

An Investigation of Students' Experiences with Corpus-based Approach on High School Students' English Paragraph Writing



Noppawan Jantarabang, Khomkrit Tachom

Doctor of Philosophy Program in English,

School of Liberal Arts, University of Phayao

Corresponding Author, E-mail: raccoonair57@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aims to (1) examine the effectiveness of Corpus-based Approach on students' grammatical competence for writing narrative paragraphs, and (2) to examine students' attitude towards using a Corpus-based Approach instructional material to improve upon the students' paragraph writing skills. Thirty-four Grade 11 students are used as participants. The mixed-method research design is adopted in the present research. The instruments are as follows: (1) pre-writing and post-writing ability tests; (2) learner diaries; and (3) semi-structured interview. Frequency, percentage, error analysis, and content analysis are adopted for data analysis.

To examine the effectiveness of Corpus-based Approach on students' grammatical competence for writing narrative paragraphs, the results reveals that the frequencies of the students' grammatical errors found in the writing ability test (330) after learning are lower than the errors found in the writing ability test (504) before learning. To examine students' attitude towards using a Corpus-based Approach instructional material to improve upon the students' paragraph writing skills, the learners' diaries show students' positive attitudes towards learning



through Corpus-based Approach in writing classes and using corpus websites helped students to avoid committing grammatical writing and lexical errors. The results from the semi-structured interviews also indicate the benefits of corpus materials as it is beneficial for error corrections and developing the students' English writing ability, grammatical writing ability, and vocabulary usage. The important findings from this research are that Corpus-based Approach can be an effective method for teaching writing, improving students' grammatical ability and vocabulary knowledge.

Keywords: Paragraph Writing; Corpus-based Approach;
Teaching and Language Corpora

Introduction

Writing is the creative act of putting our imagination and thoughts into words. It is the creative imagination of displaying what we have in mind into text and making it possible for all to see easily. The ability to write is not a naturally acquired skill. It is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional setting. In fact, writing is an outward expression of what is going in the writer's mind. Hyland (2003) believes that performance in language development is subject to improvement in writing skills. A text of an effective ESL writer must be cohesive, logical, clearly structured, interesting and properly organized with a wide range of vocabulary and mastery of conventions in mechanics (Jacobs, 1981). The development of writing skill influences tremendous attention for its learning and teaching from the beginning of language education. Nunan (1989) argues that writing is an extremely difficult cognitive activity which requires the learner to have control over various factors. These factors vary from academic background and personal interest of the writer to various psychological, linguistic and cognitive phenomena (Dar & Khan, 2015; Haider, 2012).

In Thailand for example, EFL context where English language is mainly used in academic settings (e.g. schools, colleges, and universities) and in the workplace. Thai EFL writing learners, however, encounters a lot of writing problems/difficulties that needs amelioration, as has been seen in many prior research studies (Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2017; Kaweera, 2013; Noom-ura, 2013; Thongmee & Meesri, 2019; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). Previous studies have attempted to explore Thai students' writing problems in various areas (e.g. L1 lexical interference, L1 negative transfer, grammatical and lexical inaccuracy) and ways to improve their writing abilities. Interestingly, several studies (Boontam & Phoocharoensil, 2018; Chang, 2010; Kularb & Noom-ura, 2015) suggest that Corpus-based Approach can be an effective method for improving students' problems in writing and vocabulary usage. Therefore, the present study adopted the Corpus-based Approach as the conceptual framework to enhance students' paragraph writing ability.

The present research examined the effectiveness of Corpus-based Approach on the students' writing ability in terms of grammatical ability for writing through the use of errors analysis and investigate the students' attitudes towards using the Corpus-based Approach to improve their writing ability. The students' pre and post writing ability tests were used as the data for error analysis and the learner diaries and the semi-structure interview were also used to investigate the students' attitudes towards the adopted approach.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the effectiveness of Corpus-based Approach on students' grammatical competence for writing narrative paragraphs.
2. To examine students' attitude towards using a Corpus-based Approach to improve the students' paragraph writing skills.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the writing problems, factors that hamper writing development, and suggestions to improve writing skills of senior high school students. The research was carried out to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the effects of using a Corpus-Based Approach on the students' English paragraph writing?
- 2) What are the students' attitudes towards using the Corpus-Based Approach to improve their paragraph writing ability?

Population and Samples

The populations of the study were Thirty-four Grade 11 students at Latyaowithayakhom School, Nakhon Sawan. The school was chosen as the research site on convenience basis because the researcher has worked in this school and intended to promote the students' writing ability. In addition, the students who participated in this study have had some problems with writing in English and they also needed to develop their English writing skills. The students enrolled in the English Reading and Writing Course in academic Year 2019.

Research Instruments

The instruments of this study included (1) pre-and post-writing ability test, (2) student learner diaries, and (3) semi-structured interview questions.

1. Pre-writing and Post-writing Ability Test

The learner corpus of 68 pre-and post-written works were used to investigate the students' writing ability before and after the instruction, all 34 participants wrote narrative writing for pre-test. An error classification was constructed following the concepts of error analysis. The errors were categorized into four groups: grammar, structure, spelling and punctuation.

2. Student Learner Diaries

The learner diaries were employed to find out the shreds of evidence of the students' own learning and skills development. It was used as a record of what they have learned, tried, and critically reflected upon. The students were assigned to write their learners diary on five different topics as a writing task after every class.

3. Semi-structured Interview Questions

The semi-structured interview was conducted on 18 participants. The participants were randomly selected from a class of 34 students. They were selected based on their grade points, with 6 excellent students, 6 good students, and 6 average students with their answers used for finding suitable previously unknown qualitative trends and issues, explore new areas of the research interest.

Results

This section presents the results of the present study. The results are divided into two main parts according to the research questions. Part 1 shows the results of the error analysis as a means to the progress of the students' grammatical ability learned through Corpus-based Approach. Part 2 reveals the results drawn from the learner diaries and semi-structure interview.

1. What are the effects of using a Corpus-Based Approach on the students' English paragraph writing?

In order to answer Research Question 1, the data taken from error analysis are shown in the following table.

| Types of Errors/ Error Categories | Pre-writing Test | | Post-writing Test | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Frequency of Errors (Places) | Percentage of Errors (%) | Frequency of Errors (Places) | Percentage of Errors (%) |
| Grammar | | | | |
| 1. Articles | 14 | 2.78 | 4 | 1.21 |
| 2. Tenses | 75 | 14.88 | 57 | 17.27 |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 3. Conjunctions | 24 | 4.76 | 8 | 2.42 |
| 4. Prepositions | 14 | 2.78 | 6 | 1.82 |
| 5. Auxiliaries | 7 | 1.39 | 2 | 0.61 |
| 6. Word Forms | 9 | 1.79 | 4 | 1.21 |
| 7. Singular and Plural Nouns | 8 | 1.59 | 3 | 0.91 |
| 8. Pronouns | 21 | 4.17 | 13 | 3.94 |
| 9. Word Order | 14 | 2.78 | 13 | 3.94 |
| 10. Subject-Verb Agreements | 16 | 3.17 | 14 | 4.24 |
| 11. Infinitives | 5 | 0.99 | 5 | 1.52 |
| 12. Relative Clauses | 12 | 2.38 | 4 | 1.21 |
| 13. Word Choices | 20 | 3.97 | 10 | 3.03 |
| Structure | | | | |
| 14. Fragments | 35 | 6.94 | 17 | 5.15 |
| 15. Run-on Sentences | 26 | 5.16 | 21 | 6.37 |
| Spelling | | | | |
| 16. Capitalization | 67 | 13.29 | 61 | 18.48 |
| 17. Spelling | 50 | 9.92 | 8 | 2.42 |
| Punctuation | | | | |
| 18. Punctuation | 87 | 17.26 | 70 | 21.21 |
| Total | 504 | 100 | 330 | 100 |

Table 1: Comparison of Errors found in Pretest to Posttest

According to table 1, the error types of writing ability before and after learning through corpus-based approach, based on the analysis of grammatical, structural, spelling and punctuation errors, it can be seen that the overall number of grammatical errors of the post-writing ability test (330 errors) were lower than that of the pre-test (504 errors). The almost all (15 types: articles, conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliaries, word forms, singular and plural nouns, pronouns, word order, subject-verb agreement, infinitives, relative clauses, word choices, fragments, run

sentences, and spelling) error types were frequently made in the post writing test, whereas there were only three error types (tenses, capitalization, and punctuation) whose percentage of the errors were still high in the post-writing test. The most striking result to emerge from the data is that the aspects of errors pertaining to students' vocabulary use (conjunctions, prepositions, word choices, and spelling) were lower nearly a half from that of pre-writing ability test.

In the pre-test, the student committed 504 grammatical errors and the most errors committed with the greatest problem being the use of punctuation (17.26%), the second and third most found errors were the misuse of tenses and capitalization (14.88% and 13.29% , respectively). The other types of errors, for example, spelling errors (9.92%) and fragments (6.94%) were least frequently found.

According to the students' writing ability test after learning, the total number of error frequencies was 330 which reduced by nearly a half from the before learning errors. The table revealed the most errors found were grammatical errors with the use of tenses (17.27%). The second and the third most frequently found errors were with punctuations and capitalization (21.21% and 18.79%, respectively). The other types of errors, such as run-on sentences (6.37) and fragments (5.15) were also identified.

In summary, the scores of the pre-test and the post-test seem to suggest that the corpus-based approach can be a useful teaching method in helping EFL students to develop their writing ability.

2) What are the students' attitudes towards using the Corpus-Based Approach to improve their paragraph writing ability?

To answer Research Question 2, the data from semi-structure interview and learner diaries were used the results are illustrated in the following sections.

1. Results from Semi-structure Interview

The semi-structured interview was conducted on 18 participants. The participants were randomly selected from a class of 34 students. They were selected based on their grade point average, with 6 excellent students, 6 good students and 6 average students. The students' responses to each interview question are as follows.

Interview question 1: What's your viewpoint on narrative writing in the English language using corpus approach?

About 90% of the interviewees expressed positive attitudes towards narrative writing using a corpus-based approach. They indicated that it helped build up one's creative imaginative skills and enhanced the way they expressed themselves. One student indicated that:

I can explain how certain events unfolded with ease and accuracy.” (Interviewee 1, 2019)

Interview question 2: What is your typical proofreading or editing process like when writing a narrative paragraph?

Most of the student's, 70% and above, accepted using one or more Corpus technologies in their learning processes and skill practices. Phones, computers and tablets are some of the resources that drive the student's motivation and achievements and help to enhance their proofreading and editing skills when writing a narrative paragraph. One student expressed the following feeling:

“I prefer using the <https://www.lex tutor.ca/> since the website gives an insight into both vocabulary and grammar and also for sentence structure formation.” (Interviewee 3a, 2019)

Interview question 3: Where do you always turn to for assistance when writing an English paragraph?

Most students, almost 95% used websites well with valuable materials such as various online search engines for assistance when they needed some guidelines to avoid committing errors. The example of comment from one student is listed below.

“ Most often than not, I use the Google search engine on my phone to research on a few things while writing.” (Interviewee 3b, 2019)

Interview question 4: How would you assess concordance as writing assistance for your narrative writing?

The majority of the interviewees saw concordance as a very vital tool for narrative writing. They believed that concordance helped by increasing the amount of exposure, awareness of appropriateness and association between lexical items and grammar. The example of one student’s report is presented below.

“ The concordance really made things easy for me and helped to activate my memory to retain certain difficult words and phrases from all the sample sentences I read from the concordance lines.” (Interviewee 5, 2019)

Interview question 5: Are there any advantages of using corpus data and concordance as a guide to your narrative writing? How?

All of the students concluded that there are far reaching positive effects of using corpus data and concordance in narrative writing. They concluded that there are many new meanings of words that enter the dictionaries, so, upgrading dictionaries is possible while using corpus. One student’s report is presented below.

“ They help me detect new meanings of words that were otherwise strange and difficult, now I can confidently apply new vocabularies into my narrative writings.” (Interviewee 9, 2019)

2. Results Obtained from Learners’ Diary

The students were assigned to write their learners diary on five different topics as a writing task after every class. The following are extracts from the students’ learning diaries 1-5 with effects on their writing exercise from exercise 1 to 5.

Students’ Learner Dairy 1: Some students said about learning new words which they have never known before. Thus, the corpus helped them learned more vocabulary, and understood sentence

structures and how to write paragraphs in English. One student commented:

“I learned new words that I never knew before, which were vital and improved upon my writing skills a lot.” (Student 13, Personal Communication, 2019)

Students’ Learner Dairy 2: Concerning the second progressive writing activity, most students agreed that they understood the purpose of using corpus-based vocabulary activities. One student stated that:

“Corpus is more practical than the usual traditional dictionary. Also, it gives me an inside meaning of words I never knew of, and I could see the context of most words.” (Student 21, Personal Communication, 2019)

Students’ Learner Dairy 3: According to the third activity, there was a sizeable difference as their writing abilities also improved using corpus-based activities. In their responses, it reveals that corpus-based vocabulary activities promoted deducing the meaning from the context strategy which was a survival skill for the language learners. Students had a positive feeling like self-confidence in the learning process. One student stated that:

“Because of the corpus, I am strongly motivated to become an English teacher in the future. When I become a teacher, I will use the corpus-based approach to instill valuable knowledge to my students, easily and coherently.” (Student 25, Personal Communication, 2019)

Students’ Learner Dairy 4.

In the fourth writing class, the students perceived that the use of corpus-based materials helped them to finish their writing assignments. In addition, new content words and transitional words gained from the writing class assisted them to write some interesting stories. Most importantly, the corpus-based lessons allowed the students to know more about the meanings of words with appropriate contexts. One student stated that:

“I could use the vocabulary to create stories and improve on my creativity.” (Student 31, Personal Communication, 2019)

Students’ Learner Dairy 5.

In the last writing class, the students felt that learning words via corpus-based devices provided them with encouragement to use words to write some specific cultural topics. Moreover, the students learned about from some certain sample sentences which made the writing easier to them and encouraged them to write more interesting paragraphs. One student stated that:

“ I learned new words about festivals in Thailand such as conclusive, evidence, anthems, inherited. These words encouraged me to write about festivals and traditions and also sample sentences helped me to create the story correctly.” (Student 4, Personal Communication, 2019)

In summary, it can be seen from the results above that the students had improved their English writing abilities through a corpus-based approach and they had positive attitudes towards the use of corpus-based approach to enhance their English writing abilities. From the results, it seems that the corpus-based approach can be used to promote EFL students’ English writing abilities as the corpus provides the students with example of language used in daily life and in academic contexts.

Discussion

To answer the Research Question Two, the results from errors analysis of the writing ability test before and after learning through the corpus-based approach were used. The results of the error analysis of the students’ writing ability tests also supported the benefits of using corpus-based approach in developing students’ narrative paragraph writing as the students’ frequencies of errors found in the writing ability test after learning were lower than that of the

before learning test. This might have been because the students had more exposure to the use of corpus data when they participated in the writing activities and tasks for several weeks. In accordance with the present results, previous studies have demonstrated that of Girgin (2011) who investigated the effectiveness of lower level EFL students learning English grammar using corpus-based activities. The results showed that the students were able to successfully use corpus-based exercises in studying target grammar structures. In addition, it was observed that the use of corpus-based tasks in studying target grammar constructs yielded comparable results when compared to the use of a course book.

To answer the Research Question Four, the results from the learners' diaries and semi-structure interviews were utilized. The findings from research question 4 revealed how the corpus-based approach instruction enhanced students' paragraph writing in a positive way. Students' attitudes towards using corpus data as materials for learning were positive as corpus linguistics provides a more objective view of language than that of introspection, intuition, and anecdotes. John Sinclair (1998) pointed out that this is because speakers do not have access to the subliminal patterns which run through a language. A corpus-based analysis can investigate almost any language patterns, lexical, structural, lexico-grammatical, discourse, phonological, and morphological. There were similarities between the attitudes expressed by the students in this study and those described by Foomani and Khalaji (2016).

New Body of Knowledge

The new body of knowledge gained from the present study is the use of corpus-based approach in enhancing the EFL high school students' English writing abilities. It seems that the corpus-based approach can be applied to teaching writing for high school students to write various kinds of paragraph writing such as opinion paragraphs, process paragraphs, compare and contrast paragraphs, and cause and

effect paragraphs. Most importantly, the local contents with corpus-based approach can also be adopted for high school students as the students have already gained general knowledge on their local community so that they can continue their learning to write effectively.

Conclusion

Most high school students today face the difficulty of writing in a pattern that follows a logical order and some have limited vocabulary knowledge with a few words to their credit coupled with the limited class time and it goes as far as they do not speak and practice English language regularly at home. Using corpus material to mediate the students' writing ability, and grammar competence improvement, is the main purpose of the present study. The results of this study indicated that corpus materials, which is based on grammar learning, corpus-based approach, and writing approach, are effective. It can help the students use the correct words in their writing and correct the errors. Expectantly, the results of this study will be helpful for high school teachers and students in improving their grammar competence, and encourage students to write in English. For recommendations, the EFL high school teachers who are striving to develop their students' writing abilities, the corpus-based approach can be their choices of teaching methods as suggested below.

1. EFL high school teachers should adopt the corpus-based approach for teaching different kinds of paragraphs.
2. EFL high school teachers should integrate local contents with corpus-based approach for teaching writing or speaking to provide students with more opportunities to practice using productive skills successfully.

References

- Boontam, P. and Phoocharoensil, S. (2018). Effectiveness of English Preposition Learning through Data-driven Learning (DDL). *3L: The*

Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies. 24 (3), 125-141.

Boonyarattanasoontorn, P. (2017). An Investigation of Thai Students' English Language Writing Difficulties and Their Use of Writing Strategies. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*. 2 (2), 111-118.

Chang, J.-Y. (2010). Postsecondary EFL Students' Evaluations of Corpora with regard to English Writing. *SNU Journal of Education Research*. 19, 57-85.

Dar, M. F., and Khan, I. (2015). Writing Anxiety among Public and Private Sectors Pakistani Undergraduate University Students. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*. 10 (1), 121-136.

Foomani, E. and Khalaji, K. (2016). Corpus-based versus Traditional Collocation Learning: The Case of Iranian EFL Learners. *Journal of Social Science Studies*. 3 (2), 103-116.

Girgin, U. (2011). *Corpus-based Activities at Lower Levels of EFL Proficiency: The Effectiveness of Using Concordance Lines on Grammar Learning*. (Master's Thesis). Bilkent University. Ankara.

Haider, G. (2012). An Insight into Difficulties Faced by Pakistani Student Writers: Implications for Teaching of Writing. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*. 2 (3), 17-27.

Hyland, K. (2003). *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Interviewee 1. (2019). Excellent Student at Latyaowitthayakhom School, Nakhon Sawan. *Interview*. 8 November.

Interviewee 3a. (2019). Good Student at Latyaowitthayakhom School, Nakhon Sawan. *Interview*. 6 December.

Interviewee 3b. (2019). Average Student at Latyaowitthayakhom School, Nakhon Sawan. *Interview*. 22 November.

Interviewee 5. (2019). Average Student at Latyaowitthayakhom School, Nakhon Sawan. *Interview*. 22 November.

- Interviewee 9. (2019). Average Student at Latyaowitthayakhom School, Nakhon Sawan. *Interview*. 22 November.
- Jacobs, L. H. (1981). *Testing ESL Composition: A Practical Approach*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Kaweera, C. (2013). Writing Error: A Review of Interlingual and Intralingual Interference in EFL Context. *English Language Teaching*. 6 (7), 9-18.
- Kularb, T. and Noom-ura, S. (2015). The Effects of a Corpus-based Teaching Approach to Improve Collocations Comprehension of Thai Students in a Secondary School. In *the 4th LITU International Graduate Conference, "World English and Asian Integration."* Language Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok Thailand. pp. 313-327.
- Noom-ura, S. (2013). English-teaching Problems in Thailand and Thai Teachers' Professional Development Needs. *English Language Teaching*. 6 (11), 139-147.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Design Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thongmee, A. and Meesri, R. S. (2019). A Comparative Study of Collaborative Writing through Small Mixed-Ability Groups to Reduce Writing Anxiety of Grade 12 Student. *An Online Journal of Education*. 14 (2), OJED1402036-14.
- Watcharapunyawong, S. and Usaha, S. (2013). Thai EFL Students' Writing Errors in Different Text Types: The Interference of the First Language. *English Language Teaching*. 6 (1), 67-78.