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Building Blended-learning Materials for Improvement of Academic English Writing Skills for Vietnamese Higher Education Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to offer insights into academic and research challenges confronting Vietnamese students. This paper also indicates need analysis for designing a blended-learning set of materials for improvement of academic writing skill. Using a mixed-method approach, a survey of 1,026 respondents was conducted with students and 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers to obtain a through understanding of the issue investigated. Findings reveal that there is an urgent need for a set of writing skill materials in a blended-learning format. The research also unveils writing difficulties being faced by students of English when it comes to academic and research writing. Major challenges centred around vocabulary, grammar, structure and lack of writing practice materials. Future research concerning the examination of the effectiveness of the blended learning practice materials for enhancement of writing skills is also mentioned in this paper.

Keywords: Vietnamese students, blended learning, writing skills in English, materials for teaching

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Формирование материалов для смешанного обучения вьетнамских студентов академическому английскому языку в целях улучшения их навыков письма

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РЕФЕРАТ

В статье рассмотрены академические и исследовательские проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются вьетнамские студенты при изучении английского языка. Автором рассматривается также вопрос разработки методических материалов для смешанного обучения в целях улучшения навыков академического письма студентов на английском языке. Для проведения исследования был проведен опрос 1026 респондентов (студентов), а также было взято 10 глубинных полуструктурированных интервью с преподавателями для получения всестороннего понимания исследуемых вопросов. Результаты показывают, что существует острая потребность в формировании новых материалов для совершенствования навыков письма у студентов в формате смешанного обучения. Исследование также раскрывает трудности, с которыми сталкиваются вьетнамские студенты, изучающие английский язык, когда дело доходит до академического и исследовательского письма. Основные проблемы связаны со словарным запасом, грамматикой, структурой и отсутствием методических и прикладных материалов для совершенствования практики письма.

Ключевые слова: вьетнамские студенты, смешанное обучение, навыки письма на английском языке, методические материалы для обучения

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1. Introduction

In many parts of the world, university students aspire to have excellent writing skills in English. However, in the countries where English is used and considered as a foreign language, academic writing is seen as a challenge for students [18]. A lot of researchers describe writing as a very difficult task, not an easy one for many of us to note our thoughts on paper [34]. Especially, academic English writing skill is an important skill to learn, and is considered one of the most difficult skills when learning foreign language; therefore, to master this skill, there are more requirements than the other three skills (reading, speaking and listening) [35]. Academic writing is also considered a challenge for students due to the differences in writing structure and style between English and other languages [21]. Students are required to make great efforts to be able to recognize and manage these differences while they are writing [15].

Currently, Vietnamese students still have difficulties in learning English due to lack of appropriate materials, lack of proper approach, and poor academic writing skills [16, 20], or lack of source texts, lack of vocabulary to use when writing [19]. In addition, in the teaching process, most of the lecturers use English textbooks of foreign publishers to support teaching of academic English writing. However, these textbooks often lack a combination of theory and practice, and do not meet diverse needs of students [10]. Along with that, the strong development of information technology brings many conveniences to life, including education. The use of information technology in building a system of English learning materials can help solve some challenges faced by students in learning English [11; 27; 33].

Moreover, the world of technology is changing at a rapid pace, and now our young generation is equipped with all kinds of Internet-connected devices, creating necessary conditions for teachers to change their form of teaching easily. In other words, blended learning seems to be more relevant to the current era and to the targeted students than the traditional course settings. Therefore, the gradual shift to new technology-based approaches is an inevitable trend in education. Blended learning gives teachers an opportunity to take advantage of the technologies that are available in and out of classroom in order to make teaching and learning more effective and flexible [5; 31]. Blended learning approach in academic written English courses is a new method in language education that helps students gain a more comprehensive approach to language, thereby improving their language skills [6; 8].

From the aforementioned background, this study aims to build a system of English learning materials in the form of blended learning approach in academic English writing courses for Vietnamese students. The research objective is to improve academic English writing skills of Vietnamese students through the use of this system of learning materials, helping students approach theory and practice at the same time. This study can contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning of academic writing English in Vietnam, and simultaneously meet the needs of students for a comprehensive and diverse system of learning materials.

The research results will help teachers and students have more effective learning methods and materials in improving academic English skills, and academic English writing skills.

2. Literature review

2.1. Academic English writing

Academic English writing studies methods and strategies for learning and using English in an academic context, especially in writing academic documents such as scientific papers, theses, essays, etc. The typical author of this theory is John M. Swales who proposed the concept of "genre analysis" to study the structure and features of various

types of academic texts [29; 30]. In addition, Ken Hyland in “Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing” explored the use of language with the forms and techniques of academic writing [7; 13], while Brian Paltridge in his studies mentioned the methods of teaching academic writing, providing teaching aids [22; 23]. And Christine B. Feak provided basic skills and tasks in writing theses and other research papers in her research [28; 29].

2.2. English learning materials

English learning materials are materials for learning English and ways that can be developed and used effectively in the process of learning English. The main author of this theory is Brian Tomlinson whose research of “Materials Development in Language Teaching” shows that development of materials in language teaching aims to help readers apply current theoretical principles, and research results to the practice of developing and exploiting materials in classroom [32]. Or the author Neil Harwood, in the book “English language teaching materials: Theory and practice” emphasizes that the use of materials is very important in teaching modern English, but materials need to be selected and designed to suit the needs and levels of students [9].

The authors Jo McDonough, Christopher Shaw, and Hitomi Masuhara in the book “Materials and methods in ELT: A Teacher’s guide” also provide how to develop English learning materials, how to design teaching activities based on materials, how to evaluate English learning materials. In addition, this book also provides teachers with methods to use materials in classroom for effective teaching [17]. In addition, there are also other authors such as Tom Hutchinson, Alan Waters [12], Jack C. Richards, Theodore S. Rodgers [26] who also have a lot of remarkable studies on building and development of effective English learning materials for lecturers and students.

2.3. Blended learning

Blended learning is a learning method that combines traditional and online learning through the use of information and communications technologies (ICT). In the book “Adding some TEC- VARIETY: 100+ activities for motivating and retaining learners online”, the two authors mention blended learning methods, including traditional and online learning, to help students complete tasks and improve their learning performance [2]. The research by author Derek Bruff uses feedback systems in classroom to create a more positive and enjoyable learning environment for students [3].

Blended learning is said to provide a wide variety of learning opportunities to suit students’ different learning styles, according to another study by Michael Prince [25]. Blended learning strikes a harmonious balance between accessing online knowledge and traditional teaching [1]. Blended learning is increasingly used in higher education because it has advantages of both traditional and online teaching methods [24].

Blended learning shifts the focus from teaching to learning, thus allowing students to be more involved in the learning process and more passionate, thereby improving their persistence and commitment [14]. Poon concludes that blended learning has the potential to be developed into the leading teaching method for the future as one of the top ten educational trends that will emerge in the 21st century [24].

3. Research methods

This study combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Quantitative research is carried out in two phases: (1) preliminary survey, and (2) formal questionnaire survey. Preliminary quantitative research is carried out to preliminarily assess the scale reliability, and eliminate inappropriate observed variables, so the authors will build a complete scale. The second one was used for data collection and analysis.

Qualitative research is used to help discover English learning materials under the blended learning approach; identify the factors affecting Vietnamese students' research writing skills in English, in order to adjust the scales of each factor to suit the Vietnamese context. 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with English teachers.

For quantitative data, descriptive analysis was employed using SPSS software. For qualitative data, thematic approach was used using Nvivo.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Statistics of research samples

The complete questionnaire is included in the official quantitative survey in Hanoi, from September 2022 to November 2022. The study population is all students studying at universities that use English in teaching. To increase the research reliability, in this study, the authors plan to collect samples with a size of 1,500 elements ($N = 1,500$), and the results obtained are 1,228 elements (questionnaires). After screening and removing invalid questionnaires, the authors use 1,026 valid questionnaires for use in formal analytical processing. Sampling method is the convenience sampling method through sending questionnaires directly to students.

Among the respondents, 320 people (30.9%) are first-year students, 341 people (32.9%) are second-year students, 299 people (22.1%) are third-year students, and 137 people (13.2%) are fourth-year students. In addition, the respondents to the questionnaire include 189 males (18.2%), 837 females (80.7%). Among them, 232 people (22.7%) have A level, 435 people (42.2%) have B level, 263 people (25.7%) have C level, and 96 people (9.5%) have English level above level C [4].

4.2. Research results on the current situation of demand for learning materials on research writing skills in English in the form of blended learning

4.2.1. Students' perception of learning materials on research writing skills in English in the form of blended learning

Table 1 shows that the majority of students agree that materials can be used on personal computers, with diversity in form and large scope of use, easy updating and sharing. However, different perceptions are also reflected in different opinions and no idea.

Table 1

Students' perception of learning materials on research writing skills in English in the form of blended learning

Content	Totally disagree, %	Disagree, %	No idea, %	Agree, %	Totally agree, %
Materials can be used on computers, shared and interactive in space and time	3.6	3.4	14.5	63.3	15.1
Materials are diverse in form and have a large scope of use	3.5	1.2	9.2	62.6	23.6
Multi-source, easy to update, easy to share to the learning community	2.9	1.1	8.3	59.1	28.7
A complete course with 4 parts: course; study guide; content; references.	2.9	2.0	13.6	60.9	20.6

Content	Totally disagree, %	Disagree, %	No idea, %	Agree, %	Totally agree, %
A “packaged” specific educational software used to create a course part or a course	2.9	2.7	21	56.2	17.2
Materials that can be used for both face-to-face and online learning	2.8	1.1	13.1	54.5	28.4

Among the respondents, 78.4% agree, 15.1% totally agree that learning materials can be used on computers, with high sharing and interaction; 86.2% agree, 23.6% strongly agree to the diversity and large scope of use of course. Besides, students also agree with a complete course (agree: 87.8%, totally agree: 28.7%) showing flexibility and connectivity in sharing knowledge and educational materials. Similarly, the majority of respondents agree (82.9%) and strongly agree (28.4%) with the ability to use materials for both face-to-face and online learning. In addition, 73.4% agree and 17.2% strongly agree with the definition of the course as a packaged educational software.

4.2.2. Responsiveness of learning materials on research writing skills in English

According to Table 2, regarding that content is not rich and does not meet the needs of use: The number of respondents who agree and totally agree accounts for the highest percentage (35.8% and 30.9%, respectively), and the number of respondents with no idea is 15.5%. For the content about updating and meeting learner autonomy: The percentage of respondents who strongly agree and agree is high (7.7% and 24.9%, respectively); however, those who have no idea account for 32.2%. Regarding online materials' diversity and meeting the needs: The percentage of respondents who agree

Table 2

Responsiveness of learning materials on research writing skills in English

Content	Totally disagree, %	Disagree, %	No idea, %	Agree, %	Totally agree, %
Content is not rich, does not meet the needs of use	30.9	35.8	15.5	9.6	8.2
Materials are not up-to-date, have not kept up with the requirements of meeting learner autonomy	7.7	24.9	32.2	20.5	14.8
Online materials are now diverse and rich, meet the needs of learners	7.7	23.8	39.3	20.6	8.5
Online materials are now diverse and rich, but many of the contents are not reliable enough to use	10.3	26.9	36.3	21.7	4.8
Online materials are easy to update and share, convenient for students to exploit and use	7.6	22.2	37.4	23.9	8.9

and have no idea is high (23.8% and 39.3%), showing a part of respondents agree that materials meet the needs of learners.

Although the percentage of respondents who totally disagree (8.5%) is low, the percentage of respondents who disagree is 20.6%. Regarding that online materials are easy to update and share: The percentage of respondents who agree and have no idea is high (22.2% and 37.4%, respectively), indicating that a part of respondents agree with the view that online materials are easy to update and share. However, the percentage of respondents who disagree (23.9%) and totally disagree (8.9%) shows that some respondents disagree with this view.

The analytical data shows that although there are some disagreements, the percentage of respondents who agree have no idea is high in terms of content, updating, diversity and ease of updating of online materials. Despite some disagreements, there is a significant amount of agreement with positive aspect of online materials in meeting the needs of use and interaction with learners.

4.2.3. Responsiveness of content components of learning materials on research writing skills in English in the form of blended learning

Table 3 shows diverse opinions about learning materials. The highest percentage of agreement is recorded in the following items: "Materials provide students with information about learning activities and tasks" (agree: 59.3%), and "Lecture-support materials with audio files" (agree: 40.9%). However, there is also a high percentage of disagreement in the items such as "Materials provide students with information about learning activities and tasks" (disagree: 38.3%), and "Lecture-support materials with videos" (disagree: 42.9%).

Table 3

Responsiveness of content components of learning materials on research writing skills in English in the form of blended learning

Content	Totally disagree, %	Disagree, %	No idea, %	Agree, %	Totally agree, %
Materials provide students with information about learning activities and tasks	2.4	2	26.1	59.3	10.1
Self-study guides	2.3	3.7	30.4	53.1	10.4
Diversification of multimedia electronic lectures	2.6	3.7	35.5	45	13.2
The multiple choice question bank with direct feedback and explanations.	2.5	6.1	40	41.7	9.6
Lecture-support materials with texts	2.4	5.5	42.9	38.3	10.8
Lecture-support materials with audio files	2.7	5.1	40.6	40.9	10.6
Lecture-support materials with videos	2.4	5	36.2	42.9	13.5
Materials that provide online learning materials	2.6	4.8	33.7	44.9	13.9
Materials on discussion situations	2.4	3.9	33.7	45.3	14.6

Remarkably, the percentage of no idea is also quite high in a lot of items, such as “The multiple choice question bank with direct feedback and explanations” (no idea: 42.9%) and “Lecture-support materials with audio files” (no idea: 42.9%). This indicates that the number of surveyed students has not clearly expressed their views on these aspects. The percentage of disagreement is also worth noting, as in the following items: “Lecture-support materials with audio files” (not reliable enough: 13.5%) and “Materials on discussion situations” (not reliable enough: 14.6%).

Thus, the data in Table 3 shows the difference in views on learning materials, which indicates that the study of learning materials system is an urgent need that needs to be improved to better meet the diverse needs of students.

4.2.4. Responsiveness of the types of materials in English for research writing skills

The data in Table 4 shows the responsiveness of the current types of materials for students. The highest percentage of strong agreement is found in the items of “References” (18.2%) and “Online Lectures” (17.7%). However, there is also a high percentage of disagreement in the items such as “Game applications for exercises” (16.2%) and “Simulation lectures and exercises” (17.0%). Notably, the percentage of no idea is also quite high in many items including “Online Lectures” (17.3%) and “References” (18.5%). The data thus reflects the diversity of types of learning materials. To better meet the diverse needs, it is necessary to continue to research and improve a variety of types of materials to ensure satisfaction and effectiveness of learners.

Table 4

Responsiveness of the types of materials in English for research writing skills

Content	Totally disagree, %	Disagree, %	No idea, %	Agree, %	Totally agree, %
Multimedia curriculum	2.5	2.0	24.6	59.2	11.7
Game applications for exercises	2.3	3.0	22.4	56.0	16.2
Simulation lectures and exercises	2.2	2.4	20.3	58.1	17.0
Online lectures	2.0	2.2	17.3	60.6	17.7
References	2.0	2.0	18.5	59.1	18.2

4.2.5. Degree of difficulty of students when writing research in English

Table 5 shows the aspects related to writing skills. The highest percentage of strong agreement is found in the items such as “Not setting long-term goals when learning writing skills” (23.5%) and “Influence of mother tongue on English writing ability” (18.1%). However, there is also a high percentage of disagreement on “The time for students to be taught writing skills is very limited” (10.2%) and “Teachers lack creativity in lesson design” (18.3%). Especially, the rate of no idea is also quite high in the items such as “Lack of vocabulary when writing” (25.4%) and “Learners are limited writing skills due to little reading” (25.2%).

This shows that a lot of respondents have not clearly expressed their views on these aspects. Thus, to better meet these diverse needs, it is necessary to continue to research and improve teaching process, learning materials, as well as encourage learners to practice and develop their writing skills.

Degree of difficulty of students when writing research in English

Content	Totally disagree, %	Disagree, %	No idea, %	Agree, %	Totally agree, %
Difficulty in organizing ideas in logical writing	2.8	3.2	16.1	64.2	13.6
Difficulty in applying grammatical structure to papers	2.7	4.8	22.4	60.3	9.7
Lack of vocabulary when writing	3.1	4.2	25.4	55.3	12
Not setting long-term goals when learning writing skills	2.3	4.8	14.8	54.6	23.5
Lack of self-training when learning writing skills	3.5	3.4	22.1	55.5	15.5
Learning and teaching materials are not diverse	2.4	5.3	20.1	55.4	16.9
The time for students to be taught writing skills is very limited	2.6	8.2	32.7	46.3	10.2
Learners are limited writing skills due to little reading	2.2	5	25.2	53.3	14.2
Influence of mother tongue on English writing ability	2.2	2.8	20.1	56.7	18.1
Teachers lack creativity in lesson design	2.5	4.2	22.3	52.6	18.3

4.2.6. Necessity of building a system of learning materials in English for research writing skills

The data in Table 6 show that the highest percentage of strong agreement is recorded in the items: "Develop confidence to form writing motivation for students" (23.0%) and "Learning materials are suitable and meet the actual teaching requirements" (18.8%). However, the percentage of disagreement and strong disagreement is not too high in the items such as "Learning materials that meet technical requirements need to be upgraded and updated" (1.9% disagreement, 1.3% strong disagreement) and "Develop regularly-updated, interactive, and easy-to-share learning materials" (2.0% disagreement, 1.4% strong disagreement). The percentage of respondents with no idea is quite high in the following items: "Learning materials are suitable and meet the needs of learners" (31.7%) and "Form a culture of information sharing" (32.5%). This shows that a part of respondents have not had clear views on these aspects.

Thus, the data reflects the diversity of students' opinions on building and development of learning materials for writing skills. To better meet these diverse needs, it is necessary to continue to study and improve the process of building learning materials, at the same time encourage information sharing, and develop confidence and writing motivation for students.

**Necessity of building a system of learning materials in English
for research writing skills**

Content	Totally disagree, %	Disagree, %	No idea, %	Agree, %	Totally agree, %
Build resources of learning materials in English for writing skills in the form of blended learning	2.2	3.1	31.7	51.4	11.5
Develop regularly-updated, interactive, and easy-to-share learning materials	1.4	2.0	30.7	50.4	15.5
Learning materials that meet technical requirements need to be upgraded and updated	1.9	1.3	34.9	46.1	15.8
Learning materials are suitable and meet the actual teaching requirements	1.5	1.3	31.2	47.2	18.8
Learning materials are suitable and meet the needs of learners	2.8	2.2	31.7	46.4	16.7
Improve students' information capacity	1.3	4.0	30.2	46.8	17.7
Form a culture of information sharing	1.4	2.1	32.5	46.8	17.2
Develop confidence to form writing motivation for students	1.7	2.6	26.5	46.1	23.0

4.2.7. Results from in-depth semi-structured interviews

Most outstanding findings from interviews showed that Vietnamese higher education students were faced with a series of challenges in terms of vocabulary, grammar, writing structure, and lack of specialised materials for practice. Specifically, interviewees unveiled the challenges as follows:

In regard to vocabulary, many students had difficulty in identifying the right context: 'The most challenging difficulty that students face is concerned with vocabulary restraint. They failed to put the right words into the right context' (ID3)

'Students find it hard to come up with the right words and to have good word choice for their writing' (ID5)

Concerning grammar, students had challenges in using the right tenses:

'Students do not know how to use the right tenses in English. For example, many students use present tense to describe what already happened, say the research process' (ID9)

With regard to structure, issue of coherence and cohesion was of prime importance: 'Students do not have a good understanding of how to make use of coherence and cohesion in writing'

In terms of learning materials, there was a big concern for how to have enough and updated writing materials for practice:

'I have lots of difficulties in teaching academic writing. Lack of practice materials is a challenge to us' (ID8)

‘Reading materials for academic and research writing is limited’ (ID6)

‘Having lots of difficulties in writing up a good literature review’ (ID4)

4.3. Discussion

From the survey results, it can be seen that there are some common discussions on the assessed aspects, such as the need to develop diverse learning materials. Although there is a high rate of choice about the need to build rich and diverse resources of learning materials to support the learning process, there are still some different points of view. The analytical data show that there is an agreement that rich and diverse resources of learning materials need to be built to support the learning process. This shows the awareness of the importance of having diverse resources to meet the learning needs of students.

Some respondents disagree or have no clear opinion on development of learning materials in English, ensuring technical requirements and matching actual needs of learners. This may reflect the difficulty in accessing and using English materials, as well as the variety of technical requirements and suitability to the reality and needs of each learner. There are some opinions that show the difficulty in applying appropriate grammatical structure and vocabulary when writing. This may require special training and support to improve this skill.

The aforementioned results indicate that building and improving learning materials, meeting the diverse needs and requirements of learners, play an important role in improving writing skills. The matters such as study time, information capacity, grammatical structure, vocabulary and instruction are also given to be considered and addressed in the process of improving writing skills. The findings from both questionnaire survey and interviews reveal the fact that there is an urgent for producing learning materials that can foster academic writing and research skills of students.

5. Conclusion

As discussed above, Vietnamese higher education students have met with many academic writing and research writing challenges. The difficulties they faced are diverse and can be common to other learners in the learning community of practice. The need for having a good set of writing practice materials has become urgent for betterment of students’ writing skills. One of the manageable approach, in this case, is to make the best use of blended-learning materials that can support students in both face-to-face and online learning environments. Findings from this study can serve as foundations for future research investigating the effectiveness of blended learning materials for writing consolidation and improvement.

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