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A Phenomenological study of challenges encountered by mountainous high school students in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

English writing skills have received considerable attention from Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training with their decision involved the skills in the national examination for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) for the past two years. However, that many high school students in mountainous areas in Vietnam are encountering challenges of writing in English results in their low marks in writing tests, or even their avoidance of writing assignments. With such a phenomenon, this paper is aimed at investigating challenges that high school students in mountainous areas encounter in English writing. The 5-point Likert scale questionnaires were delivered to 520 grade-12 students from three high schools in mountainous areas, Vietnam. The results revealed that high school students in mountainous areas encountered many challenges related to English writing. It obviously proved that poor spelling, inadequate mastery of grammatical structures, the first language interference, lack of vocabulary, and poor understanding of a well-organized presentation are the most common challenges. The findings will be the first step to assist high school teachers to achieve in-depth understanding of students' challenges in English writing as well as to prepare for the textbook changes in Vietnam in 2018.

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1 INTRODUCTION

“Writing is a way of life. Without some ability of expressing oneself in writing, a person does not pass the course” (Brown, 2000, p.339). Moreover, it is said that writing is a two-step process. First, learners figure out their meaning, then they put it into language. Meaning is not what learners start out with, but what learners end up with (Peter Elbow, 1973, cited in Brown, 2000). Therefore, most of the students who do not perform well in English writing tasks ultimately face average or poor results in academics (Bilal *et al.*, 2013). In addition, writing is a skill that second language learners take time to acquire because it is not the way to write down spoken language. To create a well-written

product, learners not only need to have good linguistic knowledge but also know how to gather, analyze, organize and present ideas and information (Williams, 2005). These requirements result in various challenges to learners such as generating ideas on the content knowledge relevant to a writing topic, creating sentences with correct grammar structures, organizing sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into an essay with appropriate organizational patterns, considering the writing purpose, and audience. Each of these challenges calls for a certain type of consideration and treatment (Dujsik, 2008, cited in Shafiee *et al.*, 2015). As a result, there is no doubt that writing can be considered as a challenging skill for most English second language learners.

Regarding to teaching and learning English in Vietnam, although writing has been taught as an independent skill in textbooks at upper secondary schools for many years, it has just been included in the national examination for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) since 2014. This results in students' not keeping face with changes in exams as well as their inability to generate a well-written product. In fact, it is an undeniable fact that most students' writing skills are poor, or even they are afraid of learning writing lessons as well as practicing writing. Consequently, learners' writing test results at high schools show to be far from the requirement. Besides, looking at the results of the last two - year writing tests, it is apparent that students failed in generating a well-written work. The low result of the GCSE examination in the 2014-2015 school year was recorded with only approximately 17.2% of students gaining above-average marks (Tran Quoc Em, 2015). Moreover, in the first semester of the 2015-2016 school year, it was found that over one third of the high school students in a mountainous town omitted the writing assignment in their first – semester test. This strongly encouraged this research to be conducted.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of writing

McDonough *et al.* (2013, p.189) defined writing as “*a process of encoding (putting your message into words) carried out with a reader in mind*”. Meanwhile Bell and Burnaby (1984) took the view that writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to control a number of variables simultaneously, which means that the writer must plan the content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and idea formation (cited in Akinwamide, 2012). Besides, it is well-documented that writing “*focuses students on how to generate ideas, how to organize them coherently, how to use discourse markers and rhetorical conventions to put them cohesively into a written text, how to revise text for clearer meaning, how to edit text for appropriate grammar, and how to produce a final product*” (Brown, 2000, p.335). Ruddell (2005) described that in the secondary school, writing is considered as a stylized task with assigned topics so that students can write and submit for teachers to give marks. In addition, Richards (2004) stated that writing is considered as a constructed product which meets the writer's command of grammatical and lexical knowledge. Therefore, to create a well-written product in the second language, learners need not only to gain good linguistic knowledge but also to know how to

gather, analyze, organize and present ideas and information (Williams, 2005).

2.2 The importance of writing in English

To start with, Carter and Nunan (2001) presented that the importance of second language writing has been highlighted during the last decade. Examples mentioned for this are (1) direct tests of writing included in standardized tests of English language proficiency such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) of written English and British Council's IELTS (International English Language Testing System) writing sub-test; (2) more courses or at least coursework in graduate TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers to Other Languages) programs for better teacher preparation for second language instruction; and (3) a dramatic increase in textbooks, and public research and commentary about English second language writing. As a result, lack of second language writing proficiency can prevent people from academic and professional success. Especially, learners will encounter difficulty in getting through high school without writing (Williams, 2005).

With regard to students' benefits relevant to writing skills, Nguyen (2015) stated that students can benefit from being good at writing. Firstly, writing helps students increase the ability of using language, especially the ability of developing vocabulary and grammar of the target language. Secondly, writing can support other skills such as reading, and speaking. Finally, writing is an approach to access modern information technology and human knowledge. In addition, Yingjie (2015) said that two important goals of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing are second language acquisition and writing skill practice. Language learners use the writing system to practice new language knowledge, as well as to demonstrate their knowledge in the context of assessment (Tribble, 1996, cited in McDonough *et al.*, 2013). Obviously, writing encourages thinking and learning, motivates communication, and makes thought available for reflection (Mekheimer, 2005, cited in Shafiee *et al.*, 2015).

Moreover, it is said that among four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing development and accumulation have led to learners' insights into the nature of language (McDonough *et al.*, 2013). Writing helps learners learn better because it encourages students to focus on accurate language use, and provoke language development (Harmer, 2004). Especially, writing performance is much different from oral performance because written products are the result of thinking, drafting,

and revising procedures by specialized skills (Brown, 2000). Furthermore, writing helps students better comprehend, think critically, and construct new understandings about what they are learning (Emig, 1977; Rivard, 1994; Klein, 2000; cited in Gillespie *et al.*, 2014).

In terms of the importance of writing English language for personal development and academic success, Nyasimi (2015) noted that writing is considered the most vital language skill students need to master. Besides, he also presented that writing skills are of major importance to students at all levels of education system in order to finish given assignments at school as well as pass all examinations. Furthermore, Nguyen (2015) asserted that writing is the key to success in college and university, which means that writing is a required skill in all exams for foreign language certificates in order to fulfill the required graduation qualification of college and university. Due to its importance, writing in the second language should not be underlooked.

2.3 Challenges in writing English as a second language

Writing in the second language is a complex task which causes the biggest challenge for many students (Adas and Bakir, 2013; Dwivedi and Chakraverthy, 2015; Phuket and Othman, 2015; Rass, 2015) because writers must consider different issues in their writing including content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary and mechanics including using the right punctuation, spelling and capitalization. Writing in a second language is even more demanding because it is “a complex, challenging, and difficult process” (Alsamadani, 2010, cited in Rass, 2015, p.49).

Firstly, with challenges related to teachers, it is presented that “a good teacher teaches, a better teacher explains, and the best teacher inspires” (Adas and Bakir, 2013, p.254). Teaching methods and textbooks are considered as primary factors in learners’ success (Brown, 2000). Therefore, writing lessons included in all upper secondary school English textbooks imply that writing should be taught as an independent skill; however, students seem to be below the required level (Ferede *et al.*, 2012). Noe (2004) took the view that perception has a relationship to our actions and practices (cited in Ferede *et al.*, 2012). Once both teachers and learners fail to consider writing important, their perceptions can influence their teaching and learning of this skill. Then, writing can be considered as a difficult task. This deeply affects the students’ writing performance. It was illustrated by

Al.gomoul (2011) that methods of teaching English writing and teaching aids contribute to challenges in students’ English writing. Moreover, Farooq *et al.* (2012) claimed that teachers’ selecting a wrong pedagogic approach will lead students to face challenges in writing English language. Therefore, teacher’s appropriate teaching method, useful teaching aids, and teacher’s support and motivation play a crucial role in assisting students partly avoid challenges in writing in English.

In addition to challenges related to teachers, most EFL students tend to encounter challenges by themselves in writing in the second language, i.e. affective, linguistic, and cognitive factors. In fact, there is no doubt that these factors not only affect learners’ writing performance, but also prevent academic success. In terms of affective factors, Ruddell (2005) presented that according to Krashen’s theory, anxiety, motivation and self-confidence are three affective variables that affect learners’ second-language acquisition. In other words, when anxiety is high, and motivation and self-confidence are low, acquisition of the second language is not enhanced.

Regarding cognitive factors, Brown (1994) assumed that initial language acquisition takes place when a person is highly centered. Each individual has a different learning style that contributes significantly to learning writing successfully, and differences in learning styles reflect the different ways a person reply to learning situations. Most students are not interested in writing due to its difficulty (Dwivedi and Chakravarthy, 2015), so their learning styles partly contribute to challenges in their writing assignment. Besides, Brown (1994) defined that strategies are special attacks that a person makes on a given problem. Then the importance of an individual is emphasized because learners may be successful despite methods or techniques of teaching. Learning strategies deal with the receptive domain of intake, memory, storage and recall. It is highly appreciated that learning strategies are specific procedures learners use with individual learning tasks to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more effective (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). Richards and Lockhart also stated that according to Vann and Abraham (1990)’s research, the inability to choose the right strategy for the task results in language learners’ failure. This is because skilled writers tend to spend time thinking about the task and planning how to approach it while unskilled writers tend to spend little time planning and organizing strategies (Richards and Lockhart, 1996).

In regards to linguistic factors, Brown (2000) pointed out that content, organization, vocabulary use, grammatical use, and spelling are criteria to measure students' final written product. Richards (2004), however, suggested that writing in a second language focuses on linguistic knowledge, vocabulary choices, syntactic patterns, and cohesive devices. Accordingly, students need to gain good understanding of how words, sentences, and structures in a second language can be used correctly to express the meanings they want to convey. Phuket and Othman, (2015) indicated in their study that Thai EFL students encounter twenty-two types of errors in writing essays such as wrong verb tenses, wrong verb forms, pronouns, prepositions, articles, nouns, adjectives, conjunctions, infinitive and gerund, subject-verb agreement, sentence fragment, word choice, confusion of sense relations, collocation, question mark, comma, full stop, capitalization, and spelling. Thus, it is obvious that students encounter many challenges when writing in the second language. Firstly, *the first language interference* has important implications in the learning of written expression. Secondly, *grammar* is the most difficult area for second language writers. Thirdly, *lack of vocabulary* is another cause of difficulty which makes writing colourless, boring and ineffective. Fourthly, *a well-organized presentation* is also a problem that learners of English face. Finally, *poor spelling* is the most serious factor that hinders students from writing down correct words.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research participants

There were 520 grade-12 students (298 females and 231 males) from the three high schools in mountainous areas in Tri Ton town in Vietnam participating in this study. They were all at the age of from 17 to 19.

3.2 Research question

The current research paper is attempted to find out the answer to the following question:

What challenges do high school students in mountainous areas encounter in English writing?

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The data were collected using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire to explore challenges students encounter in English writing. The questionnaire includes two clusters. Cluster one consists of three sub-clusters, i.e. (1) teachers' teaching method, (2) teachers' teaching aids, and (3) teachers' support and motivation. Cluster two composes of eight sub-

clusters, i.e. (1) learners' anxiety and attitudes; (2) learners' learning styles and strategies; (3) time constraint; (4) the first language interference; (5) limited vocabulary; (6) poor spelling; (7) inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language; and (8) poor understanding of a well-organized presentation. The SPSS software 20.0 was then used to analyze the data.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of a descriptive statistic test showed that the mean score of challenges that participants encounter when writing in English was not very high ($M=3.3$; $S.D=.45$). In addition, a one-sample T-test was conducted on the overall mean score of challenges encountered by high school students in mountainous areas in writing in English and test value 3.0 in order to check whether the mean score of 3.3 was significant different from the third scale (3.0) among five-point Likert scales. The test indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean score of participants' challenges in writing in English ($M=3.3$) and test value 3.0 ($t=14.9$; $p=.00$). The results reported that challenges encountered by high school students in mountainous areas in writing in English was significantly high.

Participants' challenges of each aspect in writing in English were tested. The results from the descriptive statistic tests run on the two main clusters and the 11 sub-clusters are shown in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, it can be concluded that regarding to challenges related to teachers, lack of teachers' teaching aids ($M=2.96$; $S.D=.77$) is the most common challenge that high school students in mountainous areas encounter in writing in English, and lack of teachers' support and motivation is the least difficulty ($M=2.67$; $S.D=.79$). Besides, regarding challenges related to students, the biggest challenge is poor spelling ($M=3.67$; $S.D=.74$) and the least challenging one is learners' anxiety and attitude ($M=3.14$; $S.D=.74$). As a result, among 11 listed challenges, poor spelling is the most frequent challenge ($M=3.67$; $S.D=.74$) and the least faced difficulty is lack of teachers' support and motivation ($M=2.67$; $S.D=.79$), which is evident in Fig.1. Moreover, participants encounter other positive challenges such as inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language (ranked second with $M=3.64$; $S.D=.71$), the first language interference (ranked third with $M=3.57$; $S.D=.69$), poor understanding of a well-organized presentation (ranked fourth with $M=3.55$; $S.D=.69$), and lack of vocabulary (ranked fifth with $M=3.44$; $S.D=.61$).

Table 1: Mean differences of participants’ challenges of each sub-cluster in writing in English

Domains	Sub-clusters	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
1.Challenges related to teachers		520	2.83	.57
	1.Teachers’ teaching methods	520	2.86	.71
	2.Teachers’ teaching aids	520	2.96	.77
	3.Teachers’ support and motivation	520	2.67	.79
2.Challenges related to students		520	3.44	.49
	4.Learners’ anxiety and attitudes	520	3.14	.74
	5.Learners’ learning styles and strategies	520	3.3	.76
	6.Time constraint	520	3.17	.77
	7.The first language interference	520	3.57	.69
	8.Limited vocabulary	520	3.44	.61
	9.Poor spelling	520	3.67	.74
	10.Inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language	520	3.64	.71
	11.Poor understanding of a well- organized presentation	520	3.55	.69

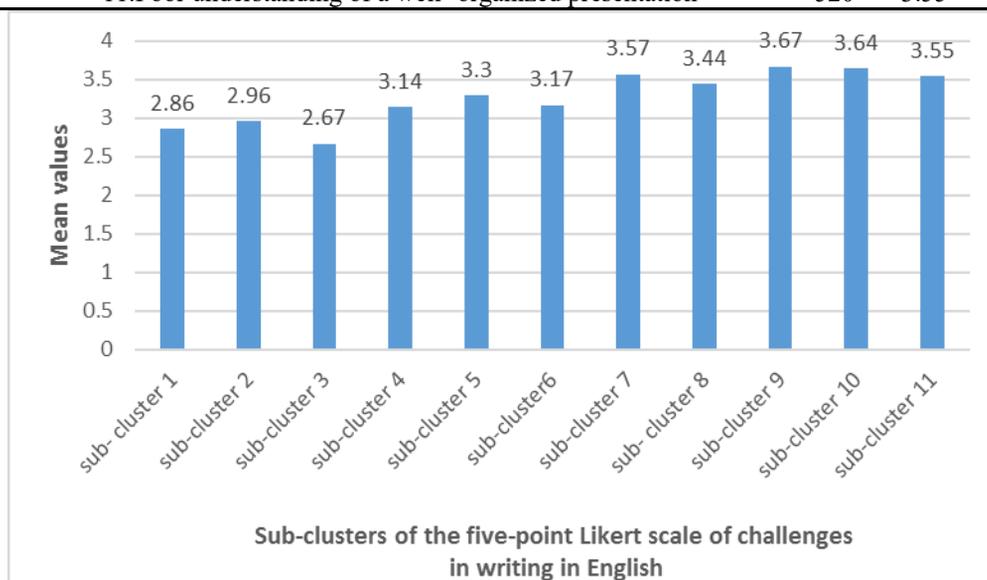


Fig. 1: Participants’ challenges of each sub-cluster in writing in English

(1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree)

To explore whether there was any relationship among the factors relating to challenges encountered by high school students in mountainous areas in English writing, a Pearson correlation test was run on the mean scores of 11 sub-clusters. The result showed that there were strong relationships between sub-cluster 9 - poor spelling and sub-cluster 10 - inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language ($r = .616$; $p = .00$); sub-cluster 8 - limited vocabulary and sub-cluster 9 - poor spelling ($r = .485$; $p = .00$); and sub-cluster 7 - the first language interference and sub-cluster 9 - poor spelling ($r = .393$; $p = .00$). In other words, students who encountered challenges in poor spelling also faced problem of grammatical structure mastery; students who face challenges

due to limited vocabulary also have difficulty in poor spelling; or students encountered challenges in the first language interference also face difficulty in poor spelling when writing in English. As a result, poor spelling, inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language, limited vocabulary, and the first language interference have strong correlations which affect students’ challenges in English writing. Participants may face challenges in writing due to this variable and also because of other variables.

Regarding challenges encountered by mountainous high school students in English writing, the results in this section indicated that participants in mountainous areas did not encounter challenges related to teachers in English writing. Before conducting

the study, it was hypothesized that participants encountered challenges related to teachers. In addition, in previous studies, teachers' teaching methods (Zeng, 2010; Al.gomoul, 2011; Farooq *et al.*, 2012; Ferede *et al.*, 2012; Bilal *et al.*, 2013; Nguyen, 2015; Nyasimi, 2015); teachers' teaching aids (Al.gomoul, 2011; Bilal *et al.*, 2013; Nguyen, 2015); and teachers' motivation (Bilal *et al.*, 2013; Dwivedi and Chakravarthy, 2015) were said to be attributed to challenges that students encountered in writing in the second language. Nevertheless, interestingly, the results in the current study showed that participants did not encounter challenges related to their teachers. Learners found that, in details, they had no problems with teachers' teaching methods, teaching aids, support and motivation in English writing. This could be explained by the fact that high school teachers in mountainous areas took responsibility for improving their students' writing skills. Another explanation was that learners found teachers' enthusiasm in teaching writing skills.

More importantly, in connection with the previous studies, the results in the current study were consistent with those by Al-Khasawneh (2010), Farooq *et al.* (2012), Bilal *et al.* (2013), Alfaki (2015), Dwivedi and Chakravarthy (2015), Nguyen (2015), Nyasimi (2015), Rass (2015), and He (2016) which revealed that challenges hindering students from creating a good writing were poor spelling, inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language, limited vocabulary, the first language interference, and poor understanding of a well-organized presentation. Besides, the findings of the study were also in line with the studies by Pineth (2014) and Nguyen (2015) who stated that learners' learning attitudes played a part to challenges that they encountered in English writing. Moreover, another challenge from the findings was mentioned by Al Fadda (2012) and Yingjie (2015) who found that lack of skills and strategies was also a challenge that students encounter in English writing. As a result, in this study, the challenges that students encountered in English writing were found similar to those of previous studies.

From the results of the present study compared to the previous ones, it can be seen that despite various groups of participants, and the various areas they come from, students encountered the same challenges, namely poor spelling, lack of vocabulary, inadequate mastery of grammatical structures and the like, related to themselves in English writ-

ing. However, a different point in the current study is that students considered time constraint to be a challenge when writing in English. When they practiced writing in class or took a writing test, they noted that there was not enough time to finish their writing task. This was similar to Nguyen's (2015) study which revealed that learners had no much time for practice in class. This could be explained by the fact that writing in the second language or the foreign language is a difficult skill which causes many challenges for a variety of learners.

For further analysis, after finding out challenges that high school students in mountainous areas encounter when writing in English, due to the different features of each participating school (school A, school B and school C), it is essential to figure out challenges participants from each school face in English writing. Therefore, the descriptive statistic tests were run to check for the mean scores of participants' challenges in writing in English from each school. The result indicated that the mean scores of challenges that participants in each school encounter when writing in English were slightly high ($M_a=3.28$; $S.D_a=.47$; $M_b=3.3$; $S.D_b=.45$; $M_c=3.28$; $S.D_c=.36$). Especially, the mean scores of the three schools were relatively similar.

One-sample T-tests were conducted on the mean scores of challenges encountered by high school students in each school in writing in English and test value 3.0. The tests indicated that there were significant differences between the mean scores of participants' challenges in writing in English from the three schools ($M_a=3.28$; $M_b= 3.3$; $M_c=3.28$) and test value 3.0 ($t_a= 8.62$; $p_a= .00$; $t_b=10$; $p_b= .00$; $t_c=7.34$; $p_c=.00$), respectively. The results showed that challenges encountered by high school students from each school in mountainous areas in writing in English was relatively high. In addition, the level of challenges encountered by the participants in School B when writing in English was higher than that of School A and C.

To better understand each participating school as well as to check whether there was any difference between the levels of challenges among the three schools in relation to the most and the least challenging factors of each school in comparison with these factors of participants in mountainous areas, the Descriptive Statistic Tests were conducted to find out the mean scores of 11 sub-clusters in each school. The most and the least faced difficulties in each school were presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean differences of challenges of participating schools in writing in English

Schools	N	Challenges	Mean	Std. Dev.
A	202	- Sub-cluster 9: Poor spelling	3.59	.76
		- Sub-cluster 3: Teachers' support and motivation	2.84	.83
B	230	- Sub-cluster 9: Poor spelling	3.73	.73
		- Sub-cluster 3: Teachers' support and motivation	2.54	.72
C	88	- Sub-cluster 10: Inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language	3.75	.58
		- Sub-cluster 3: Teachers' support and motivation	2.60	.81

As can be seen from Table 2, in the three schools A, B and C, the smallest problem that high school students face in writing in English is teachers' support and motivation (Ma=2.84; Mb=2.54; Mc= 2.6, respectively). In School A and B, poor spelling was the biggest problem encountered by participants (Ma=3.59; Mb= 3.73 respectively); however, grammatical structure difficulties (Mc= 3.75) were the biggest challenging factor for participants in School C.

With regard to challenges that participants in each school encounter in English writing, it is apparent that poor spelling is the biggest challenge of School A and B while inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language is that of School C. This could be inferred that different features of each school lead to different challenges in English writing. As presented in Section 3.5, School A and B are the two in small towns where students come from lower secondary schools with better conditions. School C is a small one far from the town. Teachers of this school are young ones with a few years of teaching experience. That could explain the reason why these findings of School A and B are different from those mentioned Al-Khasawneh (2010), Zeng (2010), and Nguyen (2015) who revealed in their studies that the most serious problem that students usually encounter in English writing is lack of vocabulary, followed by grammar. However, the finding of School C is similar to the research finding mentioned by Nysami (2015) who found that use of correct grammar was the greatest challenge that students faced when writing in English. Therefore, it can be claimed that students face many challenges in English writing and students in each school can rank challenges differently.

In brief, compared with the general result with regard to the most and the least challenging factors that participants in mountainous areas encounter, high school participants from School A and B had the same challenge, that is, poor spelling - the most challenging one and teachers' support and motivation - the least challenging one. Nevertheless, participants' responses from School C showed that although participants there had the same least chal-

lenging factor - teachers' support and motivation, the biggest problem of participants in School C in English writing was inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of the second language. Generally, after the study, participants demonstrated a strong positive perception towards challenges that they encounter in English writing.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Among the four English language skills, writing is an indispensable skill in every aspect of the life. Unfortunately, in Vietnam this skill is not paid enough attention to, which leads various challenges for students in English writing. Although the findings of the current study indicated that challenges that students encounter in English writing are not related to teachers, teachers should not overlook this skill as well as reduce their care to students because students still face many difficulties in it. The findings showed that participants' perception in relation to challenges in writing is significantly high. In English writing, they face difficulties in not only spelling, vocabulary and grammar but also their learning styles, learning strategies and attitudes. Thus, teachers' notice to students is always required. Eventually, the findings of this research can also be used to improve students' writing skills in their perspectives because through this study, teachers of English can gain in-depth understanding of challenges and reasons for such challenges in English writing in order to be able to find out the most appropriate solutions for their students' improvement in English writing from now on.

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