

SCAFFOLDING FORMAL LETTER WRITING IN VSTEP PREPARATION: EFFECTS ON GENRE PERFORMANCE AND LEARNER CONFIDENCE AMONG VIETNAMESE EFL UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Formal letter writing remains one of the most demanding components of the VSTEP examination for many Vietnamese university students, however it has received comparatively little attention in the pedagogical literature. This study examines whether a structured scaffolding program can improve Writing Task 1 performance among students in the High-Quality Training Program at the University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), Thai Nguyen University - a population for whom VSTEP B2 certification is a non-negotiable graduation requirement. Forty third-year students participated in an eight-week action research intervention built around three scaffolding types: hard scaffolding through writing templates and annotated model texts, soft scaffolding through teacher-led Socratic questioning, and peer scaffolding through guided review sessions. Pre- and post-intervention writing scores were compared using paired-samples t-tests, and student confidence was tracked at three time points via a Likert-scale questionnaire. Using the official VSTEP four-criterion rubric (each criterion scored 0 -10), the intervention produced significant gains across all criteria ($p < .001$), with formal register and task fulfilment showing the largest improvements. Students also reported substantially greater confidence in composing formal letters independently. The findings are discussed in relation to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Bruner's scaffolding framework, and practical recommendations are offered for VSTEP writing instructors.

Keyword: scaffolding, formal letter writing, VSTEP, Zone of Proximal Development, L2 writing, Vietnamese EFL

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its national introduction in 2015, the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP) has become the dominant target for measuring English competence among Vietnamese university graduates and professionals. Administered by the Vietnam National University system, the test covers listening, reading, speaking, and writing at three levels mapped broadly onto CEFR B1, B2, and C1. For students enrolled in High-Quality Training Programs, the stakes are particularly concrete: VSTEP B2 certification is written into the graduation requirements of programs such as the one at the University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), Thai Nguyen University. Successful completion of the examination is a compulsory requirement.

Within the writing section, Task 1 asks candidates to produce a formal letter of 120 -180 words in response to a given prompt - a complaint, inquiry, application, or similar communicative situation. In the classroom experience of the present author, this task trips up more students than any other part of the examination. The difficulties are not primarily grammatical. Students who can construct reasonably accurate sentences in less formal contexts often flounder when asked to adopt a sustained formal register, organize a letter according to expected English conventions, or choose vocabulary appropriate to written professional correspondence. The gap between what they can do in everyday English and what Task 1 requires seems, to many of them, genuinely hard to close.

A natural response to this problem, from a theoretical standpoint, is Vygotsky's (1978)

concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) - the region between what a learner can do independently and what they can manage with guidance from a more capable other. Learning, in Vygotsky's account, happens most efficiently in this zone. Bruner (1976) gave this idea a practical form by introducing the term scaffolding to describe how a tutor can provide temporary, calibrated support that enables a novice to complete tasks beyond their current unaided capacity - support that is progressively withdrawn as the learner gains competence. Hyland (2003), writing specifically about second language writing instruction, made a related argument: that genre knowledge and register awareness cannot simply be absorbed through exposure but need to be explicitly taught, ideally through staged, supported practice.

The present study asks whether these ideas can be put to work in a **specific, high-pressure academic environment**. Forty students in TUEBA's High-Quality Training Program participated in an eight-week scaffolded writing program targeting VSTEP Writing Task 1. Three research questions guided the investigation:

1. *Do scaffolding strategies produce measurable improvement in VSTEP formal letter writing scores?*
2. *Which aspects of writing: organization, vocabulary, and register benefit most?*
3. *Does students' self-reported confidence in formal letter writing change over the course of the program?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory rests on the premise that cognitive development is fundamentally a social process: the thinking that eventually becomes internal and independent begins as shared activity between people. The ZPD captures the productive tension in this process, the space where a learner cannot quite manage alone but can succeed with assistance. The pedagogical implication is that instruction aimed at what students can already do independently is largely wasted; real development happens when teaching targets the ZPD.

Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) gave this insight a concrete instructional form. Working from observations of adult-child problem-solving sessions, they described how effective tutors recruit a novice's interest, reduce the complexity of the task to manageable portions, keep the learner oriented toward the goal, highlight what matters, and model solutions when necessary - all while calibrating the level of support to the learner's current state. The support is meant to be temporary. Once a competency is internalized, the tutor pulls back. The metaphor of a scaffold is apt: it holds things in place until the structure can support itself, then it comes down.

Later researchers extended this framework to distinguish between different scaffolding modes in classroom settings. Hard scaffolding refers to pre-designed materials - templates, sentence starters, annotated model texts - that provide structural support regardless of what happens in any individual lesson. Soft scaffolding is contingent and conversational: the questions a teacher asks in the moment, the way feedback is worded, the decision to hint rather than tell. Peer scaffolding involves the mediation of learning through interaction among students themselves, typically structured by teacher-provided criteria or prompts (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005).

2.2 Scaffolding and Second Language Writing

The case for scaffolding in L2 writing instruction has been made most influentially by Hyland (2003), who argued that writing in a second language is not simply a matter of encoding ideas grammatically but involves entry into socially regulated genres with their own conventions, purposes, and audience expectations. These conventions are not intuitive to outsiders; they need to be made visible and practiced. Genre-based pedagogy, in Hyland's account, is essentially scaffolded pedagogy: the teacher models the target genre, jointly constructs examples with learners, and eventually releases control as students gain independence.

Empirical work has broadly supported this view. Chang (2011) found that Taiwanese university students receiving genre-based scaffolded instruction outperformed a control group on academic essay writing, with particularly clear gains in organization and register appropriateness. Nguyen and Nguyen (2017) reported similar results in a Vietnamese EFL

context, noting that scaffolded feedback cycles in which teachers responded to drafts with targeted questions rather than direct corrections led to more substantive revisions and stronger lexical choices. The evidence on peer scaffolding is also encouraging: Tsui and Ng (2000) showed that the act of evaluating a peer's writing, when structured around explicit criteria, produces deeper internalization of those criteria than simply reading a rubric does.

2.3 VSTEP Writing Task 1: Format, Scoring, and Learner Challenges

Before designing scaffolds for a task, it helps to understand precisely what that task requires - and where learners characteristically fall short. This section describes the VSTEP Writing Task 1 format and its scoring system, then reviews the main difficulties documented in the literature.

VSTEP Writing Task 1 presents candidates with a situational prompt specifying a communicative purpose, a recipient, and a relationship between writer and reader. The candidate must produce a formal letter of approximately 120-180 words in continuous prose, bullet points and numbered lists are not acceptable, within the time allocated for the Writing section. The task recurs across a range of letter types, including complaints, inquiries, job applications, invitations, apologies, and recommendations. Table A1 in the Appendix provides a format overview and a sample prompt at B2 level.

Responses are assessed on four equally weighted criteria, each scored on a band scale of 0 -10. Task Fulfilment evaluates whether the letter addresses the given communicative purpose, covers all required content points, and stays within an appropriate length. Organization examines how logically the letter is structured, the sequencing of rhetorical moves (opening, development, closing), paragraph coherence, and the effective use of discourse markers. Vocabulary assesses the range and precision of lexical choices and, critically, whether the candidate has maintained register-appropriate language throughout; informal or colloquial wording is explicitly penalized under this criterion. Grammar evaluates the variety and accuracy of syntactic structures. The official band descriptors for each criterion are published by the Vietnam National University examination authority.

Research on Vietnamese EFL learners' formal writing difficulties paints a fairly consistent picture. Pham (2019) and Le and Nguyen (2020) both point to the influence of L1 discourse patterns: Vietnamese written communication tends toward indirectness and formulaic politeness in ways that do not transfer smoothly into the more direct, purpose-first structure of formal English correspondence. Students frequently open letters with lengthy contextualizing statements before arriving at their actual purpose - a habit that costs marks under both Task Fulfilment and Organization. Vocabulary is another persistent weakness: learners often have an adequate general vocabulary but reach instinctively for informal or high-frequency words when more formal alternatives are needed, and they may be unaware that a word like "want" or "get" is inappropriate in a letter addressed to a hotel manager or university admissions officer. Genre-specific conventions - how to address an unknown recipient, how to close a formal letter, how to phrase a complaint without sounding rude - are also areas of genuine uncertainty for many students. These challenges point toward the kind of explicit, staged genre instruction that scaffolding is designed to provide.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study used an action research design, which seemed appropriate for several reasons. The researcher was also the students' course instructor, which made random assignment to experimental and control conditions both logistically difficult and ethically questionable, it would have meant deliberately withholding the intervention from students facing the same examination deadline. Action research allowed for systematic data collection within authentic teaching conditions while acknowledging the dual role of the researcher-practitioner (Burns, 2010). Both quantitative data (writing scores) and qualitative data (confidence ratings and written reflections) were gathered, with each informing interpretation of the other.

3.2 Participants

Forty third-year students (27 females, 13 males; aged 20–22) from the High-Quality Training Program at TUEBA, Thai Nguyen University took part. The choice of this group was deliberate.

Because VSTEP B2 certification is a stated graduation requirement of their program, these students had a personal purpose in improving their formal letter writing, they were not practicing a genre they might encounter someday but one they would need to perform satisfactorily within a defined timeframe. Placement assessments conducted before the study placed all participants at approximately CEFR B1, positioning them within the ZPD for the skills being taught. All participants gave written consent, and data were anonymized throughout.

3.3 The Instructional Program

The program ran for eight weeks with two 90-minute classes per week (24 hours total), organized into four two-week phases representing a gradual release of instructional responsibility.

1. Weeks 1-2: Modeling and Deconstruction (Hard Scaffolding). The instructor introduced annotated model letters representing different VSTEP task types. Students worked with guided frameworks to identify rhetorical moves and distinguish formal from informal lexical choices. Partially completed sentence templates were provided for initial drafting.
2. Weeks 3-4: Joint Construction (Soft Scaffolding). The class worked together on VSTEP-style prompts, with the instructor using Socratic questioning: "Is this vocabulary appropriate for addressing someone you have never met?" "What does the rubric say about register?" rather than providing corrections. Individual drafts received targeted written feedback within 48 hours, limited to three specific issues per script.
3. Weeks 5-6: Peer Review (Peer Scaffolding). Students wrote letters independently, then reviewed a classmate's draft using a four-criterion rubric adapted from the VSTEP scoring guide. Reviewers were required to write specific comments under each criterion, not merely assign scores so that the exercise demanded genuine engagement with the text.

4. Weeks 7-8: Independent Production (Fading). Templates, model texts, and collaborative support were withdrawn. Students responded to unseen prompts under timed, examination-like conditions. Written reflections were collected at the end of Week 8.

3.4 Instruments

Writing performance was measured using a pre-test (Week 1) and post-test (Week 8), each requiring a formal letter of complaint in response to a VSTEP-format prompt (120-180 words, 30 minutes). Both prompts were reviewed by an experienced VSTEP examiner for equivalence in difficulty. Scripts were scored independently by the course instructor and an external VSTEP-certified rater using the official four-criterion rubric, with each criterion scored on the 0-10 band scale (maximum total: 40 points). Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = .83$) indicated strong inter-rater agreement.

A five-item Likert questionnaire (1-5 scale) assessed students' confidence in specific aspects of formal letter writing at three time points: the start of Week 1, the start of Week 5, and the end of Week 8. Open-ended written reflections, collected at the final time, asked students to describe what had changed about their approach to the task and what they still found difficult.

3.5 Analysis

Pre- and post-test scores were compared using paired-samples t-tests (IBM SPSS 25), with Cohen's d as a measure of effect size. Confidence questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively; a one-way repeated measures ANOVA with Bonferroni correction examined change across the three time points. Reflections were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006), with an inductive coding approach and member-checking to verify theme plausibility.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Writing Scores: Pre-Test to Post-Test

Table 1 reports mean scores for each criterion and the overall total at pre-test and post-test, using the official VSTEP 0-10 per-criterion scale (maximum total: 40 points). Every criterion improved significantly, with all effect sizes in the large range.

Table 1. Pre-Test and Post-Test Mean Scores by Criterion (N = 40; each criterion scored 0–10)

Criterion	Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)	Gain	t(39)	p	d
Task Fulfilment	5.65 (1.08)	7.40 (0.93)	+1.75	9.78	< .001	1.63
Organization	5.38 (1.22)	7.10 (1.01)	+1.72	8.61	< .001	1.44
Vocabulary	5.00 (1.27)	6.93 (1.06)	+1.93	10.14	< .001	1.61
Grammar	5.54 (1.19)	6.79 (1.02)	+1.25	6.24	< .001	1.05
Overall Total (/40)	21.57 (3.96)	28.21 (3.44)	+6.64	11.35	< .001	1.80

The overall mean rose from 21.57 to 28.21, a gain of 6.64 points on a 40-point scale. Vocabulary showed the largest absolute gain (1.93 points; $d = 1.61$), followed by Task Fulfilment (1.75; $d = 1.63$) and Organization (1.72; $d = 1.44$). Grammar improved meaningfully but to a lesser degree (1.25; $d = 1.05$), a pattern taken up in the Discussion. All effect sizes exceeded Cohen's (1988) threshold of $d = 0.80$ for a large effect, indicating that improvements were practically as well as statistically significant.

4.2 Confidence Ratings

Table 2 shows self-reported confidence means at three time points. The repeated measures ANOVA returned a significant main effect of time, $F(2, 78) = 183.61$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .82$, and pairwise comparisons confirmed that each time point was significantly higher than the one before it (all $p < .001$, Bonferroni-corrected).

Table 2. Self-Reported Confidence Means at Three Time Points (N = 40; Scale 1–5)

Dimension	Pre (Wk 1)	Mid (Wk 4)	Post (Wk 8)	Δ
Maintaining formal tone	2.18	3.35	4.23	+2.05
Knowledge of letter structure	2.55	3.70	4.40	+1.85
Choosing appropriate vocabulary	2.30	3.48	4.10	+1.80
Finishing within the time limit	2.08	3.15	3.93	+1.85
Overall confidence in formal writing	2.28	3.44	4.15	+1.87

Improvements were substantial across all five dimensions, ranging from 1.80 (vocabulary choice) to 2.05 (maintaining formal tone). The lowest absolute post-intervention mean was for time management (3.93), suggesting that writing to time remains a source of anxiety even after the program. Notably, the dimension that improved most in the confidence data, formal tone, aligns with the criterion that showed the largest proportional improvement in the scoring data,

Vocabulary, where register appropriateness is directly assessed.

4.3 Themes from Student Reflections

Four themes emerged from the end-of-program reflections. Students most often mentioned that the model texts and templates in the early weeks gave them a way into the task when they had not previously known where to begin, several used the phrase "I knew what to do" to describe the

shift. A second theme concerned the instructor's questioning style: a number of students noted that being asked why they had made a particular word choice was more useful than being told the choice was wrong, because it made them think about formality as a principle rather than a list of dos and don'ts. Peer review generated more mixed responses, most students valued it, particularly for seeing how classmates handled the same prompt differently, but several found giving written comments time-consuming and awkward at first. The fourth theme was autonomy: in the final-phase reflections, a majority of students expressed that they now felt capable of tackling an unseen formal letter prompt on their own, a confidence that, by their own account, had not existed at the start of the course.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Interpreting Overall Outcomes: ZPD, Motivation, and Institutional Context

A mean improvement of 6.64 points on a 40-point scale, with large effect sizes across every criterion, is a stronger outcome than expected from an eight-week program. Some caution is needed: without a control group, it is not possible to prove that practice effects, higher motivation, or general writing experience did not also contribute to the increase. However, effect sizes of this magnitude - $d = 1.80$ for the overall score - are difficult to explain by natural progress alone, and the pattern of results is consistent with what the scaffolding framework predicts.

In essence, the framework predicts that students working just below a target level benefit most from instruction that makes the gap visible and provides structured ways to close it. The TUEBA students were in exactly that position: B1 learners working toward a B2 requirement, in a genre they had rarely practiced formally. The strict graduation requirement may also have given the program a clear purpose that amplified its effects - these students were not practicing formal letter writing as an abstract exercise, but as preparation for an exam with real consequences.

5.2 Differential Outcomes Across Criteria: Register, Vocabulary, and Grammar

The largest absolute improvement was in Vocabulary (1.93 points; $d = 1.61$), which is important to examine because register is often considered one of the hardest parts of L2 writing

to teach directly. This increase seems to come from hard and soft scaffolding working together on the same problem. The annotated model texts in Phase 1 made register easy to see: students could compare formal and informal options side by side and understand why one is correct for a hotel manager while the other is not. The Socratic questioning in Phase 2 then pushed them to use this knowledge in real time and explain their reasoning. This kind of metalinguistic awareness - knowing not just that a word is wrong but understanding why - appears more effective and durable than just learning vocabulary lists.

The relatively smaller growth in Grammar (1.25 points; $d = 1.05$) is less surprising. Eight weeks is not enough time to significantly expand the complex structures of a B1 writer. The structures that students struggled with most, such as conditionals, passive voice, and nominalization, need a lot of practice to become automatic, and the program did not have specific time for grammar lessons. A revised version of the project could include short grammar activities in Phase 1 or 2, focusing on the specific structures needed for formal letter writing.

5.3 The Evolving Role of the Teacher: From Genre Expert to Background Facilitator

Perhaps the most important part of the program was how the teacher's role changed across its four phases. In the first weeks, the teacher acted as an expert on the genre: explaining rules, showing models, and making the logic of formal letter structure clear. By Weeks 3 and 4, this role had shifted significantly. The teacher started asking questions more than giving answers and returned drafts with suggestions rather than just corrections. This put students in a position where they had to make and defend their own choices. During the peer review phase, the teacher's main job was to organize and supervise how students talked to each other, rather than joining in. By the final phase, the teacher was almost unnecessary to the actual writing process.

This is a substantial transition with important pedagogical implications. Most VSTEP preparation courses work the opposite way: teachers correct drafts, point out errors, and tell students what to change. That method creates better second drafts, but it might not help students develop the skills they need for a new exam prompt. The scaffolding model aims for something more difficult: not just

fixing individual texts, but developing the writers themselves. The data on student confidence support this idea: the students' most impressive achievement was their feeling that they could handle the task independently, which is exactly what is needed in an exam.

5.4 Perceived Effectiveness of Hard, Soft, and Peer Scaffolding

The study was not designed to separate the effects of each scaffolding type, so claims about which one worked best should be treated with caution. However, the students' reflections offer some useful observations. Hard scaffolding - such as templates and model texts - was most valued at the beginning of the program when students felt lost. Once they had learned the genre structure, several students mentioned that the templates felt limiting. This may be a sign that the scaffolds were working: they were becoming unnecessary.

Soft scaffolding through Socratic questioning was described by many as the most difficult part, but also the most useful in the end. The experience of having to justify a word choice felt very different from simply being told it was wrong. It was more uncomfortable at the time, but it was better for their long-term development. Finally, peer review had mixed results. Students who took the rubric criteria seriously found it helpful for organizing their knowledge; those who saw it as just a formality found it less useful. This suggests that peer scaffolding needs more preparation—students need more training for the evaluator role before they are asked to perform it.

5.5 Limitations

Three limitations are worth mentioning. The absence of a control group is the most obvious: without one, it is difficult to prove that the improvements were caused only by the scaffolding program. The fact that the study was conducted at a single site with one group of students also limits its generalizability. The results might not be the same for students at different proficiency levels, in different programs, or those preparing for VSTEP B1 or C1 instead of B2. Additionally, the self-report confidence data, while consistent with the test scores, are subjective. These responses might reflect general satisfaction with the course rather than a true judgment of writing ability. Future studies would benefit from using a comparison group, repeating the research at other institutions, and including a longer

follow-up to see if the progress lasts after the exam is over.

6. CONCLUSION

The central finding of this study is straightforward: eight weeks of scaffolded instruction produced large, statistically significant improvements in VSTEP Writing Task 1 performance for B1-level students. These results were consistent across all four scoring criteria and were accompanied by a substantial increase in self-reported writing confidence. The program was not complicated; it used long-standing principles of scaffolding, applied to a specific and practically important writing task. What it required, more than any complex technology, was a willingness from the instructor to change roles: to stop correcting and start questioning, to provide support early and withdraw it deliberately, and to focus on developing independent writers rather than just producing better drafts.

For teachers working with students in high-stakes contexts like High-Quality Training Programs, the practical message is clear: students who struggle with formal letter writing often do not fail because they lack grammar knowledge. Instead, they struggle because they have never seen how the genre works from the inside, never thought about why certain words are inappropriate in a formal letter, and never practiced evaluating a text against clear criteria. Scaffolding, in its various forms, addresses all three gaps.

While this study shows positive results, it is unclear if the same approach works as well at the C1 level or over shorter periods. Future research should test these findings across different institutions and proficiency levels. It would also be useful to separate the effects of individual scaffolding types and explore how technology can support the teacher's role. What the evidence does suggest is that this combined approach, delivered in a logical sequence, is worth the effort.

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Appendix

VSTEP Writing Task 1 - Format and Sample Prompt

Table A1. VSTEP Writing Task 1: Format Summary

Feature	Description
Task type	Formal letter in response to a situational prompt
Word count	Approximately 120–180 words
Format	Continuous formal prose; no bullet points or numbered lists
Common letter types	Complaint, inquiry, application, invitation, recommendation, apology, request
Assessment criteria	Task Fulfilment; Organization; Vocabulary; Grammar
Scoring scale	Each criterion: 0–10; Maximum total: 40 points
CEFR level covered	B1 (minimum pass), B2 (standard target), C1 (advanced)

Sample Prompt (B2 level):

You recently stayed at a hotel for a business conference. However, you were dissatisfied with the service you received. Write a letter to the hotel manager to:

- describe the problems you experienced during your stay;
- explain how these problems affected you;

- suggest what action the hotel should take.

Write approximately 120–180 words. You do NOT need to include postal addresses. Begin your letter with "Dear Manager,"