

# Challenges Cambodian Students Face in English Essay Writing: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

English essay writing is a key productive skill that plays a critical role in students' academic achievement, in both national and international examinations. In Cambodia, many students, especially high school students, struggle with the English subject, often resulting in poor performance or failure in national exams. This article aims to discuss the key challenges Cambodian students face in writing English essays and proposes strategies to enhance their performance in essay writing. Based on a review of secondary sources, the article identifies several major challenges, including students' poor English backgrounds from the lower levels, their lack of understanding of essay organizational structures, their limited English vocabulary, their difficulties with English grammar, and their negative attitudes toward essay writing. The article offers some suggestions to improve students' performance in English essay writing, focusing on the role of key stakeholder collaboration in supporting students to perform well in essay writing. The article concludes with implications and suggestions for future research to advance our understanding of the ongoing challenges facing Cambodian students and suggestions to improve the situation.

**Keywords:** *English Essay Writing, Academic Writing, Cambodian Students, Challenges, Suggestions*

## INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four core English language skills, along with listening, reading, and speaking. It is one of the most important productive skills that can be utilized to measure how much students understand English (Ayana, 2020; Febriani, 2022; Toba et al., 2019). Al-Khazraji (2019) noted that writing skills play a pivotal role in education since they can increase students' writing ability, one of the major purposes of education. It is vital for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students because they have to fulfill the requirements for their courses (Bulqiyah et al., 2021). When students write an essay, they can face many challenges related to faulty sentences, dangling and misplaced modifiers, mechanical errors, wrong use of grammatical structures, and wrong word choices, among others (Ayana, 2020; Ma, 2020).

Marue and Pantas (2019) mentioned that writing is an essential skill in the language learning context and the transfer of global knowledge for everyone. This productive skill is both used to communicate and negotiate meaning or ideas, and it is concerned with the reflection of the absorption of the source of knowledge. More specifically, it is retransferred into the written form accurately and precisely (Marue & Pantas, 2019). Rachmawati and Fadhilawati (2024) pointed out that academic writing plays a fundamental role in academic settings because it can serve as a primary means of communication and internal assessment across disciplines. Likewise, Nenotek et al. (2022) stated that academic writing is one of the crucial skills in academic writing. It can help students enhance self-development via opinion writing, grant essay writing, and other types of writing. However, Marue and Pantas (2019) argued that writing is not only a critical skill but also a very difficult one to develop. Since English is used as a communicative language, EFL students, particularly non-native speakers whose language exposure is limited, may face many challenges concerning

“content, organization, grammar, syntax, mechanics, word choice, audience and purpose, and the ability to not ignore the writing process itself” (p. 89).

Since writing an English essay is part of the writing skills, many EFL students often find it difficult to write an English essay in exams, often resulting in failure in this task. Previous research, for example, has indicated that there are many challenges impeding students from producing an English essay with high quality. Key challenges commonly identified in the literature include a lack of understanding of paragraph or essay organizational structures, poor knowledge of English grammar, limited vocabulary knowledge, negative attitudes toward academic writing, a lack of knowledge of cohesion and coherence in writing, incorrect use of punctuations, insufficient understanding of parallelism, misuse of connectors, difficulties in transferring from students' native language into English, and a lack of support from teachers or lecturers (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Sogutlu & Veliaj-Ostrosi, 2022; Saputra, 2023).

Against this background, this article aims to identify the key challenges contributing to Cambodian students' weak performance in English essay writing and provide suggestions to improve the situation. Specifically, the article has two objectives: (1) to discuss the key challenges contributing to students' challenges in English essay writing, and (2) to offer suggestions for improving students' performance in English essay writing.

In the Cambodian context, research has shown that there are many challenges contributing to students' poor performance or failure in the English subject, including in essay writing (Hem, 2017; Sor et al., 2017; Sou, 2010). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no empirical research or literature review explaining why many Cambodian students perform poorly in their English essay writing. Therefore, this review article aims to shed light on this issue by discussing key challenges that may contribute to students' challenges in English essay writing. The article also aims to provide suggestions to improve Cambodian students' performance in English essay writing. This chief goal of the article is to shed light on this issue to pave the way for further research.

There are two research questions utilized to guide this review article: 1) What are the key challenges contributing to Cambodian students' challenges in English essay writing? 2) How can the key challenges be addressed to improve Cambodian students' performance in English essay writing?

### **Definitions and Types of Academic Writing**

Essay writing is defined as “the reflection of the students' knowledge and language acquisition” (Marue & Pantas, 2019, p. 88). It plays an essential role in the education system, especially within the context of English language teaching and learning, but many EFL students, including high school students, always confront many challenges when it comes to essay writing (Marue & Pantas, 2019). According to Andersson et al. (2007), an academic essay is “a document that has a defined structure – an introduction, a body and a conclusion” (p. 1). It is a part of academic writing that has at least five paragraphs – a common length of academic writing – consisting of an introductory paragraph, body paragraphs with at least three paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph (Saputra, 2023).

However, Oshima and Hogue (2006) argued that an essay is a piece of writing with several paragraphs about one topic and consists of three main sections, such as an introductory paragraph, body paragraphs with two or more paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. Likewise, Boardman and Frydenberg (2002, 2008) pointed out that an essay organization includes three main parts. They include the introductory paragraph that has two main purposes, including (a) getting the reader's attention and (b) telling what the essay is about through the thesis statement; the body paragraphs that contain more than one paragraph; and the concluding paragraph with a summary or review of the main points that are discussed in the body. Zemach and Rumisek (2003) also stated that “an essay is a group of paragraphs written about a single topic and a central main idea. It must have at least three paragraphs, but a five-paragraph essay is a common assignment for academic writing” (p. 56). Therefore, in order to write a good English essay, each writer cannot ignore its three major components: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002, 2008).

According to Rachmawati and Fadhilawati (2024), there are many types of academic writing for students, including essays, research papers, lab reports, and dissertations. Sari and Agustina (2022) stated that there are six types of academic writing, such as a summary, a research paper, a book

review, a journal article, a synthesis, and an essay. Since they are scholarly articles for students, these writing components need to comply with their precise and concise formats or templates. As Toba et al. (2019) noted, Indonesian university students are always assigned to complete the written communication and academic writing for both in school and national exams to fulfill their study requirements. These writing tasks consist of letters, essays, papers, articles, project reports, theses, etc. Of these writing tasks, essay writing is considered one of the most significant components of academic writing for students in both school and university settings (Marue & Pantas, 2019), and many students find an academic essay one of the most difficult and challenging tasks (Sari & Agustina, 2022).

### Parts of Academic Essays

There are three parts in an essay: an introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph (Oshima & Hogue, 2006, 2007). First, the introductory paragraph is often organized by giving the general ideas first and then leading to the specific idea, which is called the thesis statement that comes at the end of the introductory paragraph (Oshima & Hogue, 2006, 2007; Zemach & Rumisek, 2003). The thesis statement is the most essential sentence in the essay, as it contains the main ideas for the whole essay (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002, 2008; Zemach & Rumisek, 2003). Likewise, according to Oshima and Hogue (2006), the thesis statement is the most important sentence in the introduction, stating the specific topic of the essay, leading to the body paragraphs. There are four ways of writing an introductory paragraph, such as anecdotes, interesting facts or statistics, historical introduction, and general to specific (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002).

Second, as Bastola (2018) stated, body paragraphs containing supporting details have a vital role in essay writing because they (a) contain facts, statements, and examples, guiding the writer to conceptualize the main idea the thesis statement indicates; (b) clarify, illuminate, explain, describe, expand, and illustrate the main points; (c) are asserted immediately after the topic sentences are written; (d) demand cohesion and coherence in our entire essay; and (e) justify the thesis statement and maintain a flow in our entire essay. In a five-paragraph essay, there are at least three paragraphs in the body paragraphs (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2008; Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Each paragraph must have one topic sentence and two or three major supporting sentences. Usually, a major supporting sentence needs one or two minor supporting sentences; however, Boardman and Frydenberg (2002, 2008) argued that all major supporting sentences do not need to have minor support when they have a complete thought. Afterwards, each paragraph must have a concluding sentence (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002, 2008), although sometimes the concluding sentence can be optional (Oshima & Hogue, 2006, 2007).

The last element of an essay is the concluding paragraph. Indongo and Ithindi (2024) pointed out that the concluding paragraph is a very important section because it summarizes the points, rounds up the ideas, or suggests solutions for the reader. It is the final paragraph in an essay having three purposes, such as signaling the end of the essay, reminding the readers of the main points, and leaving the reader with final thoughts on the topic (Oshima & Hogue, 2006, 2007). A good concluding paragraph has four components: summarizing the main points of the essay, restating the thesis (utilizing different words), making a final comment about the essay's main idea, and probably emphasizing an action that the writer would like the reader to take (Zemach & Rumisek, 2003). It has a very important function, as it is the last paragraph of the essay to be read, where the writer wants the reader to leave with a clear understanding of the essay's main point (Bastola, 2018; Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002, 2008). This last paragraph consists of three main parts, such as a summary of the points made in the body paragraphs, a restatement of the thesis statement, and/or a final comment on the topic (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002, 2008).

### METHODS

This article utilized a literature review method, relying on secondary data, to answer the research questions. According to Wee and Banister (2016), a literature review is one of the research activities that can be independently carried out. Any article utilizing the secondary data can be a good catalyst to contribute to knowledge advancement or theory development and provide ideas for

further research in a specific area as well (Webster & Watson, 2002). In a review article, public and private documents are useful in gaining insights into the research topic because documents are the texts or visual devices enabling information to be shared and stories to be presented to the reader (Coffey, 2014).

The literature was sourced primarily from Google Scholar and ScienceDirect, which are effective platforms for accessing peer-reviewed research. As Oeun and Heng (2024b) noted, Google Scholar and ScienceDirect are very powerful tools to find scholarly literature that can offer valuable insights into the research topic. Since our aim was to include as many articles as possible, we tried to search for relevant articles or documents and included them for review as long as they are related to the research topic and are available for access. Keywords used for the literature search were varied, including 'challenges in English essay writing', 'problems in English essay writing', 'difficulties in English essay writing', 'difficulties in using English vocabulary in essay writing', 'difficulties with grammar in essay writing', 'negative attitudes toward essay writing', 'paragraph to essay in academic writing', 'challenges or problems in English essay writing in Cambodia', and 'challenges facing Cambodian students in English essay writing'.

We did not utilize any specific inclusion or exclusion criteria; however, we aimed to include only refereed articles or academic documents such as books, book chapters, journal articles, conference papers, and theses/dissertations to enhance the quality of this review. We did not use publication years to limit our search, as we believe that the challenges concerning essay writing remain relevant, irrespective of the publication date of the research articles or documents. Nonetheless, we aimed to include recent articles or documents, particularly those published within the last 10 years. Overall, our search resulted in a range of articles and documents collected for the review, such as books, book chapters, journal articles, conference papers, doctoral dissertations, and master's theses. These articles or documents are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Articles or documents included in the review**

Types of articles or documents	Number
Books	1
Book chapters	2
Journal articles	26
Conference papers	1
Doctoral dissertations	1
Master's theses	2
Total	33

The review revealed five categories of challenges commonly faced by students when writing English essays. They include (a) poor English backgrounds, (b) a lack of understanding of essay organizational structures, (c) problems with grammar, (d) difficulties with vocabulary, and (e) negative attitudes toward essay writing. In the next section, we discuss these key challenges faced by students in the general context when writing English essays. Based on these five categories of challenges, we elaborate on the key challenges Cambodian students encounter in English essay writing by drawing on relevant research in the Cambodian context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Challenges Students Encounter in English Essay Writing

#### *Poor English Backgrounds*

One major reason students struggle with English essay writing is their limited English proficiency, often due to their poor English backgrounds from earlier educational levels. Phung and Le (2024), in their study on the difficulties encountered by students in completing IELTS Writing Task 2, found that many Vietnamese university students could not write English essays effectively due to their poor English knowledge. Lacking good English backgrounds or having a low English language proficiency from the lower levels could contribute to students' low-quality essays (Phung & Le, 2024). Dang et al. (2020) showed that Vietnamese students with poor linguistic competence or poor English

backgrounds, including limited knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and coherence, experienced significant difficulties in writing argumentative essays. Kanyama (2017) reported similar difficulties among Grade 11-12 students in Namibia who could not write argumentative essays well because they had limited English knowledge or poor English backgrounds from the lower levels. Hossain (2024) also revealed that Bangladeshi university students frequently made errors in essay writing, due to their inadequate foundational knowledge of English. Similarly, Msuya and Abdala (2025) showed that Tanzanian secondary students with poor English backgrounds could not write English essays properly. Thus, strong English backgrounds can play a vital role in the development of effective essay writing skills; without good English backgrounds, students tend to face obstacles in producing effective essays (Phung & Le, 2024).

### ***Lack of Understanding of Essay Organizational Structures***

Previous research has also indicated that many students, particularly EFL students, cannot write English paragraphs or essays well because they lack an understanding of essay organizational structures (Tang, 2012). For example, Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) showed that many Indonesian university students could not write a good English paragraph or essay because of their limited knowledge of paragraph or essay organizational structures. Common issues included a paragraph with no indented line, the inappropriate length of paragraphs with too many sentences making the paragraph too long and unreadable, and overly brief paragraphs consisting of only a single sentence that fails to meet the standard number of five to seven sentences per paragraph. According to Ashrafiyany and Basalama (2020), most university students have difficulties in writing English essays, particularly with respect to essay formatting on account of two main reasons: (a) difficulties during the pre-writing stage caused by a lack of a lack of information about the topic, and (b) difficulties during the pre-drafting stage caused by the nature of the teaching and learning process, making it challenging for them to choose an essay topic and organizing it effectively. Bulqiyah et al. (2021) found that 42.8% of Indonesian university students reported that they could not write a good essay due to difficulties in organizing thoughts – generating more ideas – in their writing, while 52.4% of the students admitted to lacking awareness of the basic components of English essay structure, including the introduction, body, and conclusion. Similarly, Sogutlu and Veliaj-Ostrosi (2022) showed that high school students in Albania also had difficulties in organizing an essay structure, due to their unfamiliarity with producing the introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs.

### ***Problems with Grammar***

Another challenge contributing to difficulties in writing an English essay is a lack of English grammar comprehension (Al-Bakri & Troudi, 2020; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Dzimar et al., 2025). Darus and Subramaniam (2009) revealed that errors in grammatical rules committed by Malaysian high school students are in the highest percentage. They include errors in singular/plural forms, verb tenses, word choices, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and word order, which cause the low quality of English writing. Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) showed that grammar, which accounted for the highest percentage of reported difficulties, is one of the most challenging aspects of essay writing for Indonesian university students. Specifically, the students encountered issues related to incorrect use of tenses; subject-verb agreement mistakes; misuse of personal pronouns; incorrect word order; and mistakes involving articles auxiliaries, and sentence fragments. Sogutlu and Veliaj-Ostrosi (2022) also reported that grammar-related challenges, such as incorrect use of tenses, articles, pronouns, and plural forms, are prevalent among Albanian high school students, significantly affecting their essay quality. Likewise, Saputra (2023) showed that Indonesian university students could not write effective English essays because they faced problems with grammatical errors related to the use of articles, verb tenses, pronouns, prepositions, subject-verb agreements, singular/plural nouns, noun clauses, adjective clauses, modal auxiliary verbs, comparative adjectives, sentence structures, and parallelism. Relatedly, Dzimar et al. (2025) found that undergraduate students in Indonesia struggled to apply grammatical tenses appropriately in different contexts. Those students experienced many mistakes in terms of using the correct tenses,



which frequently led to unclear or ambiguous meanings, especially in showing time and conveying the meaning of an event in writing and sentence construction.

### ***Difficulties with Vocabulary***

Previous studies (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Cennetkuşu, 2017; Johnson et al., 2016; Sogutlu & Velić-Ostrosi, 2022) have revealed that a lack of extensive vocabulary knowledge is also a key factor contributing to students' difficulties in essay writing. Johnson et al. (2016), for example, noted that vocabulary knowledge does play an important role in English essay writing. They further added that the greater diversity of English vocabulary that students possess, the stronger English writing performance they can do. This means that having extensive vocabulary knowledge can contribute to the high quality of English essays. Many students could not use the English words in their writing correctly; that is, they frequently misspelled words and misused them, contributing to reduced essay quality (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). Likewise, Sogutlu and Velić-Ostrosi (2022) revealed that more than half of Albanian high school students (51.80%) could not write good English essays owing to vocabulary-related difficulties. Those students often made vocabulary mistakes in terms of wrong word choice, misuse of words, and the use of informal words in their essays, which contributed to low-quality essays. Additionally, Ma (2025) also noted that limited linguistic knowledge often prevented students from expressing ideas or arguments clearly and effectively.

### ***Negative Attitudes Toward Essay Writing***

Negative attitudes toward English writing constitute another key challenge for EFL students in writing an essay. Ismail et al. (2012) found that many Malaysian university students had negative attitudes toward academic writing, due to some factors, such as the difficulties in English writing, a lack of time to practice in classes, and the ineffective instructional guidance and resources to develop critical writing skills. Asadifard and Koosha (2013) showed that many university students found writing activities really uninteresting, so they were often disengaged from writing tasks unless required. Similarly, Setyowati and Sukmawan (2016) noted that many EFL college students often had negative attitudes toward writing, especially in the form of essay composition. Due to the perceived difficulty of writing in English, students did not practice writing English paragraphs or essays either in class or at home. Supporting this, Ceylan (2019) revealed that most university students in Turkey did not write English paragraphs or essays well because they were not interested in any topics for writing, and they thought that English writing is not beneficial to them in their future life. In this regard, students' attitudes are one of the most important factors that impact their language learning, playing a significant role in helping them produce either good or bad English essays (Fakeye, 2010).

### ***Challenges Cambodian Students Face in English Essay Writing***

Drawing on the results of the review discussed above, we utilized the five categories of challenges as an analytical framework to discuss the challenges Cambodian students face when writing English essays. These challenges are discussed in turn below.

#### ***Students' Poor English Backgrounds from the Lower Levels***

Cambodian students, especially those in rural public schools, often exhibit low English proficiency from the primary level, leading to significant challenges in English essay writing. According to Song (2014), many Cambodian primary school students in rural areas have poor English backgrounds from the lower level because they have no time for English classes, particularly a lack of financial support for private classes, leading to their poor performance in essay writing. Similarly, Phon (2017) noted that many Cambodian students from low-income families attending a rural university usually have lower levels of English proficiency. Lay et al. (2017) also stated that most rural students attending urban universities typically have limited English knowledge, making it difficult for them to catch up with lessons in English. In line with these findings, Oeun and Heng (2024b) noted that Cambodian Grade 12 students who have limited exposure to the English language tend to not do well in English exams, including in essay writing.

### ***Students' Lack of Understanding of Essay Organizational Structures***

A lack of understanding of essay structure also significantly hampers students' ability to write effective English essays. Sou (2010) found that there are several problems faced by university students making them unable to write good English essays. One of the key problems is related to their limited knowledge of essay organization. It was found that many Cambodian students could not construct introductory and concluding paragraphs. They often write paragraphs without unity and coherence, reflecting their "limited knowledge about the background information and poor essay summary skills" (Sou, 2010, p. 27). Likewise, Hem (2017) revealed that many Cambodian students or writers could not produce a good essay because most of them misunderstand essay organizational structures. For instance, they often write an introductory paragraph with no thesis statement, body paragraphs with just one paragraph without clear topic sentences or major and minor supporting sentences, and a very long and ambiguous concluding paragraph. Supporting these findings, Oeun and Heng (2024b) stated that high school students without knowledge of organizational structures often cannot write good English essays, which contributes to their poor performance or failure in essay writing in the national Grade 12 examinations.

### ***Students' Limited English Vocabulary***

Limited vocabulary knowledge has also impeded Cambodian students' ability to perform well in English essay writing, particularly during national examinations (Oeun & Heng, 2024b). Previous research has indicated that Cambodian students usually have problems with English vocabulary use in both spoken and written tasks (Doung, 2019; Heng, 2011; Sor et al., 2017). Heng (2011) revealed that Cambodian EFL students often face problems in learning English terms, especially related to their inability to remember the spellings and definitions of new words, difficulties in pronouncing words, and limited opportunities and abilities to practice new vocabulary in real-world situations. These difficulties can considerably impede their ability to produce well-developed English essays. Likewise, Sor et al. (2017) found that many Cambodian and Thai Grade 12 students could not write compositions or essays effectively because of three main reasons, one of which is their limited English vocabulary, particularly concerning academic terms. Doung (2019) also indicated that due to the high number of difficult words in English reading texts, most Cambodian high school students could not understand the texts, which contributes to their lack of comprehension of the whole reading passages. As a result, they often have poor performance in English essay exams, especially the national Grade 12 examinations.

### ***Students' Difficulties in Using English Grammar Correctly***

Difficulties in applying English grammar correctly are another key factor contributing to students' challenges in constructing well-written essays. Sou (2010) noted that many university students could not write good essays due to a lack of how to use grammatical rules accurately in their writing. Most of them had difficulties grasping grammatical rules related to verb usage in sentences, parallel structures, reference objects, and subject pronouns. Likewise, Sor et al. (2017) found that Cambodian Grade 12 students, like their Thai counterparts, were not able to write good composition or essays because they had difficulties in using accurate grammatical rules in sentences, particularly in using nouns, verbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and tenses in correct ways. Sor et al. (2017) further pointed out that students' lack of understanding of English grammar, particularly related to incorrect tense usage, unclear subject-verb disagreement, improper pronoun references, and limited understanding of clause connectors, affects their performance in essay writing. These findings suggest that when students are not good at English grammar, they tend to have difficulties or face failure in English essay writing.

### ***Students' Negative Attitudes Toward Essay Writing***

Negative attitudes toward English writing constitute another significant barrier to students' success in essay writing. Negative attitudes, in this context, refer to students' lack of interest or motivation to study English, including tasks related to essay writing, for both monthly assessments and national examinations (Oeun & Heng, 2024a). Many students do not pay much more attention to

English essay writing tasks; that is, they do not like practicing it either at school or at home. Yim (2012) found that when university students have negative attitudes toward learning English, they tend to achieve lower academic outcomes, whereas 92.63% of those with positive attitudes demonstrated high achievement in the subject. Similarly, Oeun and Heng (2024b) noted that students with negative attitudes toward English learning tend to perform poorly in the English subject in both classroom and national exams.

### **Suggestions to Improve Cambodian Students' Performance in English Essay Writing**

Previous research has suggested that enhancing the process of teaching English is vitally important for English teachers; therefore, it is essential to provide them with professional development opportunities, such as participating in local, regional, and international conferences, seminars, workshops, and debates to improve both their English language proficiency and professionalism in teaching English (Boy & Water, 2023; Em, 2022; Mao, 2015). In addition, sufficient learning and teaching materials, including adequate updated textbooks for students (Em, 2022; Sok, 2019), as well as an updated English curriculum (Em, 2022) is essential for effective instruction. As suggested by Boy and Water (2023), the Cambodian government should invest more in the education sector by providing more funding, facilities, and teaching resources to schools, while prioritizing English as a core exam subject in the national curriculum. Likewise, Oeun and Heng (2024a, 2024b) suggested that collaborative efforts among all stakeholders can be the best way to motivate or encourage students to learn English and develop their positive attitudes toward this subject, especially toward English essay writing.

### **Teachers**

Teachers play an essential role in ensuring effective instruction, which is crucial for helping students attain better English essay writing skills. First, teachers should assign students to write at least one English essay per week, focusing on various essay formats to enhance their writing skills. This is a good idea to help students enhance their essay writing by practicing it as much as possible. More specifically, they should teach past examination papers to students for better comprehension of expected structures and evaluation criteria. As Morgan (2016) has noted, the more you practice, the more you remember, and the more you know. This is an approach that applies not only to English but to language learning in general. Another approach for teachers to assist their students in improving their English essay writing skills is to encourage them to do more and more English reading either in school or at home, as this extensive reading approach can allow students to improve many things, such as vocabulary, grammar, writing style, the flow of ideas, coherence and cohesion in writing, and more particularly the application of essay writing structures and templates. As Ashrafiyany and Basalama (2020) mentioned, good English essays can be written when "the students need to have basic knowledge by reading" (p. 61).

### **Students**

Students play a crucial role in improving their English writing skills, particularly in overcoming challenges in essay writing. To build their skills, students should practice writing part of an English essay on a daily basis in order to remember the essay format as well as improve vocabulary, grammatical rules, and other writing techniques. They can also start by doing more English reading to improve basic knowledge about essay structures, effective writing styles, word choices, grammatical rules, syntax, and standard essay formats, including the introduction, body, and conclusion (Ashrafiyany & Basalama, 2020). As Boardman and Frydenberg (2002, 2008) and Oshima & Hogue (2006) noted, good English essays must comply with the flow of three main components – the introductory paragraph, the body paragraphs with at least three paragraphs in this section, and the concluding paragraph. This five-paragraph format is widely recognized as a standard in academic writing (Saputra, 2023). In this sense, students should pay close attention to essay writing lessons, whether in school or through private classes, to gain a better understanding of how to write essays effectively, especially to perform well in essay writing in high-stakes assessments such as the national Grade 12 examinations.



### **Other Key stakeholders**

Other key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), educational institutions, and the broader community, must collaborate to support students in enhancing their English essay writing skills. First, MoEYS should introduce the English language into the national curriculum as a core examination subject, ensuring that its score contributes to students' overall national exam scores (Oeun & Heng, 2024b). MoEYS should also design a new English curriculum with an essay writing section in every unit or lesson in the core textbook, and it should increase instruction time for the English subject to allow teachers to have adequate teaching sessions to teach students more about essay writing to meet the requirements of the national exam papers every year.

Second, educational institutions, especially schools, play a crucial role in fostering students' essay writing development. School principals are key change actors who have a crucial role to help students develop their writing competence (Oeun & Heng, 2024a, 2024b). They can provide support by supervising teachers of English and encouraging them to teach English essay writing to students every week to achieve good learning outcomes. As Sorm and Gunbayi (2018, 2020) noted, school leaders are very essential chameleons in charge of many school activities and effective strategies in order to meet various teaching and learning demands, leading to better learning outcomes. School principals can provide teachers with a variety of instructional resources and materials for the effective process of teaching and learning English (Oeun & Heng, 2024b).

Finally, the community also plays an essential role in improving the situation and helping students develop their writing competence. The community can enhance students' English essay writing skills through various initiatives such as collaborative learning, peer feedback, study groups, and other supportive programs, including English essay writing competition, to help stimulate students' interest in and attention to English essay writing. Sriwigati and Musharyanti (2022) noted that peer learning or peer-assisted learning can offer various significant advantages to students, such as increasing their knowledge and self-confidence, improving writing skills, and enhancing communication skills. Such community-level initiatives not only support formal instruction but also fosters a conducive environment for language learning outside the classroom settings.

### **CONCLUSION**

This review article has examined the key challenges Cambodian students encounter in English essay writing. These key challenges include students' poor English backgrounds from the lower levels, their lack of understanding of essay organizational structures, their limited English vocabulary, their difficulties in using English grammar, and their negative attitudes towards English writing. The article has also provided some practical suggestions for improving Cambodian students' performance in the English essay. The suggestions focus on stakeholders' collaborative efforts for the sake of Cambodian students, suggesting that all stakeholders, particularly MoEYS, school leaders, teachers, and communities, need to work together to motivate students to enjoy learning English, in particular to improve their essay writing skills.

This article has a few important implications. First, it highlights key challenges contributing to Cambodian students' struggles in English essay writing and offers an understanding of suitable suggestions to help students perform well in essay writing. Second, it provides valuable insights for policymakers to enhance the process of teaching and learning English, including the essay writing process, to help students improve their performance. Third, the article can inform English teachers, students, and other relevant stakeholders of what they should do in order to support students to pass the English subject in exams, particularly high-stakes exams such as the national Grade 12 examinations.

The discussion in this article is limited to secondary data and documents available during the research period. Hence, future research should address this limitation by empirically investigating the challenges students face and the effects of these challenges on them. Future research should also focus on providing research-informed suggestions or strategies to assist students in coping with essay writing and improving their English language proficiency, which is imperative for them to succeed in their personal and professional endeavors. In addition, empirical research into students' challenges in

English essay writing should be conducted to provide a more nuanced understanding of why students fail the English essay in exams, especially in the national Grade 12 examinations in Cambodia. Research into evidence-based suggestions to improve this situation is also highly recommended.

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