

# **An Investigation Into Group Essay-Writing Practices Among Students At A Teacher Education University In Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam**

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper explores students' experiences with group essay writing at a teacher education university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, focusing on their perceptions, challenges, and perceived benefits of collaborative writing. The study employed interviews with two lecturers and eight students from faculties in the field of social sciences between August 2024 and April 2025. Findings reveal that students initially felt more engaged and motivated when working in groups compared to individual writing. They identified collaboration, content research, and instructor support as key positive aspects. Group essay writing helped them develop various skills such as research, academic writing, communication, and teamwork. However, the study also highlights several challenges, including difficulty in finding relevant references, limited research and writing skills, unequal task distribution, and group conflicts. The paper concludes that group essay writing is an effective pedagogical tool for developing both academic and soft skills. To maximize its effectiveness, Vietnamese universities should provide structured guidance and assessment, strengthen students' collaboration and research skills, encourage critical thinking practice, and expand the application of this method across different disciplines. The study also suggests future research directions, including the long-term impact of group essay writing and how different learning contexts influence students' collaborative experiences.*

**Key Word:** *collaborative writing; group essay; student experience; academic skills development*

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## **I. Introduction**

In the context of higher education in Vietnam, university life provides students not only with an extensive body of knowledge but also a wide array of skills ranging from basic to advanced levels. Among these, academic writing—whether in the mother tongue or a foreign language—poses a considerable challenge. Writing is a complex skill that demands a clear understanding of structure and style, as well as continuous practice and reflection. Numerous studies in Vietnam and abroad have explored methods to improve students' writing abilities, with group essay-writing emerging as one of the most effective strategies. This approach promotes idea generation, collaborative outlining, and peer support throughout the writing process (Pham, 2013).

Research by Aminloo (2013) and Biria & Jafari (2013) reveals that students' individual writing skills significantly improve after engaging in group work, as compared to working independently. While solo writing tasks require students to brainstorm, organize, and refine ideas on their own, collaborative writing allows them to develop ideas more thoroughly, express them more coherently and logically, and achieve higher overall accuracy. Hence, group essay-writing is widely recommended for classroom activities and end-of-course projects.

A study by Pham (2016) on students' attitudes toward group writing indicated that most students preferred this method due to its numerous benefits. It made writing classes more engaging, encouraged lively discussions, reduced pressure, saved time, and enhanced learning outcomes. His follow-up research confirmed that group writing not only improved the overall quality of individual writing but also helped boost students' fluency and confidence.

Although writing is traditionally viewed as a solitary activity, collaborative writing has become increasingly common in academic settings. Students are often required to work in pairs or groups to complete assignments, much like collaborative projects in other subjects (Ede & Lunsford, 1990). However, some studies have shown that the use of group work in writing classes remains limited, often restricted to the drafting or final review stages. At best, students review each other's work and provide feedback. This peer feedback process, while improving metacognitive awareness (Leki, 1993), also fosters analytical reading and writing skills

(Nystrand & Brandt, 1989). Still, one limitation is that the focus tends to remain on the final product rather than the writing process itself (Storch, 2005).

Storch and other scholars emphasize that collaborative writing allows learners to share responsibility in producing a final product, thereby encouraging co-ownership of the text. This collective responsibility motivates learners to contribute to all aspects of the writing process: content, structure, and language. The benefits of collaborative writing have been consistently supported by researchers such as Higgins, Flower, & Petraglia (1992) and Keys (1994), who argue that the practice promotes critical thinking, especially when students are required to explain and defend their ideas.

Additionally, studies conducted with smaller groups of learners (Donato, 1988; DiCamilla & Anton, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1998) show that during co-writing, learners not only focus on grammatical and lexical accuracy but also engage in meaningful discourse. Depending on the group dynamics (Storch, 2002, 2003), collaborative writing facilitates a “collective scaffolding” environment, wherein students build on each other’s knowledge and achieve higher levels of performance than when working alone.

Storch (2005) found that group-produced texts were shorter yet more accurate and syntactically complex, indicating that students were more effective at completing writing tasks collaboratively. Students also benefited from immediate feedback and timely revisions, as they were jointly responsible for the final product and more receptive to peer input.

While most of the existing studies highlight the advantages of group writing over individual work, there is still a lack of structured models for managing group writing activities. Moreover, despite the higher quality of group-written essays, students often face challenges in group dynamics—ranging from member selection, content agreement, task distribution, to peer editing. Conflicts due to differing opinions are also common, with students sometimes having to forgo their ideas in favor of the group consensus (Ajmi & Ali, 2014).

Given the aforementioned perspectives, this study seeks to examine students’ experiences with group essay-writing activities at a teacher education university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. By exploring their practices and challenges, the research aims to propose practical solutions and applicable models to enhance the effectiveness of group-based academic writing.

## **II. Literature Review**

Research on group essay writing has gained considerable attention both internationally and nationally, reflecting its increasing relevance in modern education.

Internationally, Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) highlighted that group writing enhances students’ communication, collaboration, and mutual learning by enabling members to pool diverse skills and knowledge. Despite these benefits, challenges such as managing differing perspectives and work styles can hinder group effectiveness (Hassanien, 2006).

In the realm of second language acquisition, Dobao and Blum (2013) conducted a mixed-methods study with 55 Spanish learners, concluding that collaborative writing improved grammatical and lexical accuracy. Their findings were echoed by Fernandez Dobao (2012), who showed that group work produced more accurate and complex writing compared to individual or pair work. These outcomes were attributed to the sharing of knowledge and increased occurrence of Language-Related Episodes (LREs), fostering deeper cognitive engagement.

Theoretical underpinnings further reinforce the value of group collaboration. Social Interdependence Theory (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 2005) suggests that positive interdependence promotes mutual support and shared goals. Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism (1978) emphasizes learning through social interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), while Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1984) underscores the value of reflective learning through real-world experiences such as group tasks. The development of soft skills—such as communication, critical thinking, and conflict resolution—is also central to group work, as noted by Heckman and Kautz (2012).

Within the Vietnamese context, studies reflect similar trends. Nguyen and Nguyen (2024) found that collaborative writing increased motivation and reduced writing errors among students in an intensive English program. Pham (2016) reported notable improvement in writing quality after students participated in group writing training, suggesting a strong correlation between collaboration and individual skill development.

Nguyen and Tran (2022) explored English majors’ perceptions of group writing at Quy Nhon University. Their findings affirmed the perceived value of collaborative writing in enhancing academic outcomes and learning motivation, while also highlighting concerns about uneven task distribution, which may undermine group cohesion and fairness.

The literature collectively affirms the pedagogical value of group essay writing, particularly in higher education contexts where students are expected to develop both cognitive and interpersonal competencies. Group writing supports language development, enhances writing accuracy, and cultivates essential soft skills through social interaction and knowledge construction. These benefits are consistent across both international and Vietnamese studies, indicating the universality of collaborative writing as an effective educational strategy.

However, existing research also reveals important challenges and limitations. Group dynamics can be affected by uneven workload distribution, lack of accountability, or conflicting work styles, which can impede both the process and outcomes of group writing tasks. Moreover, while studies have emphasized short-term improvements in writing quality, long-term impacts on individual writing development and autonomous learning remain underexplored.

Additionally, much of the research focuses on language learning contexts or isolated classroom experiments. There is still a lack of comprehensive understanding of how group writing functions within diverse academic disciplines, student demographics, or institutional frameworks—particularly in the Vietnamese higher education setting.

Therefore, while the foundations for collaborative writing pedagogy are well-established, further research is needed to investigate how group essay writing is implemented in practice, how students perceive and navigate collaboration, and what institutional or instructional factors influence its effectiveness. Such inquiry is particularly valuable in the context of Vietnamese universities, where group work is increasingly emphasized but not always well-supported by infrastructure, assessment strategies, or pedagogical training.

### **III. Research Method**

This study employed interview methods to collect data from two main groups of participants: lecturers and students. The data collection phase was conducted from August 2024 to April 2025.

In the initial stage, the research team interviewed lecturers to gain insight into their perspectives, expectations, and experiences regarding the assessment of students' group essay writing skills. Through these interviews, the study aimed to identify specific assessment criteria and methods currently used by lecturers, with the ultimate goal of proposing solutions to enhance students' essay writing skills.

In the following phase, the research team conducted interviews with students to gather information about their perceptions, real-world experiences, and the challenges they face when working on group essays as part of academic assessment. This helped to shed light on the difficulties students encounter, including their ability to comprehend assignment requirements, analytical thinking skills, logical reasoning, writing proficiency, and the capacity to express ideas clearly in written form. Based on these in-depth insights, the study will propose effective support measures to improve students' essay writing abilities.

Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method, including two lecturers and eight first- and second-year students from departments within the fields of social sciences at a teacher education university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research team developed a set of interview questions, which were conducted either in person or via online platforms. Data collected from a total of ten interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded to protect participants' personal information and to facilitate accurate and effective data analysis.

### **IV. Findings**

#### **Students' Personal Experiences**

##### ***Interest and Excitement***

Initially, students often worked on individual essays as a means of self-expression, showcasing their unique voices and perspectives. While this allowed for diverse outputs, it also created feelings of monotony, isolation, and pressure. With the shift to group essays, students experienced a renewed sense of enthusiasm. Many expressed excitement about the collaborative nature of the task. As student H.T.K.A shared, *"This is a relatively new experience since I never had the chance to try it in high school. It's also quite beneficial as it helps me improve my skills."*

Group essay writing provided an opportunity for exploration and self-discovery. Student H.T.N.D remarked, *"It felt interesting and somewhat challenging because each group member had unique ideas that made the content richer."* Meanwhile, L.T.K.C noted the joy of knowledge sharing, stating, *"I enjoy group essays because they allow me to learn from my peers and feel like an essential part of the team."* These positive sentiments indicate that students view group essay writing as a valuable, motivating experience that fosters teamwork and skill development.

##### ***Anxiety and Pressure***

Despite these positives, many students expressed initial confusion and stress. Group essays demand not only deep research and academic writing but also collaboration and group management. Among the eight interviewed students, most admitted feeling anxious about taking on such a demanding task, especially when facing unfamiliar challenges. However, these feelings were seen as natural responses to new academic experiences, rather than signs of failure.

### **Most Enjoyable or Impressive Aspects**

Reflecting on the process, students identified certain aspects they found especially engaging. Collaboration was frequently cited as the most rewarding, not only for enhancing teamwork but also for helping students recognize individual responsibilities. For example, H.T.K.A emphasized the importance of fairness during task distribution, while L.T.K.C appreciated being able to choose roles that aligned with personal strengths. H.T.N.D highlighted the importance of setting clear tasks, establishing timelines, and organizing meetings to consolidate ideas.

Some students particularly enjoyed the content research stage, where they discovered new information and drew creative insights. P.N.D.L shared that *"Researching helped me dig deeper into the content, make connections, and spark creativity."* This stage was seen as instrumental in fostering both academic understanding and real-world application.

### **Advantages and Challenges**

#### ***Instructor Support and Guidance***

Students recognized the crucial role instructors played in providing structure and support. Guidance ranged from setting clear expectations and essay formats to suggesting reference materials. As V.T.D.P noted, *"Our lecturer gave specific requirements, explained the steps, and provided reference sources."* Such guidance helped students approach their topics more comprehensively.

Lecturers also published detailed evaluation criteria, guiding students on content depth, formatting, citation standards, and expectations for word count and relevance. According to L.T.T.L, a faculty member at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, this clarity enabled students to effectively plan and execute their essays.

#### ***Skill Development***

Group essay writing allowed students to develop a range of skills. These included research, academic writing, referencing, communication, time management, and teamwork. H.T.K.A emphasized critical thinking and analysis as foundational skills, while others highlighted the importance of effective communication to ensure idea sharing and conflict resolution. Logical writing was also seen as crucial for organizing knowledge and integrating feedback meaningfully.

#### ***Academic and Personal Benefits***

Collaborative essay writing not only honed academic writing but also improved reasoning, presentation, and critical reflection. According to N.M.D, *"Group writing helped us grow and learn from each other's experiences."* Through group discussions and feedback, students improved their ability to self-assess and identify areas for improvement, thus advancing personal development.

#### ***Access to Diverse Resources***

While creativity and personal input are vital, students also relied on extensive references to support their arguments. Resources from university libraries and academic databases were particularly useful. Students N.B.N.Q and P.N.D.L appreciated the school's collection of physical and digital materials. H.T.K.A noted how resources enhanced the quality of their essay in Vietnamese Literature: *"Relevant references helped us understand the work better and make more accurate assessments."*

#### ***Efficiency and Shared Responsibility***

Working in groups allowed students to save time and reduce personal pressure by leveraging each member's strengths. P.N.D.L mentioned that *"Identifying strengths and weaknesses helped divide the work more effectively."* According to instructor L.T.T.L, successful group essays reflect students' individual and collective academic abilities, from topic comprehension to information synthesis and critical thinking.

#### ***Difficulties in Finding Suitable References***

Despite resource availability, students struggled to find relevant, high-quality materials—especially for niche or unfamiliar topics. N.M.D remarked, *"Sources were limited, so we had to filter from various platforms."* Even with library access, some topics lacked sufficient depth or up-to-date references.

#### ***Limited Research and Writing Skills***

Many students faced challenges in evaluating and applying information, particularly with complex or specialized literature. H.T.K.A reflected on their experience in Vietnamese Literature, noting that *"Limited skills led us to rely on personal interpretation, which sometimes caused inaccuracies."*

### **Unbalanced Workload and Conflict**

Inequity in task distribution was another key issue. P.N.D.L pointed out, "*Uneven division caused imbalance,*" emphasizing the need for fair leadership. Disagreements over ideas also emerged, with N.B.N.Q stating, "*Group members struggled to reach consensus.*" Differing opinions and styles can enrich a project but may also cause friction without effective communication and compromise.

L.T.K.C noted that these disagreements sometimes led to tension: "*Difficulty in agreeing on ideas caused discomfort and impulsiveness during discussions.*" In large groups especially, the potential for conflict increases unless members prioritize shared goals over personal views.

## **V. Concluding Discussion**

This study set out to explore students' experiences with group essay writing at a teacher education university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, focusing on their perceptions, challenges, and the perceived benefits of collaborative writing. The findings strongly support the growing body of literature that recognizes group essay writing as an effective pedagogical tool for developing both academic and interpersonal skills.

Students expressed a general sense of excitement and increased engagement when working in groups, contrasting with feelings of monotony and pressure experienced during solo writing tasks. These positive emotions echo Pham Vu Phi Ho's (2016) findings, where students reported enhanced motivation and participation in group writing settings. Additionally, the opportunity to share ideas, divide responsibilities, and reflect collaboratively contributed to improved writing outcomes and more dynamic learning experiences, consistent with the benefits outlined by Aminloo (2013) and Biria & Jafari (2013).

The results also revealed that collaborative writing encouraged deeper learning through peer interaction and co-construction of knowledge. Students engaged more critically with content, improved their time management and communication, and practiced important soft skills such as negotiation and conflict resolution. These outcomes align with Social Interdependence Theory (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 2005), which posits that learners achieve more when they perceive their success as interlinked with that of their peers. Vygotsky's Social Constructivism (1978) is also evident, as students collectively scaffolded each other's learning within the group context, reflecting the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in action.

However, this study also brought to light several practical challenges that mirror the limitations noted in previous research (Ajmi & Ali, 2014; Hassanien, 2006). Uneven task distribution, difficulties in managing group dynamics, and occasional conflicts over idea selection or work styles hindered the writing process for some groups. While collaborative writing fosters co-ownership of a text, this shared responsibility is not always accompanied by equal participation or accountability, especially in the absence of clear assessment criteria or instructor intervention. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of group writing is heavily dependent on how it is facilitated and structured.

A particularly salient issue raised by participants was the lack of access to relevant resources and the difficulty of finding quality references for niche topics. This underscores the need for improved research training and information literacy among students, as well as stronger support from academic libraries and instructors in guiding students toward credible sources.

Despite these limitations, students widely recognized group writing as a valuable and enriching experience. It enabled them to build confidence, improve individual writing skills through exposure to diverse perspectives, and develop critical thinking abilities—hallmarks of high-impact educational practices. These insights reinforce the conclusions of Storch (2005), who found that collaboratively produced texts were more accurate and complex, and that students benefited from immediate peer feedback.

Importantly, the findings also highlight the gap between the theoretical promise of group writing and the realities of its implementation in Vietnamese higher education. Although collaborative writing is gaining traction, its integration into coursework often lacks systematic support in terms of pedagogical frameworks, assessment rubrics, and instructor training. The current emphasis still leans toward evaluating final products, rather than embracing the full writing process as a formative and reflective journey.

To fully realize the benefits of group essay writing, Vietnamese universities should consider the following: 1) Provide structured guidance and assessment: Lecturers should offer clear expectations, detailed rubrics, and milestones that reflect not only the final output but also each stage of the writing process. This can ensure fairer evaluations and greater student accountability; 2) Foster collaborative skills: Students need targeted training on teamwork, role negotiation, and conflict resolution. Embedding these soft skills into the curriculum can help address group dynamic issues and promote equitable participation; 3) Enhance research literacy: Strengthening students' ability to search, evaluate, and apply scholarly resources will reduce reliance on superficial references and improve the overall quality of their arguments; 4) Promote reflective practice: Incorporating self and peer evaluations, as well as reflective journals, can help students internalize lessons learned and apply them in future writing tasks—bridging the gap between group experience and individual development and 5) Encourage interdisciplinary implementation: While group writing has been widely applied in language

learning contexts, expanding it to other academic disciplines could foster interdisciplinary thinking and better prepare students for the collaborative demands of the modern workforce.

In sum, this research affirms the pedagogical value of group essay writing in Vietnamese higher education, particularly as a method to enhance both academic and soft skills. While students benefit from the collaborative process, there remain structural and pedagogical gaps that need to be addressed for such practices to be fully effective. Future studies should explore the long-term impacts of group writing on independent writing abilities, and how different institutional and cultural contexts shape students' collaborative writing experiences. By refining how group writing is taught and assessed, universities can empower students not just to write better—but to learn, think, and work more effectively together.

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