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The Use of Immediate Feedback and Error Correction in Improving University Students' Writing (A Tale of Two Methods)

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Abstract

Yala Rajabhat University students need to improve their writing skill in English. This research aimed to find a method of teaching to improve the YRU students' skill in writing, and then to compare the method found to the traditional lecture method. The population included two groups of 46third year students majoring in English. The instruments used were a pre-test and a post-test. For both pre- and post-tests, the students were told to write about 15 to 20 sentenceson the topic of a tennis ball. These tests were blindly evaluated by other English lecturers and rated from one to four according to the degree of improvement. The results showed a small insignificant difference between the two groups of students in the improvement of their writing skill (traditional method: mean = 2.52 +/- 1.02; error correction/feedback method: mean = 2.69 +/- 0.75). This result shows that the method of teaching writing based on error correction and immediate feedback is a good way to teach writing to university students, and can be another tool for English teachers to use.

Keywords: students, writing, error correction, immediate feedback

Introduction

The role of English has gradually expanded in parallel with the economic growth of Thailand and the launch of the AEC in 2015, thus, it is important to encourage Thai people to be familiar with English in keeping up with globalization and preparing to be part of the ASEAN community. With regards to teaching and learning English as a foreign language, average Thais are considered to have very low proficiency in this language (Arunsiro, 2013). For this reason, several research works had been done to find out how to help Thai learners improve their skills in the English language. One of the skills that Thai learners seem to have the most difficulty with is their writing production in English. It has been said that writing is the most difficult skill to learn in the English language. And for Thai learners of English, this difficulty is magnified by the many and varied differences between Thai and English grammars, starting from the grammar differences to capitalization, punctuation and simply the way Thai is written. Traditionally, the lecture format and rule-based instruction has been the method most teachers use in teaching writing even to university students, with some self-correction added.Due to the challenges in teaching this course to Thai university students, there is a great need to find another way to impart the knowledge and skill to these learners. The challenge starts with the differences between Thai and English grammars starting with the use of both definite and indefinite articles in the English language, and the non-existence of that part of speech in the Thai language. There are also English pronouns which have no counterpart in Thai. In addition, there is no such thing as subject-verb agreement in the Thai language while this concept is very important when using English. Moreover, the placement of adjectives in relation to the nouns they modify are in direct contrast in the two languages; in Thai, the adjective is placedafter the noun while the same has to be placed before the noun in English. These are just some of the differences and grammatical challenges which Thai learners face when they are trying to learn English. This language interference usually causes the Thai learners' problems in their study of the English language which lead to their making errors in their

production in the target language, particularly in their writing in English. Over and above these differences in grammar and the problem of language interference, there is the non-use of capitalization and particularly no punctuation in the Thai languagewhich resultsin long and sometimes complicated sentences. This is a big obstacle when learners are trying to write simple sentences in English, and are being taught to do so.

Making mistakes and errors is part of the process of learning a second/foreign language and can provide students and English teachers with evidence of how language is learned or acquired, and what strategies or procedures are the best ways to learn (Jung, 2013). Thai learners of English, just like their Korean and Chinese counterparts, make mostly the same kinds of mistakes in their writing production in the target language. The mistakes they make are generally of two kinds, form-based errors which relate to using exact grammatical principles as well as other factors such as punctuation, omission and insertion; and meaning-based errors which relate to using appropriate words for specific meaning in the sentence rather than understanding within the context of communication, or what other researchers call lexico-grammatical or mechanical errors (Jung, 2013, Luo, 2015). Specifically for Thai learners, a study showed that the most frequent types of errors were translated words from Thai, word choice, verb tense, preposition, and comma. The errors derived from two sources: interlingual (or native language) and intralingual, and the former was found to be the dominant source of errors (Na Phuket, 2015).

In Thailand, it is very common to see a Thai-speaking teacher of English standing in front of the class and explaining English grammatical structures in Thai, written on the board. Interaction on social media by students occurs even more frequently inside a Thai classroom impacting EFL learners by either facilitating or inhibiting their English writing skills (Chamcharatsri, 2010; Kamnoetsin, 2014).

According to Ahangari (2015) giving feedback to learners' performance is one of the most important responsibilities of a teacher. Learners can also benefit from the opportunities of learning from each other through peer feedback, and students can learn to communicate effectively, accept different opinions, listen carefully, think critically, and participate efficiently (White and Caminero as quoted in Ahangari, 2015). In Jung's study of Korean students, many realized their errors easily from explicit correction through peer-review and teacher-review feedback, hence, EFL learners may benefit from various forms of feedback on their errors. Like Thai learners, the Korean students focused on form-based errors more than meaning-based errors because most EFL learners find it difficult to use the grammatical rules of English due to the difference in structure of both languages.

Thus, language teachers need to familiarize themselves with different correction strategies and the best and most effective ways through which they can identify and remove their learners' errors. Teachers should continue to provide written corrective feedback to their students' writing in order to help them improve their writing accuracy (Salehfard, 2014).

As stated earlier, most teachers follow the lecture format of rule-based instruction perhaps because of all those grammar differences discussed above, and it also seems to have become the traditional method used in most schools of learning even in the institutions of higher education. This present study tries to find another learner-centered method of teaching the skill of writing to university students, and then evaluate the value of such method by directly comparing it with the traditional lecture format. The result of this study will provide not only Thai EFL learners with another way to help them improve their writing skill, but also provide English teachers of writing with another tool to use in order to help students improve their writing production in English.
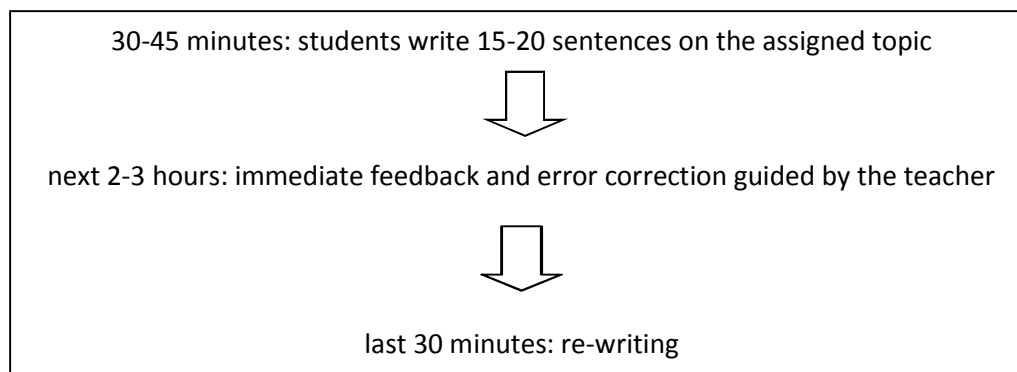
Objectives

This study had twoobjectives: 1) to find a method of teaching to improve the English writing skill of YalaRajabhat University students, 2) to compare this method with the traditional lecture format of rule-based instruction.

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Research Methodology
    Research Design
The design of this research was experimental.
    Teaching Process (4-hour class)

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│   30-45 minutes: students write 15-20 sentences on the assigned topic │
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│                                 ⬇                                    │
│                                                                       │
│  next 2-3 hours: immediate feedback and error correction guided by    │
│  the teacher                                                          │
│                                                                       │
│                                 ⬇                                    │
│                                                                       │
│                      last 30 minutes: re-writing                      │
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    Sample: Two groups of 46university students majoring in English. One group (23 students) was taught by a teacher who used the traditional lecture format; the second group (23 students) was taught by another teacher who used the error correction and immediate feedback format in teaching writing, both lecturerstaught during the first term of school year 2015–2016 at YRU.
    Research instrument: Pre- and post-tests blindly evaluated by other English lecturers. The evaluators assessed the papers based on over-all improvement from the pre-test to the post-test, in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation and expansion of the idea. The papers were rated according to the following: 1-with little or no improvement; 2-about 25% improvement; 3-about 50% improvement; 4- more than 50% improvement.
    Data collection: At the beginning of the term, for the pre-test, all the students were shown a tennis ball and were told to write 15 sentences about it. At the post-test about three months later, the same ball was shown and the students were told to write 15 to 20 sentences about it applying everything they learned from their writing class during the term. Essay papers were immediately collected after each test.
    Data analysis: The same number of paired pre- and post-test papers was evaluated.Statistics used were means, standard deviation and independent samples t-test.

Results

Improvement of writing skill	Group	N	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	t	p
					-.614	.543
	1 (lecture format)	23	2.52	1.02		
	2 (immediate feedback and correction)	23	2.69	0.75		

Independent samples t-test: Difference not significant

Discussion
    In this era of widespread use of modern technology by almost everyone particularly students, teachers face the new challenge of making their classrooms more interactive in order to hold the students' attention. The traditional method of lecture certainly has its place in the classroom but for a teacher who aims for more learner participation, this method has to give way to a more learner-centered instruction. This change towards a more participatory instruction can be quite difficult for many lecturers to follow, perhaps mainly because with this method, teachers have

to give up some of their perceived authority inside the classroom. With this new method of more learner participation, they also have to allow not just a one-way direction of learning and teaching, but a multi-directional way where learners not only receive the knowledge from the teacher but also from each other. Lecturers who are so used to the lecture format of teaching can feel threatened when they let the students voice their opinions or give feedback about what is being learned. Some lecturers may also feel that they are not doing their jobs well when they are not the primary source of knowledge or skill inside the classroom, and some students may also feel the same way as the teacher, thinking that they are simply supposed to receive the knowledge from the primary source which is the instructor, and not take the opportunity to share their own knowledge and skill. This resistance from both parties is a big obstacle against achieving the goal of more learner-centered teaching and learning.

The need however, for greater participation from the students towards achieving their learning goals supersedes that of their resistance so that both learners and instructors have to prepare themselves for this change if they want to become more productive in their learning and teaching. Both parties have to understand that because of the popularity of new technologies like the social media, iphones, and the internet itself, students' minds are being influenced to have short attention spans and at the same time, they are becoming more interactive in their relationships. In a study on Facebook's impact on collegiate EFL students' English writing in Thailand, researchers had found that using this social media impacts the type, whether formal or informal, of EFL English students' in-class writing (Kamnoetsin, 2014). This is a challenge for lecturers to understand the influence social media has on their students and find ways to creatively use this to improve students' learning. Inside the classrooms, traditional lectures will not hold students' attention long enough anymore, students become bored more easily, unless of course the topic is extra interesting and the speaker is extra good as well. In an English writing classroom, because of the nature of the subject, interaction between learners and the instructor is not only a must, but the activity itself calls for more learner participation. An English lecturer in a writing class will be defeating the class' purpose if he/she insists on giving lectures without really allowing the students to do the required activity in the classroom itself. And if the lecturer allows the students to do the writing activity outside of the classroom, it will be a real challenge for the teacher to check if the students will do the requirement themselves, or if they will ask someone more knowledgeable to do the activity for them. These reasons definitely call for a learner-centered instruction that can be followed by lecturers and accepted by the students, regardless of what the subject being taught and learned is, but most particularly for classes that involve activities like writing.

For a more learner-centered instruction, the method of error correction with immediate feedback from and review by both the instructor and peers can be introduced slowly. With the skills of listening and speaking in English, researchers warn against excessive correction which can be intimidating to learners trying to develop such skills. But with regards to the writing skill, previous studies had shown that immediate feedback from the instructor together with peer and instructor reviews and correction can be truly beneficial in improving the learners' skill in writing. Self-correction gives the learner more confidence in recognizing her/his own errors, while instructor and peer reviews and correction lead to a community-wide learning experience. Because more people are involved, learning and teaching becomes more participatory, interaction becomes more alive leading to a more interactive classroom, learners are more interested and the whole process of teaching and learning becomes multi-directional and more interesting.

Most YalaRajabhat university lecturers follow the traditional lecture format of instruction regardless of the subject being taught. As in most Asian universities, one seldom finds much interaction between the lecturer and the students inside an English classroom, especially if this

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interaction involves the instructor giving feedback on the learners' production whether it is in a speaking or writing classroom. This study directly compared a rule-based lecture format used by one lecturer in teaching writing to third year students majoring in English, with an error correction-immediate feedback-peer- and teacher-review format used by another teacher with another group of third year English majors. For both pre- and post-tests, students were shown a tennis ball and were told to write 15 sentences about it. The pre-test was done at the beginning of the term and the post-test was three months later towards the end of the term. For the post-test, students were instructed to apply whatever they have learned from their writing class during the term. The paired papers (pre- and post-tests) were then blindly assessed by other YRU English lecturers. Evaluation and rating were based on the improvement from the pre- to the post-test in terms of grammar, punctuation, spelling and expansion of idea. As with previous studies done by other researchers, the mistakes which the students made were either form-based (grammatical mistakes) or meaning-based (choice of word/s) or both. Examples of form-based mistakes committed by the students in this study: grammatical mistake + omission –*I think he have the reason but I just to know*. *It use play tennis. I know tennis player is Paradon*. Grammatical mistakes: *The tennis is a green color. My activities are play tennis, read a book. We are enjoy together at the gym. It's can buy in the market.* Examples of meaning-based errors: *It is enamel with cotton. You can not violent to hit and to throw. People diagnosed as tennis stripes.* Examples of both form-based and meaning-based errors: *The tennis is a hair*. *Tennis makes you healty if you use it follow step.Tennis ball it has a circle.* Both groups of students made these kinds of mistakes in the pre- and post-tests. One noticeable difference between the two groups of students is the length of the expansion of idea. More students in the group given immediate feedback wrote longer and more sentences than those in the lecture group.

The format for the class where the students were given immediate feedback was almost basically the same throughout the term. The class met once a week and for the first two meetings, the students were instructed to write 15 sentences about themselves, their families and friends, within 30 minutes. The number of sentences they were required to write about various topics was gradually increased for the subsequent meetings, and by the last meeting, they were writing 30 sentences in 30 to 45 minutes. After everyone had finished writing, volunteers were asked to show their work through the overhead projector, and the whole class was invited to assess the papers one at a time. The writer had the first opportunity to correct his/her own mistakes one sentence or paragraph at a time, then the classmates help the writer, with the teacher guiding the whole class in this error correction. Due to time limitation, not all the papers were corrected during the class time, and the students were guided to do self-correction. It was truly alearner-centered instruction.

The difference between the two groups of students in the improvement of their writing skill was not statistically significant, although the mean of the group given immediate feedback was a little bit higher (2.69 vs 2.52). There is obviously a need to further prove its value due to the small size of the samples in this present study, but it can be said that this mixed method of error correction, immediate feedback, and peer- and teacher-reviews, can be used in teaching writing to university students. It is another tool for university lecturers to use. The result of this present study corroborates that of previous studies by various researchers from different places and with different groups of learners.

From this small but promising result, it is thus recommended that lecturers try this method especially if their classes involve any kind or length of writing activity, if they aim to improve their students' writing skill. But even if the subject does not really involve a lot of writing activity,

university lecturers should aim towards a more student-centered instruction if they want to produce graduates who are more prepared to contribute towards the progress of the society. We as university lecturers do not want to prepare graduates who will later only sit and receive what is given them, but we want graduates who will become productive contributors, interacting meaningfully in the society, expressing their own ideas sensibly and with good judgment. We can achieve these aims if we create more interactive classrooms and allow our students to give their own ideas and feedback on what is going on inside our classrooms.

Conclusion

At this time when students have very short attention spans and very much involved in interactive activities like the social media, there is a big need for teachers to make their classrooms more interactive as well in order to keep the attention of their students, and make them more interested in learning what they need to learn. Making instruction more learner-centered is a big challenge to many teachers, and this tool being presented in this study offers help to meet this challenge. This method can be used not only in writing classes but also in translation classes, and other courses where writing is involved. It is thus recommended that translation teachers try this method in their classrooms, and add a usable tool in their teaching.

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