



## **Vietnamese upper-high school teachers' views, practices, difficulties, and expectations on teaching EFL writing**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching EFL writing at the secondary level of education is one of the challenging tasks for every teacher. However, few studies on how EFL writing is taught at up-secondary schools (U-SS) have been reported. This study attempts to explore how Vietnamese teachers at this educational level perceived the importance of EFL writing, how they taught this skill, and what difficulties and expectations/suggestions they had in making the teaching of this skill at their own schools more effectively. Employing the 5-point Likert-scale survey with 20 teachers from five U-SS, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, the study found these teachers' understanding of the importance of teaching this skill, their confidence, and appropriate pedagogical use and content knowledge (PCK) in teaching it. However, their lack of time, the heavy contents in the textbooks, the multiple-choice test formats, large classes, students' dislike of this skill, and their insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary challenged their teaching of this skill. With the suggestions/recommendations made by these teachers, this study is expected to provide some insights for relevant and timely support to teachers for the effectiveness of teaching this skill in the educational settings in Vietnam and in similar EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** EFL writing; teaching EFL writing; secondary school teachers; Vietnamese students; Vietnamese teachers

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## Introduction

Teaching the writing skill of the English language is reported to be one of the most challenging tasks experienced by not only English-native teachers but also English as Second (ESL) or Foreign Language (EFL) teachers around the globe (Ghoorchaei & Khosravi, 2019; Nguyen, 2018; Syafii & Miftah, 2020). In fact, due to the complex nature of English writing and learners' limited linguistic knowledge, teaching this skill in EFL contexts is a challenging process (Ghoorchaei & Khosravi, 2019; Syafii & Miftah, 2020). Besides learning the English language, EFL learners need to learn how to develop their ideas to produce texts with the rhetorical features that they have never had in their first language (L1). As Ghoorchaei and Khosravi (2019) argued, this problem would be compounded if students' previous learning experiences do not include this skill. Additionally, Tefera (2019) also states that while L1 writers face difficulties in writing fluency, EFL writers encounter challenges of linguistic aspects and writing strategies. EFL learners' challenges could subsequently prompt the difficult task for teachers because developing this skill takes a long time to see the improvement (Tangpermpoon, 2008). However, Harmer (2007) suggests that this skill should be taught to help EFL learners acquire the language through the visual demonstration of how it is constructed and reinforce what they have learnt.

Several studies to help teachers and learners teach and learn EFL writing effectively have been conducted in various EFL contexts. In Vietnam, Nguyen (2009) identified teachers' language problems in teaching EFL writing and suggested different ways to develop Vietnamese students' English writing skills. Similarly, based on the documented problems in EFL writing by Chinese students, Sun (2010) provided several pedagogical solutions to help them improve their English writing competence. To teach EFL writing to Thai students, Tangpermpoon (2008) suggested incorporating the product, process and genre-based approaches. Similarly, in applying modified genre-based approaches to teach Thai university students, Changpueng (2012) and Nguyen (2018) found the effectiveness of their instructional techniques in improving

Thai university students' EFL writing. In Indonesia, to enhance grade-nine students' skills and motivation in writing reports, Syafii and Miftah (2020) employed the Venn-diagram strategy and found it effective. Besides the approaches to teaching EFL writing, research on Iranian and Taiwanese learners' writing strategies was also carried out (Aidinlou & Far, 2014; Ghoorchaei & Khosravi, 2019; Kao & Reynolds, 2017). Their findings showed a positive relationship between learners' language proficiency, self-efficacy beliefs, writing strategies and students' writing abilities.

In Vietnam, according to the policy entitled 'National Foreign Language 2020 Project' (hereby, the Project) proclaimed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), since 2008, English has been taught as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 in the mainstream national curriculum (rather than from Grade 6 as previously implemented). This Project aims to enhance the quality of English language teaching (ELT) and learning in the national education system (Hoang, 2016). In particular, the Project places a strong emphasis on developing effective English language users who can function successfully across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Hoang, 2016; Tran & Tanemura, 2020). Consequently, a series of new English textbooks have been produced for use in schools nationwide since 2012 in order to cultivate students' communicative competence and prepare them to become global citizens. These textbooks are organized into themes/topics (units) with the focus on two oral skills (listening and speaking) at the primary level and four macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) at the upper-secondary level. Different linguistic elements (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar) and intercultural aspects are also included in each unit. The communicative competence levels from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) were used as important bases for these textbooks' development and the development of competence framework for each grade and each level of education (Le, 2019). As stated in the Project, students are required to achieve A1 at the primary level, A2 at the lower-secondary level and B1 at the upper-secondary level. Besides training teachers to exploit the textbooks effectively, standard teaching and learning facilities have been improved to meet the learning outcomes required by MOET.

Despite MOET's strong emphasis on the English language in the national curriculum, research on how elementary and high-school teachers in Vietnam implemented this Project tends to be scarce. Furthermore, although the Project aims to help all young Vietnamese people have a good grasp of the language for their future communicative needs after leaving school (Parks, 2011), few studies were conducted on how each language skill was taught at these

educational levels. As found in Nguyen (2012) and Trinh and Nguyen (2014) and according to recent test results from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), writing has been the most problematic to Vietnamese test-takers. This issue could be explained in terms of the low quality of English language teaching in Vietnam (Le, 2019), the challenge of teaching EFL writing due to the impact of Vietnamese cultures and testing and assessment on learners' EFL writing (Nguyen, 2009; Trinh & Nguyen, 2014). In spite of this problem, to the researcher's best knowledge, there tends to be the absence of research on how EFL writing is taught at up-secondary schools (U-SS) in Vietnam.

Therefore, this study attempts to explore how teachers at this educational level perceive the importance of EFL writing, how they teach this skill and what difficulties and expectations/suggestions they have in making the teaching of this skill at their own schools more effective. The research questions posited for this study are as follows:

- (1) What are Vietnamese upper-secondary school teachers' views on the importance of EFL writing?
- (2) How do they report to teach this skill at their U-SS?
- (3) What are their difficulties in teaching this skill at their U-SS?
- (4) What are their expectations/suggestions for making the teaching of EFL writing at their U-SS more effective?

The answers to these questions are expected to shed lighter on teachers' perspectives, practices, difficulties and expectations in teaching this skill at U-SS in Vietnam. Furthermore, these findings are hoped to provide some insights for relevant and timely support to teachers for the effectiveness of teaching this skill in the context of Vietnam and in similar EFL contexts.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

This study applied a descriptive qualitative research design (Creswell, 2012) as this study involved natural settings in U-SS schools where EFL teaching and learning were conducted. As the main subject of the study, the teachers directly experienced the practice of teaching this skill. Furthermore, through descriptive research, the researcher was able to fully comprehend the teachers' views, practices, and challenges related to EFL writing teaching at U-SS schools in Vietnam.

### **Context and Participants**

This study was conducted with 20 English teachers (16 females & 4 were males) from five rural U-SS schools in a Mekong Delta province of Vietnam. This proportion reflects gender imbalance in English language teaching (ELT) in Vietnam. Nine of them were in the age of forties (mid-career) while the other half were in the ages of twenties (15%), thirties (30%), and fifties (10%). 85% of them held a Bachelor degree, and teachers with Master's degrees accounted for 15%. Because the education system in Vietnam is centralized, from MOET's guidelines, the Department of Education and Training (DET) in this province developed a detailed framework for the English curricula for all educational levels, including the number of tests, test structures, and the time allocated to teach this subject for each educational level and each unit in the textbooks.

According to their framework, the textbook series by Van et al. (2016), joint-published by the Educational Publishing House and Pearson Education were employed to teach Vietnamese Grade 10 (G10) (aged 15), Grade 11 (G11) (aged 16), and Grade 12 (G12) (aged 17) students. The books were said to have adopted a theme-based curriculum approved by MOET. Each book contained 16 teaching and five review units to be taught over a period of 105 instructional hours, with three periods of 45 minutes each per week. Each unit contained various sections focused on developing students' linguistic knowledge, language skills, and intercultural knowledge. To prepare G12 students for the national exam, their regular and end-of-term tests are in the multiple-choice format while 40%-45% of the tests for both G10-11 students are in constructed-response forms in which students are asked to use correct tenses, rewrite sentences and write a certain text type (e.g., emails, paragraphs, job application letters) using given prompts.

### **Data collection**

The main research instrument employed in this study was the 5-point Likert-scale survey which aimed to learn about the participants' views on the importance of EFL writing, their teaching practices, difficulties and expectations and/or suggestions on how to help teachers and students at U-SS in Vietnam to teach and learn EFL writing effectively. In particular, besides 32 5-point Likert-scale items, one open-ended question for each surveyed category was also included for them to add their own views, ways of teaching, difficulties and expectations/suggestions if they were not listed in the survey.

### **Data analysis**

In order to understand teachers' views, practices, difficulties and expectations/suggestions on how to make teaching and learning EFL writing at their U-SS effective, the means scores of all items in both teacher and student surveys were determined with the employment of SPSS. Their self-reported responses to the open-ended questions in each category were independently read and classified into themes by the researcher and an inter-rater who is a university lecturer with a Ph.D. degree in Applied Linguistics. Discussion on the differences was then conducted to achieve a complete agreement on the theme classification. Employing the purposeful sampling method, semi-structured interviews with five teachers (T1-T5) (one from each school) (See Appendix), were also conducted in the Vietnamese language in order to clarify the findings from the survey. Also, classroom observations were made in order to learn more about their teaching practices. Then, the findings from the surveys and the open-ended questions were interpreted together with the interview data, test paper examinations, and classroom observations. However, only the related information was translated and included in the manuscript to understand the research findings better.

### **Findings**

This section presents the findings from the survey (Tables 1, 2, 3 & 4) and their self-reports from the open-ended questions (Figures 1, 2 & 3) on the participants' views, teaching practices, difficulties and suggestions/expectations in teaching EFL writing at U-SS in Vietnam. The discussion on these findings with the data from class observations and semi-structured interviews with five teachers will be provided in the next section.

As recommended by Sullivan and Artino (2013) that a mean score is not a very helpful measure of the central tendency of Likert-scale data, the percentages of teachers' positive (strongly agree & agree), neutral and negative (strongly disagree & disagree) attitudes are also included in Tables 1, 2 3 and 4. Moreover, Wiboolsri (2008) suggested that the mean score of 3.5 is considered as the acceptable value representing a positive attitude.

### ***Teachers' views on the importance of EFL writing***

As shown in Table 1, most of these teachers believed their students needed to learn writing in English (Item 1), and they had to help them improve their writing ability in class. In fact, besides the absence of disagreement, these two

first items received the highest means score of 4.10 for the agreement of 85% of the teachers. Although Item 3 (*Because writing is not an important part in the test, I usually skip writing lessons in the textbooks*) had the low means score of 2.25 with 90% of the teachers showing their neutral and negative attitudes, it tends to show that EFL writing was taught in their class. The lowest means score for Item 4 (*Writing in English is not a necessary skill for my students*) also asserts these teachers' beliefs of the importance of this skill for their students.

Table 1. Teachers' views on the importance of teaching EFL writing

No.	Items	Means	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
1.	My students need to learn English writing in class	4.10	85	15	0
2.	I have to help my students improve their English writing ability in class	4.10	85	15	0
3.	Because writing is not an important part in the test, I usually skip writing lessons in the textbooks	2.25	10	20	70
4.	Writing in English is not a necessary skill for my students	2.05	5	20	75

### ***How EFL writing was taught***

Among 13 surveyed items on how EFL writing was taught, only five items (Items 1-5 in Table 2), which focused on their teaching methods, received a means score higher than 3.5, indicating their agreement (Wiboolsri, 2008). While Item 1 (*I use relevant teaching activities to teach each specific writing task in the textbooks*) gained 85% of these teachers' agreement without any disagreement, the neutral and negative attitudes in the other four items accounted for around one-third of them. In particular, about two thirds agreed that they always checked two-third students' writing (Item 2) and organized interactive writing activities for students (Item 3). The process and genre-based approaches to teach EFL writing (Items 4 & 5) received the agreement of 70% and 60% of these teachers, respectively, but the percentages of disagreement on these items were 10%. Furthermore, as seen in Figure 1, these teachers self-reported to design extra activities to help their students write by asking them to write diaries or something related to each unit's themes in the course books (20%, 15% & 5%, respectively). This could support the highest percentage of their agreement to Item 1.

The next four items (Items 6, 7, 8 & 9) received the means scores of 3.35, 3.30, 3.15, and 3.10, respectively. 60% of the teachers admitted training their students with sentence transformation and grammar exercises (Item 6), while 40% agreed that they gave their students writing samples for most writing tasks in the textbooks (Item 8). This teaching technique was also self-reported by 30% of these teachers (Figure 1). While Item 9 (*I always ask my students to do their own writing*) received almost equal percentages of agreement, neutrality, and disagreement, 50% of teachers chose a neutral stance to Item 7 (*I use writing activities as fun activities*).

Table 2. How teachers taught EFL writing in class

No.	Items	Means	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
1.	I use relevant teaching activities to teach each specific writing task in the textbooks	4.10	85	15	0
2.	I always check my students' writings	3.75	70	25	5
3.	I always ask my students to do the writing in pairs or groups	3.75	60	35	5
4.	I follow the process approach in teaching English writing in class	3.75	70	20	10
5.	I apply genre-based approaches in my writing class	3.65	65	25	10
6.	I focus on training my students with sentence transformation and grammar exercises	3.35	60	20	20
7.	I use writing activities as fun activities	3.30	35	50	15
8.	I give my students writing samples for most writing tasks in the textbooks	3.15	40	35	25
9.	I always ask my students to do their own writing	3.10	30	35	35
10.	I ask my students to learn the writing samples by heart in case they have them in the test	2.70	30	30	40
11.	I briefly introduce the writing tasks and ask my students to do the tasks in groups at home	2.70	25	20	55
12.	I don't spend much time teaching the writing lessons in the textbooks	2.55	25	10	65
13.	I don't teach the writing lessons in the textbooks	1.80	0	10	90



Regarding the last four items with the means lower than 3.0 (Item 10-13), these teachers' disagreement was mainly attributed to the last three. With 90% of teachers' disagreement on "*I don't teach the writing lessons in the textbooks*" (Item 13), it was confirmed that these teachers did not skip teaching EFL writing in their classes. Furthermore, Item 12, which received the disagreement of 65% of these teachers, also indicated that they spent sufficient time teaching the textbooks' writing lessons. With the same means of 2.70 and a higher percentage of disagreement than those of agreement and neutrality, Items 10 and 11 tended to show that 40% of them did not expect students to learn writing samples by heart (Item 10), and more than half of them taught this skill properly (*I briefly introduce the writing tasks and ask my students to do the tasks in groups at home*).

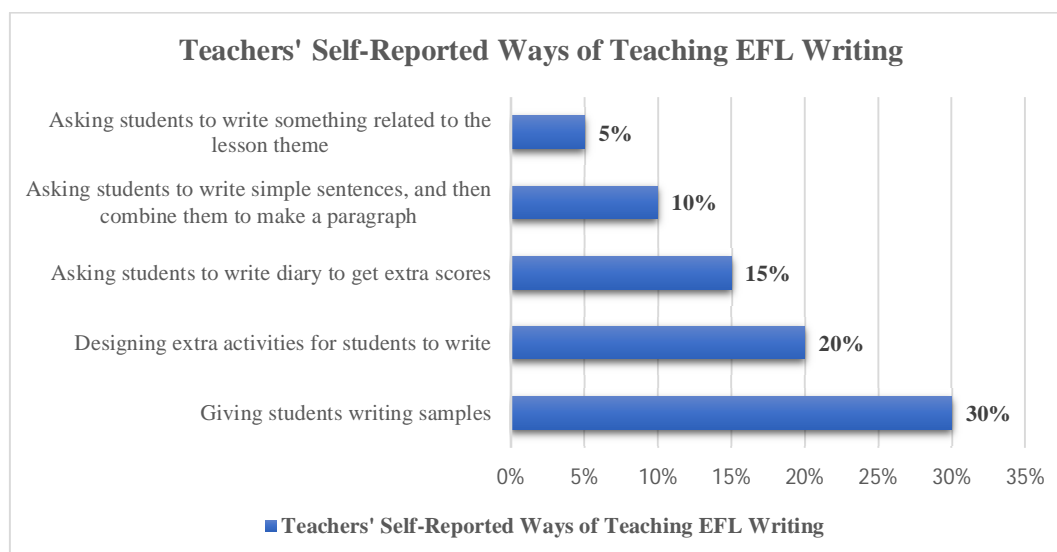


Figure 1. Teachers' self-reported ways of teaching EFL writing in class

### ***Teachers' difficulties in teaching and learning EFL writing***

Table 3 and Figure 2 display the challenges these Vietnamese teachers had in teaching EFL writing in their local settings. As seen in Table 3, only three out of nine surveyed items got the means higher than 3.5. However, the first two items (Items 1 & 2) revealed that not having enough time (to teach this skill and check their students' writing) was the challenge that 75% of these teachers had. Students of different English abilities (Item 3) were also believed to make the teaching of this skill difficult by 55% of them. Regarding the lessons in the textbooks (Items 4, 6 & 7), only a small proportion of these teachers thought they would challenge their students and their teaching (35%, 15% & 20%)

respectively. Similarly, only 25% of these teachers agreed that they did not have supplementary materials to use and sufficient knowledge of methods to teach EFL writing (Items 5 & 8), respectively. Receiving the lowest means score in Table 3 and with 100% of these teachers' neutral and negative attitudes, Item 9 showed their confidence in correcting and providing feedback on their students' writing.

Table 3. Teachers' difficulties in teaching EFL writing in class

No.	Items	Means	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
1.	I don't have enough time to teach writing in my English class	3.85	75	15	10
2.	I don't have enough time to check students' writing	3.75	75	10	15
3.	Students are at different levels	3.40	55	25	20
4.	I find the writing lessons in the textbooks too difficult for my students	3.20	35	45	20
5.	I don't have supplementary materials to use in my teaching English writing	2.75	25	35	40
6.	The writing lessons in the textbooks are too difficult to teach	2.70	15	50	35
7.	I find the writing lessons in the textbooks not relevant to the tests	2.65	20	40	40
8.	I don't have sufficient knowledge of methods for teaching English writing	2.65	25	25	50
9.	I don't know how to correct and provide feedback to my students' writing	1.80	0	15	85

Similar to the finding of Item 3 in the survey, students of different levels of English proficiency accounted for the highest percentages (25%) of teachers' self-reported difficulties in teaching EFL writing (Figure 2). That could be the reason why 10% of them stated it was difficult for them to design different writing tasks for students of different abilities, and they did not have various writing exercises. The same percentage of teachers (25%) also mentioned the absence of writing-skill parts in the national graduation exam as another challenge for them to teach this skill. Moreover, 20% of the teachers reported that their difficulties also derived from "Students don't like writing" and "Students lack grammar and vocabulary to write". While "Writing is a difficult skill to

teach" was reported by 15% of the teachers, 5% of them mentioned that their students' preference to learn the writing samples by heart made the teaching of this skill difficult.

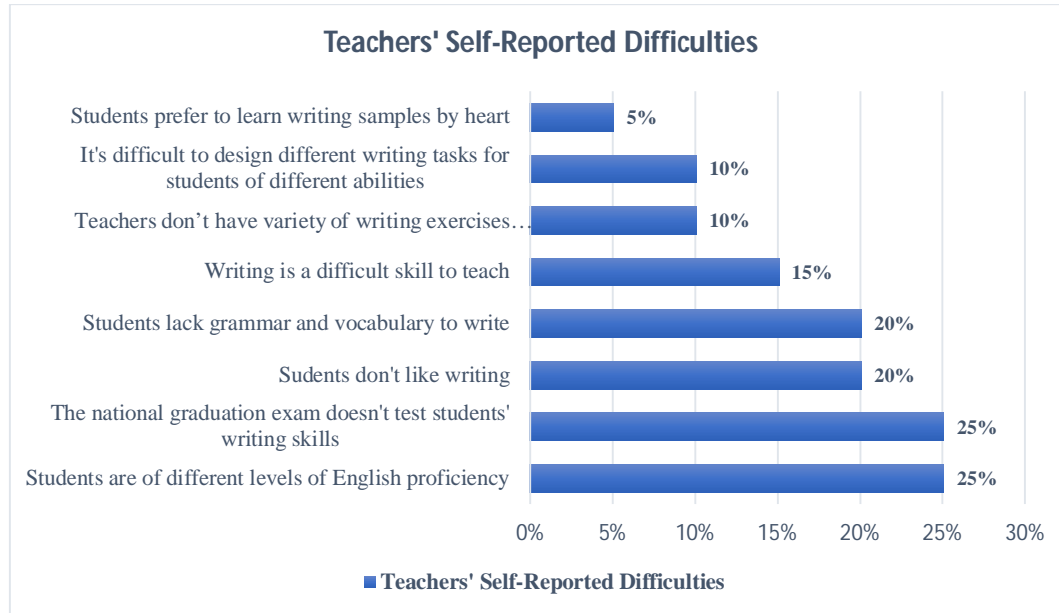


Figure 2. Teachers' self-reported difficulties

**Teachers' expectations on how to teach EFL writing at U-SS effectively**

Different from the findings of the surveys on the other categories (views, teaching practices, difficulties), all five items in this category had the means higher than 3.5, indicating these teachers' agreement to these surveyed items (Table 4). Requiring teachers at lower educational levels to teach this skill was expected the most by 90% of these teachers (Item 1). This expectation was also reported by 10% of them in their self-reports when they stated that "The upper-secondary school admission English test should have a writing part" (Figure 3).

Table 4. Teachers' expectations and suggestions

No.	Items	Means	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
1.	Require English teachers at elementary and lower secondary schools to teach English writing	4.05	90	10	0
2.	Make writing a compulsory part of the tests	3.90	75	20	5
3.	Increase the teaching time for each unit in the textbooks	3.85	75	20	5

Hang	Vietnamese upper-high school teachers' views, practices, difficulties, and expectations on teaching EFL writing				
4.	Provide teachers with hands-on training on how to teach each writing task in the textbooks	3.80	70	25	5
5.	Reduce the teaching contents for each grade level	3.50	60	20	20

Although 75% of them showed their agreement to Item 2 (*Make writing a compulsory part of the tests*) (Table 4), the self-reports restated their expectations/suggestions to have a writing part in the national graduation exam by 25% of these teachers (Figure 3). Besides, the teachers also agreed to increase the teaching time for each unit in the textbooks and reduce the teaching contents for each grade level with the means scores of 3.85 and 3.50 (Items 3 & 5, Table 4), respectively. With the means of 3.8, "Provide teachers with hand-on training on how to teach each writing task in the textbooks" (Item 4) also gained the agreement of 70% of the teachers. In their self-reports, these teachers also expected to be provided with the strategies to teach EFL writing and to be regularly trained on how to teach this skill (20% & 10%, respectively). Besides allocating more time to teach this skill (10%), the teachers also suggested that the textbooks should have practical and meaningful writing tasks for students (20%) (Figure 3).

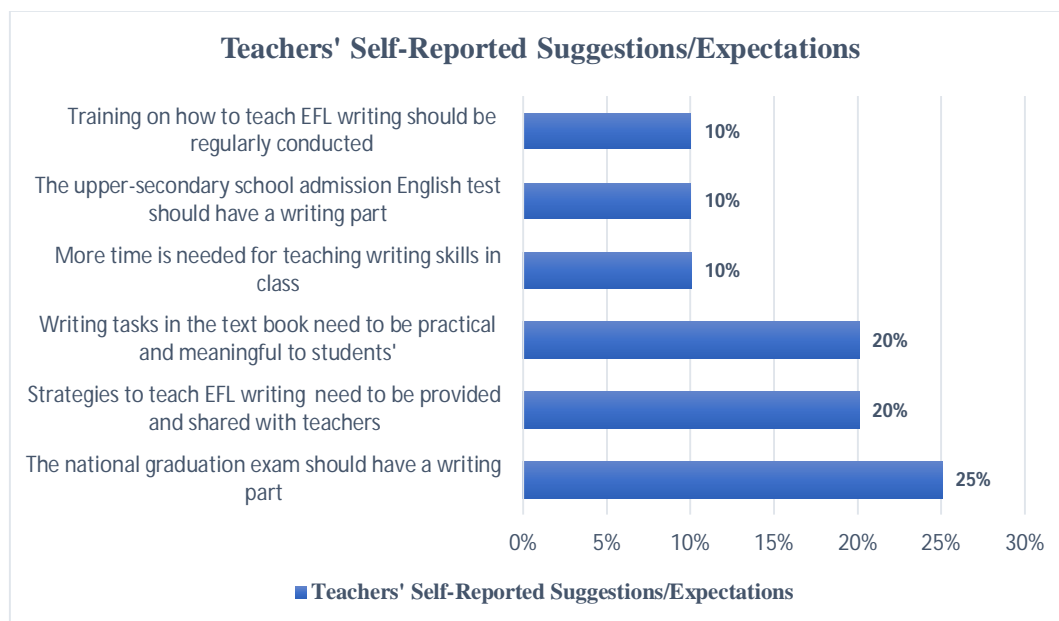


Figure 3. Teachers' self-reported expectations/suggestions

## Discussion

The findings from the survey showed these Vietnamese U-SS teachers recognized the importance of EFL writing. That was reflected through the agreement of almost all of them with the high means scores to the items surveyed on the need for students to learn this skill and teachers' responsibility to help them improve this skill in class (Items 1 & 2, Table 1). Furthermore, their perceived significant role of EFL writing was also shown in their self-reports on designing extra activities for their students to write, such as writing diaries or something related to the lessons' themes in the course books (Figure 1). The survey also revealed that they did not skip teaching EFL writing in their classes and spent sufficient time teaching the writing lessons in the textbooks (Items 13, 12 & 11, Table 2). In the interviews with the teachers (T1, T2 & T4), it was surprising to know that they understood the importance of teaching this skill from the government's Project in English language education and the reality that their graduate students experienced. As shared by these teachers, due to their low level of English writing skills, many of their old students could not get a job after their university graduation or got promotions in their organizations where English is used as the main means of communication. Moreover, they added that students' problems were a driving force for their making the best efforts to teach this skill although they had limited time in class and knew that it would not be tested in the national exams. This information suggests that the enabling factors for teachers' changes involve their awareness of the significance of what they are doing. This finding asserts previous scholars' statement (Nguyen, 2020; Nguyen, 2020) that once teachers have seen the needs for their educational reforms rather than being enforced by school leaders and policymakers, changes would take place.

Regarding their teaching, these teachers tended to show their confidence in the pedagogical knowledge through the means scores higher than 3.50 for the surveyed items on teaching methods (Table 2). They employed genre-based and process approaches and organized different interactive activities to teach each specific writing task in the textbooks (Items 1-5, Table 2). The observations of five classes proved that teachers employed appropriate teaching methodologies to teach the writing tasks from the textbooks. They designed extra activities for students to practice the necessary writing elements before asking them to compose a specific text type. Besides these, the ways they provided feedback and corrected students' writing were effective. It could be argued that because these teachers were informed about being observed, they had a good preparation for demonstrating their teaching performance to the researcher.

Though that could be true, what they performed indicated that they had sufficient PCK to teach the subject. This positive sign could result from the government's prerequisite for having a minimum of four-year training on their subject majors at universities of pedagogy before they could become U-SS teachers (Le, 2019; Nguyen, 2020). As compared to Thai U-SS counterparts, Vietnamese teachers tend to be more pedagogically efficient because in Thai education system, "individuals may choose to become members of their state teaching systems first and foremost and that their choice of subject to teach is a secondary consideration" (Hayes, 2008, p. 488).

Despite having satisfactory PCK, these Vietnamese U-SS teachers still had some unfavorable teaching approaches. First, they focused on training their students with sentence transformation and grammar exercises in writing classes and gave them writing samples for most writing tasks in the textbooks (Items 8 & 6, Table 2, respectively). This teaching strategy was also self-reported by 30% of these teachers (Figure 1). Additionally, more than half of them briefly taught this skill in class and asked students to write on their own or with friends at home (Items 11 & 9, Table 2, respectively). As revealed in the interview with them (T1, T3 & T5), it was known that the heavy contents in the textbooks and the multiple-choice test formats led them to these teaching short-cuts in order to complete the lessons within the allocated time and enable students to perform well in the tests. In fact, the mainstream school system in Vietnam has largely relied on high-stakes testing to gauge the effects of teaching and learning (Le, 2019).

Accordingly, a variety of tests have been adopted as the main measures of language competence and performance (Nguyen, 2020). Following the DET specifications in this Mekong Delta province of Vietnam, the in-class assessment per semester includes one quiz, three regular 15-minute tests, two periodical 45-minute tests, one mid-term test and one end-of-term test, and for G12 students, besides these tests, they have to take the national tests for their graduation. Moreover, the teachers (T2 & T5) added that they did not teach EFL writing to G12 students because, as guided by the provincial DET, the regular, mid-term and final tests for this group of students did not have writing parts, but were in the multiple-choice formats. The tests for G10-11 students included 40%-45% of self-constructed-responses that required them to do grammatical exercises, rewrite sentences and writing a certain text type using given prompts; EFL writing was taught to them. Test-oriented teaching is commonly known to extensively practice in the examination-oriented education system like Vietnam and Thailand (Darasawang & Todd, 2012; Nguyen, 2019). The last interesting

point in their teaching of this skill is that almost two-thirds of them did not use writing activities for students to have as fun in class (Item 7, Table 3), and this choice was explained by their insufficient time to cover all teaching units required by their schools (T1, T4 & T5). This finding in U-SS classrooms in Vietnam is different from those in Thailand where having fun, enjoyment and comfort are the typical features expected by Thai students (Baker, 2008; Nguyen, 2019).

In terms of challenges, the majority of these U-SS teachers reported that they did not have enough time to teach EFL writing properly. As revealed in the interviews, teachers (T2, T3 & T4) stated that there were various sections to cover in each unit, and three 45-minute periods per week was too short of completing all properly. As a result, they chose to focus more on what was important for their students to do well in the tests and spent little time on lessons that were not tested in the exams. Another difficulty was that their students had different abilities in English (Item 3, Table 3; Figure 2), and that challenged them in designing different writing tasks and activities to suit them all. Although most teachers in this study were confident about their PCK, and only 25% of these teachers agreed that they did not have supplementary materials to use (Item 8, Table 3), the interview with them (T1, T2, T3 & T5) showed that it would be impossible for them to develop tasks and activities corresponding to every student in classes of 40-50 each and with different levels of English proficiency. Also, the absence of writing-skill parts in the national graduation exam was their other constraint on teaching EFL writing to students, especially G12 groups whose success was decided by the results of their graduation exams. The test results considered as the main measures of the effects of teaching and learning in Vietnam could account for this incident (Le, 2019; Nguyen, 2020). This fact is likely to explain for why some of these U-SS stated that students' preference to learn writing samples by heart in order to do well in the tests made it difficult for them to teach this skill in class (Figure 2). Similar to the situation in Thailand reported by Nguyen (2018), the last challenge these teachers had in teaching EFL writing was their students' dislike of this skill, and they did not have enough vocabulary and grammar (Figure 2). This could be the reason why 15% of the teachers reported that "*Writing is a difficult skill to teach*" (Figure 2).

The suggestions or expectations made by these teachers centered on their practical problems in their teaching contexts. The first one gaining the agreement of 90% of these teachers (Item 1, Table 4) was requiring teachers at lower educational levels to teach this skill. In their self-reports (Figure 3), they

also expected to have a writing part in the English admission test to U-SS (Figure 3). Furthermore, as indicated in the renovated English curriculum by Hoang (2016), the textbooks series for the Project emphasize two oral skills at the primary level, and small attention is given to writing at the lower secondary level while equal attention is paid to all the four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing at the upper secondary level.

As revealed in the interview, they stated that this skill should be taught to students at lower-secondary schools in order to familiarize them with it, and the admission test to U-SS should also include a writing-skill part in order for teachers not to ignore teaching this skill in class (T3 & T5). Besides teaching EFL writing at lower educational levels, 75% of these U-SS teachers also suggested making writing a compulsory part of all in-class assessment tests (Table 4) and of the national graduation exam (Figure 3). This inclusion in the interview was a waste of their time to teach this skill when it was not tested (T2, T4 & T5). These three teachers further added that because students knew this skill would not be tested, they would not learn. As lack of time was reported to be the main difficulty for their teaching this skill properly in class, these teachers also expected to reduce the contents in the textbooks for each grade level and/or increase the teaching time for each unit in the textbooks (Items 3 & 5, Table 4). Moreover, hand-on training on how to teach each writing task in the textbooks was also expected to regularly provide to these teachers (Item 4, Table 4). Such training would save time preparing lessons to teach this skill effectively (T1 & T3). The teachers also suggested having the textbooks with more practical and meaningful writing tasks for students (Figure 3). As revealed in the interview, all teachers said that many writing tasks in the textbooks were not relevant to Vietnamese students in terms of cultures and daily life. This information tends to confirm the textbooks' evaluation by Nguyen, Marlina, and Cao (2020) when they claimed that these books focus merely on preparing students to use English for communication with non-Asian English users. Since Vietnamese teachers and students rely mostly on textbooks for teaching and learning, "it is crucial that textbook writers support them in embracing the pluri-centric nature of English." (Nguyen et al., 2020, p. 14).

## **Conclusion**

This study explores Vietnamese teachers' perspectives, teaching practices, difficulties, and suggestions/expectations in teaching EFL writing at U-SS in a Mekong Delta province in the South of Vietnam. Employing the 5-point Likert-scale survey with 20 teachers from five U-SS, classroom observations, and semi-



structured interviews, the findings showed these teachers' acknowledging the importance of teaching this skill for their students' future betterment. Unlike their Thai counterparts, these Vietnamese teachers were confident about their PCK, and they knew how to apply various teaching techniques to teach different writing genres. However, their improper teaching of this skill was reported to be influenced by their lack of time, heavy contents in the textbooks, multiple-choice test formats, large classes, students' dislike of this skill, and insufficient knowledge of grammar vocabulary. Their recommendations were, therefore, made in relation to their practical problems. Although the Project's focus was more on communication skills at lower educational levels while writing was given equal attention at the upper-secondary level, these teachers believed that it would be more beneficial to U-SS students if writing was also taught at all levels. Furthermore, these teachers also expected the inclusion of a writing-skill section in all in-class assessments and national tests in order not to waste their time teaching this skill. These teachers also suggested the reduction of textbook contents, more time allocation to cover all textbook units, and the inclusion of relevant and meaningful writing tasks in the textbooks. Despite their sufficient PCK, regular and hand-on training on how to teach each writing lesson in the textbooks was also expected by these teachers in order for them to teach EFL writing to their students effectively. Although this is a small-scale study, its results are likely to provide MOET and DET some insights for relevant and timely support to teachers for the effectiveness of teaching this skill in the educational settings in Vietnam and in similar EFL contexts. Future research on this topic in other EFL contexts in Vietnam should also be conducted to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic. Studies on this topic in other EFL settings are also encouraged in order to have insightful information regarding how to support EFL teachers in teaching EFL writing successfully.

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## Appendix

### Semi-structured interview questions

1. Why don't you skip teaching EFL writing in class?
2. Why do you give students writing samples?
3. Why don't you use writing as fun activities?
4. Why did you report not having enough time to teach EFL writing?
5. Why did you expect teachers at lower educational levels teach EFL writing to students?
6. Why do you think writing sections should be a compulsory part of all tests?
7. Why do you expect to have regular training to teach this skill when you are confident about your PCK?
8. Why did you comment that "textbooks should have practical and meaningful writing tasks"?