

The English-majored Students' Practices of Mind Maps in Writing Skills

Ngo Thi Hien Trang^{1*}, Tran Thi Thuy Oanh¹

¹ University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang, Vietnam

*Corresponding author's email: nthtrang@ufl.udn.vn

EOI: <http://eoi.citefactor.org/10.11250/ijte.01.03.017>

Received: 01/11/2021

Revision: 19/11/2021

Accepted: 23/11/2021

Online: 24/11/2021

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Mind maps; occurrence; perceptions; phases; writing skills.

Writing is one of the two productive and four vital skills in acquiring any foreign language. Therefore, it is necessary for language educators, teachers, linguists, and learners to make use of a wide range of different methods to enhance all four English skills for language learners. The researchers have the assumption that using the mind mapping technique positively influences the improvement of this productive skill for the first-year students at the Faculty of English, University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang. The purposes of this article entitled “*The English-majored Students' Practices of Mind Maps in Writing Skills*” are to investigate the practices of mind maps related to the rate of occurrence, the phases in writing, and the perceptions of first-year students when taking advantage of mind maps to boost their writing skill. This research is quantitatively and qualitatively carried out, which gathered information from three research instruments: classroom observation, interviews, and questionnaires for freshmen students. The assumption of the researchers was proved to be correct since the first-year students advocated the effectiveness of mind maps in writing skills at different rates and often used mind maps during the pre-writing stage.

Introduction

In the era of globalization and integration among nations in the world, improving English language teaching and learning in all school levels, namely primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels, has always been the aim of the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam. At Faculty of English, University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang (FE, UFLS - UD), for graduation, senior students must hand in the English language certificates, namely Test Of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), or Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency

(VSTEP). To be more specific, they must earn an overall band of at least 8.5 points out of ten, which corresponds to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level C1. At UFLS-UD, first-year FE students have to study the integrated skills of two receptive and other two productive skills in the Preliminary English Test (PET) exam format.

Understanding the significance of writing ability in particular, as well as four English skills in general, lecturers at UFLS – UD have been seeking a wide variety of teaching methodologies, applying them, and doing action research in classrooms in order to give students highly-motivating lectures to not only get the graduation certificate in the short-term plan but also enhance their English language skills in long-term use. According to Rao (2007), writing skills help learners encourage thinking and analyzing skills, organize ideas, and summarize ideas; therefore, there is no shadow of a doubt that writing plays a crucial part in acquiring a foreign language.

The obstacles that most of the students during their first academic school year at FE, UFLS-UD encountered in writing skills could be the word limit of the writing tasks, the inability to identify what writing approaches should be utilized to a particular writing task type, the lack of lexical resource, and the shortage of writing ideas. To solve the last two aforementioned problems, mind maps were considered to be used by the researchers. It is widely advocated that many papers have looked into the usage of mind maps; however, it seems that no study has looked into the application of mind maps in the writing skills of UFLS English-majored students. The article “*The English-majored Students’ Practices of Mind Maps in Writing Skills*” was conducted for the reasons above.

Literature review

Writing skills, as claimed by Meyers (2005), are important language skills. According to Byrne (1979) and Richards (1990), writing skills use symbols consisting of alphabetical letters, punctuations, and spaces to form words, sentences, stories, essays, or articles. According to White (1994), writing skills are believed to be an essential skill in learning English as a foreign language and the most challenging to be acquired by language learners since it involves different skills and conventions. Kepner (1991) points out that when practicing writing skills, learners often make many mistakes, namely spelling, the lack of idea extension, the shortage of vocabulary, and grammatical mistakes. However, Kepner (1991) also suggests two ways to improve learners' accuracy in writing skills. The first and foremost is the ability to learn sentence structures. Additionally, the support of language teachers also plays an important role in enhancing learners' writing skills. For instance, after they finish their writing, correction and feedback from the teachers are extremely necessary for their writing skills improvement. Therefore, suitable strategies which comprise of smartphones and portable devices, blog-based peer response, self-regulated learning strategies, and computers supported reasoning mapping as suggested in Le (2021), Pham and Usaha (2009), Tran (2021), and Elsegood and Rahimi (2009), respectively should be applied to acquire this skill efficiently. These researchers

advocate the effectiveness of such techniques in improving their students' writing performances.

Many researchers (Ahangari& Behzady, 2011; Budd, 2004; Buzan, 2006, 2007; De Porter, 2008; Lee, 2010) share common views towards the efficacy of mind mapping techniques in writing skills. Relating mind maps, Tony Buzan is the creator of this learning method, which dates back to the late 1960s. According to Buzan (2007), mind mapping is "a creative thinking device that represents normal work brain." (p.68). As could be understood from his definition, constructing a mind map is similar to how the brain works. Supporting concepts can radiate outward on several branches of the map, with the keyword or theme in the center. When used with written content, mind maps are regarded as an efficient strategy in learning a foreign language. Buzan (2006) also states that a mind map is a visual tool that language learners can utilize to think and generate ideas by taking notes and developing notions and opinions. It works by combining data from various sources and showing it as keywords in a vibrant, colorful manner. Because two hemispheres of the brain are stimulated, Budd (2004) and De Porter (2008) concur that this strategy can assist learners in generating and extending ideas, as well as trigger memories. Mind maps can help language learners naturally express their thoughts and build associations between concepts and words in this way. Hence, there is a high possibility that it is beneficial for first-year English-majored students to use this method to develop their writing skills. A mind map is, indeed, considered a helpful strategy for language-majored learners since it has been shown to improve learners' writing skills significantly, make the writing process thorough and meaningful, and assist learners in communicating their thoughts effectively. Despite disparities in geographical locations and teaching-learning environments, mind maps can help students improve their English acquisition in general and their writing ability in particular (Ahangari& Behzady, 2011; Lee, 2010).

Research Aims

The aims of this research are to investigate the practices of using mind maps by English-majored first-year students at FE, UFLS – UD, which include the occurrence, writing phases, and perceptions.

Research Questions

The researchers carried out this study to answer three research questions:

1. How often do English-majored first-year students use mind maps in writing skills??
2. What phases in a writing lesson do English-majored first-year students use mind maps?
3. What are the perceptions of English-majored first-year students on the use of mind maps in writing skills?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting and Participants

There are eight faculties at UFLS-UD. The Faculty of English has gained an essential role in training and providing resources for competent language users and meeting the need of researching, learning, and using English in the local regions and others. There are two semesters of a whole academic school year, and each semester comprises 15 weeks. At FE, there are two majors, namely English Translation and Interpreting and English Communications, in which the latter has just commenced this academic school year of 2021-2022. In this study, the researchers invited 240 English-majored first-year students in the former major. The participants aged from 18 to 21, and 50% of them have been studying this language for ten years. More than 120 first-year students who live in big cities in Vietnam start learning English at the age of 5 or 6 years old, and the rest have been learning English officially at grade 3 of primary schools when they are nine years old.

The core teaching curriculum compiled for first-year students at FE is at the intermediate level or CEFR level B1; therefore, FE has been using two commercial books named “Solution – Pre Intermediate” and “PET Result” of the publishing house of Oxford University Press for over ten years. The former is for General English (GE)-B1.1 and GE-B1.3 and is written by Tim Falla and Paul A Davies, while the latter is for GE-B1.2 and GE-B1.4 and is written by Jenny Quintana.

Table 1. Textbooks and participants

Time	Classes	Quantity	Subjects	Textbooks
Semester I August 2019 - December 2019	19CNA05	40	GE-B1.1	Unit 1– Unit 5 Solution: Pre-Intermediate
	19CNA07	38		
	19CNA08	42		
Semester II January 2020 - May 2021	19CNA11	39	GE-B1.4	Unit 7 – Unit 12 PET Result
	19CNA10	41		
	19CNA03	40		

As evidently seen from table 1, these first-year students had finished their first academic school years of 2019-2020 at UFLS - UD; and were meant to achieve level 3, which corresponded to CEFR test level B1. There were 240 first-year students in 6 different classes consisting of 19CNA05, 19CNA07, 19CNA08, 19CNA11, 19CNA10, and 19CNA03. The three classes of 19CNA05, 19CNA07, and 19CNA08 studied GE-B1.1 making up from unit 1 to unit 5 of Solution: Pre-Intermediate in the semester I from August 2019 to December 2019. In semester II from January 2020 to May 2021, the three remaining classes took the course of GE-B1.4, including the last six units of PET Result.

Data Collection and Analysis

To gain data sufficiently and effectively about the practice of mind maps in writing skills by English-majored first-year students at FE, a set of questionnaires and the interviews for first-year students conducted at the 15th week of each semester which is also the last week of every semester. The researchers also conducted the observation in writing classrooms during the 15 weeks of each semester. These three aforementioned research instruments were chosen as the research instruments to collect data for this research.

Initially, a sheet of classroom observation was designed and for the researchers to have an overview of the practice of mind maps in writing skills by English-majored first-year students. The observation during the academic years of 2019-2020 took place in writing classrooms with direct interaction among the researchers and students where offline classes were still in progress.

Secondly, the researchers wrote a set of questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions. Specifically, the first part has two questions about the range of first-year students' age and their English learning duration; whereas, the second part consists of five questions which concern the frequency, the phases of a writing lesson, and the perceptions of first-year students on the practice of mind map to improve their writing skills. At the end of semester I, this set of questionnaires was uploaded to Google Drive, which subsequently released a link for the researchers. The researchers sent this link to six different classes via Messenger or Zalo in order to gather information for analysis.

At last, the researchers carried out interviews which aimed to support what the researchers observed. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at the end of each offline semester. Since 240 first-year students took part in the interview, the researchers had 240 interviews at a time.

To answer three research questions, data from questionnaires, interviews, and observation were examined quantitatively and qualitatively. The researchers recognized and categorized the data into three groups of instruments after it was collected. The data from the interview, questionnaires, and observation were subsequently demonstrated in percentages and accompanied by charts, figures, and tables thanks to the support of Excel software. The research question of the occurrence of mind maps in EFL writing skills was answered thanks to the use of questionnaires. In order to investigate at which stages in writing lessons first-year students utilize mind maps, the researchers made use of classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires. The last question of the perceptions of first-year students on mind maps in writing skills was found by using all three instruments as aforementioned. Based on this quantitative analysis, the researchers discussed the results and suggested some implications for English-majored first-year students at FE, UFLS-UD to better use mind maps in writing skills.

Findings and Discussion

Occurrence of Mind Maps in Writing Skills

What should be highlighted from figure 1 is that none of the students always or never utilized mind maps in EFL writing classes. This result could be possibly originated from the challenges that they faced when drawing mind maps, namely students' inability to identify the main and minor content of a writing requirement, the time duration to draw a mind map, the lack of lexical resources, and their terrible drawing skills.

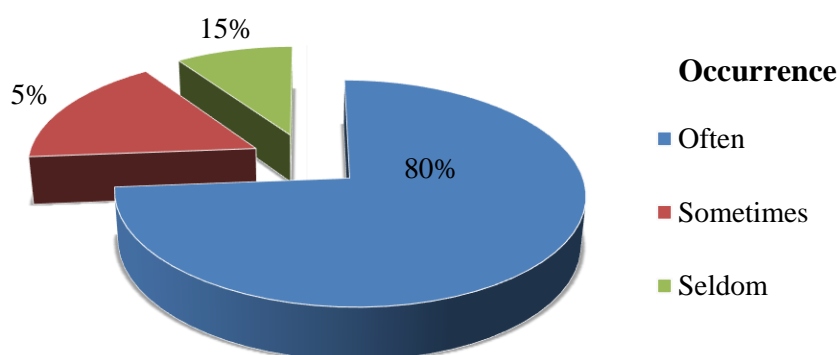


Figure 1. *Occurrence of Mind Maps in Writing Skills*

On the other hand, this table also revealed that 177 students out of 240 occupying 73.75% often made use of mind maps because mind maps might assist them in brainstorming lexical resources and generating writing ideas by making a connection among primary ideas with supplement ones. Only 40 (16.67%) and 23 (9.58%) students sometimes and seldom utilized this learning method, respectively which were roughly 4.5 and more than 7.5 times lower than the often used percentage at 73.75%. These difficulties synthesized from interview and observation caused the fact that students felt demotivated always to use this method; however, the fact that there were no students who never used this technique, a minority of them who sometimes and seldom utilized it, and the majority who often took advantage of it clarified the reason why mind maps were useful for first-year students in their EFL writing classes.

Writing Phases of Using Mind Maps

When conducting an EFL writing lesson, there are three phases, namely pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing. To investigate the writing phases where first-year students at FE, UFLS – UD drew mind maps, the researchers conducted observations, interviews, and a set of questionnaires to gather data.

The results from observations of the researchers and students' interviews showed that the first-year students mostly took advantage of mind maps before they started to do their writing tasks;

meanwhile, the occurrence of this technique at the while-writing phase hit bottom. The writing tasks in the two officially-used teaching materials for English-majored first-year students involve writing formal letters to apply for a job or request information, informal emails to relatives or friends to apologize for mistakes, short stories, and film reviews.

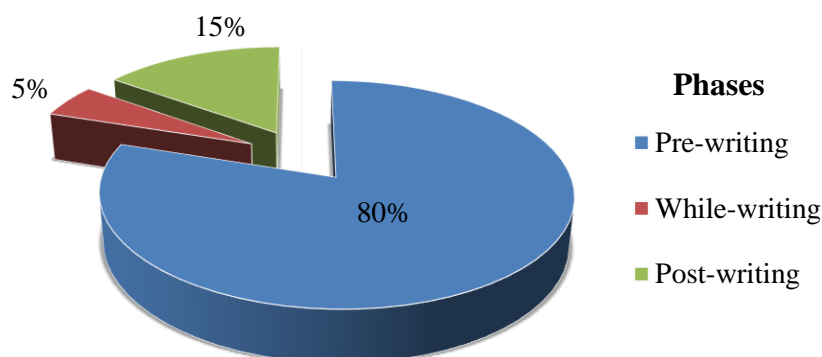


Figure 2. Writing Phases of Using Mind Maps

The results from questionnaires considered to be the last data collection instrument in this study could be apparently depicted in figure 2 above. This technique ranked the top by EFL students at the pre-writing stage at exactly 80%, which was more than fivefold compared to the second most used stage of post-writing at 15% and 16 fold as opposed to the least used stage of while-writing at precisely 5%. The percentage of using mind maps occurred in every stage of a writing lesson could be inferred that this technique was useful to help them develop this skill. To make it more specific, before first-year students started to achieve their writing tasks, they often drew a mind map to list lexical resources which had relevance to the topic of writing requirements. According to them, post-writing ranked the second since they had a tendency to use the mind mapping technique to cover more theme-related new words and supporting ideas from their peer writing papers to review for their later writing test easily. While they were writing their papers, they created mind maps if they lost the terminology or ideas. It could be possibly stated that mind maps were used at different rates and at different phases of writing instruction.

English-majored Students' Perceptions on Mind Maps in Writing Skills

The researchers discovered students' perceptions of the efficaciousness of this learning method in EFL writing classes by classroom observation, interviews, and questionnaires.



Image 1. English-major Students Using Mind Maps in Writing Skills

Thanks to the first two data collection of classroom observation and interviews, the majority of students expressed an interest in creating mind maps to improve their writing skills, as shown in image two since the enhancement in their writing skills was evidently reported by marks given by lecturers for writing assessment at the end of each semester. Another reason that should be taken into consideration was traced back to the fact that they might establish a logical sequence for more coherent ideas in their writing papers by learning additional topic vocabulary. There was no record concerning the idea that the mind mapping technique was not beneficial.

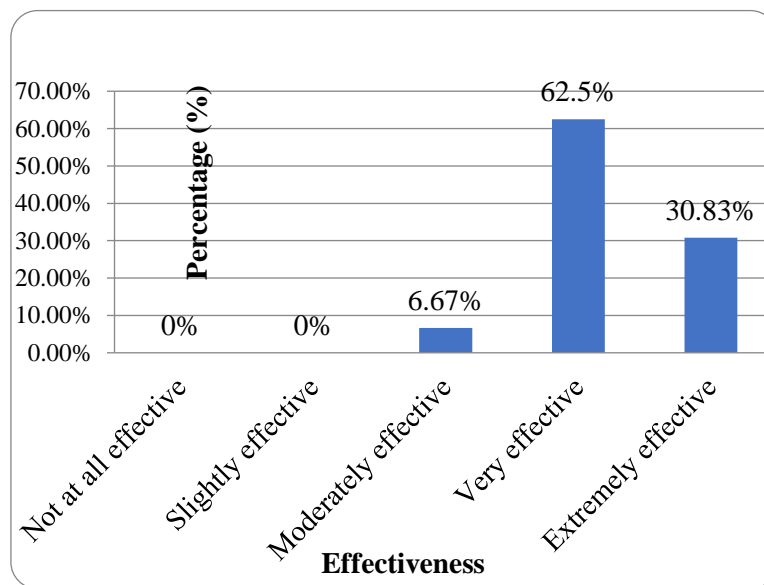


Figure 3. Students' Perceptions on Effectiveness of Mind Maps in Writing Skills

Looking at the column chart of figure 3 in greater detail, with 62.5% of "very effective" voters, 30.83% of "very effective" voters, and 6.67% of "moderately effective" voters, 100% of EFL first-year students valued using this strategy to improve their writing skills. No participants denied the efficacy of this technique since 0% was seen by the "slightly effective" and "not at all effective" voters. In summary, the analysis of such proportion reaffirmed the efficiency of using mind maps to boost first-year students' writing skills in EFL classes at FE, UFLS – UD.

Conclusion

To sum up, this work addressed the three research questions on the occurrence, writing phases, and students' views toward the usage of mind mapping technique in writing skills of English-major students in their first year at FE, UFLS – UD during the academic school years 2019-2020.

In terms of the occurrence of mind maps in EFL writing classes, a remarkable differentiation among the occurrence, namely "always," "often," "sometimes," "rarely," and "never," was recorded. The most easily recognized belonged to the choice of "often" as their learning method in their writing classes. Since the obstacles students had to confront when utilizing mind maps included the lack of lexical resources, the bad skills of mind map drawing, the inability to generate primary and supplement ideas, and time duration to draw a mind map, mind maps were neither always nor never drawn by the first-year students at FE, UFLS - UD.

Regarding the writing phases, before starting to write a particular task required by their lecturers, first-year students tended to draw mind maps to make a list of related-topic vocabulary and establish a coherent chain of ideas. The stage of post-writing stood at the second and was followed by the while-writing phase. When it came to writing exercises that needed them to work alone, first-year students tended to develop thought maps. When it came to writing activities in pairs, mind maps were used less than individual work.

Regarding first-year students' perceptions on the efficacy of mind maps in EFL writing classes, first-year students stated this technique's effectiveness at different levels with positive opinions.

Suggestions

Image 1, drawn by a group of first-year students in their presentation periods at FE, UFLS-UD, set an example of a standardized mind map as suggested by Buzan; however, it took first-year students a great amount of time to draw since there should be pictures to illustrate their ideas, and color to make the mind map eye-catching.



Image 2. A Model Mind Map Drawn by First-Year Students at FE, UFLS -UD

The researchers recommended a model of a less complicated mind map compared to the original one by Buzan, as illustrated in figure 4. Students can make use of this mind map model and apply it in EFL writing classes with the hope to shorten the drawing time length. It is highly believed that students do not have to spend such much time coloring and drawing images for mind maps since there is no image or color embedded in this simplified mind map model.

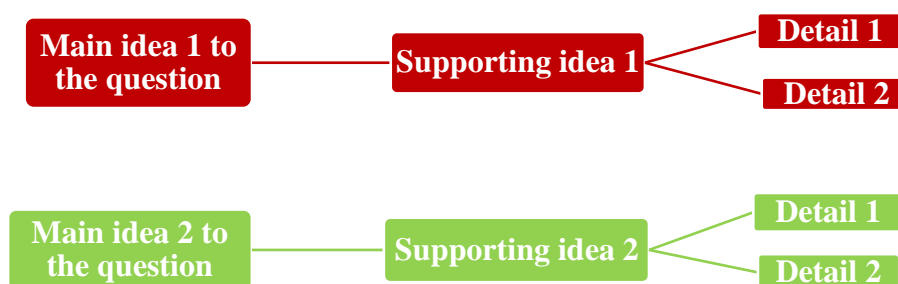


Figure 4. A Model of Simplified Mind Map

Figure 5 sets an example of the simplified mind maps drawn by first-year students at FE, UFLS – UD. For instance, to write down a paragraph of leisure activities, English-majored students fill in two boxes of the main ideas with "Read" and "Listen 2 music". Subsequently, to generate main ideas, students have to think of the supporting ideas by raising other questions related to the main ideas such as "Where do you read?" and "Why do you listen to music?". After thinking the two supplement questions, students add in the supporting idea 1 box with "library", and supporting idea 2 box with "balance life + spirits". The "library" box will be extended by the replacement of detail 1 and 2 boxes. Specifically, detail 1 box is substituted by "quiet" and detail 2 box is added by "variety". The branch of "balance life + spirits", "work load" and "1-2 hours" are the two supporting ideas.

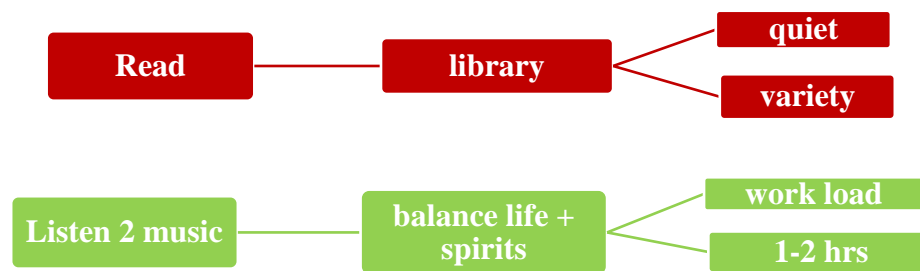


Figure 5. A Simplified Mind Map in Writing Skills Drawn by Students

Whenever first-year students finish their mind map drawings for vocabulary and ideas, they begin to write to fulfill their writing task. A writing paragraph is generated by an English-major first-year students with the support of the mind map in figure 5 this student draws.

Reading books and listening to music are my leisure activities. In terms of reading books, I like reading books in the library at my university campus. Initially, the atmosphere there is very ideal for reading because all the students have to keep quiet. Hence, I could absolutely concentrate on my reading. Furthermore, a great number of materials and references are well-organized on shelves which make it not challenging to search for. Also, books about general knowledge are easy to get access to. Additionally, listening to melodic rhythms is one of my hobbies which helps me balance my life and my spirits. I am now an English-major freshman at Faculty of English, University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang; then I have a lot of workload which makes me sometimes feel stressed. I usually spend 1 to 2 hours a day listening to music when having free time, or at the same time studying and listening to music makes me less stressed. These are two free time activities I am keen on the most.

After students accomplish their writing performances, they have to work in pair for peer correction. At the following step, thanks to the peer correction, they have accomplish their final draft before submitting it to lecturers. Their lecturers subsequently assess students' writing papers by giving feedbacks and making comments via emails or face-to-face conversations in writing classes.

References

- Ahangari, S., & Behzady, L. (2011). The effect of explicit teaching of concept maps on Iranian EFL learners writing performance. *American Journal of Scientific Research*, 6, 100-112.
- Budd, J. W. (2004). Mind maps as classroom exercises. *The journal of economic education*, 35(1), 35-46. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JECE.35.1.35-46>
- Buzan, T. (2006). *Mind mapping*. Pearson Education.
- Buzan, T., & Buzan, B. (2007). *The mind map book*. Edinburg.
- Byrne, D. (1979). *Teaching writing skills*. Longman.
- De Porter, B. (2008). *Quantum learning*. Kaifa.

- Elsegood, S., & Rahimi, A. (2009). Using computer supported reasoning mapping to teach EFL learners critical reasoning and academic writing. *AsiaCALL Online Journal*, 4(1), 81-102. Retrieved from <https://asiacall.info/acoj/index.php/journal/article/view/7>.
- Kepner, C. G. (1991). An experiment in the relationship of types of written feedback to the development of second-language writing skills. *The modern language journal*, 75(3), 305-313. <https://doi.org/10.2307/328724>
- Le, M. T. (2021). Students' Attitude Towards Using Smartphones and Portable Devices for Studying Writing. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, 1(3), 54–64. Retrieved from <https://i-jte.org/index.php/journal/article/view/13>.
- Lee, Y. (2010). *Concept mapping strategy to facilitate foreign language writing: a Korean application*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University.
- Meyers, M. (2005). *Gateways to academic writing: Effective sentences, paragraphs, and essays*. Longman.
- Pham, V. P. H., & Usaha, S. (2009). Blog-based peer response for EFL writing: A case study in Vietnam. *AsiaCALL Online Journal*, 4(1), 1-29. Retrieved from <https://asiacall.info/acoj/index.php/journal/article/view/1>.
- Rao, Z. (2007). Training in brainstorming and developing writing skills. *ELT Journal*, 61(2), 100-106. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccm002>
- Richards, J. C. (1990). *From meaning into words: Writing in a second or foreign language. The language teaching matrix*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tran, T. T. M. (2021). Use of Self-regulated Learning Strategies in Paragraph Writing at Van Lang University. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, 1(3), 1–13. Retrieved from <https://i-jte.org/index.php/journal/article/view/80>.
- White, E. (1994). *Teaching and assessing writing*. (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Biodata

Ngo Thi Hien Trang has more than 10 years of teaching experience at Faculty of English, University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang, Vietnam. Her expertise and interests include language teaching methodology and English linguistics. She has published papers in conference proceedings and WOS and SCOPUS journals.

Tran Thi Thuy Oanh is a senior lecturer at University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang, Vietnam. She had a Ph.D's degree in English Linguistics and spent a research course at University of Nice Sophia Antipolis, French Republic. Her current research fields are English linguistics, pedagogy and education.