

**SỞ GIÁO DỤC VÀ ĐÀO TẠO HÀ NỘI
TRƯỜNG THPT HOÀI ĐỨC A**

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SÁNG KIẾN KINH NGHIỆM

Tên SKKN:

**AN ACTION RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF PRE-WRITING ACTIVITIES ON
GRADE - 11 STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN WRITING**

**(Nghiên cứu thực nghiệm về ảnh hưởng của các hoạt động trước khi viết tới việc tăng
cường hứng thú trong kỹ năng viết cho học sinh lớp 11)**

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

I. RATIONALE

Nowadays English has become an international language because it is widely used in many parts of the world. In the tendency of integration of the global economy, English is one of the effective communicative tools for everybody. The role of English is considered to be very important in the fields of economics, politics, science, culture and education. Especially, Vietnam's official membership of WTO on 7th November 2006 opened a new door for integrating into the world economy, and more and more people want to learn English for communicating with foreign partners, tourism, and study tours, etc.

Thanks to the innovation of ways in teaching English, English lessons are taught with four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in one unit. Moreover, there exist three stages: pre - while - and post-teaching in one lesson. This really helps students improve their skills beside the grammar exercises to pass the exams.

When teaching writing skill to grade 11th students at Hoai Duc A High School I found out that pre-writing stages are very important in teaching writing and it also has significant effects on the students' writing performance. If students do not prepare well enough they can not write well, they can not even write anything in their notebooks.

I decided to carry out the action research to find out how pre-writing stages affect the students' writing performance and whether the pre-lesson activities are important to teachers of English at Hoai Duc A High School. Based on the results of this action research, some changes and improvements could be applied in my lessons, and some appropriate strategies needed to be designed with the hope that students will work more effectively in a writing lesson. Hopefully that the results of this study would be shared with any colleagues who had the same problems or anyone who is interested in this study.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Do teachers highly appreciate the pre-writing activities in a writing lesson?
2. How do pre-writing activities affect the students' writing performance?

III. METHODS OF THE STUDY

The study is basically a qualitative research, which employs the following methods:

1. Data is collected by means of three sets of questionnaires, one on the teachers and the others on the students in pre-improvement stage and post-improvement one. The questions are of the three kinds: close - ended

- questions, open - ended questions and scaling.
2. Other sources of data come from writing tasks from the textbooks. The analysis of the data hopefully will bring about reliable findings useful for the teaching of writing to students at my school.

1. Participants

The subjects chosen for the research include 85 grade 11th students in class 11A2, and 11A3 of Hoai Duc A High School with the survey questionnaires, and 14 teachers who are currently teaching English. To be more specific, among 14 teachers answering the questionnaires, there were four male teachers. The teachers' ages range from 33 to 57. Their experience of teaching English varied from 11 years to 32 years. The research was carried out during the first term of the academic year 2017 - 2018 at Hoai Duc A High School.

2. Instrumentation

Instrumentation one: A set of questionnaires answered by the students in pre-writing stage.

The questionnaires were designed with 5 questions to elicit from students the information about the situation of their class in pre-writing stage, the way the teacher carried out these activities. The questions are multiple choices.

Instrumentation two: A set of questionnaires completed by the teachers.

This set of questionnaires were designed with the aim to find out the attitude of the teachers toward teaching pre-writing activities in a writing lesson, the difficulties they often meet while conducting these activities and solutions to solve the problem. In addition, their suggestions of how to make the pre-writing activities effectively were also mentioned. To complete the questionnaires, teachers had to tick the appropriate boxes or to give answers.

Instrumentation three: A set of questionnaires answered by the students in post-writing stage.

This was done with a view to exploring the changes that the teachers made to change the situation, the changes from the students appreciated by them.

Instrumentation four: A collection of students' writing papers in both pre-improvement stage and post-improvement one.

IV. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

This action research consists of three main stages: Pre-Improvement stage, Trying-out stage and Post-Improvement stage.

Stage 1: Pre-Improvement

Step 1: Identifying the problem which was wished to solve or an area which was wished to improve by:

1. Observing a lesson that illustrated the problem.
2. Conducting a survey to get information from students.

Step 2: Finding causes of the problem by:

1. Consulting with colleagues: a number of colleagues were asked to answer three questions about the effectiveness of conducting the pre-writing activities in writing lessons.
2. Reading professional books or journals for ideas and suggestions.

Stage 2: Trying-out

Step 3: Designing strategies for improvements (plan for action).

Step 4: Trying-out the strategies and making records of what happened in class.

Stage 3: Post-Improvement

Step 5: Evaluating the try-out by:

1. Observing a lesson that illustrated the changes that have been made.
2. Reflecting on the reasons for those changes.
3. Carrying out a survey to get information from the students.
4. Giving comments and conclusions.

V. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out in two English classes with 85 grade 11th students at Hoai Duc A High School. The research focused on how pre-writing activities affect the student' writing performances in writing lessons.

VI. DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The research consists of three main parts: Introduction, Development and Conclusion.

Part 1: Introduction presents the rationale, the research questions, the method of study, the research procedure, the scope of the study, the significance of the study and the design of the study.

Part 2: Development consists of Chapter one "Literature Review" and Chapter two "Action Research Procedure". In Chapter One, the theoretical background of action research is introduced with its definition, three reasons to use it, and ways to carry it. The concepts of writing, approaches to teaching writing and some pre-lesson factors affecting students' writing performance are also presented in this chapter. What is more, the writing program for grade 11th students at Hoai Duc A High School is described in this chapter, too. Chapter two namely "Action Research Procedure" describes the procedure of this action research with the following main steps: defining the problem, observing class, conducting a survey using questionnaires, collecting data and analyzing data, and giving out conclusions from findings.

Part 3: Conclusion is the last part which offered a summary and suggestions for more effective writing activities and some limitations and suggestions for further studies.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Writing, one of the two productive skills, has always a significant position in language teaching. Nevertheless, how to teach and learn writing effectively often poses great problems to both teachers and students. For the teachers of English at high school, writing is considered a difficult skill to teach. Some of them even ignore teaching writing skill and focus only on grammar exercises for the exams. However, nothing is difficult if we, the teachers make decision to make it easier. Hopefully, with a range of suggestions of how to make pre-writing activities effectively in writing lessons introduced in this research, it will be more motivating for the teachers to teach and make progress in teaching writing. Therefore, their students will be interested in writing lessons.

PART TWO: DEVELOPMENT

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

I. ACTION RESEARCH

1. What is action research?

According to Jerry G. Grebhard (1999), the concept of action research originated in the work of Kurt Lewin (1948, 1952). He was a social psychologist who brought together experimental approaches to social-science research and the idea of “social action” to address social issues. Stephen Corey (1952, 1953), a Columbia University Professor, was among the first to use action research in the field of education. He argued that formal research following a scientific method had little impact on educational practice. Through action research, he argued, changes in educational practice were possible.

In terms of what action research was, having considered what it was not action research had been defined in many different ways. In Stephen Corey’s definition “Action research is a way in which teachers try to study their own problems scientifically, in an effort to evaluate, guide and correct their procedures”. Tsui’s definition was more detailed and simpler: “Action research is a very effective way of helping teachers to reflect on their teaching and to come up with their own alternatives to improve their practice” (Tsui, 1993).

In another way, action research was mentioned at two levels by Grebhard and Oprandy: “At one level, action research is about teachers identifying and posing problems, as well as addressing issues and concerns related to the problem. It is about working toward understanding and possibly resolving these problems by

setting goals and creating and initiating a plan of action, as well as reflecting on the degree to which the plan work. At another level, it can be about addressing educational practices that go beyond each teacher's classroom" (Grebhard and Oprandy, 1999).

In brief, action research is a kind of scientific study which is often carried out by a teacher or an educator in order to solve a practical problem in a classroom. As it was named, it focuses mainly on the actions of both students and teachers. So, it can solve the problems which are related to all actions and activities in a classroom. The problems which are solved by action research are often practical and useful for teachers.

2. Why does a teacher need action research?

Action research in schools, colleges or universities solves everyday practical problems experienced by teachers, rather than the "theoretical problems" defined by non-teaching researchers. It should be carried out by the teachers themselves or by someone they commission to carry out for them.

Action research in education focuses on the three related stages of action:

- 1. Initiating action, such as adopting a text, choosing an alternative assessment strategy.*
- 2. Monitoring and adjusting, such as seeing how a pilot project is proceeding, assessing the early progress of new programme, improving a current practice.*
- 3. Evaluating action, such as preparing a final report on a completed project (Sagor, 1992).*

If the teacher was trained to conduct action research, he could solve his problems on his own or in collaboration with other teachers. Anders (1988), Curtis (1988) and Tsui (1993) gave three reasons why a teacher needed action research:

- to solve own problems in a scientific process and improve own practice.
- to adapt theory (findings of conventional research) to practice (own problems)
- to share the results of action research with other teachers.

Moreover, action research was also for a teacher's professional developments. He would become a better teacher because he knew how to find out and solve his problems in teaching scientifically on his own. This also showed his dynamic, activeness and imagination in his teaching job.

3. How does a teacher carry out action research in a language classroom?

Tsui (1993) suggested 5 steps in conducting action research:

Step 1: Identifying problems or an area you wish to solve or to improve by:

- reviewing an audio or a video-taped lesson and the transcription of a segment of the lesson that illustrates the problem.
- conducting a survey to hear from your students.

Step 2: Finding causes of the problem by:

- consulting with your colleagues, and trainers.
- reading professional books or journals for ideas and suggestions.

Step 3: Designing strategies for improvement (plan for action) and writing a proposal for action research.

Step 4: Trying out the strategies (action) and keeping a diary of what happened in the class.

Step 5: Evaluating the try-out by:

- reviewing a lesson that illustrated the changes that have been made.
- reflecting on the reasons for those changes.
- carrying out a survey to get information from students.

Other authors such as Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1998), Andy Curtis (1988) and Nunan (1989) also recommended the similar steps in doing action research in a classroom. Different from Tsui, in the step of “Collecting data and identifying the problem”, Nunan (1992) suggested that teachers should observe and make notes on what their learners and they said and did in class, and then, based on these observations, identified positive ways to bring about this change.

In my opinion, observing the class and making notes are feasible for a teacher to implement his/her action research where cassette recorders or camcorders are not available.

A necessary component of action research is collaboration among different people. They are teachers, their colleagues and students, who should be willing to talk with each other about the problems and find out the solutions together, as well as help each other in implementing classroom-centered action research projects. It also needs the collaborative efforts of students who participate in the action research project. Students’ collaboration plays an important role in the success of the action research project.

4. Summary

Action research is a kind of scientific study carried out by a teacher which solves the practical problems in a classroom. The teacher needs action research to adapt theory to practice. Action research consists of three stages:

1. *Pre-improvement:* Firstly, the teacher identifies the problem in his teaching job in class. He/She observes by himself/herself or asks somebody to observe or has his/her lessons video-taped in class to get data to prove the

problem. He/She also proves the problem by conducting a survey to get information from his/her students. Secondly, the teacher tries to find out the causes of the problem from professional books or journals, colleagues and students.

2. *Try-out*: The teacher designs the strategies for improvement and tries them out in some following lessons. Next, a lesson is observed or video-taped to get data to illustrate the changes and improvements.
3. *Post-improvement*: The teacher reflects on the reasons for the changes and improvements. To ensure the success of the applied strategies in action research a survey is necessary to get the evaluation from students. From the results of the action research some conclusions and comments will be made.

Action research can be carried out in collaboration with other teachers or educators and it needs the supports from both students and education administrators. Its results should be popularized and shared with anybody who is interested in.

II. WRITING

1. What is writing?

In teaching a language, writing is considered one of the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) that a learner is expected to master. Writing is the process in which the writer expresses his thoughts or ideas in the form of handwriting. "Writing is communicating. Good writing gets your ideas out of your head and into the reader's head without losing or distorting those ideas" (Leki, 1976). To understand thoroughly the nature of writing, some more academic definitions of writing should be studied.

According to "Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary" (1989), writing is to "make letters or other symbols on a surface, especially with a pen or pencil". Writing, in Davies's point of view, involved two kinds of skills. The first ones were low-level skills such as handwriting or typing, spelling, constructing grammatical sentences, organizing and sequencing, structuring, drafting, and editing.

In conclusion, Byrne's definition can be considered one of the most complete definitions of writing because it covers all of the features of writing given by two above mentioned authors.

2. Why teaches writing?

When we learn a second or a foreign language, we learn to communicate with other people: to understand them, talk to them. An integral part of participating fully in a new culture setting is learning how to communicate when the other

person is not right there in front of us, listening to our words and looking at our gestures and facial expressions. Visitors to another country will often have to leave a note for the mailman, fill out a customs declaration form, give written instructions, or write a thank-you letter.

Raims (1983, page 3) thinks there is "... an additional and very important reason: writing helps our students learn." She shows three ways in which students can learn through writing:

- First, writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that we have been teaching our students.
- Second, when our students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond that they have just learned to say, to take risks.
- Thirdly, when they write, they necessarily become very involved with the new language, the effort to express ideas and the constant use of eye, hand and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning.

Writing is a productive skill, so it is writing that provides students with a chance to put all those language itself and practice communicative skills at the same time. Through the act of writing students will realize what they are already good at and what they still need to learn to become a better and more effective writer (also a better learner) by far, the difficult question for teachers to answer is not "why teaches writing", but it is how to create good reasons for writing.

3. Approaches to teaching writing

Nowadays there are many different approaches to teaching writing.

According to Ann Raims (1983, page 5-10), there were six approaches to teaching writing namely: Controlled-to-Free Approach, Free-Writing Approach, Paragraph-Pattern Approach, Grammar-Syntax-Organization Approach, Communicative Approach and Process Approach.

a. Controlled-to-Free Approach

According to this approach mistakes shown up in written work was regarded as a major problem. The teacher assumed that students made mistakes because they wrote what they wanted freely. This approach stressed the importance of control in teaching writing skills to students in early stages. Students were taught how to write and combine various sentence types and manipulation exercises were used to give students the experience of writing connected sentences.

The amount of control would be reduced gradually and students were asked to exercise meaningful choice. At the next stages, students might be given a good

deal of guidance and content, but allowed some opportunities for self-expression. This approach also emphasized step - by - step learning and formal correction.

b. Free-Writing Approach

This Free-Writing encouraged students to write as much as possible and as quickly as possible - without paying attention to mistakes. The important thing students did was to get their ideas down on a paper. The drawbacks of this approach were that many students wrote badly because they did not write enough and for the same reason they felt inhibited when they picked up a pen to write. This approach might be useful when writing a journal or a diary.

c. Paragraph-Pattern Approach

This Paragraph-Pattern Approach stressed the importance of paragraph as the basic unit of written expression. Students were taught how to construct and organize paragraphs. This approach helped students express themselves effectively at a level beyond the sentence.

d. The Grammar-Syntax-Organization Approach

Writing can not be seen as composed of separate skills which are learned one by one. So some teachers devise writing tasks that lead students to pay attention to organization while they also work on the necessary grammar and syntax. This approach links the purpose of a piece of writing to the forms that are needed to convey the message.

e. Communicative Approach

This Communicative Approach emphasized the communicative role of writing. Students should have a reason for writing and think about whom they wrote to or for. This approach required situations which allowed them to write purposefully. This approach motivated students to write and showed how writing was a form of communication.

f. The Process Approach

In this approach, particular stress is paid on a cycle of writing activities which move learners from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the “publication” of a finished text:

PRE-WRITING (Specify the task/ planning and outlining/ collecting data/ making notes) → COMPOSING → REVISING (Reorganizing/ shifting emphasis/ focusing information and style for your readership) → EDITING (Checking grammar/ lexis/ surface features)

So in the Process Approach, students did not write on a given topic in a restricted time and gave their writing assignments to their teachers to correct.

They explored a topic through writing in an unrestricted time, showing their teachers and each other their drafts, and using what they wrote to read over, think about, and move them on to a new one. Teachers could give their feedbacks on the content of what students have written in their drafts. The writing process became a process of discovery. That was the discovery of new ideas and new language forms to express those ideas.

To sum up, there is no one perfect way to teach writing. We, teachers have to take into consideration the many factors of our context before deciding which approach to apply or very likely, develop one of our own which is the combination of some approaches and which suits our settings best.

4. What is Pre-Writing?

For most of us, getting started is often the hardest part of writing. A blank page, begging to be filled with ink, can be intimidating, especially when our words come slowly or when our minds go blank. Pre-writing is considered to be very important in teaching writing. Smith (1989) stated that Pre-writing is the complex network of initial mental sequences we undergo when we write a paper. In addition, Richmond (1985) pointed out that Pre-writing is the first stage of the writing process and is also called the idea - generating stage which stretches back to include anything that you have ever done or have ever been that might have given you ideas to write about.

III. PRE-LESSON FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN WRITING LESSONS

Students' performance in writing lesson can be affected by a variety of factors originating from students, teachers and other external factors. In the following sections, some of the major factors will be discussed.

1. Student factors

a. Students' learning styles

Harmer (2001) emphasizes the importance of understanding that there are different individuals in our class if we are to plan appropriate kinds of activities for them. Different individuals may have different learning styles, prefer different kinds of work, and expect different degrees of care and attention from the teacher. This can be seen clearly that there are different reactions from students toward the pre-lesson stage. We can conclude with certainty that if teacher realizes the differences among the individuals in the class when an activity is in progress, the students will participate in the lesson actively.

b. Students' motivation

Regarding the issue, there are sample definitions of motivation. Lightbown

and Spada (1999) consider motivation a complex phenomenon and define it in terms of two factors: learners' communicative needs and their attitudes towards the second language community while Harmer (2001) defines motivation simply as "some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something". No one can deny the importance of motivation towards the success in learning a foreign language so we have to understand the sources of motivation. According to Harmer, the sources of motivation are diversified. They may derive from the society we live in, significant others like parents or old siblings, the teacher and the method. Among these sources, the teacher and the method may be of the most importance. For the teacher, his or her attitudes and enthusiasm help create a positive classroom atmosphere. For the method, it means involving both teacher and students' confidence shown in the way of teaching and learning. If either loses this confident motivation, the chance of success in learning a language will be very small.

Clearly, motivation plays an important role in the success of language learning in general but we may wonder how much or to what extent motivation accounts for students' participation in pre-lesson stage. We may not give the exact answer but we can conclude with certainty that the degree of motivation is directly proportional to the level of involvement in pre-lesson stage in common and particularly in students' performance in writing lesson. To be more concrete, the more motivated students are, the more actively they will participate in the lesson.

c. Students' language levels

According to Harmer (2001), in a class where students' language levels are different, teacher may have some difficulties choosing a suitable teaching method, language and activities used in class. Harmer claims that some techniques and exercises are suitable for some students but less appropriate for others. The language we use in classroom and in the materials we expose to students must be carefully chosen concerning the complexity, length and genre. With regard to *Topic and Genre* Harmer says that if students are not interested in the topics we are asking them to talk about, they are unlikely to invest their language production with the same amount of effort as they would if they were excited by the subject matter. If they are unfamiliar with the type of activity we are asking them to talk about, they may find it hard to engage themselves with the task we have given to them. Concerning the topic and genre Harmer (2001) suggests that teachers should take some issues into consideration such as choosing interesting topics, creating interest in the topic, activating schemata,

varying topics and genre and providing necessary information. In writing lesson, we do not have the chance to choose the topic because of its various writing tasks. However, teacher should choose the suitable genre or activities to motivate students.

In brief, the limitation in the students' language levels can directly affect their participation however much they like the activities. We, therefore, should choose the topics as well as the kinds of activities of their levels to encourage their participation.

In conclusion, those are the main factors originating from students' side that may affect students' participation in classroom activities. For each student, the degrees of effect of those factors may vary and within one factor the degrees of effect on each student are different. First, in a class may exist different learning styles. The teacher should identify which group a student belongs to, this may help students overcome the difficulty getting involved in the activities. Second, students' knowledge including both knowledge of English proficiency and knowledge of field expertise seems directly proportional to their level of involvement in the tasks. To be more concrete, the more knowledge students have, the higher degree of participation is. In addition, if students are motivated, they will engage themselves more in classroom activities.

2. Teacher factors

a. Teachers' teaching methods

Through the history we have experienced the existence and development of many teaching methods that can be divided into two types: teacher-centred and learner-centred methods. In pre-lesson stage, teachers' teaching methods are focused on the ways teacher design appropriate activities to motivate students to write as well as the ways that the teacher elicits pre-lesson activities. In order to have a suitable method, the teacher should take some of the following factors into consideration including learners, teaching purposes and other available classroom conditions. Choosing an inappropriate or not being flexible in applying methods to a certain class may have negative effects on students' participation.

b. Teachers' knowledge

In the study *what makes a good teacher*, Breach (2005) points out that most students believe that the teacher is a fountain of knowledge and their main responsibility is to pass on that knowledge to students. Breach compares the teacher as a teapot and the students with empty cups waiting for the knowledge from the teacher to be poured down in. In the pre-lesson stage of writing lesson,

we are going to focus on language ability and general knowledge.

Language: According to Underwood (1987), being a fluent, accurate English speaker is a great help, but this alone does not make us a successful teacher. Indeed, many teachers whose command of English is limited still are good teachers as they understand the difficulties their students often face. According to Underwood the secret lies in being confident about the language we use and we should not feel embarrassed due to the lack of greater knowledge.

General knowledge: In order to conduct a useful pre-lesson activity, a teacher needs not only knowledge of the language but also knowledge of content which means the knowledge of the topic they are going to conduct. According to Underwood, the more knowledge of the lesson a teacher can apply to his lesson, the more interested his students will feel in because the students can experience language being used.

c. Teachers' instructions

Complicated instructions are another major problem that often makes giving instructions very time-consuming. In the class, if the students do not understand the teachers' instructions, they do not react anything. Therefore, the teacher has to try at least twice to explain to them before resorting to Vietnamese. Much has been written on how to give effective instructions. Ur (1996) provides several very useful recommendations: The first step is to prepare what you are going to say, and if possible, even to write it down. Then the teacher needs to ensure the class's attention. Next, he should give the information more than once. Make sure that the language is brief and clear, and then follow it up with demonstrations. Giving effective instructions is not as easy as some teachers may think. It is a skill that we can gain only with proper learning and frequent practice.

In conclusion, students' writing performance can be affected by teachers' factors including teaching methods, teachers' knowledge and teachers' instructions in pre-lesson stage. Teaching methods may play a decisive part in obtaining teaching goals in pre-lesson stage. Beside teaching methods, teachers' knowledge also plays an important part as the former makes the activities interesting in term of the content. Additionally, the fact those teachers' instructions properly may help students be sure that they can understand what they need to do in the lesson. Thus, with a view to improve the pre-lesson stage in writing lesson, teachers should renovate their teaching methods, in this case that is the way teachers elicit the pre-lesson activities. At the same time, teachers should improve their knowledge including both knowledge of language and

knowledge of the field expertise. Finally, teachers should give clear and brief instructions in this stage so that students can produce good writing pieces.

3. External factors.

a. Time limitations

Normally, in pre-lesson stage, only 5 to 10 minutes are used to conduct the activities. However, if teachers, for some reasons, do not prepare the materials well enough, they will realize the failure of having pre-lesson activities immediately. Moreover, in some large classes with a number of students whose English knowledge are limited, it often takes time to conduct these activities. This leads to the confirmation of the teachers' role in designing appropriate materials in pre-lesson activities.

b. Classroom and materials restraints

According to Williams and Burden (1997), we can not underestimate the importance of appropriate environmental conditions for learning to take place as an understanding of the ways in which aspects of the environment affect learning is vitally important for language teachers and learners.

Underwood (1987) points out some factors related to the classroom physical conditions that can affect the learning process:

- The lightness
- The temperature and fresh air
- The acoustics
- The lines of vision
- The layout of the desks/ tables
- The possibility of moving desks/ tables
- The other furniture
- The facilities for displaying pictures, charts, etc

It is common that in Vietnamese high school, visual aids are not available so that teachers have to prepare the materials by themselves and this leads to the fact that Vietnamese English teachers do not use the materials regularly and effectively. In some cases, teachers do not use the visual aids effectively such as they use the pictures in small sizes so that students can not see what exactly are shown on the board or they use the visual aids which do not match with the topics of the lessons.

No one can deny the role of classroom atmosphere in the success of language learning. According to Underwood (1987), both the teacher and students are responsible for creating a good atmosphere and a good learning atmosphere consists of some characteristics such as giving a sense of purpose or the teachers

should ensure that English is spoken. Balancing fluency and accuracy or using appropriate language are the two necessary elements in creating a good classroom atmosphere. Underwood also mentioned the effects of encouragement as well as students' involvement on the improvement of students' English learning. Last but not least, tests and extracurricular activities are also considered as important parts of increasing learning atmosphere in the classroom.

IV. THE WRITING PROGRAM FOR GRADE 11TH STUDENTS

1. The objectives of the program

Basing on the new textbooks designed by the Ministry of Education and Training, English is taught with four skills and Language Focus which focuses on grammar and pronunciation. The writing program at Hoai Duc A High School follows the syllabus of the MOET (Ministry of Education and Training) with the aim of improving students' abilities in writing. On English 11 textbook, there are a range of types to practice writing with narrative, writing letters, describing statistics from a chart or a table or writing a report or a biography.

As regards the language, students sometimes have to depend on the provided structures and phrases or vocabularies. However, some of them start to be aware of and perform different styles as well as various levels of formality to match the writing situation. But most of their works still need to be examined for vocabulary and style accuracy.

In terms of methodology, students are expected to master the general study skills. Students should be active in self-studying, peer and group cooperation. They understand the process in teaching and learning writing and know how to write.

2. The teaching materials

The course books used to teach writing skills to grade 11th students of Hoai Duc A High School is **English 11** by *MOET*.

3. The schedule of the course

There are 3 periods of English in a week. In Hoai Duc A High School, we spend two weeks for one unit because each unit is taught from five to six periods.

The teaching and learning tasks for the academic year will be scheduled as follows:

Unit 1: Friendship - Writing a narrative: Writing about your friend

Unit 2: Writing a personal letter to describe a past experience

Unit 3: A Party - Writing an informal letter of invitation

- Unit 4: Volunteer work - Writing a formal letter expressing gratitude
- Unit 6: Competitions - Writing a letter of reply
- Unit 7: World population - Interpreting statistics on population from a chart
- Unit 8: Celebrations - Describing a celebration's activities
- Unit 9: Writing a formal letter to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction
- Unit 10: Nature in danger - Describing a location
- Unit 11: Sources of energy - Describing information from a chart
- Unit 12: Describing the preparations for the coming Asian Games
- Unit 13: Hobbies - Writing about a collection
- Unit 15: Space Conquest - Writing a biography
- Unit 16: The Wonders of the world - Writing a report on a man-made place

CHAPTER TWO: ACTION RESEARCH PROCEDURE

I. PRE-IMPROVEMENT STAGE

STEP 1: IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

1. Identifying the problem

The action research was carried out with the aim of finding “The effects of pre-writing activities on grade 11th students’ writing performance at my school” While teaching writing here, I realize that some English teachers, for some reasons, do not usually conduct the pre-writing activities effectively at writing lessons. To make it clearly how pre-writing activities affect to the students’ writing performance, some factors related to students’ participation in pre-writing stage will be discussed in this part.

2. Observing a lesson that illustrated the problem

Three volunteer teachers from other classes were asked to come to classes 11A2, and 11A3 in two different periods to observe the writing lesson without notifying to the teacher and all the students in that class. The observers just focused on what the teacher did in pre-writing stage and the reaction of students in the class at this stage. What is more, the teachers collected some of students’ writing papers in order to compare the differences in students’ writing performance between the pre and post improvement stage of this research.

A. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE LESSON

- 1. Topic for the writing task.** “Writing a formal letter expressing gratitude”
- 2. Time allowance:** 10 minutes (3 minutes for warm up and 7 minutes for pre-writing activities)

B. THE RESULTS OF PRE-IMPROVEMENT CLASS OBSERVATION

Class	T’s activities	Ss’ activities	Comments
11A2	For warm up:		This is a typical

	<p>- T pointed at the textbook and asked Ss “What is this?”</p> <p>- OK. Today we are going to learn how to write a formal letter of expressing gratitude.</p> <p>For pre-writing stage:</p> <p>T asked her Ss to do Task 1, and she explained some new words such as <i>donated, gratitude, ...</i></p> <p>T asked Ss to do Task 2 for the while writing stage.</p>	<p>Some of them said “It is a letter”. Some said nothing, some kept on personal talks.</p> <p>The class was noisy because of the hot weather. Most of the students did nothing and only some of them listened to what the teacher said.</p>	<p>lesson of a careless teacher. She did not prepare anything for the lesson so students felt bored with her lesson so that their writing performance would be affected.</p>
11A3	<p>For warm up:</p> <p>T showed a letter copied in A4 paper and asked Ss “Can you see what do you call this? Is this a letter?”</p> <p>For pre-writing stage:</p> <p>T also asked Ss to do task 1 in the textbook and then she answered all the questions by herself if there was no reply from the students.</p> <p>T also asked Ss to do task 2 with no emphasis on what they had to do to write a letter of expressing gratitude</p>	<p>“Yes”</p> <p>Students seemed tired and nervous and tried to finish their task.</p>	<p>This is a teacher-centered teaching approach. T didn’t notice the feelings of the students. T even gave a wrong sentence “<i>Can you see what do you call this?</i>” at warm up stage. This shows that T didn’t prepare the lesson plan before teaching that writing lesson.</p>

The above results show that the problem of ineffective pre-writing activities was true in writing lessons. The next step is to conduct a survey to find out the causes of the problem from students.

3. Conducting a survey to get information from students

85 students were asked to give their answers to the 5 questions and then handed in their papers to the teacher. These were the results of the survey:

Question 1: What is your self-assessment on your writing performance today?

Very bad		Bad		Fair		Good		Very Good	
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%

37	43.5	24	28.2	8	9.4	10	11.8	6	7.1
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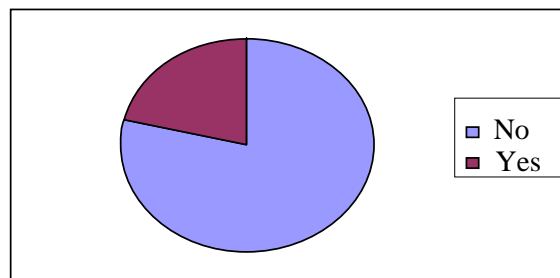
The data in *Table 1* shows that the writing performance of the grade 11th students at my school was not good. The percentage of the students who thought their writing performance on that day was very bad (43.5%) and bad (28.2%). What is more, 9.4% of the asked students assessed that they had no idea of their writing performance. Meanwhile, the percentage of the students thinking their writing performance was good and very good was 11.8% and 7.1% respectively. Clearly, the findings show us that most of the students feel their writing performance will be monotonous if there is nothing improved.

Question 2: Does your teacher ask you to join in the pre-writing activities today?

All the students (100%) are asked to join in the pre-writing activities on that period. This shows that the trend of having pre-writing activities in the writing lesson is very popular in my school.

Question	Yes	No
Does your teacher ask you to join in the pre-writing activities today?	100%	0%

Question 3: Do you like those pre-writing activities? If No, please answer the next question.



As can be seen from the chart, almost all the students (79.8%) who were asked did not like the activities of the teachers whereas 20.2% of them stated that they liked the pre-activities that the teacher conducted on that day.

Question 4: Why aren't you interested in taking part in the pre-writing activities today?

Reasons	No	%
My vocabulary and grammar structures are so poor	35	41.2%
I don't know much about the writing topic	22	25.9%
The topic is not a "hot" one	11	12.9%
I don't feel being motivated enough	9	10.6%
Others (the classroom is not comfortable enough with the dim lights, the picture is so small to see, the fans	8	9.4%

spin slowly)		
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As can be seen from the table, a large majority of the students (41.2%) stated that their vocabulary and grammar structures were not enough to take part in the pre-writing activities on that day. 25.9% of them said that they did not know much about the topic. One more reason for the inactiveness of students in that pre-writing activity is that students thought that the topic was not “hot” enough. This accounted for 12.9% of the students. Motivation and other classroom effects added 10.6% and 9.4% respectively to the list. From the information collected, teachers at my school should be aware of some factors affecting to the students’ participation in pre-writing stage so that they can conduct more effective activities that help students write better.

STEP 2: FINDING CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

1. Consulting with colleagues

In order to get more professional advice, suggestions and ideas about the problem of finding out “the effects of pre-writing activities to students’ writing performance” and with the aims of making teachers at my school realized the importance of pre-writing activities in teaching writing I consulted with 14 English teachers who are teaching in the English Division at my school.

The following questions were chosen for teachers of English in the English Division at my school to answer on piece of paper:

Question 1. According to you, how important these activities affect to students’ writing performance?

Item No	(1) Least important → Most important (5)				
	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
a	0	6.7	26.6	33.4	33.3
b	6.7	13.6	6.9	53.5	19.3
c	0	42.3	20.4	26.2	11.1
d	17.1	32.5	42.7	2.4	5.3

a. Warm - up activities.

b. Pre - writing activities

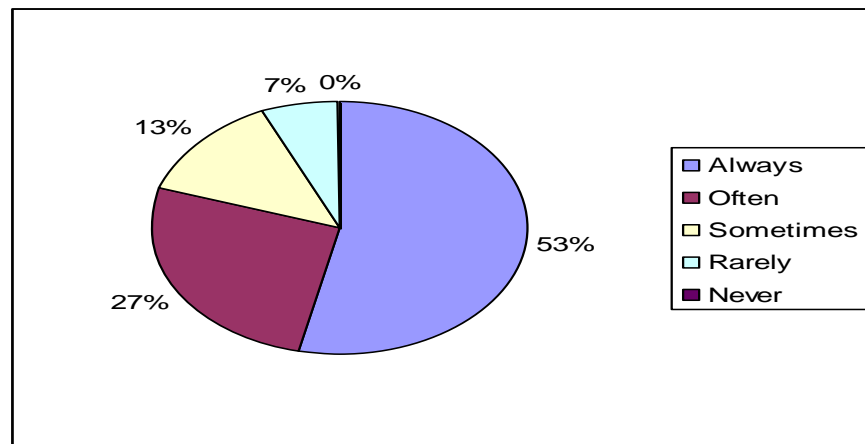
c. While - writing activities.

d. After - writing activities.

Table 6 summarizes the teachers’ ideas about the importance of pre-writing activities on students’ writing performance. In general, they thought that pre-writing activities affect most students’ writing performance. Coming back to the above analysis, we also can see that warm-up activities ranked the second after pre-writing activities in the teachers’ view toward its relationship with students’ writing performance meanwhile while and after-writing stage were appreciated less important than the above activities.

Clearly, the findings show that English teachers at my school realized that pre-writing activities are really important to measure their students' writing performance.

Question 2. Do you often conduct pre-writing teaching in writing activities?

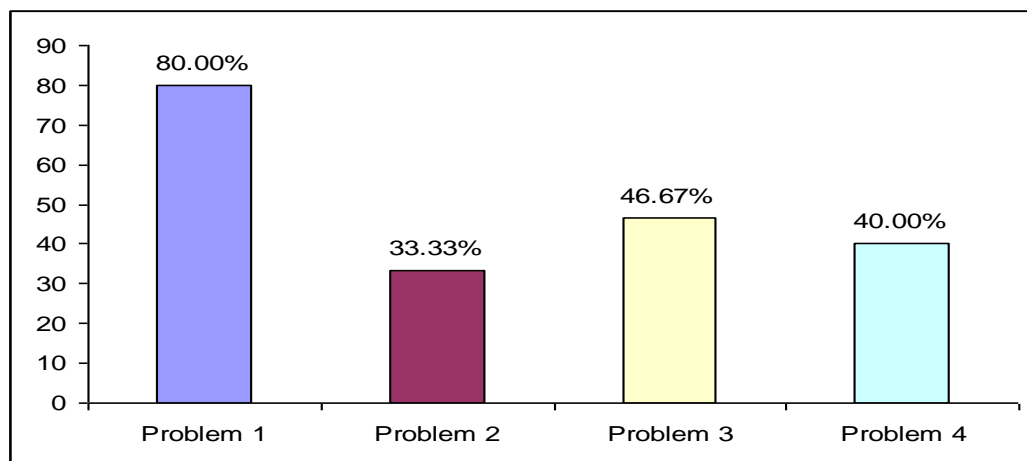


This question was designed with a view to explore whether the teachers of English at my school have the habit of conducting pre-writing activities in writing lessons or not. And the result was as follows:

As can be seen from the pie chart, a majority (8 teachers = 53%) of the teachers said they **always** conducted pre-writing activities, and 27% claimed **“often”**. Meanwhile, 13% admitted to conducting these **“sometimes”** only and 7 % of all the teachers **rarely** took pre-writing activities into consideration when teaching writing. Luckily, no teachers confessed **“never”**.

Question 3. Have you ever met the following problems while conducting pre-writing activities?

- a. Students make noises and keep on their personal talks.
- b. Students do not do anything, just keep silent.
- c. Students do not work effectively with the activities you have prepared.
- d. Others



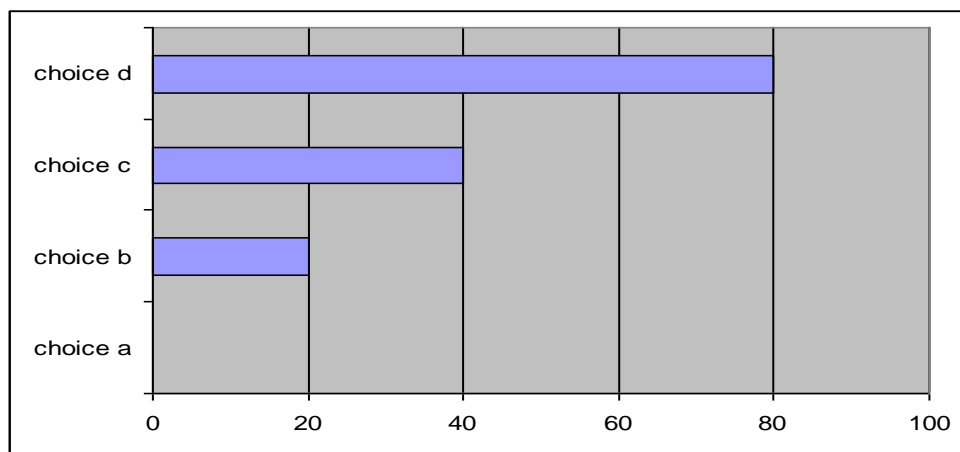
The answers to this question revealed that all of the teachers have ever met

problems when they conduct pre-writing activities in writing lessons. Not surprisingly, 80% (11/14) responded that they saw the students made much noise and kept on their personal talks in pre-writing stage. This may be accounted for the psychological matter of the students. They are, at that age, often talkative and naughty not only inside the classes. 33.33% (5/14) of all the teachers admitted that their students did not do anything, just said in the chairs and kept silent.

Six out of 14 teachers (which accounted for 46.66%) also stated that they had prepared some pre-writing activities but their students did not work effectively. This should be concluded that may be the students do not like the activities of the teachers. Besides, 40% (6/14) of all the teachers gave out some more problems in pre-writing stage they had ever met such as students slept, they looked out of the windows or leant the other subjects.

Question 4. How do you solve the problem? If you choose choice *d*. Please answer the next question.

- a. Just do nothing, let the class be.
- b. Shout at the students and punish them.
- c. Move to another parts of the lesson.
- d. Try to find out the reasons why they are not interested in the lesson and find
- e. The appropriate activities for the next lessons.



To solve the above problems, it is a good sign that 80% (11/14) of all the teachers wished to change the situation by trying to find out the problems and looked for the appropriate activities for the next class (one teacher can teach more than one class at the same grade) or the next lesson. In addition, no one did nothing and let the class be. However, 20% (3/14) admitted that they would shout at the students and punished them when they did not listen to the teacher. What is more, 40% decided that sometimes they were not patient enough to expect the ordered class and then they moved to another parts of the writing

lessons.

2. Reading professional books or journals for ideas and suggestions

All the information, ideas or suggestions taken from the professional books or journals were mentioned in details in the chapter one in this Minor Topic Paper (from page 12 to page 17)

II. TRY - OUT STAGE

STEP 3: DESIGNING STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

From the comments, ideas and suggestions from the students, colleagues, professional books or journals and my own teaching experience the author of this thesis designed the following strategies to improve the problem:

1. Preparing more than ONE suitable activities for pre-writing stage and making the writing topic easier.
2. Trying to avoid the unclear instructions and English proficiency problems
3. Making sure that students are motivated to work and be more interested in the writing lessons.
4. Trying to avoid the classroom restraints.
5. Paying more attention to less - active or quiet students and encouraging them to work.
6. Managing time well in each part of the writing lesson.

STEP 4: TRYING OUT STRATEGIES AND MAKING NOTES ON WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CLASS.

The new strategies and changes were tried out in the next practice writing lesson. All the changes and improvements or even new or bad problems after each lesson were made notes by the teacher in brief.

* *The first try-out lesson at class 11A2:*

Topic: "Describing information in a table"

- Pre-writing activities lasted for 10 minutes.
- Teacher prepared a table drawn in A0 paper, the classroom was comfortable and well-prepared.
- After the warm-up activities, the teacher presented the words and the language expressions used in describing a table with some symbols of "rise", "drop", "slightly", "Sharply"....

All these symbols were drawn on the board. Teacher checked the words by showing at the symbols and the students read the words without looking at the letters or the translation of the teacher. At the end of the stage, teacher divided the class into 3 big teams and let students play a game in which the longer sentences were emphasized such as "**the number of the literate females**

dropped sharply in 2006”, “it increased slightly”... If any team has more correct sentences, they will be the winners.

- It might be a successful lesson.

*** The second try-out lesson at class 11A3:**

Topic: “Describing information in a table”

- Pre-writing activities lasted in 10 minutes in a comfortable classroom.

- After the exciting warm up activities of a game “Word category” with the aim of presenting the new words in describing a table, the teacher showed a A0 paper with the number indicating the trends of *falling, increasing*....

The students might be successful in writing this kind of exercise because there were a large number of students repeated these expressions.

III. POST-IMPROVEMENT STAGE

STEP 5: EVALUATING THE TRY-OUT

- Three volunteer teachers were asked to observe a lesson after the trying-out stage that illustrated the changes that had been made.

- The results of class observation were used to reflect on the reasons for those changes (which could include things that were improved or that got worse).

- A survey was carried out to get information from students.

- Comments and conclusions were made.

1. Post-improvement class observation

A. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE LESSON

1. Topic for writing a paragraph:

“Write about one of the competitions for secondary school students on TV”

2. Time allowance: 10 minutes

3. Classroom observation description

Time/Activity	T’ activities	Ss’ activities	Comments
1. Warm-up (4’)	- T asked some questions such as “Do you often watch game shows on TV?” “Can you tell me the names of these competitions for secondary school students on TV?” - T showed some big pictures of the	“Yes” Road to Olympia Tuoi Doi Menh Mong, Nguoi ban gai dang men, Rung chuong vang. After looking at those pictures, students	This period is considered to be successful. After being consulted by English teachers at Hoai Duc A High School as well as conducting the two try-out lessons, teacher has withdrawn

<p>2. Pre - writing activity (10')</p> <p>3. While - writing activity (20')</p>	<p>famous game show “Road to Olympia” and asked Ss to play the game “What is this?” There are five big pictures, all are copied from the gameshow on TV. If any team can guess the name of the game at the first picture will get the highest mark. The marks will be counted backward.</p> <p>- T asked students to answer the six suggestions about the content of the game show in the textbook. All the students of the class had the chance to talk about the show before writing it.</p> <p>- Ss can discuss in groups and choose one competition to write about.</p> <p>- T asked Ss to make sentences basing on the suggestions in the textbook and practice in pairs.</p> <p>- T asked Ss to write about any competitions for</p>	<p>discovered the name of the game show was “Road to Olympia” at the second picture and the winner is group 1 in the class. The class is excited with a big applause for the winner.</p> <p>T: “What time is it on TV?”</p> <p>S: “Ten o’clock”</p> <p>“What chanel is it on?”</p> <p>“ VTV3”</p> <p>S: How long does it last?</p> <p>S: 2 hours</p> <p>S: How many parts are there in the show?</p> <p>S: four parts</p> <p>S: How many competitors are there?</p> <p>S: four</p> <p>.....</p> <p>- Students write the passage in a very good mood with the content suggested in the textbook. Some of them write</p>	<p>some reasons for the success of the period.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pre-activity is interesting. 2. Visual aids are effective enough. 3. Students cooperate better because they are acquaintances. 4. New words and structures are taught logically. 5. There is no problem with students’ misunderstanding toward teachers’ instructions.
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	secondary school students on TV. Most of them chose the show “Road to Olympia” and some chose other show such as “Not Nhạc Vui” - the singing contest.	short passage. However, some write very well - done ones	
4. Post - writing activity (10’)	- Ask Ss to work in pairs for peer correction. - T goes around to check whether Ss can correct their classmates’ writing.	- Students do the peer correction	
5. Homework (1’)	- Read your passage again, make it perfect and retell it in the next period.	- Write on the notebook.	

Bellows are some more comments about the improvement of the students in post - improvement stage:

Pre-improvement	Changes	Post-improvement
Low 30% of the students did not write because they said that the topic was boring. Some of them were forced to write basing on the suggestions in Task 1. They wrote in a bad form of letter.	Students’ motivation	Higher Most of students were eager to write after the game because they said that they liked the game so much.
More Some students tried to follow the suggestions in Task 1 in the	Ss’ mistakes on both grammar	Less Mistakes on grammar and expressions have improved a lot. There still existed some but for the whole passage they

felt confident with their writing performance accounted for 43.75% and 37.5% respectively while there was no students stated that their writing performance is very bad or bad (0%). The students' writing performance improvement should be assessed by the teacher but students' ideas toward what they have done is an important matter that we teacher should take into consideration.

Question 3: Which of the changes made by the teacher were successful?

- The teacher carried out interesting activities that made the class work well.
- The teacher provided sufficient and effective new words and sentence structures.
- The teacher encouraged the less active students to work and give helps when necessary.
- The teacher gave clear instructions.
- All of the above changes.

Question	Choice					Notes
	a	b	c	d	e	
Which of the changes made by the teacher were successful?	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	

All of the students (100%) agreed that the changes made by the teacher were successful

Question 4: a. The class is well-equipped.

- Visual aids are used effectively.
- Good class atmosphere.
- Suitable time using for the activities.
- All of the above factors.

Question	Choice					Notes
	a	b	c	d	e	
Besides, the changes from teachers, which of the following factors in pre-writing stage help you write better?	21.4%	16.1%	4.2%	7.2%	51.1%	

It can not be denied that students needed a lot of changes for the situation. That is the reason why they choose the option *e* with 51.1% of all the students. Classroom facilities are really helpful in conducting the lesson. Students can not pay attention to the lesson if the fans do not work or they can not see the board clearly because of the dim lights. Therefore, they appreciated that well-equipped classroom with 21.4% of the students may help to change the situation. It seems that students did not take care of how much time the teacher used for the pre-

writing activities because there were only 7.2% of the students thought that this may be the cause of the situation. However, teachers should be aware of the time limitation problem, because sometimes they make the class involve in the activities and they forget that they have only 5 to 10 minutes for the pre-writing activities.

IV. SUMMARY

This chapter is not only the most important but also the most interesting part of this research. It provides information on the practical study with situational analysis. Given the fact on how teachers and students at my school teach and learn writing classes, the effects of pre-writing activities on the students' writing performance, the students' ideas about the way teachers conducted these activities, teacher will realize the importance of pre-writing activities in teaching writing skill and what they should do to make the students feel more interested in their writing lessons.

PART THREE: CONCLUSION

I. Summary of the main findings

As evidenced from the previous chapters, teachers in my school stated that they ever conducted pre-writing activities but it seems that it didn't work perfectly. What these writing classes really lack is more effective pre-writing activities prepared by the teacher.

It has also been revealed from the data analysis that most teachers agreed that they ever met many difficulties when they conducted pre-writing activities and most of them chose the way of changing their method or activities with the hope that the students would be more interested in the writing lessons. Teachers also gave out some solutions to create more effective activities for pre-writing stage. They emphasized that we, teachers, should be aware of some factors that may affect the teaching writing process. These were classified into teacher - related problems, student - related problems and some external ones such as classroom restraints, time limitation.

Another important finding is that in post-improvement stage most of the students realized the changes from the teachers that made them write better. They also felt more confident when writing. This was shown in their writing performance in post - improvement stage.

II. Implications for more effective writing lessons

1. To the teachers

Choosing techniques is the day-to-day business of every writing teacher. Pre-writing activities play a very important role in writing lessons because if the

teacher conducts this stage successfully, the classroom atmosphere will change and also the students' writing performance will be much better. Therefore, the teacher should make sure that the following things are done perfectly.

First of all, preparation is necessary for English teacher in writing lessons with a list in details of activities prepared with useful language knowledge, good time management for each activity, effective visual aids usages and clear instructions giving. What is more, sometimes the writing topics in the textbook are boring, the teacher should try to make them easier to attract students' attention. One more thing is that the teacher should know how to motivate the students by changing the activities day by day or take care of the quiet students in the class.

2. To the classroom facilities

In Vietnam, it is normal that there are 40 to 50 students in a language classroom at high school. This makes the teachers meet many difficulties in conducting a language lesson. However, the situation can not be changed in a short period of time so the teacher should get over all these difficulties by making sure that the classroom facilities are comfortable enough before the lessons start.

III. Limitations and suggestions for further research

The study still has some limitations. First of all, this study is very small - scale, which focuses on only the effects of pre-writing activities on the students' writing performance so while-writing activities roles are not mentioned here. Secondly, the study basically bases on one source of data, questionnaires, which might be subjective on the side of the informants, so the researcher can not guarantee the reliability of the information collected. What is more, the area of the study is only restricted to classroom writing in the textbook published by MOET; thus, any application outside classroom context requires careful thoughts and consideration. Finally, there were still some problems that this study could *not* solve *absolutely* for during the try-out stage: The student's poor vocabularies and the insufficiency of grammar knowledge. This needs time to realize the improvement. However, the teacher should pay much attention to this goal when teaching a productive skill like writing. Hopefully that the above problems could be solved in other studies after this research in the near future.

IV. Conclusion

This study is carried out as a contribution to the knowledge of all teachers and students of English in their teaching and learning.

In previous chapters, the review of literature with theoretical backgrounds of

action research, teaching writing, factors affecting the students' writing performance are put at the beginning, the next are the study with the data analysis and findings of questionnaires in pre-improvement stage, the trying-out and the post-improvement stage. The last chapter gives recommendations to the teachers and classroom facilities.

I do hope that this study would be of some value to both teachers and students in their language teaching and learning process.

ABBREVIATIONS

MOET:	Ministry of Education and Training
Ss:	Students
T:	Teacher
S:	Student

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