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## **Using Sample Readings at Prewriting Stage in EFL Classroom** **Do Minh Hung**

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### **Abstract**

*The present study used sample readings at prewriting stage as a treatment program for the experimental class of EFL learners from one local college in South of Vietnam. This was supposed to be one possible solution to reduce their difficulties/problems in English essay writing, which are commonly admitted and also confirmed by the questionnaire results in the present study. The treatment findings show that the experimental class improved their writing ability from the pretest to the posttest, and also better than that of the control class who did not receive extra sample readings. Additionally, the experimental class voiced their positive attitudes toward the treatment program at the end of the course. Accordingly, using sample readings at prewriting stage in academic writing classes appropriately is of great help to those EFL learners of low proficiency level.*

***Key Words: Sample readings, essay writing, EFL, prewriting.***

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**Introduction:** English essay-writing is integral in EFL undergraduate program, i.e. it is always compulsory for EFL majors (and even non-majors), but it is generally one of the difficult jobs for most EFL college students in many countries. This is because the art of writing requires not only the use of English language resources (lexis, syntactical elements, genres, discourse dimensions, and others in question), but also relevant ideas, contents, arguments which are likely to call for high concentration, serious efforts and good knowledge of certain social, cultural, cross-cultural domains. In addition, many students are not very motivated to write English essays (they prefer other skills like reading and speaking), and do not practice writing regularly. Thus, in that way Vietnamese-speaking students of EFL frequently face difficulties in academic English writing, especially at their first and middle stages of EFL acquisition. And teachers are trying several approaches and techniques to assist students step by step to gain strong writing skills and be able to confidently produce good English essays as expected in their prospective employments. In this vein, the present study is aimed to apply sample readings at prewriting activities in EFL writing classes in one local college of South Vietnam, where students' English level is generally lower than that of other universities. This approach has yet to be widely applied, especially in Vietnamese setting. As such the present study is to answer the following target questions:

- (1) *What do students think about and practice writing English essays?*
- (2) *What difficulties do students face in this skill?*
- (3) *What are the possible effects on students' writing products by using sample readings at prewriting activities?*

**Literature Review:** *What is writing?* Writing involves the encoding message of some kind, that is, we translate our thoughts into language (Byrne, 1991: 1). Writing is always embedded in a rhetorical situation – a complex web of relationships amongst the elements of writing. The rhetorical situation

refers to combination of various elements of writing that comprise the context of writing; it is a particular social and material arrangement in which written expression and communication take place. Writing is definitely a productive skill, which have unique elements (Nunan, 1999). And this therefore makes it challenging for learners to acquire, especially second/foreign language ones. As Brown (1987: 82) wrote, “It is clear from learning theory that a person will use whatever previous experience he or she has had with language in order to facilitate the second language learning process. The native language is an obvious set of prior experiences. Sometimes the language is negatively transferred, and we say then that negative interference has occurred.”

*What is an essay?* An essay is “a longer piece of writing, particularly one that is written by a student as part of a course of study or by a writer writing for publication which expresses the writer’s viewpoint on a topic” (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992: 128-129). An essay usually contains the following major sections: (i) *an introduction*: this presents the topic and contains the thesis statement; (ii) *a body*: this is a series of paragraphs, each with a topic sentence. The paragraphs in the body of the essay develop and support the thesis statement; and (iii) *a conclusion*: this summarizes what has been said and often presents a solution or makes a prediction.

The *product approach* to writing instruction is a traditional way, including familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing and free writing (Badger & White 2000, Grossmann 2009, Pincas 1982). This approach is consistent with sentence level structural linguistics and bottom-up processing. The role of the teacher is provider of model language and guided exercises and corrector of errors, based primarily on linguistic knowledge, the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices.

Meanwhile, the *process approach* gives student writers more freedom than the product one. It purposefully helps them discover their own voice, allow them to choose their own topics, provide teacher and peer feedback, encourage revision and use student writings as the primary texts of the course (Silva & Matsuda 2001). This approach basically includes five steps (Vanderpyl, 2012): prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. Writers are encouraged to spend significant time performing tasks within each step and revisit previous steps as necessary. The process approach is not linear; it is cyclical and fluid. Multiple revisions and feedback sessions with teachers and peers take place before submitting final, polished products.

A large body of research has dealt with problems and solutions to EFL/ESL learners around the world. Nguyen (2009) examined different methods based on psycholinguistics, second language acquisition, syntax, sociolinguistics and pragmatics, and then suggested several solutions for teachers of (i) how to raise students’ awareness of why they should write in English, (ii) how to teach students to write in English, (iii) how to assess students’ writing skills. Thus, this looks like a holistic, long-term approach to improve the skills in question.

Adas and Bakir (2013) initiated a solution by blended learning for EFL students with an online platform of MOODLE software program at a conventional university in Palestine. The results obtained were the experimental students performed better in English paragraph writing with their significant score differences than those in the control group in terms of using the topic sentence, spelling, grammar, punctuations, capitalizations and paragraph cohesion. It is a good solution, a powerful teaching strategy with the use of modern technology as a forum for written product displays, error analysis and discussions, but this could not be applied in the local college, where the present study was conducted because not all students there had good access to the internet at home.

With a survey on 1114 school students and 317 university students in Oman, Seyabi and

Tuzlukova (2014) reported that these students faced several difficulties in English writing such as how to start a paragraph/essay, how to choose right vocabulary, and how to produce sentences with the right structure. In addition, the study came up with their writing strategies frequently used, e.g. brainstorming, outlining, editing and error correcting. Thus, this large-scale survey provided further evidence to the widely acknowledged phenomenon of writing skill problems faced by EFL learners.

**Prewriting activities:** They are all those that occur during the pre-writing stage in a writing class, which is the process of generating and recording ideas of the writing process as it lays a prepared foundation for the writing that is to come. As Hedge says 'before putting pen to paper, the skilled writer in real life considers two important questions: What is the purpose of this piece of writing? And who am I writing this for?' (1988: 21-22). These two questions clearly emphasize the decisive importance of the prewriting stage and related activities, which include brainstorming, jotting down/listing ideas, ordering items, scaffolding, activating and developing schema, targeting grammatical structures, spelling and vocabulary, exposing rhetorical patterns (Vanderpyl, 2012), and outlining the target writings as frame for the next steps of writing.

Writing an English essay can be a daunting task for college students of all ages and skill levels, but it is particularly difficult for novice student writers who feel anxious, uncertain or uncomfortable when they write. Teachers should therefore help them overcome these anxieties and fears so that they can fulfill the given tasks successfully and dauntlessly. One of these working aids is to choose and fit related sample readings at the prewriting stage with detailed analyses of the step-by-step procedure of writing. And the present study was designed to go in this way, which has yet to be explored widely and in depth, at least in EFL classrooms of the Vietnamese setting.

### **Methodologies:**

**Participants:** The study was conducted with the participation of 80 second-year Vietnamese-speaking majors of EFL from two classes in one local college, South of Vietnam. It was assumed that these students suffered from several problems in academic writing. In the two chosen classes, there were 19 males and 61 females. Their ages varied from 19 to 22. The two classes were randomly assigned to the control class for one and the other as the experimental. In this local college, although they all completed their first-year undergraduate program at the time of research conducted, their English level was just around low-intermediate, and they were learning to write English essays as planned in the same undergraduate training program.

### **Data collection instruments:**

**Questionnaires:** Two questionnaires (Appendix 2) were used. Questionnaire 1 (10 items) was used for both classes right before the treatment. The purpose was to investigate problems/difficulties that students faced in studying and writing essays, how often they practiced writing, how they self-ranked their present writing ability, etc. Questionnaire 2 (10 items) was used for the experimental class only, administered just after the treatment in question, collecting their reflections on it at the end of the course.

**Writing Tests:** Two in-class timed writing tests were administered to the participants. Writing test 1/pre-test served as the diagnostic one to ensure that they were approximately equal at the beginning of the applied treatment and writing test 2/posttest was kind of achievement test provided at the end of the treatment program. In each test, participants had to write an English essay (about 250-500 words) on a given topic and finished in 75 minutes. All written papers were scored (in terms of contents, ideas organization, essay structure, word choice, spelling, grammar and punctuation) by 2

independent teachers of English from that college, who were not involved in the treatment delivery.

**Materials:** The same syllabus was delivered to both classes, experimental and control (see Appendix 1) by the same teacher at the college. In the control class, pre-writing activities included essay introduction, brainstorming, ideas/contents listed and selected, and outlining. For the experimental class, in addition to those regular activities, the teacher brought in extra-sample readings for specific illustrations and analyses of the steps of essay writing. Each class met twice a week, 2 hours for one meeting. It lasted 6 weeks.

**Procedures:**

- (1) One week from the start of the writing course, the writing test 1 and questionnaire 1 were conducted to both classes right in the classroom. And they were collected right after the students finished.
- (2) Then the following week the course began with both classes. The control class went with regular instructions and activities, while the experimental was purposefully aided with sample readings for specific illustrations and analyses by the instructor.
- (3) At week 7, writing test 2 was administered to both classes. Then only the experimental class stayed on to complete questionnaire 2.

**Results and Discussions:**

**Questionnaire 1 Results:** The following is the main points found from the questionnaire 1 result.

**Table 1: The importance of writing skill**

Students' opinions	Class			
	Experimental		Control	
	Count	%	Count	%
Very important	3	7.5	7	17.5
Fairly important	10	25.0	9	22.5
Important	27	67.5	24	60.0

Table 1 describes the students' opinions on the importance of writing skill. On the whole, nearly all of them admitted the level *important* with 67.5% in experimental class and 60.0% in control class; and the level *very important* with 7.5% in treatment class and 17.5% in control class. The rest were at *fairly important* with nearly equal between the two classes (25.0% and 22.5%, respectively).

**Table 2: Students' self-evaluation of their writing ability**

Levels	Class			
	Experiment		Control	
	Count	%	Count	%
Fairly good	1	2.5	1	2.5
Average	10	25.0	18	45.0
Bad	29	72.5	21	52.5

Table 2 sees very little difference in the self-ranking in writing skill between the two classes. It is worth noting that 72.5% of students in treatment class and 52.5% of students in control one classified their writing at the level *bad*, and with the modest number, 2.5% of students in each class at the level *fairly good*. This table also indicates that 25% of students in the former and 45% of ones

in the latter classified their writing at the level *average*. As a result, it shows that both classes well recognized their weakness in writing skill.

**Table 3: Sources of difficulty in writing essays**

Sources of difficulty	Class			
	Experiment		Control	
	Count	%	Count	%
Lack of reference books	20	50.0	20	50.0
Lack of instruction from teachers	20	50.0	20	50.0
Find it hard to understand essays	22	55.00	24	60.00
Dislike practicing writing essays	23	57.50	21	52.50

It shows that *Lack of reference books* gets the balance rate between the two classes, 50% in each class. The case is the same for *Lack of instruction from teachers*. *Find it hard to understand essays* got 22 (55%) for the experimental and 24 (60%) for the control; and *dislike practicing writing essays* was 23 (57.5%) and 21 (52.5%), respectively. Generally speaking, the two classes got all four sources of difficulty and more than half of them faced these difficulties.

**Table 4: Frequency of practicing essay writing**

Essay writing practice	Class			
	Experimental		Control	
	Count	%	Count	%
Every day	0		0	
Almost every day	13	32.5	15	37.5
sometimes	24	60.0	22	55.0
rarely	3	7.5	3	7.5

The two classes show the similar frequency of English essay writing practice. Although none practiced every day, more than half *sometimes* did. Only about one quarter of the students from each class practiced writing *every day*. The minority rarely practiced writing.

In terms of reading books on essay writing (Table 5), it found that only 12 students (30%) in the experimental and 11 from the other class were at the level *almost every day*. Meanwhile, 60.5% and 67.5% respectively only sometimes read books on essay writing.

**Table 5: Frequency of reading books on essay writing**

Students' frequency of reading books on essay writing	Class			
	Experiment		Control	
	Count	%	Count	%
Every day	3	7.5	1	2.5
Almost every day	12	30.0	11	27.5
Sometimes	24	60.0	27	67.5
Rarely	1	2.5	1	2.5

**Pre-test Results:** In order to assess students' writing essay competence level before the treatment, the pre-test was administered. The results obtained from the pre-test were subjected to the software SPSS for data analysis. A descriptive statistics was then run to measure the mean scores of the students' writing essay ability before the intervention. The result was displayed in Table 6.

**Table 6: Descriptive statistics of the pre-test of two classes**

Class	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experiment	40	2.0	8.5	4.8500	1.47718	.23356
Control	40	2.0	8.0	4.6875	1.44864	.22905

It reveals that in the pre-test the mean score of the control class was  $M=4.69$  (out of 10 points) ( $SD=1.45$ ), while that of the experiment was  $M=4.85$  ( $SD=1.48$ ). So, both got low scores, below the average at the beginning of the treatment program. In order to see whether the two classes obtained the same level of essay writing ability, one t-test was conducted on the two mean scores of the two classes.

**Table 7: The results of independent sample test**

T-test for equality of means	T		.497	.497
	Df		78	77.970
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<b>.621</b>	.621
	Mean difference		.16250	.16250
	Std. error difference		.32713	.32713
	95% confidence interval of the difference		Lower Upper	.81377 -.48877

Table 7 reveals that the Sig. in the t-test ( $0.621 > 0.05$ ) makes no significant difference between the two classes' essay writing ability (right at the start of the target program). As a result, both class were equally at low level of writing skill and faced by several difficulties in practicing this skill. It also confirms that it is necessary for teachers to invest in alternative approaches/techniques to assist students overcome these problems and the present study is one solution.

**Post-test Results:** First, from the descriptive statistics in Table 8, although the mean scores of both classes are just above the average, i.e. over 5 out of 10 points, it finds that the mean score from the experiment class (5.9125) is higher than that of the control (5.0875). Also, its standard deviation is smaller ( $0.9928 < 1.0912$ , respectively). That is, the students who received the treatment program (of sample readings aided with step-by-step analyses of the writing procedure), on average, had better performance in the writing test 2.

**Table 8: Descriptive statistics of the posttest of the two classes**

Class	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. D	Std. Err. Mean
Experiment	40	4.0	8.0	5.9125	.9928	.1569
Control	40	3.0	8.0	5.0875	1.0912	.1725

Next is the t-test results

**Table 9: The results of independent sample t-test**

T-test for equality of means	T		3.537	3.537
	Df		78	77.313
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.001
	Mean difference		.82500	.82500
	Std. error difference		.23327	.23327
	95% confidence interval of the difference		Lower	1.28941
		Upper	.36059	.36059

Table 9 reveals that the Sig. of the t-test ( $0.001 < 0.05$ ) makes a statistically significant difference between the post-test results of the two classes. As a result, it comes to the conclusion that the treatment program did make positive impacts on the concerned subjects.

**Questionnaire 2 Results:** This questionnaire was designed to get feedback from the experiment class (40 students) on the treatment program. The following is the main points obtained.

On the whole, nearly all of them admitted the helpfulness. Up to 85.0% confirmed *very helpful* and 15.0% of them did *helpful*. Encouragingly, *Feel interested and confident when learning writing* was chosen by 100% (40 students); *understand writing lessons easily* by 95%, and *develop students' brain power in writing skill* 87.5%. Also, 87.5% students showed the readings *improve writing skill in general*, and 77.5% confirmed that they *orient them into the right way*, while 65% reported they *ease them in writing tasks*. More than half students agreed on the helpfulness of improving writing skill and proofreading from the related readings in class. And thus, the option *easier to set up an essay outline* was picked up with the overwhelming majority, accounting for 75% of the students, 25% defined *much easier*. Regarding their opinions on the future application, nearly all of students agreed that the instruction given by the instructor is of great importance to the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students and also to some others.

The above collected information is of great significance. It shows that the students are well aware of the importance of the studied applications in their acquisition of writing English essays.

**Conclusion:** The present study results are in line with previous studies in terms of EFL learners' awareness of writing skill importance, their poor ability, and anxieties/difficulties in English writing skills in general and essay writing in particular (Nguyen 2009, Demirel 2011, Vanderpyl 2012, Adas & Bakir 2013, Seyabi & Tuxlukova 2014, etc.).

The experimental class's improved performance from the pre-test to the post-test with their positive attitudes found in questionnaire 2 about the treatment program indicate that the application of sample readings at the prewriting stage is one of the feasible solutions to the problems universally voiced by EFL learners of low level proficiency in writing skills. As a result, teachers are advised to rationally use and explicitly guide their students with appropriate sample readings and strategic analyses in essay writing classes at the prewriting stage and after class as well. But, in fairness, it should be a warning that students may get too much dependent on samples and commit plagiarism. Thus, it is also a good idea for teachers not to overuse sample readings and consciously know how to gradually reduce them from their lesson plans when students are likely to get on the right track to write essays confidently and creatively. This is perhaps the major limitation of the present study and should be further researched.

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**Appendix 1: The Writing Syllabus**

**Course book:** *Writing Academic English* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2006), A. Oshima & A. Hogue, and Pearson Education.

Week	Contents	Teaching Points	Activities	Functions & Aims
1	<i>Chapters 1, 2</i> The process of academic writing What is a paragraph? An overview	Writing process: Stage: I,II,III Paragraph structure, the topic sentences, The concluding sentences Review	Introduction Class- Discussion Giving feedback & assignment	Introducing writing process: Stage: I,II,III Mastering paragraph structure, the topic sentence & concluding sentences
2	<i>Chapters 3, 4</i> Unity and Outlining	Unity, paragraph outlining; The parallel form rule	Group presentation Class-Discussion Giving comment	Practicing outlining paragraph, making unity in paragraph with the two



	Coherence	and equivalent value rule: Outlines with details Transitional signals; Logical order & Review	Exercises for practice	studied rules Identifying transitional signals in paragraphs
3	Chapter 5 Kinds of Logical Order	Introduction: Chronological order; Logical Division of ideas; Two topic sentence tips; Transitional Signals for Comparison/Contrast	Group presentation Class-Discussion Practices in uses Review Topic: Essay writing	Understanding all kinds of logical order Fitting the studied practices in uses Building and writing an essay
4	Chapters 6, 7 Concrete Support I Concrete Support II	Introduction: Facts versus Opinions; Concrete Supporting Details Quotations, Paraphrases and Summaries & Documenting Sources of Information Review	Group presentation Class-Discussion Practices in uses Review	Presenting the lesson requirements & making them clearly Mastering and applying Concrete Support I, II in writing paragraph
5	Chapters 8, 9 The Essay Patterns of essay organization	Writing an essay: The Introductory paragraph, the concluding paragraph, the essay body: outlining; Writing process & Review Chronological order; Logical Division of ideas; Causes and Effect order; Comparison & Contrast; Review	Class-Discussion Group presentation Individual work Practices in uses	Mastering the three studied paragraphs Outlining the essay body Understanding the pattern essay organization
6	Chapters: 10-14 Types of sentences Clauses of Noun, adverb & relative clauses Participial Phrases	Sentence Structures Types of sentences Clauses of Noun, adverb & relative clauses Participial Phrases	Reading at home Group presentation or Class Discussion Discussion- Review Consolidation & Final Test Individual Presentation	Reviewing sentence structures Remarking the uses of noun, adverb and relative clauses & participial phrases. Testing & Consolidating the course study

**Appendix 2: Questionnaire 1**

*The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of problems that students face in process of studying and writing essays. Your opinion is really important to the success of this study. Would you mind cooperating in the collection of data for the research by responding to the questionnaire enclosed? Please feel free to give your answers.*

*Thank you very much for your cooperation! (Mark ✓ for each item you choose).*

1. How important do you consider the role of writing skill?  
(a) Very important            (b) Fairly Important    (c) Important    (d) Not important
2. How good is your self-evaluation of your present writing ability?  
(a) Very good            (b) Fairly good            (c) Average    (d) Bad
3. How much do you face difficulties in your writing skill in general?  
(a) Very much            (b) Not much            (c) Little            (d) No ideas
4. What are your difficulties in practicing writing essays (more than one choice is possible)?  
(a) Lack of reference books            (c) Lack of instructions from teachers  
(b) Find it hard to understand essays            (d) Dislike practicing writing essays
5. How often do you practice writing essays every week?  
(a) Everyday            (b) Almost every day    (c) Sometimes            (d) Rarely
6. How much time on average do you spend on writing essays each day?  
(a) Half an hour            (b) One hour            (c) One hour and a half (d) Two hours
7. How often do you read books on essay writing?  
(a) Everyday            (b) Almost every day    (c) Sometimes            (d) Rarely
8. How do you feel when you write essays?  
(a) Very stressed    (b) Stressed            (c) Relaxed            (d) Interested
9. What is the most interesting part to write in an essay for you?  
(a) Introduction            (b) Body            (c) Conclusion
10. What the most difficult part in writing an essay for you?  
(a) Introduction            (b) Body            (c) Conclusion

**Questionnaire 2**

*This questionnaire is used for the experimental class after finishing the experimental program. Please give a tick ✓ to the option that applies to you for each question below.*

*Thank you very much for your cooperation!*

1. How helpful is sample readings at prewriting stage?  
(a) Very helpful    (b) Helpful    (c) Not very helpful    (d) Not helpful at all
2. What can sample readings at prewriting stage do?  
(a) Ease me in the writing tasks            (d) Motivate me to write  
(b) Orient me into the right way            (e) Improve my writing skill in general  
(c) Promote creativeness in writing            (f) Save my writing time

3. Which effectiveness can you get after using sample readings at prewriting stage?
  - (a) Help me with good way of writing essays
  - (b) Inspire my passion in writing essays
  - (c) Help me with understanding essays
  - (d) Improve my writing skill
4. What can sample readings help you to study?
  - (a) Develop my brain power in writing skill
  - (b) Promote my creativeness in writing
  - (c) Understand lessons easily in writing periods
  - (d) Feel interested and confident when learning writing
5. What good points can sample readings at prewriting stage bring to you?
  - (a) Remember lessons at class
  - (b) Develop my cooperation with others in class
  - (c) Improve writing skill and proofreading
  - (d) All the suggested answers above
6. For whom should sample readings be used at prewriting stage?
  - (a) For the first year students
  - (b) For the second year students
  - (c) For the third year students
  - (d) For all levels at college
7. How important is sample readings at prewriting stage?
  - (a) Important
  - (b) Quite important
  - (c) Very important
8. After applying sample readings in writing essays, what do you think about your writing essays?
  - (a) Progress
  - (b) Quite progress
  - (c) Much progress
9. Do you think that using sample readings is easier for you to set up an outline?
  - (a) A little easier
  - (b) Easier
  - (c) Much easier
10. How useful are sample readings in learning and writing essays?
  - (a) Useful
  - (b) Quite useful
  - (c) Very useful