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**Literature and the Effectiveness of
EFL Students' Writing and
Thinking**

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Literature and the Effectiveness of EFL Students’ Writing and Thinking

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Abstract

This paper aims to present the findings of the study on Literature and the Effectiveness of EFL Students’ Writing and Thinking Skills. The study was conducted with a belief that literature can improve not only writing but also thinking skills of Thai students. The study employs literature as a tool to examine students’ grammatical errors and types of errors in their writings, writing strategies and thinking skills as appeared in the writing. The participants of this study are 15 English-major students who were in their fourth year of study. The study took place in 2010 when the participants took the course EN 452: Contemporary Literature in their first semester. The participants were assigned to write essays reflecting their ideas toward the selected stories and excerpts of novels at the end of each lesson. Five papers of each participant were collected and marked by rubrics for writing strategies and thinking skills. Grammatical errors were detected and counted by frequency. Statistics used in the study are means, standard deviation, and paired t-test.

The study shows that the participants’ writing format is inconsistent from the first to the last paper. There is a difference with statistical significance at .05 on every item, except for the item on paragraph components. There is also a difference on the 3 thinking skills, which are comprehension, analysis and synthesis, with statistical difference at .05. However, there is no difference on the other three skills, knowledge, application and evaluation. The writings reflect three categories of grammatical errors, which are global, local and other errors but the difference was found only on global and other errors in the first and the last essays at .05 statistically significant

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English language learning in Thailand has encountered several problems throughout the century. Thai students' twelve years in school does not guarantee them the ability to communicate efficiently in English, either through writing or orally. Furthermore, such problems continue on into their university years. Alan Mackenzie (2002) writes of Thailand, "... after twelve years of English education, university students' communicative English level was lower than expected and in many cases non functional." Mackenzie's statement is supported by the low scores recorded by Thai students taking the "Test of English as a Foreign Language" (TOEFL).

As an EFL teacher, the researcher notes that it is not only grammatical and structural errors that EFL students regularly make in their writing but they also generally fail to produce good organization. Moreover, most students are found to lack understanding of topics and to lack ideas about what to write. Unlike students in other majors whose areas of study are content-based (for example, those in philosophy, psychology, engineering, medical science etc.) EFL students focus is on three strands of knowledge: language, linguistics and literature. In language classrooms, they are taught to master four language skills. Even though their English is better than students from other majors, English majors still lack substantial knowledge of the type of content which could strengthen their productive skills of speaking and writing.

Taking literature as a content-based subject, the researcher believes it can be a shortcut for EFL students to improve their English language and thinking skills. In this study, the researcher employed selected literary works to investigate the types of errors made in the students' writings, to explore writing strategies that EFL students employed in writing their essays, and to examine students' cognitive ability as reflected in the writing.

Rationale

At tertiary level, Thai students are encouraged to employ their English language ability in all four skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—both to acquire knowledge and to fulfill their academic goals. They are exposed to genuine texts which are written in English in various forms, be it electronic or printed, such as books. This is to prepare them for more advanced courses in higher levels as well as in their workplace. Like learners from EFL countries that take English as a foreign language (EFL), Thai students encounter several problems, such as the lack of knowledge of the language, content and of writing strategies in producing good writing. Aymerou Abaye (2001) showed that the writings of EFL students in US colleges lacked important components of composition, an absence of thesis statements, no clear development of ideas in paragraphs, and poor organization of ideas. Thai EFL students are no different, particularly the English major students (who thereafter will be referred to as EFL students) even though their language proficiency is expected to be higher than other major students. EFL students are prone to more problems when it comes to the contents that they need to supply when practicing the four language skills in language classrooms. Similar problems can be found in writing classroom in Thailand. Possible

reasons include: limitation of vocabulary, poor grammar knowledge, lack of organizational competence, and lack of information to support discussion.

Language studies have shown that literature may provide a variety of content for language students to exploit in their writing. Hui-fang Shang (2006) contends that literature courses emphasize the exploration of themes more than other courses and that, as a result, students can learn more about how to express thoughts through language. According to Shang, the literature curriculum can increase students' knowledge of a content area, as well as enhance their critical thinking ability and English fluency. In support of this concept, Judith A. Langer (1997) proposes an integration of literature in literacy acquisition with a belief that it effectively engages students in full activities instead of exercises. It is the university's role to perfect students' English language skills to the extent that students are able to use language both in their career and to further their studies effectively. The idea is confirmed by William Leonard Roach (1988) who writes that, 'The study of literature is seen as a highly-effective means to the acquisition of language skills and as an avenue to humanistic concerns and the acculturation process.'

In studying literature, students learn literary components that weave a story. Courses in literature aim at teaching students how to identify themes of stories in ways in which no other subjects do. Those who study literature are taught to recognize how the writers express their messages through literary works. Meghan McLaughlin (1997) has found that literature encourages students to think. Reading literary works can also reduce readers' feeling of loneliness. Literature helps readers see their strengths and weaknesses through giving them the opportunity to compare themselves to characters and situations in stories. Michael J. Palardy (1997) explains that literature provides

... the opportunity to develop insights and understandings of cultures and people of the world, develop their imagery and visualization abilities; and to gain new perspectives by testing their ideas with those found in the book (67)

In the literature classroom, students are exposed to authentic materials composed in professional styles of writing, and employing the language that is really used in real situation. In the meantime, students have the opportunity to learn, through the characters, setting and narration, about Western thought, culture, politics and economics in various forms of literary works.

However, the study of literature in the university remains traditionally separate from other language skills courses. Even though students can apply their language skills to express their views on literary works, students are taught to recognize literary components and genres, and to appreciate the rhetoric of literary works. According to its distinctive nature, literature can be taken as a content subject in language study. Krashen (1982) contends that content-based instruction helps students acquire the content area of the subject matter through comprehensible input, and simultaneously remodels their language skills. To achieve the goal of language skill improvement, Krashen

states that the focus of teaching should be on authentic and meaningful input, rather than on grammatical form. In her paper on teaching writing through the use of literature, Mueller showed that literature consists of patterns of structure and meaning that could be beneficial to this form of pedagogy.

Literature is a highly valued part of our culture, as are the other branches of the humanities. Literature can help students learn to read in a rewarding way, so that they come to understand that there are many modes of discourse. By learning to read literature, by wrestling with the human concerns it presents, they may enhance their powers of analysis. Literature provides a framework of reflection, contemplation and insight and may point the way to continue their own self-education.

(Roseanna M. Mueller, 1986: 14)

Mueller explains that teachers can use literature to teach students how to solve problems, and to understand and learn from other cultures. She further suggested that colleges in the Mid West of the US include literature in the college curriculum, which Mueller saw as preferential to assigning students writing exercises. According to Mueller, using literature in language instruction involves much more than providing students with quality literature. It also involves doing the kind of authentic things with literature that all writers and readers naturally do and gives students support with activities as they need it.

In terms of literacy development, Wells (1990) indicates that children and young adults improve reading, writing, and thinking skills through having real literacy experiences and getting support from more-experienced individuals, who may be adults or peers. Research clearly shows that literature-based instruction helps students become better readers, writers, and thinkers (qtd. Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989).

With multidisciplinary knowledge appearing in literary texts, the researcher believes that the integration of literature, be it American, English, or works written in English, to other language courses, can be a shortcut to effectively improve students' English proficiency and academic ability.

Why contemporary literature?

Contemporary literature emphasizes works written after 1945 or post World War II when there were dramatic changes in economics and politics. After the war ended, new philosophies and forms of thinking flourished. Most of contemporary works provide readers with concepts on politics, economics, history, and philosophy while instilling them with literary values. The features of contemporary literature are different from those of classical literature in a way that political and philosophical theories such as Marxism, Feminism, Post modernism and Post colonialism become part of literary study. The literature has been developed by time and extended its scope by the changing of the world caused by economics and technological advancement. The portrayal of story in contemporary works does not limit to the lives of dominant people as classical

literature but it extends to the lives of ordinary people like readers. Furthermore, contemporary writers tend to exploit literary works as a tool to express social issues in a way that is not so apparent in classical works. American literary works written after WW II reflect works written by immigrants of different origins, be it African, Chinese, Indian, Jewish, or even Native American. These works strongly reflect the existence of various minority groups in American society.

The researcher contends that works written by these immigrant writers give a comprehensible entry point for EFL students of the concepts or philosophies behind the works and help students learn about different cultures and beliefs. Besides, understanding contemporary literature can help students accept such differences and learn to live with each other with respect. In reading contemporary works, EFL students are exposed not only to the originality of the texts, but also to people from different walks of lives that are not far from their experiences. Finally, EFL students can use what they gain from literary works to improve their writing and thinking skills.

Composition Writing

English-major students in general are required to take three courses or more in the area of writing, from basic to advanced levels. In the writing classroom, students learn about the organization of a paragraph which consists of a topic sentence, supporting details and a concluding sentence. A topic sentence consists of one main idea and a controlling idea. The main idea is developed by supporting details which can be facts, statistics or any type of evidence that strengthens the main ideas and aids logical organization. Some paragraphs contain concluding sentences at the end. This can be to restate the main idea in a different way or to signal a transition from one paragraph to the other.

Various types of composition are taught for students to use for certain purposes. Since narrative, persuasive or argumentative essays share common components in forming good basic writing; the participants were required to use the three types of essay in writing a response to the selected literary works. The criteria used in the study to evaluate an essay was based on five components which are (1) an introduction that provides readers with the writer's thesis, (2) a body that may have more than one paragraphs and each paragraph includes a topic sentence, synopsis and discussion that develops the writer's thesis, (3) a concluding paragraph that restates what the essay is about, 4) the format of an essay that follows the guidelines of writing, and 5) relevant discussion that provides supporting details of each paragraph which can be quotes, scenes or setting, or description drawn from the selected works.

Thai EFL students have not only problems with the organization of composition writing, they also have problems with grammar usage. Since the Thai and English languages have different grammatical rules and structures, Thai students have to put much effort in writing a comprehensible essay which needs correct grammar and structures. Robert Lado (1957), an American linguist, believes that the errors made by those who learn English as a second language (ESL) is caused by the learners' first language. Learners tend to use

their first language as well as their culture to understand the new or second language. As a result, one criterion used in the evaluation of EFL writings is the degree of correct grammar usage.

H. D. Brown (2000) defines “error” as deviation from correct grammar. This clearly reflects learners’ language ability. Jack C. Richard (1974) explains two reasons that cause language errors, the interference of learners’ first language and learners’ progress in terms of steps of language learning that may lead them to over-generalize rules. Diane Larsen-Freeman and Michael H. Long (1991) also classify language errors into 2 types, Interlingua errors, which are caused by interference and Intralingua errors caused by other factors, apart from first language interference, such as overgeneralization, oversimplification, or induced errors. M. K. Burt (1975) further explains that there are two types of errors, global and local. Global errors refer to errors in major grammar points which affect the understanding of readers and need correction immediately. Local errors are not as severe as global errors as they do not affect the meaning or understanding of the reader. While global errors include errors in using verb tense, verb form, conditional sentences, voice, clause, sentence structure, word order and connecting words, local errors consist of subject-agreement, articles, singular/plural of nouns, word choices, word forms and prepositions. Further to this, Janet Lane and Ellen Lange (1999) place “modals” in the global category which makes 9 grammatical items classified as global errors.

In this study, the researcher examined both global and local errors as suggested by Lane and Lange to detect the level of EFL students’ writings. As earlier mentioned that the Thai and English language are of a different nature, the researcher included five grammatical errors in the ‘other’ category which were capitalization, comma splice, punctuation, pronoun reference, and pronoun agreement. The grammatical errors explored in this study are altogether 20 of them.

Thinking skills

Another main focus of this study is also to explore the participants’ thinking skills as appeared in their essay writings. There are many definitions on thinking skills. Benjamin Bloom (2009) classifies human knowledge into 6 stages of thinking skills, known as Bloom’s Taxonomy, which are: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Bloom explains that certain thinking skills need to be practiced or trained in order to allow thinking ability to progress through each stage. Arlene Burgdorf et al. (1993) provide details of Bloom’s thinking taxonomy which involves sub-thinking skills as follows:

Knowledge: The first stage of thinking involves 5 sub skills which are classifying, discriminating between the real and the fanciful, discriminating between fact and opinion, discriminating between definition and example and outlining and summarizing.

Understanding or comprehension: This stage requires the practice of 7 sub-thinking skills which are comparing and contrasting, identifying structure,

explaining steps in a process, figuring out relationships, comparing word meanings, identifying main ideas and identifying relationships.

Application: This stage reflects the ability to order objects, to estimate, to anticipate probabilities, to infer and to change word meanings.

Analyzing: This stage involves 7 sub skills which are judging completeness, judging relevance of information, judging whether story elements are abstract or concrete, recognizing the logic of actions, recognizing the elements of a selection, following story logic and recognizing fallacies.

Synthesizing: This stage involves the ability to communicate ideas, to plan projects, to build hypotheses, to draw conclusions and to propose alternatives.

Evaluating: The last stage of thinking includes the ability to test generalizations, to develop criteria, to judge accuracy, to make decisions, to identify values and to describe the mood of a story.

Bruce R. Reichenbach (2001) considers Bloom's thinking skills critical in bringing together related skills involving analyzing and integrating creatively, and in evaluating what is read or heard. To be a critical thinker, one must be able to decide if the writers' ideas are true or false, and support one's judgment with adequate reasons. Critical thinkers must be able to provide practical suggestions as well as efficient solutions to problems. The framework of critical thinking developed by Reichenbach is also divided into six steps with a focus on the integration of literary study with thinking ability:

Step 1: Knowledge refers to the ability to know the main idea and main points of a story.

Step 2: Understanding refers to the ability to understand what is seen or heard and to explain this in the learners' own words.

Step 3: Application refers to the ability to apply what is learnt in different situations.

Step 4: Analyzing is the ability to classify the texts read or heard and to tell how the information is organized or related.

Step 5: Synthesis refers to the ability to bring together the different analyzed parts in combination with other information to create something new.

Step 6: Evaluation involves the ability to evaluate the analyzed information and to tell if it is reliable or what to do next.

In this study, the researcher applied the six steps of Reichenbach's critical thinking to examine EFL students thinking skills reflected in their writing when responding to literary works.

Methodology

The participants of this study are 15 English major students who were in their fourth years at Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok. The participants were chosen by purposive sampling. They were students who enrolled the course EN 452: Contemporary Literature in the first academic year 2010. They had taken at least two courses on literature and writing. It is believed that the participants who took these courses were equipped with sufficient knowledge of writing and literature. As a result, they would be enable to write essays expressing their opinion toward literary works better than those who did not take the courses.

The researcher constructed 3 sets of instruments: Essay Writing Rubrics adapted from Ann Hogue's (1996). *First Steps in Academic Writing*. Thinking Skills Evaluation Sheet was adapted from Bruce Reichenbach's (2001) to examine EFL students' thinking ability. The last instrument was the Error Awareness Sheet which was adapted from Janet Lane and Ellen Lange's (1999) *Writing Clearly: An Editing Guide*.

This study lasted for 10 weeks. During the period of study, the participants were assigned 3 pieces of work to read, which were *Scar* and *The Red Candle* by Amy Tan, and *A Father* by Bharati Mukherjee, and to watch two movies, *Imitation of Life* by Fannie Hurst and *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster. The researcher also introduced critical theories such as feminism, racism and post colonialism in the classroom and had the participants discuss and share their opinion orally before assigning an essay for them to write as homework. Each participant was assigned 5 essays, one essay per one literary work. Altogether there were 75 essays assigned. In the literature classroom, students read and practiced criticizing and analyzing texts while employing theories of literary criticism to support their discussion.

The researcher also introduced three critical theories, feminism, racism and post colonialism, and had the participants discuss and share their opinion orally in class before assigning them to write an essay as homework. Each paper was marked by two evaluators. The mean score from the two evaluators was calculated before being analyzed statically by using percentage, mean scores, standard deviation and dependent paired t-test.

Findings

The findings presented in six tables are on grammatical errors, writing skills, and thinking skills respectively.

Table 1: Grammatical Errors as Reflected in the Participants' Essays

Types of Error	\bar{X}				
	Essay no 1	2	3	4	5
Global Errors	3.22	2.99	2.53	2.04	1.39
Local Errors	4.03	3.93	4.09	3.16	3.04
Other Errors	2.19	2.33	4.09	1.56	1.12
Total	3.16	3.07	2.79	2.22	1.79

Table 1 shows the average number of grammatical errors found in the participants' essays. In general, the number of grammatical errors decreased in the participants' second and later essays. The error of grammatical items in global category gradually decreased in the second and later papers. The decrease of errors in local and the other categories are not consistent from the second to the fourth essays but they both decrease in the fifth essay.

Table: 2 A Comparison between Essay nos 1 and 5 on Grammatical Errors by Dependent Paired t-test

Types of Error	Essay no 1		Essay no 5		t
	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	
Global Errors	3.22	1.56	1.39	1.10	-5.510*
Local Errors	4.03	1.21	3.04	1.92	-1.954
Other Errors	2.19	0.75	1.12	0.79	-6.500*
Total	3.16	1.09	1.79	1.17	4.666*

* Statistical significance at .05

Comparing between the first and the fifth essays, Table 2 shows that there was a difference with statistically significant at .05 levels in the global and other errors categories. However, no difference was found in the local category.

Table 3: Writing Organization and Sequence of Ideas as Appeared in the Participants' Essays

A	Organization	\bar{X}				
		Essay no 1	2	3	4	5
	1. Introductory paragraph	2.73	2.07	2.93	2.80	3.13
	2. 2. Body paragraphs.	2.87	2.27	2.73	2.93	3.27
	3. Concluding paragraph	2.47	1.60	2.07	2.53	3.27
	4. Format	3.13	3.47	3.20	3.27	4.00
B	Discussion	2.60	2.20	2.53	2.80	3.13
	Total	2.76	2.32	2.69	2.81	3.39

Table 3 shows an average score of the participants' essay writing. The participants' score of every item, except the format, in the second essay decreased in almost all items of the second essay and gradually increased in the later essays.

Table 4: A Comparison between Essay nos 1 and 5 on Writing Organization and Sequence of Ideas by Dependent Paired t-test

A	Organization	Essay no 1		Essay no 5		t
		\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	
	1. Introductory paragraph	2.73	0.70	3.13	0.74	2.449*
	2. Body Paragraphs	2.87	0.64	3.27	0.70	1.702
	3. Concluding paragraph	2.47	0.83	3.27	1.22	3.595*
	4. Format	3.13	0.92	4.00	0.00	3.666*
B	Discussion	2.60	0.63	3.27	0.70	2.320*
	Total	2.76	0.63	3.39	0.58	3.593*

* Statistical significant at .05

Table 4 shows a comparison of the participants' score between the first and the fifth essays. The participants' scores of the fifth essays are higher in every item. The difference is statistically significant at .05 levels.

Table 5: Levels of Thinking Skills as Reflected in the Participants' Essays

Steps of thinking	Thinking skills	\bar{X}				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Knowledge	0.80	0.90	0.90	0.87	0.90
2	Comprehension	0.18	0.20	0.24	0.29	0.31
3	Application	0.37	0.57	0.27	0.43	0.50
4	Analysis	0.17	0.38	0.43	0.40	0.37
5	Synthesis	0.11	0.22	0.31	0.51	0.33
6	Evaluation	0.17	0.33	0.17	0.13	0.27
	Total	0.26	0.40	0.38	0.43	0.42

According to Table 5, the average score on thinking skills increases in all 6 steps but at different levels of progress. The essays showed that the participants' thinking skill at knowledge level got the highest mean score of 0.90 while the thinking skill at evaluation level got the lowest score of .27. While the participants' scores at application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation levels reflect an inconsistent change, the scores of thinking skills at comprehension and evaluation levels increased gradually.

Table 6: A Comparison between Essays 1 and 5 on Levels of Thinking Skills by Dependent Paired t-test

Step of thinking	Thinking skills	Essay no. 1		Essay no 5		t
		\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	
1	Knowledge	0.80	0.25	0.90	0.21	1.382
2	Comprehension	0.18	0.17	0.31	0.20	2.103*
3	Application	0.37	0.30	0.50	0.33	0.939
4	Analysis	0.17	0.18	0.37	0.19	2.703*
5	Synthesis	0.11	0.16	0.33	0.38	2.320*
6	Evaluation	0.17	0.24	0.27	0.26	1.000
	Total	0.26	0.10	0.42	0.10	5.104*

* Statistical significant at .05

Table 6 shows that the difference between the participants' scores on understanding, analysis and synthesis is significantly different at .05. The participants got low scores on three thinking skills which are knowledge, application and evaluation.

Conclusion

According to the results of the study, it can be seen that the participants made overall progress in grammar usage, writing skills and thinking skills. In grammar usage, the overall numbers of grammatical errors decrease. It is noticed that the grammatical items in local errors still exists. This can be explained that the influence of the mother tongue language is strong. Some grammar points in the local category do not exist in Thai language such as, no subject-verb agreement, no article in front of the nouns, and no plural forms of the nouns.

The study shows that the participants' writings that get an overall improvement. It can be concluded that the opportunity to read and criticize literary works helps them get the points to discuss in their paper. Discussion and ideas presented in the writings contain evidence or references. Likewise, the opportunity they had for writing makes them become more aware of the correct format of writing. The findings signified that the participants writing improved, in other words, their writings became clearer with proper topic sentences, relevant discussion and details supporting the thesis.

The findings signify that the participants' grammar usage was improved and their writings could convey meanings better despite some grammatical errors. Besides, the participants have few opportunities to practice writings, only few hours in a week. They have no opportunities to use English language in their daily lives. As a result, the possibility for them to make mistakes is high. Such problems may take long time as well as frequent practice to eliminate.

In terms of thinking skills, the findings prove that literature helps improve the participants' levels of thinking skills at comprehension, analysis, and synthesis

levels. The findings shows that the training on applying critical theories to analyze the literary works played a part in developing EFL students' thinking skills. As for the synthesis skill, the participants learned to apply their knowledge and experience to predict the outcome of the story. They learned how to solve the problems in case they encountered the problems similar to the characters. In general the participants developed their thinking ability at an average level.

To conclude, the finding indicates that the participants' writing and thinking skills get an overall improvement. It can be seen that literature plays an important role in developing critical thinking ability alongside with language skills. Moreover, EFL students should be provided more time to practice reading, writing, and thinking.

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