target language. In other words, lack of practice in every life conversation is a major hindrance to their language acquisition and progress. Le (2013) points out the teaching load for the 10-year program that Vietnam primary school students have two hours/ week (210 hours in total), lower school ones four hours/ week (420 hours in total) and secondary school four hours/ week (420 hours in total). The curriculum framework, objectives and content are designed in accordance to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an international standard for describing language ability. In fact, CEFR describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. Similarly, Vietnamese Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework is divided into 3 levels (Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced) and 6 levels (from Level 1 to Level 6 and compatible with levels from A1 to C2 in CEFR) (Hoang, 2018). A comparison between Vietnamese Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework and CEFR is illustrated in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. A comparison between Vietnamese Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework and CEFR

Vietnamese Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework		CEFR
Elementary	Level 1	A1
	Level 2	A2
Intermediate	Level 3	B1
	Level 4	B2
Advanced	Level 5	C1
	Level 6	C2

Minister of Education and Training (MoET), 2014

In fact, CEFR describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. Similarly, Vietnamese Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework is divided into 3 levels (Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced) and 6 levels (from Level 1 to Level 6 and compatible with levels from A1 to C2 in CEFR). Hoang (2018) illustrates the stages of learners' achievement and claims that English learners have to reach three levels from Zero to Level A1 which includes Level A1-1 for Grade 3, Level A1-2 for Grade 4 and Level A1-3 for Grade 5, to Level A2 which consists of Level A2-1 for Grade 6, Level A2-2 for Grade 7, Level A2-3 for Grade 8, and Level A2-4 for Grade 9, and to Level B1 which involves Level B1-1 for Grade 10, Level B1-2 for Grade 11, and Level B1-3 for Grade 12. However, according to Hoang et al (2006), the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages at both general and tertiary levels in Vietnam is currently poorer than the expectation of socio-economic development of the country. Numerous evidences reveal that students at general level have to struggle with tons of words and grammar rules, incorrect pronunciation and poor language skills while university students fail to meet the basic requirements of English.

For Hyland (2019, p.3), there are six aspects in teaching writing to bilingual writers: *Language structures, Text functions, Creative expression, Process, Content and Genre*.

- Structure-based approach: writing is viewed as the finished product of exploiting both grammar rules and lexical knowledge to build up correct sentences then paragraphs and texts to convey their messages or information to readers. In particular, learners are taught some certain grammar rules, typical patterns and models to practice and then make their own phrases, sentences, paragraphs.
- Function-based approach: writing is more than grammar. It's crucial to make an appropriate choice for language patterns or expressions to teach. The term "function"

is defined as language in use and communication purpose. In other words, writers have to achieve the primary communicative purposes of writing.

- Creative-expression approach: Hyland (2019) claims that “writing is considered a creative act of self-discovery” (p.9). This approach promotes the self-awareness of writers to develop or brainstorm their own ideas, generates or produces linguistic expressions and texts by themselves.
- Process-based approach: this approach offers significant assistance for teachers to help their learners perform a writing task well and over obstacles in writing process. The well-adopted framework established by Hayes and Flower (1980) is ‘planning-translating-reviewing’.
- Product-based approach: puts an emphasis on the importance of imitating standard models and of the correct use of sentence-based grammar. In particular, teachers introduce a specific model text and analyze it by highlighting its grammar structures, word use, linguistic expressions, organization and format, stylistic devices and after that learners start to write and practice the identified features.
- Genre-based approach: is far beyond content, lexico-grammar, writing process in response to communicate with readers. Genre orientation deals with discourse and contextual aspects of language and guide writers through particular purposes which are called genres.

Methods

Data collection

With the population of eighty undergraduate students taking a two-credit English writing course in the University of Da Nang, all participants are voluntary, and there is no compensation for their participant. The two-credit English writing course is designed to help learners to write some typical kinds of letter in part 1 writing test of Vietnamese Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework. The questionnaires in English were developed based on research aims and objectives. All participants were invited to fill out the questionnaire. In total 80 questionnaires were filled out via conventional survey, resulting in a response rate of proximately 100 %. In addition, participants were assigned to write a letter every week and the data in this work consists of 1226 personal letters, job application letters, complaint letters, request letters.

Data analysis

Descriptive and qualitative approach is adopted in this work and the data are analyzed at two levels: sentence level and text level. The former one is examined in terms of grammatical and lexical choice but the latter one is viewed in response to discourse analysis. In addition, a practical teaching writing process and some sources of challenges in writing are mentioned.

Findings and discussion

Practical ideas of teaching writing letter as a process

There is a dramatic shift from conventional teaching writing skills with three phases “*Pre-writing, While-writing and Post-writing*” to innovative ones. This new approach in teaching writing for university students is viewed as a cognitive process and teaching is a linear series of stages namely: ‘*planning-translating-reviewing*’. There is no doubt that ‘*planning*’ is an initial stage enabling learners to recall previous knowledge and experience of related topic, think about the readers, set up task goals to generate their ideas. The second stages ‘*translating*’, best known as the ‘*storming or challenging stage*’, is the stage in which a piece of letter is being produced. According to Hayes and Flower (1980), the term ‘*translating*’ is fully understood as ‘*transcribe*’ or ‘*write*’ to focus on the peculiar qualities of the task. Six approaches in Figure 3.1 particularly are adopted to guide learners to compose their tasks.

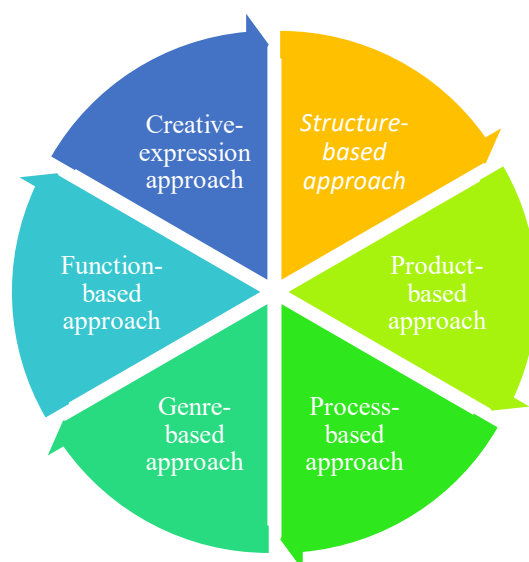


Figure 3.1. Six adopted approaches to guide learners to write their letters.

‘Reviewing’ includes two sub-processes: namely ‘*reviewing*’ and ‘*revising*’. ‘*Reviewing*’, itself, can be a conscious process done by himself, a peer, or the teacher. ‘*Reviewing*’ stage drives learners to recognize their lexical and grammatical errors, good points and bad points of a letter and develop their analytic skills and logical mind. After reviewing, ‘*revising*’ takes place to help them improve their writing. Significantly, writing rubrics of letters are provided to them do their assessment in three steps: (i) self-review, (ii) peer review and (iii) teacher’s review.

To support review stage, rubric design and use are viewed not merely as scoring and grading but also a set of guides and rules to perform their writing tasks. At a higher level, rubrics are indicators of learning outcomes. The writing rubrics are built in accordance with Cambridge English assessment rubrics for writing skills of B1 Preliminary for schools in Figure 3.2.

Content	✓ The candidate answered the task. They done what they were asked to do.
	✗ The candidate did not include everything they were asked to. They have written something irrelevant.
Communicative Achievement	✓ The writing is appropriate for the task. The candidate used a style which is appropriate for the specific communicative context.
	✓ The writing is appropriate for the target reader.
Organisation	✗ They have written in a way that is not suitable – for example, using a very formal style in an email to a friend or ending an article with 'Love'.
	✓ The writing is put together well. It is logical and ordered.
Language	✗ It is difficult for the reader to follow. It uses elements of organisation which are not appropriate for the genre, like beginning an email with a title or starting every sentence in an article on a new line instead of using paragraphs.
	✓ There is a good range of vocabulary and grammar. They are used accurately.
Language	✗ Check the mistakes. How serious are they? Do the mistakes make it difficult for the reader to understand?

Figure 3.2. A detail of Writing rubrics by English Cambridge Assessment (2020)

Sentence level

According to the data, more than two thirds of respondents disclose that mother tongue-centric translation method is overwhelmingly exploited. Consequently, loss and gain in translation occurs. In other words, the exact meaning of mother tongue language cannot be translated completely into target language, namely English. Grammar rules and word use are their top priority for learners in their writing process. The problem is that the root thought or the message is identical but syntactic and semantic choices result in a great diversity of

sentences. Numerous evidences reveal that English and Vietnamese follow their own syntactic orders from arranging words into phrases and then sentences. Let us consider the following examples of variable translation versions of students.

Meaning of Vietnamese sentence	Word-by-word translation (data)	English translation (Suggestion)
(1) thịt gà chứa nhiều chất đạm	(1.1) chicken contains a lot of protein. (1.2) Chicken, it have a lot of protein.	(1.3.) chicken is rich in protein. (1.4) there is a lot of protein in chicken.
(2) Trồng cây xanh thay mái che vỉa hè là hoàn toàn có thể	(2.1) Planting trees instead of building cover sidewalk is complete possible. (2.2) Planting trees instead of sidewalk roof is entirely possible (2.3) Planting trees could take the place of sidewalks	(2.4) It is completely possible to plant trees instead of building sidewalk covers.

The domain of meaning in Example (1) and (2) as information or messages is manifested in sentences. And as can be seen from these two examples, S-V-O are put in the similar order in the English and Vietnamese sentence. However, example (2) can have the best paraphrase such as “It is completely possible to plant trees instead of building sidewalk covers”. There was alternative sentence like this in their writing. This reflects the fact that word-by-word translation is dominant in their writing and they have inability to recall and use common English structures such as: dummy subjects “it” and “there”. Vietnamese bears some similarity to English in terms of SVO structure in sentence formation. Nevertheless, dummy subjects are rare phenomenon in Vietnamese.

89% of the respondents state that they have to struggle to generate ideas and translate them into English. In particular, poor ideas and tons of lexical and grammatical errors cast doubt on their language competence and demotivate their writing learning and practice. Some typical grammatical and lexical errors are taken from the data as following:

(3) It takes you about \$5 to rent bike for a day. (Misuse of “takes”)

(4) My city is very large and many beautiful place. (Not parallel and a plural noun mistake)

In example (3), learners are confused to use the word ‘take’ and ‘cost’. ‘Take’ is used to mention a particular amount of time to do something while “cost” in this context means you need to pay an amount of money to rent a bike. This source of errors come from the mother tongue language. In fact, there is no distinction between the verb “take” and “cost” in

Vietnamese. In other words, there is only one word “tồn” for both the amount of time and money in their mother tongue language, Vietnamese. Therefore, it’s crucial to give a clear explanation of this case to them and it can be inferred that grammar does not always count very much on its own. Nevertheless, example (4) is a kind of grammatical error involving with “Parallel structure”. “Parallel” is the repetition of a chosen grammatical form within a sentence. (4) should be rewritten as “my city is very large with many beautiful places”. According to the data, this sort of mistake is made in many letters because “Parallel” is not available in Vietnamese. It is a typical case of grammatical transfer errors in second language writing. Learners, therefore, are encouraged to think English directly and to use English phrased to form correct and meaningful sentences to convey the original thought in English. It would be perfect if translation stage is totally eliminated in their cognitive process.

Let’s consider the below examples:

- (5) I want us to listen to it together.
- (6) I want to invite you to visit my house this week.
- (7) I want you to sorry me.

The data show that modal verb “*want*” is abundant in their writing. Writers’ desire, strong wish and suggestion are frequently expressed in grammatical verb “*want*”. Example (5) and (6) serve functions in communication to express their suggestion while example (7) aims to demonstrate their disappointment and a word or statement saying sorry for something that has been wrong or causes some inconvenience. Particularly, adjective “*sorry*” is misused as verb in example (7). To deal with the problems, learners should be taught to find out the meaning and functions in communication that are performed through language. The term “*choice*” is introduced to learners in writing process. More importantly, it is essential to enable them to recognize the fact that there is wide range of relevant individual choices in wordings to express the meaning in a specific context and the most frequently used English expressions such as “*It would be great if, Let’s/How about/ why don’t we.? / I feel that*” and others should be mentioned. Compare what the differences and probability of choice in the example (5) (6) (7) and the revised sentences are:

- (8) It would be great if we could listen to it together. \longleftrightarrow I want us to listen to it together.
- (9) How about visiting my house this week? \longleftrightarrow I want to invite you to visit my house this week.
- (10) I want you to sorry me. \longleftrightarrow I feel that you own me an apology.

Apparently, forming correct English sentences does not matter much for intermediate level but English native writing and cognitive style itself is the top priority and concern in teaching writing to English non-native learners who are unfamiliar with English culture, history and cognition. In particular, English learners have strong wishes to express their feelings, emotions, moods, sympathy, regret and others to show their own identities in this kind of genre.

Text level (discourse organization)

This section is devoted to discourse organization analysis but vocabulary and grammar. As noted, it is needed to focus on the organization and structure of a letter in terms of genre. Below, a personal letter in the data is given.

Your English friend, Daisy, has sent you some birthday money to buy a music CD. Write an email to Daisy. In your email, you should:

- Thank Daisy for the present
- Say which music you are going to buy
- Explain why you have chosen this CD

You should write at least 120 words. You do not need to include your name and addresses. Your response will be evaluated in terms of Task fulfilment, Organization, Vocabulary and Grammar.

Dear Daisy,

Good evening Daisy. I'm Ngoc. How are you? I'm fine. My family every one so good very miss you and meet you.

I am surprised when this morning, front of my house has a present was taken by a shipper and he talked it was mine. And then I realized it was yours when I found that mini letter rose paper. I am very happy and exciting, just open the box. You know then previously, I so like BTS and music of them and now it don't change. I heard that BTS group will new album music on next week but I don't have enough money. However, I can use your gift to buy a BTS music CD now. Thank you very much for the generous gift. I said you that BTS makes me more positive and believe in the life, believe in myself. I am beautiful with my styles without different person's styles, so on. I love music of them

Next week, I am going to buy a CD music of BTS group and I want to we to listen it with together. Daisy I know you so busy for your study, work and family but you should take a rest, relaxing and to arrive in my country play with me.

I look forward to hearing from you

Lavie

(223 words)

The target reader of the letter is his friend so the language use is informal. To some extent, the writer is successful to meet the three purposes of communication namely (1) sincere thanks to his friend; (2) the depiction of favorite type of music and (3) an explanation of his choice. So in terms of task fulfilment organization, learners can include everything they are asked but the letter is poorly-organized and logical.

A good letter must exclude irrelevant sentences. It means that all sentences should relate to the main purpose of communication in the letter. It is advisable to help learners avoid unrelated sentences in their writing. As compared to the requirement of the task, the letter is too lengthy with 237 words due to some unconnected and repeated sentences that should be removed.

I was surprised to receive your birthday present. Interestingly, I can use your gift to buy a BTS music CD now. Thank you very much for the generous gift. BTS is my best choice because this band makes me become more positive and believe in the life, in myself. I love music of them.

According to the data from questionnaire, ninety percent of learners disclose that their inability to write stems from the multiple driven test, google translation abuse and insufficient amount of writing practice. In fact, these sources of difficulties prevent them from generating their ideas, planning and performing their writing by themselves.

Alongside with the great efforts of teachers and learners, language planning and policy do the lion share of work. Formal English education has gone through five different phases between the early 1950s and the early 2020s and English has spread across Vietnam schools since the period of “reform” in 1985 and has seen a thrive since the late 1990s. Like many other countries in the world, English has become a foremost language and has great impacts on Vietnamese socioeconomic development. The government frequently updates and renews its language policies to adapt to the new challenges and perspectives. In particular, from 2020 to present, English language ability testing is pursuant to Circular No: 1/2014/TT-BGDDT dated January 24th 2014 of Minister of Education and Training Promulgating Six-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework for Vietnam by The Minister of Education and Training in Vietnam. This tailored Framework is based on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), an international standard for describing language ability within four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

Conclusions

Adopting six approaches in teaching writing to bilingual learners, this study works on the practical ideas of teaching writing letter as a process by combining the six approaches namely: Structure-based approach, Function-based approach, Creative-expression approach, Process-based approach, Product-based approach and Genre-based approach and exploiting writing rubric via self-review, peer review and teacher review as well as covers specific areas related to sentence level and text level. It should be noted that non-native English learners face numerous obstacles with developing their ideas, exploiting structures and lexicon to convey their original thought in their mind to readers, their demotivation and as well as deficient amount of practice. To help them overcome these difficulties, self-review and teacher review are crucially significant because the former advances their understanding of mistakes and promote their own self-assessments while the late, this kind of intervention of the teacher them to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the letter and results in considerable improvement in planning, writing the letter. Ultimately, Vietnam government regulates and renews its language policies periodically to catch up with current theoretical and empirical perspective in the world. However, the study of this type is mainly descriptive so it makes very few claims about the cognitive and psychological process of writing, cultural models and much remains should be done from theoretical and empirical perspectives.

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