

# Learning English Rhetoric and Composition as A Vietnamese Student

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## Abstract

This study centers around Vietnamese students, with a comparison with East and Southeast Asian students who share the same cultural idea, at higher education level who want to acquire better writing skills in English in and out of academic settings. Since English is not the students' first language, they normally craft an essay from the vocabulary that they know. This is understandable, but a good piece of writing in standard American English is not supposed to be traced word by word. Understanding this fact in-depth and practicing it regularly is the core requirement for English major students. In return, they can join any workplace with their strong writing skills that they have to acquire during their undergraduate years, or more if they attend graduate schools. This group of students is known to be timid since they were raised in a collectivistic community in which many of them make their higher education choices based on firstly the current trend, then what is suitable for them. Thus, by making a bolder choice of declaring English as a major, double major, or minor, they could have better insight into English rhetoric and composition to apply them as a multi-meaning sign to their writings properly.

**Keywords:** collectivistic culture, Vietnamese undergraduate students, English writing, English rhetoric and composition, sign

## 1. Introduction

Rhetoric and Composition as a field of English Studies teaches students that writing is not waiting for ideas to come but to focus on the ideas. However, it is not guaranteed that students would practice this all the time, especially those whose first language is not English. While students can have different approaches to craft their writings, it is important to keep in mind the essential part of their papers, the content.

It impacts the improvement of the English writing skills of Vietnamese students and other students from the similar collectivist background as this of Vietnam and possibly reminds and guides English teachers to different approaches when they instruct students whose backgrounds are different from theirs.

Language in its “game language” (Wittgenstein) and “différance” (Derrida, 1997) will be regularly renewed and changed in many meanings. English reading or writing for non-native speakers is a great challenge because of the rhetoric and composition in their verbal signs. Over time, that creation caused more and more layers of meaning which were formed in a sign. Depending on personal proficiency and experience, that sign will be understood to a certain limited extent. Vietnamese students' learning English is facing great obstacles because of this feature.

The approach to this research is pragmatic approach by using data of English evaluation of Vietnamese undergraduates and English teachers from 2007 to 2019 through second-hand sources. Therefore, it provides some reasons and proposal solutions to the study of English rhetoric and composition from the undergraduate level.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

As a Vietnamese student who chose English as a major, the correspondence of this paper is not the only one who has found a distinctive difference in rhetoric and composition in English and Vietnamese. This paper is in the frame of Rhetoric and Composition and English Education. Students' writing levels in both English and Vietnamese are neither extraordinary nor limited. Through this paper, we would like to address what we have learned thus far, some are supported by research, which is useful for the sake of improving English writing skills for Vietnamese students.

### 1.2 Research Objective

This study aims at achieving the following objectives:

- To map out the methods that students with a collectivist background use to understand the importance of rhetoric and composition and practice it in their writings.
- To examine the differences in the attitudes of students of Rhetoric and Composition and English Education in Vietnam and its applications in relation to their accumulative average.
- To identify the differences in the attitudes of students in class in individualistic and collectivist cultures, or America and Vietnam as prominent examples.
- To introduce a number of important recommendations and proposals towards the use of semiotics and its applications in the Rhetoric and Composition course in Vietnam.

### 1.3 Research Questions

The present study seeks to answers to the following research questions:

- What are the methods that students with a collectivist background use to understand the importance of rhetoric and composition and practice it in their writings?
- What are the differences in the attitudes of students in class in individualistic and collectivist cultures, or America and Vietnam as prominent examples?
- How are semiotics and its applications in the English Rhetoric and Composition course in Vietnam?
- How should Vietnamese students, their families, and their professors change their current practices to improve the undergraduate's understanding about their areas of improvement in English rhetoric and composition?

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

This literature review will discuss the teaching methods and student approaches and their attitudes in class in individualistic and collectivist cultures, or America and Vietnam as prominent examples. Other articles, theses, journals, and so on, in both English and Vietnamese, have pointed out the reality in teaching English in Vietnam and other Asian countries. They have yet to take a further look into writing more specifically. This article will do so with the evidence from our personal experience and secondary sources that are cited fully in the Reference page.

### 1.5 Delimitations of the Study

This study was limited by the following:

- This study was conducted during the end of the Fall 2019 semester for the class Introduction to English Studies at Northern Kentucky University with further editing as of November 21, 2020.
- This study was limited to the second-hand survey results of understanding English rhetoric and composition of Vietnamese through examination results on Vietnamese undergraduates.

### 1.6 Definition of Operational Terms

Some words contain more than one meaning, but this paper only chooses one meaning that reflects the closest to the main idea of this research:

Sign: A sign is "something that shows that something else exists or might happen or exist in the future" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Rhetoric: Rhetoric is "the art of speaking and writing effectively, or the study of this art" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Composition: Composition is "something that a person has created or written, esp. a text, a work of art, or a piece of music, or the act of creating or writing something" (Cambridge Dictionary).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Differences

*Education standards.* The first noticeable thing is the difference in English and Vietnamese rhetoric and composition in educational standards. In the US and many other countries, Rhetoric and Composition go hand in hand. As introduced in the Introduction to English Studies class, "From the 1960s onward, Rhetoric and Composition becomes increasingly critical to defining English Studies" (O'Callaghan and Krouse, 7). This serves the purpose of drafting writing with profound ideas.

Whereas in the Vietnamese literature standard, rhetoric and composition fall into the field of linguistics and semiotics (Dao and Le, 2019). It is for the methods of arranging diction for aesthetic purposes. A side note that there is a saying about the challenging level of Vietnamese, "Phong ba bão táp không bằng ngữ pháp Việt Nam," which is directly translated as "storm and hurricane are not as terrible as Vietnamese grammar." In Vietnamese literature class at the high school level, while analyzing any writing, students are typically taught to look at the composition and then go in-depth into rhetoric. Since there are various ways to express the same ideas in the Vietnamese language, students are instructed to note carefully on the dictions. It is hard and confusing since writers can choose to be vague in their expressions because, with the rich verbal signs, they have numerous alternative expressive words and phrases. This is the reason why the saying is rather a fact than a hyperbole.

*Individualism versus collectivism.* The development of cultural patterns on language signs depends on various factors, in which significant experience such as wars plays a role. This classification can be traced back from the usage of language throughout the history of Vietnam. "... the Vietnamese, as historical colonized subjects, have always been hybrid and ambivalent regarding their language, culture, and identity" (Pham, x). The history of Vietnam has been recorded with numerous wars, most of which were from different dynasties and countries which tried to claim Vietnam theirs, only some were from the Vietnamese government waged wars with other kingdoms to expand the land to what we know the territory of Vietnam today (Wikipedia). With this suffering for such a small country, our people need to maintain the culture by getting together and negotiating with words. That is one noticeable part of a collectivist culture, in which people do not want to hurt the harmony of the community.

For long, we have reminded our identity and taught the later generations by various idioms, including "bút sa gà chết" [the die is cast]. While the English translation is close to the expressive meaning of this Vietnamese idiom, the literal translation is "a pen fails thus making a chicken die." Such meaning results from practices in the past society, in which many people agreed that the literacy rate was low, so whenever ordinary people, mainly illiterate farmers, needed help with paper works, they would ask for help from scholars; in return, they gave a chicken as a gift. This explanation can be understood that a word can even kill a life, therefore being careful with it is necessary. We have another saying, "nói là bạc, im lặng là vàng, lắng nghe là kim cương" [speaking is silver, silence is gold, listening is diamond]. This is not the only case in Vietnam. "... a model of communication among many Japanese, one in which silence is in some sense the preferred norm, and where the language is judged and valued more for what it doesn't directly express" (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 48).

These facts explain that Vietnamese students, so do many Asian students, tend to take this extra care in class, therefore they barely voice up until they feel that their expressions are correct or firm enough, which is often viewed as a timid behavior. Most students are afraid of making mistakes in front of many other peers, and still, many Vietnamese adults are not comfortable with the idea of doing presentations and giving speeches due to the same fear. In both writing and speaking, people tend to gather the community's attention and common ideas to give their voices. For example, in typical Vietnamese literature in public schools, teachers usually use the word "we" to analyze writing.

Individualism, on the other hand, values the independence of each person. With the highest score on Individualism on Hofstede scale, 91, American history of war, in comparison to this of Vietnam, has proven as such. Both Native Americans before the white settlement and the Europeans had tried to expand their territory. Europeans fled to the continent of America for freedom since the 17th century. The First Amendment for the Freedom of Speech is also a contributor to the highest score for this factor.

As address in the quiz of "Rhetoric and Composition" chapter, English Studies classroom, through the influence of rhetoric and composition, "changes from a place where students passively take notes while a 'sage on the stage' pontificates about great works of literature to a collaborative space where student-centered, discussion-based pedagogical approaches are preferred" (O'Callaghan & Krouse, 2019). Whereas in Vietnam, especially in public schools, it is an opposite case since we are not willing to fail the class if the teachers mention some small random details that we forget to cramp up more. Even though there are students who are extroverted and not afraid of criticism, most of the cases are not. Thus, the composition styles of Vietnamese, and Asians in a general sense, often confuse the Westerners if translated directly or applied in English writing.

*Languages.* There are cases when the literal translation does not work. Slangs are quintessence since it reflects the difference in informal languages, but formal languages in writing also suffer from this indeficiency when the expressions themselves do not carry the whole surface and underlying meanings. This creates confusion for language users and learners, even the professional ones, especially in the time limit (translationjournal.net). One example of word-by-word translation is "chuẩn bị tâm lý," or "preparing their psychology," but the original text refers to "getting ready to deal with the obstacles". However, the phrase was separated, and each word was translated such as "preparing"

for "chuẩn bị" and "psychology" for "tâm lý" (translationjournal.net). Another example showcases the wordy translation, which we get from one of our Vietnamese students, "Humankind is coping with difficulties in containing the coronavirus." It is not grammatically wrong, but the expression can be shortened to "Humankind is strugglingly coping with the coronavirus." Our student's longer expression shows her mindset in the Vietnamese writing style, whereas the English one prefers to be concise and direct.

This does not just happen in Vietnamese and English translation, it can happen to any other languages, in which the next example is Japanese, which shares the same collectivistic culture with the author's. People know "kimono" is Japanese traditional clothes. In literal translation, "kimono" means "something to put on": "ki" in "kiru" means "to wear," "mono" means "thing." However, if one translates "something to put on" from English to Japanese, many people would not think of the word "kimono," unless they know the real meaning of this word.

It is, thus, can be concluded that the difference in writing style is impacted by the culture. No matter how similar it is when writings from different cultures have an opening, body, and conclusion, the formats are the main difference, which is shown clearly in the body paragraphs (Purves, 39). It is called the "rhetorical community": "Although any article has a beginning, a middle, and an end, the physical format will vary according to discipline as will the placement of certain kinds of material" (Purves, 39). "Some studies have looked at literary styles as they change across geographical or temporal boundaries, but the IEA study provides a way of pursuing contrastive rhetoric using a systematically drawn sample of writing from an "average" population writing in the language of instruction" (Purves, 40). Many Vietnamese teachers would encourage the students to start with the amount of English vocabulary that they know, following up with their ideas instead of the way around ever since they started learning to write in English, which is not accurate in the standard American English composition. The difference between the two composition methods starts from the beginning of the writing process.

### *2.2 Vietnamese Undergraduates' Views on Learning English*

No matter how arduous learning English in Vietnam is, the undergraduates are fully aware of the importance of studying this language. A study conducted by six Vietnamese undergraduates from Kent International College in Ho Chi Minh City on 100 random undergraduates at six universities located in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and another one conducted on 400 undergraduates in Can Tho City show that almost all students feel the need for learning English. Another finding on motivations of learning English in 180 English-majored and 242 non-English-majored Vietnamese shows that, "both groups demonstrated high levels of motivation to learn English to prepare for their future profession. English major students felt more intrinsically motivated and less obligated to learn English" (Huong Ngo, et al, 2015).

Vietnamese teachers in the English field are aware of the influence of culture on composition and their students' concerns of improving on this language, even though the aforementioned education method of them in writing English is wrong. Many teachers strongly agree that "Culture should be integrated into foreign language lessons as early as possible" (Chau & Truong, 448). Vietnam is a collectivist culture, therefore, students are often taught to think of other people and keep the harmony of the community. This leads to the averagely lower levels of "selfness" than "otherness," which, on the other hand, are significant in the individualistic culture. In intercultural communication, if Vietnamese students were not introduced to and practice these notions early, they will have trouble understanding and presenting their ideas properly to people from a different background.

### *2.3 Drawbacks of Vietnamese Education System on English Education*

While the study above tries to prove that Vietnamese teachers are fully aware of this fact and they have been trying to cooperate culture and language studies for low English proficiency level students, the levels of these teachers are drastically low. Project 200 conducted by the Education Ministry is to aim for high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who have their English level at least 7.0 IELTS, which is my most current point. As of 2017, many of them, which were described as "way larger than expected," failed to get to this point because 1. Vietnamese universities concentrate on the degree that the teachers earned instead of their quality and 2. The prospective teachers are trained to be "experts of grammar so that they manage to instruct their students to pass grammar-oriented exams" (Van, 47). The failure of their test mainly results from their lack of skills in speaking and writing, since they took the IELTS test which has four sections: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Therefore, the exposure of Vietnamese students to Rhetoric and Composition in the standard American English is limited.

No matter how aware of the importance of English, many Vietnamese find learning this language demotivated. Motivation is the strongest drive to study a foreign language, thus, losing it leads to a low level of acquiring this language (Tran & Baldauf, 80). The study of demotivation in studying English asked for the participation of 100 Vietnamese undergraduate sophomores in Vietnam whose majors were economics-related and requirement of four

semesters of English. Only nine of the participants claimed that they had never felt demotivated. The three most common reasons are context demotivates, structure/format demotivates, and teacher-related factors. Another Vietnamese education website listed out similar factors, plus the fact of studying for testing only so teachers barely get trained and train their students on listening, speaking, and writing skills, and the large class size of more than 35 students per class on average while using low-tech equipment (Le, 2018). Sarcastically, many Vietnamese teachers excluded themselves as one of these reasons when they were asked about their prediction in their students' demotivation, which actually accounts for the second-largest factor, 38% (Tran & Baldauf, 92). Unlike some American undergraduates who would drop out because they do not feel they can cope with the workload, their Vietnamese counterparts would choose to stagnantly work towards their degrees (Tran & Baldauf, 80). This factor worsens their demotivation state, which leads to the fact that students view writing tasks rather boring assignments than chances for them to practice.

#### 2.4 Writing Motivations

However, it is not true that people never find any motivation to write, it is more of a matter of what to write and which motivations work for the writers and the contexts. According to a study by Suzzane Hindi and Pietro Boscolo, the motivations are "writing as a motivational problem," "interest and writing," "self-efficiency and writing," "self-efficiency and interest," "self-regulation of writing," and "writing as a meaningful activity" (MacArthur, et al, 144-54). The authors pointed out, "an interested writer is also a self-efficacious and self-regulation one, where as the mastery of cognitive and linguistic tools that characterizes an expert writer is likely to improve or sustain his or her positive motivational attitude toward writing" (MacArthur, 154).

#### 2.5 Proposal Solutions

*Current activities.* It can be perceived as the fault of both teachers and students, in which teachers' language proficiency is not decent enough and the students are passive and timid. The attempt of improving its education has started from different scales. The Board of Education since 2011 receives the financial support from the World Bank to alter the textbook. The Vietnamese Parliament is still considering the proposal of making English a second national language in 2020. However, the conduct of Project 2020 shows the impossibility of this proposal within the foreseeable future. Universities and schools encourage and promise to pay their teachers for the IELTS exam expenses if they reach the minimum required scores from the Board of Education guideline, as well as keeping track with other existing teaching evaluation methods. Parents have encouraged their children to make use of all the language-studying tools that they can afford, such as buying them laptops, dictionaries, sending them to cram schools or abroad, and so on.

*What students and their families can do better?* While waiting for all these changes can be long, the shift in the cultural mindset is much longer than this. It has always been a part of the community, thus changing it is not an easy task. Studying at domestic universities is the most obvious choice since not everyone can afford and brave enough to go abroad. In addition, they can enroll in free writing courses offered by the Embassy of the United States in Hanoi, Vietnam, for instance, if this is a more affordable higher education track. For those who have larger education funding, they have abroad universities, international universities, or national universities that offer a study abroad option or English track of their majors to choose.

Asking direct question: instead of asking after the children, "is university hard," guardians and/or parents can alter their question to "what is the hardest part of university and your courseload?" By pointing out the problem in a clearer sense, even when not all parents can solve it with their children, the kids have a better sense at solving their problems on their own or seeking help, for example, from the suitable supporting departments at their institutions. Universities in both America and Vietnamese have a department for psychology help, but not many people know about it; if they do, they also do not know where to start, and they feel shy to seek out for help in this way. Encouraging them to consult with professors is another option that can directly influence their education, but this comes back to the fact that students in Vietnam are not accustomed to this practice yet, which will be discussed in the next part.

*Introduce one-on-one consultancy.* As mentioned above, practicing the culture contributes to the improvement in learning language, in which this kind of consultancy should be more frequent, from getting academic help from peer mentors, professors, to psychologic help from healthcare department at universities. Encouragement to address their concerns and seek help starting from the family level is important, but the result is in the control of the students themselves.

Domestic students, besides enrolling in these classes, also should try to change themselves. Learning literature in Vietnamese secondary school levels can be passive since teachers tend to be the ones who provide their perspectives on the reading materials, which can lead to the demotive in writing in the further level of education. However, once

entering tertiary education, professors are no longer teachers, and students need to practice by themselves, which they are fully aware of. Vietnamese students should be more confident when consulting with their professors for help, which is not a very frequent practice. Consulting one-on-one with professor is not compulsory in Vietnamese public universities overall, plus students do not have the culture of doing so comparing to their peers in American universities, either due to being not confident or independent enough. Understandably, they behave as such towards their writings, but it is clearly not a good move when avoiding solving their problems with their instructors.

*What professors can do to improve the current situation?* This consulting activity benefits the professors as well. Not only they can define their students' struggles and problems early to calibrate their teaching materials and methods, but they also have more chances to practice their critical skills. Thus, it is more likely for them to increase their score in English test like IELTS and guide their students closely to the standard English rhetoric and composition. The professors should keep up with the changes from the government about English education. They can exert more influence than their students since the Board of Education works directly with the educators.

It is understandable that the professors are getting busier since they are the bridge between the students and the higher-ups, including the Board of Education, the Ministry of Education, and so on. Therefore, the cooperation from the students with the universities is crucial to their own changes. Most of the students think that their voice may not be heard anyway so they either talk behind the back or not cooperate sincerely and frankly with the universities' academic faculties, such as professors, teaching assistants, and class monitors. They do not hope to be a pioneer who may receive all the hatred if they voice up. In this collectivistic culture, why not try to visit their professors together instead of going alone? If they need privacy to work on their papers, the professors must be willing to help. Practicing the one-on-one consultation is one of the further steps to induce the American culture, therefore students and professors have more chances to practice the standard English rhetoric and composition, an important factor that is pointed out in the study of Chau and Truong as mentioned earlier in the paper.

*What can the students' surroundings do?* This practice not only needs the work from the students and professors but also the universities and their families. Around 28% of Vietnamese population from age 18 to 29 enrolled in tertiary education in 2019 (Tran), while it is more than 50% in the US in 2018 for the 20-21 age group (Bustamante). It barely occurs in people's mind to have this kind of consultation in Vietnamese universities. The class size is often too big (study), professors cannot remember all their students' faces, not to mention the names. Course load only gets heavy during the final phase so it needs to be evened out before putting the consultation into a more frequent practice. Many think writing is not a significant part in their life so they just need to pass the class without realizing that every field needs writing, especially if they want to earn more money, they need to attain decent English writing skill as well. The changes are hard, but indeed it is not impossible.

### 3. Conclusion

Writing, or composition, cannot be achieved in a matter of some days or even some months. It takes constant practice to express ideas effectively. Unlike speaking, writing, in a general sense, cannot get better naturally. It must be taught through thorough thoughts and requires frequent practice. This is a harder task for international students whose English is not their mother tongue. Some words or phrases cannot be literally translated because they barely make sense in English and vice versa. It is even harder for those whose background is the collectivist culture, since the writing standards in each "rhetorical community," as introduced by Alan C. Purve aforementioned, are different. Thus, choosing English as an undergraduate study track is not a risky choice, especially for international students, contrary to the popular's mindset.

It is not inherently wrong to study with the way that East and Southeast Asian students have practiced in domestic education. It is harmful that when students need to voice up and make their own choices, we tend to have a harder time since they have been and have influenced the dependence and passiveness in this cultural setting. This is our belief from the collectivist perspective in showing respect to other people, but it is troublesome when students need to contribute their ideas in class or speak for their paper analysis to find out which parts need improvement.

Studying domestically means saving money, but it does not associate with other opportunities that money can buy, such as better cultural tolerance and adaptation, especially in writing and understanding a kind of multi-meaning signs. While it is understandable that their education is their choice, we are all encouraged to practice writing in at least Vietnamese and English. In this globalization era and English has been recognized as the first foreign language in Vietnam since 1986 (Hoang, 7), there is no way that one can avoid using it at different levels.

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