



## What Are the Factors Affecting Writing Skills as Perceived by Undergraduate Students in the English Academic Writing Class?

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### Abstract

The purpose of the study is to investigate the factors affecting writing skills of undergraduate students of Rangsit University. A number of the participants were sixty; they studied in English Academic Writing (ENG 333) in term 1/2018 at Rangsit University. A questionnaire was used as the instrument to collect data. The questionnaires were divided into four main parts: the general information; students' interest, ability in writing and awareness of writing skills; students' strategy and attitude toward writing in English; and factors causing students to have errors in writing. The data were analyzed by using frequency, percentages, and means. The findings of the study revealed that the most found errors were vocabulary knowledge and active- passive voice. Also, article usage was the third factors affecting their English writing skills.

**Keywords:** *EFL learners, Academic writing, Students' strategies and attitude, Undergraduate students*

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### 1. Introduction

English is a universal language popular in the world. It is essential for almost everyone because English is the basic language which people around the world need to learn, and it is also the language used to communicate with foreigners. In addition, English is important in everyday life such as education, work and tourism.

In the world arena, one of the most important English skills is writing. Geiser & Studley (2001) stated that if the person has the ability to compose an extended text, it is considered the single best predictor of success in course work during the freshman year. Also, Benjamin & Chun (2003) revealed that a good indicator of the value added by higher education derived from how learners developed their in informative and analytical writing ability. Ultimately, in a current economy, a large share of the value added by businesses is codified in written documents, placing a premium on a literate workforce (Brandt, 2005).

A number of scholars and linguists voiced their opinion that writing is considered as one of the most important skills in learning English. In order to meet the demands of particular writing contexts, Hyland (2003) indicates that second language (L2) writing is unique and requires learners to use strategies in the process of writing, namely planning, translating, and reviewing (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

When it comes to academic writing, it means the writing created for the purpose of study (Chin, et.al. 2012). Based on their writing, a huge number of undergraduate students will be evaluated. Therefore, writing skills are significant for students' academic success. Chan (2013) supports this idea, stating that to persuade others, putting forward convincing evidence, sensible reasoning, and effective rebuttals are required. To reinforce the statement, Listyani (2018) revealed in the paper saying that

*"In academic writing, students will learn about the fundamentals or a good argument. They learn how to find mistakes, fallacies, or inconsistencies in others' arguments, so that they will not be easily deceived. They will also learn how to formulate their own arguments and influence or persuade others to agree with their opinions. Clear ideas in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation will make students stay in a good, strong stance with consistency and good reasoning. Elements graded in an academic essay are generally the focus of the essay, organization, structure, development, supports, elaboration, critical thinking, style, and mechanics."*



To write effectively is proved to be a major cognitive challenge; it is a test of memory, language, and thinking ability. Rapid retrieval of domain-specific knowledge about the topic from long-term memory is required (Kellogg, 2001). Moreover, it is believed a high degree of verbal ability is necessary to generate cohesive text that clearly expresses the content. Padgate (2008) also stated in his paper,

*“In addition to proficiency in general writing, academic writing is another skill that learners in higher education institutes should possess since they are often required to produce writing tasks in their academic discipline. The format of academic writing is relatively systematic and predictable. However, background and experience of writing in the first language (L1) of learners are important for their ability to write in a second language (L2). If they have experience in academic writing in their L1, they may be able to borrow or transfer their thinking and L1 writing strategies to English academic writing. For this reason, learners' experience in L1 writing is worth studying and should be taken into account when considering their problems and strategies in writing English.”*

A significant number of studies suggested that to write a text better in English, learners need to use writing strategies. These strategies are proved to be different because proficient learners are more aware of writing process than novice learners. Besides, successful learners develop a better understanding of writing skill, set writing goals, and use different writing strategies (Lipstein and Renninger, 2007). A better understanding of learning strategies will contribute to more students' interest and motivation and lack of suitable strategies will cause low motivation for students. Many other factors affect writing skill. In social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is considered people's judgment of their capabilities to organize or execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances (Bandura, 1986).

In Thailand, Thai EFL writing learners, however, have a number of writing problems/difficulties that need to be improved, as shown in previous research studies (e.g., Bennui, 2008; Chiravate, 2011; Kaweera, 2013; Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008; Sersen, 2011; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate factors affecting writing skills of undergraduate students in English Academic Writing Class at Rangsit University.

## 2. Purposes

The purpose of the study is to investigate factors affecting writing skills of undergraduate students at Rangsit University.

## 3. Materials and Methods

This research study adopted survey research designs. In quantitative research, the procedures in which investigators administer a survey to a sample to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or characteristics of the population. The research instrument was validated by three experts in the field of English teaching. This study applied purposive sampling, and the main reason why these selected groups of students were requested to join the current study is because of their exposure to English and their level of English proficiency. Sixty students participating in ENG 333 (English Academic Writing) at Rangsit University, out of which were male (31.6%) and female (68.3%). The questionnaires which were distributed returned 100%. The majority of the respondents (86.6%) were 20-21 years old. All of the respondents (100%) are third year students. The majority of the respondents (73.3%) are those who have been studying English more than ten years. Most of respondents have fair English writing proficiency (73.3%), Lastly, 61.6% of the respondents are those with the grade 2.00 – 2.99.

The data obtained from the distributed questionnaires were used to interpret, categorize, and complete the data which were as follows:

Part I: Background of the participants consisting of gender, age, studying year, English educational background, the level of English writing proficiency, and grade average. The data were analyzed in frequency and percentage.



Part II: This part aimed to examine students' interest, ability in writing and awareness of writing skills. After these categories were identified, the students were explored through a series of close ended questions. The data were analyzed in frequency, percentage, and mean.

Part III: This part aimed to explore students' strategy and attitude toward writing in English. The data were analyzed in frequency, percentage, and mean.

Part IV: This part aimed to identify the current factors causing students to have errors in writing. After current problems were identified, the data were analyzed in frequency, percentage and mean.

#### 4. Results

This section analyses the data collected according to the method applied in the present research: questionnaire. The questionnaire section analyses the data from the participants' responses.

##### 4.1 General information of respondents

**Table 1** Gender

Gender	Number of Students	Percentage
Male	19	31.6%
Female	41	68.4%
Total	60	100%

Table 1 revealed most respondents were female (68.4%) and the rest were male (31.6%).

**Table 2** Age

Age	Number of Students	Percentage
18-19 years old	0	0%
20 -21 years old	52	86.6%
22-25 years old	8	13.3%
More than 25 years old	0	0%
Total	60	100%

According to Table 2, most of the respondents (86.6%) are at the age of 20 - 21 years old, followed by the age of 22 – 25 years old (13.3%). There were no participants from 18-19 years old to more than 25 years old.

**Table 3** Year of study

Year of Study	Number of Students	Percentage
First year	0	0%
Second year	0	0%
Third year	60	60%
Fourth year	0	0%
Total	60	100%

As shown in Table 3, the results revealed that all respondents were third-year students (73.5%).

**Table 4** English educational background

English Educational Background	Number of Students	Percentage
3-5 years	6	21.5%
5-10 years	10	25.5%
More than 10 years	44	53%
Total	60	100%



Table 4 revealed that most of the respondents (53%) are those who have been studying English more than 10 years, followed by those who have been studying English for 5 – 10 years (25.5%), and those who have been studying English for 3 - 5 years (21.5%).

**Table 5** English writing proficiency

English Writing Proficiency	Number of Students	Percentage
Very good	2	3.3%
Good	11	18.3%
Fair	44	73.3%
Poor	3	5%
Very poor	0	0%
Total	60	100%

Table 5 exposed that the majority of respondents have fair English writing proficiency (73.3%), while no respondents have very poor English writing proficiency (0%).

**Table 6** Grade Average

Grade Average	Number of Students	Percentage
0.00-0.99	0	0%
1.00-1.99	0	0%
2.00-2.99	37	61.6%
3.00-4.00	23	38.3%
Total	60	100%

Table 6 shows that the majority of respondents are those with the grade of 2.00 – 2.99 (61.6%). The following majority of the group belonged to the grade of 3.00 – 4.00 (38.3%). There are no respondents who indicate the grade of 1.00 – 1.99 and 0.00 – 0.99.

#### 4.2 Respondents' interest, ability in writing and awareness of writing skills

**Table 7** respondents' interest, ability in writing and awareness of writing skills

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	5	4	3	2	1
1. I like an English writing activity.	13.3%	31.6%	48.3%	5%	1.6%
2. I wish to be a good writer.	33.3%	33.3%	21.6%	10%	1.6%
3. Writing skills are simple for me.	8.3%	1.6%	66.6%	23.3%	0%
4. I like to share knowledge and opinion with friends by using writing works.	10%	21.6%	43.3%	21.6%	3.3%
5. I think, a writing activity is essential and useful	35%	40%	25%	0%	0.5%
6. My language competence is used to create pieces of writing.	10%	28.3%	41.6%	16.6%	3.3%
7. While process writing being conducted in class, I was able to help friends.	10%	25%	50%	13.3%	1.6%
8. Writing skills are practiced by me via pair and work group, etc.	21.6%	25%	38.3%	10%	5%



9. I have an ability of accurate writing.	3.3%	21.6%	56.6%	16.6%	1.6%
10. I provide friends suggestions and information about writing techniques.	5%	23.3%	53.3%	13.3%	5%

As illustrated in Table 7, the respondents agreed that there are three interests and abilities rated the most. The interest and ability in writing found to be the most rated is “a writing activity is essential and useful” for which the respondents strongly agree (35%) and agree (40%). The second one is “I wish to be a good writer” for which the respondents strongly agree (33.3%) and agree (33.3%). Third is “Writing skills are practiced by me via pair and work group” for which the respondents strongly agree (21.6%) and agree (25%). These are the most important results identified as respondents’ interest, ability in writing with the mean of 3.76, 3.42, and 3.4.

**Table 8** Respondents’ strategy and attitude toward writing in English

Statement	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	5	4	3	2	1
1. I find more English grammar knowledge.	25%	36.6%	33.3%	3.3%	1.6%
2. I find more writing technique.	23.3%	40%	30%	5%	1.6%
3. I find more technical term knowledge.	33.3%	31.6%	31.6%	3.3%	0%
4. I spend more time when writing.	16.6%	41.6%	31.6%	8.3%	1.6%
5. I use both English and Thai when writing.	21.6%	33.3%	41.6%	3.3%	0%
6. According to my opinion, English is a fundamental skill everyone should have.	48.3%	35%	13.3%	3.3%	0%
7. According to my opinion, I feel unconfident when communicate by writing in English to communicate with my professors.	21.6%	35%	35%	8.3%	0%
8. According to my opinion, there are many situations at university that require written English.	28.3%	43.3%	21.6%	5%	1.6%
9. According to my opinion, nowadays written in English is one of the most important skills required in the university.	40%	36.6%	15%	8.3%	0%
10. According to my opinion, writing English to communicate within the university can cause communication breakdown.	15%	23.3%	46.6%	6.6%	8.3%

As shown in Table 8, the most rated strategy and attitude which the respondents indicated to be the highest level is “According to my opinion, English is a fundamental skill everyone should have” for which the respondents use very often (48%) and often (31.5%) with the mean of 3.86. However, the respondents point out that “According to my opinion, writing English to communicate within the university can cause communication breakdown.” which is the lowest level of strategy and attitude toward writing in English for which the respondents use very often (15%) and often (23.3%).

**Table 9** Factors causing students to have errors in writing

Statement	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	5	4	3	2	1
1. Vocabulary knowledge	23.3%	33.3%	23.3%	16.6%	3.3%
2. Spelling	20%	31.6%	21.6%	18.3%	8.3%
3. Subject-Verb agreement	11.6%	33.3%	38.3%	11.6%	5%



4. Active- Passive voice	15%	50%	21.6%	10%	3.3%
5. Adjective usage	10%	30%	33.3%	20%	6.6%
6. Adverb usage	10%	23.3%	46.6%	11.6%	8.3%
7. Article usage (a, an, the)	10%	18.3%	41.6%	20%	10%
8. Preposition usage	11.6%	20%	36.6%	21.6%	10%
9. Word order	13.3%	25%	35%	20%	6.6%
10. Communication breakdown	20%	33.3%	36.6%	5%	5%

Table 9 exposed that most of the respondents agree that three factors could contribute to errors in writing. The most rated error is found to be “Vocabulary knowledge” for which the respondents make very often (23.3%) and often (33.3%). The second rated error is found to be “Spelling” for which the respondents make very often (23.3%) and often (33.3%). The third rated error is found to be “Subject-Verb agreement” for which the respondents make very often (11.6%) and often (33.3%) with the mean of 3.86, 3.69, and 3.6 respectively. However, the respondents believed that preposition usage and sentence errors are the lowest factors causing them to have errors in writing with the mean 3.23.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussions

In this study, a number of factors affecting writing skills of undergraduate students of Rangsit University were investigated. The respondents from ENG 333 (English academic writing) class were asked to respond to the questionnaire to reveal their interest and ability, strategy and attitude, and factors in English writing. The results can be concluded that all of the respondents have an awareness of English writing. Furthermore, the majority of respondents have a good attitude toward writing in English as they found it appropriate within English which is a fundamental skill everyone should have. Many factors affecting English writing skills were including “Vocabulary knowledge”, which the respondents considered a serious factor. Moreover, according to the results, most of respondents have encountered some factors when writing in English communication. However, they tried to find some strategy and to solve the problems and some of them tried to enhance their English skills by their interest and attitude.

In the discussion part, the current study is consistent with the work of Polpo and Mahakaew (2019) who investigated factors affecting writing skills of two hundred participants were in English Reading and Writing class (ENL 113). The findings of the study revealed that there were 3 out of 10 items rated high level of factors affecting English writing skills. The respondents reported that the errors were found to be vocabulary knowledge and active- passive voice. The respondents also realized that article usage was also the third factors affecting their English writing skills. These three factors made difficulties for them to create English writing tasks and they became nervous and worried as a result. Another research study shows to have the same results. The results of Vu Thi Ngoc (2013) showed that a writing activity is essential and useful. Therefore, it means that the results of these two research studies are consistent.

However, the present study is not consistent with the research study as follows. The results of Warattha (2014) showed that writing English is a basic skill that everyone should have. So, it means that the results of these two research studies are not consistent. The last aspect is a factor causing students to have errors in writing. The result of Warattha (2014) showed that the strongest factor is time constraint. In other words, the results of these two research studies are not consistent.

Based on the results presented above, the results could be an advantage for the university to know the factors that are causing students to have errors in writing. The English major could use the results to develop English writing courses to serve the needs of learners so that the learners can improve their English writing skills more efficiently. Also, in order to prepare Thai students for the world arena, English writing will be required for effective communication. Accordingly, it is important for this field of study.



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## 7. References

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