

Examining Essay Writing Competence: A Case Study Of Students At A Teacher Education University In Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Abstract:

This study investigates the essay-writing skills of students at a teacher education university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research aims to identify the factors influencing students' ability to answer essay questions in exams, focusing on their analytical thinking, writing skills, and the challenges they face. Data were collected through interviews with 3 lecturers and 10 first- and second-year students, which were analyzed to determine common difficulties such as lack of focus, logical reasoning, and issues with spelling, grammar, and the structure of their arguments. The findings highlight that students struggle with understanding the core elements of the essay question, articulating ideas coherently, and linking theory to real-life examples. Additionally, psychological factors like exam stress and time management difficulties also affect performance. To address these challenges, the study recommends increased practice in essay writing, constructive feedback from lecturers, and strategies to help students better manage their time and stress. The findings suggest that both lecturers and students need to collaborate to enhance critical thinking, improve writing skills, and create a more supportive learning and testing environment for essay-based assessments.

Key Word: skill; writing skill; skills to answer questions; skills to answer essay questions

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I. Introduction

Writing skills are crucial for language learning and need to be practiced consistently throughout the educational process. Among the various methods of assessing student learning, essay-type questions provide a comprehensive evaluation of students' cognitive abilities, language proficiency, and depth of knowledge. Educators emphasize that assessment is an integral part of the learning process, helping to gauge students' knowledge acquisition, moral development, and the formation of essential skills and techniques in relation to learning objectives.

However, many students face significant challenges when answering essay questions during tests and assessments. These difficulties stem from various factors, such as a lack of specialized knowledge and analytical skills, poor understanding of the requirements of the questions, an inability to craft appropriate responses, and insufficient writing and presentation skills. As a result, students may provide answers that are unclear, incoherent, or difficult to understand, which limits their ability to demonstrate their knowledge effectively.

The skill of answering essay-type questions is not innate, but rather one that can be taught and developed through practice. While not every exam day may present ideal conditions for students, it is hoped that this research will inspire educators to explore techniques that can enhance students' confidence and self-esteem when approaching essay questions. By providing students with practical strategies for answering a variety of test questions, educators can help them feel more prepared and capable in future assessments (Adeyemi, 2018).

This study focuses on examining the essay-question answering skills of students at a teacher education university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research will involve analyzing students' exam responses and conducting interviews with both instructors and students to identify the root causes of students' struggles with essay-type questions. The study aims to propose targeted solutions and strategies to help students improve their essay-writing skills, with the ultimate goal of enhancing their performance in tests and assessments.

The findings of this study will provide a foundation for proposing practical measures to strengthen students' essay-answering abilities. By evaluating how well students have mastered this skill, the research will offer actionable solutions to improve their approach to essay writing. In turn, these improvements will contribute to raising the overall quality of student training, equipping future educators with the professional competencies necessary for success in the education sector in Vietnam.

Although several studies have examined essay-writing competence, many aspects remain underexplored, particularly in the context of Vietnamese higher education. This study aims to fill these gaps by providing insights into the specific challenges faced by Vietnamese students. It will highlight the factors influencing students' ability to answer essay questions and propose strategies that are both relevant and practical within the Vietnamese educational setting

II. Literature Review

For centuries, education has been a central concern for both individuals and society. Teaching and learning, along with the assessment and evaluation of students' knowledge acquisition, are fundamental to the educational process. Researchers highlight the significance of higher-order thinking skills, often emphasized alongside life skills, with reading being defined as the use of various personal abilities (Kutlu et al., 2010). According to the relevance theory proposed by Carston (2012), students must engage in logical reasoning, encode and decode necessary information, and eliminate irrelevant data to provide optimal answers to questions.

Badger and Thomas (1991) argue that open-ended questions, especially essay-type questions, are more effective than other question types in assessing higher-order cognitive skills and the ability to use information. The way students access and apply their memory, along with how test questions serve as retrieval cues and reasoning triggers, plays a crucial role in how students respond. As Graham et al. (1995) assert, test-item writers must understand that certain test items are not explicitly defined, meaning students need a broad knowledge base and the ability to apply problem-solving skills, including reasoning and memory retrieval. These essay-type questions require students to recall key information, integrate, compare, or contrast different types of information. Responses should be concise and balanced, neither overly detailed nor too simplistic. The clarity of these questions, including their structure and guidelines, defines the cognitive level expected in student responses, and they are frequently used in social science assessments (Adeyemi, 2018).

The skill of answering essay questions is not innate; it is a skill that can be taught and honed through practice. With proper guidance and repeated practice, students can gain confidence in handling various test question formats. This makes the teaching of essay-writing skills essential (Adeyemi, 2018). Interviews conducted by Veldry Yunsarsi on students' test-taking experiences revealed that students struggle with both multiple-choice and short-answer essay questions. Based on these findings, the author suggested strategies such as reading to expand vocabulary and focusing more on the text or question to understand its meaning.

Further research by Dhanya and Alamelu (2019) identified several factors that influence students' writing skills, including the learning environment, the relationship between students and instructors, motivation to learn, and teacher feedback on essay-type questions. To address these factors, the authors recommended fostering a positive learning environment, breaking tasks into manageable components, providing constructive feedback, using electronic devices for teaching, and reducing student anxiety. At Ondo State University of Science and Technology, Adeyemi (2018) found that students' understanding of discourse and the use of connecting words played a significant role in their writing abilities. Discourse markers, such as transitional words and phrases, help transmit ideas coherently, and students' reading comprehension skills are crucial for writing, particularly when answering essay-type questions (MaezVAMagliano, 2022).

Common mistakes in students' responses include grammatical errors, incorrect semantic relationships, poor style, punctuation mistakes, and improper word usage. Additionally, the way teachers frame their questions significantly impacts students' ability to answer them effectively. Teachers must ensure that their questions are content-appropriate, aligned with learning objectives, and clearly formulated. Hatice Kumandas Ozturk pointed out that teachers often focus more on lesson content than on cultivating students' critical thinking abilities. Moreover, teachers must refine their written language skills, as inconsistencies in subject-verb agreement and punctuation in open-ended questions can hinder students' understanding.

To enhance students' ability to answer essay-type questions, researchers and educators have proposed several solutions to address the factors affecting response quality. Instructors should teach students how to use discourse appropriately and develop activities that promote reading comprehension and information processing (MaezVAMagliano, 2022). Writing skills should be nurtured through methods like Quantum Writing (Fauziah & Gumindari, 2024), and students should be given regular writing practice accompanied by constructive feedback. Teachers should foster a non-pressuring learning environment, encouraging students to discuss difficulties and reduce their fear of being judged. A process-based approach to teaching writing can enhance students' essay-writing skills, and teachers should be flexible and creative in their implementation to overcome challenges and ensure effectiveness (Ha, 2021).

Despite these recommendations, challenges remain in improving students' ability to answer essay-type questions. The skill of answering essay questions continues to pose significant difficulties, and its improvement has not yet been fully realized. This study aims to explore in greater depth the challenges students face when answering essay questions and propose targeted solutions for improving this skill in tests and assessments.

III. Research Method

The research team uses the interview method to collect information from two main groups: instructors and students. The interview process will take place from August 2024 to April 2025.

First, the research team conducts interviews with instructors to understand their perceptions, viewpoints, and experiences in assessing students' ability to answer essay questions. Through this, the team can clearly identify the criteria and assessment methods applied by instructors, which will help in making recommendations to improve students' essay-writing skills.

Second, the research team interviews students to gather information about their perceptions, experiences, and difficulties when answering essay questions in tests and assessments. This helps clarify the challenges students face, including their ability to understand the prompt, analyze, reason, and present their written responses. Based on these insights, the research team can propose support measures to improve students' essay-writing skills.

The interview participants are selected through a convenient sampling method, which includes 3 instructors from the Faculty of Educational Sciences and 10 first- and second-year students from this faculty at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education. The research team develops an interview questionnaire that aligns with the research objectives, contacts the participants, and conducts the interviews either in person or online through communication platforms. The data obtained from 13 interviews is recorded, transcribed, and coded to ensure participant confidentiality, while also making the analysis process more convenient and accurate.

IV. Findings

The Current Situation of Students' Essay Writing Skills in Tests and Assessments

The Ability to Identify the Focus of the Question and Logical Thinking

One of the biggest challenges that students face is not clearly identifying the focus of the question, leading to answers that are rambling and lack logical coherence. According to Lecturer 2, "First-year students struggle with analyzing the question and identifying the key content, which makes their writing lack structure and their arguments weak." This is also acknowledged by students, as Student 1, Student 3, Student 4, Student 6, Student 7, Student 8, Student 9, and Student 10 all agree that a good essay should "stick to the core content, have a clear argument, and avoid being off-topic." However, many students still have difficulty filtering out the key terms in the question, which affects the quality of their writing.

Expression and Presentation Skills

Expression is also a significant issue in essay writing. Lecturer 1 comments, "Students write very long answers, but the ideas are not logical, not cohesive, or unclear in what they are trying to express." Similarly, Lecturer 3 points out that many students "only answer the question or concept without deep explanation, analysis, or real-life application." From the students' perspective, Student 2 and Student 5 both believe that an essay should be clear, coherent, and have a strong connection between its parts, but they still struggle with organizing and presenting their ideas effectively.

Relating to Real-Life and Applying Foundational Knowledge

An important aspect of essay writing is the ability to relate to real-life situations and apply foundational knowledge. However, Lecturer 2 observes, "Many students approach their essays subjectively, lacking scientific reasoning and rarely connecting their ideas to the foundational knowledge from the textbook." This means that the essays lack depth in analysis and the ability to connect to real-world situations. Lecturer 5 also admits, "Providing real-life examples or personal opinions on a certain issue is important but is often overlooked." Therefore, it is crucial to train students in applying their knowledge to explain and support their arguments in order to improve the quality of their essays.

Common Mistakes in Writing (Spelling, Grammar, and Word Usage)

In addition to content and argumentation, mistakes in spelling, grammar, and word usage also greatly affect the quality of the essay. Lecturer 1 points out, "Students often make errors in expression, use incorrect words, and have spelling and punctuation mistakes." Lecturer 3 adds that some students "still make basic grammar errors and incomplete sentence structures." This is also reflected by Student 1, Student 3, and Student 6, who admit that spelling errors are a common problem when writing essays, impacting the clarity and professionalism of their writing.

"Blank Mind" Phenomenon and Forgetting Knowledge During the Exam

Another challenge many students face is the "blank mind" phenomenon when writing essays. Student 2 shares, "Blank mind is one of the most common difficulties, causing the essay to lack coherence and limiting the content." Additionally, Student 5 mentions that students often struggle when they forget important theories or

formulas during the exam. This indicates that, aside from developing writing skills, students also need to reinforce their foundational knowledge to write more comprehensively and accurately.

From the feedback provided by both instructors and students, it is evident that students' essay-writing skills still have many limitations, particularly in identifying the focus of the question, expressing ideas clearly, applying real-life knowledge, and avoiding basic mistakes. To improve the quality of their essays, students need to develop analytical thinking, form strong arguments, and present their work in a systematic manner. Additionally, avoiding spelling and grammatical errors, as well as developing clear and well-supported ideas, will help students achieve higher results in their essay-based exams and assessments.

Factors Affecting Students' Essay Writing Skills in Tests and Assessments

Students' essay writing skills are influenced by various factors. Based on the perspectives of both lecturers and students, these factors can be divided into three main groups: cognitive and analytical abilities, psychological and environmental factors, and writing and presentation skills.

Cognitive and Analytical Abilities

One of the important factors affecting essay writing skills is the ability to think critically and analyze problems. According to Lecturer 2, many students fail to identify the core of the question, and their analytical skills are weak, leading to answers that are illogical and lack structure. Lecturer 3 also emphasizes the importance of problem-solving skills in essay writing. Each essay question should be viewed as a problem that students must identify, analyze, and propose reasonable arguments or solutions. Without critical thinking and logical reasoning skills, students may struggle to present a well-organized and persuasive essay.

From the students' perspective, Student 6 and Student 8 also agree that the most important factor affecting an essay is foundational knowledge and the ability to connect ideas. When students lack a solid understanding of the material or don't know how to apply it practically, they encounter difficulties in analysis and argumentation. This results in answers that are off-topic and fail to meet the requirements of the question.

Psychological and Environmental Factors

In addition to cognitive abilities, psychological and environmental factors also significantly affect students' performance. According to Student 1, Student 3, and Student 5, time pressure and stress make it difficult for students to focus and organize their ideas effectively. Improper time management can lead to essays that lack depth or are left unfinished. Student 4 also mentions that forgetting knowledge or experiencing nervousness during the exam causes students to lose focus and fail to express their ideas clearly.

Furthermore, the surrounding environment plays an important role. Student 2 points out that noise, the exchange of papers with classmates, or the lecturer moving around the exam room can distract students. Student 9 and Student 10 also agree that external factors, such as other students asking for extra paper or finishing their essays early, can increase pressure and make them feel less confident.

Writing and Presentation Skills

Writing and presentation skills also have a significant impact on the quality of students' essays. According to Lecturer 2, many students answer questions based on subjective views, lack scientific evidence, and do not know how to connect their content with foundational knowledge. Additionally, the presentation format of the essay is important because an essay needs not only good content but also clarity, readability, and proper structure.

From the students' perspective, Student 7 emphasizes that preparing materials thoroughly before the exam helps them feel more confident, reducing the psychological impact, and allows them to focus on analyzing the issue more effectively. Meanwhile, Student 8 believes that writing skills play a crucial role in determining the quality of the essay. A good essay not only needs accurate content but also a clear structure, strong arguments, logical expression, and correct spelling.

In general, students' essay writing skills are influenced by several factors, which can be divided into three main groups: cognitive and analytical abilities, psychological and environmental factors, and writing and presentation skills. Lecturers play a vital role in guiding students on how to think critically, structure their arguments, and present their essays in a scientific manner. However, to improve essay writing skills, students need to actively develop critical thinking, manage time effectively, minimize distractions from their environment, and enhance their writing abilities.

V. Concluding Discussion

The research reveals that students in the case study face significant challenges when completing essay-based exams. Many students tend to write overly long essays that lack coherence, fail to clearly identify the focus of the question, and result in rambling and illogical content. Additionally, common issues such as errors in

expression, spelling, and difficulties in developing ideas in a logical sequence were identified. These shortcomings indicate a disconnect between the expected theoretical standards and the actual writing abilities of students, highlighting the need for adjustments in teaching and learning strategies to address these issues.

The findings also suggest that multiple factors affect students' essay writing abilities, as observed from both the lecturers' and students' perspectives. From the lecturers' point of view, the primary challenges stem from students' misunderstanding of the question and their lack of skills in analysis and structured argumentation. Some lecturers also noted that the way questions are phrased and the guidance provided by instructors can significantly influence how students approach and respond to essay questions. Conversely, students identified both objective and subjective factors that impact their ability to write essays effectively. Time pressure, exam anxiety, poor time management, insufficient foundational knowledge, and external factors such as noise and supervision during exams can all negatively affect students' reading comprehension, ability to synthesize information, and present content in a logical and coherent manner. The combination of these factors ultimately reduces the quality of students' work in tests and assessments.

To improve students' essay writing skills, lecturers should incorporate regular essay-writing practice exercises into the curriculum. These exercises would help students sharpen their abilities to analyze questions, create outlines, and build logical arguments. Guiding students to focus on identifying the core of the question and developing ideas in a clear, systematic manner will help minimize off-topic responses and rambling. Furthermore, lecturers should offer detailed feedback on common mistakes, such as issues with expression, spelling, and grammar, which would allow students to become more aware of areas for improvement. Additionally, systematizing knowledge and providing students with opportunities for regular writing practice will foster their critical thinking and logical argumentation abilities.

Beyond support from lecturers, students also need to take a proactive approach in developing their essay writing skills. Reading books, journals, and other research materials, along with practicing writing regularly, will improve their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills. Effective time management during exams is also crucial, as it reduces psychological stress and enables students to present their ideas in a more organized and logical manner. Moreover, students should prepare their materials thoroughly before exams, reinforcing their foundational knowledge and enabling them to build solid arguments and write deeper, more thoughtful essays. Practicing fundamental writing skills, such as constructing topic sentences, developing ideas, using appropriate arguments, and drawing strong conclusions, will also help ensure that essays are well-structured and effective.

The recommendations presented in this study are based on the findings regarding the essay-writing skills of students in the case study. Improving essay writing competence is a shared responsibility between lecturers and students. If both parties collaborate to enhance teaching and learning methods, students will have greater opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, sharpen their argumentation abilities, and present their ideas more effectively and scientifically in tests and assessments.

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