

Teacher Perceptions and Course Development: A Case Study

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Abstract

Writing is often a difficult skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It is a complicated process which requires both syntactic and semantic knowledge and a great deal of effort to continuously practice (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013, p. 68). Thereby, the teaching and learning process requires the incorporation of different activities and techniques, and constant improvements of course content to meet both the course goals and needs of stakeholders.

Previous preliminary work (Piriyasilpa, 2015), which investigated teacher perceptions toward Thai students' English essay writing, found that the perceived quality of student writing varies depending on the criteria set by the teacher; and these criteria were influenced by teacher perceptions and background. The present study made an in-depth analysis of teacher comments on students' English essay writing as well as the course description. Based on these findings, this paper proposes the potential contents of the English essay writing course and marking rubrics for assessment.

Keywords: Academic Literacy, Discourse Community, English Essay Writing

Introduction

English has become an important language in today's interconnected world, and in Thailand the need for the workforce to speak English has

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become increasingly important due to globalization and Thailand's entry into the ASEAN Economic Community. According to the ASEAN charter, Chapter 10 (Administration and Procedure), Article 34 states that the working language of ASEAN shall be English. For this reason its role is now imperative in many contexts throughout Thailand.

Among industrial sectors, graduates showing a high level of language proficiency would meet the demand of labor markets, and of the four English skills (Listening, Speaking, Writing, and Reading), studies claim that writing ability is regarded as highly important (Piriyasilpa, 2014; Stevens, 2005). Even though writing is perceived to be important for industrial sectors, students' writing ability is considered to be below average in Thailand (Foley, 2005, p. 231); and a number of studies have indicated it as one of the most difficult skills for students to master (Chinnawongs, 2001; Padgate, 2008; Piriyasilpa, 2012; Syananondh & Padgate, 2005). This problem exists even when some students speak fluent English (Padgate, 2008). Rayupsri & Kongpetch (2014, p.32) claim that student writing is less than satisfactory due to their insufficient knowledge of vocabulary and connectors, inadequate knowledge of grammar structure and organisation of ideas, and a lack of opportunities to practice writing beyond text level.

As far as the writing process is concerned, Hedge (1988, p. 5) argues that effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of organisation in the development of ideas and information, a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity in meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate for the subject matter and the eventual readers. For this reason, writing skills are often difficult for learners even though they have a long undertaking of English study prior to taking writing courses.

At Rajamangala University of Technology Isan (RMUTI), Khon Kaen Campus, Thailand, the English for International Communication Program (EIC) has been open for more than 10 years, and the compulsory writing courses that students have to undertake include: Paragraph Writing, English Essay Writing, English Report Writing and Argumentative and Persuasive Writing, with the condition that they have to pass the pre-requisite course before moving on to the upper.

The English Essay Writing Course is one of the compulsory subjects which students have to enroll in their third year, and a number of them still face writing problems even though they have already passed the Paragraph Writing Course. When considering content, the Paragraph Writing Course focuses on paragraph structure, paragraph writing processes, naming topics, ideas organization, and practice in writing at sentence and paragraph levels, while the English Essay Writing Course aims to prepare students for writing at text level, studying essay types and structure, preparing drafts and outlines, and using appropriate language consistent with the type of essay and its goals. The different levels of writing practice between the natures of the two courses described above could create difficulties when students move to study the English Essay Writing Course.

As RMUTI comprises four campuses, the EIC curriculum is shared, and while every course follows the same guidelines, the contents, the teaching materials and teachers are different. This means that similar problems could also exist in the other RMUTI campuses, and an exchange of ideas and perspectives among the teachers relevant to this course will lead to mutual understanding of expectations and improvement in teaching materials, which will benefit students greatly.

This study investigated the opinions of teachers in the English Essay Writing Course and other relevant courses from the four campuses of RMUTI,

and two teachers from other institutions (T1-T10-see Appendix A). It analysed teachers' opinions on problems in student writing as well as desirable characteristics for English essay writing. Based on the findings, the study proposes potential changes in existing course contents. The research questions were:

- 1) What were the teachers' opinions toward the problems found in student writing and the desirable characteristics of students' English essay writing?
- 2) Based on those opinions and course descriptions, what possible changes could have been implemented to the existing course?

Literature Review

The learning and teaching of academic writing in higher education focuses on the practice of writing for different purposes. Writing to attain different goals thus requires different language patterns and forms. The different forms of language used in writing can also be influenced by other factors, for example, the writing context and the requirements or expectations of different organisations. To write successfully, it is important for the writer to know the subject content and to be aware of the desirable language features used in a particular context in order to construct a piece of writing that meets such requirements and expectations. The study of desirable language characteristics in different organisations is therefore useful, helping the newcomer understand; and especially in a language learning context, helping teachers prepare appropriate teaching materials for successful student learning. There have been previous studies which investigated the relationship between student writing and the organisation such as Horowitz (1986); Moore (2007); and Bush (1995).

The present study investigated teacher feedback on the problems of student writing, and the desirable characteristics of students' English essay writing. This section discusses the review of relevant literature under three main areas: academic literacy, discourse community, and the structure of English essay writing.

Academic literacy

Literacy can be defined broadly as the ability to read and write (Baynham, 1995). From this literature review, literacy can be explained from two perspectives: the traditional view and new literacy.

The traditional view explains student literacy based on the understanding of language patterns, grammar and literal interpretation. Learning, in this view, begins when children enter school at a certain age (Hall, 1987) and focuses on students performing the role of 'code breaker' (Freebody & Luke, 1990), decoding meaning according to the form given under the control of the teacher.

The new literacy claims that language communication is a social process. It has no certain form but is flexible and adaptable to different social settings. The various forms of language used are influenced by surrounding factors, namely: certain types of people, the location, diverse social roles of participants and the different social contexts (Baynham, 1995). This is because a text does not consist of context-free or a value-neutral set of skills, but is shaped by different social and cultural values in its community, making a 'unique and text specific meaning' (Lemke, 1989, p. 29). Christie (1990, p. 21) claims that 'Literacy in today's world is a very different thing from what it was in the past...for we do keep generating new kinds of writing, new kinds of genres, as a necessary part of generating new knowledge and new ways of thinking'.

As language change is influenced by social and cultural values in different social contexts, the ways that language is used to organise texts for different purposes varies depending on the requirements of the community or organisation. Academic literacy is thus related to discourse community, and the discussion on this follows.

Discourse community

The concept of discourse community is concerned with a group of communicators with a common goal or interest that adopts certain preferred ways of participating in public discussion. The variation of language used in different social contexts reflects the requirements and expectations made by members of the social group, reflecting the uniqueness of ways of communication in different organisations. Swales (2011, pp. 471-473) has indicated the main characteristics of discourse community as including a broadly agreed set of common public goals, a mechanism of intercommunication among its members, the use of its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback, utilisation and possession of one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims, acquisition of a specific lexis, and a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise.

This implies that different communities require the use of language in different ways depending on the policy, requirements and disciplinary variations, and these differences are the key issue which reflect the organisation expectations in terms of language (Tardy, 2009). A good piece of writing is, therefore, not created to meet only the writing goals, but also the organisation's language requirements. That is, students, who are like an apprentice of the organisation, need to understand the requirements set by teachers who act as full members of the community (Swales, 1990). It is, therefore, important that both teachers and students have consistent understanding of

those requirements and work together to attain those set expectations.

To be accepted, students have to work hard and practice their skills in order to construct written work that contains the language features as required by the educational institution. Belcher (1994, p. 24) argues that while learners are considered apprentices in the learning community, the role of teachers could be performed in three different ways: as a model, transferring knowledge and demonstrating how to solve problems; as a coach, facilitating learners during the learning process; and after transferring knowledge by allowing learners to practice and learn independently without the presence of teachers.

This study investigated teacher opinions toward the quality of student writing, before interviewing them about student writing difficulties and the desirable characteristics of their English essay writing.

The structure of English essay writing

An essay is a piece of writing that discusses one main topic (Chin, Koizumi, Reid, Wray & Yamazaki, 2012, p. 38). It consists of several paragraphs and is divided into three parts: introductory paragraph, body and concluding paragraph. The introductory paragraph entails general ideas or background information of the topic and the thesis statement; the body contains the arguments supporting the thesis; and the concluding paragraph draws a conclusion, summarises and re-affirms the thesis statement (Chin et al, 2012). Table 1 below presents a sample of English essay writing.

Table 1 Sample of English essay writing (Thomson & Droga, 2012, pp. 112-113)

Introductory Paragraph	Background	People with chronic liver disease may need to have a liver transplant. Having a liver transplant operation is a high-risk procedure. However, in some cases, patients will die without the procedure and so have to take the risk of an operation.
	Thesis Statement	While most people would choose to have a liver transplant in this situation, it is important that the patient be properly counseled before embarking upon the transplant.
	Preview	The arguments which justify counseling are the risks of organ rejection, the need for immunosuppressive drugs, the expense and the high death rate.
Body	Body: Argument 1 (Risk of rejection)	Firstly, there is the risk of organ rejection. The new liver is unlikely to match the patients system and so the immune system may attack the organ and this may result in the new liver failing.
	Body: Argument 2 (Need for drugs)	Secondly, the patient must take immunosuppressive drugs. Immunosuppressive drugs act to reduce the immune system's response to foreign issue. They reduce the chance of the body attacking the new organ. However, to prevent the immune system attacking, it is necessary for the patient to take the drugs for a long period of time. The problem with these drugs is that the patient is vulnerable to other diseases.
	Body: Argument 3 (Expense)	Another reason for counseling is the high cost of the procedure. The costs include transplant evaluation, testing surgery and follow-up care and medication. The biggest cost is the time spent in the intensive care unit. None of these costs are avoidable.
	Body: Argument 4 (High death rate)	Finally, the patient should be made aware that there is a high death rate, particularly within the first three months. Even with the best care, the risk of early death is a possibility, although in Finland 83% of patients survive for one year.
Concluding Paragraph		In conclusion, there are many risks associated with a liver transplant operation. However, before embarking upon the procedure, it is essential that patients receive proper counseling and full information about the implications of their decision.

According to Hammond, Burns, Joyce, Brosnan, & Gerot, (1992), the significant language features of an essay include use of causal additive connectives to construct the argument e.g. “so”, verbs of being and having e.g. “is”, “are”, “have”, verbs of thinking and feeling predominantly in the thesis and reinforcement e.g. “choose”, use of vocabulary items to indicate the writer’s attitude e.g. “vulnerable”, use of modality to indicate writer’s attitude e.g. “would”, and “may”.

Research Methodology

Fifteen writing drafts titled, “*It is better for children to grow up in the countryside than in a big city. Do you agree or disagree?*” written by 3rd year students who are English majors, and who were undertaking the English Essay Writing Course in the first semester of academic year 2014 were assessed by ten teachers for comments on their writing problems and desirable characteristics of the English Essay Writing. Table 2 below illustrates the details of students.

Table 2 Details of students

Age	20-22 years old
Gender	2 males, 13 females
Level of English proficiency	Lower intermediate-Intermediate
Last writing course before undertaking the English Essay Writing Course	Paragraph Writing

The research instruments used in this study included fifteen writing drafts from the students, semi-structured interviews, and a textbook of the English Essay Writing Course. The ten teachers were interviewed in different modes; depending on their convenience (five were interviewed via email, three on the telephone and two in person). The findings from the interviews were

taken into account when examining the contents in the existing textbook, which are illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Contents of the English essay writing course

Unit	Contents
1	Fundamental elements of academic writing: Nouns and noun groups
2	Fundamental elements of academic writing: Verb groups and the clause
3	Cohesion and coherence in academic writing
Midterm exam	
4	The structure of an essay
5	Argumentative essays with a counter argument
6	Writing a discussion
Final Exam	

As shown in Table 3, the contents of the English Essay Writing Course began with the fundamental elements of academic writing to revise student knowledge of the structure and use of nouns, verbs and clauses, followed by the knowledge of cohesion and coherence. Students started to write an essay using longer texts after the midterm examination, and practiced the complicated structure of essays through counter argument and a discussion. In this study, students learnt as far as Unit 4 before composing the essay.

Fifteen drafts of student writing with an average number of 306 words were collected. Students spent two hours completing their essay drafts. Most of student writing drafts were composed of 4-6 paragraphs, depending on the number of their arguments, and each essay consisted of the main stages of an essay, namely, background, thesis statement, preview, arguments and conclusion. The essays were assessed by 10 teachers from both the participating university and outside institutions. After reading the drafts, the teachers sorted out the levels of student-writing quality into different groups:

good-excellent (80-100), moderate (60-79) and poor (0–59). A semi-structured interview was later conducted to compare the teacher' opinions of the problems in student writing and the desirable characteristics, and for the teachers to clarify their assessments. The findings were to be used for the development of the English Essay Writing Course contents.

Findings

The analysis of teacher' opinions about student writing problems was made and a summary of the findings is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Summary of teacher opinions toward problems in student writing

Problems	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	TOTAL	%
Ideas not successfully communicated, fail to address the task					X	X	X		X		4	40
Poor logic reasoning	X		X	X	X	X					5	50
Essay structure			X			X		X		X	4	40
Paragraph structure		X			X	X			X		3	30
Poor grammar and language structure	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10	100
Vocabulary	X	X	X			X			X		5	50
Cohesion		X		X				X			3	30
Mechanics	X				X	X					3	30
No revision of writing drafts	X		X								2	20
Copy			X								1	10

The data from a semi-structured interview showed that all of the teachers thought students have problems in language and grammar, especially subject – verb agreement.

“The misuse of Tense and subject - verb agreement.”

T8

“Poor in prepositions and grammar.”

T7

“Problems in grammar, especially subject + verb agreement, sometimes students used run-on sentences.”

T3

“Students wrote in a complex structure, which was not considered a correct sentence and not meaningful. Mistakes in language used and grammar were found in all students' writing. For examples, mistakes were found in terms of subject+ verb agreement, tense, singular and plural nouns, articles, etc.”

T1

Half of the teachers pointed out problems with vocabulary used and logical reasoning.

“There was enough information in the 1st body paragraph but used incorrect word choices to express ideas clearly.”

T10

“A few samples showed serious grammatical errors and less use of cohesion devices.”

T8

“Lack of reasoning, samples not to the point.”

T2

“Poor logic reasoning.”

T5

Some of the teachers (40%) thought students failed to communicate ideas to reach the goal or task assigned.

“Vague opening introduction- no definition of the issue? What is the goal?”

T10

“Fail to address the task.”

T5

“Answer completely unrelated to the task.”

T9

Overall, teacher opinions toward problems in students' essay writing were in terms of grammar, vocabulary, logical reasoning and goal attainment. These problems are consistent with a previous study by Rayupsri and Kongpetch (2014) who also pointed out grammar, vocabulary and connectors as students' writing problems.

Further investigation has been made to examine teachers' expectations of the characteristics of a good essay. A summary of the findings is made in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Teacher opinions toward desirable characteristics of students' English essay writing

Desirable characteristics	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	TOTAL	%
Communicate ideas successfully & related to task	X			X	X	X			X		5	50
Correct essay structure			X					X		X	3	30
Correct paragraph structure				X					X		2	20
Strong & logic reasoning					X	X					2	20
Strong grammar and language use					X	X	X		X		4	40
Relevant details to support thesis statement				X			X	X	X		4	40
Well-chosen words or vocabulary						X			X	X	3	30
Coherence & cohesion			X								1	10
Use of mechanics				X	X	X			X		4	40
Others: Trying hard, not to get upset when receiving comments from teachers		X								X	2	20

The 10 teachers were interviewed for their opinions, and it was found that there were no significant differences among them, that is, half agreed that the desirable characteristics of a good essay include: goal/task achievement (50%);

“Answer is completely related to the task.”

T5

strong use of language and grammar, supporting details, mechanics (40%);

“Strong grammar.”

T5

A successful essay easily communicates a series of ideas.

T9

and essay structure (30%).

“Almost all of them produced essays based on the organisation patterns (Introduction, Body and Conclusion).”

T8

“A good essay must contain three main structures of Introduction, Body and Conclusion.”

T3

Discussion and Conclusion

The comments from the ten teachers about problems in student writing and desirable characteristics were useful for the development of contents in the English Essay Writing Course. Overall, what was considered by the teachers as important included the use of appropriate language and grammar for essay writing, paragraph structure, and essay structure, argument, ideas organisation, presentation, cohesion and coherence.

As far as the course description is concerned, the essay writing course aims to increase learners' writing skills at text level, help them study the types and organisation of essays and ideas organisation, prepare drafts and outlines, and use appropriate language consistent with essay types and goals. Based

on the teachers' comments and the course descriptions, the contents in the textbook were revised, and the possible changes in the course contents are discussed below.

Firstly, the findings from this study showed that the writing level of many students was below expectation and did not reach the goal provided by the teacher because of problems in terms of ideas and argument organisation, reflecting the need for knowledge about useful noun types which help arrange ideas and arguments. Student problems found in this area are consistent with Biber, Gray, & Poonpon (2011) and their claim that nouns play an important role in academic writing. Therefore, the fundamental elements that students should learn prior to practicing their writing are different noun types that they will need when composing an English essay.

The knowledge of Present Simple tense is another area of language form to focus on. With regard to the writing goal, the purpose of an essay is to convince the readers that something is the case and the topics provided mainly require them to write based on the facts of something, thereby requiring the use of Present Simple tense. Yet, problems in terms of subject-verb agreement were pointed out by all the teachers and continued to appear in student work. According to T4, the knowledge of Subject-Verb agreement with the focus on Present Simple tense should be included at an early stage. Therefore, Unit 1 should focus on the revision of student knowledge on nouns, noun groups and subject-verb agreement.

Another problem inherent in the student writing included mistakes in paragraph structure, e.g. one sentence-paragraph or a paragraph without a topic sentence. Unit 2 should, therefore, aim to review knowledge of paragraph structure (topic sentence, body, concluding sentence). Drawing from Unit 2, Unit 3 should aim to introduce students to writing at a higher level (text level) by showing them how ideas at paragraph level can be mapped out in an

essay (topic sentence: introductory paragraph, paragraph body: essay body, concluding sentence: concluding paragraph - see Piriyaasilpa, 2012). In Unit 4 knowledge of “counter argument” should be included to help students strengthen arguments in their writing. Unit 5 aims to polish students’ writing by creating relations in terms of language use (cohesion) and content (coherence).

Finally, the knowledge of vocabulary items and modality to present the writer’s ideas or opinions should be included. From the teachers’ comments, some have indicated that students used incorrect vocabulary choices (T3, T1, T9) and the ideas were not successfully presented (T10). This shows that the knowledge of vocabulary and modality for presenting ideas is important and this language area is one of the significant features of an essay (Hammond et al, 1992), thereby it should be included in the contents.

The contents from the six units have the potential to help students to better communicate ideas in their writing. That is to say, the knowledge of nominalisation and reference nouns can enable them to organise ideas and arguments effectively. The counter argument represents the response made to other opposing views, and the language use in terms of metadiscourse markers can help the writers successfully communicate ideas while creating interaction and solidarity with the readers. Overall, the potential contents of this course are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Potential contents of the English essay writing course

Unit1	Contents
1	Fundamental elements for an English essay writing Section 1: Noun group, nominalisation and reference nouns Section 2: Subject-verb agreement
2	Revision of paragraph structure
3	Essay structure
Midterm exam	
4	Counter arguments
5	Cohesion & coherence
6	Interpersonal metadiscoursal markers: hedges, certainty markers, attributes, attitudes markers & commentaries
Final Exam	

As far as assessment is concerned, the marking rubrics for student essay writing could follow the marking scheme of Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel & Hughey (1981), by focusing on contents and writing goals (30%), language and grammar (25%), organisation (20%), vocabulary (20%), and mechanics (5%).

With the mark of 30%, the first area to focus on is the success in student writing to communicate the ideas and address the goals or tasks assigned. This includes the contents in the discussion and sound opinions to support the thesis statement. The second focus of assessment is on language and grammar. As this skill was pointed out by all the teachers as one of the difficulties faced by students, marking on this could be made for 20%. Organisation is another key element for success in essay writing, yet problems in this area are still found in student writing. The skill in using language to create relations as the essay unfolds could be marked as 20%, and assessments include the use of transition signals and the ability to create

cohesion and coherence in student writing. The marking in terms of vocabulary (20%) includes the use of appropriate word choices, noun types and lexical items to present ideas, and finally mechanic assessment includes the use of punctuation marks, spelling and capitalisation (5%).

It should also be noted that the marking rubrics proposed in this paper are for this learner group only, assessments of writing for different learner groups should be adjusted depending on different factors, for example, learner background, teacher perceptions of the level of the learner group, and the focus of the course or what teachers view as desirable characteristics of essay writing. This study, moreover, has some limitations. For example, participants and learning context were limited. Further study should extend the size of participants and investigate the English Essay Writing Course in other contexts and compare findings.

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Appendix A Personal Details of the Teachers

#	Name	Gender	Nationality	Level of education	Experience in teaching Thai students	Experience in teaching writing courses
1	T1	F	Thai	MA	3 years	1 year (English essay writing) 1 year (English report writing) 1 year (Paragraph writing)
2	T2	F	Filipino	BA	2 years	2 years (Business letter writing)
3	T3	F	Thai	MA	38 years	12 years (Paragraph writing)
4	T4	M	British	MA	14 years	12 years (Writing for daily life, Business letter writing)
5	T5	M	British	MA	12 years	2 years (English essay writing)
6	T6	F	Thai	MA	20 years	3 years (Paragraph writing)
7	T7	M	British	MA	6 years	3 years (Writing for daily life)
8	T8	F	Thai	PhD	20 years	1 semester (English essay writing) 2 semesters (Paragraph writing)
9	T9	M	Dutch	MA	12 years	10 years (Writing for daily life, Writing for business purposes)
10	T10	F	Thai	PhD	16 years	16 years (English essay writing)

Appendix B Sample of Student Writing

S15

It is better for children to grow up in countryside than in a big city. Do you agree or disagree? Why? Modern and comfortable lifestyles are needed by most of people. Many parents wish their children to live in a good place with modernity and convenience. The big city is a good place that has many interesting things. So, I disagree with this idea, growing up children in city is better because of the following reasons, the big city can be a better place with modern educations, healthcare systems, internet networks and social and environment.

First of all, modern educations, in the city offers better education compared to the countryside. The children who grow up in the big city have a better choice for education because there are more schools, colleges, and universities in the big city than the countryside. These schools bring more experience and knowledge with those in the countryside.

Second, health care systems, there are a lot of public and private hospitals in the city. Urban people can easily bring their children to the best hospital for checking their health. In contrast, in countryside, rural people are very disadvantage about this case because there are a few hospitals which are very far from their houses. Therefore, if their children were sick, they would have to spend about 45 minutes to go to hospital, which is always full of patients.

Third, internet networks, internet is the important tool for research in schools. Children who live in the city access to media easily, they can know a lot of things and can connect to their friends to exchange their knowledge by social networks. While children who live in countryside do not have internet, if they want to connect internet, they must spend a lot of time to are able to use internet.

The last, social and environment, children in the city can meet people of different races, cultures and backgrounds, these will not only help children n learning more about people, but also to improve their communication skills as well. This way, these children will grow up to be good speakers who will face no problems in terms of communication in the near future. However, in countryside, the children would familiar with only the same type of people who are similar to them.

To sum up, I think not only education is one of the most important parts of growing children but also better health care systems, better internet networks and social and environment are important. Children who live in big cities have more advantages than children in countryside. So, it would be better for children to grow up in the big city rather than the countryside.