

Investigating the Language Learning Strategies Used in Paragraph Writing

among Thai EFL Matthayomsuksa 3 Students

การสำรวจการใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษาในการเขียนอนุเจตของนักเรียนไทยชั้นมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 3
ที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the learning strategies in writing used by Thai EFL high school students and the relationship between strategy use and the students' success. A multi-method approach combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches was used to answer the research questions. This approach was achieved by means of method triangulation which consisted of structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and learning diaries. Nine female Matthayomsuksa 3 students at Thantongpittayakhom High School in Buriram Province, participated in the study. Questionnaires were administered at the beginning of the data collection phase. Guidelines for diary writing were then provided to the participants. Semi-structured interviews which served as the primary method of data collection were finally conducted with each of the participants. The findings showed that the successful writers not only used strategies more frequently but also used more metacognitive, memory, compensation, and cognitive strategies than the less successful writers. The study also found some strategies which were most and least frequently used by both the successful and less successful writers.

บทคัดย่อ

วัตถุประสงค์ของการวิจัยในครั้งนี้ เพื่อสำรวจการใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้การเขียนของนักเรียนไทยชั้นมัธยมศึกษาที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศและเพื่อสำรวจความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้และความสำเร็จของผู้เรียน โดยใช้วิธีวิจัยทั้งเชิงคุณภาพและเชิงปริมาณเพื่อตอบคำถามวิจัย เครื่องมือวิจัย ประกอบด้วยแบบสอบถาม แบบสัมภาษณ์กึ่งแบบแผนและการเขียนไดอารี่ กลุ่มตัวอย่างในการวิจัยครั้งนี้ได้แก่นักเรียนหญิงชั้นมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 3 โรงเรียนธาทองพิทยาคม จังหวัดบุรีรัมย์ จำนวน 9 คน การเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลใช้แบบสอบถามแนวทางในการเขียนไดอารี่และการสัมภาษณ์กึ่งแบบแผนตามลำดับ ข้อค้นพบจากการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่า ผู้เขียนที่ประสบความสำเร็จ ไม่เพียงแต่ใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้บ่อยครั้งกว่าแต่ยังคงใช้การรับรู้ ความจำ การใช้คำทดแทน และกลวิธีในด้านความรู้ความเข้าใจมากกว่าผู้เขียนที่ประสบความสำเร็จน้อยกว่า การวิจัยยังพบว่าผู้เขียนที่ประสบความสำเร็จมากใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้มากที่สุดและผู้เขียนที่ประสบความสำเร็จน้อยใช้กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ที่น้อยที่สุด

Key Words: Language Learning Strategy, Paragraph Writing, Thai EFL Students

คำสำคัญ: กลวิธีการเรียนรู้ภาษา การเขียนอนุเจต นักเรียนไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Introduction

Academically speaking, English is a major international language taking part in both regional and global academic and professional communities. Overall, people all over the world in non-English speaking countries take English as a foreign language (EFL) to develop their proficiency in English. The higher the level of education being pursued, the greater the command of English is required, especially in reading and writing in order to access academic resources and keep up with world standards in all disciplines (Paris, Lipson & Dixon, 1994; Cummin, 2000). More specifically, learning to read and write in English is a great challenge for EFL students, especially when it is mostly for academic purposes. One way to envision the steps an EFL learner must take is to consider the nature of their language learning on a continuum.

At the high school level, Thai writing is an elective course. Moreover, Thai students rarely have a chance to practice academic writing. In Thai writing classes, students are primarily taught to use language grammatically and to write a variety of letters and poems with proper structure. In English classes, Thai students rarely write. If they write, grammatical structure at the sentence level is emphasized. For writing, speaking from the researcher personal experience as both an EFL student writer and an EFL writing teacher, the researcher perceives that learning and teaching writing by a product-oriented approach helps students to develop mainly their linguistic skills rather than writing expertise (Tonthong, 1999; Dhanarattigannon, 2008; Zhou & Siriyothin, 2009). Clearly, its major limitation is that it does not prepare students to become proficient, independent writers because they

do not learn to be explicitly aware of the writing processes they are working on and do not gain the strategic knowledge necessary to enhance their performances during these processes. In one study, a Thai EFL high school is described at the beginning of the study as a non-fluent writer since she could not produce “complete and meaningful texts” (Rorschach, 1986). The researcher notes that the student’s concern about the teacher’s expectations of the final quality of the written work focused the attention away from how the student should deal with writing processes. However, more recent research that examined the effect of the instruction of the process-oriented writing practice to Thai high school students reported that using a communicative writing task (i.e., dialogue journal writing) helped build students’ awareness of what writing means and entails (Tonthong, 1999; Tapinta., 2006; Dhanarattigannon, 2008). Most important of all, writing academic English seems to be a difficult task for EFL students in Thailand.

Consequently, in Thailand, English is a foreign language and taught as an academic subject. From the researcher’ experiences as a student in English class, writing in English is taught as an assembly of discrete parts, starting from tracing the 25 letters from A to Z, followed by simple words, sentences, and paragraphs, respectively. Exercises in writing are primarily focused on forming sentences correctly. From the researcher’ person experiences as a student and a teacher and as far as the research have informally observed, writing classes in Thailand are generally product-orient. As illustrated earlier, writing is a process, as well as a product. The current study therefore seeks to provide a more holistic investigation of writing strategies via the use of the

mixed methods approach. A close investigation of how their writing occurs and what writing strategies they use may contribute to the teaching/training them to be more effective strategy users, thus help them become more effective academic English writers. As a result, this research seeks fill some of the gaps and seeks to make some contribution to the teaching of effective academic English writing to EFL students in Thailand by providing a more comprehensive understanding of writing strategies via the research design.

Objectives of the study

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the learning strategies in writing used by Thai EFL high school students and the relationship between strategy use and the students' success.

Methodology

4.1 Population and Samples

The school district where this study took place had a total enrollment of the expanding level (grades 7-9) taking the course English for Basic Writing (023102), which is the supplementary course. The population were all 9th-grade students who are studying at Thantongpittayakhom High School in Buriram Province.

The data sources in this study were both arts and science students studying English for Basic Writing (023102) at Thantongpittayakhom High School in Buriram Province. There were a total of 219 students in seven classes (4 science classes, 3 arts classes). From these seven classes, two intact classes were participated in this study. One was selected as an arts group, and the other as a science group. The arts group consisted of 27 students and 39 students from the science group; thus, 66 students participated in this study.

4.2 Research Instruments

4.2.1 Writing Strategies Questionnaire

(WSQ)

The WSQ used in this study is based on Oxford's (1990) classification of language learning strategies and is adapted from the one that is used in Baker and Boonkit's study in 2004. It has been recognized by Hsiao and Oxford (2002), and Zhang (2003) that there is a connection between learning strategy use and the context in which it takes place. In consideration of the language teaching and learning context in Thailand which is culturally distant from the Western academic contexts of most previous studies, the adoption of the research instrument used in a similar context in Baker and Boonkit's (2004) study in Asia (Thai context) can result in a better understanding of strategy use. Strategies asked in the WSQ are divided into seven categories in which six belongs to Oxford's taxonomy: Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective and Social. The last category used in the present study is called Negative which consists of strategies regarded as deterring writing process. This additional category has been included because it adds validity to the questionnaire by offsetting "overly positive responses and any tendencies to simply agree with everything in the questionnaire" (Baker & Boonkit, 2004: 305). For example, negative strategy such as "When I have finished my work I don't look at it again"; it is finished can be used to cross-check the participants' answers to questions involving revision after finishing their writing such as "I go back to my writing to edit and change the content (ideas)", and "I go back to my writing to edit and change the grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation".

4.2.2 Semi-structured

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed in this study as a primary method of data collection and as one method in triangulation for cross-checking data.

The interview question list consisted of eleven questions divided into two sections. Section one included two questions asking participants to explain more if there is any confusion when completing the questionnaire and if there are any other strategies not included there. The second section consisted of a series of open questions which derive from the researcher's knowledge of the literature, giving participants opportunities to discuss more about their writing. These open questions aim to gain a better understanding about some of the content areas of the questionnaires, and some aspects which are not included such as the teacher's approach to teaching writing and the participants' general writing behaviors. The interview questions were translated into Thai so that they could decide whether to answer in Thai or English. The questionnaire will also be translated.

4.2.3 Learning Daily

Learning diaries were used in this study to elicit longitudinal data on writing strategies and allow the participants to "write about their language learning experiences without the constraints imposed by specific questions" (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The guideline for diary writing is a list of suggestions on what could be included. These suggestions are derived from the literature and instructed the participants to write down any activities involving their writing task before, during, and after their

writing. The number of diary entries was not restricted.

4.3 Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected over a period of nearly two months in 2011. The samples were asked to self-complete the questionnaires in the context of their academic study during their second semester at the school and at the first stage of the data collection phase. In addition to the questionnaire in English, there was also a Thai version but it was not chosen by any of the samples. The samples were provided with enough time to read through the questionnaire carefully to check if there is any difficulty in understanding the questions before completing it. After the questionnaires were collected, the samples were provided with some guidelines for diary writing by the researcher. These included suggestions on what could be included in the diary: brief descriptions of the writing task, activities involving before, during and after writing. The guidelines were explained carefully and some examples were also given by the researcher. The samples were asked to keep learning diaries right at the beginning of the data collection phase. The number of diary entry was not limited.

4.4 Data Analyses and Statistics

Procedures

Quantitative data resulting from the questionnaire responses were analyzed following methods for quantitative data analysis outlined in Baker and Boonkit's study (2004). Each strategy included in the questionnaire was coded for analysis according to seven categories of learning strategy. These include Oxford's (1990) six learning categories: Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, Social; and one added Negative category which consists of learning

strategies considered as having a negative influence on the writing process, e.g. “I like to start writing immediately without a plan”. The samples’ responses to the questionnaire were tabulated for each learning strategy and the mean score for frequency of use will be derived for each strategy, and subsequently, each strategy category. The two groups’ mean scores for individual strategies as well as each of the seven categories were examined for statistical significance using paired t-tests. Unpaired t-tests were also employed to determine the statistical significance among seven categories of strategy. The alpha level was set at $\alpha = .05$ for both types of t-tests.

Results

5.1 Questionnaire Findings

All nine questionnaires were self-completed by the participants. Data drawn from the questionnaires were analyzed following the quantitative method of data analysis as described in the previous chapter. The questionnaire findings are to be presented in the following sub-sections.

5.1.1 Overall writing strategy use

Table 1 below illustrates the results for overall writing strategy of both the high and low proficient students.

Table 1: Overall Writing Strategy Use

Category	Frequency	Mean	S.D.
Metacognitive Strategies	344	3.47	0.86
Memory Strategies	104	3.85	0.37
Social Strategies	67	3.72	0.39
Compensation Strategies	318	3.53	0.63
Affective Strategies	74	4.11	0.31

Strategies			
Cognitive	176	2.79	0.95
Strategies			
Negative	48	1.78	0.11
Strategies			

According to Table 1, the findings revealed that there is little difference in the frequency of use for the first four categories (metacognitive, memory, social, and compensation) with quite close mean scores. It is noticeable that the last two categories are used least frequently compared to the other five categories with cognitive and negative categories receiving lowest mean score of 2.79 and 1.78, respectively. Table 2 below illustrates the overall writing strategy use by high and low proficient students.

Table 2: Writing Strategy Use by High and Low Proficient Students

Writing Strategy	High		Low	
	Proficient		Proficient	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Metacognitive Strategies	3.50	1.01	3.42	0.85
Memory Strategies	3.89	0.34	3.78	0.19
Social Strategies	3.92	0.58	3.33	0.23
Compensation Strategies	3.58	0.69	3.43	0.90
Affective Strategies	4.08	0.35	4.17	0.23
Cognitive Strategies	1.67	0.28	2.00	0.33
Negative Strategies	3.36	0.84	3.25	0.72

Table 2 represents the frequency of use of each category of high proficient and low proficient students. As can be seen from the table, the high proficient students generally use strategies more frequently than their low proficient counterparts, apart from affective and negative category.

5.2 Interview Findings

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method to investigate writing strategies in the current research. Interviews were conducted with each of the participants in their first language, and each lasted about thirty minutes. Eight out of nine participants attended except for one student in the less successful group of writers. Interviews were first transcribed and any sections in the participants' first language were then translated into English by the researcher. Data drawn from the interviews were analyzed for content.

The interview question list consists of two sections. Section one includes two questions aiming to allow the participants to explain if there was any confusion that may have affected their answers in the questionnaire, and ask for strategies they use but were not included. The participants' answers to the first question confirmed that there was not any ambiguity that may have affected their answers. Among the eight participants who attended interviews, the most successful writer reported using one more strategy which is not included in the questionnaire. In order to facilitate writing, this student spent time reading newspapers and magazines in English as much as possible. She said this activity helped her both enrich her background knowledge and accumulate vocabulary.

Section two includes a series of open questions probing detailed information about the participants' writing. The data from the interviews firstly revealed that all the students took a process approach to writing. Generally, they went through a series of steps to reach a finished product including pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing. In addition to the strategies used by the participants during the writing process, the interviews also identified a number of their general writing behaviors which are presented in the following table:

Table 3: The Samples' General Writing Behaviors

Student	General Writing Behaviors
HPS1	- Make no timetable for practicing writing.
	- Practice writing before exams only.
HPS2	- Make no timetable for practicing writing.
	- Practice sometimes: free write when coming across interesting topics.
	- Write not very well when having little time.
HPS3	- Make no timetable for practicing writing.
	- Rarely practice writing, only before exams.
	- Write topics of interest better.
HPS4	- Make timetable for practicing writing.
	- Do practice writing.
	- Write topics of interest better.
HPS5	- Make no timetable for practicing writing.
	- Rarely practice writing, only before exams.

- Write topics of interest better.
- Her writing is affected by her emotions.

HPS6

- Have no timetable for practicing writing.
- Free write when having inspiration.
- Reading English to enrich background knowledge and vocabulary for writing.

LPS7

- Make no timetable for practicing writing.
- Seldom practice writing, only before exam.
- Write topics of interest better.

LPS8

- Make no timetable for practicing writing.
- Practice writing before exams.
- Her writing is affected by such other factors as the topic she writes about, time allowed to prepare for writing, her health state, and the weather.

Note: HPS = High Proficient Student

LPS = Low Proficient Student

Table 3 indicated that almost all the participants attending interviews didn't make time table for practicing writing except for one student in the successful group of writers. In addition, these seven students didn't practice writing when it was not the task assigned by their teacher. They only practiced writing before exams or free wrote when they were inspired by the topics they felt interested in.

Regarding factors which affect their writing, five out of eight students reported that they wrote better when writing about the topics of their interest.

Table 4: Writing Strategies Used by High and Low Proficient Students from Interviews

Writing Stage	High Proficient Student	Low Proficient Student
Pre-writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brainstorm ideas using background knowledge. - Discuss with peers to generate ideas. - Search information and read about the topics to help generate ideas. - Take notes while reading. (2)* - Make outlines. - Write in a quiet and comfortable place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brainstorm ideas using background knowledge. - Discuss with peers to generate ideas. - Search information and read about the topics to help generate ideas. - Make outlines. - Write in a quiet and comfortable place.
While Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write one draft. (3) - Write more than one draft. (3) - Think in both first and foreign language but 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write no draft. (1) - Writes one draft. (1) - Think in both first and foreign language but

	write in English. (6) - Think totally in first language. (2)	write in English.
After Finishing Writing	- Edit for grammar (3), vocabulary (2), and spelling (1). - Edit for content. (2) - Use peer and teacher edit. (3) - Self-reward.	- Do not edit much. (1) - Edit for both content and grammar. (1) - Self-reward.
After the written work has been marked	- Remember teacher feedback. (4)	- Remember teacher feedback.

*Note: * = the number of students who used the strategy*

As indicated in Table 4 above, the high proficient student and low proficient student had a number of strategies in common at the pre-writing stage. They all used their background knowledge to brainstorm ideas on the topic. Two other strategies to help them with the generation of ideas included discussing with others and searching information and reading about the topic. Making outlines was the strategy also reported to be used by both groups of writers. Moreover, it is interesting to see that all eight students' writing was more or less affected by the place where they write. A quiet place where they could concentrate was said to be a good place to write by all the students.

At the writing or drafting stage, seven out of eight students wrote at least one draft while only one low proficient student did not write a draft; as a result, she edited her work while writing, paying attention to grammar and vocabulary. The data also reveal that the high proficient student wrote more drafts than their low proficient student counterparts with three among six reported writing more than one draft. Another strategy employed at this stage by six out of eight students was the use of first language while writing. However, there was a process of translation of their thoughts from the first language into the foreign language before their ideas were written down. The difference in this strategy between the two groups of students was that two proficient students relied totally on the first language while writing.

As mentioned earlier, seven out of the eight students reported writing at least one draft except for one low proficient student. However, they did not edit their work until they had finished writing a draft. There seems to have been a focus on accuracy rather than content. This focus is reflected in the revision for grammar, vocabulary, and spelling by almost all the students while only three of them also edited for content. Regarding editing strategy use, the high proficient students were different from the low proficient ones in the use of peer and teacher editing by asking their peers and teacher to edit their work for them. The last strategy found at this stage of writing which was the affective strategy to help retain motivation such as self-rewarding was reported to be used by five students while self-rewarding was decided later by three others depending on the results of their work after it had been marked.

The only strategy revealed from the interviews after the writing has been assessed was remembering teacher feedback. Among eight students who attended the interviews, six answered they attended to and tried to remember the teacher's feedback to help them improve their writings later.

5.3 Results from Diaries

Learning diaries were used in the present study to elicit longitudinal data on writing strategies and as a means to cross-check the data drawn from the other two research instruments. The number of diary entry varies among the participants. The minimum was three while maximum was nine. The data drawn from those learning diaries was analyzed for content using the same method as analyzing interviews. A summary of the writing strategies reported in the diaries is presented in the Table 5 below:

Table 5: Writing Strategies Used by High and Low Proficient Students from Diaries

Writing Stage	High Proficient Student	Low Proficient Student
Pre-writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Search information about the topic. (4)* - Take notes of phrases and structures while reading. (1) - Make outlines. (3) - Write in a quiet place. (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Search information about the topic. (2) - Take notes while reading. (2) - Make outlines. (1)
While	- Use dictionaries	

Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> for unsure vocabulary (2), sentence structures (1). - Use grammar books for unsure sentence structures. (2). - Use collocation book for vocabulary. (1) - Consult friends for difficult terminologies. (1) - Use dictionaries to deal with vocabulary. (1) - Use first language for complicated sentences. (2) 	
After Finishing Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Edit for content (2), organization, and vocabulary. (1) - Use teacher editing. (1) - Use peer editing. (2) - Self-reward. (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Edit for grammar and vocabulary (1).
After the written work has been	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make notes of teacher feedback. (1) - Use teacher feedback to help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make notes of teacher feedback. (1) - Remember teacher

marked	with other language skills. (1) - Use teacher feedback to help improve later writings. (1)	feedback. (1)
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*Note: * = the number of students who used the strategy*

Table 5 revealed that the first strategy found in the diary entries used by most participants at the pre-writing stage was searching for information about the writing topic. While this strategy was reported to be used by all the samples in interviews, it was reported by four proficient students and two low proficient ones in learning diary entries. Diaries also revealed another strategy, that is, note taking while searching information about the topic. Note taking while reading about the topic was reported by two low proficient students in their diaries but this strategy was not found to be used by any writers in the low proficient group through interviews. Making outlines was also one of the strategies used at the pre-writing stage by three high proficient students and one low proficient student. Affective strategy such as writing at a quiet place found in the diaries of the three high proficient students, again, confirmed this finding found in interviews.

The diary entries written by the low proficient students did not reveal any of their writing strategies used when they write, while those written by the high proficient group of students did show some. Most of the strategies used by the high proficient students at this stage were compensation strategies such as using dictionaries and collocation book to check unsure vocabulary, and grammar books

for sentence structures. One cognitive strategy, that is, thinking complicated sentences in first language, was also apparent in the diary entries of two high proficient students.

Editing strategies were used by both groups after they finished writing. Again, learning diaries repeated the finding from the interviews that the high proficient students revised both forms and content. Moreover, social strategies such as using teacher and peer editing were also reported in diary entries of three high proficient students while these strategies were absent in the low proficient students' both interview and diary data. Another strategy found in the diary entries of two high proficient students was self-rewarding.

Discussion and Conclusions

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the learning strategies in writing used by Thai EFL high school students and the relationship between strategy use and the students' success. The research was carried out at Thantongpittayakhom High School in Buriram Province. The arts group consisted of 27 students and 39 students from the science group; thus, 66 students participated in this study. The research questions were addressed by means of a triangulated approach to collect data, including structured questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and learning diaries. The data were collected over a period of two months.

The results from an analysis of the quantitative data showed that the high proficient students not only generally used writing strategies more frequently but also made more frequent use of metacognitive, memory, compensation, and cognitive strategies than their low proficient counterparts. A number of writing strategies which were most and

least frequently used by the students were identified. Regarding individual writing strategy use, the research found that the high proficient students were different from the low proficient ones in that they wrote more drafts, used editing strategies more frequently, and used a dictionary to check unsure things.

The qualitative results from interviews and diaries not only provided supportive evidence to the questionnaire results but gave more insights into the writers' writing process and some factors affected their writing. The qualitative results indicated that the writers all took a process approach to writing and generally made no timetable for their writing. Some important affective factors identified were the place of writing, the writing topic, self-rewarding, the amount of time allowed to prepare for writing, the writer's personal emotions, state of health, and even the weather.

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