

## Challenges Faced by EFL Students in Choosing Academic Words for Essay Writing

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**Abstract:** Choosing academic words to use in writing an essay is one of the big problems for EFL learners today. This study investigated this issue to understand the challenges faced by EFL learners. The purpose of this study is to clarify the difficulties in using academic words, word usage, and factors affecting the choice of academic words to use in essay writing. This research included 53 students majoring in English Studies, course 44, of a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Through 53 questionnaires and 5 interview samples, the study has collected data for analysis. As a finding, this study revealed three main problems for EFL learners. Firstly, the difficulty of an academic vocabulary has affected learners' word memorization and application of academic words in essay writing. Secondly, the way to choose effective academic words to use is to create a rich vocabulary for yourself, use it regularly and improve your self-study ability. Finally, the vocabulary level of the learners and the topic are two factors that seriously affect the choice of academic words to use and the quality of the essay. In short, this study has discovered remarkable issues about the difficulties of students in the process of choosing academic words in essay writing.

**Keywords:** academic words, challenges, writing essay, EFL learners

### 1. Introduction

Learning English may have a huge impact on us because it helps us to grow in all aspects of our life such as knowledge, work, communication, etc. EFL learners who learn and use English still have many problems to overcome and master different skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and so on. However, like other skills, writing is also an important skill and causes some challenges for learners. Of all issues related to writing, facing the difficulty in choosing academic words would be the hardest one in writing an essay.

Academic words are typically uncommon and hard to remember. However, academic words play an important role in writing. Especially, in the context of today's developed society, the development of using academic vocabulary should be promoted by learners. The use of academic words helps English learners or users express themselves better while writing, which allows the reader to easily understand or capture the writer's thoughts. This research entitled "The EFL learners' challenges of choosing academic words in writing an essay" would be essential for EFL learners. It represents one of the problems that learners face in writing an essay. For most learners, the ability to use English fluently, grammatically, and correctly has not yet been recognized. It has been assumed that a variety of academic usage in terms of vocabulary and the right choice of words in writing an essay would be highly classified for writing fluency.

According to Al-Mukdad (2019), learners have faced many difficulties in writing an essay. Some learners often use common words in communication which leads to the lack of using academic words in writing an essay. Besides, in the study of Afzal (2019), some problems with the process of learning academic vocabulary are also a problem faced by learners. Learners may have a chance to learn English academic vocabulary but only at the surface level, not deep learning. Especially, learners only know one or some meanings of a word, but rather do not know how to use it in other cases. Therefore, using academic words is not commonly utilized by writers. The language users may encounter the situation of expressing or using the phrase or words in the wrong context or with different collocations (Ashraf et al., 2020). Finally, academic words are not commonly used because academic words are hard to remember, and require good writing skills and high learner awareness.

Based on the above, this research helps learners recognize the challenges of choosing academic words. From there, learners will have a better awareness of learning and using academic words. In addition, learners will easily detect and improve their problems. This study also hopes that learners can overcome the problems of choosing academic words to achieve good quality in essay writing.

The aim of this study was clearly expressed through three questions:

1. What difficulties do EFL learners have in choosing academic words in essay writing?
2. How to make EFL learners choose effective academic words in essay writing?

### 3. How does the use of academic words affect EFL learners in essay writing?

This study explored three main issues encountered by EFL learners including difficulties in using academic words, how to choose academic vocabulary to use, and factors affecting the choice of academic words in essay writing. This study explores the problems of using academic vocabulary in essay writing that EFL learners encounter. Al-Mukdad (2019) has researched that students' awareness and vocabulary richness are some of the factors affecting the learning and use of academic vocabulary. Since then, we can see that using academic words in essay writing brings many benefits to learners. Learners have a rich academic vocabulary also means that learners with professional qualifications can easily read scientific books and refer to many other sources.

## 2. Literature review

In previous research articles, researchers have studied the problems of choosing academic words in essay writing. This is one of the challenges for EFL learners. The problem involves many aspects such as writing, essay writing, academic words in writing, and challenges in choosing academic words in essay writing.

### 2.1. Writing

Writing is a way of using language to convey information between a writer and a reader. This is also considered a way of indirect communication with each other. Moreover, according to research by Crossley and McNamara (2012), writing is also considered a language skill because writing requires skills of coherent expression, rich vocabulary, and professionalism for the reader to understand the writer's content.

Thereby, writing plays an important role in language expressions because this is one of the ways to retain the language and pass on knowledge to future generations through books, newspapers, etc. In addition, writing is also a form of expressing the writer's level by helping readers feel deeply about the written content.

### 2.2. Essay writing

According to Ibnian (2011), the essay is a short literary piece about a topic that expresses a personal viewpoint. The structure of the essay has three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. In addition, the essay is divided into many categories such as the expository essay, the descriptive essay, the argumentative essay, and the narrative essay.

Regarding the challenges of EFL learners in essay writing, Toba et al (2019) discovered several problems. Firstly, the problems faced by learners are mainly about content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Secondly, these problems stem from students' lack of knowledge, practice, motivation, perception, and the process of acquiring knowledge from teachers.

### 2.3. Academic words in writing

Academic words are words that are more complex than common words in terms of meaning and word structure. Moreover, the word academic is used in different fields, which can appear in books, newspapers, magazines, etc. According to Baumann and Graves (2010), academic vocabulary is divided into two categories: domain-specific academic vocabulary and general academic vocabulary. Besides, research by Alhojailan (2019) has shown that academic words are rarely used in essay writing. However, the use of academic words plays an important role in expressing the level and quality of writing.

### 2.4. Challenges in choosing academic words in essay writing

To complete good essay writing, learners need to ensure the elements of vocabulary and writing skills. Besides, learners need to pay attention to other influencing factors such as the problems of using academic words in essay writing, how to choose effective academic words, and factors affecting the selection of academic words in essay writing.

#### 2.4.1. Difficulties in using academic words in essay writing

Al-Mukdad (2019) researched AIU<sup>1</sup> students' perspectives on difficulties in academic writing, students encountered many problems. Research has shown that one of the problems of learners is that students lack awareness of academic writing and have poor academic performance. Besides, regarding student learning and practice, research data from Ratnawati et al. (2018) have shown a lack of academic writing in classroom practice. In addition to the book resources, students were looking forward to having more electronic databases in the new. Particularly, this study also found that students are also very bored with the traditional way of

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<sup>1</sup>Arab International University

providing materials. Thus, the students want to learn more flexibly through e-databases such as videos, exercises, links, and so on. Academic vocabulary is words that are more difficult to remember than ordinary words and are rarely used in everyday communication. Therefore, the study of Afzal (2019) demonstrated the challenges of EFL learners on problems related to academic vocabulary such as memorizing new academic vocabulary, learning new vocabulary, and using academic words in speaking and writing. In addition, the problem of the lack of vocabulary in learners' academic writing and the use of informal language was also mentioned in the study of Ahmed (2019) and Ashraf et al. (2020).

#### **2.4.2. How to choose effective academic words in essay writing**

Looking at previous studies on choosing academic vocabulary to use, there are many ways to choose vocabulary effectively. However, enriching academic vocabulary is an important thing for EFL learners. According to Al-Mukdad (2019), motivation is considered an important factor to promote the learning process. Tan and Goh (2020) also offer a method for teaching academic vocabulary through Kahoot! This has significantly contributed to supporting students in terms of improving academic vocabulary, improving scores, and a practical approach to effective learning. Besides, Şenel (2018) has studied the use of SCAMPER<sup>2</sup> technology to help students think creatively to develop vocabulary and improve their writing ability. the study of Fazilatfar et al. (2018) aimed to help EFL learners become aware of the core issues of citation and avoidance of plagiarism. Thus, from these studies, learners can refer to them to learn and improve the effective use of academic words in essay writing.

#### **2.4.3. Factors affecting the choice of academic words to use in essay writing**

The score was one of the factors that influence the selection from academic to quality articles. The study of Alhojailan (2019) showed a correlation between grades and academic vocabulary. To apply academic words effectively in the assignment, students were proactive in using academic words and strategically chose academic vocabularies from books, experience, BBC listening practice, etc. Furthermore, the study of Maamuujav (2021) has identified lexical features and grasped the vocabulary challenges for students studying L2 in essay writing. Through the data analysis, it was found that the importance of knowledge and level of vocabulary has a great influence on the quality of essay writing. Besides, Al-Mukdad (2019) has found that student motivation and awareness are important factors to help motivate students to improve their academic vocabulary to achieve high quality in academic writing.

### **3. Research methodology**

The study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods with an interview and a questionnaire. The study site is a campus of a large university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The researcher desired that the data collected from the research tools answer the following questions:

1. What difficulties do EFL learners have in choosing academic words in essay writing?
2. How to make EFL learners choose effective academic words in essay writing?
3. How does the use of academic words affect EFL learners in essay writing?

The structured interview was conducted with 5 participants via phone call to collect qualitative data. The interviewees were selected at random and given their informed consent. The questionnaire with 53 participants obtained significant data across 30 items. The content of the external questionnaire revolves around problems in essay writing. This is including the participants' general information, how to learn academic vocabulary, the problems students encountered, and solutions to overcome. Most of the questions are designed in the form of closed-ended multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions to easily collect and synthesize data.

To obtain the desired data, the researcher piloted research tools including one-person interviews and questionnaire surveys with 11 random participants. However, the pilot results showed that the interview data obtained was less than predicted. Most of the answers were unsatisfactory, the question did not go into the heart of the problem, and it was necessary to add more questions to obtain the necessary information for the data. In contrast, the questionnaire was quite successful because the collected data source was complete and met the desired requirements. Therefore, the modifications included adding some questions about influencing factors and the role of using academic words in essay writing. After adjusting the pilot study, the interview completed a total of 15 questions and conducted formal data collection.

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<sup>2</sup>SCAMPER: Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to other use, Eliminate, Reverse

The official participants of the study included EFL learners from 53 fourth-year students, majoring in English Studies, from two classes of a large university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Most of the participating students have completed the academic writing courses and they have a basic to advanced level of English.

During the formal data collection process, quantitative data is collected via an online form based on Google Form. Qualitative data were collected by phone call, recording, and with the permission of interview participants. After that, the interview data was carried out for meta-analysis. For interview data, the study uses the analytical method of Nguyen's (2018) technique of unfolding the matrix. Then, coded extracts would be classified into themes for reporting the findings. On the other hand, quantitative data is aggregated and analyzed in the form of graphs and tables. The responses were divided into percentages based on the problem results of the question.

#### 4. Findings

This section contains investigation data to answer research questions about the challenges faced by EFL learners in choosing academic words to use in essay writing. The research findings will be described and analyzed from the collected data from interviews and questionnaires. These data will clarify research issues including the difficulties in choosing academic words, how to choose effective academic words, and the impacts of using academic words in essay writing.

##### 4.1 Difficulties in using academic words in essay writing

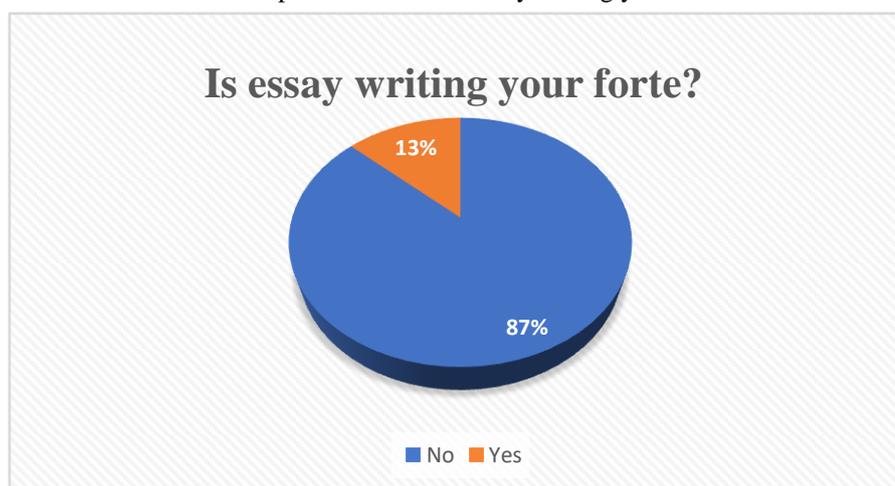
From two research tools structured interview and a questionnaire, the study found the problems faced by the participants in using AW in essay writing. First, both qualitative and quantitative data describe that essay writing was not the strength of most participants. The findings can be found in 9 extract codes as 9T01D, 69T02D, 220T04, 279T05, 81T02D, 153T03D, 159T03D, 232T04D, 288T05D. Specifically, the extracts are shown as follows:

“I have taken many writing courses. If I say strength, it's not quite right because it's just enough for me to complete the writing modules quite well. When writing, I am confident about the layout and how to develop my ideas in the essay.” – 9T01D

“Having studied it, writing an essay is not my forte because essay writing requires a high degree of logic, choose academic vocabulary and it is important to have an idea for the essay.” – 279T05D

Similarly, items 8 of the questionnaire also show the strengths of EFL learners in essay writing. The data is shown in graph 1.

Graph 1: Items 8 – Is essay writing your forte?



Graph 1 shows that the majority of students with strengths in essay writing account for a very small percentage, only 13% (n=53). The remaining 87% of students have no strength in essay writing. This proves that students have encountered many difficulties in essay writing.

However, one of the problems learners encounter in essay writing is academic vocabulary. Many reasons are leading to difficulties in learning and using academic words, the research finds the reasons from the above 9 extract codes. Some extracts express that academic vocabulary is more difficult to remember than general words, is rarely used, easy to forget, and takes a long time to learn.

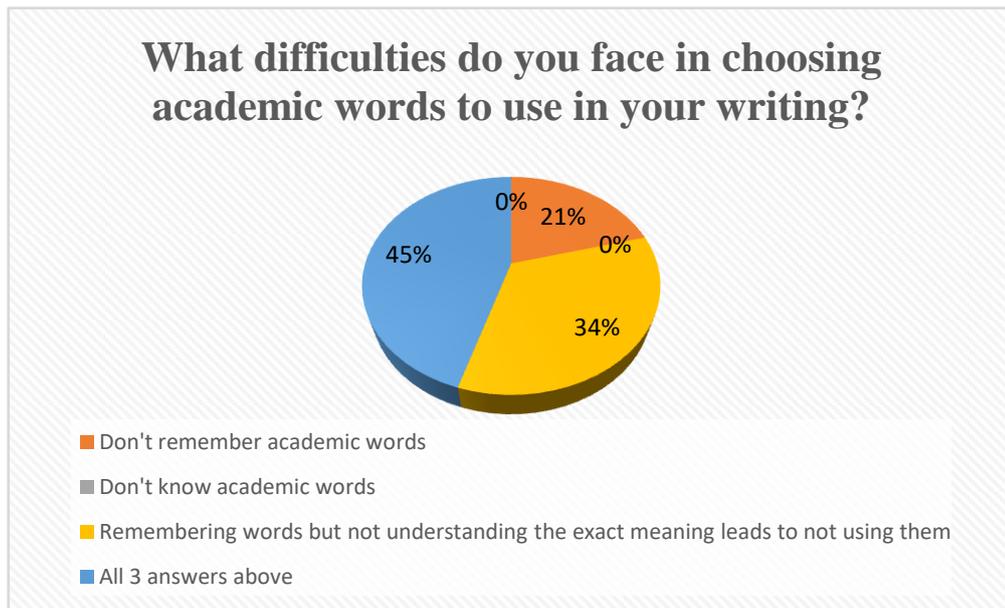
“When I learn academic vocabulary, it is harder to remember than normal words, so I often put it in context and have to find synonyms at a lower level to help me remember words more easily than academic.” - 81T02D

“I don't have a rich academic vocabulary. Therefore, it is difficult to choose academic words when writing an essay.”- 153T03D

“Learning academic vocabulary takes time because it is often difficult to remember. Besides, it's not used often, so it's easy to forget.” - 232T04D

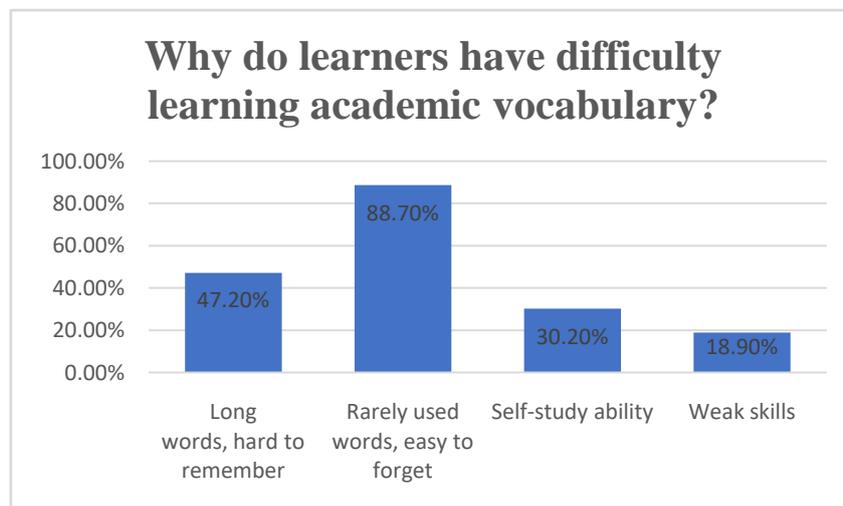
Furthermore, the study also discovered some difficult problems for learners, which are shown in items 15,16, and presented in graphs 2 and 3.

Graph 2. Items 15 - What difficulties do you face in choosing academic words to use in your writing?



Through the data obtained from graph 2, the findings can be found about the learners' difficulty in choosing academic words to use in essay writing that 45% (n=53) of learners do not remember academic words, do not know academic words, and do not remember the exact meaning of words. academic word. Besides, 34% of the participants did not remember the exact academic word. Twenty-one percent of participants do not remember academic words well.

Graph 3. Items 16 - Why do learners have difficulty learning academic vocabulary?



Academic words that are rarely used, and easy to forget account for the highest rate with 88.70% of participants. In contrast, weak skills in learning academic vocabulary account for the lowest proportion with 18.70% of participants.

From the data of the graphs and interviews, the research can answer the difficulties faced by EFL learners are (1) learners do not have strengths in essay writing that are considered among the greatest difficulties, although learners have learned through writing courses, (2) learners have problems of not having the rich academic vocabulary, difficult academic words, rarely used academic words, and not remembering the exact word that leads to difficulty in choosing words to use in essay writing, (3) the biggest reason learners encounter is that academic words are rarely used, leading to easy forgetting.

#### 4.2 How to choose effective academic words in essay writing

To write a quality essay, the writer must have a rich academic vocabulary. First, to have the choice of academic words in essay writing must refer to the learner's vocabulary learning. Next, what learners need to do to be effective in essay writing. Finally, a matter of concern is the writer's habit of using academic words. To find out about these issues researchers conducted surveys to collect data from interviews and questionnaires. Findings are shown in code extracts and graphs.

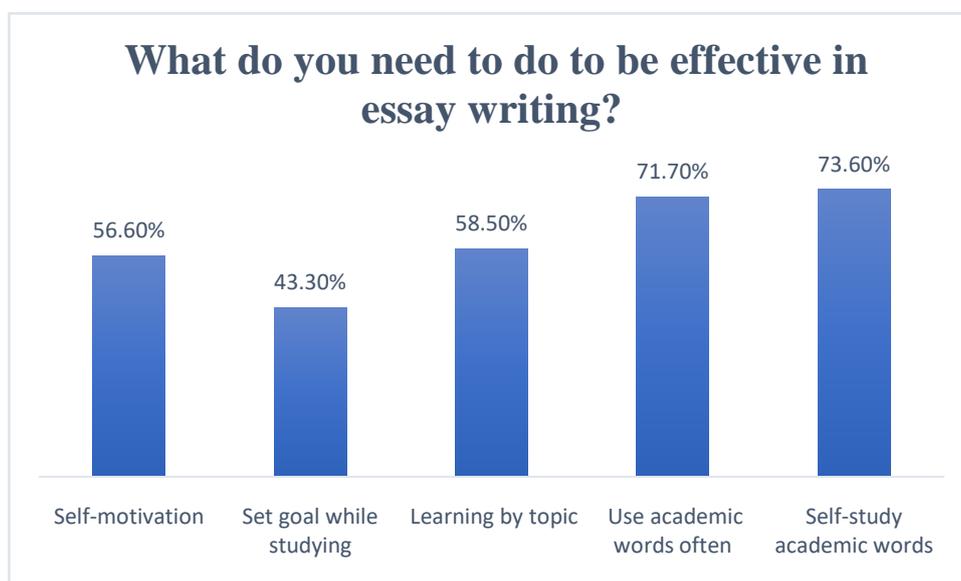
Through code extracts research has discovered how participants learn and use academic words. Participants express:

“Should choose academic words suitable for the context, avoid repeating words, use synonymy combinations.” - 49T01H.

“I learn from academics thanks to the Internet, I often like to watch videos of foreign teachers, they share very specific and easy to understand. Every day, I will try to add at least 5 vocabulary words including academic words and common vocabulary.” – 87T02H,

“I have learned from scientific research papers, essays from Ielts books, and some other materials from class.” - 239T04H.

Graph 4. Items 22 - What do you need to do to be effective in essay writing?

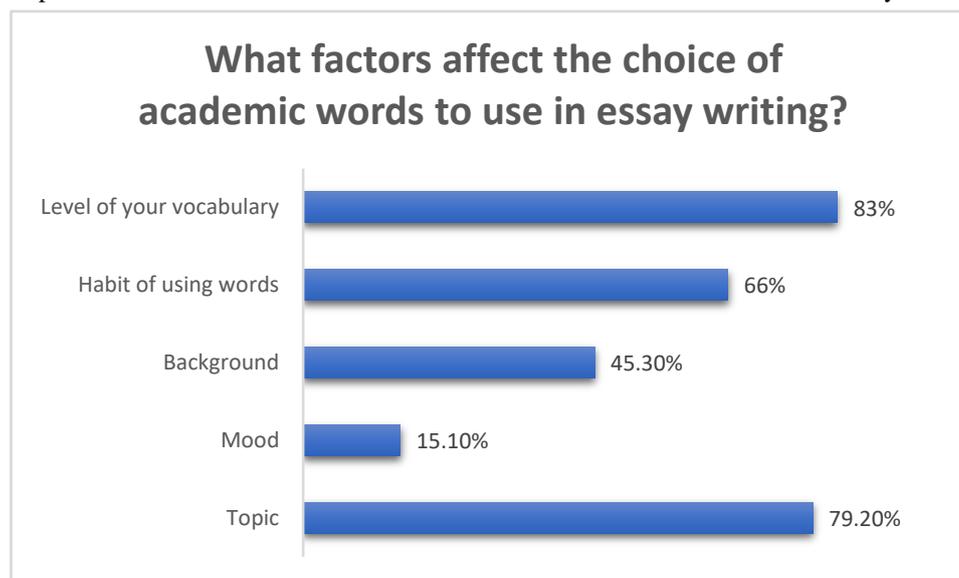


Nevertheless, in item 22 in the questionnaire, the study illustrates through graph 3 what learners need to do to be effective in essay writing. The percentage of participants choosing self-study academic words reaches the highest with 73.60% (n=53) of the total participants. In addition, regular academic word usage also takes the second-highest place with 71.70% of participants. Besides, learning by topic is also among the top three things learners need to do to achieve effectiveness in essay writing with 58.50% of participants. This is one of the most influential things to complete a good essay writing that learners need to study to have a rich academic words vocabulary and use it effectively.

#### 4.3 Factors affecting the choice of academic words to use in essay writing

Through interview data, the study found the factors that affect the choice of academic words in essay writing. EFL learners mention the following “That's the level of your vocabulary. If I have a rich vocabulary, I can write a more professional article.” - 190T03A, “In my view, the topic influencing factors are the ability to remember, the impact environment, and the topic factors.” - 308T05A. The results show that the most prominent problem is the level of your vocabulary and topic.

Graph 5. Items 20. What factors affect the choice of academic words to use in essay writing?



The questionnaire also found similar results in item 20. Graph 5 shows that the majority of learners answered about the influencing factors like level of their vocabulary (83%), topic (79.20%), and habit of using words (66%), respectively. However, the level of your vocabulary is considered the most important factor because if learners do not have a high vocabulary, in any subject they will not achieve good quality in terms of professionalism in essay writing.

Besides, the study explores the role factors that also make an important contribution for learners to make progress in essay writing. When learners use academic words, it will help learners improve their scores and show professionalism through the interviewer's mention "Regarding the role, the word academic shows the author's solemnity, professionalism as well as the careful investment of the" author. Moreover, it helps to get good scores." - 246T04R. On the other hand, in item 19 of the questionnaire, the role of using academic words in essay writing is to demonstrate the quality of writing (83%) and to expand vocabulary (83%).

## 5. Discussions

From the two research tools, results are revealed through qualitative and quantitative analysis of difficult issues, how to choose academic words to use, and the factors influencing the choice of academic words to use in essay writing. One of the outstanding problems found was that the majority of 87% (n=53) students were not strong in essay writing. They have many problems using academic English words in essay writing, especially the problem of difficult academic words, rarely used, so their vocabulary is limited. Moreover, the ability to self-study plays a huge role in supplementing the academic vocabulary to use. The level of your vocabulary is the biggest influence on the choice of academic words in essay writing.

As a result of difficulty learning and using academic words, the study found some similarities with several other earlier studies. Learners who have problems remembering words but not remembering meanings (34% of participants) and take a long time to learn are mentioned in the interview data which was also found in the previous study by Afzal (2019). In addition, when talking about strengths in academic writing, the study of Al-Mukdad (2019) also mentioned the lack of background knowledge about academic writing among students of Arab International University.

Regarding students' cognitive issues in academic writing skills, Ratnawati et al. (2018) did previous research. For this study, the low skill level of students was also shown but at a low rate, only 18.60% (n=53) in all students. In particular, in the study of Ahmed (2019), it was also found that students' problems are little vocabulary knowledge, and lack of practice. Regarding the similarity in the influence of academic words in essay writing, the study also found a similarity in the research. specifically, in terms of the impact of motivational factors, also mentioned in the study of Al-Mukdad (2019). Besides, the study of Ashraf et al. (2020) also reported on issues of academic words such as vocabulary and topic ability.

In addition, acquiring a wide vocabulary requires learners to increase their study efforts and practice regularly. Participants also mentioned the problem of developing vocabulary to have a choice of academic words in essay writing through interviews and questionnaires. The majority of participants mentioned “Should invest in learning academic words through dictionaries and lectures on the internet to enrich the vocabulary and apply it to writing more effectively.” - 60T01E, “I think to learn and use it effectively, you need to improve yourself more and teachers provide more academic materials for students.” - 269T04E. Besides, learning methods were also mentioned by participants in the effective use of academic words such as “I think you should find the most suitable learning methods and means for yourself.” - 210T03E. In addition to trying to learn and practice on their own, students also mentioned their teachers about teaching methods as follows: "I hope that teachers will provide, guide, and spend certain lessons to focus on supplement knowledge about academic vocabulary, especially writing modules.". In this regard, previous studies by Tan and Goh (2020) also compared two methods of direct vocabulary learning and random vocabulary learning to find an effective method for learners. On the other hand, the study of Ashraf et al. (2020) also suggested methods for students to improve academic writing. Moreover, the research of Şenel (2018) also used a technology method SCAMPER to apply to learners about creative writing ability to improve academic vocabulary.

However, unlike previous studies, the ability to self-study academic vocabulary in this study is considered by the majority of participants as one of the factors that have a great impact on the quality of writing. This is as well as the ability to choose academic words to use in essay writing. One of the things learners need to do the most is self-study academic vocabulary because only by perseverance in learning, the vocabulary richness will increase. As a result, learners can easily express their language in essay writing, show their professional level, impress readers and achieve high scores.

## 6. Conclusions

This study from 53 students majoring in English Studies at a university in Vietnam clearly shows the problems EFL learners have with choosing academic words to use in essay writing. Through research methods, the survey was completed with the main content on difficulties, choosing words to use, and factors affecting the choice of academic words in essay writing.

The majority of learners' difficulties in this regard are that academic writing is not their forte. Besides, academic vocabulary is considered difficult to remember and rarely used. Therefore, in the process of writing essays, learners have trouble choosing academic words to use because they do not remember the exact words and have little vocabulary.

The way to choose effective academic vocabulary to use in essay writing is to self-study academic vocabulary and use it often. This can be said to be the most effective way because only by improving your vocabulary can you easily choose academic vocabulary to use in essay writing. Academic vocabulary is an important component in essay writing, but the ability to create your vocabulary is a prerequisite for choosing the right vocabulary to use. Therefore, learners should motivate themselves to enrich their vocabulary and achieve high efficiency in writing.

Through the investigation, the vocabulary level of oneself and the topic are two factors that greatly influence the choice of academic words in essay writing. According to research from the data collection process, the lexical level factor is always appreciated in all cases because academic vocabulary helps learners express ideas professionally and impressively deeply to the reader and show the quality of the article. Especially, if EFL learners have a wide vocabulary, the topic is no longer a problem for learners.

On the whole, this study brings great meaning to the reader through the above issues and helps the reader to grasp the core issues of the challenges of academic vocabulary selection in essay writing by EFL learners.

## 7. Limitations and suggestions

Research has highlighted the problems EFL learners face with academic vocabulary in essay writing. However, this study still has some limitations. Firstly, in the context of the Covid-19 epidemic, research data cannot be collected directly from students but must be collected online. Therefore, in the process of interviewing the participants encountered some difficulties. For example, the progress of data collection was slower than

anticipated because busy participants could not join immediately. Secondly, the number of participants is still small. As expected, the participants in the study were 70 students in two English Studies classes, course 44, but in the end, the number only reached 53 members. Finally, this research area is not as wide as other studies.

Hopefully, new researchers in the future will overcome such limitations. At the same time, new studies will delve deeper into this issue and propose methods to promote the learning process and apply academic vocabulary to essay writing more proficiently. Besides, in addition to studying this issue, researchers should also pay more attention to other aspects of language that affect EFL learners.

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