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TIME PRESSURE, ANXIETY, AND COPING STRATEGIES IN VSTEP WRITING TASK 2: A QUALITATIVE STUDY WITH A2 EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: This small-scale qualitative study explores how first-year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students perceived time pressure, experienced anxiety, and explained their coping strategies while completing a timed VSTEP Writing Task 2 essay. The study involved 10 students in an intensive English program at a Vietnamese university whose entry proficiency was approximately A2 CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and who were working toward B2/VSTEP-related demands. The data were drawn from timed 40-minute essays, immediate post-task written reflections, and task-elicited interviews conducted within one week. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the study examined the learners' reported perceptions of time pressure, anxiety triggers, and coping rationales. The findings suggest that the participants commonly experienced timed writing through persistent clock awareness, difficulty initiating and sustaining ideas, fear of not finishing, and reliance on completion-oriented strategies such as simplification, content reduction, and limited revision. The study offers a context-specific qualitative account that may inform pedagogical support for lower-proficiency learners preparing for timed argumentative writing in VSTEP-related contexts.

Keywords: VSTEP, Writing task 2, A2 CEFR, EFL learners

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ÁP LỰC THỜI GIAN, LO ÂU VÀ CHIẾN LƯỢC ỨNG PHÓ TRONG VSTEP WRITING TASK 2: NGHIÊN CỨU ĐỊNH TÍNH VỚI NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH TRÌNH ĐỘ A2

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu định tính quy mô nhỏ này tìm hiểu cách sinh viên năm thứ nhất học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ cảm nhận áp lực thời gian, trải nghiệm lo âu và lý giải các chiến lược ứng phó khi thực hiện VSTEP Writing Task 2 trong điều kiện có giới hạn thời gian. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện với 10 sinh viên trong một chương trình tiếng Anh tăng cường tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam; các sinh viên này có trình độ đầu vào khoảng A2 theo Khung tham chiếu trình độ ngôn ngữ chung của Châu Âu (CEFR) và đang hướng tới các yêu cầu ở mức B2/VSTEP. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ ba nguồn: bài viết 40 phút có giới hạn thời gian, bản phản hồi ngắn ngay sau khi làm bài, và các cuộc phỏng vấn gợi nhớ theo nhiệm vụ được thực hiện trong vòng một tuần. Sử dụng phương pháp phân tích chủ đề phân tư, nghiên cứu xem xét cách người học thuật lại áp lực thời gian, các yếu tố gây lo âu, và lý do họ lựa chọn các chiến lược ứng phó. Kết quả gợi ý rằng người học thường trải nghiệm bài viết có giới hạn thời gian qua ý thức thường trực về đồng hồ, khó khăn trong việc khởi ý và duy trì ý, nỗi lo không hoàn thành bài, và xu hướng dựa vào các chiến lược ưu tiên hoàn thành như: đơn giản hóa ngôn ngữ, rút gọn nội dung và hạn chế rà soát. Nghiên cứu cung cấp một mô tả định tính mang tính đặc thù bối cảnh, từ đó gợi ý một số hướng hỗ trợ sư phạm cho người học trình độ thấp khi luyện viết nghị luận có giới hạn thời gian trong bối cảnh chuẩn bị cho VSTEP.

Từ khóa: VSTEP, Writing task 2, trình độ A2 CEFR, người học EFL

1. Introduction

Timed writing is a core component of many standardized English proficiency tests and is often treated as evidence of learners' ability to communicate in academic or semi-academic contexts (Weigle, 2002). In Vietnam, the VSTEP is widely used in higher education, and its writing component requires candidates to produce an extended essay within a fixed time limit. For lower-proficiency learners, such as those working to bridge a sizable gap to a target level, timed Task 2 writing can be especially demanding. Writers must simultaneously interpret the prompt, generate and organize ideas, retrieve linguistic resources, and monitor time. Under exam conditions, this concurrent processing can strain attentional resources and make it difficult for learners to demonstrate their full writing ability (Güvendir & Uzun, 2023; Khuder & Harwood, 2015).

Prior research suggests that time pressure shapes both the writing process and the resulting text by compressing planning and revision and encouraging rapid text production (Khuder & Harwood, 2015). These constraints may push writers to prioritize task completion over idea development, often resulting in simpler language and less developed arguments, particularly when cognitive demands are high (Güvendir & Uzun, 2023). Alongside these process and product effects, timed exam writing may also trigger significant anxiety,

including the fear of errors, the concern about negative evaluation, and the worry about not finishing on time—factors frequently reported in studies of L2 writing anxiety (Jawas, 2019; Zargar & Nimehchisalem, 2023). To cope, learners may adopt “survival” strategies such as simplifying structures, relying on memorized chunks, planning in the first language, or skipping revision. While these may aid completion, they also shape what learners practice and value in test preparation.

While the cognitive and affective challenges of timed writing are well-documented, fewer studies provide qualitative, learner-centered explanations of how candidates *interpret* time pressure during a specific high-stakes task and *why* they adopt particular coping strategies. Understanding these in-the-moment perceptions and rationales is crucial for developing targeted pedagogical support. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates learners’ experiences in timed VSTEP Writing Task 2, focusing on their perceptions of time pressure, reported anxiety triggers, and the rationales behind their coping strategies.

This study does not claim strong theoretical novelty. Rather, its contribution lies in providing a context-specific qualitative account of how A2-entry Vietnamese EFL learners, working toward VSTEP-related demands, perceived time pressure, experienced anxiety, and explained their coping strategies during a timed argumentative writing task.

2. Research Aims and Objectives

This study aims to provide a qualitative, learner-centered explanation of how EFL learners experience timed VSTEP Writing Task 2, with particular attention to perceived time pressure, anxiety triggers, and coping strategies during composing. To achieve the objective, this study addresses the following questions:

1. *How do EFL learners perceive and describe time pressure during timed VSTEP Writing Task 2?*
2. *What are the main anxiety triggers learners report while completing timed Task 2 writing?*
3. *What coping strategies do learners use under time pressure, and how do they explain these choices?*

3. Literature Review

3.1. VSTEP Task 2 Demands

VSTEP Writing Task 2 requires candidates to produce a 250-word argumentative essay within 40 minutes, demonstrating the ability to present and justify opinions, develop arguments, and provide relevant examples on both concrete and abstract topics in line with Level 3–5 descriptors of the Vietnamese six-level framework (Doan & Piamsai, 2025). The task therefore draws simultaneously on idea generation, organization, argumentation, and language control under strict time constraints.

Vietnamese studies suggest that these demands are challenging even for English majors: students commonly struggle with task fulfillment, idea organization, and appropriate vocabulary use, whereas grammar is reported as comparatively less problematic (Trinh et al., 2025). Research on VSTEP-related essay tasks similarly reports intertwined linguistic, cognitive, and affective difficulties, including limited background knowledge, heavy cognitive load, and performance pressure in high-stakes contexts (Kieu, 2022; Phung & Le, 2024). For non-English majors, unfamiliarity with the test format and limited opportunities to practice

extended argumentative essays may further heighten perceived difficulty (Nguyen et al., 2025). Overall, VSTEP Writing Task 2 can be considered a high-demand task that taxes candidates' attentional resources and may be particularly challenging for lower-proficiency writers. These combined demands—cognitive, linguistic, and evaluative—create a fertile ground for anxiety, particularly under the time constraints of the actual test.

3.2. Time Pressure in Second Language Essay Writing

Timed L2 writing places substantial demands on writers' limited attentional and working-memory resources because they must generate ideas, formulate language, and monitor accuracy within a strict time limit (Kellogg, 1996; Kormos, 2012). Experimental studies show that under severe time constraints (i.e., no or minimal planning time), writers engage in more online planning and self-repair. This often prevents simultaneous improvements in complexity, accuracy, and fluency—a trade-off consistent with Kellogg's Overload Hypothesis and limited-capacity models of writing (Kellogg, 1996; Rostamian et al., 2018).

Research also indicates that brief pre-task planning or less pressured online planning can mitigate time constraints, often resulting in higher fluency and, in many cases, better accuracy than conditions in which learners must write immediately under strict timing (Fan & Ma, 2024; Rahimi & Zhang, 2017; Tabari, 2022). Under more pressured conditions, increased working-memory burden may depress syntactic complexity and accuracy, particularly when tasks are cognitively demanding (Güvendir & Uzun, 2023; Johnson, 2017; Li, 2023). Taken together, this body of work suggests that time pressure is not merely a practical test feature but a key cognitive constraint that reshapes composing processes and written outcomes. It may also generate affective strain (e.g., anxiety), which can further influence strategy use during composing—an issue reviewed in the following section.

3.3. Writing Anxiety and Coping Strategies Under Timed Conditions

3.3.1. Writing Anxiety: Triggers and Manifestations in Timed Conditions

Writing anxiety is a skill-specific form of foreign language anxiety involving somatic symptoms (e.g., heart pounding), cognitive worry, and avoidance behaviors (Cheng, 2004; Fan & Wang, 2024; Tabari et al., 2025). Timed and evaluated writing tasks are frequently reported as especially anxiety-provoking. Evidence from the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) highlights that learners often report panic-like reactions “under time constraint” or “under time pressure,” including blank-mind experiences and physiological symptoms (Cheng, 2004; Nugraheni, 2023). Across studies, time limits and assessment orientation repeatedly emerge as prominent triggers, with learners describing reduced concentration, freezing up, and slower writing when they fear not finishing on time (Wern & Rahmat, 2021). Review studies likewise identify time constraints and fear of negative evaluation as key causes of foreign language writing anxiety (Guo et al., 2025).

3.3.2. Effects of Anxiety Under Timed Tasks

Under timed conditions, writing anxiety can shape both the composing process and the written product. At the process level, anxiety may disrupt attention and reduce working-memory availability, interfering with idea generation, lexical retrieval, and online planning. Learners may devote disproportionate effort to monitoring errors or worrying about evaluation, which can slow text production and reduce flexibility in developing arguments. At the product level, empirical work has linked heightened anxiety in timed writing to reduced syntactic complexity and weaker overall performance, particularly in cognitively demanding tasks where

writers must manage content, organization, language form, and time simultaneously (Güvendir & Uzun, 2023; Tabari & Goetze, 2024; Rahimi & Zhang, 2019). In practice, anxiety may also discourage risk-taking: learners may rely on familiar sentence patterns, limit the number of ideas or examples, and reduce revision to ensure task completion within the time limit.

3.3.3. Coping Strategies and Pedagogical Interventions

Learners report a range of coping strategies that either help them regulate anxiety or enable them to complete timed writing tasks. At an individual level, students describe using positive self-talk, brief breaks, and increased practice, as well as following explicit process steps such as brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and quick self-checking (Erdel, 2024; Puspita, 2023). Mixed-method and survey studies also highlight self-regulated strategies, including cognitive and metacognitive planning and reviewing, as well as motivational regulation. Greater use of planning and review strategies tends to be associated with lower anxiety and higher perceived benefits, whereas heavy reliance on translation strategies has been linked to higher anxiety and lower proficiency (Bailey & Almusharraf, 2022; Cui et al., 2024; Fan & Wang, 2024; Teng & Zhang, 2020).

Instructionally, several approaches have been shown to reduce anxiety and support performance in timed writing contexts. Task repetition and sequencing (simple-to-complex) may lower task anxiety over time while improving complexity, accuracy, and fluency in repeated or sequenced tasks (Tabari & Goetze, 2024; Tabari et al., 2025; Tabari & Golparvar, 2025). Portfolio-based instruction emphasizing drafting, feedback, and revision has also been associated with improved timed writing performance and reduced L2 writing anxiety compared with more traditional instruction (Fathi et al., 2020). More broadly, interventions focusing on explicit self-regulation training, peer feedback, and supportive teacher feedback have been recommended to counter fear of evaluation and time-related stress (Cui et al., 2024; Erdel, 2024; Puspita, 2023).

Overall, prior research indicates that timed essay writing imposes substantial cognitive demands that reshape composing processes and written outcomes. Furthermore, anxiety can exacerbate these constraints, leading to risk-avoidant strategies. However, fewer studies provide qualitative, learner-centered, task-specific explanations of how candidates interpret time pressure during a high-stakes timed essay and how they rationalize coping strategies in the moment of composing. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates learners' perceptions of time pressure, reported anxiety triggers, and coping strategies with rationales in timed VSTEP Writing Task 2.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with an explanatory and descriptive aim to examine how EFL learners perceive time pressure, experience anxiety, and adopt coping strategies while completing timed VSTEP Writing Task 2 essays. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on learners' subjective experiences, interpretations, and rationales, which are best captured through in-depth, interpretive methods rather than quantitative measures (Yu & Zhou, 2022). This aligns with recent qualitative work on L2 writing anxiety that uses interviews and thematic analysis to explore the lived experience of "pressure moments" during composing (Erdel, 2024). More specifically, the study is informed by an interpretivist orientation, as it seeks to understand how learners make sense of timed

writing experiences in a specific high-stakes context rather than to measure such experiences as fixed variables. Within this design, reflexive thematic analysis was adopted to identify patterned meanings across learners' accounts while preserving the contextual and interpretive nature of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

This design is particularly suitable for timed exam writing because learners' performance is shaped by the interaction of cognitive demands (e.g., idea generation, lexical retrieval, organization, and time monitoring) and affective pressures (e.g., anxiety, fear of failure, and urgency). Qualitative, task-elicited methods are therefore necessary to capture how learners interpret and navigate these interacting pressures in a specific, high-stakes context rather than treating them as decontextualized variables (Yu & Zhou, 2022; Erdel, 2024).

4.2. Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in an intensive English program at a Vietnamese university. The participants were 10 first-year EFL students whose entry proficiency was approximately A2 based on the program's placement procedures. Within the program, the students were expected to progress toward B2 level and prepare for the VSTEP within one academic year. Although VSTEP Writing Task 2 is associated with higher proficiency demands, these learners were already engaging with the task as an instructional target within their program. The study therefore focused not on whether the participants had already met the target construct, but on how the lower-proficiency learners experienced and interpreted a demanding timed writing task while working toward VSTEP-related expectations.

The participants were recruited through purposive sampling to obtain a small but varied set of information-rich cases for an exploratory qualitative inquiry. In particular, variation was sought in students' self-reported writing confidence and classroom engagement. These characteristics were identified through self-ratings collected prior to participation and teacher knowledge of students' classroom participation. The aim was not to achieve representativeness, but to include learners who might experience timed writing in somewhat different ways. Given the small sample size and single-institution context, the findings are intended to provide contextualized insight rather than broad generalization.

Participation was voluntary, and all the participants provided informed consents. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned and identifying information was removed from all records.

4.3. Data Collection

The data were collected in two sequenced stages and analyzed qualitatively to develop a rich, explanatory account of learners' lived experiences of time pressure, consistent with qualitative designs that foreground subjective interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

First, the participants completed one 40-minute VSTEP Writing Task 2 essay under exam-like conditions (Appendix A). They typed their responses individually on Google Docs to a prompt concerning the decline in children's physical activity (analyzing causes and solutions), a procedure aligned with task-based timed-writing research in L2 assessment (Weigle, 2002). Immediately afterwards, the participants completed a brief open-ended written reflection (Appendix B). The reflections invited them to identify when time pressure felt strongest, what difficulties they experienced (e.g., ideas, vocabulary, grammar, organization, or prompt understanding), and what actions they took when they became stuck. This immediate retrospective step was intended to capture perceptions that were still relatively fresh in memory (Cumming, 2013).

In the second stage, task-elicited semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–40 minutes were conducted within one week of the writing task (Appendix C). During the interviews, the participants reviewed their own essays and written reflections to support recall of specific moments of pressure, anxiety, and strategy use. They were invited to identify particular “pressure moments,” describe the thoughts and feelings associated with these moments, and explain the coping strategies they used to continue writing within the time limit.

The essays were treated primarily as contextual artefacts that supported participants’ retrospective accounts rather than as texts to be scored for writing quality. Because the study relied mainly on retrospective self-report data, these accounts were interpreted as learners’ perceptions and explanations of their experiences rather than as direct evidence of moment-by-moment composing processes.

4.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The primary analytic dataset consisted of participants’ written reflections and interview transcripts, while the timed essays were used as contextual support during interpretation. Analysis was mainly inductive, although attention was guided by the study’s focus on time pressure, anxiety, and coping strategies.

The researcher first read and re-read the reflections and transcripts to gain familiarity with the data and record initial analytic notes. Initial codes were then generated manually, using short descriptive labels that stayed close to participants’ wording. These codes were reviewed and organized into a provisional coding framework, which was refined as the researcher returned to the dataset, merged overlapping codes, and grouped related codes into broader patterns of shared meaning. Candidate themes were then reviewed against both the coded extracts and the full dataset, revised where necessary, and finally defined and named. Throughout the process, analytic memos were kept to document coding decisions, theme development, and interpretive reflections, thereby supporting the transparency of the analysis (Saldaña, 2021). In reporting the findings, participants are identified only through pseudonyms/codes (e.g., S1–S10).

4.5. Research Positionality and Trustworthiness

As a researcher working in the area of EFL writing, I approached this study with prior familiarity with timed writing instruction and the VSTEP preparation context. I was therefore aware that my own assumptions could shape what I noticed in the data, particularly the expectation that timed writing might be experienced as stressful by lower-proficiency learners. Rather than attempting to remove subjectivity entirely, the study addressed it reflexively by making the interpretive process visible throughout the analysis.

To support trustworthiness, the study drew on three related sources of data—the timed essay, the immediate post-task reflection, and the task-elicited interview—to allow comparison across written and spoken accounts of the same experience. An audit trail was maintained through coding notes, theme revisions, and analytic memos, and attention was given to less typical or contradictory cases during theme development. These procedures were intended to strengthen the transparency, reflexivity, and grounding of the analysis.

4.6. Research Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a small sample from a single institutional context and is therefore intended to provide contextualized rather than

generalizable insight. In addition, the study used only one timed writing prompt, and learners' experiences may have varied depending on topic familiarity or perceived task difficulty. Much of the dataset consisted of retrospective self-report data, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability and cannot provide direct evidence of real-time composing processes. The study also did not include process-tracing data such as keystroke logging, screen recording, or think-aloud protocols, nor did it systematically examine individual differences in anxiety intensity or strategy profiles. These areas remain important directions for future research.

5. Results

5.1. Time Pressure as a Persistent Constraint: Clock Awareness and Compressed Composing

Across participants, time pressure was commonly described not simply as a lack of time, but as a persistent awareness of the clock throughout the task. Participants' accounts suggested that this pressure was often felt most strongly at two points: (a) early in the task, when they had to understand the prompt, generate ideas, and decide how to begin, and (b) near the end, when they were trying to complete the essay before time ran out. For example, student 2 (S2) described the beginning of the task as especially difficult: *"I feel peak pressure at the start. I often spend around 10 minutes understanding the task and generating ideas."* In contrast, other participants emphasized end-stage pressure more strongly. S9 stated directly: *"I often can't finish the task in 40 minutes."* Similarly, S3 reported that time pressure sometimes disrupted their usual essay sequence: *"Forty minutes are not enough. I usually have to write the conclusion before finishing the body because I'm rushing."*

Taken together, these accounts suggest that many participants experienced timed writing as a shift from writing carefully to writing in order to finish. Several participants also linked time pressure to shortened or skipped planning and to limited revision. Some described beginning to type immediately in order to save time, later realizing that the lack of planning made organization more difficult. Others reported making a brief plan but feeling that it remained unstable and changed as they wrote. Overall, participants' accounts indicate that awareness of limited time often influenced how they allocated attention across planning, idea development, and completion.

5.2. Anxiety Triggers: Uncertainty, Evaluation Fear and Linguistic Insecurity

Participants' accounts suggested that time pressure frequently interacted with anxiety, although the immediate triggers were not identical across learners. One commonly reported trigger was difficulty understanding the prompt or retrieving vocabulary, which often created uncertainty about how to proceed. As S2 explained: *"Sometimes I don't understand the task, especially the vocabulary. I don't know what to do and how to do it."* A related difficulty appeared even when the prompt was broadly understood but the participant struggled to initiate writing. For instance, S5 reported: *"I understand the task but I don't know where to start."* These accounts suggest that anxiety was often tied to early-stage composing demands such as task comprehension, idea generation, and starting the first paragraph.

Another reported trigger was fear of failure or negative consequences in a high-stakes context. S4 explicitly linked the task to test-related worry: *"I think a lot about failing the test when I do the writing task. This is the most difficult part for me."* In this sense, anxiety appeared to stem not only from language difficulty, but also from concern about evaluation and performance outcomes.

Participants also described anxiety in relation to the experience of reduced composing

control under time pressure. S3 stated: *"I can't write and think at the same time within 40 minutes."* Similarly, S10 reported: *"When I am under timed writing pressure, I write more slowly and often can't finish the task."* These accounts suggest a possible pressure–anxiety cycle within this dataset: limited time increased anxiety for some participants, and that anxiety appeared to make writing feel slower, less controlled, or harder to sustain.

5.3. Coping Strategies: Simplification, Content Reduction and Completion-Oriented Writing

To manage time pressure and anxiety, participants described several coping strategies aimed at maintaining progress and increasing the likelihood of task completion. One frequently reported strategy was language simplification. Rather than attempting more complex structures, some learners deliberately used shorter and simpler sentences to save time and reduce the risk of error. As S3 explained: *"To save time, I often use simple short sentences instead of complex ones."*

Another strategy involved relying on memorized formats or familiar organizational patterns. S1 reported: *"I need to learn by heart the structure to apply to the test."* In this case, memorized structure appeared to provide a sense of control and a quicker way to organize the essay under pressure. Participants also described reducing content as a practical response to limited time. Instead of developing several ideas or examples, they sometimes cut back in order to finish within 40 minutes. As S8 noted, *"Sometimes I need to reduce the ideas and examples to fit the time."*

Finally, some participants reported giving up revision because of time shortage. S10 stated, *"I often don't have time for reviewing the work before time's up,"* suggesting that checking for errors was often deprioritized in favor of completing the essay. Overall, these accounts indicate that many coping strategies were strongly completion-oriented. Although the exact combination of strategies differed across participants, the reported pattern was broadly similar: simplifying language, relying on learned structures, reducing content, and limiting review in order to keep writing under time pressure.

6. Discussion

This study explored how A2-entry EFL learners, working toward VSTEP-related demands, retrospectively described time pressure, anxiety triggers, and coping strategies while completing a timed VSTEP Writing Task 2 essay. Overall, participants' accounts suggest that Task 2 was experienced as a demanding writing situation in which idea generation, organization, lexical retrieval, and time monitoring had to be managed simultaneously. In this sense, the findings are broadly consistent with previous research describing VSTEP-related writing as linguistically, cognitively, and affectively demanding, particularly in high-stakes contexts (Doan & Piamsai, 2025; Kieu, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2025; Phung & Le, 2024; Trinh et al., 2025). At the same time, the contribution of the present study lies less in proposing a new theoretical model than in providing a context-specific qualitative account of how these pressures were perceived and explained by lower-proficiency learners in a VSTEP preparation context.

6.1. Time Pressure as a Cognitive Constraint

Participants commonly described time pressure as a persistent awareness of the clock rather than as a simple lack of time. In particular, pressure appeared to intensify at two stages: at the beginning of the task, when learners were trying to understand the prompt and generate ideas, and near the end, when they were trying to complete the essay before time ran out. Several participants also reported shortened or unstable planning and limited revision. These accounts suggest that, within this dataset, time pressure influenced how learners distributed attention across planning, idea development, and completion.

One possible interpretation, supported by prior literature, is that timed VSTEP Writing Task 2 places lower-proficiency learners under a form of constrained attentional load. This interpretation is consistent with limited-capacity models of writing, which argue that planning, language formulation, and monitoring compete for finite attentional resources under time pressure (Kellogg, 1996; Kormos, 2012). It is also consistent with research showing that severe time constraints compress planning and revision and push writers toward online planning and rapid text production (Fan & Ma, 2024; Rahimi & Zhang, 2017; Rostamian et al., 2018; Tabari, 2022). In the present study, however, these dynamics are not observed directly through process-tracing data; rather, they are inferred from participants' retrospective descriptions of feeling rushed, reorganizing essay structure, and prioritizing completion.

These findings may also help explain why VSTEP Writing Task 2 can be especially demanding for A2-entry learners. Although the task is associated with higher proficiency demands, the participants in this study were still developing toward that target. Their accounts therefore suggest not only general timed-writing pressure, but also the experience of encountering a task whose linguistic and rhetorical demands may exceed their current resources.

6.2. Anxiety Triggers and a Possible Pressure-Anxiety Cycle

Participants' accounts also suggest that time pressure and anxiety were closely intertwined, although the immediate triggers were not identical across learners. For some, anxiety centered on prompt comprehension and vocabulary retrieval; for others, it was linked more strongly to difficulty initiating the essay or to fear of not finishing. Fear of failure and negative evaluation also appeared in several accounts. These patterns indicate that anxiety in timed Task 2 writing was not limited to language form alone, but also involved uncertainty, perceived inadequacy, and concern about performance outcomes.

These reported experiences are broadly consistent with previous research on L2 writing anxiety. Prior studies have shown that timed and evaluated writing tasks often trigger blank-mind experiences, concentration difficulties, and fear of negative evaluation (Cheng, 2004; Guo et al., 2025; Nugraheni, 2023; Wern & Rahmat, 2021). In the present study, participants similarly described uncertainty about how to proceed, difficulty managing simultaneous thinking and writing, and worry about test failure. Taken together, these accounts suggest a possible pressure–anxiety cycle within this dataset: limited time increased feelings of anxiety for some participants, and that anxiety, in turn, appeared to make writing feel slower, less controlled, or harder to sustain.

Importantly, this “pressure–anxiety cycle” should be understood as an interpretive framing of participants' accounts rather than as a directly measured causal mechanism. The study did not include real-time process data such as keystroke logging, screen recording, or think-aloud protocols. Nevertheless, the recurring pattern across reflections and interviews suggests that for at least some learners, time pressure and anxiety were experienced as mutually reinforcing rather than as separate influences.

6.3. Coping Strategies as Completion-Oriented Risk Management

Participants reported several coping strategies that were strongly oriented toward maintaining progress and increasing the likelihood of finishing the task. These included simplifying sentence structure, relying on memorized organizational patterns, reducing the number of ideas or examples, and limiting or skipping revision. Although the exact combination of strategies differed across participants, the overall pattern was broadly similar: learners appeared to favor options that reduced immediate cognitive load and lowered the perceived risk

of not completing the essay.

These findings largely confirm previous literature rather than suggesting a strongly new conceptual pattern. Earlier research has likewise reported simplification, reduced revision, and reliance on familiar patterns as common responses to time pressure and writing anxiety (Güvendir & Uzun, 2023; Rahimi & Zhang, 2017; Tabari, 2022; Tabari & Goetze, 2024). However, the present study adds contextual specificity by showing how such strategies were rationalized by A2-entry learners in a VSTEP-related writing context. In participants' accounts, these strategies were not presented as ideal writing practices, but as practical ways of managing pressure, uncertainty, and the need to finish on time.

For this reason, the coping strategies in this study may be understood as a form of completion-oriented risk management. Learners appeared to make pragmatic trade-offs: they reduced linguistic and content ambition in order to preserve momentum and avoid breakdown under time pressure. This interpretation is also compatible with literature suggesting that anxiety can discourage risk-taking and encourage reliance on safer, more familiar options. At the same time, the findings suggest that such strategies may help learners complete the task while potentially constraining idea development, elaboration, and revision—abilities that are also important for stronger Task 2 performance.

6.4. Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of this study should be tied closely to what participants actually reported. First, because several learners described strongest pressure at the beginning of the task and difficulty knowing how to start, instruction may need to focus more explicitly on entry into the task. Quick idea-generation templates, prompt-analysis routines, and simple paragraph-function frames may help learners move from task interpretation to drafting more efficiently. Such support appears particularly relevant for lower-proficiency learners who experience the beginning of timed writing as cognitively congested.

Second, because participants frequently referred to clock awareness and fear of not finishing, teachers may consider training a short, repeatable timed-writing routine that protects basic planning and revision time. For example, learners might practice a fixed sequence such as brief outlining, controlled drafting, and a minimal final check. This implication is grounded in the present data, where learners reported rushed starts, unstable planning, and reduced review, and it is also supported by literature suggesting that planning can mitigate some effects of time pressure (Fan & Ma, 2024; Rahimi & Zhang, 2017; Tabari, 2022).

Third, because some participants relied heavily on memorized structures and language simplification to maintain control, pedagogy may need to balance short-term exam survival with longer-term writing development. Fixed frames may serve as useful scaffolds in early timed-writing practice, but they should gradually be accompanied by work on lexical expansion, idea elaboration, and efficient revision so that “safe” strategies do not become the default ceiling of performance.

Finally, because fear of failure and reduced composing control emerged in several accounts, affective support should not be separated from writing instruction. Teachers may need to normalize time-related stress, reduce evaluative threat where possible in practice settings, and equip learners with manageable recovery moves when they get stuck, such as using a temporary sentence stem, drafting a simpler version first, or leaving a point to return to later. These implications are modest rather than prescriptive, but they suggest that support for timed

VSTEP writing should address not only language and organization, but also learners' emotional management of the task.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored how A2-entry EFL learners in a Vietnamese university context perceived time pressure, experienced anxiety, and explained their coping strategies while completing a timed VSTEP Writing Task 2 essay. Overall, the findings suggest that many participants experienced timed writing as a demanding process shaped by persistent clock awareness, difficulty initiating and sustaining ideas, fear of not finishing, and reliance on completion-oriented coping strategies. Within this dataset, participants commonly described simplifying language, relying on memorized structures, reducing content, and limiting revision in order to keep writing under pressure.

Rather than claiming broad generalizability or strong theoretical novelty, the study contributes a context-specific qualitative account of how lower-proficiency learners, working toward VSTEP-related demands, made sense of a timed argumentative writing task that may exceed their current linguistic and rhetorical resources. In this respect, the study adds to existing research not by proposing a wholly new model of timed writing, but by showing how the pressure–anxiety–coping relationship was experienced and rationalized by learners in a VSTEP preparation context.

Several pedagogical implications follow from these findings. First, because participants frequently reported difficulty entering the task, instruction may need to provide more explicit support for prompt analysis, quick idea generation, and early paragraph planning. Second, because fear of not finishing was a recurrent concern, learners may benefit from practicing a short, repeatable timed-writing routine that protects at least minimal planning and revision time. Third, while memorized structures and simplified language may help lower-proficiency learners maintain control in the short term, instruction should gradually extend beyond “survival writing” by building idea elaboration, lexical flexibility, and efficient revision habits. Finally, because anxiety in this study appeared closely tied to feelings of uncertainty and loss of control, writing instruction in VSTEP-related contexts may need to address affective regulation alongside language and organization.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The study involved a small sample from a single institutional context and used only one writing prompt. In addition, the dataset relied largely on retrospective self-report data and did not include process-tracing methods such as keystroke logging, screen recording, or think-aloud protocols. The findings should therefore be understood as participants' reported perceptions and explanations rather than as direct evidence of real-time composing processes. Future research could build on this study by examining a wider range of prompts and contexts, incorporating process-based data, and exploring individual differences in anxiety intensity and coping profiles more systematically.

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APPENDIX

