

AN INVESTIGATION INTO DIFFICULTIES IN READING AND WRITING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Nguyen Phuong Duy Anh⁽¹⁾

(1) Thu Dau Mot university

Corresponding author: anhnpd@tdmu.edu.vn

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Abstract

The study investigates the challenges faced by Food Technology students at Thu Dau Mot University in mastering English reading and writing skills. The findings reveal that limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge significantly hinder students' proficiency in these areas. For reading, students struggle with insufficient vocabulary, poor comprehension strategies, and a lack of background knowledge, making it difficult to understand texts, identify main ideas, and interpret references. Similarly, writing is affected by challenges such as improper grammar usage, insufficient vocabulary, awkward phrasing, and issues with sentence construction. Mistakes in punctuation, spelling, and word order further reduce the quality of written work, limiting students' ability to express ideas clearly and cohesively. These difficulties stem from a combination of linguistic limitations, lack of exposure to English, and insufficient support in structured learning strategies. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these challenges. Proposed solutions include vocabulary enhancement exercises, grammar-focused sessions, structured reading techniques, and writing workshops. Additionally, integrating modern tools like AI-powered learning applications can provide personalized feedback and improve overall proficiency. By adopting these strategies, students can gradually overcome their difficulties, enhancing their reading and writing skills to meet both academic and professional demands. The findings emphasize the importance of consistent practice and tailored learning approaches in language development.

Keywords: English, food technology students, learning difficulties, reading skill, writing skill

1. Introduction

English has emerged as a globally dominant language, spoken and learned by millions worldwide. It plays a vital role in communication and serves as a primary medium of instruction in education. According to Visual Capitalist, English dominates the Internet, with over 60% of the top 10 million websites using it (Bhutada, 2021). Proficiency in English is increasingly essential in professional and business fields, making skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening comprehension indispensable (Erlenawati, 2005).

However, English is often regarded as one of the most challenging languages to learn due to its complex grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Grammar, in particular, poses significant difficulties for both learners and native speakers because of its unpredictable spellings and rules. Despite improvements in access to education, many students struggle with reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and expression in English, which ultimately leads to poor academic performance (Misbah, 2017).

In Vietnam, surveys reveal that even after a decade of formal English education, many students fail to master basic vocabulary. Nearly half of the participants did not grasp the 1,000 most common words, and over 90% faced difficulties with the 2,000 most common terms (Dang, 2020). To address this issue, training programs at Thu Dau Mot University (TDMU) have established clear output standards across all majors, ensuring that students can write and present ideas in English proficiently.

A 2023 study examined the challenges faced by Food Technology students at TDMU in acquiring English listening and speaking skills (Anh, 2023). Based on a survey of 59 students, the main barriers identified included poor sound systems, lack of contextual understanding for communication, limited vocabulary, insufficient cultural awareness, and fear of making mistakes. Students also struggled with pronunciation due to limited exposure to English and weak phonetic skills. Vocabulary challenges involved difficulties in remembering complex words, their meanings, and practical usage. Grammar issues centered on understanding tenses, verb forms, and the proper use of articles. The study aimed to propose solutions to overcome these challenges by fostering a supportive learning environment and equipping students with essential skills to improve proficiency and achieve better academic and career outcomes.

Additionally, English reading and writing skills are among the most important language competencies taught at secondary schools and universities. These skills serve as foundational tools widely applied in both academic and professional environments. Without the ability to express ideas effectively in writing, students may struggle to communicate with professors, recruiters, peers and others (Trình, 2024).

Moreover, the writing process requires learners to develop essential skills such as recording, analyzing, and synthesizing information from various sources. By practicing these skills, students not only enhance their English proficiency but also cultivate critical thinking and intellectual abilities.

To address these challenges, a study was conducted to identify the difficulties faced by Food Technology students in acquiring reading and writing skills. The goal was to help students overcome their fear of learning English and improve their proficiency to meet academic and professional demands.

2. Literature Review

Reading is described as an active and interactive process where the reader engages with text using both their cognitive abilities and emotions. According to Weaver (Weaver, 2009), it involves understanding and interpreting written information by using one's knowledge, mood, and processing strategies. Reading comprehension occurs when the reader successfully grasps the information and ideas presented in a text.

Writing, on the other hand, is a developmental and intricate process that requires planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Lacina & Silva, 2011). It involves producing

structured and meaningful content by using proper grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorical techniques (Brown, 2004). Writing demands both micro-skills (e.g., grammatical accuracy, cohesive devices) and macro-skills (e.g., organizing ideas, conveying meaning).

Students face significant challenges in mastering reading skills. Pronunciation problems are common, often caused by a strong influence of their native language and lack of exposure to English (Dang, 2017). This affects their confidence and ability to read aloud. Furthermore, students struggle with understanding text due to limited vocabulary and poor grasp of grammatical structures. Identifying the main ideas, interpreting references within the text (e.g., pronouns like "it" or "this"), and guessing unfamiliar vocabulary in context are additional obstacles. These difficulties often reduce students' interest and motivation in reading, which adversely impacts their learning outcomes (Suryanto & Sari, 2020).

The studies highlighted the challenges students face in reading and writing due to difficulties in vocabulary acquisition. Pronunciation issues and spelling mismatches hinder their ability to read fluently and comprehend written texts (Susanto, 2021; Đức, 2023; Lan, 2024). Similarly, challenges in grammar usage, such as understanding inflections and word forms, lead to errors in writing, making it harder for students to construct coherent sentences and effectively convey their ideas. These obstacles significantly impact students' proficiency in both reading and writing, emphasizing the need for targeted strategies to address their linguistic limitations (Nguyen, 2021; Rosyada-AS, 2023).

Writing presents challenges such as insufficient vocabulary and poor grammar knowledge. Students often find it difficult to construct coherent and grammatically correct sentences (Phuong, 2021, Huyền, 2024). They also struggle with organizing content logically and maintaining a clear connection between sentences. Cognitive barriers, including issues with punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and content organization, further complicate their ability to express ideas effectively. Additionally, limited understanding of topics hinders their ability to write with fluency and accuracy (Ahmad, 2021).

Researches shows that these challenges not only reduce learning efficiency but also make students feel pressured and lack confidence in improving their English skills. Developing effective learning methods, such as increasing English exposure and applying appropriate learning strategies, is important to overcome these difficulties.

Based on the analysis above, we have designed a survey to identify the difficulties faced by food technology students at TDMU in their English reading and writing skills.

3. Methodology

Research Design: This study focuses on the reading and writing difficulties faced by Food Technology students at TDMU in learning English as a foreign language. Data were collected via online surveys distributed to students majoring in Food Technology. The anonymous nature of the surveys encouraged honest feedback without fear of bias. Students completed the questionnaire at their own pace, and the collected data were analyzed using computational, statistical, and mathematical tools. Quantitative results were illustrated through charts and graphs for clear visualization.

Population and Sampling: The study's population included 87 freshmen, 29 sophomores, 28 juniors, and 67 seniors majoring in Food Technology at TDMU. From this group, 59

students were randomly selected to participate: 3 freshmen, 10 sophomores, 16 juniors, and 30 seniors. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 25, with 24 males and 35 females. Their English learning experience varied: under 1 year (5 students), 1-5 years (11 students), 5-10 years (26 students) and over 10 years (17 students).

Research Instruments: A questionnaire was used as the primary data collection tool due to its efficiency, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness. The questionnaire had three sections:

Demographic information about students, their use of English in daily life, and the English skills they use most frequently.

Questions focusing on reading, and writing difficulties in learning English. Besides, questions also addressing challenges in vocabulary, and grammar. The responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree.

Data Collection Procedures: The survey was delivered through Google Forms to Food Technology students at TDMU. After designing the questionnaire, feedback from the supervisor was incorporated, and the revised version was distributed to participants.

Data Analysis Procedures: The collected data were analyzed systematically:

Responses were categorized based on a predefined scale.

Descriptive percentages were calculated using the formula: $P = F \times 100 / N$, where P represents the percentage, F is the frequency of an item, and N is the total sample size.

Mean values were calculated, and results were presented in tables for clarity.

4. Results

4.1 Survey results on the current difficulties in reading and writing English as a foreign language

We conducted a survey on the difficulties of learning listening and speaking skills, difficulties in learning pronunciation, learning vocabulary, and learning grammar for 59 Food Technology students. The survey results are analyzed in detail in below sections.

TABLE 1. Difficulties in learning reading skills

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. You don't have reading methods.	2	8	22	18	9
2. You don't know enough vocabulary to understand reading texts.	3	6	11	26	13
3. Your language knowledge and background knowledge are limited.	4	4	16	26	9
4. You don't have reading strategies.	3	4	20	26	6
5. Lack of reading process.	2	7	22	22	6
6. Lack of reading purpose.	3	5	18	25	8

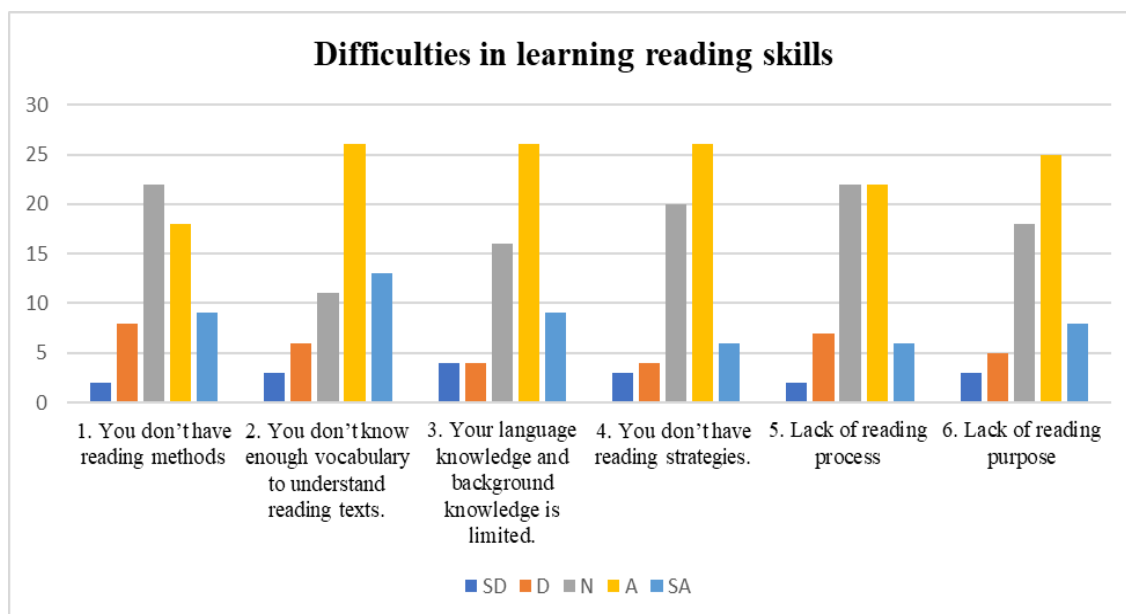


Figure 1. Difficulties in learning reading skills

In the table 1 and the figure 1, the analysis of the data reveals several key difficulties faced by students in English reading skills:

Lack of Reading Methods: Based on the survey results, 22 students (37.29%) remained neutral about the lack of reading methods, while 27 students (45.76%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they lacked effective reading methods. This means a total of 49 students (83.05%) expressed uncertainty about effective reading methods, with many remaining neutral or agreeing that they lack a clear approach to reading, affecting their ability to engage with texts efficiently.

Vocabulary Limitations: The results are SA: 6 students (10.17%), A: 9 students (15.25%). In total, 15 students (25.42%) agreed or strongly agreed that insufficient vocabulary hinders their comprehension of reading materials, making it a significant barrier to understanding texts effectively.

Restricted Language and Background Knowledge: In total, 17 students (28.81%) strongly agreed or agreed that their restricted language knowledge and background knowledge negatively impact their reading proficiency, making it a notable limitation. Additionally, the 26 students (44.07%) who remained neutral suggest a need for further exploration into their challenges. Many students admitted that their limited knowledge of English and the lack of contextual understanding further restrict their reading proficiency. This limitation affects their ability to interpret and relate to the content.

Absence of Reading Strategies: 35 students (59.32%) either strongly agreed or agreed that they lack effective reading strategies. This gap leaves them unsure about how to approach texts systematically or extract meaningful information efficiently.

Unstructured Reading Process: An absence of a structured process in reading was another notable difficulty, 28 students (47.46%) strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. Without a clear sequence or framework, students struggle to follow texts and retain information effectively.

Lack of Reading Purpose: 43 students (72.88%) either strongly agreed or agreed that they often lack a defined purpose for reading, which leads to reduced motivation and engagement. This lack of direction negatively impacts their comprehension and focus.

Overall, the analysis highlights vocabulary limitations and a lack of strategies or structured processes as the most critical obstacles to improving reading skills. Addressing these issues through targeted interventions, such as vocabulary enhancement and strategy training, could help students overcome these challenges and develop stronger reading abilities.

Table 2. Difficulties in learning writing skills

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. You don't know enough vocabulary.	3	3	17	15	21
2. You use unconventional grammar.	6	3	17	17	16
3. You use awkward phrases.	4	17	20	13	15
4. You use inappropriate colloquial language.	5	8	18	17	11
5. You make mistakes in constructing sentences.	1	9	16	17	16
6. You make mistakes related to word order.	3	9	16	17	14
7. You have trouble reading back what is written.	5	9	19	17	9
8. You have difficulties with word sounds, spelling, and meanings.	4	10	11	20	14

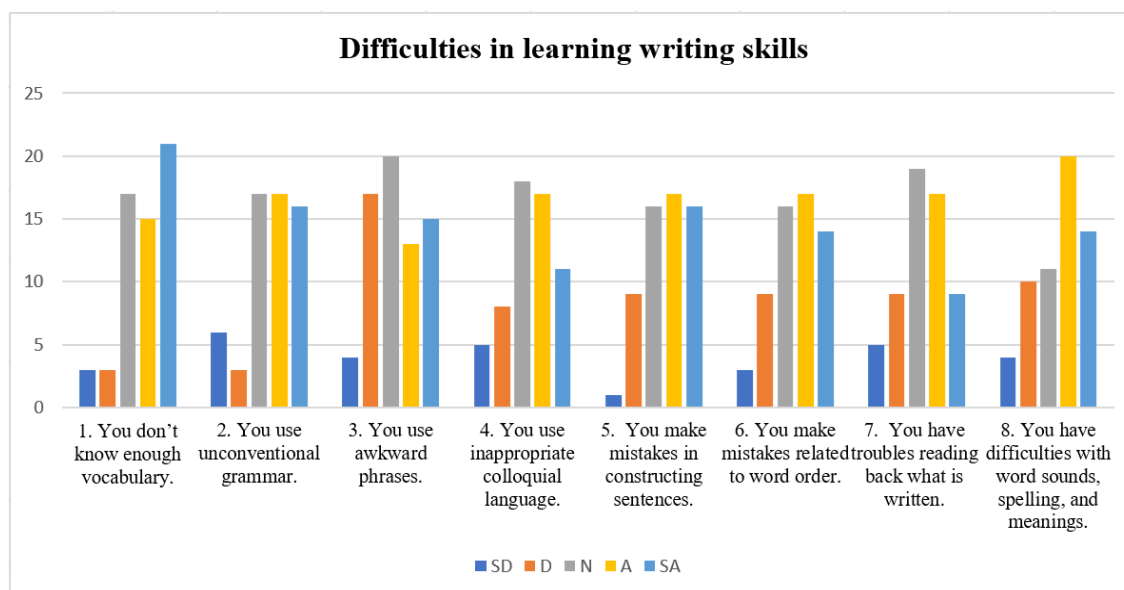


Figure 2: Difficulties in learning writing skills

Based on the analyzed data of the table 2 and the figure 2, students encounter numerous challenges in developing their English writing skills. Here are the key findings:

Insufficient Vocabulary: 38 students (64.40%) strongly agreed or agreed reported not having enough vocabulary to effectively express their ideas in writing, impacting clarity and precision.

Unconventional Grammar: 38 students (64.40%) admitted to using improper grammar, leading to inaccuracies and less coherent sentences in their writing.

Awkward Expressions: 36 students (61.02%) frequently used unnatural or awkward phrases, which made their writing less fluid and harder to understand.

Inappropriate Colloquial Language: 28 students (47.46%) either strongly agreed or agreed that inappropriate colloquial language posed a significant issue, making their writing less suitable for academic or formal contexts.

Sentence Construction Errors: 20 students (33.89%) either strongly agreed or agreed that sentence construction errors, including improper syntax and lack of logical flow, were widely observed in their writing.

Word Order Mistakes: 32 students (54.24%) either strongly agreed or agreed that word order mistakes, such as misplacement of words within sentences, disrupted meaning and coherence.

Proofreading Challenges: 31 students (52.54%) either strongly agreed or agreed that they found it difficult to review their written work for errors, resulting in lower-quality compositions.

Word Sounds and Spellings: 34 students (57.63%) either strongly agreed or agreed that pronunciation inconsistencies, spelling errors, and difficulty with meanings made writing particularly challenging for many.

The findings highlight critical areas where students need support, such as vocabulary building, grammar instruction, and training in formal writing styles. Enhanced focus on proofreading and spelling can also improve the overall quality of their written communication.

Besides, the analysis of the data in the study Anh (Anh, 2023) also indicates that difficulties in learning vocabulary and grammar significantly affect students' reading and writing skills:

Impact on Reading Skills: Limited vocabulary hinders students' ability to understand texts, as they struggle with unfamiliar words and their meanings. Pronunciation challenges also affect comprehension when reading aloud. Grammar-related issues, such as difficulty recognizing parts of speech or sentence structures, further reduce their ability to grasp the logical flow of texts. These challenges make it harder for students to extract the main ideas or follow references within reading materials.

Impact on Writing Skills: Insufficient vocabulary restricts students' ability to express their ideas clearly and effectively. They often face difficulties in constructing sentences due to a lack of grammatical accuracy, such as errors in tenses, word order, or the use of articles and prepositions. Poor understanding of word forms and connotations leads to incorrect usage, making their writing less cohesive and harder to understand. Additionally, challenges in spelling and pronunciation affect written accuracy and consistency.

Overall, difficulties in vocabulary and grammar create foundational barriers, directly impeding students' proficiency in both reading and writing. To overcome these obstacles, targeted interventions such as vocabulary-building exercises, contextual grammar practice, and structured reading and writing strategies are essential.

The survey results on the difficulties in English reading and writing skills experienced by food technology students at Thu Dau Mot University are fully consistent with the findings reported in prior studies (Trinh, 2024; Tran, 2024; Phuong, 2021; Nguyen, 2021).

4.2 Solutions to overcome the limitations that cause difficulties in reading and writing English as a foreign language.

From the above analysis, to address these challenges, several measures can be implemented:

Vocabulary Development: Regular practice through contextual learning, vocabulary-building apps, and thematic exercises to expand students' word knowledge.

Grammar Instruction: Intensive grammar-focused sessions, emphasizing tenses, articles, and sentence construction, supported by interactive exercises and quizzes.

Strategic Reading Practices: Implementing reading techniques such as skimming, scanning, and annotation to enhance comprehension efficiency. Encourage students to read diverse materials like books, articles, and journals.

Structured Writing Support: Teaching students to plan and organize their writing using outlines, brainstorming, and drafting techniques. Provide tools for proofreading and online grammar correction.

Feedback and Revision Training: Encouraging students to review and revise their own work, helping them identify and correct errors for better quality output.

Integrated Language Learning: Creating an engaging and immersive environment with blended learning activities such as group discussions, storytelling, and project-based tasks to reinforce language skills.

Besides, suggesting the use of AI for improving students' reading and writing skills can be highly beneficial. AI-powered tools and applications provide personalized and adaptive learning experiences that cater to individual needs (Anh, 2024). These targeted interventions can empower students to overcome challenges, fostering stronger reading and writing abilities for academic and professional success.

5. Conclusion

This study collected data from the Faculty of Food Technology by surveying 59 students, and from their responses, it was found that students had a lot of difficulties learning reading and writing English skills. The analysis demonstrates that students' difficulties in vocabulary and grammar learning significantly impact their reading and writing proficiency. Limited vocabulary restricts their ability to comprehend reading texts and express ideas clearly in writing. Grammar challenges, including issues with tenses, sentence structure, and proper usage of articles and prepositions, lead to reduced accuracy and coherence in both skills. These obstacles impede academic progress and limit effective communication in English.

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