

Analysis of Writing Skills of Business English Majors at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Southeast Bangkok College

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated Business English majors' writing ability. The population for the study consisted of 54 students studying at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Southeast Bangkok College in the 2nd Semester of 2016 academic year. There were 18 males and 36 females aged between 18 and 24 years. The aims of the study were to find out the students' strengths and weaknesses in their writing using Jacobs' evaluation scales. The tools for data collection were 270 expository compositions based on 5 given topics namely: "Who Am I?", "My Best Friend", "My Dream Place to Visit", "My Future Job", and "What My Future Looks Like". Descriptive analysis by percentage was used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that the students had basic knowledge of composition writing, and they had enough vocabulary to express themselves. However; they made many mistakes regarding language use. In addition, they got mixed up between written and spoken language. In conclusion, Jacobs' writing evaluation scales proved to be effective in classifying good writing and bad one. It is recommended that the teacher use integrated teaching methods with combination of the four language skills, especially, reading as models to enrich students' vocabulary and refine their writing.

KEYWORDS: Business English Majors, Written Communication Skills, Writing Ability, Integrated Teaching Methods

Introduction

Studying a foreign language has become exceedingly important, especially in the 21st century to cope with new paradigms of living, working, and many other challenges. This concern is apparently a global phenomenon. As presented in

the American Committee for Economic Development Report entitled *Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Languages for U.S. Economic and National Security* (Committee for Economic Development, 2006), the committee stated "To confront

the twenty-first century challenges to our economy and national security, our education system must be strengthened by the increase of foreign language studies. Our continued global leadership will depend on our students' abilities to interact with the world community both inside and outside our borders."

The citation above shows that learning a foreign language is beneficial and has become a must to achieve in the new world. In addition, English communication competence will be an added value for economic advantage both personally and at a national and international level. As a result of development in IT and technology, people around the globe are connected through English. Crystal (2003) remarked that economic and cultural globalization includes the globalization of language and in particular the spreading role of English as a universal global lingua franca. In this aspect, teachers need to constantly improve their teaching pedagogy to meet the needs of their students, as well as to help gauge how well their students do to improve their communication skills.

Viewed in light of the above, it is sensible to investigate Thai students' communication competence through their writing to see if they can convey their message or ideas clearly. In addition, the researcher wants to discover their weaknesses, and language need in order to help recommend their teachers a new teaching method

to enhance students' writing ability and communication skills to live happily and successfully in the 21st century.

Purposes of the Study

This study aimed to:

1. analyze writing skills of Business English Majors at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Southeast Bangkok College based on Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981)
2. find out their strengths/weaknesses in writing, and their language needs

Benefits of Research

The research outputs yielded benefits for both teachers and learners and all stakeholders. The teachers could understand the impact of an effective evaluation system to measure students' writing abilities, while the students could also realize their language needs reflected by the types of mistakes they had made. Consequently, the teacher might change or develop their teaching method to help the students improve their written communication skills.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

As teachers, we need to focus sustained attention on issues of responsibility, specifically the responsibilities to help our students learn and improve their communication skills, especially writing. That means students are more likely to write well when they think of themselves as writers rather than as error makers. In order

to help students feel more confident about their writing, it is sensible to encourage them to understand the importance of broad exposure to a variety of text types. That is to make them write as much as possible to create their own writing styles by using writing to improve their own writing.

Many scholars have explored different ways to help learners learn. Jia (2010) stated that learning was a process during which individuals created their cognitive structures. The learning process is the construction of knowledge. Only when learners code, process, and construct their unique understandings based on their previous experiences, can it be real learning. Consequently, it can be implied that students can write well if they have previous knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, including how to form a good paragraph, and the writing process with the audience in mind.

Learning Difficulties among Non-Native Speakers of English

Sawir (2005) undertook a research on “Language difficulties of international students in Australia” and found that traditional EFL difficulties in East and Southeast Asia nations were not adequate to meet the need for an extended emphasis on oral communications. These traditional pedagogies took a scholastic approach in that they tended to treat English as if it was outside the national or local linguistic environment. Her research findings revealed that first,

the weaknesses of international students studying in Australia in relation to oral English, and the learning difficulties created by those weaknesses. Second the most important, there was a connection between the international students’ problems with English, and the prior language learning experiences of those international students in their own countries, and their beliefs about language learning. The implication was that the prior learning and beliefs about learning had not been taken into account sufficiently or systematically. That meant the teaching practice in Asia and other countries needed to be changed. And sufficient attention should be given to teachers in charge to develop better communicative teaching and learning practice in the home countries. This research finding was useful and the researcher’s comment was practical. Many Thai teachers shared some common experiences that most of their students often thought in Thai when the writing was in English. As a result, their writing did not sound English. It became a blend, or a mixture of Thai and English. That is why undertaking this research to find out Business English majors’ writing ability is significant to gather evidences about their writing weaknesses and strengths in order to help them improve their writing and communication skills.

From what has been discussed above, it is useful to investigate Business English majors’ writing ability so as to help them improve their written communication skills

and become competent in English. The current study proposed Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981) to find out not only students' weaknesses and strengths in writing. It suggested ways to improve teaching techniques to enhance students' overall English proficiency necessary for study and work.

Population

Population for the study consisted of 54 Business English majors studying in the 2nd Semester of 2016 academic year at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Southeast Bangkok College. There were 18 males and 36 females aged between 18 and 24 years.

Instruments

The research instruments were based on Jacobs' evaluation of writing components, namely Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language Use, and Mechanics of 270 free compositions under 5 given topics. The students were assigned to write the first free expository writing in December, 2016 under the topic "Who Am I?". At the interval of every three weeks the students were assigned to write the 2nd composition entitled "My Best Friend", the 3rd on "My Dream Place to Visit", the 4th one on "My Future Job", and the last one on "What My Future Looks Like", respectively. The project ended in February, 2017. The proportion of the scores assigned to each criteria is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The proportion of the scores assigned to each criteria based on Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981)

Criteria	Excellent	Good	Fair	Very poor	Not Enough to Evaluate
Content	30-27%	26-22%	21-17%	16-13%	12-0%
Organization	20-18%	17-14%	13-10%	9-7%	6-0%
Vocabulary	20-18%	17-14%	13-10%	9-7%	6-0%
Language use	25-22%	21-18%	17-11%	10-5%	4-0%
Mechanics	5%	4%	3%	2%	1%

Source: Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981)

- NB:**
- Content in this study refers to the information provided in each composition.
 - Organization refers to the layout of the composition consisting of an introduction, supporting details, and a conclusion.
 - Vocabulary refers to the words and expressions used to convey ideas and explanation.
 - Language use refers to grammatical structures and tenses.
 - Mechanics refers to the rules of written language or rules of grammar.

Research Process

The research methods employed in the study were both qualitative and quantitative with descriptive analysis and basic statistics for presentations of the findings. Evaluation scales were based on Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981).

Data Analysis

Both descriptive analysis and basic statistics were used to present the data with discussion on the findings.

Findings

The findings are presented as the objectives of the research. First Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981) can classify the students' writing abilities from

excellent to very poor with identification of their weaknesses and strengths in each of the writing component. It was found that all the business English major students' writing abilities varied according to the topic given. Most of them were able to write well in the first topic as they had enough knowledge to write about. However, in the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and last topics we can see big differences between the good students and the poor ones. This was due to the fact that students could write well if they knew what to write, and when the given topics were demanding, students made many mistakes.

Second Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981) proved to be effective in classifying the students' strengths and weaknesses as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Classifications of the students' scores of their writing content

Topic	Content Score Level				
	Excellent	Good	Fair	Very poor	Not Enough to Evaluate
1. Who Am I ?	N = 7 12.9%	N = 23 42.5%	N = 15 27.7%	N = 7 12.9%	N = 2 3.7%
2. My Best Friend	N = 3 5.5%	N = 22 40.7%	N = 15 27.7%	N = 9 16.6%	N = 5 9.2%
3. My Dream Place to Visit	N = 1 1.8%	N = 24 44.4%	N = 13 24.0%	N = 10 18.5%	N = 6 11.1%
4. My Future Job	N = 0 0.0%	N = 12 22.2%	N = 17 31.4%	N = 7 12.9%	N = 18 33.3%
5. What My Future Looks Like	N = 0 0.0%	N = 6 11.1%	N = 11 20.3%	N = 10 18.5%	N = 27 50.0%

Table 2 shows that according Jacobs' score level, there were 12.9% of the students whose writing content on the first topic titled "Who Am I?" was considered excellent, 42.5% good, 27.7% fair, and 12.9% was very poor, respectively. In comparison, only 5.5% of the students whose writing on the 2nd topic entitled "My Best Friend" was considered excellent, 40.7% good, 27.7% fair, and 16.6% very poor. Whereas on the 3rd topic titled "My Dream Place to Visit" fewer students equivalent to 1.8% whose writing was considered excellent, and 44.4% good, 24.0% fair, and 18.5% very poor. Regarding topic

no. 4 titled "My Future Job" no student got an excellent level. But 22.0% of the students whose writing content was considered good, and 31.4%, fair, and the rest 46.2% whose writing content was considered from very poor to not enough to evaluate. Although the last given topic was the most difficult, there were 11.1% of the students whose writing was considered good, and 20.3% fair, and 18.5% very, poor. Interestingly, as average 21.4% of the students writing content could not be measured as there was not enough to evaluate.

Table 3 Classifications of the students' scores of their writing organization

Topic	Content Score Level				
	Excellent	Good	Fair	Very poor	Not Enough to Evaluate
1. Who Am I?	N = 13 24.0%	N = 30 55.5%	N = 10 18.5%	N = 1 1.8%	N = 0 0.0%
2. My Best Friend	N = 23 42.5%	N = 20 37.0%	N = 9 16.6%	N = 2 3.7%	N = 0 0.0%
3. My Dream Place to Visit	N = 23 42.5%	N = 19 35.1%	N = 10 18.5%	N = 2 3.7%	N = 0 0.0%
4. My Future Job	N = 11 20.3%	N = 17 31.4%	N = 12 22.2%	N = 4 7.4%	N = 10 18.5%
5. What My Future Looks Like	N = 3 5.5%	N = 17 31.4%	N = 8 14.8%	N = 0 0.0%	N = 26 48.1%

Table 3 shows that most of the students in this study had knowledge about how to organize their writing. They gave an introduction, elaborated the detail, and had a conclusion. However, most of their writing reflected their weaknesses in their

introductory paragraphs. They did not make a good introduction, but moved on to give the detail in the second paragraph, and many of them did not know how to end the last paragraph in an interesting way. In other words, most of the students provided

the detail in the body of their compositions, and sometimes repeated themselves. This shows they wrote without any specific audience in mind or that they did not know who their readers were. As presented in Table 3 there were about 10 students whose writing organization was considered very poor. This reflects the quality of teaching and learning

that needs to be improved. However, it is interesting to find that there were some students in the Business English Program whose writing organization was considered either excellent or good. This was because they were keen to improve themselves and responsible for their own learning.

Table 4 Classifications of the students' scores of their use of vocabulary

Topic	Content Score Level				
	Excellent	Good	Fair	Very poor	Not Enough to Evaluate
1. Who Am I?	N = 11 20.3%	N = 29 53.7%	N = 12 22.2%	N = 1 1.8%	N = 1 1.8%
2. My Best Friend	N = 10 18.5%	N = 30 55.5%	N = 11 20.3%	N = 2 3.7%	N = 1 1.8%
3. My Dream Place to Visit	N = 8 14.8%	N = 28 51.8%	N = 17 31.4%	N = 0 0.0%	N = 1 1.8%
4. My Future Job	N = 3 5.5%	N = 26 48.1%	N = 6 11.1%	N = 4 7.4%	N = 15 27.7%
5. What My Future Looks Like	N = 3 5.5%	N = 15 27.7%	N = 9 16.6%	N = 3 5.5%	N = 24 44.4%

Table 4 shows that these students' knowledge of vocabulary varied from one composition to another. The findings revealed that in the first composition 20.3% of the students got excellent scores in their use of vocabulary, while 53.7% good, 22.2% fair, 1.8% very poor. That means more than half of the students had got rich vocabulary for their writing. In the second composition 18.5% got excellent level, whereas 55.5% was considered good, 20.3% fair, and the rest

5.5% was considered very poor to not enough to evaluate. It is also interesting to find that the students' knowledge of vocabulary was limited as the given topics became more and more demanding. The findings show that fewer students got excellent scores in the last three compositions from 5.5% to 14.8%. Yet 51.8% of the students got good scores, and 48.1% of the students were able to use good vocabulary in their fourth composition. In comparison, only 27.7% of the students

were able to earn a good score level in the last composition.

In conclusion, only an average 3.68% of the students got very poor scores. That means, in general most students had rich vocabulary to express themselves or they had verb form mastery to communicate their ideas appropriately. Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981) are effective tools to clearly identify students' strengths and weaknesses in their use of vocabulary, and teachers can help enrich the students' vocabulary through integration of reading and writing to develop their communication skills. It was found that the students who wrote well were able to express themselves with appropriate words, and idioms. They showed their mastery of verb forms, including idioms and collocations.

Among the 5 components of writing mentioned earlier, it was found that Language Use and Mechanics were most of the students' weaknesses. Many of them made a lot of errors and mistakes in their use of articles, prepositions, word – order, wrong parts of speech, run – on sentences, fragments, and tenses. Some of them still made a lot of mistakes in their use of mechanics such as, either not using a full stop when the sentence was complete. They made comma splices to create run – on sentences, or wrong spelling, and not using capital letters in new sentences, including wrong spelling. However, the students' wrong use of mechanics were not considered their serious errors as their messages were still understandable. Therefore, a focus should be put on students' scores of their language use as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5 Classifications of the students' scores of their language use

Topic	Content Score Level				
	Excellent	Good	Fair	Very poor	Not Enough to Evaluate
1. Who Am I?	N = 3 5.5%	N = 30 55.5%	N = 16 29.6%	N = 4 7.4%	N = 1 1.8%
2. My Best Friend	N = 5 9.2%	N = 30 55.5%	N = 15 27.7%	N = 4 7.4%	N = 0 0.0%
3. My Dream Place to Visit	N = 7 12.9%	N = 25 46.2%	N = 15 27.7%	N = 6 11.1%	N = 1 1.8%
4. My Future Job	N = 8 14.8%	N = 23 42.5%	N = 16 29.6%	N = 7 12.9%	N = 0 0.0%
5. What My Future Looks Like	N = 5 9.2%	N = 12 22.2%	N = 13 24%	N = 9 16.6%	N = 15 27.7%

Table 5 shows that 5.5% of the students got scores in the excellent level in their language use in writing 1, and 9.2% in writing 2, 12.9% in writing 3, 14.8% in writing 4, and 9.2% in the last. Apparently more than half of the students got good score levels in their language use in their writing 1&2. However, as the given topics became more demanding, fewer students got scores in the good level in their language use from

22.2% to 42.5%. When making an average, it was found that half of the students or 27.7% whose knowledge about grammar was considered fair, and the rest of the students need great help to improve their grammar. Apart from Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981), it is worthwhile to investigate specific types of errors and mistakes these students made as shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Types of grammatical errors found in the students' free writing

Language use	Articles	Prepositions	Word-Order/ Structures	Vocabulary	Tenses
	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found
1. Types of grammatical errors found in all the students' first free writing	49 11.3%	64 14.8%	235 54.6%	61 14.1%	21 4.8%
2. Types of grammatical errors found in all the students' 2 nd free writing	54 12.3%	70 17.2%	121 29.8%	149 36.7%	11 2.7%
3. Types of grammatical errors found in the students' 3 rd free writing	91 15.8%	94 16.3%	30 5.2%	308 53.6%	51 8.8%
4. Types of grammatical errors found in all students' 4 th writing on the given topic "My Future Job"	73 9.8%	92 12.3%	34 4.5%	454 61.1%	90 12.1%
5. Types of grammatical errors found in all the students' free writing on the last given topic "What My Future Looks Like"	90 9.6%	106 11.3%	43 4.5%	549 58.7%	147 15.7%

As shown in Table 6 students' errors in language use varied starting from articles, prepositions, word - order, structures: subject/verb agreements, run - on sentences, fragments, and parts of speech. The students were confused about adjectives, and verbs including mixed use of present - participles, infinitives, and tenses. It was found that articles and prepositions are common errors. This may be due to the differences between the mother tongue, (the Thai language) and the target language. Even those who are considered well educated, often make mistakes in using articles between "a" and "the". In comparison between articles, and prepositions, it is more difficult to use correct prepositions. This can only be mastered through real language use with a lot of reading and writing. With regard to vocabulary, students need to be encouraged to read more and use reading as models to enrich their vocabulary and expressions in order to improve their writing. In addition, students main problems were their inadequate knowledge about gramatical structures. As apparent, their mistakes in this category was the highest in number. To solve the problems and help students improve their English proficiency, the instructor should must encourage them to learn and use English as much as possible. He/she also needs to speak English as a medium of instruction. All the subjects need to be integrated, such as Reading, Writng, Speaking, and Listening. The instructor also needs to reinforce students to read and write more

and motivate them to edit their writing and correct their mistakes to improve their English. Diary and summary writing are also useful to help students develop their communication skills.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings have served the two research objectives of study with interesting implications Firstly, from what have been discussed earlier, it is obvious that Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981) can be used to classify the students' writing ability. It was an effective way to identify the level of the students' writing abilities from excellent to very poor with specific components of writing scales as have been discussed earlier. Each component of composition writing is evaluated based on specific criteria that help the teacher understand the learning achievement and failures of each individual student as well as their language needs. Moreover, the teacher can improve the teaching methods and assignments that are suitable for the students to develop their writing and communication skills. In this respect, Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981) can make judgments about the students' writing skills and thus provide detailed information about the students' writing performance better than the single score of a holistic rating. It also helps the instructor to appropriately plan teaching lessons, beginning with need analysis, and then assign suitable tasks step by step with

immediate feedbacks to help the students make progress in their learning. Especially, integrating reading as model for writing can help enhance students' writing skills.

With reference to Barnett (1989), today we are more aware than in the past that all the four skills, together with cultural awareness, are essential to language learning. Reading is central in many ways: appropriate texts provide comprehensible input from which learners assimilate grammar and vocabulary. Closely, related to writing, reading promotes analytical and cognitive skill development as readers grapple with both surface meaning and deeper understanding. In this regard, it is more practical to integrate reading and writing to help students develop their writing skills through reading. In doing so, they will absorb the grammar and vocabulary, and expressions, including discourse structure used in the reading models and apply them in their writing.

Secondly, Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales (1981) can help the instructor find out who the best or good students are. At the same time, the scales of writing evaluation can help underpin the students' most serious weaknesses as discussed earlier in details.

All in all, the types of the serious mistakes found in this study are useful for English language teachers to be more aware of the important role of grammar and students' ability to improve their English for communication. In order to provide feedback on students' writing errors,

Cook (2013) suggests that it is not enough for the instructor to identify errors the students need to remedy, highlighting the strengths in the prose is just as important. Students need to understand what they need to continue doing as well as what they need to stop doing. Students should be encouraged to identify errors and repair them. Without the ability to research the error, the student will in all likelihood repeat the errors in his/her future work, despite having seen it written correctly by the instructor.

In addition, Valero, Fernandez, Iseni, & Clarkson (2008) claims that mistakes and errors may be caused by a) Ignorance of not knowing the rules, the structure of the language, and so on, and b) the inability of students to apply what they have learned. He further argued that teachers should consider students' mistakes and errors their major concerns for many reasons: Firstly, they are direct proofs of what students know and what they don't know. Secondly, mistakes and errors are systematic of any problems that students may have. The best way to underpin learners' errors and mistakes is through their production either speaking or writing. Yet, learners can also avoid their limitations in language use by simply do not use a form with which they are uncomfortable. Valero also argues that mistakes and errors must not be routinely left uncorrected. Students must be informed of their mistakes and errors, and they must constantly be updated on their learning development. He concludes that we should pay great

attention to teaching our students to recognize their mistakes and errors themselves, correct them, and analyze them, which leads naturally to a greater understanding and more profound self-evaluation of their work.

As is clear from the findings, those who wrote very well were the ones who were proficient in English. They understood the rules and used them correctly, while those who did not have enough English proficiency made various inconsistent mistakes. Therefore, serious attention needs to be paid on how to extend the students' knowledge about grammar. It is more practical to integrate all the four skills in language learning, using speaking, listening, reading, and writing in every class to get students acquainted with different genres and modes of communication. It is also important to help students understand the differences between the writing and speaking discourses as many of them could not distinguish good writing from bad. They tended to write their compositions as if they were talking without any specific audience in mind, being careless about making themselves clear.

In sum, outcomes of the study had many implications that reflected some critical teaching methods in Thailand. Taking into consideration though the students had spent over ten years studying English, they have yet to master the basic rules of language use. It is timely for all stakeholders: teachers, curriculum designers, policy makers, and administrators, including the government itself

to enhance the learning environment and to garner the students' serious commitment to their learning and studying English both inside and outside the classroom. New teaching contents and assessments including standards evaluation must be implemented to gauge students' learning achievement. Thus a task-based approach should be adopted to enhance students' English competence. Today students often use email with informal language that have impacted their standard writing. Therefore, a focus should be put on students' weaknesses or limitations in language use, which created a lot of confusion to the reader as well as underpinned their language needs Griva, Chostelidou, and Tsakiridou (2012) points out that English is an important tool for life learning and career advancement that can create a healthier nation.

Recommendation

As this study investigated only Business English majors' writing ability to find out their weaknesses and strengths at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Southeast Bangkok College, the findings may not be represented all Thai English major students' limitations and language needs. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that another study on the same topic be undertaken either using Jacobs' evaluation scales of writing (1981) or a holistic rating system for the investigation to make a comparison which is a better evaluation system to find out other Thai students' writing ability and their weaknesses in English at other

institutes. Other future studies on effective teaching methods are also encouraged to help our students achieve a high success rate during classroom instruction so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning English in Thailand.

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