Problems with Academic Writing Encountered by EFL Postgraduate Students at a University in the Mekong Delta

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ABSTRACT

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This small-scale survey aimed to investigate the frequent problems of EFL postgraduate students in academic writing. The subjects were 37 postgraduate students studying theand methodology of English language teaching major at a University in the Mekong Delta. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data in this study. The results of the questionnaires suggest that reference and citation, coherence and cohesion, plagiarism and paraphrasing, lexical, and grammatical problems are EFL postgraduate students' problems in academic writing. The results from semi-structured interviews indicated a variety of factors contributed to those problems. They are the difference between English and their mother tongue, lack of academic writing knowledge and experience, lack of understanding of the topic, and reference material. Realizing the existence of problems, EFL postgraduate students can find ways to overcome them. Besides that, lecturers and instructors can base on the problems and the reasons for problems to use appropriate teaching methods, approaches, and styles to support EFL postgraduate students in academic writing and minimize their problems.

Introduction

Language is considered a means to express thoughts, views, and ideas to communicate between individuals. Because it plays a role as the official language of more than 53 countries all around the world, English is believed to be a global language. Therefore, teaching and learning English increasingly play an essential role in the teaching and learning process.

English is one of the fundamental disciplines taught in schools. The Ministry of Education's Curriculum Specifications outline the four abilities that students must possess in three domains of language use: interpersonal, informational, and artistic (MOET, 2020, as cited in Phan, 2023). When learning English, students are taught four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL)

students, writing is one of the most essential and challenging skills. According to Klimova (2013), writing skills are vital in expanding other language skills, and metacognitive and writing skills are the most complicated skills to acquire in a foreign language. Kusumaningrum et al. (2019) stated that Writing is such a challenging and complex skill because it requires students to integrate a number of aspects, such as the topic, the goal of writing, and the intended readers (as cited in Vo, 2022). It is the most challenging linguistic skill to learn. Hence, learning writing must be sufficient in the English learning process.

One of the most significant types of writing is academic writing, especially for post-college education, where students' essay writing is the tool to evaluate students' achievement. According to Geyte (2013), academic writing is a formal kind written by scholars and used in college, post-college classes, and scholarly publications. Academic writing is also crucial because of its role in the students' learning and writing of research papers. Academic writing, particularly research writing, is often the means to decide whether students can graduate. For postgraduate students, academic writing is imperative, not only for proposals and theses but also for course assignments. Through academic writing skills, ideas and knowledge are imparted during the learning process and utilized in the logical style of thinking. Although English is required in Vietnam's schools, higher education students need help learning the language's writing conventions. They are learning English academic writing in Vietnam's higher education in general and post-college education, and they encounter obstacles that hinder students from academic writing to reach their professional goals successfully. Even if they are actively engaged in learning academic writing and using various writing exercises in their assignments, students still struggle with writing academically. As a result, most postgraduate students find it difficult to enhance their academic writing skills and face various problems in their writing despite their numerous years of learning English.

Literature Review

Academic writing

According to Al Fadda (2012), one of the fundamentals of academic writing is the ability of the students to locate pertinent references and analyze them to synthesize the many thoughts and perspectives to find their own voice. That means students can write their own words by exploiting others' views and then indicate from where those views have been taken. It differs from daily writing in that it has particular features, follows a specific format, uses more academic vocabulary and complicated phrases, and develops the argument logically while considering the intended audience. It can be in many forms: essays, journal articles, small scales, research proposals, theses, etc. Academic writing can be essays, literature reviews, research proposals, and research papers, particularly for students.

Students' problems with academic writing

Although academic writing is essential in higher education and post-college, there are problems for students to achieve. Language aspects such as grammatical errors and lack of vocabulary, expressing the writer's ideas, developing argumentations, writing critically, Coherence and cohesion, paraphrasing and plagiarism, and references and citations are students' problems in

academic writing.

Lexical problems

In terms of academic writing, errors related to the lexicon are the most frequent problems that EFL students commit (Abdulkareem, 2013; Al-Khairy, 2013). Students need a vocabulary size for them to function effectively in their writing. Alharbi (2017) finds out that in the vocabulary aspect, using appropriate vocabulary is the most problematic component in academic writing. Within the limited vocabulary, students will be unable to express their opinions freely and correctly. Lusta (2012) mentioned that using inappropriate vocabulary was the main error in EFL students' academic writing. Basir et al. (2015) stated that lexical errors in academic essays, wrong word choice, omission/incompletion, and misspellings were the most frequent errors made by EFL students.

Grammatical problems

Besides lexicon, grammar is a fundamental aspect of creating good writing. Mohammed and Abdalhussein (2015) investigated that the students make errors in tenses, prepositions, articles, active and passive voice, verbs, and morphological errors, including prepositions, in their writing. Anh et al. (2022) confirmed that articles, prepositions, plural/singular forms, tenses, passive voice, and subject-verb agreement were grammatical errors in the academic writing of EFL students. Academic writing, Tenses, adverbs, and pronouns were the most frequent grammatical errors in the academic writing of EFL students (Atashian & Al-Bahri, 2018).

Coherence and cohesion problems

Cohesion and Coherence are crucial components of academic writing's structure because they affect the text's readability and logical flow. Although students know the significance of Coherence and cohesion in academic writing, they reveal that it is quite hard to accomplish. Ahmed (2010) mentioned that students find writing the introduction, topic sentences, thesis statement, and conclusion challenging. Aguieb and Bouaziz (2017) found that misuse, overuse, and ambiguity in using coherent and cohesive devices were the frequent problems that EFL students committed.

Plagiarism and paraphrasing problems

Good academic writing demands a variety of resources; the writers copy source documents without appropriate citation guides to plagiarism. Paraphrasing is an appropriate technique for students to avoid plagiarism and increase academic writing skills. Academic theft (plagiarism) occurs when we fail to credit other authors' contributions to current writing appropriately. However, that aspect is challenging for students to achieve. Loh (2013) presented that the students faced problems with grammar structures because of using synonyms without sentence structure changes and misunderstanding the original texts. Na and Mai (2017) stated that using synonyms to paraphrase without sentence structure changes, misunderstanding of original texts, and the lack of vocabulary to paraphrase were the problems in the academic writing of EFL students.

Reference and citation problems

Academic writing requires many resources and documents; therefore, using them appropriately is indispensable. Consulting various resources is necessary; however, writers must pay attention to academic crime, which is plagiarism. According to Lamptey and Atta-Obeng (2012), in terms of reference, using weak sources, inconsistencies in reference citations, and using various citation styles were the main problems in academic writing. Citation is the way writers report to the readers that certain documents used in their work came from other authors. It can be seen as a means to give credit to other authors whose ideas are paraphrased in current academic texts. To Shanmugam (2009), citation styles' poor accuracy and dependency on sources were the problems in academic writing citations.

Factors causing problems in academic writing

Each language has its own system, and there are differences between different languages. And it cannot deny the influence of the mother tongue on English language writing. Mohammed and Abdalhussein (2015) mention that grammatical and linguistic systems of the mother tongue affect EFL students' written production in the target language, which is the main reason for almost all grammatical errors in academic writing. In addition, the difference between EFL students' mother tongue and English language alphabet and writing style causes problems in academic writing (Al-Fadda, 2012).

Knowledge of a language is essential to language learning, especially in writing. Hence, a lack of English language knowledge is the main cause of most problems in English writing. Particularly, lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, misunderstanding of grammatical usage, and word-by-word translation are major factors causing EFL students' problems in academic writing (Arunsamran et al., 2011). For Al-Mukdad (2019), one of the reasons for problems in EFL students' academic writing is their awareness of the differences between academic and general English writing.

Besides that, practice is one of the good ways to enhance English writing. For this reason, a lack of academic writing practice opportunities is the main factor of EFL students' problems (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022). The problems in academic writing are influenced by a lack of knowledge about the conventions of academic writing and previous experience of writing academically (Al-Badi, 2015). Alharbi (2017) states that the habit of writing in English is a source of EFL students' problems in academic writing.

Research gap

There are several research studies in the world to investigate problems in academic writing (Al-Khasawneh & Maher, 2010; Al-Fadda, 2012; Abdulkareem, 2013; Al-Khairy, 2013; Al Badi, 2015; Alharbi, 2017; Kotamjani et al., 2018). These studies emphasized the problems, and few mentioned the reasons for problems in academic writing (Al-Khasawneh & Maher, 2010; Al-Fadda, 2012). There are few studies in the context of Vietnam (Anh et al., 2022; Thuy et al., 2022); however, they focus on several specific fields of problems, word choice, or grammatical problems. In the studies in the Vietnamese context, the factors causing the problems in academic writing were not discovered. This study aims to fill the blank that investigates the wide field of problems in the academic writing of postgraduate students in the Vietnam context, including

lexical and grammatical errors, Coherence and cohesion, plagiarism and paraphrasing, and references and citations. Besides focusing on the problems, this study also focuses on the causes of problems.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the survey sought to answer the following research questions:

What are the frequent problems in the academic writing of EFL postgraduate students at a university in the Mekong Delta?

What are the factors that contribute to EFL postgraduate students' problems in academic writing?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The participants in this study are studying at Tra Vinh University, Vietnam, which has a total of 24 majors for post-college. Particularly, more than 50 postgraduate students in the Theory and Methodology of English language teaching major were admitted to the university after passing the entrance examination each year. In this major, the teaching staff consisted of over 20 teachers. Postgraduate students must use English in almost all courses except for Philosophy. Most of the final assignments are academic essays.

37 EFL postgraduate students at Tra Vinh University aged 22 to 40 were the participants in this study. All of them are Theory and Methodology of English language teaching major students and completed an Academic writing course consisting of 3 credits at school. They are required to conduct a study in the English language to graduate.

Design of the Study

The case study using a mixed-methods design was conducted to investigate EFL postgraduate students' frequent problems in academic writing and the reasons for those problems. For Fraenkel et el. (2012), mixed-methods research consists of qualitative and quantitative methods. A mixed-method design allows the relationship between variables to be clarified, explained, and explored in depth (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Quantitative data from the questionnaire was used to collect data on EFL postgraduate students' frequent problems in academic writing.

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews was used to follow up on the questionnaire and discover the reasons why postgraduate students face those problems. The interview involves open questions in which the participants can freely share their views and opinions (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017).

Data collection & analysis

The questionnaire adapted from Amiri and Puteh (2017) consists of two main sections, biodata and 26 Likert items, and is divided into five factors. The format of a five-point Likert-scale type ranges from (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree. Four factors, namely Lexical problems (items 1-3), Grammatical problems (items 4-9), Coherence

and cohesion problems (items 10- 15), Reference and citation problems (items 16-22), and Plagiarism and paraphrasing problems (items 23-26).

The questionnaires were sent to 40 EFL postgraduate students in the third week of the study. After two weeks, all questionnaires were gathered. Data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed through SPSS version 25.0. Then, the Descriptive Statistics Test, including mean scores (M) and standard deviation (SD), were processed to answer EFL postgraduate students' frequent problems in academic writing. In this study, M and SD can show the participants' awareness of the factors and items. After gathering the questionnaire, 12 participants were chosen randomly for the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were in Vietnamese, starting with open-ended questions based on the questionnaire and continuing with explorative questions to clarify what participants said.

Data collected from semi-structured interviews were analyzed to answer both research questions 1 and 2. There are 28 questions in the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The record of each interview was transcribed. Then, the transcripts were translated into English, read carefully, and coded using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Due to the similarities and differences, the participants' answers were gathered into themes. Four key themes were the differences between English language and EFL students' mother tongue, lack of academic writing knowledge and experience, lack of knowledge of the topic, and difficulties in finding reference material.

Results/Findings

Research question 1: What are the frequent problems in the academic writing of EFL postgraduate students at a university in the Mekong Delta?

Table 1

Frequent problems in academic writing of EFL postgraduate students

	Factor	n	M	S.D.
1	Lexical Problems	37	3.0	.935
2	Grammatical problems	37	2.8	.970
3	Coherence and cohesion problems	37	4.1	.709
4	Reference and citation problems	37	4.2	.610
5	Plagiarism and paraphrasing problems	37	4.1	.683

As seen in Table 1, there are differences among the five factors in problems in academic writing that postgraduate students face. Their rating differs significantly, as shown by the standard deviation (SD >.6). As can be seen from the Mean (M), the factor with the highest Mean (M) was reference and citation problems. That means postgraduate students face problems in this factor most frequently. They were followed by the group of two factors, coherence and cohesion

problems (M = 4.1, SD = .709), plagiarism and paraphrasing problems (M = 4.1, SD = .683). That means the problems in Coherence, cohesion, plagiarism, and paraphrasing were the problems that EFL postgraduate students frequently face with in academic writing—then followed by lexical problems (M = 3.0, SD = .935). It can be considered that problems related to lexicon were the third group of problems that EFL postgraduate students frequently face with. Lastly, the factors with the lowest Mean (M) were grammatical problems (M = 2.8, SD = .970). It can be understood that the problems in grammar were the problems that FFL postgraduate students less frequently face in academic writing.

Table 2

Frequent problems in term of reference and citation

	Items	n	M	S.D.
1	I make the reference list with the wrong format.	37	4.3	.588
2	I make the reference list with insufficient details of sources cited in the text.	37	4.4	.639
3	I make the reference list with inconsistency among details.	37	4.4	.594
4	I wrote incorrect elements of reference list entries.	37	4.3	.560
5	I write incomplete recordings of elements of reference list entries.	37	4.4	.676
6	I use more than one reporting verb for citing a quotation.	37	4.1	.918
7	I write direct quotations without the quotation mark.	37	3.7	1.045

In general, from the mean score (see Table 2), it can be said that EFL postgraduate students totally agree with the items in this factor. Specifically, they strongly agree with the idea and assert that they make the reference list with insufficient details of sources cited in the text (item 2, M = 4.4, SD = .639), make the reference list with inconsistency among details (item 3, M = 4.4, SD = .594), and write incomplete recording of elements of references list entries (item 5, M = 4.4, SD = .676). Followed by the lower mean score (M = 4.3), they verified that they made the reference list with the wrong format (item 1, SD = .588) and wrote incorrect elements of reference list entries (item 4, SD = .560). In addition, they also agree that they use more than one reporting verb for citing a quotation (item 6, M = 4.1, SD = 918). In this factor, EFL postgraduate students least agree with writing direct quotations without the quotation mark (item 7, M = 3.7, SD = 1.045).

Table 3

Frequent problems in terms of Coherence and cohesion

	Items	n	M	S.D.
1	I find it difficult to write coherent paragraphs.	37	4.2	.908
2	I find it difficult to use appropriate cohesive devices.	37	4.1	.954
3	I write irrelevant support sentences to topic sentences.	37	4.0	.833
4	I write a different idea in the conclusion.	37	4.1	.906
5	I write details that are not consistent with the points stated in the statement.	37	4.2	.750
6	I write meaningless/unclear statements.	37	4.2	.672

As can be seen from Table 3, the Mean (M) of all six items is 4.0. It can be concluded that EFL postgraduate students strongly agree that coherence and cohesion are their frequent problems in academic writing. Particularly, they agree that writing coherent paragraphs is difficult (item 1, M = 4.2, SD = .908). With the same mean score, they also agree that they write inconsistent details with points stated in the statement (item 5, M = 4.2, SD = .750) and write meaningless or unclear statements in their writing (item 6, M = 4.2, SD = .672). With the lower mean score, EFL postgraduate students confirm that they find it difficult to use appropriate cohesive devices (item 2, M = 4.1, SD = .954). Besides that, they also agree that they write irrelevant support sentences to topic sentences (item 3, M = 4.0, SD = .833).

Table 4

Frequent problems in term of Plagiarism and paraphrasing

	Items	n	M	S.D.
1	I use synonyms without sentence structure changes when paraphrasing.	37	4.2	.764
2	I change the meaning of the original text when paraphrasing uncaringly.	37	4.2	.760
3	I decreased ideas/important information in the original text when paraphrasing.	37	4.1	.848
4	I add more ideas/information are not stated in the original text when paraphrasing.	37	4.0	.763

With a broad view, the mean score shows that EFL postgraduate students strongly agree with all items in this factor (see Table 4). With the highest mean score (M = 4.2), they confirm that they use synonyms without sentence structure changes when paraphrasing (item 1, SD = .764)

and they also change the meaning of the original text when paraphrasing uncaringly (item 2, SD = 760). Next, they agree that they decreased ideas or essential information in the original text when paraphrasing (item 3, M = 4.1, SD = .848)—in contrast, adding more ideas or information that are not stated in the original text when paraphrasing (item 4, M = 4.0, SD = .763) is also agreed by EFL postgraduate student.

Table 5

Frequent problems in term of Lexicon

	Items	n	M	S.D.
1	I face problems in word choice.	37	3.7	1.106
2	I face problems in capitalization.	37	3.8	.877
3	I face problems in using word form.	37	3.7	.990

As shown in Table 5, EFL postgraduate students have different thoughts about the items in this factor. Specifically, they agree that they face problems capitalizing needed words (item 2, M = 3.8, SD = .877). They also agree that they face problems in making word choices (item 1, M = 3.7, SD = 1.106) and they face problems in using word form (item 3, M = 3.7, SD = .980).

Table 6

Frequent problems in term of Grammar

	Items	n	M	S.D.
1	I face problems in using articles.	37	2.8	1.101
2	I face problems in using prepositions.	37	2.9	1.031
3	I face problems in using verb tense.	37	2.8	1.058
4	I face problems in sentence structure.	37	2.8	1.050
5	I face problems in subject-verb agreement.	37	2.8	1.175
6	I face problems in word order.	37	2.8	1.167

The mean score in the Table 6 shows that EFL postgraduate students neither agree nor disagree with the idea of the items in this factor. With all mean score (M) lower than 3.0, it can be concluded that using prepositions (item 2, M = 2.9, SD = 1.031), using articles (item 1, M = 2.8, SD = 1.101), using verb tense (item 3, M = 2.8, SD = 1.058), writing appropriate structure of structure (item 4, M =2.8, SD = 1.050), subject-verb agreement rules (item 5, M= 2.8, SD = 1.175) and making order of words (item 6, M = 2.8, SD = 1.167) are not the frequent problems of EFL postgraduate students in academic writing.

Research question 2: What factors contributed to EFL postgraduate students' problems in academic writing?

The results from the second part of the semi-structured interviews show the EFL postgraduate students' opinion on the reasons for frequent problems in academic writing. Four factors identified include [1] The differences between English language and EFL postgraduate mother tongue, [2] Lack of academic writing knowledge and experience, [3] Lack of knowledge of the topic, and [4] The difficulties in finding reference material.

Factor 1: The differences between English language and EFL postgraduate mother tongue

When asked about the reasons for participants' problems in academic writing, 5 of 12 participants agreed that the differences between the English language and their mother tongue is one of the reasons for their problems in writing for academic purposes. For instance:

> There is no article in Vietnamese, sometimes, I do not use or use wrong article when writing a sentence in English. (S3, interview extract)

> There are differences between Vietnamese and English in word order in a sentence, so when I think and write a sentence in Vietnamese and then translate it into English, sometimes I make mistakes with word order. (S6, interview extract)

> In Vietnamese, the word is kept intact when appearing with various subjects, while in English, the verb is changed to belong to the subject and tense, when translating my ideas into English, I make mistakes with this. (S10, interview extract)

Factor 2: Lack of academic writing knowledge and experience

All of 12 participants expressed that a lack of academic writing knowledge and experience is the cause of their problems in academic writing. In particularly:

> Since I had never written academically before joining the MA course, I am unfamiliar with the conventions of academic writing. (S2, interview extract)

> Do not comprehend the knowledge related to academic writing led me to many plagiarism problems. (S3, interview extract)

> Without experience in writing academically, I usually use synonyms when paraphrasing. However, some words in the original text cannot be replaced, which can lead to plagiarism. (S4, interview extract)

> When writing an essay, I am petrified of plagiarism, I feel tentative when paraphrasing because I not have much time to practice writing academically. (S11, interview extract)

> Because I do not have the knowledge of academic writing and do not use academic writing in my work frequently, I think this is why I face problems in analyzing the writing requirements. (S12, interview extract)

Factor 3: Lack of knowledge of the topic

8 of 12 participants were concerned that lack of the topic's knowledge is the rationale of the problems they faced in academic writing. For example:

Writing about the topic is difficult when I do not understand it clearly. (S5, interview extract)

I cite unrelated ideas in my writing because I do not comprehend the topic.

Without understanding the topic, it led me to write inappropriate titles with the requirement of the writing task. (S7, interview extract)

Because of many document sources from Google Scholar, I cite the wrong information of the topic when I do not understand what I am writing. (S9, interview extract)

I feel unconfident when writing about a topic that I am unfamiliar. I am scared that I will give wrong or missing information. (S12, interview extract)

Factor 4: Reference material

5 of 12 participants mentioned the difficulties in finding reference materials when asked about the cause of their problems in academic writing. For instance:

Many reference materials on the internet make it difficult to choose a reliable source to cite in my writing. (S6, interview extract)

I find it difficult to consider whether the reference material source is reliable because of the large number of them on the the internet. (S8, interview extract)

Reference materials like journals and articles contain an academic vocabulary, they are difficult for me to understand. (S12, interview extract)

Discussion

Research question 1: What are the frequent problems in the academic writing of EFL postgraduate students at a university in the Mekong Delta?

Academic writing is believed to be a complicated process, and EFL students face problems when writing academically. The results of the study showed that EFL postgraduate students encounter coherence, cohesion, reference, citation, plagiarism, paraphrasing, lexical, and grammatical problems in academic writing. It was proved by the mean score of participants' responses. The finding of this study reinforces many previous research studies, such as Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010), Fahmida (2010), Kotamjani et al. (2018), Mohammad et al. (2018), and Mohamed (2021).

According to Fahmida (2010), EFL students make two main types of errors in academic writing: lexical and grammatical errors. The results of this study presented that in terms of grammar, EFL postgraduate students encountered problems in using prepositions most frequently. This result is consistent with the study of Mohammed and Abdalhussein (2015) that prepositions constitute the most problematic area for EFL students. However, in the study of Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2020), prepositions had the lowest percentage values of grammatical errors in academic writing. Kotamjani et al. (2018) also found that using appropriate academic lexical was the most difficult area in academic writing; besides that, writing a coherent paragraph is difficult for EFL students. In the lexicon aspect, this study presented that EFL postgraduate students encountered problems in capitalization and word choice. This result corroborates the

study of Lusta (2012) which indicated that EFL students face problems in using vocabulary appropriately. Likewise, Basir et al. (2015) mentioned that wrong word choice was the most common lexical error committed by students. Besides that, Amiri and Puteh (2017) indicated that capitalization was one of the four common errors that students performed. In terms of coherence and cohesion problems, the results of the current study showed that writing a coherent paragraph, writing details and statements consistently, and writing meaningful and clear statements were problematic in academic writing. The results were parallel with previous studies. Ahmed (2010) presented that writing the thesis statements and the topic sentences were the problems revealed by the students. Writing coherent paragraphs was ranked as the most difficult area in academic writing (Kotamijani, Abd-Samad & Fahimirad, 2018). As Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010) stated the main difficulties in academic writing of postgraduate students are grammar, vocabulary, referencing, organization of ideas, spelling, and register. In the aspect of reference and citation problems in academic writing, the current study pointed out that making the reference list with sufficient details of sources cited in the text, making the reference list with consistency among details, and writing a complete recording of the elements in reference list entries were problematic for students. This result substantiates the study of Shanmugam (2009) that there were a large number of missing and inconsistent citations in the students' writing. From the results of the current study, it can be understood that students do not grasp the citation styles used in their writing. It supports the study of Lamptey and Atta-Obeng (2012) which stated that EFL postgraduate students faced problems in mastering reference style format, and they could not identify the citation format they used. In terms of plagiarism and paraphrasing problems, the current study indicated that students frequently paraphrase the original text by using synonyms while not changing the sentence structure and they change the meaning of the original text. This result reinforces the study of Na and Mai (2017), that students regularly used synonyms when paraphrasing, but infrequently altered the syntactic structure, and the students ran into several language-related problems, including poor comprehension of the source material and a dearth of appropriate vocabulary.

Research question 2: What are the factors that contribute to EFL postgraduate students' problems in academic writing?

The findings from semi-structured interviews showed the reasons for problems in academic writing are the difference between English and their mother tongue, lack of academic writing knowledge and experience, lack of knowledge of the topic, and reference material. The finding of this study reinforces previous research studies. Such as Al-Fadda (2012), he found that the difference in alphabet and writing styles between English, and the student's mother tongue was the main cause of EFL students' difficulties in academic writing. For Vietnamese students who study English as a foreign language in their mother tongue, the use of tenses does not significantly add to the meaning of the utterances because the time reference of the phrase can be represented through the use of the words themselves, not grammatical features. Lack of knowledge and experience in academic writing is one of the causes for students' problems. Academic writing is the kind that requires various conventions and rules. That rules are for the small unit as academic vocabulary up to the way to structure the writing. Moreover, academic writing demands the correct information and have the evidence. Hence, students have to know about the topic clearly to convey information to readers, and discuss on the topic as well.

Without comprehending the topic, students can provide inappropriate ideas in their writing, and more seriously, they can write a text deviating from the subject. To obtain the knowledge of the topic, students need to read many documents about it. However, to consult the documents about the topic is complicated. Reference materials is the other reason for students' problems in academic writing. Since the various reference materials in the Internet, students find it difficult to evaluate the quality of the document to cite in their writings. Almost reference materials are also in academic writing and contain various academic vocabulary, that makes students difficult to understand the document clearly. On the other hand, current research findings were also inconsistent with the findings presented by Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010). They discovered that students' English knowledge foundation and environment are the reasons for their problems in academic writing.

Conclusion

This study looks into the frequent problems in academic writing of Theory and Methodology of English language teaching major postgraduate students in a puclic university in the Mekong Delta. The result of the study indicated that the problems in reference, citation, Coherence, cohesion, plagiarism and paraphrasing were the most frequent problems, followed by the problems related to lexicon and grammar, which were the group of problems that FFL postgraduate students less frequently faced in academic writing. Moreover, the causes of these problems are the differences between the English language and students' mother tongue; students find it difficult to transfer the ideas from their mother tongue. In addition, lack of academic writing knowledge and experience, lack of knowledge of the topic, and reference material were also the reasons for students' problems in their academic writing. This study proposes several pedagogical implications with the hope of making valuable contributions in learning English language, particularly in learning English academic writing. Students should be more self-directed, actively identify their problems, and improve their academic writing. To achieve those intents, students should gather knowledge of English language, academic writing, and the topic they want to write, and repeatedly practice writing academically. Furthermore, lecturers and instructors should effectively indicate EFL students' methods and approaches in learning academic writing.

Although the research was strictly observed, some unavoidable limitations go beyond the scope of the study. This study might undergo some limitations related to the generalization because the study was conducted in a small number of participants. A similar study could have to be conducted with more participants in different courses.

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Biodata

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