

# Student writing process, perceptions, problems, and strategies in writing academic essays in a second language: A case study

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*Received 19 May 2008*

**Abstract.** When studying in Australia, international students in general and Vietnamese students in particular meet many difficulties, one of which is writing academic essays/assignments in English. The current case study, applying the cognitivist view, aims at exploring the problems as well as the process of writing academic assignments of a particular Vietnamese student studying at an Australian university. Based on the coding scheme applied by Cumming [1989] and Boshier [1998], the study specifically addresses three major questions: (1) How does the student perceive the requirements of the academic essay? (2) What does he actually do in the process of writing? (3) What are the problems he encounters and strategies he used during the process of writing the essay in English? Data relevant for the study was collected by means of in-depth interviews, stimulated recall, and interpretation of the student's written products. Data analysis has shown that the subject did not pay much attention to grammatical errors or spelling mistakes and he met many problems and used a lot of strategies to solve them.

## 1. Introduction

Second language (L2) composition research and teaching have developed and matured to a great extent for the last few decades (Roca de Larios, Murphy & Marin [1]). L2 composition specialists have found guidance, however, in first language (L1) composition research, which has a history dating to the early 1900 (Haynes, 1978, as cited in Krapels [2]). After the mid twentieth century, L1 composition research in English-

speaking countries changed its attention from examining the effects of some pedagogical treatment on student writers' products to exploring the act of writing (Krapels [2]). Later in 1971, Emig's L1 writing research was the first major study to officially signal the shift in composition research from product to process (Krapels [2]).

A similar shift can be observed in the field of L2 composition research and practice. From the socio-cultural context where the writer writes and learns to write and the text the writer produces, L2 writing research has shifted its focus of concern to the acts of thinking the writer engages in to produce the

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text (Cumming [3]). The process movement, according to Roca de Larios, Murphy, and Marin [1], originated from the belief that for teaching L2 writing effectively the teaching procedures should be based on a theory that accounted for what student writers actually did in the process of composing a text.

The current study aims at exploring the problems as well as the process of writing academic assignments of a particular Vietnamese ESL student studying at an Australian university. It is significant because studying at Australian universities, ESL students meet quite a few problems writing essays, reports, assignments, etc. in English as they not only have to write in another language, English, but come up with strange patterns and conventions of academic written discourse in a new university culture (Ballard and Clanchy [4]).

Although this study was carried out as a case study, it is hoped that its findings can help other Vietnamese students studying at Australian universities to be aware of how one of their peers copes with writing academic assignments in English. Also, the study may provide ESL support unit with some implications if they are to help Vietnamese ESL students with their academic writing.

## 2. Literature review

As mentioned earlier, composing process has been a major focus of L2 writing research for the last several decades. Researchers have investigated different aspects of L2 composing process for different groups of participants. Based on L1 writing models, they have compared L2 skilled and unskilled writers or considered L2 writing skill as a continuum of abilities evolving at different rates (Roca de Larios, Murphy and Marin

[1]). There are also studies comparing L1 and L2 composing behaviours to examine the transfer of writing abilities across languages, or analyzing the relationship between writing ability and L2 proficiency (Roca de Larios, Murphy and Marin [1]).

This section, however, will not attempt to review all of the literature on L2 composing process. Of interest to this particular study are those studies which examine the writers' micro cognitive processes while composing in English and give insights into the problems and solutions of the writers. This section will firstly review some key studies in this field. After that it will discuss what the studies have found. Also, it will show the gaps in the literature and how the present study can fit in.

## 3. Review of the studies

One of the earliest investigations is carried out by Zamel [5]. Adopting the case study approach, the researcher analyzed in detail observational data collected while six advanced ESL students were writing a "course-related writing task" (Zamel [5]). Although the students were encouraged to spend as much time as necessary to complete the task, it took them from four to eighteen hours to write several drafts. Among the six students, four were identified as "skilled" and two as "unskilled" based on the "holistic assessments" of experienced readers (p.172). Instead of "think aloud" protocols, the most effective way to investigate the writing process (p.169), Zamel interviewed the students and observed their composing behaviours because "there is some doubt about the extent to which verbalizing aloud one's thoughts while writing simulated the real composing situation" (p.169).

On the contrary, adopting the methods employed in L1 process writing studies and adapting Perl's [6] coding scheme, Raimes [7] examined concurrent think-aloud data collected from eight unskilled ESL students while they were writing a narrative during 65 minutes. Data for the study was also gathered from the results of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency, holistic scores on the essay, and answers to a 12-page questionnaire.

In another study, Kelly [8], again using the participants' think-aloud protocol data, investigated the composing processes of nine advanced ESL learners from seven different L1s. The study followed the design adopted by Zamel [5] and Raimes [7] and adapted the coding system from Perl [6]. Although similar techniques (concurrent think-aloud protocols) were used, the nature of the writing task given to the subjects was changed. The writing task assigned to the subjects was expository in nature. Kelly's results corresponded to a fairly great extent with those of other researchers writing about the same time or a little later.

A much larger scale study was one by Cumming [9] which investigated the English writing processes of 23 French-speaking college students using their written texts and think-aloud data. The study had some notable characteristics. First, it used multivariate statistical analyses, which was made possible by the relatively large sample size. Second, the students' writing processes for three different tasks (letter writing, summary, and argumentation, one to three hours each) were compared. Moreover, the study introduced controlled variables of L1 writing expertise and L2 writing proficiency. Depending on the subjects' decision statements in the think-aloud protocols,

Cumming investigated the four aspects of writing (language use, discourse organization, gist, and procedure for writing) the students attended to in the writing process. Five types of problem-solving behaviours including heuristic searches with and without resolution, problem resolution, problem identification, and knowledge telling were also focused on.

Similarly, Boshier [10] compared the L2 writing processes of three Southeast Asian ESL college students with different educational backgrounds. While adapting the coding scheme from Cumming [9], Boshier used a technique which was not only different from Cumming but also different from other researchers. Stimulated retrospective protocols gathered from the subjects who recalled their composing processes while watching their own videotaped writing behaviours were used as alternative data to think-aloud protocols. Participants' written texts were also analyzed.

Roca de Larios, Murphy, and Manchon [11] carried out two small case studies, again applying think-aloud protocols collected from the participants while writing, to examine the restructuring process where the writers look for "an alternative syntactic plan once the writer predicts, anticipates, or realizes that the original plan is not going to be satisfactory for a variety of linguistic, ideational or textual reasons" (Roca de Larios, Murphy and Manchon [11]). Unlike other studies reviewed above, the study by Roca de Larios, Murphy and Manchon focused on the particular writing strategy of restructuring which, according to the researchers, received not much attention in research on composing process.

More recently, Sasaki [12] carried out a rather large-scale study on the writing

processes of two groups of Japanese EFL learners (34 in total): an expert writer group of 12 learners and a novice writer group with 22 college students. The method was similar to the one used in Boshier [10] in that the subjects produced recall protocols while watching their videotaped writing behaviours; however, the participants could choose the language in which they produced the protocols. Also, the study adopted a different coding scheme specifically developed for this type of data. Besides think-aloud protocols, the data included the participants' written texts, their pausing behaviours while writing, and analytical scores given to the written texts.

#### **4. Findings of the studies**

The above studies investigating part of or the entire process of L2 writing commonly have reached to some conclusions. Firstly, unskilled L2 writers are similar to unskilled L1 writers in that they tend to plan less and revise more at the word and phrase level (e.g., Zamel [5]; Raimes [7]; Roca de Larios, Murphy and Manchon [11]; Sasaki [12]). Secondly, unskilled L2 writers are different from L1 counterparts in that they are less concerned about surface level revisions and more committed to the given assignment (e.g., Raimes [7]; Sasaki [12]). Besides, skilled L2 writers are similar to skilled L1 writers in that they have the tendency to plan more, revise more at the discourse level, and spend more time finding the most effective way to do the task (e.g., Zamel [5]; Kelly [8]; Cumming [9]; Roca de Larios, Murphy & Manchon [11]; Sasaki [12]). Also, composing proficiency which is independent of L2 proficiency appears to have influence on L2

writing (e.g., Raimes [7]; Cumming [9]; Boshier [10]). Lastly, learners' attention patterns and their problem-solving behaviours are different depending on their L1 writing expertise and the type of tasks they have to do (e.g., Cumming [9]).

#### **5. Limitations of the studies**

Although the above studies have provided useful insights into the writing process of ESL students, they are not without limitations. Firstly, except for the study by Zamel [5], all the described studies depend on the controlled conditions of most process studies, requiring the participants to compose about an artificial topic for a predetermined amount of time. This may result in writing that is not truly representative of the writing most students do most often. Writing in controlled conditions implies "a composing process that is radically different from the process each of us undergoes in the course of our normal writing" (Freedman and Pringle [13], p. 312). Secondly, the studies (apart from Zamel [5]; Boshier [10]; Sasaki [12]) exclusively use think-aloud protocols as the main data source. Although collecting concurrent verbal data can provide real-time data on the writing processes (Ericson and Simon [14]; Gass and Mackey [15]), this method presents some inherent problems (Sasaki [12]). It is very difficult for some participants to produce think-aloud data while writing in L2, especially when they are asked to speak in L2 (Raimes [7]; Sasaki [12]). Also, there is some doubt about the extent to which verbalizing aloud one's thoughts while writing simulates the real composing situation (Zamel [5]). Moreover, the fact that

our study investigates the writing process of an ESL students writing his real academic assignment in a long period of time makes think-aloud protocols almost impossible to conduct. Last but not least, a preliminary investigation of ESL writing research has revealed that few studies pay attention to Vietnamese ESL learners while writing.

Bearing these limitations in mind, we conducted the present study to explore the writing process of a Vietnamese ESL university student studying at an Australian university while composing his real academic essay with the hope that it will make a very little contribution to the current writing process research.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1. *The subject and his writing task*

The subject involved in this study is a second-year Vietnamese student of Architecture. Hai (not his real name) spent one year taking the foundation course at Trinity College before entering the University of Melbourne to study Architecture. Besides English, he can use Japanese quite fluently. Hai appeared to be suitable for the study because at the time to begin the study Hai had to write his 2000-word assignment for the subject called "Asian Architecture B: China, Korea, Japan". He was given a handout with eight topics for the assignment and had to choose one to write about. In addition, he was pleased to take part in our investigation.

### 6.2. *Approach of the study*

Adopting the case study approach of the qualitative tradition, the study aims at exploring how this particular ESL student

cope with writing his academic essay in English. The study specifically addresses three major questions: (1) How does the student perceive the requirements of the academic essay? (2) What does he actually do in the process of writing? (3) What are the problems and strategies he uses to solve the problems during the process of writing the essay in English?

The study adopted the post-positivist tradition and case study as the general approach for some reasons. To begin with, the study aims to explore the subject's writing process in real conditions, corresponding to the purpose of qualitative research which is to "explore, explain, or describe the phenomenon of interest" (Marshall and Rossman [16]) in "natural settings" (Denzin and Lincoln [17]). Moreover, the study is not "theory building" (Stake [18]) and does not try to generalize the findings, which makes the qualitative case study a suitable approach to follow according to Nunan [19]. Also, our subject's problems and perceptions typify the abstract and unquantifiable nature of data from a qualitative study (Merriam [20]). For this very reason, the case study design which can provide insights as well as result in a "rich and holistic account of a phenomenon" (Merriam [20]) in real-life situations proves to be appropriate. Last but not least, the case study approach is particularly appropriate if researchers are interested in process (Merriam [20]). That is the reason why many studies investigating the process of ESL writing (Zamel [21]; Zamel [5]; Raimes [7]; Kelly [8]; Jones and Tetroe [22]; Silva [23]; Sanei [24]; Boshier [10]) have adopted the case study design.

### 6.3. *Data collection*

Data relevant for the study was collected by means of in-depth interviews, stimulated

recall, and interpretation of the student's written products. It is realized that each of the three techniques has its own strengths and weaknesses; however, if triangulated with other techniques, they can provide extensive data to produce understanding of the entity being investigated.

The data procedure started with the subject being interviewed to probe his experiences in writing essays in English as well as to uncover his problems of writing academic essays in general. Right after the subject finished writing, another interview was conducted to get information on the student's writing process as well as the aspects the subject paid attention to when writing.

Secondly, his plans of writing and his first draft were examined. Interpreting these documents was the supplementary method to triangulate with other two methods of data collection. The documents were used later as stimulus for follow-up recalls. Also, the information gained from the interpretation of the writing could lead to more understanding of the writing process. It was decided that only the first draft of the student's writing was examined because Hai revealed that he always went through revision stage with one of his friends.

Two stimulated recalls were carried out. During the first recall session, the student looked at the topic paper provided by his lecturer and reflected on any perceptions of the requirements of the assignment. Right after the student finished writing, another recall session was administered to reveal more about the process of his writing as well as any problems he had during this process. The recall also uncovered the solutions the subject used to overcome his problems.

The interviews and stimulated recall sessions were conducted in English and were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis

purposes. These two techniques were piloted with another Vietnamese student before they were used with the subject of the study. We also had two informal talks with Hai in Vietnamese before and after he wrote the paper to get information about himself and to make clear some points.

#### *6.4. Questions for the interviews and the coding scheme for data analysis*

The first interview was conducted in an unstructured way with no fixed questions. The second interview was structured in nature with prepared questions adapted from Boshier [10]. The questions used in Boshier's study appeared to be detailed and could provide relatively comprehensive information on the subject's process of writing. To explore the aspects of writing focused in the writing process, the coding scheme was adapted from Cumming [9]. More details of the coding scheme can be found in Appendix A.

More data of the writing process as well as the problems while writing and strategies to deal with these problems were collected during stimulated recalls. The subject's responses were categorized according to what strategies he employed to help generate a solution to a perceived problem in his writing. Cumming's coding system was used in this study because Cumming is considered to be a notable theorist in the field (Sasaki [12]). The coding scheme was applied in Boshier [10] and seemed to produce desirable results. As for us, the coding scheme was easy to follow and convenient to analyze the data. Explanation of the coding scheme is provided in Appendix B.

In short, following three principles of data collection including multiple sources of evidence or triangulation, a case study

database, and a chain of evidence (Yin [25]) and adopting a systematic and comprehensive data analysis scheme has helped increase the reliability and validity of the study.

## 7. Results

The data collected were analyzed and interpreted under four major headings: the subject's experiences and problems when writing essays in English, his perceptions of the requirements of this particular essay, the process of writing the assignment, and the problems arising during the process of writing this essay and strategies to deal with them. The techniques of data collection supplemented and triangulated one another to produce the results of the study.

### *Hai's experiences and problems when writing academic assignments.*

Although the research questions do not include the subject's experiences and problems when writing academic essays in general, it is worthwhile to know whether the subject is experienced or skilled in academic writing or not. The reason is that other studies have revealed there are differences between skilled and unskilled writers. We would like to see if the subject has any characteristics of the skilled or unskilled writers to compare our findings with ones of other studies. In addition, it is good to uncover whether Hai's problems when writing this essays are the same as the problems he usually encounters when writing in general.

The first interview showed that Hai did not have much experience in academic writing as during the first year at the university he had to write only one essay.

This year he is studying Asian Architect B as an elective subject which requires the students to submit two writing assignments. This is the third time he has dealt with academic writing at tertiary level. It can be said that Hai is a "novice" (Sasaki [12]), or "unskilled" (Raimes [7]) student writer. While writing academic assignments in English at the university the subject met such difficulties as not being able to find the sources of information, being late for borrowing books from the library, reading too much and forgetting what was read, and not remembering where the ideas came from. He then spent a lot of time reading the books again and again. Hai also revealed in the informal talk after this interview that he did not have experience in writing academic essays like this one in Vietnamese. He just received some writing instruction when he attended Trinity College.

### *Hai's perceptions of the requirements of this assignment*

The first stimulated recall with the topic paper as the stimulus gave information on the subject's perceptions of the requirements of the essay. Hai chose topic six to write about because he thought that each of the other topics just focused on one aspect of the urban structures. On the other hand, topic six reflected all aspects of the city which attracted him the most. Specifically in this class paper, he chose to write about Edo, the old name of Tokyo, in the process of developing from a small village to a capital city in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

*"If you can picture the city so you can picture all that aspect small aspect so garden how you develop and how you plan a palace or how domestic house in a particular city so if you can picture the whole city you can... it means you can picture all the small parts"*

The essay or class paper that Hai was doing required him to describe and analyze the characteristics of an ideal capital. In his perception, it meant that he had to read the books to get the similar opinions about the city to support the main ideas of the essays.

*"As the question say they require to analyse or describe the characteristics of one ideal capital so generally you read the book and you describe what is your understanding and reinforce that idea by collecting more source that say the same thing"*

He thought that most of the main ideas in the essay were taken from the books as history included facts. In his opinion, history depended on old sources, so sometimes the information might be right or wrong. Therefore, he had to read many sources to compare and to combine ideas.

*"I believe that of course the history all is not correct but if you compare a lot of sources together you can find out what is wrong and what is right and from that you get the idea"*

*"You compare with other sources do they say the same thing or not if they say the same thing it means they are correct or they come from the same source"*

*"And of course if people differently it means there is not accurate source and there is assumption so you have to make your own assumption of that aspect"*

Talking about the writing conventions, he said that his tutor preferred footnotes. Therefore, he would use footnotes and follow the conventions as explained in *Essay and Report Writing* published by the Faculty of Architecture.

The process of writing and aspects focused on during this process

Analysis of the second interview provided a lot of information on Hai's process of writing and aspects he focused on

during this process. The second stimulated recall and the interpretation of the student's plan and first draft also gave out additional insights. Informal discussions as well produced some information. The student's writing stages are usually characterized as pre-writing, writing, and revising (Zamel [5]); however, Hai's writing behaviours were not entirely amenable to this breakdown.

During the pre-writing stage, after choosing the topic Hai borrowed many books from the library and kept reading. He changed the topic a little and decided to discuss why people chose Edo as the capital city. It did not simply describe the characteristics of the city. At first he did not know what to be included in the paper, so he wrote down the main points of what he was reading and everything related to the topic. Then he made a plan for the essay.

*"I changed the topic is why they choose that particular city as the capital city because it is ideal city, ideal capital and I want to find out what is the reason behind"*

*"Actually when I read the topics I just didn't know what the question was. I just keep reading, I just chose one city and just read about that city"*

When examining the plan of his writing at different points of time we realized that he had more than one outline for the paper and asked him about that. Hai revealed that as he kept writing he finally found out what he liked to write about. Therefore, he decided to change the plan of the writing.

*"I just kept writing and I don't know that I'm writing. And at the end oh that's interesting that's the issue that I write I want to write about. So at last I found out what I want to write and I changedt"*

It can be seen that during the writing stage, Hai did some important planning. In addition, he kept moving from writing to



revising and vice versa. As he continued his writing process, he explored the direction he had to follow and made necessary global revision. The second stimulated recall presented interesting information on Hai's writing the introduction.

*"Normally the introduction is the paragraph that shows what you're going to say in the body so as I mentioned that I had no idea what I'm going to say so I just introduced the the aspect of that city and and I have no introduction of what I'm going to write in the body part so I just leave it after I've done the body part and I know what I'm going to say and come back to the introduction"*

Hai basically took the ideas from the books he had read. He found writing this paper quite hard as he was not sure what to

write about. He kept complaining about that. He revealed that he often got stuck as *"the word doesn't come out"* and he was confused. To get more energy for writing, he *"leave the desk, go for a drink, or listen to music or do something else not related to the essay"*.

During the process of writing, Hai paid attention to different aspects of the writing. Cumming [9] presents five aspects of writing people may focus their attention to while composing: language use, discourse organization, gist, intentions, and procedure of writing (see Appendix A for explanation). Table 1 below lists the frequency of various aspects the subject paid focused on during his writing process as withdrawn from the second interview data. Examples of the aspects are provided in Appendix A.

Table 1. Aspects of writing

Language use (LU)	Discourse organization (DO)	Gist (G)	Intention (I)	Procedure (P)	Attention to two or more aspects
0	4	7	3	5	2 P+G; 1 G+DO; 1 G+I; 1 P+I; 1G+I+P; 2 P+DO; 1 P+G+DO

It can be seen that Hai attended to gist in his writing more than to any other aspects. In other words he cared much about the points or main ideas of the paper. The procedure for writing was also usually paid attention to. Interestingly, he did not attend to language issues in the writing. The stimulated recall also revealed nothing about language use. However, the informal discussion after the second recall showed that he would correct grammatical errors and vocabulary usage with one of his friends to get the final version. It was realized that Hai attended to more than one aspect in his writing more than to each individual aspect.

The examination of his first draft showed that Hai was committed to the task and the requirements of his tutor. He followed the writing conventions set up by his Faculty.

His writing was also well supported by relevant maps and pictures to strengthen the main ideas. The main ideas of the paper were rather clearly organized. However, there are quite a few errors in terms of grammar and vocabulary usage, which made his ideas sometimes not easy to follow.

### 7.1. Problems and problem-solving strategies

Hai's second protocol was analyzed for the problems and strategies he had used during the writing process to help generate solutions to perceived problems.

#### *Problems*

Data analysis showed that Hai encountered some problems in the writing process. Firstly, he did not know what to include in the introduction. He revealed *"I*

had a hard time for like what to be introduced for the ones who first read about Edo as a city. What aspects should I show in order to in a short paragraph and you can get image of what the city like". Secondly, he did not have the direction to follow when he wrote the body of the paper and just kept repeating the words from the books he had read. He had this problem three times during the process until he moved to the middle of the essay.

*"At the beginning I just like repeat the words, repeat like I read. And the problem is as I mentioned I just write down the aspect, I don't know, I just write down the fact"*

*"So... at the middle part of the essay I know what I'm going to write"*

Also, Hai lacked words to express his explanation because he did not want to make so much repetition. He, as well, sometimes found that his arguments were not "strong enough". It was interesting to know that Hai had read books in Japanese to write the essay as he found that books in English were not "the best books to read" and "unfortunately English doesn't mean translate everything every aspect of the region or the city, it is not in culture of people speaking English". This fact also presented a difficulty for him because sometimes he could not find the direct translation from Japanese to English.

*"So I had a hard time how to translate this, how to translate"*

*"So I cannot have direct translation, it's very hard"*

The interpretation of Hai's first draft showed that he used a lot of pictures and maps to support his ideas. However, this did not present a problem to him.

The stimulated recall provided more problems Hai met while he was writing this essay than the general problems he usually encountered when writing as reflected in the first interview (see the part on Hai's experiences and problems when writing academic assignments). Besides the lack of words to explain, he had to deal with the difficulty of writing the introduction, the lack of ideas, and the problem of translating from Japanese to English.

## 7.2. Problem-solving strategies

To solve the problems in writing, Hai used a number of strategies. Cumming [9] provides four main types of strategies, and type 4 consists of six sub-categories corresponding to the six heuristic search strategies. The details of this coding scheme and the examples can be found in Appendix B. Table 2 below shows the frequency of strategy usage reflected in the second stimulated recall.

Table 2. Subject's problem-solving strategies

Strategy	Frequency
#1 No search, no resolution	1
#2 No search, resolution	7
#3 Search, no resolution	0
#4 Search and resolution	
#4a Search routine	6
#4b Directed translation or code-switching	1
#4c Generating and assessing alternatives	1
#4d Criterion, standard, explanation, or rule	1
#4e Relating parts to whole	1
#4f Setting or adhering to a goal	2
Successful strategies (#4a-#4f)	12
Automatic solutions to problems (#2)	7
Unresolved problems (#1, #3)	1

The analysis showed that to solve the problems Hai used a lot of successful heuristic search strategies (12/20 times). Of these strategies Hai seemed to prefer using search routine. It meant that he returned to the sources of information, his own emerging assignment, engaged his memory, and used the dictionary as a source text to deal with the problems. He also identified the problems then quickly resolved them, without applying any heuristics searches. There was only one time he mentioned the problem without finding a solution to it.

As Hai also read books in Japanese to write this paper, and this presented a problem to him as mentioned above, we were especially interested in the strategies to deal with this problem. He revealed:

*"Every dimension of every word is not consistent, there is no equivalent in English. So I had a hard time how to translate this, how to translate. So I take out the dictionary, the electronic dictionary and ok I put in Chinese... no Japanese but no word coming out. So what I do is just quote it quote it and explain what it means. So I cannot have direct translation, it's very hard. So I put the Japanese, how to read it in alphabet and explain what it means"*

This extract showed that to deal with this specific problem, Hai used both strategies #4a and #4b. In my opinion, he has applied very appropriate strategies. The examination of his first draft found that there were ten cases in which Hai quoted Japanese words and gave explanations in English.

From the analysis of the problems and the solutions to the problems, it can be said that to deal with a problem Hai tended to use more than one strategy.

## 8. Discussion

The current case study has revealed a lot of findings about the subject's perceptions of academic writing in English, his problems and problem-solving strategies, as well as his writing process. The data analysis has resulted in a list of cognitive processes which is quite similar to the one found in earlier research. Also, the problems and strategies found in our study are indicated and identified in Cumming [9] and Boshier [10]. Another similarity between our study and other earlier research is that our subject is not very concerned about surface level revisions

such as grammatical errors or spelling mistakes and quite committed to the given assignment (Raimes [7]; Sasaki [12]). He just paid attention to global revisions such as changing the ideas of the whole paragraph. It is possible that he relied on the last revision time when he would go through the final draft with his friend. He appeared to consider the requirements of the tutor a lot and try hard to complete the essay.

However, there are some differences in findings between our study and earlier studies that should be mentioned. In the first place, our subject is considered to be "novice", "unskilled", or "basic" according to definitions by Sasaki ([12], p. 56), Raimes ([7], p. 234), and Cumming ([9], p.88) respectively. According to Zamel [5], Raimes [7], Roca de Larios, Murphy, and Manchon [11], and Sasaki [12], unskilled L2 writers tend to plan less and revise more at the word and phrase level. It is not correct in my subject's case. Although he is an unskilled writer, he did much planning before and even during the time he wrote the essay. In addition, he paid much attention to discourse organization which means that he focused on the organization of his written discourse and its structure beyond the clause level (see Table 1 in RESULTS). It has been concluded that skilled L2 writers have the tendency to plan more, revise more at the discourse level, and spend more time finding the most effective way to do the task (e.g, Zamel [5]; Kelly [8]; Cumming [9]; Roca de Larios, Murphy, and Manchon [11]; Sasaki [12]). The data analysis has shown that Hai has some characteristics of the skilled writer as well.

Discussing the strategies used to deal with problems while writing Cumming [9] concluded that basic writers paid only 2 to 16 percent of their decision statements to heuristic search strategies. Nevertheless, in

our study Hai mostly used these strategies (12/20 times) to solve his problems. Cumming has found the behaviour that the participants identified problems then quickly resolved them without applying any heuristic searches accounted for 29 to 49 percent of the total statements regardless of whether they were basic or expert writers. Our study has come up with a similar finding. Hai used this strategy 7 out of 20 times.

The differences in findings between our study and earlier research may be due to the application of the skilled/unskilled distinction. There have existed problems related to the notion of skill in L2 writing (Roca de Larios, Murphy, and Marin [1]). Raimes [7] has suggested that the notion of skill in L2 writing might be best captured as a combination of variables, in each of which writers could be judged as more or less skilled: language proficiency, product quality, self-evaluation of L1 and L2 writing ability, knowledge of writing demands, writing background and teaching experience. We think this notion should be made clearer in future studies. Another thing is that the writing task that our subject has to carry out in this study is quite different in nature with the tasks in other studies. This may be a reason for the differences mentioned above. It is necessary to conduct more research using real writing tasks in real situations to have more comprehensive conclusions.

## **9. Conclusion**

The study has given some insights into the process of writing a real academic essay in real conditions of Vietnamese ESL students studying at an Australian university. Its findings are firstly useful for us as teachers of English majoring in teaching writing skills in

L2 at tertiary level. The study has made a little contribution to the current research of L2 writing in the sense that it was conducted with a real writing task and it helps increase the number of studies investigating writing processes of Vietnamese students. Although the results of this small case study were not intended to be generalized, it is necessary for other Vietnamese students studying at Australian universities to be aware of how one of their peers copes with writing academic assignments in English. Also, the findings have given the ESL support unit with some implications if they are to help Vietnamese ESL students with their academic writing. Last but not least, this study can be used as the basis for our future research in which we intend to investigate more Vietnamese EFL tertiary students in the process of writing academic assignments at universities in Vietnam.

On the other hand, it is realized that the study has some limitations. We think that the findings are not comprehensive enough in terms of the "thick" and "rich" data gathered from the research. It would have been better if we had been able to interview the subject's lecturer or tutor on the perceptions of the requirements of the paper. This could set up the basis for a comparison between the student's and lecturer's perceptions. Also, if the subject had had more time to share the knowledge of architecture with us, the interpretation of his writing would have resulted in more desirable findings.

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## Nghiên cứu trường hợp về quá trình viết, nhận thức, các vấn đề mắc phải và các chiến lược trong khi viết bài luận bằng ngôn ngữ thứ hai

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Sinh viên nước ngoài nói chung và sinh viên Việt Nam nói riêng khi đến Úc học gặp tương đối nhiều khó khăn trong đó phải kể đến khó khăn khi viết các bài luận/bài tập lớn (assignment) bằng tiếng Anh. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện theo phương pháp định tính (qualitative) nhằm tìm hiểu những khó khăn cũng như quá trình viết bài tập lớn bằng tiếng Anh của một sinh viên Việt Nam cụ thể đang học tập tại Úc. Dựa trên cơ sở nghiên cứu của Cumming (1989) và Boshier (1998) nghiên cứu này tập trung vào 3 câu hỏi chính: (1) Đối tượng nghiên cứu hiểu các yêu cầu của bài tập như thế nào? (2) Đối tượng nghiên cứu thực sự làm gì trong quá trình viết? (3) Những khó khăn đối tượng nghiên cứu gặp phải và các chiến lược giải quyết khó khăn được sử dụng khi viết bài tập bằng tiếng Anh là gì? Số liệu cho nghiên cứu này được thu thập thông qua phỏng vấn, hồi tưởng và nghiên cứu bài viết và yêu cầu bài viết của đối tượng nghiên cứu. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy đối tượng nghiên cứu không quan tâm lắm tới các lỗi ngữ pháp và chính tả, đồng thời gặp nhiều khó khăn trong quá trình viết và đã sử dụng nhiều chiến thuật để giải quyết các khó khăn đó.