THE USE OF KEEPING DIARIES IN TEACHING WRITING: A CASE STUDY

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1. Introduction

The ability to write communicatively is essential for individuals in solving their problems intelligently so as to upgrade their lives (Gray, 1956). Furthermore, the ability to write effectively is a basic tool that allows people to build upon their future and to contribute to the growth and the welfare of their family, their community, and their nation (Stanchfield & Wiseman, 1974). These attributes, the ability to read, write, understand and communicate are a factor that Thai students at the university level are longing for in the coming millennium.

Although English is not used as a main source of communication in Thai sectors such as general education, mass media, and legal and political systems, Thai people desperately require an increased demand for use of English in the area of technology, research, and other information gathering in their professions (Y.Boonphokha, 1990). The Educational Supervisor Unit of the Ministry of Education in Thailand (1981) found that most students' skills in learning English are inadequate to meet present demand. S.Pongthongchareon (1983) and Pura (1994) found that most Thai students from K-12 to the university level have difficulty with their writing skills. It was also found that English writing skills were not adequately applied at the university levels. (S. Nenthananta, 1989).

Information regarding the initiation into the field of writing via their own thoughts can prove beneficial when designing an English course at the university level. Giddens (1995) suggested that a flexible response in the educational system

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is necessary, simply because conditions are continually changing globally in communication, technology and education. Therefore, an English writing course at the university level should insure a productive teacher and enhance learning environments to succuessfully achieve their goal. Writing a diary as one of the assignments in a writing course is believed to be one way of expressing the students' sensitivity and flexibility in communicating their ideas through their experiential learning. However, there was little informed understanding in the relation between diary writing and in identifying general organizational patterns in writing structure.

2. Purpose of the Study

This paper reviews how keeping a diary can be used as a frame work for teaching writing so as improve students' writing ability and styles as it pertains to curriculum modification at Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus. The purpose of this study is to analyze the students' errors in 17 categories after they have finished writing their own diaries in English Writing I class. At the end of the semester, all students in this class were asked to hand in a diary that they had continuously written for the whole semester. The criteria employed in this study are concerned with the inappropriate use of sentence structures as follows: subject-verb agreements, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, faulty parallel sentences, articles, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, unclear meaning, word order mistakes, wrong words or wrong forms, punctuation, and spelling. All these terms will be clarified later.

3. Importance of the Study

This study is of particular importance because of the contribution to the field of foreign language instruction in Thailand. It may help to determine crucial materials to be integrated into a better writing curriculum at the university level. Educators may develop greater understanding of the impact of grammatical mistakes on learning writing. From a communicative standpoint, students should develop their writing skill because it is one of the most essential skills in higher education.

Thai students have studied English for many years, but their writing is often low. (S. Pongthongchareon, 1983).

Since English language writing skills are useful in learning English in Thai higher education, this study is focused on the analysis of students' writing proficiency at the university level. The key notion of writing diaries is the initiation into the field of writing their own thoughts. Furthermore, students will feel that they are having relevant experience toward their academic goals. The sdudents were also interviewed so as to understand their previous education history and how they performed their writing task. After that, students were helped by the investigator to analyze their problems.

4. Definitions of terms

The following terms are employed throughout the remaining study:

Types of errors	Short form	Example
1. Subject-verb agreement	S-V agreement	He **like** ice-cream. *Correct: He likes ice-cream.*
2. Sentence fragment	Fragment	**Because you were careless.** *Correct: Because you were careless, you had a car accident.*
3. Run-on sentence	Run-on	When I arrived home I cleaned my room the rain fell. *Correct: When I arrived home, I cleaned my room. The rain fell.*
4. Faulty parallel sentence	Parallel sentence	I eat good food, sleep well and **exercising** daily. *Correct: I eat good food, sleep well, and **exercise** daily.*
5. Article	Article	She is beautiful girl. *Correct: She is a beautiful girl.*

Types of errors	Short form	Example
6. Noun	Noun	My two go to school. *Correct: My two **sons** go to school.*
7. Pronoun	Pronoun	John loves **her** father. Correct: John loves ***his*** father.
8. Verb	Verb	I have a good time yesterday. *Correct: I **had** a good time yesterday.*
9. Adjective	Adjective	I have **many** knowledge. *Correct: I have **much** knowledge.*
10. Adverb	Adverb	He works **hardly**. *Correct: He works **hard**.*
11. Preposition	Presposition	I went **in** school. *Correct: I went **to** school.*
12. Conjunction	Conjunction	**And** they studied English. *Correct: **In addition**, they studied English.*
13. Unclear meaning	Unclear meaning	**He used to there.** *Correct: He used to go there.*
14. Word order mistake	Word order	She **me meet will** later. *Correct: She **will meet me** later.*
15. Wrong word or wrong form	Wrong word or Wrong form	Make a **write** turn. *Correct: Make a **right** turn.* Bob is a **gently** boy. *Correct: Bob is a **gentle** boy.*
16. Punctuation	Punctuation	It is a happy ending? *Correct: It is a happy ending.*
17. Spelling	Spelling	I **luve** candy. *Correct: I **love** candy.*

5. The Case Study and its Procedure

The sample selected for this case study was randomly assembled from the whole population of all 28 English major sophomores, the faculty of Liberal Arts, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus. This study was conducted during the period of June to October, 1999. From this study, the random sampling group was selected as shown on Table I.

Table 1. **Group of population and group of sample according to the students' grade point average (GPA)**

GPA	Number of Population	Number of Sample
A	3	2
B+	8	1
B	8	1
C+	4	1
C	3	1
D+	2	2

After the random sampling, the students were divided into 4 categories according to their GPA. Students who received an A were considered excellent students; a B+ and a B, good students; a C+ and a C, average students. For those who received a D+, they were students who need an improvement in the writing class.

The diaries were examined by their first 100 sentences and their last 100 sentences so as to compare the students' ability to write at the beginning of the semester and the improvement at the end of the semester. If the students have fewer mistakes in the last 100 sentences, that means the students have progressed in their writing proficiency. If there are far more mistakes in the last 100 sentences than the first 100 sentences, that means the students have some difficulty with this writing course and the writing course needs greater modification to improve the students' writing skills. The afore mentioned 17 common mistakes that were chosen for this study were really the criteria employed in the real life situation of the writing class. These criteria can be applied for the potential action research in the writing course in the near future. The students' mistakes were recorded according to the competency of their group level by the frequency of their mistakes in each category and its percentage.

Table 2. **The number and percentage of the student errors for both the first and the last 100 sentences from the A students' diaries**

The first 100 sentences		The last 100 sentences	
Type of errors	Frequency (%)	Type of errors	Frequency (%)
Punctuation	28 (14.51)	Preposition	17 (25.76)
Run-on	25 (12.95)	Verb	7 (10.61)
Conjunction	25 (12.95)	Word Order	7 (10.61)
Preposition	24 (12.43)	Punctuation	7 (10.61)
Verb	17 (8.81)	Conjunction	6 (9.09)
Noun	12 (6.22)	Noun	3 (4.55)
Unclear meaning	11 (5.70)	Unclear meaning	3 (4.55)
Article	8 (4.15)	Run-on	3 (4.54)
Pronoun	8 (4.15)	Wrong Word	3 (4.54)
Word Order	7 (3.63)	Fragment	2 (3.03)
Wrong Word	7 (3.63)	Adjective	2 (3.03)
Spelling	6 (3.11)	Spelling	2 (3.03)
S-V agreement	5 (2.59)	S-V agreement	1 (1.52)
Fragment	3 (1.55)	Parallel sentence	1 (1.52)
Parallel sentence	3 (1.55)	Article	1 (1.52)
Adjective	2 (1.04)	Adverb	1 (1.52)
Adverb	2 (1.04)	Pronoun	0 (0.00)
Total	**193 (100.00)**	**Total**	**66 (100.00)**

From Table 2, the number of errors from the last 100 sentences was less than the numbers of errors from the first 100 sentences in Group A students. For the first 100 sentences, Group A students had more punctuation errors than other kinds of errors. The errors on run-on sentences, conjunction and prepositions were in almost the same quantity. The errors on adjectives and adverbs appeared to be the lowest. For the last 100 sentences, Group A had more prepositional errors than others. The errors on verbs, word orders, and punctuation are equal. In this group, there were no errors concerning pronouns.

Table 3. **The number and percentage of the student errors for both the first and the last 100 sentences fromB+ and B students' diaries**

The first 100 sentences		The last 100 sentences	
Type of errors	Frequency (%)	Type of errors	Frequency (%)
Verb	51 (19.47)	Punctuation	19 (13.38)
Punctuation	34 (12.98)	Conjunction	16 (11.27)
Wrong Word	30 (11.45)	Preposition	15 (10.56)
Conjunction	21 (8.01)	Verb	13 (9.16)
Noun	19 (7.25)	Spelling	10 (7.04)
Preposition	18 (6.87)	Adverb	10 (7.04)
Article	15 (5.72)	Wrong Word	9 (6.34)
Unclear meaning	12 (4.58)	Unclear meaning	9 (6.34)
Adverb	11 (4.20)	S-V agreement	7 (4.93)
S-V agreement	9 (3.44)	Noun	7 (4.93)
Spelling	9 (3.44)	Run-on	6 (4.23)
Run-on	8 (3.05)	Article	6 (4.23)
Pronoun	6 (2.29)	Adjective	6 (4.23)
Adjective	6 (2.29)	Pronoun	3 (2.11)
Word Order	5 (1.91)	Word Order	2 (1.41)
Fragment	4 (1.53)	Parallel sentence	2 (1.41)
Parallel sentence	4 (1.53)	Fragment	2 (1.41)
Total	**262 (100.00)**	**Total**	**142 (100.00)**

As Table 3 indicates, the number of errors from the last 100 sentences was less than the number of errors from the first 100 sentences in group B+ and B students. From the first 100 sentences, the students had more verb errors than other kinds of errors. The errors on punctuation, and wrong words or wrong forms came on the second and third ranking respectively. The mistakes on parallel sentences were the lowest. For the last 100 sentences, the students had more punctuation problems than other kinds. The conjunction and preposition problems followed closely second and third in position. The students' fragment errors were minimal.

Table 4. The number and percentage of the student errors for both the first and the last 100 sentences from C+ and C students' diaries

The first 100 sentences		The last 100 sentences	
Type of errors	Frequency (%)	Type of errors	Frequency (%)
Punctuation	81 (16.56)	Punctuation	50 (15.34)
Preposition	73 (14.93)	Wrong Word	42 (12.88)
Article	69 (14.11)	Verb	41 (12.58)
Wrong Word	55 (11.25)	Preposition	34 (10.43)
Verb	42 (8.59)	Article	29 (8.90)
Conjunction	32 (6.54)	Run-on	23 (7.06)
Run-on	25 (5.11)	Conjunction	23 (7.06)
Spelling	25 (5.11)	Noun	14 (4.29)
Unclear meaning	15 (3.07)	Adverb	14 (4.29)
Adverb	13 (2.66)	Spelling	14 (4.29)
Noun	12 (2.45)	Unclear meaning	13 (3.99)
Fragment	10 (2.04)	S-V agreement	7 (2.15)
S-V agreement	9 (1.84)	Fragment	6 (1.84)
Parallel sentence	8 (1.64)	Pronoun	6 (1.84)
Pronoun	8 (1.64)	Word Order	5 (1.53)
Adjective	8 (1.64)	Adjective	3 (0.92)
Word Order	4 (0.82)	Parallel sentence	2 (0.62)
Total	**489 (100.00)**	**Total**	**326 (100.00)**

Table 4 shows that the most mistakes of Group C+ and C students' performance concerned with punctuation, although there was a reduction of errors in the last 100 sentences when compared with the first 100 sentences. For the first 100 sentences, the second and third ranking were prepositions and articles. The word order mistakes were minimal. For the last 100 sentences, the wrong words or wrong forms, and verb mistakes followed closely second and third in position. The students' performance concerning parallel sentences in this group appeared to be the lowest.

Table 5. **The number and percentage of the student errors for both the first and the last 100 sentences from D+ students' diaries**

The first 100 sentences		The last 100 sentences	
Type of errors	Frequency (%)	Type of errors	Frequency (%)
Punctuation	88 (18.30)	Verb	42 (13.37)
Verb	65 (13.51)	Punctuation	40 (12.74)
Article	55 (11.44)	Preposition	35 (11.15)
Wrong Word	54 (11.23)	Spelling	28 (8.92)
Preposition	51 (10.60)	Article	27 (8.60)
Conjunction	33 (6.86)	Wrong Word	26 (8.28)
Noun	26 (5.41)	Noun	25 (7.96)
Spelling	21 (4.37)	Conjunction	21 (6.69)
Run-on	20 (4.16)	Run-on	18 (5.73)
Adverb	12 (2.49)	Pronoun	11 (3.50)
S-V agreement	10 (2.08)	Adverb	9 (2.87)
Pronoun	10 (2.08)	Fragment	8 (2.55)
Adjective	9 (1.87)	Unclear meaning	8 (2.55)
Unclear meaning	9 (1.87)	Word Order	8 (2.55)
Word Order	8 (1.66)	Parallel sentence	3 (0.95)
Fragment	7 (1.46)	Adjective	3 (0.95)
Parallel sentence	3 (0.62)	S-V agreement	2 (0.64)
Total	**481 (100.00)**	**Total**	**314 (100.00)**

As Table 5 indicates, students in Group D+ had the greatest mistakes on punctuation in their first 100 sentences. The errors on verbs ranked second place. The errors on articles, and wrong words were almost the same quantity. The minimal mistakes were faulty parallel sentences. For the last 100 sentences, the errors concerning verbs were the greatest. The punctuation and preposition errors were found to be on the second and third rank. The least mistakes on subject and verb agreement were found in this group of students.

6. Conclusion and Discussions

In conclusion, the analysis of data produced the following outcomes:

1. The student errors found in this study were less in their last 100 sentences than their first 100 sentences in every group. The study indicates that the students improved in their writing skills and developed writing proficiency as their primary goal in this writing class.

2. From all tables, the students in every group had the most mistakes in the area of punctuation. Because students had some weak points on punctuation, teachers shall rainforce these points with drills, practices and exercises. In second place were the errors on verbs and prepositions. Teachers who choose to sacrifice their precious time and knowledge should put their efforts into improving their students' grammatical weak points.

3. From the overall study, all students made an improvement in grammatical writing structures. They could develop their writing skills and enhance their writing proficiency. All students had the benefit of writing their own thoughts uninhibited. They could hear themselves write in their own voice via their diaries.

4. An interview with the students at the end of the study was conducted to enhance the teacher's understanding about the students' thoughts, and their thinking process involved in solving their writing problems. As a result, these emerged some reasons to writing difficulty. First, when they had a problem concerning their writing, they guessed the meaning of words and the grammatical structure instead of using a dictionary to clarify their thoughts. They usually thought that they could get away with such problems although they, in fact, created deeper problems for themselves than they could possibly think of. Second, the students who needed the writing improvement from this class stated that they did not pay great attention to their writing homework and assignments. They declared that even their parents were very discouraged with their study performances in the sense that they did not try hard enough to achieve their goals. Therefore, the students' attitudes and their motivation to successive learning were raised under this new concept. These two factors might affect the outcomes of the study and needed further study to clarify the issue. Third, the students said that they needed more time to practice. Writing is the process of life long learning, so just one semester of a writing class might not be efficient for them to reach writing proficiency. Fourth, the excellent

students in class reported that they had pen pals and normally sent electronic mail to their friends. Moreover, they read English novels and saw sound track movies to practice and to perfect their skills. These students paid great attention and had high positive attitudes and motivation on their learning achievement. Teachers should integrate attitudes and motivation into the writing curriculum in order to elicit the students' confidence because English is almost the second language in Thailand and is used worldwide. There should be further study on this matter.

5.   There are some factors that might influence the outcomes of this study. First, the topics in the journals were unlimited. Students had freedom to think, reflect and write. Hence, students made various forms of writing mistakes that created great difficulty in judgement. The writing topics and the number of sentences for each topic should be given to the students to simplify the successive study. Second, the sample in this particular study was minimal. There will be more samples in the next study.

6.   Although keeping diaries is not the only solution to every answer in English writing, the students' intention in writing pieces of their daily experiences are put to use. All of the afore mentioned categories in English writing will encourage these students to discuss their writing mistakes.

As education is the foundation of every nation's future, it is hoped that writing a journal will be a way to express oneself communicatively. As today's globalization progresses in education, may writing be the new choice for the new generation to process their thoughts, messages, and other information through writng, such as via e-mail and so forth. May there also be a way to integrate the journal writing in modern Thai education in the new millennium in order to have a breakthrough against the old-fashioned teaching style of writing!

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