



THE PRACTICE OF APPLYING DISCOURSE-BASED ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING WRITING SKILLS TO ENGLISH MAJORS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the practice of applying discourse-based activities in teaching writing skills to English majors at a university in Vietnam. For long, discourse competence has been considered a constituent part of different models of communicative competence and developing learners' knowledge of discourse is crucial in teaching language communicatively. Strong evidence regarding the positive impacts of discourse pedagogy on English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) learners' overall English proficiency has been accumulated in different contexts worldwide. However, in Vietnam, there is a dearth of studies that explore the integration of discourse knowledge and implementation of discourse-based activities in teaching EFL writing. This paper presents an investigation into teachers' practice of applying discourse-based activities in teaching writing to English majors at a university in Vietnam. It was conducted following the mixed methods design, with the participation of 30 teachers from four different departments of the university. Data were collected by means of questionnaire, interview, and class observation, and then analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The results of the study reveal that the teachers utilized discourse-based activities on a relatively frequent basis, and the purpose of using these activities was mainly to teach the organizational and communicative aspects of writing, which is in line with the previous findings and suggests a firm correlation between teachers' perceptions and practice. The conclusion and implications drawn from the findings emphasize the role of different agents (teachers, curriculum developers, course book writers, and educational institution) in promoting the integration of discourse-based activities in EFL teaching.

Keywords. Task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT), tasks, non-tasks, EFL students, perceptions

1. Introduction

The role of English has become increasingly prominent in today's world. Particularly in Vietnam, a good command of English opens doors for a multitude of opportunities in terms of employment, business, and higher education. This has led to a growing demand for English language learning among Vietnamese people in the past few decades. In academic settings, Vietnamese EFL learners' competence in writing is strongly emphasized, yet this productive skill has long posed great challenges to learners. Writing has always been considered a challenging task in language production, even for native speakers of the language. In the case of foreign language learning, particularly in the EFL context, research has evidence of student writers facing problems, which makes the process of writing even more daunting to them. According to Celce-Murcia and Yoo (2014), one of the central problems that hinders EFL learners' development in writing is their lack of knowledge in discourse, i.e. the use of language in context. That is, at a sentence level, they might be able to construct correct sentences based on their existing knowledge about grammar and vocabulary. However, when the whole written product is examined at a discourse level, weaknesses such as lack of coherence, incorrect use of lexical items, or monotonous repetition of grammatical structures can be observed. It is often the case that students practice writing with the mindset that a text without grammatical mistakes is a good one. As a result, even EFL students at the tertiary level suffer from apparent weaknesses that hinder them from composing meaningful texts at length. Hence, for teaching and learning practices to truly reflect the communicative approach, modern Vietnamese EFL teachers have to assist learners in developing other aspects of writing besides the grammatical one. Basing on similar-context research results of the authors (Nguyen Hoang Bao Khanh & Do Thi Xuan Dung, 2019), which outlined teachers' perception of the discourse-based approach application to teaching writing, this paper reports on the results of an investigation into teachers' practice of applying discourse-based activities in teaching writing to English majors at a university in Vietnam. We hope that both advantages and difficulties of using discourse-based activities are reflected through the findings of this study, hence contributing to raising teachers' awareness of how discourse pedagogy can enhance language competence of learners. It aims to answer the following research question: "How do teachers of English make use of discourse-based activities in teaching writing skills to English majors?"

2. Discourse-based activities and teaching writing

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

Learning to write in a foreign language does not merely mean learning to compose strings of sentences using the language's linguistic resources (Berninger, et al., 2009). EFL writers must equip themselves with skills from different aspects to produce texts that are

linguistically correct, semantically meaningful, and culturally appropriate. According to Kantor (2012), the quality of written compositions is measured on 3 distinctive levels: word, sentence, and discourse; hence, one must learn how to simultaneously satisfy the criterion of these 3 aspects when learning to write. At the most minimal level - word level, student writers are assessed based on the range and accuracy of their lexical resources and writing mechanics. At the sentence level, they must learn syntactic rules and intra-sentential connectives to produce correct and meaningful single sentences. Finally, at the discourse level, emphasis is put on how ideas are organized, how different sentences are connected in a fluent manner, and how conventions of writing samples are conformed to.

Similar to writing in ones' mother tongue, writing in a foreign language is the most challenging facet of language learning to more or less all learners. Due to its great complexity, as discussed above, this productive skill is often reserved for students whose levels are above elementary. However, even to an advanced language learner, it is often the case that writing is the most laborious skill to master. Several problems that hinder EFL students' writing process have arisen due to the complex nature of writing itself, classified into psychological, linguistic, and cognitive difficulties (Byrne, 1988). Besides, there is also another task most EFL learners struggle with: that of how to effectively communicate with the targeted readers. According to Ivanič (2004), writing events are inseparable from their social factors, including purpose, context, and audience. Thus, learners need to use their linguistic and organizational knowledge to produce texts appropriate for its targeted readers, achieving the set communicative goals. Muncie (as cited in Kim & Kim, 2005) maintained that failure to produce texts that fulfill the expectations of its targeted readers vis-à-vis grammar, organization, and context would cause students to be considered incompetent.

Irrespective of how it is defined and positioned in different models of communicative competence, discourse competence has been widely acknowledged as a crucial part of communicative competence of a language. In the domain of second and foreign language learning, the development of discourse competence is argued by Bruce (2008) to be "a key element of an individual's overall communicative competence" (p.5). In line with this view, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) asserted that "it is in discourse and through discourse that all of the other competencies are realized. And it is in discourse and through discourse that the manifestation of the other competencies can best be observed, researched, and assessed" (p.16).

Discourse competence and the ability to write

Given the fact that discourse competence is an integral part of communicative competence, the communicative approach to teaching a second/foreign language inevitably involves developing learners' discourse knowledge. Throughout the literature, different researchers have discussed the components of discourse knowledge in a variety of ways. For example, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) suggested that there are five aspects of discourse

knowledge, including cohesion, coherence, deixis, genre, and conversational structure. Elkouti (2017) maintained that the key aspects to be focused on in discourse-based teaching of a language comprise knowledge about background knowledge, context, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. Within the scope of this study, we will focus on the three most commonly taught aspects of discourse knowledge, namely *cohesion* and *coherence*, *genre*, and *discourse structure*, as well as on how these aspects are related to the development of learners' writing skills.

Previous studies on the application of discourse-based activities in EFL classrooms

Research into the application of discourse-based activities in ELF classrooms has reported various theoretical benefits. Collin and Norris (2017) examined the effects of teaching contextualized grammar using authentic discourse on students' writing skills and their research revealed that the students who were equipped with embedded grammar instruction produced written texts with grammatical complexity, hence, suggesting evidence for the effectiveness of using discourse and related activities in teaching grammar and writing. Aidinlou (as cited in Elkouti, 2017) conducted a study to measure the extent to which explicit teaching of discourse knowledge affects writing quality amongst Iranian EFL learners. Results revealed that the overall quality of compositions by the group who received instructions on discourse knowledge was significantly higher than that who did not. Another preliminary research investigating the integration of discourse-based writing activities in ELT coursebooks was carried out by Belmonte and McCabe (2004) who examined the functions of discourse analysis in communicative competence development in writing and established some standards for the development of written discourse competence in pedagogical tasks. They also made several recommendations for improvements, such as increasing L2 writers' awareness of audience, interaction, and context as well as micro-level text structuring concerns.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 30 teachers were selected through purposive network sampling: basing on the initial participants' referrals, other teachers who had taught writing lessons to English majors at the research site were asked to join the research. This ensures that the participants are experienced in teaching writing skills, which is a prerequisite if insightful data are to be gained. Regarding to the participants' teaching experience, 36.7% of the teachers have up to 10 years of experience, 40% from 11 to 20 years, and 23.3% have worked for more than 21 years. Such heterogeneity in terms of experience on the part of the participants allows the researcher to obtain divergent views, hence increases the representativeness of the results. 5 teachers from

the initial pool of 30 were invited randomly as participants of interview and class observation sessions via email or phone. In response to the researcher's invitation, all of them agreed to participate. Throughout the interviews and observations, these teachers were coded as Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D, and Teacher E.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

3.2.1. Data Collection

Questionnaire

As mentioned earlier, questionnaire was utilized in this research to obtain quantitative data. This instrument, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), is relatively affordable, highly representative and is most likely to encourage greater honesty in answers. There are two parts in the questionnaire: Part A inquiring about the demographic information of those surveyed and Part B about the information needed to answer the research questions. The latter part is composed of 14 questions, both close-ended and open-ended ones, divided into three main categories that enquire informants' responses on their perception and practice of applying discourse-based activities into their actual writing skill teaching; and finally, suggestions on ways to effectively integrate discourse-based activities in teaching writing skills. Among 14 questions, we designed those who serve the category of teachers' practice investigation in five items (from question 8 to question 12). To ensure the validity and reliability of this research, two other instruments, namely interview and class observation, were also employed to compensate for its potential drawbacks.

Interview

Semi-structured interview is another data collection tool of this study, allowing the collection of valuable data at an in-depth level. Adams (2015) opined that in mixed methods approach, semi-structured interview can act as "an adjunct to supplement and add depth to other approaches" (p. 494). The set of tentative questions used in interview sessions contains both closed-ended and open-ended ones. Though the combination of both types of questions, extended probing and further clarification are achieved, and a substantial level of objectivity and uniformity is maintained in the qualitative dataset (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). In the agenda for interview sessions, the set of tentative questions is also divided into three main categories, i.e. teachers' perceptions, teachers' practice, and their suggestions for the integration of discourse-based writing activities. Through the interview sessions, the interviewees could elaborate more on their viewpoints.

Class observation

To obtain further insights that help shed light on the research questions, particularly relating to the teachers' actual integration of discourse-based activities in writing classroom,

class observation is the third technique of data collection used in this study. The major benefit of this method, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), is that “the researcher does not need to worry about the limitations of self-report bias, social desirability, or response set, and the information is not limited to what can be recalled accurately by the subjects” (p. 257). Prior to the observation sessions, an observation sheet was constructed, outlining the predetermined categories to be observed. These categories include: Name of the activity, stage of the activity, procedure of the activity, and purposes of the activity. Basing on this sheet, the researcher took relevant field notes that described what happened during the actual class observations.

Data collection procedure

Research information letters were sent to 36 EFL teachers at the research site via email. In the letter, the researcher clearly explained the purpose of the research and the importance of the recipients’ contribution, as well as requested cooperation from the teachers by filling out the questionnaire forms attached to the mail. For the convenience of the teachers, both Vietnamese and English versions of the questionnaire were attached to each email. In the end, the researcher collected 30 responds, with the return rate of more than 80%.

Out of 30 questionnaire respondents, five were randomly selected and invited to participate in the interview via email or phone calls. With their consent, the researchers arranged five one-on-one interview sessions at the teachers’ workplace. Based on the respondent’ preference, each interview session was carried out in either English or Vietnamese. The questions were addressed to the teachers following the interview agenda, and answers were recorded by one of the researchers. After that, the answers were transcribed by the researcher for later analysis.

Arrangements regarding time and location for the sessions with the teachers who agreed to be observed were made from one to two weeks in advance. The researchers attended five periods of writing class of different levels, each lasting for 45 minutes. During class time, the researcher remained detached from the students and recorded information using the observation sheet.

3.2.2. Data analysis methods

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized to analyze information gathered from the 3 data collection instruments. On the one hand, information from the questionnaire were analyzed and reported by means of descriptive statistics. Data analysis was carried out with the aid of Excel, and statistics was presented via visuals such as charts and tables. Qualitative information from interview and class observation, on the other hand, was organized into categories through inductive analysis, resulting in emerging patterns that help clarify statistical results.

3.3. Findings

3.3.1 Teachers' frequency of using discourse-based activities in teaching the four English language skills

Question 8 in the questionnaire serves to gain a general perspective of how frequently discourse-based activities are adopted by teachers in teaching the 4 skills. From Figure 1, it can be noticed that the frequency of using discourse-based activities in writing lesson far outweigh that in other skills, with 40% and 36.7% of the teachers claiming to integrate these activities very often and often respectively. This observation, coupled with the fact that none of the respondents chose the options of "Never" or "Rarely", suggests the effective use of discourse-based activities in writing classrooms.

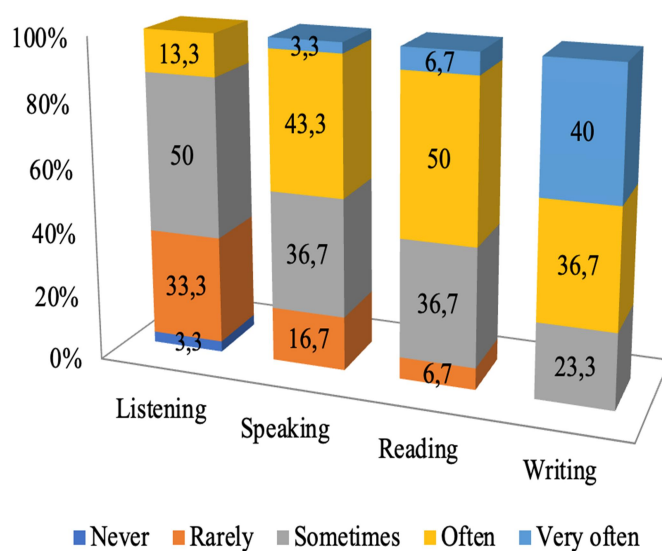
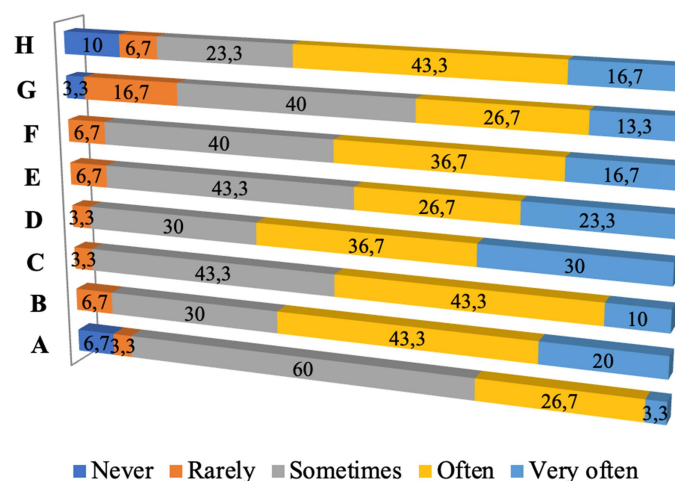


Figure 1. Teachers' frequency of using discourse-based activities in teaching the four skills

3.3.2. Teachers' frequency of using different discourse-based activities in teaching writing

Question 9 is used to measure the frequency with which each discourse-based activity is integrated into writing lessons. As can be seen from Figure 2, all the discourse-based activities are employed with relatively significant frequency.



Notes: A. Oriented Discussion; B. Language Observation; C. Discourse Analysis; D. Construction of text based on models; E. Gap-filling; F. Reassembling; G. Comparison of texts across disciplines; H. Text Adaptation

Figure 2. Teachers' frequency of using specific discourse-based activities in teaching writing

Among the activities, *construction of text based on models* is the most prevalently used one, obtaining the most substantial percentage for "very often" and "often" (66.7% in total) and only 3.3% for "rarely". Teachers' marked preference of using sample written discourse as a reference source for writing was also found in the class observations and interviews. On the one hand, it is noticed that this discourse-based activity was employed by 3 out of 5 teachers observed. A common pattern found in these observation sessions is that teachers incorporated model texts in writing theory periods, when students were first introduced to a new essay type, to familiarize them with the genre's conventions. All of these 3 teachers introduced sample discourse as models prior to students' practice section. On the other hand, out of 5 teachers interviewed, 4 reported to use models in their writing classes on a regular basis. Particularly, this respondent detailed her justification and strategy for using models in classroom as follows:

"The most frequently used activity in my classes is using discourse as models for my students to follow. For example, when I teach a specific type of essay, I will have students read through a text of that kind written by native speakers. I believe that by reading such materials before practicing writing, students are informed about the strategies to develop ideas as well as the typical text structures." (Teacher B)

Another interviewee said:

"I often provide students with sample written discourse in theoretical classes. I would have them read through the samples and then elicit questions to draw their attention to how writers select ideas for the introduction, body, and conclusion of their writing." (Teacher D)

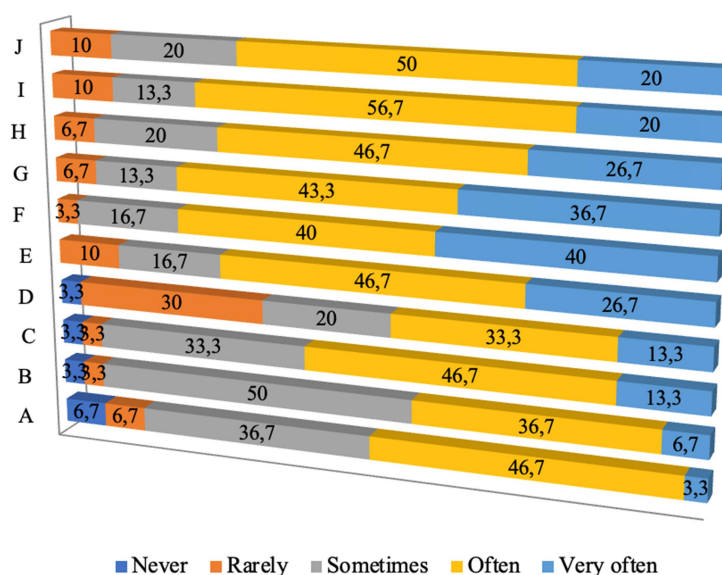
With 23.3% and 26.7% of the participants stating that they used model texts "very often" and "often", *gap-filling* is another popular discourse-based activity used in writing classrooms. Despite scoring less significant percentage for high integration frequency in the questionnaire result as compared to other activities including *language observation*, *discourse analysis*, and *reassembling* (whose total percentage for "Very often" and "Often" being 63.3%, 53.3%, and 53.4% respectively), *gap-filling* activity proved its prominence through the interviews and class observations. When asked to identify the most regularly used discourse-based activity, one interviewee chose *gap-filling*, giving details on the actual application of it in her classrooms:

"When the aim of the lesson is to develop students' use of adjectives to add details in their narrative texts, I would pick simple sentences from the discourse, take out the adjectives used in those sentences and then ask my students to fill in the blanks with the proper words. When the lesson's aim is to develop students' logical arrangement of ideas, I will design gap-filling activities which require students to add supporting ideas relevant to the major ideas taken from sample discourse." (Teacher C)

The use of *gap-filling* activity was also observed in two out of five observation sessions. Both of these teachers used *gap-filling* as a pre-writing activity to help student generate relevant ideas that they could include in their final writing task, or to make them aware of the progression of ideas throughout a text. The recurrent general procedure in these 2 classes is twofold: first, students were presented with topic sentences extracted from sample discourse, and second, they must gradually add supporting sentences to complete each paragraph started with the given topic sentence. In the second stage of the activity, while one teacher provided students with a jumble of supporting sentences from the same discourse and irrelevant sentences for them to choose and arrange into the right order, the other teacher let students come up with their own supporting sentences and finally revealed the complete sample discourse after students had finished the task.

While only 30% of the questionnaire respondents stated that they used *oriented discussion* with high frequency, two out of five teachers observed employed this activity in their lessons. The common denominator between these two lessons was that students had to create final written products that demand knowledge about contexts (one required students to write an essay about what Vietnamese people do on Tet holiday, while the other asked them her students to write a paragraph about an effective way to lose weight). In the pre-writing stage, both teachers presented students with an online article, asked them to skim through the discourse, and then elicited questions related to the social-cultural setting of the texts. Examples of questions asked by the teachers include: "Who is the target audience of this article?", or "What are the difference between how Americans celebrate New Year's Eve and how your family celebrate Tet?" Through these short discussion sections, students' awareness about the background knowledge was stimulated, aiding them in the subsequent stages of the lesson.

With a view to discovering how frequently discourse-based activities are applied in teaching different aspects of writing, we designed question 10 of the questionnaire the results of which are presented in Figure 3 as follows.



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

Figure 3. Teachers' frequency of using discourse-based activities in teaching specific writing skills

From Figure 3, it can be seen that the integration of discourse-based activities took place most commonly in teaching *coherence* and *coherence of a paragraph and whole text*, both of which gained an impressive total percentage of high integration frequency (80%). Discourse-based activities are also prominent in the teaching of other two subskills from the Organizational aspect, i.e. *use of appropriate patterns according to genres* and *selection of relevant ideas*, with the high integration frequency of for each skill taking up 73.4% of the population. In the same vein, subskills belonging to the Communicative aspect, i.e. *fulfillment of target readers' expectations* and *achievement of communicative goals* are areas which actively encourage the application of discourse-based activities, with respectively 76.7% and 70% of the respondents use these activities with high frequency in teaching each subskill. Subskills in the Lexico-grammatical aspect, on the other hand, demand the least use of discourse-based activities. This is demonstrated by the fact that components of this aspect scored the lowest percentage for high integration frequency and the highest percentage for low to average integration frequency. A salient example of this trend is the case of teaching *writing mechanics*, when 33.3% of the population stated that they never or rarely used discourse-based activities for this purpose.

The recurrent preference for discourse-based activities in teaching the Organizational and Communicative aspects of writing can also be noticed in the interviewees' answers to the question *"Which aspects of writing especially need the application of discourse-based activities in teaching?"* The excerpts below show the respondents' justifications for this trend:

"I think that aspect is teaching different types of writing. Depending on what genre we have to teach, we can expose students to real-life examples of that genre." (Teacher B, March 30th, 2019)

"I think it's the idea development aspect. As far as I know, discourse-based activities put the emphasis on the use of text structures in particular contexts. Therefore, these activities are beneficial in teaching students how to develop and express ideas logically." (Teacher C, April 3rd, 2019)

"The first aspect would have to be teaching the organizational patterns, because many students organize their English writings in the same way as how they structure their Vietnamese essays. Another aspect is teaching the differences between genres. For example, through discourse, students are made aware of the characteristic features that distinguish an essay from a letter." (Teacher 4, April 5th, 2019)

Qualitative results obtained from observation sessions also indicate that the teachers were in favor of integrating discourse-based activities in teaching students the organizational and communicative aspects of writing. As mentioned previously, three major discourse-based activities were used in the observed classes, including *oriented discussion*, *gap-filling*, and *using discourse as models*. The purpose of these activities is either to develop student's text organizational skills or to make them aware of the cultural setting of the texts.

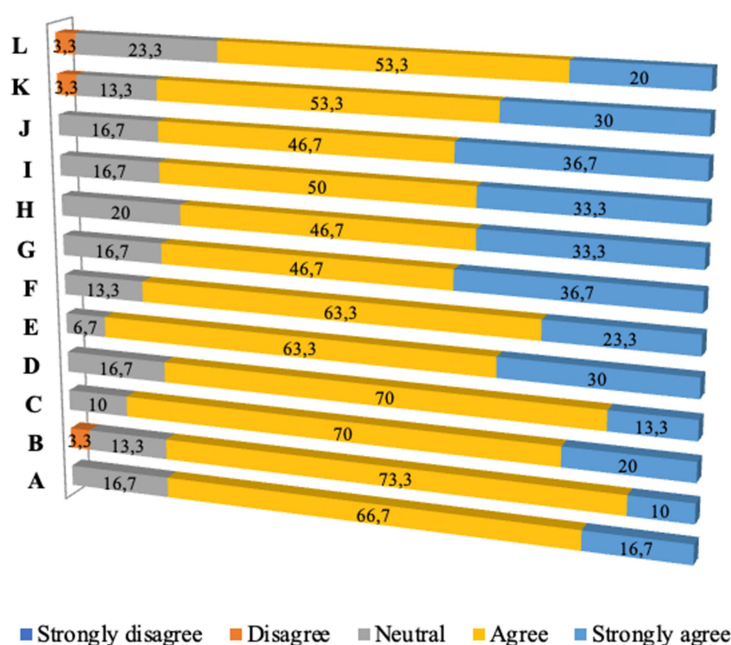
The findings of question 10, coupled with results from class observations and interviews, are therefore in accordance with that of question 7 (teacher's perception). Analysis of results from question 7 leads to the conclusion that in terms of teacher's perception, discourse knowledge is deemed more useful in teaching subskills which belong to the Organizational aspect and Communicative aspect as compared to the case of Lexico-grammatical subskills. Taken together, these results suggest that there is a firm association between teacher's perception and actual practice of applying discourse-based activities in their writing lessons.

3.3.3. Teachers' reflections on the benefits of using discourse-based activities in teaching and learning English writing

In question 11, a total of 12 potential benefits of using discourse-based activities were listed, organized into three categories, namely lexico-grammatical, organizational, and Communicative. The respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each of the benefit. From Figure 4 below, it can be clearly seen that the overall response was highly positive, with more than 70% of the teachers acknowledging the benefits of using discourse-

based activities across all categories. Disagreements to some of the statements exist, but with a negligible rate of only 3.3% for each case. Another noteworthy point is that the four benefits in the lexico-grammatical category, i.e. *benefit A, B, C, D*, received the lowest total number of votes for “Strongly agree”, as compared to those in the other 2 groups.

Once again, this result confirms the positive association between the application of discourse-based activities and learners’ development of organizational and communicative aspects of writing. Considering the finding in the first question that the writing subskills belonging to these two aspects pose greatest challenges to the participants’ students, the integration of discourse knowledge and related activities can be a viable solution.

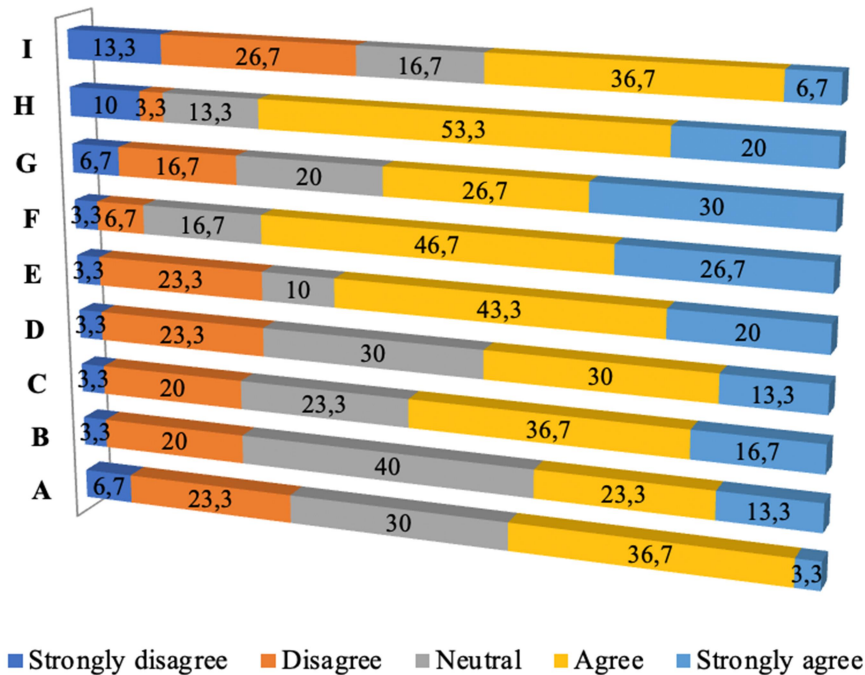


Notes: A. Be aware of typical lexico-grammatical choices to produce written texts of different genres; B. Use correct grammar to attain effective communication on a global discourse level rather than a single-sentence level; C. Use appropriate lexical resources to create well-written texts; D. Be familiar with and conform to writing mechanics; E. Understand how written texts are structured at different levels (sentences/paragraphs); F. Effectively organize ideas by means of linguistic resources to create logical written texts; G. Understand the common pattern that texts of the same genre share (generic structures); H. Effectively organize written texts with patterns that are commonly used by native speakers; I. Understand the communicative purpose of the writing task (why they are writing); J. Understand the audience’s expectations and potential background knowledge (schemata) (who they are writing for); K. Understand the situational and cultural context in which the writing task takes place (what background knowledge they have to consider when writing); L. Compose different text types that achieve communicative goals

Figure 4. Teachers’ reflections on the benefits of using discourse-based activities in teaching and learning English writing

3.3.4. Teachers' reflections on difficulties in using discourse-based activities in teaching English writing

Item 12 of the questionnaire aims to address the challenges facing teachers during the integration of discourse-based activities in writing lessons. Major problems concerning both the designing stage (*Difficulty A to E*) and the application stage (*Difficulty F to I*) were listed out for the respondents to indicate their reflections. Figure 5 below demonstrates the results obtained from this question.



Notes: A. I don't have sufficient knowledge about discourse; B. I'm not sure how to design and integrate discourse-based activities in writing class; C. I don't have access to reference materials while designing discourse-based activities; D. I have difficulties choosing appropriate written discourse that reflects the aim of lesson; E. I don't have enough time to prepare discourse-based activities; F. There is not enough time to integrate discourse knowledge because I have to focus on the target contents of the lessons; G. It's impossible to apply discourse-based activities in every teaching session; H. The majority of my students still struggle with micro skills in writings; I. My students don't show interest in discourse-based activities.

Figure 5. Teachers' reflections on the difficulties in using discourse-based activities in teaching and learning English writing

Statistics from Figure 5 point out that in-class time constraints (*Difficulty F*) and divergence in students' levels (*Difficulty H*), both of which belong to the application stage, are the main hindrances to writing teachers when using discourse-based activities. The ratios of agreement to disagreement in both of these cases are considerably significant, with approximately 7:1 for the problem of time constraint and 5:1 for the problem of mixed-level class. Despite this, when asked the question "What are the difficulties have you encountered when designing / applying discourse-based activities in your writing classes?", none of the interviewees identified the divergence in students' levels as their problem, and only one of them agreed with the idea that limited time in class made it difficult for discourse-based activities to be employed:

"My problem is certainly the time limit. Due to the short amount of time distributed to writing classes per week, I can barely develop activities outside the coursebook. I have to prioritize contents in the coursebook to make sure the target contents are covered." (Teacher A)

Problems related to which sources of discourse to choose from and which activities to construct from the chosen discourse are also of biggest concern to the teachers. In the questionnaire, these problems are presented in *Difficulty B*, *C*, and *D*. While the percentage of agreement for each of these difficulties was generally lower than that of other opinions, the results from the interviews reveal clear evidence on the teachers' struggles with these hindrances. Among the five interviewees, three expressed their viewpoints on this:

"I find it challenging to find the sources, which takes lots of time. Moreover, after selecting a source, I have to think of the activities based on it. Sometimes it is not easy to find sources that are relevant to the lesson's topic or the target text type." (Teacher B)

"I think it's very difficult to find the source that is relevant to the aims of my lessons. What I mean is, when we follow the coursebook, each unit has a theme, and it's not always possible to find additional texts that satisfy both themes and the aims of each unit." (Teacher C)

"If we use a source that is beyond the level of our students, they won't pay attention, and on our part, we will have to spend extra time to elaborately explain it to them. So, I think the challenge is to select discourse that is in line with the lesson theme as well as the students' levels." (Teacher D)

It is clear that teacher B, C, and D all experienced different sorts of challenges when seeking appropriate sources of discourse for students, that went in line with the lesson objectives, learners' level or interest. This may also lead to ample suggestions for teachers to be provided or assisted with enough teaching resources.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this study is to investigate the practice of applying discourse-based activities in teaching writing skills to English majors at a university in Vietnam. Overall, the

findings show evidence related to the teachers' frequent application of discourse-based activities in their writing lessons. The findings suggest that the construction of text based on models, gap-filling, and oriented discussion are the activities with the highest integration frequency. These activities direct students' attention to strategies to select, develop and organize ideas, and inform them of the background knowledge regarding their target readers. This affirms the effectiveness of discourse-based activities in addressing EFL students' writing problems.

Pertaining to the aspects of writing that incorporate discourse-based activities most frequently, the participants reported that teaching organizational subskills (including coherence of a paragraph and coherence of the whole text, use of appropriate patterns according to genres and selection of relevant ideas) requires discourse-based activities on an extremely frequent basis. The second area in which teachers make use of discourse-based activities frequently is the teaching of communicative subskills (including fulfillment of target readers' expectations and achievement of communicative goals). Lastly, the use of discourse-based activities in teaching lexico-grammatical subskills is reported to be scarce.

Through the teachers' observed practice, the use of discourse-based activities is seen to have positive impact to learners' overall writing competence. Despite these widely recognized benefits, the application of discourse-based activities is still hindered by a raft of difficulties, the most prominent ones being in-class time constraints, divergence in students' levels, and lack of reference sources for relevant discourse samples and activities ideas. In response to these issues, the teachers put forward valuable suggestions to stimulate the use of discourse-based activities, with the equal participations of various agents (educational institutions, curriculum developers, material creators, and teachers themselves).

In general, the findings confirm the positive effects of discourse-based approach to teaching language in general and teaching writing in particular that previous studies have pointed out. The current study asserts that discourse is the foundation for other competences realized by Celce- Murcia and Olshtain (2000) that knowledge of genres, grammar, and coherence... can serve learners of language to raise awareness towards and organize their writing more effectively (Collin & Norris, 2017; Farrokhi et al., 2018; Kim & Kim, 2005; Mohammed 2017), and that discourse-based approach can manifest the learners' becoming of competent users of language and facilitate teachers' teaching outcomes on another platform (Elkouti, 2017).

From the findings of this research, significant implications for better integration of discourse-based activities in EFL writing classes can be drawn. As "discourse plays a central role in teaching language communicatively. Immersing discourse into language teaching provides a wide range of resources for both language teachers and language learners" (Farrokhi et al., 2018, p.66). In the light of this, it is important that teachers internalize the values of

discourse-based pedagogy in developing their learners' communicative competence. On a frequent basis, target knowledge of the lessons, for examples, grammar points, text structures, etc. should be taught through various relevant pieces of discourse that contains examples of its actual use in specific contexts and for specific readers. From authentic or adapted discourse, teachers should devise relevant and diverse activities suited to teaching purposes and learner's levels. The use of discourse as a source for developing **writing tasks** should address all of the aspects of writing, for instance, lexico-grammatical, organizational, and communicative ones. Especially, more discourse-based activities that emphasize the cultural and situational aspects of writing are needed, because as revealed in the study results, the use of such activities is rather scarce when compared to activities that focus on text structures at different levels.

In terms of educational management, the role of discourse knowledge and discourse-based activities should be paid more attention in the curricula as well as the course books. Curriculum developers should tap into the potentials of discourse knowledge by adequately integrating its aspects into the curricula used for learners of different levels, and by choosing textbooks which offer a wide range of discourse-based activities for frequent writing practice. In this regard, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain's (2000) proposal of a discourse-based curriculum that emphasizes on contextualization, authenticity, and integration is a great source of reference for curriculum developers. Likewise, textbooks creators should, through the contents they include in the materials, aim at sharpening students' skills in all of the aspects of writing, especially raising their awareness about global text structures and target readers' expectations. In addition, it is of great importance for schools to provide teachers with frequent professional training in discourse-based teaching. Professional development opportunities such as seminars on discourse approach can positively bolster teachers' inquisitiveness about the field, encouraging them to proactively broaden their knowledge of discourse pedagogy, hence making the integration of discourse knowledge in English teaching much more effective.

Despite efforts made by the researcher to ensure the validity and reliability of this research, shortcomings are inevitable in the process of writing this paper. Firstly, time constraints hindered more thorough preparation in terms of the researcher's knowledge about the vast field of discourse study. This limitation results in the possibility that contents of the literature review, questionnaire, interview guide, and class observation might not adequately address all of the aspects of teachers' practice of using discourse-based activities, hence affecting the validity and reliability of the research. More importantly, because its sample population is relatively small, the generalizability level of this research is rather limited. Had this study been carried out with the participation of more teachers, the results are likely to be transferable to the wider contexts. The most potential suggestion for future research is that the same topic should be investigated with the participation of more teachers, allowing for greater generalizability. Another recommendation is that the integration of discourse-based activities in

current EFL writing course books in Vietnam should be analyzed so as to obtain further insights into their types and the role they play in developing learner's writing competence.

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