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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Writing Essays About Literature: Hindrances in the Writing Strategies of English Majors**

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**| ABSTRACT**

Writing is a daunting task for English language learners; writing a literary essay a nightmare: it requires not only writing proficiency but also literary content knowledge. Since the introduction of integrating Literature into English teaching and learning, many studies have examined its merits and drawbacks. However, an underresearched area in this field remains: students' literary writing. Educators and lecturers often borrow the criteria of Academic Writing to evaluate students' literary essays because they assume it is among the academic essay types. Simple as it may sound, writing a literary essay is more complicated. This study, therefore, was conducted to investigate students' hindrances in the writing strategies of English majors, who, to some extent, are required to take at least one literary course as a prerequisite in their program. The research employed the qualitative paradigm with two research tools, students' literary essays and interviews, to explore the issue. Findings reveal challenges experienced by the students from the preparation steps for the literary essay to the writing process. Implications and recommendations are then proposed to help lecturers better facilitate their students in writing this interesting essay. A research limitation is that the study only provides a checklist to evaluate writing, not rubrics.

**| KEYWORDS**

literary essay, writing about Literature, literary writing strategies, writing evaluation, teaching English through Literature

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**1. Introduction**

In English language teaching, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL), writing is considered one of the critical skills contributing to a language learner's competency. Besides, writing is a means of effective communication and individual manifestation. Peck and Coyle (2012) assert, "all of us reveal the naked truth about ourselves every time another person reads something we have written" (p. 1), and that we are usually "judged" by what we have written down. This may sound terrifying. However, a nightmare may come sooner than being judged by others: what to write and how to write, as writing is an intimidating and challenging skill for many EFL/ESL learners. Teaching and learning writing nowadays must adapt to the changing world, just as other aspects of the classroom are affected by globalization (Craig, 2013). Sooner or later, a learner's writing skills will affect their employability when they join the diverse and constantly changing world of careers.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language/Second Language (TEFL/TESL) through Literature is an integrated approach believed to facilitate learners to improve their language proficiency. Simultaneously, by studying Literature, learners can also effectively convey their personal viewpoints, attitudes, and affection towards a particular issue (for example, Brumfit & Carter, 2000; Carter & Long, 1997; Carter, 2007, Carter, 2016; Chambers & Gregory, 2006; Hall, 2015; Kuze, 2015; Lazar, 1993). Even though teaching English through Literature has stumbled over extremely contrasting opinions from teachers and educators (Brumfit & Carter, 2000; Vandrick, 2018), the issue of writing literary essays has been proven effective in deepening a learner's insights about the literary works and the world alike, as well as enhancing their critical thinking skills (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Ghosn, 2002; Kaowiwattanahkul, 2021; Omar & Albakri, 2016; Qamar, 2016; Rahman & Manaf, 2017; Stefanove et al, 2017; Sugimura, 2015). Other merits of Literature include rhetorical writing (Larson, 1971), creative writing (Ghani & Din, 2017), communicative skills and

therapeutic healing (Fargher, 2012), literary reception Neira-Piñeiro (2015), and learner autonomy (Abir, 2020; Sinclair, 2014). Writing about Literature, or analyzing Literature, according to Cockerleas and Logan (1970), is also a journey exploring a literary work's form and content, its uniqueness, which enables the interpretation of that work to be more meaningful and diverse.

Many research studies in both international and Vietnamese contexts are usually drawn to investigating students' critical thinking ability through studying Literature (for example, Apriliadi & Suryaman, 2020; Dien & Thu, 2020; Khalsiah et al, 2025; Lê et al, 2024; Poštic, 2025; Syamsi, 2023; Tung & Chang, 2009). Their research intention is understandable, as Literature requires learners to read critically, to ponder meticulously upon the literary text, and to analyze it logically and convincingly. However, research about literary writing has not comprehensively focused on investigating the hindrances students encounter in their writing strategies. To exacerbate the situation, the critical components of a literary essay that can help students apply to class activities, home assignments, and examinations have been underresearched. The assessment of literary essays is considered "a myth" because teachers are not equipped with transparent guidelines and rubrics (Laurian & Fitzgerald, 2013). This is a pressing issue in education in general, as it fails to contribute to building a transparent and integrity educational environment. This study, as a result, was conducted with that rationale.

Some research studies report hindrances in students' writing literary essays, the most highlighted being their language ability. Pillai (2010) discovered that the remarkable challenges encountered by students are their critical reading and writing. Subramaniam (2003) points out that their language competency did not meet the requirement for them to feel at ease reading the text and discussing their viewpoints. Ong (2016) concluded that, together with the challenge of language proficiency, students were also confronted by understanding deeper layers of meanings in a literary text, which means that they usually feel anxious if they did not consider their argument insightful or creative. They were also challenged by choosing the evidence and a suitable literary theory to analyze the text. Ong's research, as a result, recommended teaching content knowledge and improving language proficiency for EFL/ESL students, because they are hindered by both obstacles. However, the research studies above explored only general problems confronting the learner; they have not clarified at which stage in their writing strategies they encountered particular hurdles. This study was carried out to fulfil the mentioned gap.

This study attempted to answer the following two research questions:

**Research question 1:** What strategies do students employ when they write literary essays?

**Research question 2:** What hindrances do they encounter during their writing of literary essays?

Sub-question 2.1: What are the components of a literary essay?

Sub-question 2.2: Which components cause hindrances for students during their writing strategies?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Teaching English through Literature: merits and drawbacks**

From the 1940s to the 1970s, Literature was deemed an effective tool to facilitate English teaching and learning. However, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the predominant growth of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which overtook the Literature-integrated method. Fortunately, as the world entered the 21st century, this method was again employed and appreciated for its merits, especially in the interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary context (Pope, 2016). Researchers in this era can recognize both merits and drawbacks of integrating Literature into teaching English.

The most prominent benefit of this method that researchers frequently explore is that Literature can boost students' critical thinking skills (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Dien & Thu, 2020; Ghosn, 2002; Kaowiwattanahkul, 2021; Lê et al, 2024; Omar & Albakri, 2016; Qamar, 2016; Rahman & Manaf, 2017; Stefanova et al, 2017; Sugimura, 2015). The positive correlation between studying Literature and improving critical thinking has been credited to the fact that students are usually required to ponder the literary works, and refine their arguments to defend and support their viewpoints in responding to the works. This, as a result, sharpens their logical thinking skills. Bobkina & Stefanova (2016) assert, "*Students' abilities to reflect critically, relating experience and theory, undergo positive transformation in the course of formulating and discussing their vision of the text*" (p. 682). Apart from critical thinking ability, Rahman và Manaf (2017) measure students' creativity in learning Literature, using Bloom's Taxonomy. They conclude, "*The literature subject is an essential avenue for students' learning, especially in developing creative and critical thinking*" (p. 245). Different as they are in approaches and applications, the researchers converge on the enormous impact of Literature on students' independent and critical thinking abilities. This merit is, fortunately, powerful enough to counter any drawbacks possibly claimed by the components.

Another obvious merit of using Literature in the EFL/ESL classroom is developing learners' language proficiency and communication skills (Ghosn, 2002; Kaowiwattanahkul, 2021; Lazar, 1993; Rahman & Manaf, 2017). Since Literature entered the EFL/ESL classroom, this benefit has always been appreciated because of the literary work's authenticity. Ghosn (2002) confirms that

Literature encourages the expansion of learners' vocabulary repertoire in certain contexts, thanks to which learners can use the target language more spontaneously. Likewise, other language skills such as grammar, reading skills, writing skills (including creative writing), and communicative skills are considerably improved (Fargher, 2012; Ghani & Din, 2017; Larson, 1971). This merit, unfortunately, goes hand in hand with the drawbacks created by difficult literary texts if the teacher is not cautious in choosing suitable literary works for their students' levels (Arafah, 2018; Dar et al, 2021; Farhanah & Habil, 2022; Gatdula et al, 2022; Hussein & Al-Emami, 2016; Noraishah et al, 2015; Purtanto et al, 2023). In terms of the language input, learners' language proficiency is incompatible with the language used in the literary works. This even happens in countries where English is a second language, like Malaysia (Noraishah et al, 2015; Yahya, 2017). Therefore, the ultimate goal of improving learners' language proficiency is not always achieved. This goal is apparently only an ideal, not a feasible plan, and the gap between the ideal and the reality is observed to be broad.

There is no doubt that literary works serve as a fertile land to cultivate cultural and societal knowledge, especially when learners do not have the opportunities to experience the culture of the target language (Carter & Long, 1997; Ghosn, 2002; Lazar, 1993). Literature motivates exposure to collective and individual experiences, broadens one's mindset, deepens one's insights, and refines one's behaviors (Keshavarzi, 2012). This can happen because a literary work is usually set in a particular social environment, which governs the characters' thoughts and actions. By understanding the social setting in a literary work, learners can also strengthen their cultural competency. However, this merit simultaneously creates its tricky companion: learners' culture may contradict the target language's culture when they come into contact with each other. This has already been observed in Islamic countries (Hussein & Al-Emami, 2016; Nur & Nurul, 2023). Their anxiety derives from country identity, as foreign literary works may cause readers to feel alien to their own culture and history. According to Hamdi (2003), this can happen in tertiary education because at this level, students' thinking is trained universally.

In the current educational context, Literature presents an opportunity for learner autonomy and lifelong learning (Abir, 2020; Sinclair, 2014). Moreover, as the postmodernist society gradually exposes the negative power imposed on the unvoiced and the marginalized, revealing their traumatized situations, Literature in the language classroom is believed to bring about therapeutic healing for those who are constantly under pressure, prejudice, and inequality (Fargher, 2012). Comforting as it is, Literature is inevitably weighed against pragmatism and practicality in a career-driven society: it has not been able to provide students with the necessary occupational skills to prepare for their future professions (Dar et al, 2021; Haggan, 1999). As a result, learners are not convinced and motivated to study Literature.

Overall, researchers can see eye to eye with each other about the merits and drawbacks of integrating Literature in the EFL/ESL classroom. This enables a comprehensive outlook of teaching approaches, helping both teachers and learners be more cautious users of Literature as a means of learning English.

## **2.2 Approaches to integrating Literature into the ESL/EFL classroom**

The approaches of two groups of authors whose works are considered classic in Literature and ESL/EFL are mentioned. Carter and Long (1997) suggest three approaches: the language model, the cultural model, and the personal growth model. The language model allows the learner to approach the literary text as a model of the target language, thereby enabling them to acquire L2 most spontaneously and improve their language proficiency. The cultural model creates a space for exposure to the target culture, allowing learners to understand its society, customs, behaviors, and various values, enriching their cultural knowledge and heightening their cultural tolerance in a multicultural world. Finally, the personal growth model, as the name suggests, directs learners into their own mind and soul, helping them reflect on themselves and their lives, thereby developing their characteristics and strengthening the connection between themselves and the people around them.

Similarly, Lazar (1993) introduces three approaches: a language-based approach, Literature as content, and Literature for personal enrichment. The first and the last approaches are not different from those of the aforementioned authors. In the second approach, Literature as content, besides cultural and societal knowledge, this author also highlights literary theory, such as literary movements, literary genres, literary criticism, and rhetorical devices. A striking viewpoint from this author is his emphasis, "the mother tongue of the students may be used to discuss the texts, or students may be asked to translate texts from one language into the other" (p. 24). With that proposition, he allows L1 in the ESL/EFL classroom to facilitate the comprehension of the literary work. By mentioning literary theory, it can be concluded that this author extends the study of Literature to literary-minded students, not only ESL/EFL students.

The approaches above are overarching and fundamental; therefore, they have not underscored any significant change over time. The combination of the approaches is believed to ensure learners' ultimate development in their language learning with the assistance of Literature. In this digital era, the approaches remain the same; however, as a trend of the age, they are usually accompanied by digital tools, such as forums, social networks... so that Literature can extend to EFL/ESL learners more easily and effectively. Recently, the rapid growth of Digital Humanities has allowed digital trends to permeate almost every discipline within the field (Deegan & Hayler, 2016). For instance, Neira-Piñeiro (2015) used blogs in the course Linguistics and Literature for teacher

students. The findings show that the employment of digital platforms increases learner autonomy, develops reading and writing skills, and boosts digital and communicative skills. Furthermore, the integration of digital tools and Literature enables students to interact with each other more effectively and comfortably.

One important issue of integrating Literature into the ESL/EFL classroom is assessing literary essays, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **2.3 Writing essays about Literature**

#### **2.3.1 What is a literary essay?**

The literary essay is categorized as academic writing. Academic writing is taught in tertiary education, including descriptive writing, analytical writing, persuasive writing, critical writing, and inquiry writing (Chauhan, 2022). Each type of writing requires different forms and styles, which the writer needs to comprehend and apply successfully. The literary essay, in reality, is a combination of different genres, such as analytical writing (to analyze and interpret the literary work), persuasive writing (to convince the reader of the writer's arguments by concrete evidence from the workart), critical writing (to evaluate the value of the literary work), and even inquiry writing (to explore a literary phenomenon in depth). Therefore, the literary essay is a tricky type of essay for EFL/ESL learners because of its composite nature mentioned above. Vandrick (2018) concludes, "*this variation of the standard essay [writing about literature] is a difficult genre for many students, but allows them to explore an idea in depth*" (p. 5). Writing essays about Literature is indeed a challenge for learners, to some extent, as it requires knowledge of literary studies.

Griffith (2011), a scholar studying in depth Literature and Writing about Literature, proposes that a literary essay should meet the following requirements: relative brevity (from about 2-50 pages), formality, a serious audience (persons who care about the subject), persuasiveness, give-and-take between author and readers, and argumentation (p. 226). This author also emphasizes the communicative nature of a literary essay, suggesting that the interaction between the essay writer and the essay reader is similar to that between the author, the literary work, and the reader. The essay writer, with their analysis and argument, is in no way different from the author, as both are attempting to convey their messages to the reader. The following figure illustrates Griffith's point of view:

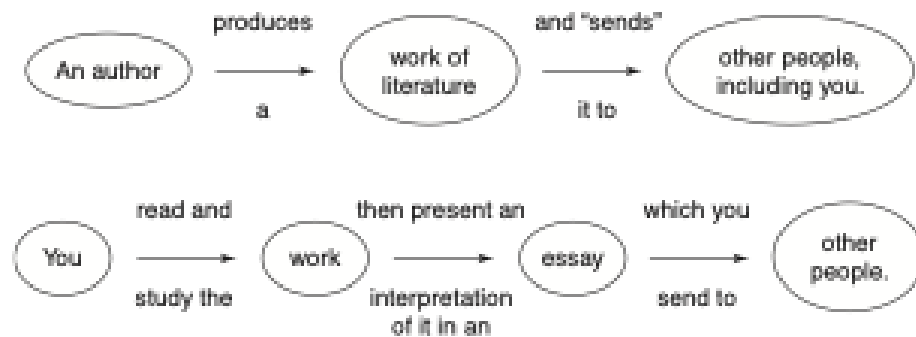


Figure 1: The interaction between the author, the literary work, and the reader (Griffith, 2011, p. 227)

It can be concluded that this author pays particular attention to the writer's autonomy in that the essay writer is endowed with equal power to the author in creating and co-creating the literary work. Therefore, one who completes their role as an essay writer recreates a new world, as novel and unprecedented as that created by the author.

A literary essay, with all the particular characteristics mentioned above, should be assessed against its own rubrics. However, since it is considered a genre of Academic writing, educators and teachers usually borrow academic writing rubrics. It is where the gap emerges and needs bridging.

#### **2.3.2 Academic writing rubrics**

Assessing an academic essay against rubrics may be deemed outdated, as Broad (2003) comments, "*the age of the rubric has passed*" (p. 4). Nevertheless, researchers have not come up with any more practical way to replace the helpfulness of rubrics (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013; Becker, 2016). Rubrics are reliable in establishing congruency among evaluators, transparency in examinations, and equality among examinees. In high-stakes international examinations such as IELTS, TOEFL iBT, GRE, CPE, and CAE, rubrics still play an important role and are widely used. Rubrics are also helpful for teachers to reflect on their teaching more effectively (Coombe et al, 2012). Within the scope of this paper, the conventional rubrics widely used in high-stakes international examinations, such as IELTS and TOEFL iBT, will be reviewed.

According to Broad (2003), the first five-point rubric was introduced in 1961 in Princeton, New Jersey, by three scholars, Diederich, French, and Carlton. This rubric was quickly adopted and employed as the conventional and standard assessment in the 20th century. This rubric is as follows:

- *Ideas: relevance, clarity, quantity, development, persuasiveness*
- *Form: organization and analysis*
- *Flavor: style, interest, sincerity*
- *Mechanics: specific errors in punctuation, grammar, etc.*
- *Wording: choice and arrangement of words*

(Broad, p. 6)

Shabani và Panahi (2020) assume that the earliest rubrics used in ETS (*English Testing Service*) writing examinations were introduced in 1981, designed by Jacobs and colleagues. This rubric framework includes five components: language development, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Since then, the writing rubrics in international examinations are quite similar to each other despite different expressions. Overall, the rubrics include:

- *Organization and coherence*
- *Task achievement*
- *Range of vocabulary used*
- *Grammatical accuracy*
- *Types of errors*

(Shabani & Panahi, p. 6)

It can be concluded that researchers unanimously agree on the assessment framework of an English essay, including idea and content, organization, cohesion and coherence, vocabulary and grammar, and language and mechanics (Jacobs et al, 1981; Schoonen, 2005).

Chan, Inoue, và Taylor (2015) work toward a rubric framework for integrated writing, or Reading-into-Writing skills. They argue, “*assignments at schools and universities often require reading multiple texts (e.g. books and articles), gathering information, developing thoughts, and then writing to produce an organised response which incorporates selected information from the sources*” (p. 20); therefore, this integrated skill “*has the potential to satisfy the need for greater validity in the assessment of test takers’ writing ability as such a task type represents more closely how people write in real life than independent writing tasks*” (p. 20). The research group supplements a component overlooked by other researchers in the same field, which is Reading for Writing. Table 1 below describes in detail their rubric:

<b>READING FOR WRITING</b>	<b>TASK FULFILMENT</b>	<b>ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE</b>	<b>LANGUAGE CONTROL</b>
<i>i. understanding of source materials</i>	<i>i. overall achievement of communicative aim</i>	<i>i. text organization, including use of paragraphing, beginnings / endings</i>	<i>i. range and accuracy of grammar</i>
<i>ii. selection of relevant content from source texts</i>	<i>ii. awareness of the writer-reader relationship (style and register)</i>	<i>ii. presentation of ideas and arguments, including clarity and coherence of their development</i>	<i>ii. range and accuracy of lexis</i>
<i>iii. ability to identify common themes and links within and across the multiple texts</i>	<i>iii. adequacy of task coverage</i>	<i>iii. consistent use of format to suit the task</i>	<i>iii. effect of linguistic errors on understanding</i>
<i>iv. adaptation of content to suit the purpose for writing</i>		<i>iv. use of signposting</i>	<i>iv. control of punctuation and spelling</i>
<i>v. use of paraphrasing and/or summarising</i>			

Table 1: The criteria and requirements for integrated writing skills (Chan, Inoue, và Taylor, 2015)

According to the table, the component “Reading for writing” requires learners to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the source materials and integrate suitable content from the source texts into writing. They should also be able to paraphrase or summarize the content to integrate into their writing. This framework is more comprehensive, especially for the integrated Literature EFL/ESL classroom, where students are instructed to work with the literary texts before setting off to write.

**2.4 Literary writing strategies in EFL/ESL**

For writing strategies, writing a literary essay is not much different from writing a general academic essay. Therefore, the stages of literary writing remain similar to those of academic writing (Roberts, 2008).

Cockelreas & Logan (1971) propose five stages in literary writing strategy: (1) Finding the subject; (2) Narrowing the subject; (3) Establishing the purpose; (4) Organizing the essay; and (5) Developing the essay. In this suggested strategy, the authors assume that learners are not provided with a topic for their writing; therefore, the first two stages emphasize meticulous consideration to arrive at a suitable topic. Stage four of this strategy provides similar guidance to the usual academic writing strategy, which includes outlining and organizing a three-part essay: Introduction, Body, and Conclusion. At stage five, the authors highlight the need to use evidence from the literary work to support the writer’s arguments and advise that the writer should never argue without evidence. As can be seen, this strategy does not include the editing stage. Griffith (2011) suggests only four stages, but they cover a more comprehensive procedure of writing, from the beginning when ideas are gathered to the end when the essay is finished: (1) inventing; (2) drafting; (3) revising; and (4) editing. Barnett et al (2008) are more concise with only three stages: (1) pre-writing; (2) write a draft; (3) editing. Among the three stages, the pre-writing stage is the most important because it is in this stage that learners read, take notes, and gather ideas for topic selection.

Peck and Coyle (2012) also suggest three stages, applied to General Studies, including literary writing. This research group emphasizes the outlining stage, warning that students are not writing the outline the right way. They argue that learners usually jot down any ideas that come to mind; consequently, they establish an outline with ideas organized in the order they pop up. Such a strategy is not an effective workable method. Instead, they propose an outline template, and the brainstorming activity should be done according to that template. The suggested template is as follows:

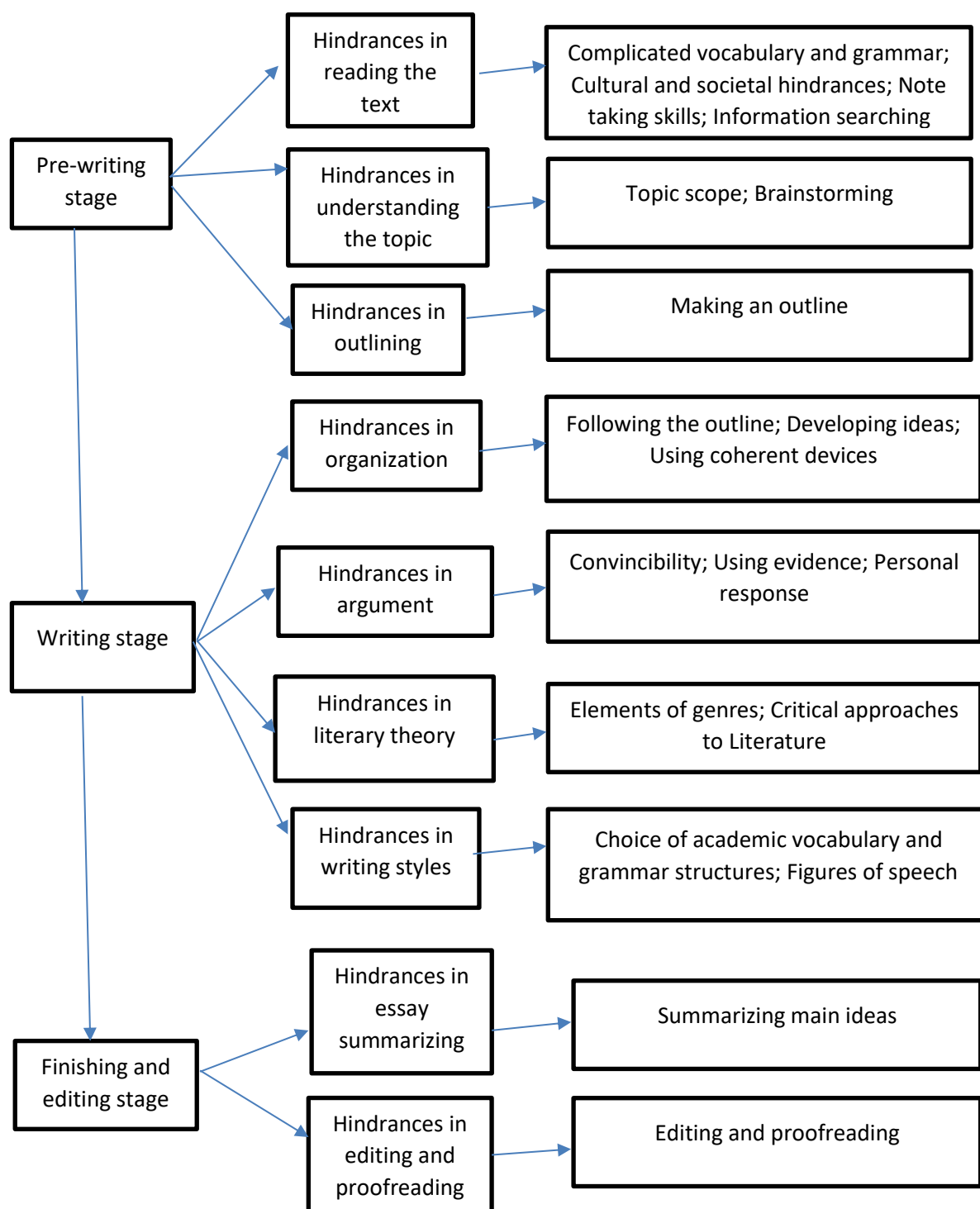
Stage 1 (first 3 paragraphs):	Paragraph 1: Introduction Paragraphs 2 and 3: Set it up (Starting to explore the issue)
Stage 2 (next 2 paragraphs):	Paragraphs 4 and 5: Push it along (Discussing more complicated aspects of the issue)
Stage 3 (last 3 paragraphs):	Paragraphs 6 and 7: Push your luck (Moving beyond received ideas or moving into more complex territory at some point in an essay; in other words, the essay arrives somewhere with the writer’s personal opinion.) Paragraph 8: Conclusion

With the suggested outline template, Peck và Coyle imply that essay writing is tantamount to solving a problem, and an effective writing strategy means constructing sharp and convincing arguments, starting with apparent aspects of the issue and advancing with more complicated propositions, finally arriving at the writer’s sophisticated decision upon the discussed issue. On completing the process, the writer shows their insightful vision, refined outlook, and a logical, critical mind to convince the reader of their viewpoint. Since literary writing is considered tackling and discussing an issue with critical thinking (Apriliadi & Suryaman, 2020), the same procedure can be applied.

It can be concluded that the mentioned authors agree on the importance of the outlining stage in literary writing, in which the writer makes a plan for the whole essay with convincing supporting ideas. In writing a literary essay, this stage comprises reading the literary text meticulously and thoroughly, ensuring not only literal comprehension but also more sophisticated aspects of the text, as Peck and Coyle (2012) mention. It may also include discussing with peers to explore the depth of the text, preparing for the analysis of the writing process.

**2.5 Conceptual framework**

Drawn from the literature review, the critical components of the literary essay are presented in this framework. These components are sequenced into the three general stages of essay writing: pre-writing, writing, and finishing and editing. The combined framework helps uncover not only students’ obstacles during the writing process but also the stage(s) at which the hindrances are present.



The reading process is embedded in the pre-writing stage, as it is a fundamental step in preparing to write a literary essay. The writing stage features both hindrances in language competence and content knowledge, namely literary theory. These two obstacles are not separated because previous studies have demonstrated their dynamics in complicating the students' writing process. The following specific components in the writing stage will be examined in the collected data (students' essays) to uncover the hindrances posed for students during their writing process:

(1) Organization

- Thesis statement and topic sentences: A clear thesis statement is introduced in the introduction. This thesis statement addresses the topic question and is connected to the topic sentence of each body paragraph.
- Body paragraphs are developed in alignment with the topic sentences;

- Body paragraphs comprise arguments and elaboration of arguments;
- Essay paragraphs are connected with suitable coherent devices;

(2) Arguments:

- Arguments are convincing and argumentative;
- Arguments are supported by sound and accurate evidence from the literary text;
- Arguments are original or personal responses;
- Arguments reflect personal experiences, beliefs, and philosophy.

(3) Content knowledge: Arguments demonstrate understanding of literary theory, for instance, the elements of different genres, including fiction, poetry, drama... depending on the topic question.

(4) Styles:

- Style, Vocabulary, Structure: Style is formal and academic, demonstrated through vocabulary and grammar structure choice.

- Rhetorical writing: Since this is literary writing, students are expected to use figurative language in their essays, maybe only common figures of speech such as simile and metaphor. Rhetorical writing is claimed to strengthen the effects of arguments and increase the overall quality of the essay, enriching learners' writing experiences (Boyd, 2012).

Finally, in the finishing and editing stage, the components to examine the literary essay's quality are related to summarizing the main ideas, editing, and proofreading the essay.

This framework functions as a checklist, not a rubric, to evaluate the collected data, which are students' essays. The next section will discuss the methodology, data collection, and data processing methods employed in the study.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research design**

The research design of this study is the qualitative paradigm. This design is suitable for the research because qualitative methods allow the researcher to explore in depth the participants' beliefs and behaviors (Dawson, 2010).

#### **3.2 Participants**

Participants in this research consist of 25 senior students of the English Faculty at a University in Vietnam. They are suitable for the research because in that year of study, all of them had at least completed a course in Literature, namely *Introduction to Literature*. If their chosen major is British and American Culture and Literature (BACC), they could take up to 5 or 6 literary courses. There are 19 students whose major was British and American Culture and Literature (BACC), 5 students in Linguistics and Teaching Methodology (LTM), and 1 student in Translation and Interpretation (TI). Students not belonging to the Literature major do not affect the research findings. As explained above, they had enrolled in one literary course, which included literary essay writing (at least two literary essays, one for the midterm and the other for the final test, not to mention various writing activities conducted in class by the teachers in charge). Therefore, they are used to writing literary essays and are aware of the hindrances during the writing process.

The following table summarizes the participants' information, including their de-identified names, biological gender, major, and the number of literary courses they had taken.

	<b>De-identified name</b>	<b>Biological gender</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Number of literary courses</b>
1	Tran Thanh	Male	BACC	5 courses
2	Quynh Mai	Female	BACC	5 courses
3	Anh Xuan	Female	BACC	5 courses
4	Tien Ha	Female	BACC	5 courses
5	Thao Trang	Female	BACC	5 courses
6	Bao Ngan	Female	BACC	More than 5 courses

7	Ky Van	Female	BACC	4 courses
8	Diem Loan	Female	BACC	5 courses
9	Thanh Duc	Female	BACC	5 courses
10	Thanh An	Female	BACC	4 courses
11	Tinh Van	Female	BACC	4 courses
12	Uyen Phuc	Female	BACC	5 courses
13	Thao Nhan	Female	BACC	5 courses
14	Bach Dung	Male	BACC	1 course
15	Giang Hoa	Male	LTM	5 courses
16	Mai Thao	Female	BACC	4 courses
17	Hieu Cong	Male	BACC	5 courses
18	Hanh Duyen	Female	LTM	1 course
19	Minh Dung	Female	LTM	1 course
20	Manh Hung	Male	LTM	1 course
21	Thuy Linh	Female	BACC	5 courses
22	Thanh Binh	Male	LTM	1 course
23	Thuy Anh	Female	BACC	1 course
24	Thach Thao	Female	BACC	1 course
25	Thuy Kieu	Female	TI	1 course

### 3.4 Sampling method

The sampling method of this research is convenience sampling. This method was chosen because the researcher was also the lecturer in charge of the VHVH class. However, to avoid the phenomenon of unbalanced power between the lecturer and students, which means students took part in the research because of their anxiety for the final scores, the researcher invited students only after their final test was finished, and even after the announcement of their final test scores. Moreover, the snowball sampling was also used simultaneously. On the one hand, it was to recruit more students taking part in the course, diversifying the majors of the participants; on the other hand, this method also helped mitigate the unbalanced power effect mentioned above, because participants invited by students did not learn with the researcher, and so did not suffer anxiety of any kind. All the participants were volunteers, and they also agreed to sign a consent form according to the regulations of the University Research Ethics Board. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time they wished, without any negative impact on their academic record.

### 3.5 Research tools

Two research tools were employed in this research study: students' essays and interviews.

For the essay, the participants were required to read a literary work, namely the play *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell, an American author, and then write an essay on a given topic. The essay should be about 500 words, written in 90 minutes. These time and length requirements apply to all literary midterm and final tests in the Faculty; therefore, the participants would not find them unfamiliar. This literary work was chosen randomly. The topic question is as follows:

*In Trifles by Susan Glaspell, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters represent women's wisdom and power, not recognized and appreciated immediately, but still holding a strong spell in the gender sphere. Discuss how their wisdom and power are manifested in the play.*

The participants were allowed to write the essays at home and submit them to the researcher on the agreed time. Because this essay did not affect their academic performance and test scores, their writing process should simulate that of a real Literature

test, which means they were required not to use AI, dictionaries, or the Internet while writing, and strictly restricted their writing time to only 90 minutes.

The second research tool is the interview. All participants were invited to the interview. This research tool allows for deeper insights from the data because it is assumed to elicit information more spontaneously and unrestrictedly (Creswell, 2012). There are 6 questions in the interview, divided into three stages of the writing process: pre-writing, writing, and finishing and editing. In the pre-writing stage, the participants were asked to share their hindrances in understanding the literary text, the topic question, and outlining. The sharing was also required for the writing stage, including their obstacles in vocabulary, grammar, style, and Literature-related content knowledge. Finally, they discussed the challenges they may have encountered during the finishing and editing stage. The participants were also encouraged to propose any other writing problems not mentioned by the interviewer.

The interview was conducted in the mother tongue, as it ensures the convenience in information sharing, and was recorded with the participants' agreement. The platform used for the interview is Zoom, which was chosen because it allows free recording. Each interview lasted from 30 to 40 minutes. The interview questions had been piloted by 3 non-participant students to revise their intelligibility. The pilot findings revealed that students had no problems understanding the interview questions; therefore, no revision was made for the interview questions.

Data from the essays and the interviews would be triangulated, from which the hindrances of students' literary essay writing would be exposed.

### **3.6 Data collection**

Data collection includes two stages. In stage 1, participants were invited to write a literary essay based on the play *Trifles* on the given topic. After submitting the essays, they took part in stage 2, the interview, at a time agreed by the interviewer and interviewees, to ensure that the interview did not conflict with their personal schedules. As mentioned above, data were collected after the completion of the final examination to avoid the unbalanced power effect. However, it is not without a drawback: as writing is a frustrating academic activity, not many students were willing to take part in the research, now that they knew their decline would not result in any performance retaliation. Therefore, the researcher could recruit only 25 students for the study.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

Textual analysis and content analysis were employed to process data from the students' essays. In textual analysis, the researcher read the essays closely and carefully several times and marked them accordingly. Content analysis followed, including coding the essays' errors. These are 5 steps in coding the data, according to Demarrais et al (2024):

- a. Read the existing theory or prior research (done the literature review)
- b. Determine initial coding categories.
- c. Define the coding categories.
- d. Read the data and begin coding with the predetermined codes.
- e. Code new data and categorize them into a new category or a subcategory of an existing code.

These two data analysis methods are combined during data reading and analysis, ensuring that no information is missing, and the most of the data is elicited. The first reading was to have an overall outlook of the issue being researched. During the second reading, the researcher analyzed the data and categorized them into the predetermined codes. This categorization step was implemented several times to mitigate missing information. After that, the researcher continued to identify the emerging codes not present in the framework, which would become the new codes – new findings. Finally, all procedures were done once more to avoid missing codes. It took the researcher 30-45 minutes to read and analyze one literary essay with all the mentioned steps. For the interview data, the researcher spent less time reading and analyzing the codes, about 20 minutes.

Because the content analysis was employed, the following section will discuss the coding method.

### **3.8 Coding method**

Based on the codes finalized in the literature review, this research study designs a framework comprising the codes related to the hindrances encountered by students during their literary writing. Those codes were used in analyzing the participants' essays and interviews to identify the hindrances. These codes were as follows:

<b>S1 (Stage 1):</b> Pre-writing	<b>S1C:</b> Textual Comprehension	<b>S1CV:</b> Vocabulary <b>S1CG:</b> Grammar <b>S1CC:</b> Culture-Society <b>S1CN:</b> Note-taking <b>S1CS:</b> Information searching
	<b>S1T:</b> Topic Comprehension	<b>S1TS:</b> Topic scope <b>S1TB:</b> Brainstorming
	<b>S1O:</b> Outlining	<b>S1O:</b> Outlining
<b>S2 (Stage 2):</b> Writing	<b>S2O:</b> Organization	<b>S2OO:</b> Idea organization <b>S2OD:</b> Idea Development <b>S2OC:</b> Coherence
	<b>S2A:</b> Arguments	<b>S2AC:</b> Convincibility <b>S2AE:</b> Evidence <b>S2AP:</b> Personal responses
	<b>S2K:</b> Literary Content Knowledge	<b>S2KE:</b> Literary elements <b>S2KA:</b> Critical approaches
	<b>S2S:</b> Style	<b>S2SV:</b> Vocabulary <b>S2SG:</b> Grammar <b>S2SF:</b> Figurative language
<b>S3 (Stage 3):</b> Finishing and editing	<b>S3S:</b> Summary	<b>S3S:</b> Summarizing
	<b>S3P:</b> Proofreading	<b>S3P:</b> Proofreading and editing

## 4. Findings

The findings in this section are categorized into remarkable and less significant hindrances in each of the three writing stages.

### 4.1 Pre-writing stage: Remarkable hindrances

#### 4.1.1 Complicated vocabulary and grammar structures (S1CV and S1CG)

The interviews revealed that most of the participants, 19 out of 25, were challenged by complicated vocabulary, and half of them by grammar structures. For them, the most noticeable hurdle in vocabulary is slang, vernacular, and outdated terms, with obsolete terms causing the most problems. Some students reported that they had to look up new words constantly during reading because they could understand only about 60% of the vocabulary in the literary work, which interrupted their reading experience and took considerable reading time. Thuy Anh, for instance, shared, *"I know they are important words, but I do not understand them, and that affects how I understand the story."* More seriously, Hanh Duyen felt that there must have been other meanings of the words; however, she could not figure out what they were, which impeded her understanding of the literary works' deeper meanings. Some others relied on the translated versions (if any) of the literary works. No doubt, vocabulary is among the top-tier problems for EFL/ESL learners of Literature.

Besides vocabulary, grammar is also the culprit that causes the participants to feel overwhelmed during reading. However, according to the interview, this issue is less serious than the one they experienced with vocabulary, with only half of the participants (12/25) reporting the trouble. They could basically understand the storyline and plot, the characterization, and some figurative language. Some participants acknowledged the obstacle in grammar, but claimed that only when the grammar was too complicated or the sentence structure was too long did they encounter a problem (Manh Hung, Thanh Binh, Thuy Anh). Overall, they did not experience too great a hurdle in grammar.

This finding is supported in the student essays. Even though the essays could not reveal the participants' reading processes, they are the telltale evidence of their story comprehension. Some students cited supporting evidence that showed their misunderstanding or inaccurate comprehension of the details (Quynh Mai, Thuy Kieu, Anh Xuan, Mai Thao, and Thanh An), suggesting that their reading processes must have been scarred by confusion. That certainly affects their essays' overall quality. Whether the problem lies in vocabulary or grammar, it reveals that some participants' language proficiency may be inadequate for reading Literature. Also, their reported troublesome understanding of slang and vernacular shows signs of incomplete comprehension regarding cultural and social issues, which will be discussed in a later section.

#### **4.1.2 Troublesome outlining process (S10)**

The second highlighted hindrance occurred when the participants outlined the literary essay. Two-thirds of the students in the interviews mentioned outline-related problems, and the reasons they offered are diverse. A majority of them, 6 participants, confessed their concern that their ideas in the outline overlapped, as they could not brainstorm enough supporting ideas. A representative, Minh Dung, stated, *"The most difficult task is outlining because I need to organize ideas logically, and my ideas often overlap."* Other students reported their obstacles in idea organization, as they had many ideas but were confused about organizing them into master ideas (5 participants). Quynh Mai said, *"My ideas are a mess. I don't know how to organize them best."* Another problem experienced by 4 participants is related to their language proficiency: they suddenly had a lapse in memory and completely forgot the words they wanted to use while outlining, leading to a frustrating experience when they could not convey their ideas as they wished. Anh Xuan and Thao Trang, for instance, were overtaken by fear when they experienced that memory lapse during tests. Finally, 3 students were uncertain if the ideas they had in the outline were relevant and could address the topic question. It can be concluded that the outlining step poses critical problems for the students in the preparation stage.

This finding is reinforced by the essay analyses, which found their ideas somewhat chaotic and disorganized, with an unmatched thesis statement and topic sentences, or unrelated topic sentences and supporting sentences. Furthermore, ideas were underdeveloped to some extent. Irrelevant ideas were also detected throughout some essays, and vague ideas marred some others. However, the analyses and discussion about this will be saved for the section on the writing hindrances to avoid potential overlaps.

#### **4.2 Pre-writing stage: Less significant hindrances**

##### **4.2.1 Cultural differences and unfamiliar social norms (S1CC)**

Eleven out of 25 participants reported hindrances caused by cultural differences and unfamiliar social norms, especially the gender issues discussed in the play they had been asked to read. The most common problem reported is their failed understanding of cultural and social matters, which mostly complicated their understanding of characterization: they could not perceive why and how the characters behaved as such (Hanh Duyen, Thuy Linh, Thach Thao). One student, Thanh An, mentioned the Bible as a source of her trouble, since American Literature uses many biblical references. Fortunately, not many of them found it very hard to overcome, because they shared that the teachers in charge had anticipated the problem and asked them to read secondary supporting texts, the stories' social background. As a result, they were well-prepared for the upcoming obstacles while reading the works. This finding not only reveals students' issues, but also highlights the teacher's role in facilitating students' literary reading process. It proves that the AI era does not eliminate the teacher's significance for their students. It is the teacher who gives instructions about which historical periods or cultural differences students should heed so that their reading experiences can be less frustrating. While students can ask AI for help with vocabulary and grammar, they would feel even more overwhelmed by cultural and societal knowledge, because the obstacles of this kind are more subtle and less obvious than vocabulary and grammar, and can only be perceived by experienced readers. Therefore, the teacher is undoubtedly the facilitator who cannot be easily replaced by technology, as feared by many educators.

##### **4.2.2 Note-taking and information searching skills (S1CN and S1CS)**

Note-taking skills, not surprisingly, cause almost no anxiety for many participants, with 17 students confirming that they were able to take notes very well during the lectures and discussions. Thao Trang and Ky Van stated that in order not to rely on notes, they took part actively in lectures and discussions to remember important ideas. Other students confidently affirmed that these skills had been well practiced in many courses; as a result, they did not encounter any problems. Tinh Van and Uyen Phuc even had their learning groups to share notes and synthesize them after class. The eight participants who found note-taking troublesome pointed out the reasons, such as their lack of concentration, ineffective use of symbols, time constraints when listening to lectures and taking notes, and low short-term memory capacity.

If note-taking skills still hinder the participants' reading process to some extent, information-searching skills are another story. All students reported no obstacles in seeking the literary work-related information for their supplement reading. They used a wide range of means to access the needed information, including Google Scholar and AI platforms... In the era of technology, this is an obvious fact. However, a remarkable obstacle emerged during their search: many websites requested paid access or

access through their university, which they did not have. Therefore, the information they wanted to read was not always available. Besides, some students reported that they felt overwhelmed by the abundant information they found on the Internet. As they shared, some websites were unreliable or provided controversial arguments about the literary works, making them drown in the seas of information.

All in all, although these two skills do not cause remarkable problems for the participants, some hindrances are still observed.

#### **4.2.3 Topic comprehension and brainstorming process (S1TS and S1TB)**

The interview does not highlight particular problems regarding the participants' comprehension of the topic and brainstorming process, with only 6 participants mentioning topic comprehension as somewhat confusing, and 7 of them reporting hindrances in brainstorming during their writing process. Their concern lies in moments when the topic question was too long, and they could not decide what to focus on in the essay. Thach Thao and Thanh Binh, for instance, shared similar worries when they were troubled by the essay's focus. As for brainstorming, they pointed to time constraints as the culprit hindering them from producing ideas. Consequently, some participants did not have enough supporting opinions, resulting in an inadequate number of words as required for the essay (about 500 words). As a common practice at the Faculty where the research was conducted, students are encouraged to write a 5-paragraph essay; therefore, without enough supporting ideas, their essays would fail to meet the requirement. This hindrance, to some extent, can be proven by the students' essays. Some essays could only reach between 360 and 380 words (Tran Thanh's and Minh Dung's essays), well under the word count, and some essays included only three to four paragraphs (1 essay and 4 essays respectively). Although the word count does not mean essay quality, the fact points to students' inability to brainstorm ideas for their essays.

### **4.3 Writing stage: Remarkable hindrances**

#### **4.3.1 Ideas organization, ideas development, and essay coherence (S200, S20D, and S20C)**

These three hindrances are discussed at the same time in one section for two reasons. Firstly, all of them are remarkable hindrances as revealed in the students' essays; secondly, they are interrelated: ideas are organized and developed coherently, all to defend the writer's viewpoint.

As mentioned above, the essay analyses shed light on what the participants shared in the interviews about their concerns related to idea organization and development. Overall, 23 out of 25 students had this problem, a startling number. Six error types related to the organization and development of ideas and coherence were detected in the essays. Errors related to the alignment between the topic question and the thesis statement, as well as the thesis statement and the topic sentences, are grouped into one error type, since they belong to the same weakness: misalignment. Altogether, they refer to the essay's coherence. The following table summarizes the errors and their frequency in the essays:

<b>Errors</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
1. Unmatched topic question and thesis statement; unmatched thesis statement and topic sentences	32 errors in 13 essays
2. Underdeveloped ideas	13 errors in 12 essays
3. Irrelevant ideas in body paragraphs	7 errors in 7 essays
4. Vague/confusing ideas (ideas that vaguely convey the writer's opinion, caused by their language proficiency)	15 errors in 9 essays
5. Disorganized ideas	2 errors in 2 essays
6. Overlapping ideas	2 errors in 2 essays

As for essay coherence, a disparity between what students self-reported in the interview and the essay can be observed. The interviews feature almost no reported hindrances from the participants, meaning all of them were confident in using coherent devices in their essays. Indeed, the essay analysis found no errors of this type. However, coherence refers not only to connecting words but also to connecting ideas in a coherent whole. From that perspective, the thesis statement is required to address the issue in the topic question; likewise, the topic sentences should all connect and support the thesis statement in one way or another.

The interviews show that the participants may have had a limited understanding of coherence, which leads to this disparity. In the essay analysis, more than half of them failed that criterion, with 32 errors in 13 essays. To analyze a few cases from the students' essays, the topic question is shown again as follows:

In *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters represent women's wisdom and power, not recognized and appreciated immediately, but still holding a strong spell in the gender sphere. Discuss how their wisdom and power are manifested in the play.

Two highlighted examples from the students' essays are Diem Loan's and Tinh Van's:

	Diem Loan's essay	Tinh Van's essay
Thesis statement	In this essay, more evidence for this view will be discussed in a lot more detail.	Through sympathy, shared experience, and careful observation, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters discover the truth about Minnie Wright's murder case.
Topic sentence 1	The play begins in the setting of a gloomy, messy kitchen, where the motives of the murder will be developed.	At the beginning of the play, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters appear passive and uncertain.
Topic sentence 2	Moving on to the second half of the play, the death of the bird reveals the motive for the murder.	Mrs. Peters represents a different kind of wisdom, one shaped by internal conflict.

The thesis statement in Diem Loan's essay is far from an acceptable one: it did not state the writer's opinion, and it only mentioned providing supporting evidence, not arguments. Compared to Diem Loan's thesis statement, Tinh Van's is a much better one and can be considered a standard one with three subtopics (sympathy, shared experience, and careful observation). Although it did not closely address the topic question, this thesis statement was a workable one, guiding the writer throughout her writing process. However, both writers failed to write appropriate topic sentences. For Diem Loan, neither of her topic sentences constructed an argument; instead, they retold the story plot. For Tinh Van, none of the topic sentences supported the thesis statement she had written.

Other errors, including underdeveloped ideas, irrelevant ideas in body paragraphs, disorganized ideas, and overlapping ideas, well reflected the participants' concerns shared in the interviews. Particularly, with underdeveloped and irrelevant ideas, the students exposed to some extent their weaknesses in logical and critical thinking to convince readers of their points, which leads to the lack of conviction in the overall essay quality, as will be discussed in the next section. Another problem, which has to do with the writers' vague ideas, can be traced to their incompetent language skills, which cloud their opinions. For instance, Giang Hoa wrote, "Nevertheless, they [the male characters] would rather assert their authority over the 'powerless' women than *use that power just for their own sakes.*" The phrase in italics impedes readers' comprehension of the writer's arguments.

All in all, the writing stage is highlighted by noticeable problems in organization and coherence, which later entail other problems in how they constructed and delivered their arguments.

#### **4.3.2 Scarce personal viewpoint and philosophy (S2AP)**

Personal viewpoint and philosophy refer to students' insights and responses when they read the literary work. As literature nurtures a language learner's personal growth (Carter & Long, 1997; Lazar, 1993), students are expected to connect the literary work's message and their life experiences. While literary scholars may argue that Literature is not meant to teach people, it is unarguable that reading Literature is, to some extent, to reflect on one's life and the society they live in. Therefore, a good literary essay for students requires them to demonstrate how their awareness has been elevated and their life insights broadened. These responses can be discussed in the final thoughts in the conclusion, or in a separate paragraph before the conclusion, to highlight how the literary work impacts students' perception of life.

The interview shows the participants' decision not to include their personal viewpoints and philosophies, with half of them declining to do so (13 students). The common reason is their assumption that in academic subjects, it is unwise to state their personal responses. Some others were afraid to digress from their main points if they discussed them, and the rest did not even think about including them in the literary essay. Although the reasons they offered made sense, it can be seen that the students did not comprehensively understand the literary essay genre, where personal responses are invaluable. The findings from the essay analysis exacerbate the situation, with 24/25 essays featuring no personal responses or philosophies. An example of personal

responses is similar to what Anh Xuan simply wrote in her essay: "... when looking into a case or a situation, if we consider something unimportant or trifles, we may never be able to seek the truth." This sentence alone can internalize the story for the reader, infusing the literary world into their own, making Literature part of people's lives, not an imaginary world.

However, it is interesting to observe that the exclusion of personal responses and philosophies did not negatively affect the overall quality of the essays. While the responses function as the students' reflectors, their logical analyses and arguments can also play the role of collective wisdom, uncovering their insights to some extent. For example, when Thien Bao called out, "...women's voices and intelligence should no longer be treated as a 'trifle' but appreciated as a form of social knowledge and strength", or when Tien Ha concluded, "This underestimated resistance challenges patriarchal dominance by proving that power does not always operate through force or visibility; instead, it can function through discretion, empathy, and collective action", they were truly speaking out for humanity wisdom.

#### 4.3.3 Essay conviction (S2AC)

This special literary essay quality is a result of many other qualities, such as idea organization (S2OO), idea development (S2OD), coherence (S2OC), citation of evidence (S2AE), knowledge of genre elements (S2KE), and critical approaches (S2KA). The findings in the interviews and the essay analyses feature a certain contrast. In the interviews, only 6 students expressed their concern about the credibility of their arguments, while the rest were confident that their points were strong and logical enough to convince readers. However, the arguments in 14 essays confessed their failed attempts to convince the reader. The reasons can be traced to the absence of any of the mentioned qualities, which affect the essay's conviction. For instance, when Thanh An mentioned "Mrs. Peters identifies herself as 'married to the law'", that negatively influenced her arguments, since the detail in the story is incorrect. The more problems in the aforementioned essay qualities, the more the essay's conviction was blemished.

#### 4.4 Writing stage: Less significant hindrances

##### 4.4.1 Formal style in literary writing (S2SV, S2SG, and S2SF)

As with the troublesome reading process, the participants' writing process is not without its problems with vocabulary and grammar. However, the hindrances they self-reported in the interviews do not match those analyzed in their essays.

Twenty-two out of 25 participants shared their anxiety about the language to write the essays in the interview. For vocabulary, they were anxious that they did not have enough vocabulary to convey their ideas, causing repetition of word use due to limited vocabulary repertoire. Some others were afraid that the words they used were too simple, unsuitable for the academic style of the literary essay. Worse, many of them were on the same page when they experienced memory lapses during writing, which considerably hindered their writing process. The concern for grammar is, fortunately, less serious. Only 14 participants reported their problems in grammar, as they could only use simple sentence structures, or the structures were not diverse. Some students were anxious when they could not find suitable structures to convey their opinions, sometimes leading to vague ideas.

However, since the participants are English majors, their performance in real writing is much better than what they feared. While vocabulary and grammar errors can be found in every essay, these obstacles are not very serious. First, errors in the choice of words are recorded in 23/25 essays, with 58 errors, making an average of 2.5 errors per essay. The highest number of errors is 9, and the lowest is 1. Grammar errors exceed those of vocabulary, with 72 errors recorded in 20 essays; the average is 3.6 errors per essay. The most errors reach 14, and the lowest is only 1.

It can be concluded from the findings that the participants' vocabulary and grammar are not very serious problems for them, as proven by the number of errors they committed in the essays. The contrast in findings between the interviews and the essays may point to one fact that English majors were conscious and cautious of their use of English. Several participants reported using AI to practice writing and suggest suitable vocabulary depending on different contexts, while others preferred reading more essays on the Internet to improve their writing proficiency. This, in one way or another, contributes to building learner autonomy, a benefit mentioned by several scholars researching in this field (for example, Abir, 2020; Gang, 2015; Sinclair, 2014...).

As for the figurative language, in the interviews, the researcher limited to only two figures of speech commonly used in writing, namely simile and metaphor. The interview findings revealed that more students used simile and metaphor (14 participants) during writing than those who did not. They explained that the use of these two figures of speech helped them best convey abstract ideas, enhancing their essays' communicative quality. They also assumed that using them in the literary essay enhanced their literariness. The rest who did not employ them in the essays, on the contrary, were afraid that using figurative language would confuse readers in understanding their ideas, while taking up their word count. As can be seen, the participants had contradictory opinions and understanding about using figurative language in the literary essay. The essay analysis offers a different result: 20 out of 25 essays used 59 similes and metaphors, mostly metaphors, making an average of almost 3 times per essay. It means that although some students claimed not to use them, they did deliver their opinions by using them. An instance of simile can be found in Hieu Cong's essay: "just as the bird's neck was wrung, Minnie's last piece of soul had been destroyed by her

*cold and authoritarian husband.*" For metaphor, there are diverse images: "Mrs. Hale was drowning in guilt..." (Thach Thao); "... domestic sphere has its own language of truth", "... trifles are often the very threads that hold the truth together" (Thao Trang); "This insight reframes Minnie Wright's crime within a broader social context of neglect and isolation" (Thanh An)...

#### **4.4.2 Citation of evidence (S2AE), knowledge of genre elements (S2KE), and critical approaches (S2KA)**

Among these three essay qualities, only S2AE records disparity between the interviews and essay analyses. The other two are recorded not to hinder the participants, both in their interviews and essays.

Fifteen students displayed their anxiety in using evidence to support their arguments. They reported that they forgot to cite evidence, failed to find suitable evidence (especially for longer texts like a novel), or did not understand how to cite the quotes grammatically correctly. Moreover, some were concerned that they repeated the evidence for several arguments, which would affect the diversity of evidence. However, the essay analysis only recorded their forgetting to provide the pages as the most common error. A few students cited inaccurate evidence, which can be due to their incomplete comprehension of the work, and a few others did not cite any direct quotes from the story.

In the interviews, all participants agreed that knowledge of genre elements and critical approaches was helpful, deepening their understanding of the multiple layers of the literary works, and thus enabling their essays to be more insightful. The only recorded problem is that such knowledge could sometimes be too academic and difficult to understand. Without the lecturers' instructions and facilitation, they had found it beyond their cognitive horizon. The essay analysis recorded keen analyses of the genre's elements that the participants employed in the essays, mainly characterization, setting, irony, symbolism, and theme. Though blemished with several errors, the essays addressed the issue in one way or another and successfully proved women's manifestation of wisdom and power. For instance, they could perceive the irony of how the women, who were disrespected and overlooked by the society of that time, united to resolve the criminal case, which was still a mystery to the prestigious and dignified men in the play. They understood the title suggests that women's power may come from unimportant things usually disregarded by men who consider themselves worthier and more important. They could also see the subtly suggested reconsideration of feminine power in the work, one that comes from empathy and emotional intelligence. Women's wisdom can be compared to that of men, as their logical thinking also led them to solve the case that the gentlemen were still confused. The analyses of intertwined elements proved that the participants possessed the knowledge of this kind to a lesser or greater extent.

#### **4.5 Finishing and editing stage: Less significant hindrances**

Both the interviews and the essays reveal that the participants did not experience serious problems in the finishing and editing stage. To write the conclusion, they knew that it was necessary to repeat the key points by paraphrasing them, provide some final thoughts about the literary work, and extend the work to the current living world. Some students shared that as they reached the conclusion, there was not much to discuss, and therefore, they just followed the instructions about writing the conclusion that they had learnt in the writing courses (Thach Thao, Thuy Anh, Hanh Duyen, Mai Thao, Uyen Phuc, Tien Ha...). The only recorded hindrance is that they almost ran out of time when writing the conclusion, making it usually shorter than the other paragraphs in the essay. It goes the same for the editing stage. All of them prioritized proofreading vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. If they had afforded the time, they would have checked the essay's coherence, handwriting, and evidence from the literary works. Again, the recorded problem is time constraint. All in all, as participants reached this writing stage, they did not experience any serious problems.

#### **4.6 Students' strategies in writing the literary essay**

The findings for this research question rely mainly on the participants' self-reports in the interviews. 24 out of 25 students had similar strategies in writing the literary essay, which included the following six steps:

- (1) reading the topic question carefully
- (2) analyzing the topic question
- (3) scanning the literary work or the excerpt that the topic question focuses on
- (4) making an outline
- (5) writing, while adjusting the outline
- (6) editing and proofreading

While step 1 is simple and may require several readings for thorough comprehension, step 2 includes more diverse actions, depending on the participants. In this step, some students reported highlighting or underlining critical keywords and terms to concentrate on when writing the outline and the essay; others emphasized the importance of dividing the topic question into chunks that were meant to be addressed during writing. In this way, they believed that they would not miss important ideas. Step

3 was implemented to select the necessary evidence in the literary work or excerpt; however, some students reported combining this step with step 4 when they wrote the outline. During the interviews, the participants did not distinguish between brainstorming and outlining; therefore, step 4 considers both tasks as one. To outline, students either listed three main ideas (most chosen) or used a mindmap (Ky Van). During step 5, writing, most participants confessed that they did not strictly follow the outline. The outline, in their opinions, was only a brief guideline for them, which could be adjusted, especially as they immersed themselves in this step, and the writing flow dictated new ideas to emerge. In that case, they would not hesitate to modify the outline. Noticeably, three students reported not outlining, as they were too concerned about the time issue. What they did was only to think about the main ideas and start jotting down the essay right after that.

Compared to the conventional strategies in the literature review, where the authors suggest copying those of writing academic essays (Barnet et al, 1008; Cocklereas & Logan, 1971; Griffith, 2011; Peck & Coyle, 2012; Roberts, 2008), the findings suggest a more detailed and practical set of strategies carried out by the participants, helping them cope more successfully with this particular essay.

Only one student, Hanh Duyen, reported a totally different strategy that worked for her: free writing. She reported that she had never outlined, but started with free writing about the topic question. After free writing for the first time, she came up with important ideas that addressed the topic. She then refined the paragraphs written in free writing, connected them with coherent devices, and finally found a thesis statement that could cover all the body paragraphs that she had just written. This student, as can be seen, did not commence writing with a guided thesis statement in the conventional way; instead, it was what she arrived at after all the body was completed. This strategy is somehow novel and individual, suggesting that students do not necessarily follow the convention. Writing is creative; they can make it fit their needs, not the other way round.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings above have highlighted the hindrances the students encountered and the strategies they employed in writing literary essays. As can be seen, in the reading stage to prepare for writing, the most highlighted obstacles reported by the participants were vocabulary and grammar structures. This finding is predictable, as it has been discussed and warned against in previous research studies (for example, Ong, 2016; Pillai, 2010; Subramaniam, 2003...). However, as English majors, the participants demonstrated their autonomy in getting over the obstacles. Many reported that they would ask AI, such as ChatGPT or Gemini, to explain the details that they were still unclear about. Therefore, it turns out that even though vocabulary and grammar were among the obvious hurdles for them to overcome, they could easily do away with them with AI assistance. It is also interesting to notice that language, on the other hand, did not hinder the participants' writing process, suggesting that, as English majors, they were aware of their language use in writing. As can be seen, the recent technology era is of great support for language learners. However, it also requires teachers to be more dynamic in their role, not only to facilitate but also to monitor their use of AI in the classroom. Because students can straddle between using AI as a tool and exploiting it, it is the teacher who helps their students be more aware of AI's potential negative effects.

Although the students reported having detailed step-by-step strategies for writing the literary essay, they still encountered critical problems with outlining, resulting in weaknesses in essay organization, development, coherence, and essay conviction. Their thinking process was flawed with underdeveloped and vague arguments, incomplete comprehension of the literary works, and overlapping ideas. This finding reinforces Peck and Coyle's (2012) observation: students do not outline the right way. Previous studies did not report problems with this outlining step directly, but rather challenges during the writing process, implying that the cause may be in the outline (for example, Ong, 2016; Pillai, 2010; Subramaniam, 2003; Ziane & Gariti, 2022). Therefore, this finding about the obstacles in the outlining process can be considered novel in this research. Teachers are recommended to provide students with more effective instruction and facilitation during this step, as it helps guide them throughout the writing process. In this respect, the outline template by Peck and Coyle (2012) can be used for practice for a more workable outline.

Another important hindrance is the participants' hesitation in manifesting their personal responses in the literary essay. Even though this does not seriously affect their essay quality, as can be seen in the analysis, it blurs the writer's identity. The literary essay is a special essay type that requires not only students' demonstration of knowledge about the literary work but also their responses to it (Flynn, 1983; Pertrosky, 1982); therefore, it comes with a special criterion in the checklist: personal responses and philosophies. As with the reader's response, a critical approach in Literature, the reader's personal responses reflect their perception and mindset; in doing so, they help them understand and develop themselves. Personal responses, to some extent, mark students' identities, especially important in this era when knowledge can be easily shared with AI's support. In essays with similar analyses and interpretations, only personal responses can set them apart. Therefore, teachers should encourage their students to respond to the literary work, connecting their world with the work's. That not only indicates their meticulous work on the literary work but also leaves their imprint on the essay.

The research findings do not indicate critical challenges regarding the participants' cultural and social knowledge and literary content knowledge. These findings imply, once more, that the AI technology has done a good job of enabling students to

access knowledge and information. Besides, it can be found that English major students are also equipped with productive study skills in studying Literature, such as note-taking, information searching, and citation of evidence. Whether they are a result of studying Literature or not, it is argued that Literature provides them with useful opportunities to practice and hone critical study skills, contributing effectively to their academic performance. Finally, the participants did not experience any visible hindrances during the final stage of writing, except for the time pressure. This implies that students should be aware of and facilitated to manage the time in essay writing.

The research study ends with a positive vision about literary essay writing: challenging as it may sound, it is truly a productive subject in English language learning, and studying Literature should be advocated to develop learners in various aspects. The study is not without delimitation: the framework is only a checklist without the weighting of components. Therefore, the essays were only marked and not scored, which did not reflect the nature of the writing assessment. Later studies can be done with attention to that delimitation in this research.

### **List of abbreviations**

- EFL: English as a Foreign Language
- ESL: English as a Second Language
- TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language
- TESL: Teaching English as a Second Language
- ETS: English Testing Service
- CLT: Communicative Language Teaching
- IELTS: International English Language Testing System
- TOEFL iBT: Test of English as a Foreign Language, Internet-Based Test
- GRE: Graduate Record Examination
- CPE: Certificate of Proficiency in English
- CAE: Certificate in Advanced English
- BACC: British and American Culture and Literature
- LTM: Teaching Methodology
- TI: Translation and Interpretation

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