



TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DISCOURSE-BASED ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING WRITING SKILLS TO ENGLISH MAJORS – THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, HUE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. Discourse competence has been widely acknowledged as a crucial part of communicative competence. Given this fact, the communicative approach to EFL teaching inevitably involves developing learners' discourse knowledge. Particularly, in teaching EFL writing skills, the integration of discourse knowledge and implementation of discourse-based activities plays an essential role as it allows learners to compose written products that are grammatically correct, logically organized, and culturally appropriate. This paper explores EFL teachers' perceptions of the application of discourse-based activities in teaching writing to English majors at University of Foreign Languages, Hue University. The results unveil that the use of discourse-based activities is deemed to have valuable potentials for the overall development of learners' writing skills, especially in terms of organizational and communicative aspects.

Keywords: discourse competence, EFL writing, English language learning, discourse-based activities

1. Introduction

Upon entering tertiary education, a typical Vietnamese EFL learner has learned English for at least six years. Nevertheless, the students' ability to use English confidently and communicate effectually – whether through written or spoken forms – is generally rather limited. This is especially true in the case of writing. University students exhibit manifold flaws in their compositions, ranging from inapt word choices, grammatically incorrect sentences to the illogical arrangement of ideas. This pothole can be attributed to a raft of reasons, the most significant one of which has been the lack of communicative writing practice at lower levels. The conventional approach to teaching English at the secondary level, usually designed to cater for testing purposes, begets a deficit in writing practices that can develop students' knowledge of both

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language forms and functions. Having to practice their writing skills in a decontextualized manner, secondary students might be able to compose individual sentences yet remain incapable of connecting these sentences into a wholly cohesive and coherent text. As a consequence, when tasked with assignments at the tertiary level, which requires the ability to write compositions of various types at length, Vietnamese EFL students are often unable to fulfill them satisfactorily.

Knowledge of discourse, i.e., knowledge of the use of language in specific contexts, has been widely acknowledged as a contributing factor in developing learner's overall communicative competence. In recent attempts to teach writing skills communicatively, language textbooks nowadays integrate instances of discourse and provide learning tasks based on these stretches of language. The pedagogical challenge for modern language teachers, then, is to raise learners' awareness of other aspects of writing, aspects that go beyond the boundary of single sentences, through discourse-based activities that emphasize "the purpose for which the discourse was produced, as well as the context within which the discourse was created" [1, p. 20].

To date, however, no study in the context of a Vietnamese classroom has dealt with the ways teachers perceive the use of discourse-based activities in their writing classroom. This research, hence, intends to answer the following question:

How do the teachers of HUFL (University of Foreign Languages, Hue University) perceive the implementation of discourse-based activities in teaching writing skills to English majors?

Through a brief literature review at the beginning, the interface between discourse knowledge and teaching/learning EFL writing skills is revealed. The next part details the methodology employed to collect data for the study. The data analysis is then presented in the successive section, providing the foundation for the pedagogical conclusions and suggestions for the effective integration of discourse-based activities made in the last part of the paper.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Discourse competence as an integral part of communicative competence

The notion of discourse competence was first introduced by Canale and Swain [2] as a sub-component of their communicative competence framework. Since its initial definition by Canale and Swain as knowledge of "cohesion (i.e., grammatical links) and coherence (i.e., appropriate combination of communicative functions) of groups of utterances" [2, p. 30], the term has been redefined by many other researchers and included in different frameworks of communicative competence. A more recent and clear-cut definition of discourse competence is that of Hublová [3], who describes it as "the ability to produce coherent, meaningful, and logically organised written texts respecting particular communication purpose and situational context."

2.2. The interface of discourse and EFL teaching/learning how to write

It is widely accepted that writing is the hardest skill to master, even for native speakers of a language. In the case of foreign language learning, learners face a variety of issues in the process of composing texts in a language that is not their mother tongue, regardless of their levels of language proficiency. For example, the lack of control over the structural components of the language (syntax, grammar, lexis, and writing mechanics) poses significant difficulties in creating correct, comprehensible individual sentences, which then complicates the comprehension process of the written products [4]. In the same manner, the lack of control over strategies to structure a coherent written text might result in communication failure, even when that text consists of grammatically allowable sentences [5]. Therefore, it can be concluded that to develop writing skills in a foreign language, one must work on broadening his or her understanding of the lexico-grammatical, organizational, and communicative aspects of the target language.

According to Farrokhi et al. [6], in the discourse-based approach, lexico-grammatical knowledge should not be taught in isolation since it is a system that “closely interacts with meaning, social function, and context it is used” [6, p. 60]. In essence, a discourse-based approach in language teaching focuses not only on the grammar forms but also on the functions and contexts within which those forms are used; through the use of discourse in teaching, insights about the conventional ways of using the target language are revealed [7]. In this sense, the relevance of discourse to the teaching of writing skills is brought to light: real instances of texts are the valuable resources for both language teachers and student writers, and a variety of activities can be devised from these discourses to help learners attain effective communication through their writings.

2.3. Prior research on the application of discourse-based activities in writing classrooms

Various studies have proven the positive impacts of using discourse and discourse-based activities as instructional media in the EFL writing classroom. For example, Collin and Norris [8] examined the effects of teaching contextualized grammar using authentic discourse on students' writing skills. Six weeks of instruction were given to the participants, who were divided into two groups of Discrete Grammar Instruction (DGI) and Embedded Grammar Instruction (EGI). While the DGI group only received grammar lessons using worksheets presented separately from other reading and writing activities, the EGI group was taught grammar with the contextualized approach, using contextualized, discourse-based reading and writing activities. The written products of the participants in the pre-test and post-test were assessed on the two criteria: the level of grammatical complexity and the correctness of writing mechanics. The two written tests revealed that the students of the EGI group outperformed their DGI counterparts in terms of grammatical complexity, suggesting evidence for the effectiveness of using discourse and related activities in teaching grammar and writing.

Aidinlou [9] investigated the impacts of discourse-based teaching on the overall writing development in the Iranian context. Sixty EFL Iranian students participated in this study, and they were divided into the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group underwent 10 sessions with discourse knowledge incorporated into the lessons; whereas, the control group just received the traditional method of teaching writing. The writing performance of students in both groups was then measured and compared using a post-test. It was concluded that the discourse-based teaching had a great effect on the writing of the Iranian TEFL majors. The overall quality of compositions by the group who received instructions on discourse knowledge was significantly higher than that of the control group.

3. The study

3.1. The context and participants of the study

The research aims to investigate the perceptions teachers have towards the integration of discourse-based activities in teaching writing to English majors at HUFL. To this end, 30 teachers were selected through purposive sampling: only teachers who have given writing lessons to HUFL students were asked to join the research. This ensures that the participants are experienced in teaching writing skills, which is a prerequisite if insightful data is to be gained. Although probability sampling with a higher number of participants could have yielded better external and internal validity for the research, non-probability sampling with a population of 30 teachers was employed in this research because it is much more feasible and cost-effective. The researchers are aware that due to the limitations of non-probability sampling, generalizing the results to larger contexts would call for greater caution.

As regards the participants' teaching experience background, 36.7% of the teachers have taught at HUFL from 1 to 10 years, 40% from 11 to 20 years, and 23.3% for more than 21 years. Such heterogeneity in terms of experience on the part of the participants allows the researchers to obtain divergent views, hence, increases the representativeness of the results. The majority of the participants are teachers of the English Department and the ESP Department.

3.2. Data collection instruments and procedure

A questionnaire was used as the main data collection tool because it was affordable, highly representative and most likely to encourage greater honesty in answers. The questionnaire consists of six questions as follows:

- Based on the general performance of your students, please rate the level of difficulty for each of the given aspects of writing. (*refer to 4.1 for a detailed list*)

- Please indicate how familiar you are with the notions of discourse and discourse-based approach.
- In your opinion, which of the given statements are TRUE about discourse and discourse-based activities? (*refer to 4.2 for a detailed list of statements*)
- From the given list of some discourse-based activities, please choose the activities you are familiar with. (*refer to 4.3 for a detailed list of activities*)
- How relevant are discourse knowledge and discourse-based activities in the teaching of each of the following aspect of writing? (*refer to 4.4 for a detailed list of activities*)
- For each of the following aspects of writing, what discourse-based activities can be used to teach it? (*refer to 4.5 for a detailed list of writing aspects and corresponding activities*)

The questionnaire was designed with the aims of:

- Examining teachers' viewpoints on the challenges facing their students in learning how to write in English,
- Measuring teachers' level of familiarity and theoretical understanding of the concepts of discourse and discourse-based activities,
- Assessing teachers' level of familiarity with different discourse-based activities,
 - Examining teachers' assessment regarding the relevance of discourse knowledge in teaching writing skills, and
- Discovering teachers' perceptions of the possible use of different discourse-based activities in teaching writing skills.

The concept of "perception" is never objective: it is the unique and personal way in which a person views the world. Due to this nature, the use of a questionnaire to measure the participants' perceptions has its limitation: the ideas and choices presented in the questionnaire largely depend on what the researchers could conceive and provide. Hence, there might be ideas that the participants could potentially have, but since such opinions are not mentioned in the questionnaire, the participants do not feel the need to expand on them. To alleviate this problem, the semi-structured interview is another data-collection tool for this study, allowing the collection of valuable data on the in-depth level. The contents of the interview questions also revolve around teachers' perceptions of using discourse-based activities in teaching EFL writing.

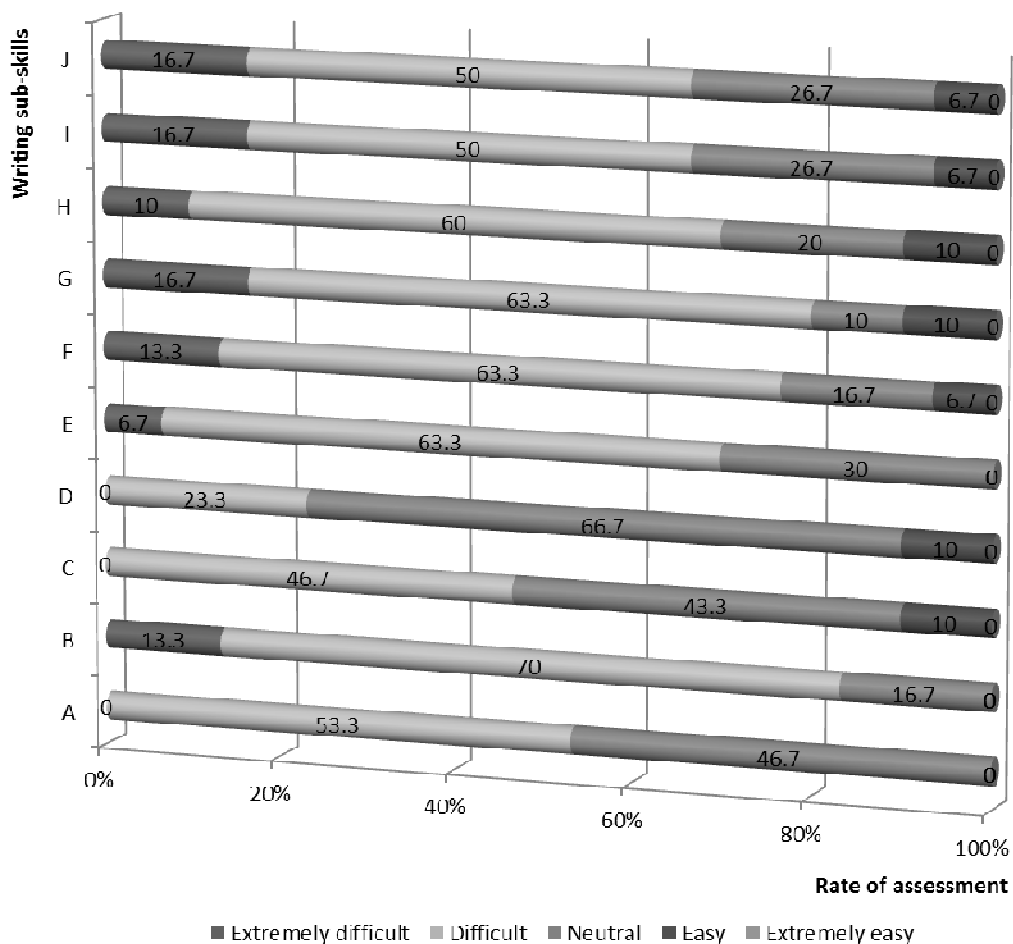
Thirty teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire. Following this, interview sessions were conducted with the consent of 5 teachers chosen randomly from the previous data

collecting stage. Data collected from these instruments were recorded and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods with Excel.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Teachers' assessment of students' difficulties in learning writing

The first questionnaire item lists out 10 sub-skills of writing, categorizing them into the 3 aspects: lexico-grammatical, organizational, and communicative. This question aims to investigate how teachers assess the struggles facing students in learning how to write. The descriptive statistics are summarized in Chart 1.



Notes: A - Grammar; B - Syntax; C - Vocabulary; D - Writing mechanics; E - Selection of relevant ideas; F - Paragraph coherence & cohesion; G - Text coherence & cohesion; H - Use of appropriate patterns according to genres; I - Fulfillment of target readers' expectations; J - Achievement of communicative goals.

Chart 1. Teachers' assessment of students' difficulties in learning writing

There are 3 aspects of writing listed in this question, each containing different writing subskills: the lexico-grammatical aspect (subskills A to D), the organizational aspect (subskills E to H), and the communicative aspect (subskills I and J). Chart 1 displays that the two biggest hindrances for EFL student writers are the organizational and communicative aspects of writing. As for the lexico-grammatical aspect, apart from Syntax, the other components belonging to this category were rated as the least challenging factors to the participants' students, with Writing mechanics being deemed "Difficult" by only 23.3% of the teachers.

The participants of the interview shared the viewpoint that cognitive-related issues such as instinctive writing without thorough planning or lack of critical thinking skill hinder the writing performance of their students. One teacher attributed this weakness to the cognitive differences between Vietnamese and English, while another detailed on how conventional use of Vietnamese prevented her students from using a particular grammar point that is widely used in English written contexts but not in Vietnamese contexts although it has been taught and learnt before:

"Their writing style is still under great influence of their mother tongue and Vietnamese way of thinking. Consequently, they often produce essays without clear structures." (Teacher 4, April 5th, 2019)

"During the first test for 100 students I am working with, none of them used passive voice, though they know passive voice very clearly. When I asked them the question 'Why', I discovered that it was because they think in Vietnamese while writing. And as Vietnamese, we rarely think in the passive voice. That's why they don't use any passive-voice sentences in their English written texts." (Teacher 5, April 5th, 2019)

It can be concluded that besides the challenge of constructing grammatically allowable sentences with appropriate lexical resources, students also have a lot of difficulties in organizing their ideas in a logical manner and in communicating their written messages operatively. Frequent exposures to instances of English discourse are therefore needed to familiarize learners with the typical English cognitive thinking process.

4.2. Teachers' level of familiarity and theoretical understanding of the concepts of discourse and discourse-based activities

In Question 2, the respondents were asked to indicate how familiar they were with discourse-related concepts. By familiarity in this context, we meant the frequency of exposure to discourse and discourse-based activities concepts. From Chart 2 we can see that only a small proportion of the participant pool reported being "Not at all familiar" or "Slightly familiar" with these concepts. The most prominent choices are "Somewhat familiar" and "Moderately familiar", accounting for 43.3% and 30% of the population, respectively.

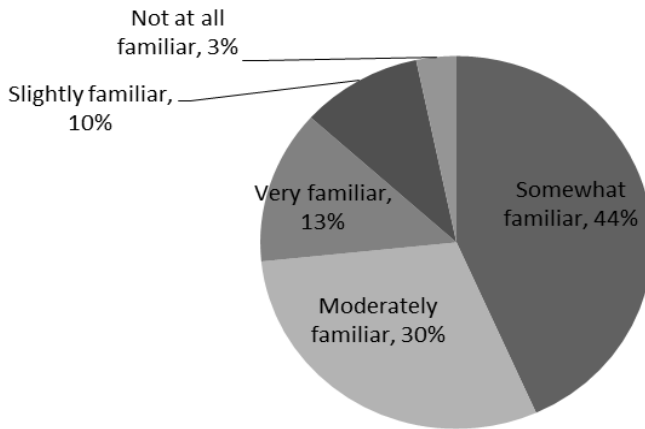


Chart 2. Teachers’ level of familiarity with the notions of discourse and discourse-based activities

The third question provided the participants with a list of statements about discourse-related concepts, asking them to identify the ones they agree with. These statements have been selected through extensive research on the field of discourse, containing both factual statements about discourse and biased ones. As can be seen in Table 1 below, a significant number of teachers accorded with statements that truly reflect the nature of the concepts in the discussion, with the percentages ranging from 60% to over 90%. The number of participants who agreed with biased statements, on the other hand, remained significantly low (less than 17% for all options).

Table 1. Teachers theoretical understanding of the concepts of discourse and discourse-based activities

Statement	Teachers agreed (N = 30)	Percentage (%)
Factual statements		
The discourse knowledge involves the study of naturally occurring language in the context in which it is used.	26	86.7
The discourse-based approach goes beyond the teaching of language in isolated sentences.	18	60.0
Exposure to instances of texts in the target language is the key principle of the discourse-based approach.	24	80.0
In the discourse-based approach to teaching writing, a writing product should be not only grammatically correct but also linguistically appropriate to the purpose it is serving.	28	93.3
In the discourse-based approach to teaching writing, satisfying the targeted audience’s expectations for the written products in terms of genres and rhetorical structures is one of the main aims.	25	83.3

Biased statements		
Discourse knowledge is relevant to advanced-level learners only.	5	16.7
The discourse-based activities only focus on teaching language meanings rather than forms.	4	13.3
The discourse-based activities only focus on teaching language forms rather than meanings.	3	10.0
In the discourse-based approach to teaching writing, the context relating to the writing tasks is not taken into consideration.	1	3.3

Taken together, results from questions 2 and 3 indicates a positive correlation between teachers' level of familiarity with discourse-related concepts and their level of understanding, suggesting an overall sound grasp of the theoretical concepts among the teachers.

4.3. Teachers' level of familiarity with different discourse-based activities

Question 4, which presents participants with various activities along with their definitions, was included to determine how cognizant the participants are of common discourse-based activities. Table 2 revealed that using discourse as model frames for new text construction, gap-filling, analysing written discourse, and reassembling exercises are the most popular activities to the teachers, with from 90 to 93.3% of the participants confirming that they were acquainted with those activities. The rest of the given activities (oriented discussion, language observation, text comparison, and text adaptation), albeit being familiar to over half of the participants, remains less common than the aforementioned ones.

Table 2. Teachers' level of familiarity with different discourse-based activities

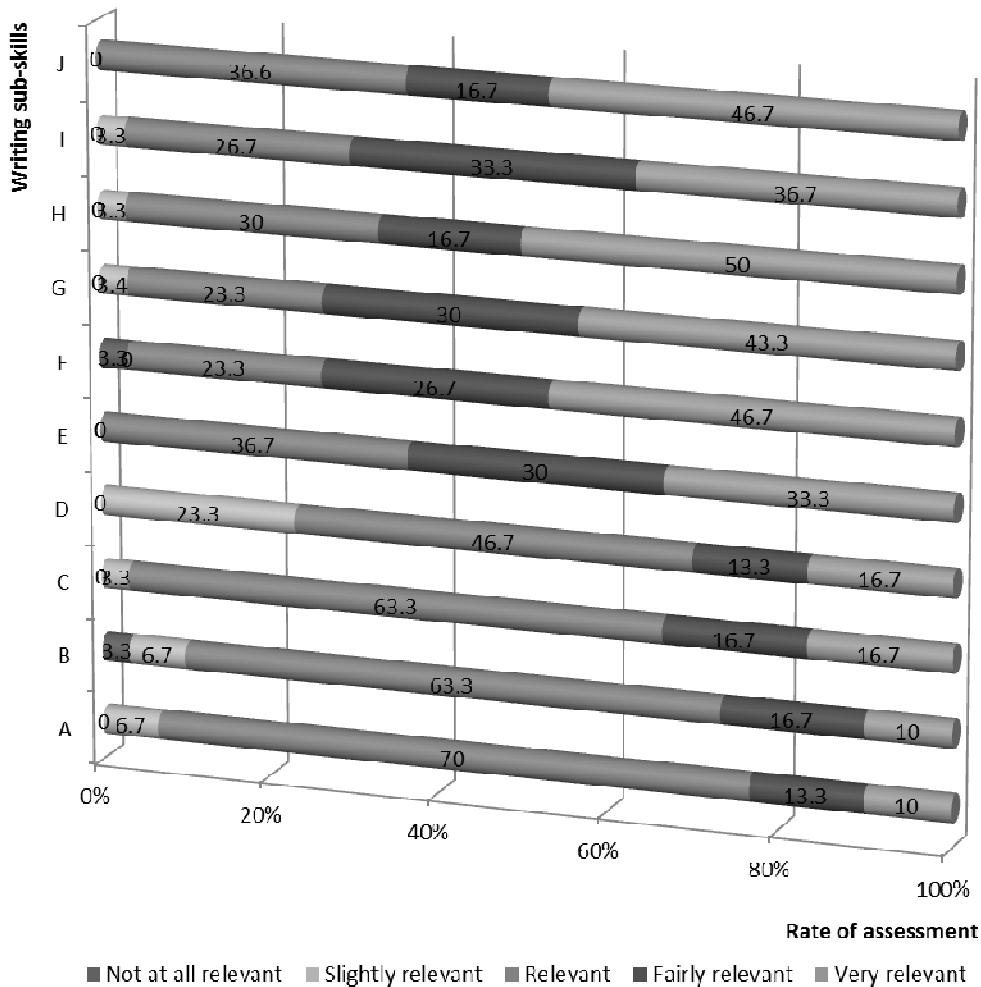
Activity	Definition	Number of teachers who are familiar with the activity ($N = 30$)	Percentage (%)
Oriented discussion	T provides Ss with instances of text in L2 and generates class discussion to explore the purposes and social-cultural setting of the texts.	23	76.7
Language observation	T draws students' attention to some particular features of the target language through provided examples.	23	76.7
Discourse analysis	T instructs students to analyze the targeted discursial features (e.g. organizational patterns, use of cohesive device, etc.) through instances of text in L2	27	90.0

Construction of text-based-on models	T instructs students to use model text as a frame to create their own written texts (model texts can represent genres/ discourse structures)	28	93.3
Gap-filling	T instructs students to fill in the gaps with appropriate cohesive devices/ words to complete the text in a logical manner	28	93.3
Reassembling	T instructs students to reassemble jumbled parts of a sentence/paragraph/ text into the correct order	27	90.0
Comparisons of texts across disciplines	T instructs students to compare and discover how written texts of different genres/ created by different social groups... might vary in terms of patterns, vocabulary use, etc.	16	53.3
Text adaptation	T instruct students to make changes to a given text so that it is more suitable for another target group of readers/ another social context	21	70.0

4.4. Teachers’ assessment of the necessity to integrate discourse knowledge in teaching writing skills

In the 5th question, the participants were asked to evaluate how relevant discourse knowledge and discourse-based activities to the teaching of different writing sub-skills. As can be seen in Chart 3, the overall response to this question is very positive: in every category of the writing sub-skills, the use of discourse-based activities is well-regarded, with the total proportion of those who considered it as “Not at all relevant” and “Slightly relevant” remaining significantly low across categories. Another noteworthy point is that discourse knowledge is deemed more useful in teaching sub-skills, which belong to the organizational aspect and communicative aspect as compared with the case of lexico-grammatical sub-skills. All of the respondents also agreed on the necessity to immerse discourse into their lessons because it raises learners’ awareness of the relationship between language and its social context. As one teacher put it:

“The use of discourse can demonstrate characteristic features of the target social contexts. For example, by having students read an authentic discourse about how Westerners celebrate New Year’s Eve, I can teach them about the cultural differences, hence helping them understand the context within which writing takes place. Once students are aware of such an aspect, their writing style and argument development would definitely be improved.” (Teacher 3, April 3rd, 2019)

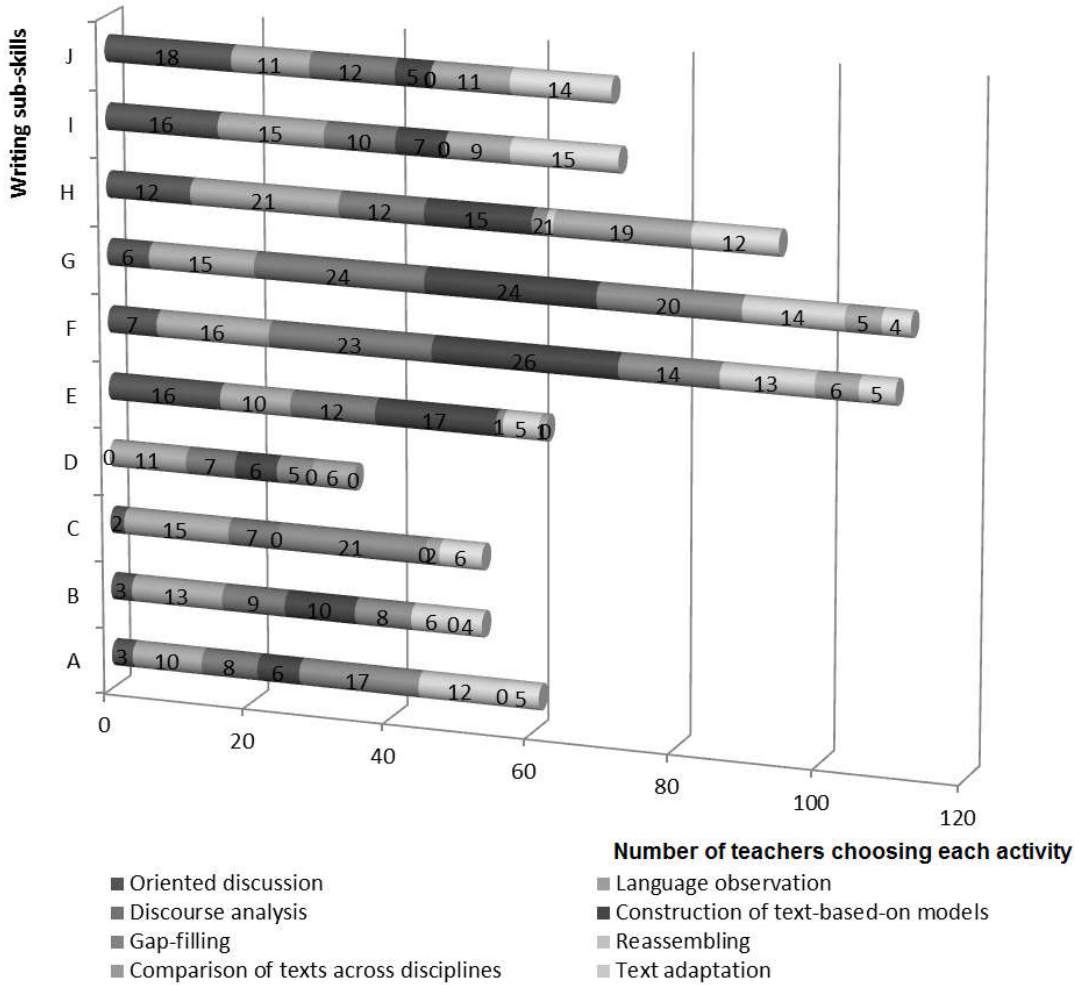


Notes: A - Grammar; B - Syntax; C - Vocabulary; D - Writing mechanics; E - Selection of relevant ideas; F - Paragraph coherence & cohesion; G - Text coherence & cohesion; H - Use of appropriate patterns according to genres; I - Fulfillment of target readers' expectations; J - Achievement of communicative goals.

Chart 3. Teachers' assessment of the relevance of discourse knowledge in teaching specific writing skills

The application of discourse-based activities can also yield positive results in teaching the typical reasoning style of native English speakers to the students, minimizing the undesirable effects of Vietnamese reasoning style on their written products:

"Most of the time, our Vietnamese students begin learning English from secondary school, and the method our teachers often apply is the grammar-translation one. That's why students often think in Vietnamese and then try to translate their thoughts directly into English words." (Teacher 5, April 5th, 2019)



Notes: A - Grammar; B - Syntax; C - Vocabulary; D - Writing mechanics; E - Selection of relevant ideas; F - Paragraph coherence & cohesion; G - Text coherence & cohesion; H - Use of appropriate patterns according to genres; I - Fulfillment of target readers' expectations; J - Achievement of communicative goals.

Chart 4. Teachers' perceptions of the possible use of different discourse-based activities in teaching writing skills

4.5. Teachers' perceptions of the possible use of different discourse-based activities in teaching writing skills

In Question 6, the teachers were asked to list discourse-based activities that could potentially be used in the teaching of each writing sub-skill given. From Chart 4, it can be easily seen that the potential use of discourse-based activities is most pervasive in teaching organizational and communicative aspects of writing. To elaborate, in teaching sub-skills of the former aspect (sub-skills E to H), the potential use of different discourse-based activities was mentioned 377

times in total. The corresponding figure for the latter aspect (sub-skills I and J) is 143. By sharp contrast, in the teaching of lexico-grammatical aspect (sub-skills A to D), the use of discourse-based activities was mentioned only 202 times.

Further analysis also revealed that certain discourse-based activities are preferred over others in teaching each group of writing sub-skills. Firstly, to develop learners' understanding of writing skills in the lexico-grammatical group, the two most frequently suggested discourse-based activities are Gap-filling and Language observation. Next, in teaching the organizational aspect of writing, the majority of teachers shared the idea that Construction of text-based-on models and Discourse analysis would be the most applicable activities. For the last group of writing sub-skills – the communicative aspect – Oriented discussion and Text adaptation are deemed the most potential activities to be integrated.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

As the research has demonstrated, the use of discourse-based activities is deemed beneficial to students' overall writing performance by teachers of HUFL.

Of the three aspects of writing, student writers at the tertiary level struggle with organizational and communicative aspects the most. This problem can potentially be addressed by integrating discourse knowledge into writing lessons, as the majority of teachers shared the perception that the discourse-based approach is greatly relevant in teaching sub-skills belonging to these two aspects, such as paragraph/whole text coherence and cohesion.

As regards their level of familiarity with discourse-related concepts, participants of the study displayed a thorough understanding. Consistent trends of using specific activities to teach different writing aspects can also be observed. These results suggest positive signs for the actual application of discourse-based activities in the classroom.

There are some significant pedagogical implications drawn from the findings of this study. On the part of students, they need to be aware of the fact that to articulate a good piece of writing, they need to have control over various factors besides grammar. Knowledge about how to structure their ideas and about the target readers are the requisites for effective writing. Discourse-based writing practice, which places special focus on features such as global coherence and cohesion or genres, should then be adopted by student writers. On the part of teachers, they should provide students with various activities devised from relevant discourse in order to raise learners' awareness about the relationship between language and its social context. In the process of teaching, teachers should direct students' attention to the discursual features of teaching materials, instructing them to draw relevant conclusions for their own writings. Besides, teachers should proactively inform themselves about discourse knowledge through accessible sources. On the part of educational administrations, it is important to acknowledge and

emphasize the role of discourse knowledge and discourse-based activities through the curricula, course books, and professional development opportunities.

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