rEFLections
Vol 30, No 2, May - August 2023

An Analysis of EFL Students' Writing Needs: Considerations for Writing Task-Based Course Design

HIEU MANH DO
College of Humanities and Fine Arts, Murray State University, USA
Author email: domanhhieubc@gmail.com

Article information

Article history:
Received: 10 Jan 2023
Accepted: 29 Jun 2023
Available online: 5 Jul 2023

Keywords:
Course development
Writing needs
EFL Vietnamese undergraduates
Writing task-based course design

Abstract

The present study adopts the four-step framework of course development processes proposed by Graves (1996) to develop a writing course for EFL Vietnamese undergraduates. A total of 60 students were asked to take a writing test and a survey about writing problems to identify their "objective needs". Then "subjective needs" were collected from interviews. In addition, the three language teachers were invited to the semi-structured interviews to collect their perspectives on teaching writing, which were analyzed in parallel with students' needs. The findings show that students' writing levels are low-intermediate and intermediate, and they have major problems with the organization of ideas, followed by grammar and idea development. Regarding teaching, students' main concerns are a lack of writing activities and teacher feedback, which may be due to large classes and heavy workloads. To improve students' writing problems, more writing tasks are needed, including pre-planning (idea development), performance (writing practice), and post-writing (peer feedback, teacher feedback, final draft). These writing tasks are arranged into different phases to help teachers follow up on students' writing practice and reduce their workloads. Considering these conditions, a proposed writing task-based course was suitable to develop, including the five components of course design: context; goals and objectives; content; method and material; and assessment, as professional support for EFL or ESL language teachers in designing a writing course that can be used for teaching, training, or coaching in a similar context.

INTRODUCTION

To develop a suitable writing course, course developers are first suggested to explore students' needs and their learning backgrounds (Huang, 2010; Yundayani et al., 2017). In other words, analyzing students' needs is a critical and necessary step in developing teaching content and methods (Do, 2022; Otilia, 2015). As the lessons meet students' language learning requirements, students would then actively participate in the lesson (Macalister & Nation, 2020; Ratnawati et al., 2018) as well as find learning purposes in what they are doing in the course (Graves, 1996). Therefore, needs analysis helps instructors provide effective lessons that meet their students' needs in a specific context because every single learner is unique regarding learning style, proficiency, and learning needs (Schiro, 2013).

Considering the significance of needs analysis in developing writing courses, an increasing number of writing researchers have investigated writing needs in different EFL contexts (Ali & Salih, 2013; Generoso & Arbon, 2020; Ratnawati et al., 2018; Yundayani et al., 2017) and learners' writing difficulties (Al Fadda, 2012; Al-Gharabally, 2015; Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2017; Farooq et al., 2020; Kampookaew, 2020; Khatter, 2019). Three highlighted results were found from these studies: teaching content and writing errors; teaching approaches; and teaching materials. As for the teaching content and writing errors, students in these studies wanted teachers to focus on some types of essays containing description and classification (Yundayani et al., 2017); grammatical errors such as tenses, prepositions, and verbs (Kampookaew, 2020; Ratnawati et al., 2018), spelling and punctuation (Al-Gharabally, 2015; Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2017; Khatter, 2019; Farooq et al., 2020), writing steps of a/an passage/essay, and how to present opinions in scientific research or academic papers (Generoso & Arbon, 2020; Ratnawati et al., 2018). Moreover, Saudi Arabian students in Al Fadda's (2012) study could not distinguish between spoken and written language words, and they did not know how to outline ideas before writing a draft. In terms of teaching approaches, Indonesian students who participated in Yundayani et al.'s (2017) study would like to have some in-class communicative activities that are highly applicable to the subject. It means that students were excited to play active roles in the subject's activities rather than being passive and depending too much on teachers. Regarding teaching documents, Indonesian students in the study of Ratnawati et al. (2018) expected teachers to use some helpful applications or e-books and online documents to easily read and look up information. Based on these studies, teachers are suggested to organize more activities/tasks in writing classes to encourage students to join the class. For example, peer review and group work could be ideal activities since they can share ideas and help each other (Yundayani et al., 2017). Furthermore, students seemed unclear about academic writing, which was suggested to be taken into account by language teachers (Al Fadda, 2012; Generoso & Arbon, 2020; Ratnawati et al., 2018).

Some research gaps from those previous studies should be worth noting. First, the issue of understanding writing learning needs has been studied in EFL contexts; however, studies conducted in the Vietnamese context on this issue seem rare since students' needs are different when they are learning in different educational environments (Ferris et al., 2013). There is a study exploring English writing errors conducted by Dan et al. (2017), who found that the Vietnamese students in their study struggled with vocabulary, grammar, and word choice. Nevertheless, this study stopped at surface errors (grammar, vocabulary) and did not go further with deep writing levels (content, organization of ideas). Second, in terms of research methodology, most previous studies used surveys and interviews as the main tools to investigate students' writing needs (Ali & Salih, 2013; Generoso & Arbon, 2020; Ratnawati et al., 2018; Yundayani et al., 2017). Of note, assessing students' writing errors and difficulties through actual writing could provide a more objective and in-depth evaluation of their weaknesses and strengths in writing skills. Additionally, a course syllabus contains several activities, such as needs analysis and testing (Brown, 1995). Thus, writing test results could provide more evidence and a more precise assessment of students' needs, which was carried out in this study. Last but not least, the previous studies stopped at exploring students' needs in learning English and did not proceed to develop goals and objectives, content, or activities for the course development. To fill those research gaps, the present study aims to develop a writing

course design based on a writing needs analysis. Accordingly, a survey and written test (to find out students' writing difficulties, lacks, and errors) and interviews (to determine students' needs and attitudes toward writing courses) were conducted. After that, a proposed writing course design was developed, including context, goals, objectives, content, activities, and methods. It is hoped that this study provides language teachers with theoretical knowledge of course development and practical knowledge of how it is applied to design a writing course based on the analysis of students' writing needs. As a result, a proposed writing course design was developed as professional support for EFL or ESL language teachers in designing a writing course that can be used for teaching, training, or coaching in a similar context. The following three research questions guided the study:

1. What difficulties do students usually encounter with their writing skills?
2. What are students' needs and wants regarding English academic writing courses? Do they match the teaching?
3. What kind of writing course design can be provided to improve students' writing difficulties and meet their needs?

A framework of course development processes

Graves (1996) introduced six major components of a course design model, as follows:

1, Needs assessment (needs analysis)
2, Determining goals and objectives
3, Conceptualizing content
4, Selecting and developing materials and activities
5, Organization of content and activities
6, Evaluation

First and foremost, needs analysis determines the specific needs of learners to ensure that the course includes relevant and useful content to fulfill students' needs in a specific context (Do & Cheng, 2021; Huang, 2010; Macalister & Nation, 2020; Yundayani et al., 2017). Needs analysis is defined as the collection of objective and subjective information to determine the purpose of learning in order to meet learners' requirements, which helps teachers apply and use suitable teaching methods and teaching materials (Brown, 1995; Richterich, 1980; Nunan, 1985). According to Hyland (2006), objective needs (environment analysis) are learners' backgrounds (age, previous learning experience, language proficiency, and language difficulties), while subjective needs consist of students' wants, weaknesses, strengths, and desires.

Second, course developers determine goals and objectives for the course based on learners' needs (the first step). According to Graves (1996), goals are "general statements of the overall, long-term purposes of the course", while objectives "express the specific ways in which the goals will be achieved" (p. 17). In particular, objectives consist of specific learning outcomes for what students will be able to do with the language at the end of the unit - the products (Christison & Murray, 2021; Shrum & Glisan, 2010). It is important to consider three dimensions for each objective, namely performance, conditions, and criteria (Hyland, 2019). Accordingly,

performance is "what learners will be able to do", *conditions* are "the parameters within which they can do it" (e.g., open book), and *criteria* is "the level of competence expected" (e.g., 80% or 90%). The objectives should be consistent with goals, feasible, and precise (Hyland, 2019). Setting clear goals and objectives helps teachers determine appropriate content, activities, and assessments for the course, making teaching more purposeful and meaningful (Graves, 2000). Students, at the same time, are more likely to be involved in the course when they know "what the course will offer them, how it is relevant to their needs, and what they have to do to meet course requirements" (Hyland, 2019, p. 68).

Third, course designers will figure out which content should be included and integrated into the course - "what to cover in the course and the sequence in which to cover it for effective learning" (Hyland, 2019, p. 56). This content refers to pedagogical aims "such as the features of language that the learners will hopefully become more aware of or be better able to produce, or the language skills they gain control of" (Basturkmen, 2010, p. 59).

Fourth, after devising the content of the course, course designers select materials and develop activities. Of note is that "materials and activities need to translate the goals and objectives into learning experiences for students" (Christison & Murray, 2021, p. 60). In addition, teachers adapt contexts and texts from students' subject areas while developing materials and activities. As for materials, they should be popular and meet the learners' interests, which motivates them to learn (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). As mentioned by Yundayani et al. (2017), "in deciding the suitable material, teachers' creativity and understanding of the students' needs are the most important aspects" (p. 62). For example, the instructional materials for the writing course should include interesting topics, the writing methods of generating ideas, the revised writing process, and editing and proofreading instruction (Richards & Renandya, 2003). Hence, materials chosen should be effective for the purpose of the course and appropriate for students and teachers (Graves, 1996). Regarding activities, Basturkmen (2010) mentioned "carrier content", which is the means of conveying real content like texts or activities.

Fifth, the content and activities should be organized appropriately. Graves (1996) stated two complementary ways regarding the organization of a course, namely, cycle and matrix. Teachers could apply the cycle approach by creating a set of activities that follow a consistent sequence. With a matrix approach, however, teachers compile a list of activities and materials and then decide which ones to use depending on the students' needs and the availability of the materials. It is worth noting that flexibility is an important element for teachers when deciding on activities and materials (Hyland, 2019). The content and materials might be determined before the course, but they could be modified as the course progresses.

Last but not least, teachers evaluate the course by looking at three key elements: students' proficiency, process, and achievement (Graves, 1996). Educators could consider using questionnaires, observations, interviews, or reflection to evaluate the effectiveness of the course. Teachers then promote and improve the course's effectiveness when they can go back to the course design and adjust where needed (Christison & Murray, 2021).

To sum up, these steps are critical in the development or reformation of a course design

(Ratnawati et al., 2018). The first step of needs analysis demonstrates learners' needs and wants in learning a language (Macalister & Nation, 2020). This information then provides teachers/course designers with information to design the entire teaching plan (steps 2 to 5), which includes teaching context, goals and objectives, teaching content, methodologies, and activities (Hamp-Lyons, 2001; Otilia, 2015; Yundayani et al., 2017). The last step (6) is to evaluate the course's effectiveness.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 60 EFL Vietnamese learners (44 females and 16 males), aged from 18 to 32, participated in this study. They learned English for an average of seven years. Their mean self-rated writing proficiency based on a 9-point Likert scale was 4.5 (SD = 1.2), which was almost similar to their low overall average writing score from the writing test at 5.08 (SD = 1.21). Thus, their English levels ranged from low-intermediate to intermediate. Among these 60 students, 15 from different classes were randomly invited for the interviews. It is worthy to note that these students belonged to different classes under the instructions of different teachers in the previous writing course (first semester of the first year of college), and they were taking Writing II, focusing on paragraphs, at the time of collecting data (second semester of the first year). They are called Participants One through Fifteen. Additionally, three writing language teachers at the same school (two males and one female) were invited for the interviews. They are called Teacher One, Teacher Two, and Teacher Three (Table 1). Teachers Two and Three taught these 60 students in the previous semester, but Teacher One did not; she is the dean and usually teaches the third-year students at higher levels.

Table 1
Teachers' information

Teacher	Position	Sex	Years of Teaching	Degree
Teacher One	Dean	Female	35	PhD in Education
Teacher Two	Language teacher	Male	10	MA in TESOL
Teacher Three	Language teacher	Male	25	MA in TESOL

Materials

A questionnaire was used to investigate how frequently learners have problems with various aspects of writing skills such as punctuation, word choice, organization, etc. The questionnaire was adopted from the *Needs Analysis Questionnaire for Non-English Background Students* (writing skills) of Gravatt et al. (1997) (Appendix B). The writing rubric was adopted from Wang and Liao (2008) with five criteria: focus, grammar and spelling, word usage, content, and organization.

Procedure

Before collecting data, I sent the consent form and the research proposal that contained information about the research to the dean of the English Language Department. These include the research aims, participants, survey questionnaires, and interview questions. After receiving the permission of the dean, I started to invite students and teachers to participate in the research. The consent form was also provided to all students and teachers. The whole process of data collection will be presented as follows:

Based on Graves' (1996) steps of course development, the first step - needs analysis - was conducted to collect objective and subjective needs. To collect students' needs, using questionnaires, personal interviews, learners' self-assessment, observation, and tests (Christison & Murray, 2014; Macalister & Nation, 2020) helps researchers "determine what students already know and where they are lacking" (Graves, 1996, p. 15). Thus, I decided to use a survey, a writing test, and semi-structured interviews to collect objective and subjective needs.

As for the survey, students were asked to complete a background questionnaire and a writing needs analysis questionnaire on a Google Form. A four-point Likert scale questionnaire (always, often, sometimes, never) was used to investigate how frequently learners have problems with various aspects of their writing skills (objective data). To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, learners were informed of the aim of the study and the fact that there were no right or wrong responses. Students expressed their opinions honestly by ticking the box of appropriate scales. After collecting data, incomplete questionnaires were discarded, and appropriate questionnaires were coded for analysis.

Regarding a writing test, pupils were asked to write a paragraph (250 - 300 words) under the teacher's supervision in 40 minutes, which could provide more evidence about their proficiency levels and discover their major problems (present situation analysis - subjective data). Since these students were taking Writing II in the second semester of their first year at college, they were asked to write about the differences between high school and university. Thus, all students are familiar with the writing topic, which does not affect their writing performance.

When it comes to semi-structured interviews, which explore learners' needs and expectations towards writing courses (subjective data). A total of 15 students in three classes were randomly selected for the interviews. They were asked about their needs and wants related to writing courses. After that, other interviews were carried out to investigate teachers' perspectives with regards to students' writing difficulties, their teaching methodology and principles, class activities, and their teaching concerns (objective and subjective data), which were used to analyze in parallel with students' writing difficulties and their needs. In particular, the researcher wanted to know teachers' perspectives about students' writing abilities (RQ 1), how they create activities in writing classes, how they provide feedback to students, and their struggles in teaching writing skills (RQ 2). All the interviews were recorded and taken notes simultaneously. The interviews were conducted in the L1 language - Vietnamese, to let both students and teachers respond naturally. After finishing collecting data, I developed a writing course including the five components of a course design: context (step 1), goals and objectives (step 2), content

(step 3), and method, assessment, and materials (step 4) for these target students.

In conclusion, this study applied the triangulation of comparing "different sets and sources of data with one another" (Long, 2005, p. 28). Accordingly, the researcher collected data from interviews, a survey, and students' written texts. It is hoped that triangulation strengthens the credibility and validity of needs analysis data and their interpretation (Brown, 2001; Gilabert, 2005), establishing a strong foundation for formulating goals and constructing a syllabus (Taba, 1962).

Coding and analysis

To examine learners' writing difficulties and lacks (RQ 1), mean scores for each difficulty were calculated, and descriptive statistics were analyzed. When it comes to the students' academic writing performances, a writing scoring rubric developed by Wang and Liao (2008), which covers both surface and deep writing levels, was adopted. This rubric consists of five categories, including focus, grammar and spelling, word usage (surface levels), content, and organization (deep levels). Each part was measured on a scale from one to ten. The mean scores of each statement were then counted and interpreted. In terms of the data from the interviews (RQ 2), audio recordings of the learners and teachers were transcribed and verified. The transcripts were then coded into specific themes before being analyzed. The transcripts presented in this study were not the original words of the participants because they were translated from Vietnamese to English. It is important to keep in mind that the researcher selected some of the participants' responses that are similar to others to present in this study to avoid repetition. According to Graves' (1996) steps of course development, all these analyses would be used for determining the course's goals and objectives (step 2), conceptualizing content (step 3), and developing activities (step 4) (RQ 3).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research question 1: Students' lack - writing difficulties and errors

As for the writing difficulties of Vietnamese learners who participated in this study, the mean scores and proportions of all responses from the questionnaire were calculated (Appendix B). According to the descriptive statistics, students appear to face a wide range of writing challenges, with only a few students reporting that they never had difficulties with specific aspects of writing. Students appear to lack confidence in their *overall writing ability* (SD = 2.53; M = .54). Learners' low writing ability is an important barrier when 45% of them reveal a high frequency of facing this problem (always or often). This supports their low self-rating of their writing skills (4.5 out of 9) as well as their average writing score (M = 5.08, SD = 1.21). In particular, the most frequent problems students encounter in writing are "*organizing paragraphs and organizing the overall assignment - how to link a paragraph to another one*" (M = 2.58, SD = .67; M = 2.57, SD = .69, respectively). Specifically, approximately 45% of students reported that they always or often struggled with constructing the organization of the paragraph and the essay (items 3, 4). *Clearly expressing their opinions* (M = 2.52, SD = .77), *addressing topic* (M = 2.51,

SD = .59), and *adopting appropriate vocabulary* (M = 2.50, SD = .62) are also common writing issues among these 60 Vietnamese learners.

To examine in-depth errors in students' written performance, learners' written texts were evaluated and marked based on five criteria adapted from the scoring rubric of Wang and Liao (2008). Their scores were calculated and shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Mean scores of making writing criteria

	Mean	SD
Overall	5.08	1.21
Focus	5.23	1.32
Content	5.22	1.39
Organization	4.67	1.34
Spelling & Grammar	5.02	1.40
Word Usage	5.25	1.20

In line with the findings from the questionnaire, the results of the actual writing texts show that the biggest hurdle in writing is organization, since the average score among students was the lowest (M = 4.67, SD = 1.34). In the students' papers, they did not know how to organize their ideas and link sentences. Similar to first-year Saudi and second-year Vietnamese students in the studies of Alkhatib (2021) and Do (2023b), most of these Vietnamese students' written papers were written in free-writing styles in which the ideas were incoherent, and the structure was not organized. It might be because learners have insufficient knowledge about academic writing, which leads to confusion about how good writing is represented (Elander et al., 2006). Likewise, Generoso and Arbon (2020) and Ratnawati et al. (2018) both found that Asian students in their studies were ambiguous in their presentations of academic writing papers.

> I am bad at making connections between sentences. I just write what I think. I did not learn and focus much on this in writing. [Participant Two]

> I usually focus on grammar and vocabulary when writing. When I re-read my writing, I sometimes delete or replace some words. I did not think much about the organization of the essay or paragraph. [Participant Fourteen]

According to Ekşi (2012), writers should take notice of both surface (grammar, language use, word choice) and deep (organization, content of ideas) levels to deliver good writing. The findings from the students in this study show that they usually focus on surface levels and do not pay attention to the deep levels of academic writing. This seems to be a popular issue for EFL students since this problem has been found in other EFL contexts (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). Therefore, this writing issue should be taken into consideration by language teachers and researchers in order to prepare comprehensive knowledge of academic writing for students by raising their awareness at both writing levels throughout their lessons and feedback. Students need to be aware that grammar or vocabulary is just a part of writing, along with content and organization of ideas. Since the previous Vietnamese study (Dan et al., 2017) focused solely

on surface writing levels, deep writing levels should receive more attention from writing researchers and teachers.

Apart from the organization of a paragraph, the answers from the interviews suggested other difficulties that students face in their writing skills. Most of them revealed that they found it difficult to choose appropriate words due to their lack of vocabulary (86.7%). This finding is in line with the findings found by Do's (2023b), Generoso and Arbon's (2020), and Ratnawati et al.'s (2018) studies, who stated that EFL learners in their studies had a problem with word choice. Furthermore, eight out of fifteen students (53.3%) also shared that 40% of them lacked ideas (using vivid details to support the main idea) and made lots of grammatical errors in their written texts. These results are consistent with the findings of Alkhatib's (2021), Kampookaew's (2020), and Ratnawati et al.'s (2018) studies that Saudi, Thai, and Indonesian learners in these studies, respectively, made the same errors. In terms of spelling and grammar, the writing scores indicate that students made frequent mistakes, as they scored lower in these criteria than others (M = 5.02, SD = 1.40) (Table 2). To be specific, the Vietnamese students in this study have popular grammatical errors such as tense, word forms, singular and plural nouns, and verb agreement.

All in all, these 60 EFL Vietnamese students have some typical writing problems, including grammar (tense, word forms, verb agreement, singular and plural nouns), and vocabulary. These issues are recognized as popular writing problems among EFL students because they were also found by various researchers in other EFL contexts (Al-Gharabally, 2015; Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2017; Elander et al., 2006; Farooq et al., 2020; Kampookaew, 2020; Khatter, 2019; Ratnawati et al., 2018). Importantly, the organization of a paragraph (idea connection and idea arrangement between the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence) and idea development should be paid more attention by language teachers when designing writing courses because this deep level of writing appears to be less noticed. The next section presents students' needs regarding the English academic writing classes, which were analyzed in parallel with teachers' perspectives.

Research question 2: Students' needs and wants regarding writing courses

Students are likely to receive more teacher feedback and want to have more collaborative and writing activities in L2 writing classrooms. These needs seem to mismatch the teaching because of some practical reasons, which are presented as follows:

Teacher feedback

On the one hand, the majority of participants reported that teachers chose typical mistakes to correct them in front of the classroom. For instance, ten of the fifteen students revealed that none of their essays were checked. Some of them asked their friends for feedback, but it seemed unhelpful since they were not trained about peer feedback.

> "The teacher seldom provides feedback on my papers. I sometimes ask my friends to read my essays and underline the mistakes for me. But I am not sure if they gave me appropriate feedback or not". [Participant Two]

> "Because of a lack of feedback, I did not know where the mistakes were and how to write better. The teacher showed some mistakes of other students on the screen and corrected them". [Participant Three]

> "During the course, instead of providing feedback, the teacher assigned a student to give feedback on my writing without training". [Participant Five]

On the other hand, five other participants reported that some of their essays were corrected but not frequently, so all of them expected that they would receive feedback from teachers frequently.

> "I hope that the teacher checks all my drafts, underlines the mistakes, and gives me suggestions on how to write better. If he just shows me where the mistakes are, I sometimes do not know what he means, so I am worried that I can make the wrong correction". [Participant Fourteen]

It can be recognized that students' writing proficiency in this study was low in general, so they needed feedback from teachers frequently to improve their drafts. In line with the finding of Alkhatib (2021), students lack teacher feedback, and their writing errors keep occurring if they are not pointed out. Thus, detecting students' writing problems in the first year is extremely important, which is helpful for the following writing courses at higher levels. Otherwise, this will lose students' motivation to practice writing since they did not receive much feedback on how to improve their writing skills. One of the reasons for this problem mentioned by teachers is that they did not have enough time to give feedback on every single assignment to all students in a large classroom, so they tried to apply different ways to deliver feedback to learners. Teacher One, for example, usually applied peer feedback to her classes, requiring that students have their written texts checked by their partners. The instructor then randomly selected five to ten texts every lesson to check and give feedback. Meanwhile, Teacher Two avoided peer feedback because he was worried about the quality of this collaborative work. He directly marked and gave feedback on a third of the texts. The other students' papers will be checked in the next writing assignment. Meanwhile, Teacher Three invited three volunteers to write on the board, and then students discussed in groups to identify mistakes and provide comments. After that, he checked and delivered feedback in front of the class. These three strategies from the three teachers seem useful in some ways. However, in some cases, they might lead to the situation that while some students' written texts were checked or given feedback, others were not, or students did not feel confident to provide feedback for their peers since they were not sure how to comment. As a result, those strategies seem to not meet students' expectations at their levels and make them uncomfortable. Accordingly, students' writing proficiency was low in general based on the proficiency test, so the solution of Teacher One might not be considered effective for these students because they were not sure about how their writing was checked if the teacher did not provide detailed guidance or training for peer feedback. In other words, this way appears to be more appropriate for students who were prepared for peer feedback training or those at higher levels. Meanwhile, the strategies of teachers Two and Three seem not to be fair, as some students were checked, and others were not. Moreover, picking up some volunteer students' work and showing it on the whiteboard, with all students

and teachers commenting on it, may not be a good option when their writing is shown and judged in front of the classroom. These problems support the idea that students' needs play an important role in designing an effective writing course. When the teaching meets the needs of students and is applied to the right learners, it is considered appropriate.

Writing activities

Ten students out of fifteen said they had few activities in writing classes. In terms of their favorite activities, they shared that they enjoyed quiz games and brainstorming activities in groups. These findings parallel those of Yundayani et al.'s (2017) study, which found that Indonesian students in the study would like to have some in-class communicative activities that are highly applicable to the subject. From the teachers' perspectives, two of the teachers revealed that in-class activities were helpful and interesting to encourage learners to join the class. Meanwhile, Teacher Two did not spend much time on writing activities in his writing classes.

> "The teacher organized activities for us to join, and I love them. For instance, she showed pictures on the screen and asked us to guess the vocabulary or the sentences. I enjoy playing quiz games and working on group projects. I also like the activity of brainstorming in groups because I can get different ideas from other members. I became more confident to work on my own after that". [Participant Seven]

> "I usually ask students to participate in the activity of creating mind maps to summarize the main ideas. I ask students to work in pairs or groups to discuss ideas with friends". [Teacher One]

In addition, doing writing activities in the class saves time and reduces the workload for students. Teacher One argued that students were tired of doing homework all the time. They must learn around eight to nine subjects in a term, so it is difficult for them to finish all their homework at the same time in a week, especially writing assignments, which need more time. Thus, language teachers should reduce the workload by dividing the assignments into small tasks, which means that they can finish half of them in class working with peers and the other half at home working individually. She always asks students to practice writing in class as part of their assignments in small groups.

Research question 3: Writing course design

According to the findings, traditional teaching focused on exams and the teacher-fronted approach seem to not meet students' needs. As Gilabert and Malicka (2021) stated, language should be taught by focusing on what students need to do with it, in lieu of being taught as an object. In fact, students in this study wanted to gain writing experience through communication, cooperation, practice, and feedback (peer feedback, teacher feedback), which could help them understand the process of composing writing and improve their writing skills (idea development, organization of ideas, vocabulary, grammar). Meanwhile, teachers taught solely "about writing", which occupied more time than writing activities, peer feedback, and teacher feedback. In

other words, the majority of language teachers in this study focused on the strands of meaning-focused input (reading and listening) and paid less attention to the strands of meaning-focused output (writing and speaking) and fluency development (ability to convey ideas and messages). Therefore, language teachers may consider balancing the strands in a language course, as Newton and Nation (2021) emphasized: "each strand should have roughly the same amount of time in a well-balanced course that aims to cover both receptive and productive skills" (p. 9).

As mentioned, students in this study had problems with the organization of ideas, idea development, and grammar. Besides, students need in-class writing activities, peer feedback, and teacher feedback that help them improve those writing problems. Therefore, a writing course with varying patterns is considered, switching between product-based and process-based approaches. Accordingly, more writing tasks or activities should be added with the hope of fixing their current writing problems and meeting their needs. Those writing tasks and activities should include pre-planning (idea development – work in pairs or small groups), writing drafts (writing practice), peer feedback, teacher feedback, and revisions (writing improvement for writing-sub skills). Based on this knowledge, a task-based writing course design using "tasks at the core of language teaching" (Ellis, 2003, p. 46), which allows learners to communicate and interact with friends and teachers in classrooms (Kroll, 2001; Lin, 2009; Smagorinsky, 2008), and learn what they want to learn (Gu, 2002), is considered suitable to develop. It focuses on purposeful and functional language use throughout real-life tasks/activities in real time in the classroom for students to practice and experiment (Ellis, 2006; Willis, 2021). In fact, Thai students and Vietnamese students majoring in English in Thirakunkovit and Boonyaprakob's (2022) and Do's (2023a) studies, respectively, had experience learning writing skills through a task-based approach, which was reported to be helpful for their writing development in terms of content and organization. Since Thai and Vietnamese students in those studies have similar writing problems and learning contexts, a writing task-based course is suitable to design for the Vietnamese EFL students in this study in order to help them improve their writing skills based on an analysis of their writing needs.

To be specific, Christison and Murray (2014) proposed the procedures for task sequencing in task-based course design, namely pre-task, task completion, and task review, along with the functions of each task (table 3). These tasks are arranged into different phases that can be done in class with peers and at home individually, and then revising papers based on peer feedback and teacher feedback (table 4), which can deal with the problem of the heavy workload of teachers and students. In fact, both teachers and students in this study expressed the same concern about the workload of assignments. Teachers are burdened with heavy workloads and may not have enough time to provide feedback on 25 to 30 papers in one week, which may lead to delayed feedback. This is also an issue for teachers teaching in other EFL contexts, like Kim (2022), who stated that "large-sized L2 writing classes are truly burdensome for writing instructors" (p. 755). Students, at the same time, may find it difficult to finish their essays in one week along with other courses.

Table 3

The procedures of task sequencing

Phases	Details
Pre-task	➢ Framing the activity (establishing the outcome of the task, students' attention on what will be expected). ➢ Providing key vocabulary words or grammatical concepts if necessary. ➢ Students work in pairs or small groups.
Task completion	➢ Students complete the task. ➢ The teacher will be an observer or facilitator.
Task review	➢ Learner report (text, a PowerPoint presentation, an audio or video recording, or an exhibition). ➢ Peer feedback. ➢ Teacher feedback. ➢ Teachers summarize what students have learned during the task.

Based on this theoretical framework of task-based course design (table 3), the writing tasks were developed with the hope of fixing students' writing problems (lacks) and meeting their needs, which are presented in detail in table 4 (purposes for each task). The detailed writing task-based course design with five components of course design, including context, goals - objectives, content, methods, and assessment that balance the strands of a language course, is provided in Appendix A.

Table 4

The purposes of writing tasks

Tasks	Writing problems/ needs	Detailed purposes - explanations
Pre-task planning	Idea development (content)	Students outline their ideas, which helps them determine and develop their ideas before they start to write. This also lessens their stress before writing. Students can do this activity in pairs or small groups, where they can provide feedback to each other before they start to write (organization and content of ideas). Free writing (optional): 10-minute writing in the class for the purpose of fluency development. Note*: Instructions and training for collaborative planning should be provided to help students, especially low-level learners, know how to provide helpful feedback. Accordingly, students should evaluate partners' ideas rather than taking about their ideas.
Task completion - writing drafts	Practice writing	After the planning task, students start to write on their own. It will be easier for them to start writing in this step when they have already determined the content and the organization of ideas in the pre-task planning.
Task review - post writing task	Grammar Vocabulary Organization Peer feedback Teacher feedback	Peer feedback: Students will provide feedback to peers (grammatical errors, language use, organization and content of ideas). This activity also reduces the workload for teachers. Teacher feedback: After peer review, students revise and send papers to the teacher. The teacher will read their drafts and provide feedback if errors still exist. Note*: Writing rubric, instructions and training for peer feedback should be provided.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study purported to develop a writing course design based on an analysis of students' writing needs and teachers' perspectives about teaching writing in the Vietnamese context. Accordingly, the EFL Vietnamese students in this study have some popular writing difficulties and problems, namely organization of ideas, idea development, and grammar. In addition, students prefer to receive teacher feedback and join writing classes in a cooperative environment. In fact, students seemed not to have many opportunities to practice writing and receive teacher feedback regularly. Meanwhile, the teachers focused solely on meaning-focused input (learning through listening and reading) rather than meaning-focused output (learning through speaking and writing) and fluency development (practice and feedback). Since teacher feedback and self- and peer-feedback training play important roles in helping students know what aspects of their writing they need to improve, these issues seem to be neglected. Thus, composition teachers may take these issues into consideration when teaching L2 writing.

Considering the students' writing problems and their needs, teachers may apply varied patterns of teaching approaches that focus more on meaning and process-based approaches to help students develop L2 writing skills. Accordingly, the task-based course design is suitable to develop (Appendix A). This alternative teaching approach is encouraged by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), switching from teacher-centered to student-centered, pair work, and discussion. Thus, this development provides language teachers, especially novice teachers, with theoretical and practical knowledge about task-based course design when switching from a teacher-fronted approach to a learner-centered approach. It was also developed with the hope of improving students' writing skills and meeting their needs (Appendix A). Furthermore, the proposed writing task-based course design can be applicable and transferable to other EFL contexts that have similar learning environments and learners' backgrounds since those writing problems and needs seem to be popular and similar to those in other EFL contexts. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this course design was developed based on the students' needs in this study, so language teachers may modify it based on their teaching contexts and their target students. As for research limitations, this study investigated a limited scope with 60 first-year Vietnamese students and three teachers; future studies might consider a larger sample of participants to generalize the findings more widely. Besides, drawing on Graves' (1996) course development, evaluating the effects of the course design was not carried out, which will be planned for my future study or leave this door open for future researchers in similar teaching contexts.

THE AUTHOR

Hieu Manh Do is a doctoral candidate (Doctor of Arts in English Pedagogy - TESOL) at Murray State University, USA. He earned his master's degree in TEFL from National Chung Cheng University, Taiwan. His main interests include second language writing, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and language assessment.

domanhhieubc@gmail.com

REFERENCES

Al Fadda, H. (2012). Difficulties in academic writing: From the perspective of King Saud University postgraduate students. *English Language Teaching, 5*(3), 123-130. https://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n3p123

Al-Gharabally, M. (2015). The writing difficulties faced by L2 learners and how to minimize them. *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research, 3*(5), 42-49.

Ali, H. I. H., & Salih, A. R. A. (2013). Perceived views of language teachers on the use of needs analysis in ESP materials writing. *English Language Teaching, 6*(3), 11-19. https://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n3p11

Alkhatib, N. (2021). First year university students' writing: A one year journey of English writing development. *Asian EFL Journal, 28*(1), 9-29.

Basturkmen, H. (2010). *Developing courses in English for specific purposes*. Springer.

Boonyarattanasoontorn, P. (2017). An investigation of Thai students' English language writing difficulties and their use of writing strategies. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences and Humanities, 2*(2), 111-118. https://dx.doi.org/10.26500/JARSSH-02-2017-0205

Brown, J. D. (1995). *The elements of language curriculum: A systematic approach to program development*. Heinle & Heinle.

Brown, J. D. (2001). *Using surveys in language programs*. Cambridge University Press.

Christison, M., & Murray, D. E. (2014). *What English language teachers need to know Vol. III: Designing curriculum*. Routledge.

Dan, T. C., Duc, V. M., & Chau, P. T. H. (2017). An investigation into common mistakes in paragraph writing of the first-year English-majored students: A case study in Can Tho university, Vietnam. *Journal of Education Naresuan University, 19*(4), 308-330. https://tci-thaijo.org/index.php/edujournal_nu/article/view/108480

Do, H. M. (2022). Plagiarism tutorials in teaching academic writing for L2 Vietnamese undergraduates. *International TESOL & Technology Journal, 17*(1), 44-62. https://connect.academics.education/index.php/itj/article/view/132/151

Do, H. M. (2023a). Does collaborative prewriting discussion always help? *L2 Journal, 15*(1), 1-7. https://doi.org/10.5070/L215159933

Do, H. M. (2023b). Pedagogical benefits and practical concerns of writing portfolio assessment: Suggestions for teaching L2 writing. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ), 27*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.27105a4

Do, M. H., & Cheng, Y. H. (2021). Needs analysis of hotel front desk staff: Considerations for ESP course design. *International Journal of English for Specific Purposes, 1*(1), 69-92. https://connect.academics.education/index.php/ijesp/article/view/149/85

Do, H. M., & Phan, H. L. T. (2023). Vietnamese undergraduate English-majored students' beliefs about English language learning. *English as a Foreign Language International Journal, 27*(2), 40-60. https://www.academics.education/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/EFLIJ-June-2023-Vol-27-Issue-2.pdf

Ekşi, G. Y. (2012). Peer review versus teacher feedback in process writing: How effective? *International Journal of Applied Educational Studies, 13*(1), 33-48.

Elander, J., Harrington, K., Norton, L., Robinson, H., & Reddy, P. (2006). Complex skills and academic writing: A review of evidence about the types of learning required to meet core assessment criteria. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 31*(1), 71-90. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930500262379

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (2006). The methodology of task-based teaching. *Asian EFL Journal, 8*(3).

Ellis, R. (2021). A case study of one teacher's introduction to task-based language teaching: Insights for the development of a professional development programme. *Language Teaching for Young Learners, 3*(1), 137-158. https://doi.org/10.1075/ltyl.00020.ell

Farooq, M. S., Uzair-Ul-Hassan, M., & Wahid, S. (2020). Opinion of second language learners about writing difficulties in English language. *South Asian Studies, 27*(1), 183-194.

Ferris, D., & Hedgcock, J. (2014). *Teaching L2 composition: Purpose, process, and practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge. ISBN-13: 978-0415894722

Ferris, D. R., Liu, H., Sinha, A., & Senna, M. (2013). Written corrective feedback for individual L2 writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 22*(3), 307-329. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2012.09.009

Folse, K. S., Muchmore-Vokoun, A., & Solomon, E. V. (2020). *Great writing 2: Great paragraphs*. Cengage Learning.

Generoso, J. C., & Arbon, A. M. M. (2020). Language needs analysis: An EAP curriculum design to develop foreign students' English skills. *Journal of Asia TEFL, 17*(2), 428-445. https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2020.17.2.8.428

Gilabert, R. (2005). Evaluating the use of multiple sources and methods in needs analysis: A case study of journalists in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia (Spain). *Second language needs analysis* (pp. 182-199). Cambridge University Press.

Gilabert, R., & Malicka, A. (2021). From needs analysis to task-based design: Methodology, assessment and programme evaluation. *Task-based language teaching and assessment* (pp. 93-118). Springer.

Gravatt, B., Richards, J. C., & Lewis, M. (1997). *Language needs in tertiary studies*. University of Auckland.

Graves, K. (2000). *Designing language courses: A guide for teachers*. Heinle & Heinle.

Graves, K. (Ed.). (1996). *Teachers as course developers*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 0- 521-49768-X.

Hamp-Lyons, L. (2001). English for academic purposes. In R. Cater & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages*. Cambridge University Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667206.019

Huang, L. S. (2010). Seeing eye to eye? The academic writing needs of graduate and undergraduate students from students' and instructors' perspectives. *Language Teaching Research, 14*(4), 517-539. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168810375372

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centered approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. (2006). *English for academic purposes: An advanced resource book*. Routledge.

Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing*. Cambridge University Press.

Khatter, S. (2019). An analysis of the most common essay writing errors among EFL Saudi female learners (Majmaah University). *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ), 10*(3), 364-381. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3466034

Kampookaew, P. (2020). An analysis of grammatical errors made by Thai EFL university students in an EAP writing class: Issues and recommendations. *rEFLections, 27*(2), 246–273. https://so05.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/reflections/article/view/248862

Kim, N. (2022). Teaching L2 writing in large classes: The effects of peer feedback in different task sequences. *The Journal of AsiaTEFL, 19*(3), 740-758. http://dx.doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2022.19.3.1.740

Kroll, B. (2001). Considerations for teaching an ESL/EFL writing course. *Teaching English as a second or foreign Language* (3rd ed., pp. 219-232). Heinle and Heinle.

Long, M. H. (2005). Methodological issues in learner needs analysis. *Second language needs analysis* (pp. 19-76). Cambridge University Press.

Macalister, J., & Nation, I. S. P. (2020). *Language curriculum design* (2nd ed.). Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-376-19650-9

Nation, I. S. P., & Macalister, J. (2010). *Language curriculum design*. Routledge.

Newton, M. N., & Nation, I. S. P. (2021). *Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Nunan, D. (1985). *Language teaching course design: Trends and issues*. National Curriculum Resource Centre.

Otilia, S. M. (2015). Needs analysis in English for specific purposes. *Annals of the Constantin Brâncuşi University of Târgu Jiu, Economy Series, 1*(2), 54-55.

Ratnawati, R., Faridah, D., Anam, S., & Retnaningdyah, P. (2018). Exploring academic writing needs of Indonesian EFL undergraduate students. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ), 9*(4), 420-432. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no4.31

Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Ernst Klett Sprachen.

Richards, J. C., & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). (2003). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge University press.

Richterich, R. (1980). A model for the definition of language needs of adults. *Trim, Richterich, Van Ek, and Wilkins* (pp. 31-62).

Schiro, M. S. (2013). *Curriculum theory: Conflicting visions and enduring concerns*. Sage.

Shrum, J. L., & Glisan, E. W. (2010). *Teacher's handbook: Contextualized language instruction*. Heinle/Cengage.

Smagorinsky, P. (2008). *Teaching English by design*. Heinemenn.

Taba, H. (1962). *Curriculum development: Theory into practice* (4th ed.). Harcourt, Brace, & World.

Thirakunkovit, S., & Boonyaprakob, K. (2022). Developing academic writing skills through a task-based approach: A case study of students' collaborative writing. *rEFLections, 29*(3), 526–548. https://so05.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/reflections/article/view/261319

Wang, Y. H., & Liao, H. C. (2008). The application of learning portfolio assessment for students in the technological and vocational education system. *Asian EFL Journal, 10*(2), 132-154.

Willis, J. (2021). An evolution of a framework for TBLT: What trainers and teachers need to know to help learners succeed in task-based learning. *Task-based language teaching and assessment* (pp. 63-92). Springer. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-4226-5_5

Yundayani, A., Emzir, E., & Rafli, Z. (2017). Need analysis: The writing skill instructional material context for academic purposes. *English Review: Journal of English Education, 6*(1), 59-70. https://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v6i1.771

Appendix A

Proposed writing task-based course design

Context

Class: Writing II (Paragraph).
Students: EFL Vietnamese undergraduates.
Class size: 25 – 30 students.
Students' levels: Low-intermediate and intermediate.
Time: 12 weeks (three months).
Focus: This writing course is designed to help students develop and master academic writing skills (focusing on paragraphs and types of paragraphs). Throughout the course, students learn how to write a variety of paragraphs. To be specific, students will learn the basic elements of a completed paragraph, which are the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence (meaning-focused input and language-focused learning). During the course, students will do a great amount of practice (writing tasks), discuss their own pieces of writing with their peers, and receive constructive feedback from peers and the instructor for both surface (grammar, vocabulary) and deep (content, organization) writing levels, all of which could significantly upgrade their writing skills to a higher level (meaning-focused output and fluency development).

Course goals and objectives

Goals:

At the end of this writing course, students will understand the process of composing writing through different writing tasks and will be able to write completed academic paragraphs on different types of topics coherently (organization, structure, content) and accurately (vocabulary, grammar). These writing skills are prepared for their next level (Writing III, focusing on essays), so students are expected to gain intermediate and high-intermediate levels after this course.

Objectives:

1, Students will be able to write academic paragraphs with enough three parts of a paragraph with at least 80% coherence (organization, content) and accuracy (grammar, vocabulary, language use) based on the writing rubric and teacher's assessment.
2, Students will be able to provide feedback on peers' written texts based on the teacher's instructions and the writing rubric.
3, Students will be able to recognize their writing weaknesses and strengths throughout the completion of related writing tasks based on the assessment of peers (collaborative work) and the teacher (teacher feedback).

Content

Content	Week
Course introduction and rules	1
Introduction: Definition of paragraph	2
Features of a paragraph (topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentences) Pre-task planning training	3
Write a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences Peer feedback training	4
Practice: Write a paragraph	5
Mid-term	6
Type of paragraph: Write descriptive paragraphs	7
Type of paragraph: Write process paragraphs	8
Type of paragraph: Write opinion paragraphs	9
Type of paragraph: Write narrative paragraphs	10
Type of paragraph: Write argumentative paragraphs	11
Final: Students' reflections	12

Methods (teaching approach) and materials

Task-based language teaching (learner-centered approach)
Book suggestion: Folse, K. S., Muchmore-Vokoun, A., & Solomon, E. V. (2020). *Great writing 2: Great paragraphs*. Cengage Learning.

Writing tasks – start from week 3

Tasks		Details
Pre-task	Pre-task planning (brainstorming, outlining)	Individual planning Collaborative planning Notes: + For simple writing tasks, students can do pre-task planning alone. + For complex writing tasks, students can work in pairs or small groups (allowing students to choose their partners). Students discuss and provide feedback to each other, focusing on content, organization of ideas, and language use (instruction and training should be provided before asking students to participate in collaborative planning). Free writing: 10-minute writing
Task Performance	Writing performance	Options: Individual writing, collaborative writing
Post Task	Peer-feedback	Providing instructions about how to provide feedback to peers (focusing on both surface and deep writing levels) Work with peers or in small groups.
	Final draft	Revise draft and submit it to the teacher. Teacher feedback Final draft

Assessment: Formative assessment (peer feedback, teacher feedback, writing portfolio).

Appendix B

Descriptive data of writing difficulties

No.	Statements	M	SD	Percentage of responses (%)			
				Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
1	Using correct punctuation and spelling, structuring sentences	2.48	.68	5 (8.3%)	22 (36.7%)	32 (53.3%)	1 (1.7%)
2	Using appropriate vocabulary	2.5	.62	4 (6.7%)	22 (36.7%)	34 (56.6%)	-
3	Organizing paragraphs	2.58	.67	2 (3.3%)	25 (41.7%)	29 (48.3%)	4 (6.7%)
4	Organizing the overall assignment (how to link a paragraph to another one)	2.57	.69	3 (5%)	24 (40%)	29 (48.3%)	4 (6.7%)
5	Expressing ideas appropriately	2.38	.61	4 (6.7%)	29 (48.3%)	27 (45%)	-
6	Developing ideas	2.28	.80	9 (15%)	29 (48.3%)	18 (30%)	4 (6.7%)
7	Expressing what you want to say clearly	2.52	.77	4 (6.7%)	27 (45%)	23 (38.3%)	6 (10%)
8	Addressing topic	2.51	.59	3 (5%)	23 (38.3%)	33 (55%)	1 (1.7%)
9	Following instructions and directions	2.08	.82	15 (25%)	26 (43.3%)	17 (28.4%)	2 (3.3%)
10	Adopting appropriate tone and style	2.32	.72	8 (13.3%)	26 (43.3%)	25 (41.7%)	1 (1.7%)
11	Evaluating and revising your writing	2.37	.71	6 (10%)	28 (46.7%)	24 (40%)	2 (3.3%)
12	Overall writing ability	2.53	.54	1 (1.7%)	26 (43.3%)	33 (55%)	-
13	Completing written tasks	1.97	.96	23 (38.4%)	21 (35%)	11 (18.3%)	5 (8.3%)