An investigation of Thai students' English language writing difficulties and their use of writing strategies

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Abstract

Aim: This research aims to learn more about the struggles undergraduate students in Thailand have when writing in the English language and the strategies they employ to overcome those difficulties.

Methodology: Using a questionnaire with five-point Likert scale items, 157 students enrolled in an intermediate English course provided quantitative data for this study. The data was analyzed with the help of the mean score, the standard deviation, and a chi-square test.

Findings: According to the findings, the student's writing skills were significantly below par, with the majority of complaints focusing on grammar. It was also discovered that the subjects routinely used cognitive strategies, most notably resourcing. There was no correlation between students' writing proficiency and the types of writing strategies they employed.

Implications/Novelty: Teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers can use the results to better understand their students' struggles with written English. It also emphasizes the importance of teaching students writing strategies so they can employ them to overcome any writing challenges they may encounter.

Key Words: Thai Writing Difficulties, Writing Strategies, Undergraduate Students, English Teaching, Teaching English Writing

INTRODUCTION

After years of preparation, Thailand has finally joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. As a result, English has become a de facto working language for personal and professional purposes. Thus, English is crucial for all member countries to develop their human resources to compete in Asia's local, national, or international job market. Students enrolled in higher education institutions in Thailand must develop their linguistic abilities in English, including their capacity for written, oral, and aural communication. Form filling, message taking, emailing, and business correspondence all require the ability to put pen to paper. Additionally, this skill is essential when some students participate in international environments, such as by pursuing higher education opportunities abroad. Many Thai students consider writing to be the most difficult academic subject.

Several studies have looked into Thai students' difficulties with learning languages. The writing was found to be the most difficult aspect of the English language for Thai undergraduates enrolled in international university programs in Thailand in a study by Pawapatcharaudom (2007). Imala-(2013) Ong's investigation of issues with language learning at Mae Fah Laung University (MFU) found that "writing skill problems" were particularly prevalent among MFU students. Based on his findings, Pawapatcharaudom (2007) divided the writing difficulties of Thai students into four categories. Unable to (1) complete an essay in a short amount of time, (2) complete an academic paper in English, (3) make flawless use of grammar rules in all writing assignments, and (4) create an appropriate structure for the content.

In a global context, the results of Huang's (2008) study corroborated the idea that English as a Second Language (ESL) authors face greater challenges than native English speakers when writing in the language. Several studies in recent years have looked at the primary obstacles to learning to write. It was found that students believed they could not use grammar rules correctly when writing and completing an essay promptly Gilmore (as cited Ismail

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2011). There was also a lack of writing experience among students (Kobayashi and Rinnert 2002; Ismail 2011; Pradhan 2016). Writing an English paper can cause students stress, overwhelm, and confusion when they have never written anything of this length. Therefore, it is important to determine what could help students achieve writing success to overcome writing challenges. Writing strategies, which have been the subject of extensive research, are one solution (Arndt 1987; Riazi 1997; Sasaki 2000; Victori 1995; Wenden 1991). In general, we can group the various ways of organizing one's approach to writing into the metacognitive and cognitive spheres. Some studies have broken down writing strategies into smaller categories, such as "resource," "search," "retrieval," and "social." However, some tactics can follow one another in a chain. Specifically, we used Wenden's (1991) categorization of strategies into metacognitive and cognitive categories as the theoretical foundation for our work. A student's ability to monitor and direct learning is at the heart of the metacognitive approach. On the other hand, cognitive strategies are linked to specific procedures that students employ to overcome difficulties with various language-related tasks. Subgroups of cognitive strategies include clarification, retrieval, resourcing, deferral, avoidance, and verification; auxiliary strategies under metacognitive include: planning, evaluation, monitoring, and so on.

Several researchers have looked into Thai college students' methods of learning a second language. These include Iamla-Ong (2013), Pawapatcharaudom (2007), and Baker and Boonkit (2004). One of the main goals of their study was to identify the factors contributing to successful language learning in students. The findings from the writing task showed that students primarily used metacognitive strategies (Baker and Boonkit 2004; Taher et al. 2016) and compensation strategies (Baker and Boonkit 2004; Pawapatcharaudom 2007; Charoensuk and Jaipetch 2017). Students of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program in Saudi Arabia have been found to prefer social, metacognitive, and compensation strategies when learning the language, according to research by McMullen (2009). Using prior knowledge as a starting point, consulting a dictionary, and receiving constructive criticism were the most frequently employed strategies by students by Baker and Boonkit (2004). This was consistent with a study conducted by Ferris (2001), who found that both instructor and peer review feedback were helpful to students in the pre-writing phase of the writing process.

Several studies also show a strong link between "good" and "bad" language learners, providing further support for the existence of such a category (Bakers and Boonkit 2004; Bremner 1999; Maftoon and Seyyedrezaei 2012; Riazi 2007; Abdul Amir 2015; Hilao 2016). Additionally, studies have shown that proficient speakers of a foreign language use various techniques to master the language. Based on their performance in writing, Bakers and Boonkit (2004) classified their sample of students into two groups: successful and unsuccessful. They assembled a set of students with varying levels of writing proficiency. Writing strategies were used less frequently by students in lower grades. These findings indicated that students' writing outcomes can be improved by applying specific writing strategies. High-proficiency students and their use of language-learning strategies were found to have a direct effect that resulted in variation in each strategy by Bremner (1999). Highly skilled writers used both metacognitive and cognitive strategies, according to a case study of writing strategies published in Good Language Learner (Maftoon and Seyyedrezaei 2012). Good language learners are more likely to use effective language learning strategies for their stages, as stated by Oxford and Nyikos (1989). (p. 291). Therefore, educators need to be conscious of the significance of promoting students' use of language learning strategies (Zamel 1982). This highlights the importance of teaching writing strategies in a writing course, giving students a solid foundation to tackle their writing assignments.

It is the goal of this study to learn more about the challenges that students face when attempting to write an essay and the methods they use to overcome those obstacles. To foster independence in the classroom, writing strategies are crucial. The research findings and results, as well as the pedagogical implications and suggestions, will aid in developing better teaching practices. In this way, university instructors and curriculum developers will be better informed to address students' writing needs. In addition to helping students overcome writing difficulties, teaching them effective strategies is beneficial in and of itself.

The study intended to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are English language writing problems perceived by Bangkok University students?

RQ 2: How do the students use writing strategies to assist in English language writing?

RQ 3: Is there a relationship between writing ability and writing strategy use?

METHODOLOGY

The Participants

The participants of the study were 157 Thai Undergraduate students at Bangkok University who studied an English course (EN014: English for Exploring the World) in the summer session of 2016 academic year. All of them were the second-year students from seven faculties (Communication Arts, Fine and Applied Arts, Engineering, Humanities and Tourism Management, Science and Technology, Accounting, and Business Administration).

Instruments

To answer the research questions, the study employed a quantitative approach. One research tool, a five rating scale questionnaire, was used to collect data from the students. For the difficulties and language learning strategies as the solutions of the clarified problems, a questionnaire was developed to gather data on the students. Then, its content was tested for validity by having two experts to examine it and revise it as appropriately. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: students' demographic data, English language writing difficulties, and Language Learning. Section one was concerned with individuals and academic background e.g. age, gender, and prior experiences in English writing and learning. Section two comprised of eight items aimed to reveal students' difficulties in English language writing. The design was based on the research of Rubin and Thompson (1994) and Pawapatcharaudom (2007). The writing problems were ranked into five levels (always = 5, usually = 4, occasionally = 3, rarely = 2, never = 1). The third section, which consisted of 26 items, sought to find solutions employed by students based on Wendens (1991) writing strategies' classification. Wenden (1991) classified writing strategies into Cognitive and Metacognitive strategies. There are sub-strategies under those two categories; Metacognitive; Planning, Evaluating, and Monitoring; Cognitive strategies; Clarification, Retrieval, Resourcing, Deferral, Avoidance, and Verification. The participants were asked to rate how often they use the writing strategies using a scale from 1 to 5 based on Oxford's (1990) SILL scales (1= never or almost never use to 5= always or almost always use).

Analysis of the Data

First of all, frequency and percentage were used to analyze the demographic data. Mean and standard deviation were used to determine writing difficulties, and writing strategy usage. Then calculated to determine suitable ranges using the mean score. The ranges were as follows: 1.00-1.80 = very low, 1.81-2.60 = low, 2.61-3.40 = medium, 3.41- 4.20 = high, 4.21-5.00 = very high. A Chi-square test was conducted to find out the relationship between students' perceived writing ability and their writing strategy usage. The acceptable statistical significance level was set at alpha (α) <0.05.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Data

Table 1 presents basic information of the respondents. The number of male participants was 69 and females were 88. Most of them were from 18 to 21 years old (70.6%). They reported most of them (93.6%) had never studied abroad; there were only 10 students who had studied abroad. Furthermore, most of them (63.1%) also rated their English writing proficiency at "fair" level. 26.8% had seen their English writing proficiency as "poor" and 10.1% as good.

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Table 1: Personal information of respondents shown in frequency and percentage

	Frequency	Percentage
1. Gender		
- Male	69	43.9
- Female	88	56.1
2. Age		
- 18-21	111	70.7
- 22-24	41	26.1
- 25-29	5	3.2
3. Experience of studying abroad		
- Yes	10	6.4
-No	147	93.6
4. Perceived English Writing proficiency		
- Good	16	10.1
- Fair	99	63.1
- Poor	42	26.8

RQ 1: What are English language writing problems perceived by Bangkok University students?

Table 2 shows the range of mean scores, which is between 2.87 and 3.69. The overall mean score of 3.43 with the standard deviation of 0.66 can be interpreted that the students had writing problems at high level. From the data, they rated seven items at high levels and two items at medium levels. The highest mean score of 3.69 shows that the students faced grammatical difficulties the most (Mean= 3.69). The problem that they perceived at medium level is "Finishing an assigned writing within the time specified" (mean = 2.87).

Table 2: Means and standard deviation of overall writing problems

Items	Writing Problems	Means	SD	Interpretation
1	Writing a paragraph / a story in English.	3.57	.87	high
2	Writing reports, projects, letters, and class assignments in English.	3.67	.88	high
3	Using native speaker's writing pattern and structure as examples.	3.49	.99	high
4	Finishing an assigned writing within the time specified.	2.87	1.08	medium
5	Using correct grammar in all types of writing.	3.69	.85	high
6	Choosing appropriate vocabulary for each writing context.	3.45	.86	high
7	Having adequate English vocabulary for writing.	3.45	.86	high
8	Developing a suitable writing structure for different writing contents and types.	3.41	.86	high
	Total	3.45	.70	high

RQ 2: How do the students use writing strategies to assist in English language writing?

Table 3 displays writing strategies used by all of participants presented in descending order. The results report that students employ all strategies at medium level or "sometimes used" with mean scores between 2.87 and 3.37. Resourcing strategies have identical means of most significant frequency used at 3.37 over other strategies. The use of planning strategies ranked at second level was at 3.34. The means of verification, retrieval, monitoring, and deferral are at 3.13, 3.11, 3.08, and 2.97 respectively. The least frequency strategy employed has happened to be evaluation strategy, with identical means of 2.87.

Table 3: Means and standard deviations of writing strategies shown in each category

Strategies	Resourcing	Planning	Verification	Retrieval	Monitoring	Deferral	Evaluation	Total
Means	3.37	3.34	3.13	3.11	3.08	2.97	2.87	3.08
SD	.79	.66	.75	.74	1.05	.91	.79	.61
Interpretation	medium	medium	medium	medium	medium	medium	medium	medium

Table 4 illustrates that the five most frequent writing strategies employed by students are in two categories: resourcing, retrieval. The students used two "resourcing" strategies at high levels which are "I look up words in a dictionary when I have problems with vocabulary or spelling" (mean = 3.61), and "I think in L1 first then translate to English to write" (mean = 3.57) respectively. Meanwhile, the other three strategies are reported at medium level.

Table 4: Most frequently used writing strategies

Ranking	Strategies	Category	Means	SD	Interpretation
1	I look up words in a dictionary when I have problems with vocabulary or spelling.	Resourcing	3.61	1.16	high
2	I think in L1 first then translate to English to write.	Resourcing	3.57	1.10	high
3	I re-read the assigned question many times.	Retrieval	3.39	.98	medium
4	I ask for help from my peers or teachers when I have writing problems.	Resourcing	3.32	1.06	medium
5	While writing, I consider my own work and question it in order to improve.	Retrieval	3.24	.98	medium

Table 5 shows six writing strategies employed by all respondents the least. The least frequent strategy employed is "I edit grammar, punctuation and lexical errors" (Mean = 2.77). Two items which are equal in their mean scores include "I edit organisations of ideas" (Mean = 2.82), and I use lead-in words, transition words e.g. "firstly", "point out", "finally" (Mean = 2.82). It is interesting to see that five items are in the category of evaluation. There is only one item belonging to the "retrieval" category. They are all at medium levels.

Table 5: Least frequently used writing strategies

Ranking	Strategies	Category	Means	SD	Interpretation
1	I edit grammar, punctuation and lexical errors.	Evaluation	2.77	.88	medium
2	I edit organizations of ideas.	Evaluation	2.82	.90	medium
3	I use lead-in words, transition words e.g. "firstly", "point out", "finally".	Retrieval	2.82	.97	medium
4	After I finish writing, I reconsider the goals and plans that I set earlier.	Evaluation	2.89	1.04	medium
5	While writing, I make some changes in the ideas and the structures.	Planning	2.90	.95	medium
6	I list out different ideas, reasons, and examples to support the main idea.	Planning	2.92	.90	medium

RQ 3: Are there any relationships between perceived writing ability and their writing strategy use?

Prior to investigating the relationship between students' perceived writing ability and their writing strategy use, data of strategy use were transformed into three groups, namely high, moderate, and low. The cut-point was determined by using Mean $\pm$.5 SD. The mean was 3.08, and the standard deviation was .61. So, the "high" group received 3.39 through highest values while the "moderate" group got values between 2.78 and 3.38. The "low" group got lowest through 2.77 values. When the students were grouped based on their scores, there were 45 students with high level of strategy use, 64 students with moderate and 48 students with low level of strategy use.

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Table 6: Students' number and percentage shown in three groups of strategy use

Group	Number	Percentage
High	45	28.7
Moderate	64	40.8
Low	48	30.6

The hypothesis proposed that writing ability was related to their writing strategy use. Therefore, a Chi-Square test was employed to examine the relationship. The result revealed that writing ability was not related to students' writing strategy use (χ^2= 4.347, p >.05). Out of 16 students with good writing ability, 7 used writing strategies at high level while 6 used writing strategies at moderate level and 3 used them at low level. Regarding 99 students with fair writing ability, it was found that about half of them (43) used writing strategies at moderate level while the rest employed the strategies at high and low levels equally (28, 28). As for 42 students who perceived themselves as having poor writing ability, the largest number used writing strategies at low level (17) followed by moderate level (15) and high level (10). So, this hypothesis was accepted.

Table 7: Chi-Square results for writing ability and writing strategy use

Writing Ability	Writing Strategy Use				Chi-Sq.
	High	Moderate	Low	Total	
Good	7 (43.8%)	6(37.5%)	3 (18.8%)	16 (100.0%)	4.347
Fair	28 (28.3%)	43 (43.4%)	28 (28.3%)	99 (100.0)	
Poor	10 (23.8%)	15 (35.7%)	17 (40.5%)	42 (100%)	
Total	45(30.6)	64(40.6)	48 (28.8)	157 (100.0)	

Discussion

The current study investigated on writing difficulties and writing strategies of undergraduate students in a private university. The important findings from this study are discussed as follows:

The findings revealed that students have high level of writing difficulties. Furthermore, the most serious writing problems that the students faced were on grammatical elements. The reasons which caused such problems was due to students feeling anxious when writing, which in turn was due to inadequacies in grammatical and vocabulary competencies. Another cause of students' writing problem might be that Asian students are exposed to writing at a later stage in education and some are even introduced to formal writing when studying at tertiary level (Tangkiengsirisin 2010). Those two factors are what cause the writing difficulties which have been reported to the same results with Pawapatcharaudom (2007) and Iamla-Ong (2013), however, the research reported by this author shows that the problem that had the least difficulty by the students was being able to write within a specific time period. Thus, it was concluded that the results contradicted with Pawapatcharaudom's (2007) research finding. This author found that the reason why the students do not sense any time pressure composing their piece of writing is because the duration of time given to the writing tasks is too long: usually 40 minutes for 60-word writing.

With regards to writing strategy use, it was found that students make the most use of resourcing strategies. The resourcing strategy is a type of Cognitive strategies. Hence, the present research findings contrasted with the research previously cited show that Thai university students prefer using Metacognitive strategies (Baker and Boonkit 2004). This finding can be explained by the fact that students come from different educational backgrounds which differentiates their English abilities. For the limited proficient learners, they do not employ a strong vocabulary and often have inaccurate spelling and grammatical errors, subsequently, they are likely to be restricted in expressing ideas using their limited word bank so the students often rely on dictionary to find a certain word in generating ideas. In addition, the research of Baker and Boonkit (2004) supported the present research findings showing that the most frequent strategy used by Thai university students was "I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about before or when I write". This finding stresses the necessity of using a dictionary while composing. Meanwhile, the teacher should encourage students to use other writing strategies which students used less frequently. If a variety of writing strategies are not introduced, the students will encounter difficulties in their writing compositions. The

present research results show that the most infrequent use of writing strategies among students was of "Evaluation Strategies", which is a subset under Metacognitive strategies. The metacognitive strategies are the writing strategies related to not only editing the grammatical elements of a piece of writing e.g. punctuation and lexical errors, but also editing idea organisation e.g. reconsidering set plans and goals. Interestingly, the metacognitive strategies had been reported to be significantly used among successful writers for example "I go back to my writing to edit and change the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation" (Baker and Boonkit 2004; McMullen 2009; Mullin 1992; Peacock 2001). The current research found no relationship between writing ability and writing strategy usage. This was not in accordance with the previous studies conducted by Baker and Boonkit (2004), McMullen (2009), Mullin (1992), and Peacock (2001) which found that proficient students use writing strategies at the considerable level. The reason why no relationship existed between writing ability and writing strategy was probably due to the fact that participants were rarely introduced to writing strategies. When students are asked to write, it is assumed they have prior knowledge on how to compose a piece of writing. Teachers normally only provide a topic, a model essay, and sample sentences as guidelines.

The students, therefore, do not have to pay much attention to idea organisation since it has already been well-organised by the teachers who usually assist the students on grammatical and lexical corrections. Hence, the students are familiar with getting answers easily and not willing to find out the answers by themselves. Accordingly, learners feel no necessity of editing their writings from both a communicative and linguistic point of view. This is why the proficiency in both low as well as high level students shows no difference when using writing strategies with essay assignments.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results from the present study show that Bangkok University undergraduate students have difficulty in learning how to write using the English language. The study also showed that students could overcome their language learning difficulties if they were taught the necessity of writing strategies. More importantly, advantages of utilizing those techniques are likely to eliminate any struggles the students may encounter with their writing. For the ESL/EFL teacher's acting alone, the research findings suggest that learners still find that teacher's assistance is more comfortable than self-directed learning. Having considered this, the research highlights the importance that the teacher is still needed in the language learning process. As a case study, this research study shows that more consideration needs to be given to teaching as well as learning practices with students when developing autonomous learning course work.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some limitations; few propositions made in this study did not find any support, hence, these findings are open for further investigation. Some of the constraints are mentioned in the study, such as the provision of long time for writing, or unfamiliarity with the writing strategies. Hence, scholars are encouraged to replicate this study in different contexts and different sets of students to get fine-grained results.

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