

Improving Vietnamese Students' English Essay Writing at Dong Thap University

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ABSTRACT— *This paper investigates the weaknesses found in English essays written by Vietnamese students of English as a foreign language from Dong Thap University, South of Vietnam. These essays are their in-class timed exam papers. It shows that although the students are all third and fourth-year English majors, their essay writing skills are not as good as expected, specifically regarding language use and essay contents. It is, therefore, suggested that teachers should take into consideration problems in question to help the students improve their essay writing skills.*

Keywords--- paragraph, essay, writing, problem, language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Being able to write sound English essays of various types (i.e. compare-and-contrast, classification, process analysis, cause-and-effect, argumentative) is one of the major targets for EFL students at tertiary education. Strictly speaking, the target requires students to work very hard on a regular practice basis to acquire related subskills of academic writing because the task of writing an essay in another language is quite a complex process. Definitely, they have to develop not only linguistic knowledge of the English language (*phonology, vocabulary and grammar*), but also competences of rhetorical conventions at the text level in order to organize and express relevant ideas in an appropriate way. As a result, Vietnamese EFL students generally have to face a number of problems due to tangible discrepancies in wording and discourse patterns between English and Vietnamese. In reality, these problems can be explicitly revealed in common weaknesses or errors committed by students in their English essays, especially during their early and mid-stages of the language acquisition.

It is, therefore, of great significance to examine the weaknesses in question to raise students' awareness and in some ways help them fix these weaknesses to improve the quality of essays before they become fossilized (i.e. *Linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a particular native language will tend to keep in their interlanguage relative to a particular target language, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the target language*, [9:36]). And more importantly, this reflective approach is part of the teaching/learning discipline to assist students to well acquire the required skills at the end of the training program, and thus expected to be confident enough to cope with different English essay writings in prospective careers as well as further education related to the English language because "writing is important in studying all subjects and in all professions. Only by writing well can you give a good account of yourself as a student, and when applying for employment, and in a career when you write letters, instructions and reports. It is by your writing that others know you." [1: 2] As a consequence, this limited paper is aimed to investigate weaknesses and accordingly suggest the "can-improve" points found in English essays written by 3rd and 4th-year English majors in their real writing exams at *Dong Thap University, Department of Foreign Languages* in the recent years (Dong Thap, one of the remote provinces in the Mekong Delta, South of Vietnam). The essay *extracts* in the next parts are all selected from the real in-class timed exam papers (having been marked and annotated by two teachers of English in charge of the writing courses), and will be typically examined at two major domains, respectively: (a) language use and (b) essay contents. All the extracts are rewritten below as in their original form (sometimes in italics and bold type just in the case of points in discussion) for illustrations and analysis.

2. LANGUAGE USE

Since grammatical errors of *tense system, articles and prepositions* made by Vietnamese EFL students in their English compositions and other task types have been more or less widely examined by Vietnamese researchers and teachers of English over the past years [3], [6], [7], [11] to name a few, the present paper is to focus on other marked linguistic errors for improvement.

2.1 Avoiding lexical repetitions

Students should be well aware of the strategy to avoid repeating the same word or phrase several times within an essay paragraph. Apart from using *pronouns* to substitute previous noun phrases (anaphoric reference), other coherence techniques are rarely found in the investigated exam papers. For example, in Extract 1 (of a body paragraph about the usefulness/advantages of Internet) the term “Internet” is boringly repeated several times.

Extract 1:

Internet is for not only information but also beautiful sights and new people. People all over the world are connected together by *Internet*. *Internet* helps us understand about lifestyles and culture of people around us although we never go to there. It also helps us understand that countries’ status are that it is rich or poor. Thanks to *Internet* we can see strangely animals or things we have never known before. Finally, *Internet* is very helpful for our studying. We can study any language on it. For example, English, Chinese, French. People may be happy when they learn many things around them. *Internet* also helps us improve our skills in many other fields such as communication, cooking, creativity, lifestyle.

In addition to pronouns, another common coherence technique particularly employed in written discourse is the use of *synonyms* or *near-synonyms* [5: 288]. Thus, “Internet” can be replaced by “the/this tool”, “the/this network/link”, or even “the/this invention” as the superordinate of “Internet”. Then, the paragraph above should read:

Internet is for not only information but also beautiful sights and new people. People all over the world are connected together by **this tool**. **It** helps us understand about lifestyles and culture of people around us although we never go to there. It also helps us understand that countries’ status are that it is rich or poor. Thanks to **the network/link** we can see strange animals or things we have never known before. Finally, *Internet* is very helpful for our studying. We can study any language on it. For example, English, Chinese, French. People may be happy when they learn many things around them. **The new invention** also helps us improve our skills in many other fields such as communication, cooking, creating lifestyle.

Similarly, “help” in the paragraph could be substituted by “assist”, “aid”, “support”, “facilitate”, “benefit”, etc. And “humans”, “human beings”, “ones”, “man/men” are for “people”. Moreover, as seen in “**The new invention**”, by utilizing the pattern “*the/this/that + synonym/near-synonym/superordinate*” = the previous entry, it is definitely possible for the writer to insert an attributive(s) in the middle, providing more information or addressing the writer’s comments, predictions, expectations, beliefs, attitudes toward the discussed subject or reference in question. Other possible replacements are “*This new promising invention; this multi-functional tool; this powerful/useful tool; this increasingly indispensable mode of modern communication*”, etc. As a result, the lexical coherence technique helps not only to avoid repetitive items, but also add supporting ideas, arguments (if needed) to the paragraph content.

This writing strategy works much better when the replaced noun phrase is rather long. For example:

Extract 2:

Getting married with a person from another culture, people will have many opportunities to improve their current jobs. They will learn more how to get good jobs. Moreover, people will learn the way of working in foreign countries because every country has its own good things. *Getting married with a person from another culture* [**This type of marriage/ This cross-culture/mixed-nationality marriage**] will also give them many new lessons, for example, how to get involved in business or how to interest their customers. Therefore, *getting married with a person from another culture* [**the/this marriage practice/event/incident/phenomenon**] has a number of advantages to improve the life.

The strategy is not limited to the paragraph level, but across paragraphs as well. Look at the Extract 3 of 3 body paragraphs below (with the exam question: *Some people prefer to get up early in the morning and start the day’s work. Others prefer to get up later in the day and work until late at night. Which do you prefer?*):

Extract 3:

Firstly, *getting up early in the morning and starting the day’s work* gets people work effectively. People usually feel tranquil in the early morning, so their work might start properly. They become more active rather than weary when working in the early morning because their energy is full at this moment. For example, when studying in the morning, students usually do their assignments effectively rather than in the late morning. In addition, working in the early morning provides people with moderate pace in work, and it certainly motivates people to succeed. With regular and ready working spirit, people are likely to obtain their targets easily.

Secondly, *getting up early in the morning and starting the day’s work* [**this good habit/practice**] provides people with effective refreshment. After hard-working days, people will recover their energy due to their sleep at night. Getting up early is always good for people’s follow-up working day because the rest time for them in the night is sufficient. Moreover, people will work successfully when they get used to operating their reasonable circulation in their work in the early morning. Refreshment is a crucial factor for working, and it recovers enough during a sleep at night.

Finally, *getting up early in the morning and starting the day's work* [**the daily habit/practice/routine**] is also good for developing people's brains. Their brains are in resting status when they sleep, and it is also a period for recovering brains. Getting up early wakes people's brains up in an effective way and provides them abilities to produce smart decisions. Moreover, working and relaxing in a reasonable way might strengthen brains's functions. The brains will get the energy most right after getting up early in the morning. In fact, working in the morning is more effective than working in other periods of day.

Meanwhile, the automatically translating strategy of “có thể” (in Vietnamese) into English “can” probably results in the overuse of modal verb “can” within a paragraph as found in the following extract:

Extract 4:

Marrying a foreigner, of course, is very good. A girl **can** broaden her knowledge as well as travel in other countries. For instance, she loves to live in Canada and fortunately, she loves and marries a Canadian so that she **can** live there. In addition, she **can** visit beautiful Quebec City with old buildings and splendid restaurants. Meanwhile, she **can** discover and know about its history, such as how and when it was established. Furthermore, she **can** also know another language as well as some characteristics of that country. For example, she **can** know Canada has two major official languages such as French and English.

The overuse of “can” is quite prevalent among Vietnamese students during their developing stages of English acquisition and teachers should draw students' attention to the problem, particularly in essay writing, as such to avoid repetitions and explore various ways of expressing possibility, ability or permission in English. In Extract 4, all the 6 **can**s express possibility (rather than ability). Consequently, other modal verbs of expressing the same concept “*may, might, could*” could be present. Alternatively, varied non-modal structures are possible, such as “*It's (is) possible for her to discover*”; “*She has opportunities to know*”; “*The new life/country/culture gives her chance to visit ...*”; and “*The new environment allows/encourages/enables her to learn about/get to know*”

Besides, these non-modal structures are equally productive to replace “will”, repetitively seen in Extract 2 earlier.

2.2 Reducing the overuse of dependent clauses

It is generally better to substitute finite dependent (noun, adjective, adverbial) clauses with equivalent present/past participle or prepositional phrases in case these full-form dependent clauses are redundantly embedded or are of virtually no necessity. This strategy helps to delete redundant items for word economy and also avoid repetitions, thus making the writing more precise and coherent [10: 261].

Extract 5:

In the modern age as now, Internet is very necessary for my life. It helps me to search many things **which serve** for my benefits. Therefore, I think that Internet provides me with a lot of valuable information **which is** essential for my studying and future job.

It is wise to delete “which serve”, and “which is” in Extract 5 above as apparently they do not necessitate. As regards “which is”, the student has probably failed to notice that the English structure “a Noun phrase + Adjective + Prepositional phrase” is quite acceptable (*Adjective + Prepositional phrase* as a nominal postmodifier), not necessarily always a *finite* relative clause following a noun phrase. The structure should be applied particularly when the prep-phrase is rather long and fixedly collocate with the preceding adjective, for instance, “*In my class, there are many female students fond of/very interested in sports like swimming, football, volleyball, tennis and table tennis*”, “*The engineer well known for his thorn computer-problem solving throughout the country is on TV today*”, “*I'll send you both a conference timetable subject to change in three days*”, and “*The author described several characteristics common to most examples of African art*.”

Alternatively, finite dependent clauses can be reduced to non-finite ones or prep-phrases. The following are samples.

Extract 6:

For example, some people use it to download many pages of Internet **which contain** [**containing/with**] a lot of unhealthy information or things **that cause** [**causing**] bad behaviors, especially among children and teenager.

Extract 7:

Man's life is getting more convenient than before by using Internet. For instance, we can know many events **that happen** [**happening**] in all nations around the world **while we don't go** [**without going**] there. Moreover, it helps us make friends by Internet and also helps people **who have** [**with**] problems talk with others directly on the Internet.

Extract 8:

Therefore, **when people go** [(**when**) **going**] to bed early at night, they usually feel well to get up in the following morning. As a result, they are easy to prepare a healthy body for their work. **When they get well-prepared** [(**when**) **well-prepared**], they usually finish the duties quickly.

Adverbial clauses of concession and cause/reason could be reduced to equivalent prep-phrases in order to diversify sentence patterns (*despite, in spite of, because of*).

Extract 9:

In short, *although it has [in spite of]* some negative effects, Internet is still a useful and convenient tool for everybody. With the good purpose, everyone can enrich their knowledge through Internet.

Extract 10:

In my class, some students did not pass their exams *because they were lazy to attend the class and do homework [because of their laziness (in class attendance and homework completion)]*.

Another suggestion is that students should be attentive to use “if-clause” in case it does not necessarily address a possibility. Instead, a “(not) to infinitive” can be applied. For example,

Extract 11:

It is very good *if a person shouldn't [(for a person) not to]* marry someone from another culture because of different language and culture and loveless marriage. If a person would like to marry foreigner, he/she should study financé(e)'s language and culture and both of them need to have love. It is a very important factor for their marriage in the future.

2.3 Other recommendations in language use

- Diversifying listing signals between sentences and paragraphs

Transitions of listing signals “First/Firstly”, “Second/Secondly”, “Third/Thirdly”, and “Finally” are far too often used in the essays as in Extract 4 above or Extract 12 below. These transitions would be likely to sound mechanical and uninteresting to the reader unless they compatibly alternate with other types of transition. Instead of “First/Firstly”, the patterns “The first + noun phrase + be/verb + the main point/idea” could be utilized: similarly for “Second/Secondly” and “Third/Thirdly”. For example, (i) “*The first advantage/ disadvantage/ benefit/problem of city life is air pollution/ learning conditions*”, (ii) “*The next/second point/issue to be mentioned is*”, (iii) “*The final remark/argument for/against city life should be*”, and so on.

At times, it is a good idea to reverse the pattern, i.e. “The main point/idea + be/verb + the first/second/third/final + noun phrase”, e.g. “*Air pollution is the first problem of city life*”.

Besides, these collocating transitions (*First, Second, Third*, and so on) do not necessarily always have to be all accommodated, respectively in a multi-paragraph essay. That is when *First* appears in the first developmental paragraph (of the body), it is possible to use other transitions (such as suggested above) instead of “Second, Third” in paragraphs to follow. Even within a paragraph, the technique is quite applicable. Take Extract 12 for example, it can possibly read “... *Firstly*, living more spacious. *The fact that they can do everything they want is the second advantage*. They can go out when they like And *quietness is another good point....*”

Extract 12:

Students always choose to live in an apartment in the community because they like the comfortability, freedom and quietness. **Firstly**, living in an apartment is more comfortable. We only share the room with one or two other students. So it is more spacious. **Secondly**, they can do everything they want. They can go out when they like without asking for permission. There is no time limitation. **Thirdly**, there are few students in one room, so it is quieter. Students can study more easily.

- Increasing the use of nominal premodifiers

Nominal premodifiers help to cut down redundant items or *paraphrases*, thus making the noun phrase concise.

Table 1: Nominal modifiers suggested

Essay sentences extracted	Suggested
- Therefore, <i>choosing a profession that they wish to enter</i> is a rightful decision	→Therefore, <i>choosing a favorite profession</i> is a rightful decision.
- <i>Being students, when they get a college degree for their school, they want to have a work which suit for them</i> in order to develop their abilities.	→ <i>Graduates</i> want to have <i>suitable jobs</i> in order to develop their abilities.
- <i>Events which have recently happened everywhere in the world</i> are mentioned in most newspapers and television channels.	→ <i>Recent events in the world/The world' recent events</i> are mentioned in most newspapers and television channels.
- It also helps us understand that countries' <i>status is that it is rich or poor</i> .	→It also helps us know about countries' <i>economic status</i> .

<p>- Although <i>the pictures printed on the newspapers</i> can be colorful, they are not as vivid as <i>the pictures displayed on the television screens</i>.</p> <p>- Men have many <i>bad habits which influence health badly</i> such as smoking and drinking alcohol.</p> <p>- But now new environments are forcing all <i>people who want to have a better life</i> have to take part in <i>working in every field to earn money</i>.</p> <p>- The percentage of women <i>who are living in a serious illness</i> is slightly declining.</p> <p>- The Government has had several effective policies to help or encourage students, especially poor students. Among these, <i>allowing students to make loans</i> is a practical policy.</p>	<p>→Though colorful (enough), <i>newspaper pictures</i> are not as vivid as <i>the TV ones/ those on TV</i>.</p> <p>→Men have many <i>health-threatening</i> habits such as smoking and drinking alcohol.</p> <p>→But now new environments are forcing all <i>better-life seeking people/ better-life seekers</i> to take part in every <i>working field</i>.</p> <p>→The percentage of <i>seriously ill</i> women is slightly declining.</p> <p>→The Government has had several effective policies to help or encourage students, especially poor students. Among these, <i>student loan</i> is a practical policy.</p>
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- Deleting “There is/are” if not necessarily needed

- *In real life, *there are* many Vietnamese girls want to marry Korean men to increase economic conditions.
- In real life, many Vietnamese girls want to marry Korean men to increase economic conditions.
- *Yet, *there are* some people think they can learn better by themselves than with a teacher.
- Yet, some people think they can learn better by themselves than with a teacher.

-Using verbal normalization instead of V-ing form

- *Attending classes can help you become active and confident.
- Class attendance can help you become active and confident.
- * A person who only gets *eating, working* and then *sleeping* but without *doing* any exercise will have a disease soon.
- A person *with only work, food and sleep* but without any exercise/ *with no exercise* will get a disease soon.

-Applying the pattern “It +be + easy (easier)/possible for someone to do something” appropriately

- *After graduation, *students are easy* to get a job.
- After graduation, *it is easy for students* to get a job.
- *Finally, *people are easy* to change the channels to watch any kind of program they like at the same time.
- Finally, *it is possible for people* to change the channels to watch any kind of program they like at the same time.

-Avoiding saying the same thing twice

- *According to *some scientists, they say* that fish, fruits and vegetables are good for health rather than meat and unfresh food.
- According to *some scientists*, fish, fruits and vegetables are good for health rather than meat and unfresh food.
- **In my opinion, I think that* money is not everything.
- In my opinion* (or *I think*) money is not everything.
- **The reason* for their broken marriage was *because* they did not really love each other.
- The reason* for their broken marriage was (that) they did not really love each other.

3. ESSAY CONTENTS

Theoretically, an academic essay always has 3 separated parts: one introductory paragraph, two or more body paragraphs and one concluding. As a result, the content sections below will discuss each part respectively. (However, it is impossible to cover everything related to essay contents within a limited paper like this one. Rather, selected extracts will be rewritten for discussion on major points.)

3.1 Introductory paragraph

As a general rule, the introductory paragraph (introduction) is the first one in an academic essay. It could be approached in different ways such as *background information* slowly leading to the thesis statement; a *quotation* from a well-known saying, or an appropriate remark by a famous person; a *definition/explanation* preparing the reader for applications and examples of the concept or term being defined; a *problem-solution* raising the problem and suggesting the solution; or a *summary* for an analysis/discussion of what has been summarized. A good introduction, whatever approach it applies, should include the following elements [10: 142], [2: 162], [4: 181]:

- (1) introducing the essay topic;
- (2) containing the thesis statement/sentence;

- (3) indicating how the topic is going to be developed (whether the essay is going to discuss causes, effects, reasons or examples; whether the essay is going to classify, describe, narrate or explain a process);
- (4) being interesting enough to make the reader want to continue reading.

Accordingly, the first problem concerning the introduction is that many students failed to address element (3) very clearly. Take Extract 13, for instance:

Extract 13:

We are living in the age of technology. The birth of Internet in modern time has actually changed everything: the way people communicate with each other, the way people entertain, the way people study, and the way people do business. Some people say that the Internet provides people with a lot of valuable information. However, *in my point of view, accessing too much information creates many problems.*

One reason creating these problems is that information on the Internet comes from various sources. Almost all people are allowed to upload information to the Internet. Maybe this information is uploaded by a famous person or a well-known group, and maybe that information is uploaded by a strange boy or girl who has nothing to do in his free time but upload useless things to the Internet. Information on the Internet also sent by opposed person who always desires to fight against the government and the society. If people searching for information on the Internet are not strong enough, not knowledgeable enough, how can they distinguish these various kinds of information and choose the rightful source?

Accessing to so much information creates problems also because it makes peoples become dependent completely on the information of the Internet sources. Daily jobs require people's critical thinking and creativity. If people spend their time just for searching for what they need on the Internet, how do they have enough time to think or consider about a perfect new idea? In addition, when people think that every thing is just as easy as an "click", that means they know all information they want are just available, how can they have enthusiasm to find out something new? Thus, they become dependent on the information of the Internet and always attach to their computer.

Since the essay (Extract 13) was intended to explain the causes of the concerned problems, it certainly makes sense to add something indicating element (3) to the end of the introduction in a more explicit way as an indicator of shift from introduction to body paragraphs, such as "*The next paragraphs will examine some major causes of the problems*"; "*Several reasons for the problems are discussed in details below*"; "*The next parts are going to point out causes and also suggest solutions to the problems*"; "*Certainly, there are reasons for these problems and they will be uncovered one by one as follows.*"

Some students not only lacked element (3), but also provided an unclear thesis statement of element (2) in the introduction. Moreover, with the *background information* approach (i.e. general-to-specific → thesis statement) to create a high level of interest, it is wise not to put the thesis statement right at the beginning of the introduction [10: 142], [8:73]. As a consequence, such introductions as Extract 14 (about the topic of the qualities of a successful teacher of English) should be improved.

Extract 14:

Qualities that make a successful teacher of English are self-confident, having good knowledge and working hard. We must love our students and our jobs. We have to understand what our students needs and solve the problems with them.

[*Suggested Version 1*→Teachers is generally one of the fundamental factors to make a successful education in all countries. However, they themselves have to develop a number of related qualities to play the given role and expectedly succeed in the career. In my opinion, a successful teacher of English is required to have the qualities of self-confidence, diligence, love for students and job. In addition, they should understand students' needs and help them solve problems if needed. These qualities will be discussed and illustrated in the following parts.]

[*Suggested Version 2*→ As a teacher of English in the future, I am very concerned about the question of "What qualities make a successful teacher of English?" To the best of my present knowledge, to do the job successfully a teacher of English should acquire the qualities of self-confidence, devotion, commitment and love for job and students. The teacher is also expected to understand students' needs and readily help them solve problems if needed. The following will address these qualities in details.]

Meanwhile, the introduction of a comparison-contrast essay should particularly include *items* for comparison and contrast, signaling the foci in the body paragraphs of the essay. The introduction below (Extract 15) could be followed by ".... and differences in terms of contents, formats and audiences, which will be compared and contrasted for more details in the next parts of the essay", or "Compared and contrasted details in the aspects of content, format and audience are discussed below".

Extract 15:

Television and newspapers are two very important means of the mass media. Nowadays most people have at least one television set in their families. Newspapers can be found in most families and offices. Watching television and

reading newspapers are two popular habits of modern people. Television and newspapers have both similarities and differences.

3.2 Body paragraphs

An academic essay needs from about two to four body paragraphs making *the heart of the essay*. They are supposed to prove the thesis statement in the introduction and should include the following characteristics [10: 146]:

- (1) All body paragraphs should be balanced and distinct (i.e. they don't overlap but have the same degree of importance in relation to the essay central idea);
- (2) Each body paragraph discusses *one aspect* of the main topic;
- (3) The controlling idea in the body paragraph should *echo the central idea* in the thesis statement of the introduction;
- (4) The body paragraph should have coherence and unity; the sentences move smoothly from one to the other.

Furthermore, a well-developed body paragraph must have [2: 91]: (i) the topic sentence expressing the main idea; (ii) the bridge explaining the main idea and connects it to the supporting material; (iii) the supporting material including examples, facts, statistics, or an anecdote (a short story about a person or event that illustrates or dramatizes a point); (iv) the conclusion reminding the reader of the main idea and concluding the paragraph. Also, it often includes an interpretation (or analysis) of the supporting material.

Look back at the Extract 1 (of a body paragraph about the usefulness/ advantages of Internet), apparently it lacks at least the topic sentence, and the conclusion as well although it addresses one aspect of the essay main topic (i.e. the good points of Internet). The paragraph would look better with such a topic sentence at the beginning like “*A great number of advantages could be thought of thanks to Internet. The tool is*”; “*Internet benefits human beings in numerous ways. It is ...*”; “*We can benefit from Internet in so many ways. It*”; “*Internet is definitely a very useful instrument to us*” and so on. Likewise, the concluding sentence at the end should most likely read “*Obviously, Internet is advantageous to human beings*”; “*As a result, this potentially great tool would certainly make our life better in various ways*” and the like.

In Extract 4, the topic sentence “*Marrying a foreigner, of course, is very good*” is present but somehow incomplete because it should have indicated “*How/In what ways is it good?*” (→*Marrying a foreigner, of course, is very good for one to learn and acquire knowledge about another culture.*) Additionally, the concluding sentence of this body paragraph has been missed.

Another marked problem is this body paragraph did not provide sufficient supporting material, namely specific examples, facts, or anecdotes. It should have given *specific* examples of beautiful sights (such as *the Great Wall of China, the city of Paris*), strange animals (like *kiwis, kangaroos, snakes*) or things that one could get from Internet with specific different websites for reference.

Extract 1:

Internet is for not only information but also beautiful sights and new people. People all over the world are connected together by Internet. Internet helps us understand about lifestyles and culture of people around us although we never go to there. It also helps us understand that countries' status are that it is rich or poor. Thanks to Internet we can see strangely animals or things we have never known before. Finally, Internet is very helpful for our studying. We can study any language on it. For example, English, Chinese, French. People may be happy when they learn many things around them. Internet also helps us improve our skills in many other fields such as communication, cooking, creativity, lifestyle.

The problems of lacking the topic sentence, concluding sentence and the specific supporting material more or less exist in Extract 2, 3, 4 above.

Especially, Extract 3 probably needs statistics or research results to prove the points in discussion. Also, the three body paragraphs, though somehow balanced in length, do not seem very distinct in idea supports. Both the second and third body paragraphs try to prove that the habit of getting up early makes one feel fine, refreshed and thus helps him/her work effectively because of energy recovery during the night sleep. However, *working effectively* is also the supporting idea of the first body paragraph. The writer of this essay probably failed to realize that it is *sound sleep* that helps the brain and body function properly and thus very likely results in efficiently working. Without sound sleep or in severe lack of sleep, it would be very hard for someone to get up early and work effectively. Depending on the working-hour basis (day time or night time shift), one may take the habit of getting up early or late in the morning as long as sound sleep is ensured.

As a result, students should bear in mind the distinct characteristic of each body paragraph in planning supporting ideas in the body to improve the essay contents.

One argument strategy students should be encouraged to apply is *refuting* (i.e. to prove one's reasons/ points are more valid or superior to the opponent's ones; or to show that something is wrong/errorous). The strategy is commonly used in argumentative essays [10: 335]. However, it is rarely found among the studied essay papers.

To argue more persuasively, for instance, in the topic of Extract 4, with another body paragraph preceding the conclusion as rewritten below, the writer may first *concede* the inevitable problems of language and culture distances, and then assert that these problems are by no means long-lasting and could be step by step strengthened out by both parties' efforts over months or years. Meanwhile, the related benefits (as accommodated in the body paragraphs) are definitely long-termed and even forever, such as the ability to speak another language and experiences to live in another culture. As a result, the cross-cultural marriage on the basis of true love has good reasons to take its place.

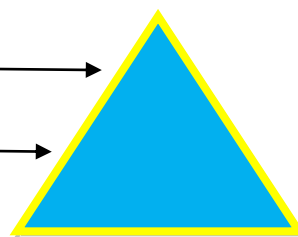
Extract 4 (continued):

In short, marrying a foreigner is good because it may be an interesting experience in human life. However, true love is always a need in marriage so that if someone wants to marry, he or she must love each other. When they have true love, they will have happy life even though they have different cultures, customs and languages.

3.3 Concluding paragraph

Like the introductory and body paragraphs, concluding paragraph has its own characteristics, looking like the following model [8: 116]:

- Restatement of the thesis (It should be brief, avoid sounding repetitious)
- More general statement(s)
- Most general statement(s) (With a prediction, suggestion, demand or quotation)



Look back at Extract 4 (continued), the first sentence with the restatement of the thesis is fine, but the next sentence sounds redundant because the idea could be accommodated in the first one and instead, a more general statement should take place there, like *“In short, marrying a foreigner on a true love basis is good because it may be an interesting experience and brings about several benefits as mentioned above. True love is essential to all marriages, especially the cross-cultural ones because it is the true love that helps concerned people overcome obstacles with regard to distances in culture, custom and language.”*

The following is the concluding paragraph of Extract 3:

Extract 3 (continued):

In sum, getting up early in the morning and starting the day's work is actually a good habit because it helps people work effectively, provides effectiveness of refreshment, and builds up people's brains. Once possessing a good working habit, which includes working and relaxing reasonably, people are likely to get success in their life.

The first sentence does its job very well in reasserting the main points discussed and the thesis in different words. The paragraph, however, would sound better with such more general statements to follow the first sentence as *“This good working habit should be practiced and customized, especially by young people and students with their whole careers in the future”*, or *“As a result, there are good reasons for everyone to practice the habit”*. The inserted sentence in the middle has three goals: (i) to bridge the first and the last sentence (from *more* to *most* general statements); (ii) to make the paragraph coherent *“... actually a good habit (first sentence).....This good working habit (inserted sentence) Once possessing a good working habit (last sentence)”*; and (iii) to make a recommendation to the reader, as usually required in an argumentative essay [10: 335].

Similarly, the concluding paragraph of Extract 13 can improve in some way:

Extract 13 (continued)

The age of Internet opens new horizon. However, accessing to so much information on the Internet may create many problems as it contains various kinds of information from various sources and it also limits people creativity. Therefore, people should use the Internet in a reasonable way to get the most benefit from it.

The first sentence is redundant because it is too general. The second sentence should be more assertive by deleting the modal “may” or replacing it by such emphatic phrases as *“does create”*, *“definitely/certainly causes ...”*, *“ultimately/in the long run leads to/results in/ faces ...”* And as such, the demand/advice expressed in the third sentence sounds more persuasive.

4. CONCLUSION

Being aware of the complexity of writing an English academic essay and authentic problems faced by EFL Vietnamese students, this paper investigated recent term-exam essays written by 3rd and 4th year English majors at Dong Thap University. Accordingly, the paper addressed two main areas of language use and essay content. Linguistically, students seemed not to have really acquired the technique of lexical coherence by using synonyms, near-synonyms or

superordinates to avoid unwanted lexical repetitions within a paragraph or across paragraphs. Another marked problem is the overuse of finite dependent clauses and misuse of other sentence structures, resulting in redundant items, long sentences or unnecessary paraphrases. These are mostly caused by students' limited knowledge of the English language and also by their word-for-word translation habit from Vietnamese into English. In terms of essay content, the can-improve points addressed fall into all three sections of an essay: introduction, body and conclusion. As a result, it is suggested that together with other regular in-class activities (i.e. presenting essay models, processes of writing, brainstorming, draft-writing, editing and so on) teachers should purposely help students not only correct linguistic errors but refine essay contents as well, particularly at the feedback stage, where students are given back their own test/exam papers for revision, correction and modification on the self or individual basis followed by the peer or group exchange if time is permitted. Subsequently, teachers may ask students to rewrite the essay in class (if possible) or at home. Then, those who resubmit the new version of essay papers will get extra marks for the term grade. On the regular practice basis in this way, students are likely not only to improve essay quality but also actually acquire the related skills and develop autonomous learning in the long run.

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