

An Investigation of Third Year Business English Majors' Communication Skills through Their Free Expository Writing

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Abstract

This study investigated 15 third year Business English majors studying at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Southeast Bangkok College. The aims are to gain insights into the students' language needs in order to improve their English communication, and to develop the teaching techniques to enhance the students English communication skills. The data collecting were done through the students' expository writings based on the given topic. The participants were assigned to write freely on the topic "Who Am I?" The Evaluation was based on Jacobs et al (1981) writing evaluation scales. Descriptive analysis and basic statistics were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that the participants had basic knowledge of composition, and were able to follow the directions given. However, their weaknesses were language use, grammar, tenses, and mechanics. In addition, they got mixed up between written and spoken language. In conclusion, the participants need more reinforcement in grammar, and extension of their vocabulary so that the teacher were recommended to use integrated teaching methods that will enhance the students' communication skills.

Keywords : communication skills, writing ability, integrated teaching methods

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ได้ทำการศึกษานักศึกษาวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจชั้นปีที่ 3 ของคณะศิลปศาสตร์ วิทยาลัยเซาท์อีสต์บางกอก จำนวน 15 คน โดยประสงค์ให้ได้รับความเข้าใจเรื่องความจำเป็นในการ พัฒนาการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษของกลุ่มนักศึกษา รวมถึงเพื่อพัฒนาเทคนิคการสอนให้สามารถเพิ่ม ทักษะการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษด้วย ทั้งนี้รวบรวมข้อมูลผ่านชิ้นงานมอบหมายในลักษณะข้อเขียนเชิง บรรยายความตามเสรีของนักศึกษาภายใต้โจทย์ "ฉันเป็นใคร?" สำหรับการประเมินผลอาศัยเกณฑ์วัด ประเมินการเขียนที่พัฒนาโดยเจคอบส์และคณะ (1981) ส่วนการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลกระทำในรูปของการ วิเคราะห์เชิงบรรยายร่วมกับหลักสถิติพื้นฐาน ข้อค้นพบที่ได้แสดงให้เห็นว่ากลุ่มนักศึกษามีความรู้ พื้นฐานในการแต่งข้อเขียนตามโจทย์ได้ อย่างไรก็ตามก็จุดอ่อนของกลุ่มนักศึกษาอยู่ที่ใช้ภาษา ไวยากรณ์ กาล และกลไกการเขียน นอกเหนือไปจากที่ยังคงใช้ภาษาเขียนปะปนกับภาษาพูด โดยสรุป

กลุ่มนักศึกษาจำเป็นต้องได้รับการพัฒนาในเรื่องไวยากรณ์และคลังคำศัพท์ โดยผู้สอนพึงใช้วิธีการสอนแบบบูรณาการที่สามารถเสริมสร้างทักษะการสื่อสารของนักศึกษาได้

คำสำคัญ ทักษะการสื่อสาร ความสามารถด้านการเขียน วิธีการสอนแบบบูรณาการ

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. In the American Committee for Economic Development Report (2011) entitled *Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Languages for U.S. Economic and National Security*, the committee stated that:

“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 advantage 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.

Pufah, Ingrid and Nancy Rhodes (2011) in their study entitled “Foreign Language Instruction in U.S. Schools: Results of a national Survey of Elementary and secondary Schools” explored how well their schools are preparing their students to become global citizens who can communicate well in languages. The findings revealed that among schools with foreign language programs, Spanish was the most commonly taught language and increased over the past decade. In 2008, 88% of the elementary schools that offered language instruction taught Spanish, compared to 79% in 1997. In addition, the researchers observed several positive trends among the elementary and secondary schools that still offered foreign languages: More of these schools taught Arabic and Chinese than previously. The researchers concluded that we need to work together to educate public and policy makers about the vital importance of an American citizen

that can communicate effectively in many languages and across cultures. In the same token, as Thai teachers, we need to show keen interest in our students' achievement in learning English as a foreign or second language to live happily and successfully in the 21st century.

In addition, Griva & Chostelidou (2011 : 56-64) state that learning languages contributes to the development of students' multilingual and multicultural awareness, which enables them to communicate across countries ,helps them acquire a wider sense of active citizenship in modern multilingual societies as well as to the development of lifelong positive attitudes to other languages and develop an understanding of their rights and responsibilities as mobile citizens across the globe.

Held (1999 : 346) mentions the important role of English education in its various aspects that creates a great demand for learning English as a universal global language for communication as follows:

English has become the lingua franca par/excellence and continues to entrench this dominance in a self-reinforcing process. It has become the central language of communication in business, politics, administration, science and academia, as well as being the dominant language of globalized advertising and popular culture.

Viewed in light of teaching and learning English, it is the responsibility of all concerned parties namely teachers, curriculum designers, policy makers, material or text book writers, including the government itself to prepare our youths to be proficient in English in order, not only to use it as a means for self-development, but also advance themselves for better paid job opportunities, and financial security with healthy life styles. In comparison to our neighboring ASEAN country such as Singapore, Mr. Lee Guan Yew has put a great priority to get Singaporean students exposed to the good quality of education, English as a medium of instruction. Consequently, Singaporean economy is no. 1 among its ASEAN community members. In addition, the quality of life of Singaporean people is also developed and become better. They can travel the world and enrich their experiences through using English. Consequently, it is necessary to improve Thai students' English proficiency in order to enhance our national economy that will provide various advantages resulting in better quality of life of Thai people. In order to do so, it is crucial for the researcher to understand the Thai students' limitations or weaknesses in English in relevance to inter-connected skills, styles, and substances in the EFL classroom, including course materials designs.

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.

Grenberg and Comprone (1994) also remarked that reading and writing are interconnected processes. More importantly, teachers expect students to write critically and use writing to demonstrate ,not only that they understand what they have read, but that they are able to interpret, evaluate, and respond to it.

Consequently, Bacha (2010) states that:

Effective communication skills are fundamental to success in many aspects of life. Many jobs require strong communication skills and people with good communication skills usually enjoy better interpersonal relationships with friends and family....Writing skills allow you to communicate your message with clarity and ease to a far larger audience than through face-to-face or telephone conversations.

The citation above confirms that it is sensible to investigate students' communication competence through their writing to see if they can convey their message or ideas clearly enough. In addition , through their writing, the researcher can find out their weaknesses, and language need in order to help them improve their English.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to:

- 1.1. Analyze 3rd year Business English majors' free expository writing ability based on Jacobs' et al (1981) evaluation scales
- 1.2. Find out their strengths and weaknesses

Definition of Terms:

1.1. The participants in this study referred to 15 3rd year Business English majors studying in the 2nd Semester of 2016 academic year at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Southeast Bangkok College

1.2. Free writing in this study referred to 15 compositions written by the participants on the given topic "Who Am I?" They were allowed to write on their own in class for an hour.

Research Questions

- 1.1. Can Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales differentiate the participants 'writing ability level?

1.2. What are the participants' most serious weaknesses in their writing?

Scope of the Study

1.1 Rationale and Significance of the Study:

In *Writing Matters*, Howard (2010) points out that as a teacher, it is important to “focus sustained attention on issues of responsibility, specifically the responsibilities writers have to other writers, to their readers, to their topic, and most specifically, to themselves.” That means students are more likely to write well when they think of themselves as writers rather than as error makers.

Further more, Qiong Jia (2010) states that learning is a process during which individuals create 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.

1.2 Learning Difficulties among Non-Native Speakers of English:

Sawir (2005 : 577-567) undertook a research on “ Language difficulties of international students in Australia” found that traditional EFL difficulties in East and Southeast Asia nations are not adequate to meet the need for an extended emphasis on oral communications. These traditional pedagogies take a scholastic approach in that they tend to treat English as if it is 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. Secondly, the most important, there is 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 is that the prior learning and beliefs about learning have not been taken into account sufficiently or systematically. That means the teaching practice in Asia and other countries needs 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.

Al Badi (2015 : 66) views writing is of importance not only to master English language but also to be successful in learning other disciplines where English is the medium of instruction. Viewed in light of writing difficulties, Chou (2011 : 47-60) provided a number of reasons why international students studying in an English-speaking country encounter a lot of stress and obstacles when writing their assignments. One obvious reason is that students might come from different cultural backgrounds where they are fully dependent on teachers. They also have not

been trained to be critical thinkers and they might have lower expectations than those of their teachers as they consider themselves second language learners. Writing teachers as they, with high expectations, might suppose that students are qualified enough to produce accurate pieces of writing and they might also assign demanding topics that learners might struggle when writing about.

Myles (2002 : 1) explored students' writing process and errors concludes that:

Writing requires conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas. Students writing in a second language are also faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. L1 models of writing instruction and research on composing processes have been the theoretical basis for using the process approach in L2 writing pedagogy. However, language proficiency and competence underlies the ability to write in the L2 in a fundamental way. Therefore, L2 writing instructors should take into account both strategy development and language skill development when working with students.

According to Myles' view above, it is important to find out students' errors and analyze their language need first in order to help them develop their writing skills through the writing process. He interestingly asserts that *the ability to write well is not a natural acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments.*

1.3. Evaluation Criteria for Students' Writing:

Language teachers need to be more sensitive to the learners' language difficulties, and pay close attention in learning practices. In so doing, language teaching could be made more meaningful and interesting by engaging students actively in class with an emphasis on communicative language skills. It is practical to integrate all the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing to encourage students to be fluent in English as well as familiarize themselves with a real English environment as much as possible. Many scholars agree that writing is considered the most difficult skill, and is an integral part of learning English. In this way, assessment of their language learning achievement should be made clear at the beginning of each course. By engaging students in narrative activities, teachers can collect data based on students' written assignments that reflect their knowledge of tenses, and other aspects focused, as well as the genre, and how that tense and aspect combination, or intention discourse, grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, and their thinking process. With recognition of the students' writing

difficulties, and needs, the teacher will have a clearer idea of how to help them improve their English and develop their communication skills. That is the reason why the researcher want to analyze third year business English majors' writing ability in order to understand their limitations and language needs.

Research Methodology

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' et al (1981) writing evaluation scales as follows:

Writing Component	Criteria/Traits	Scores
Content	extent, relevance, subject knowledge	30%
Organization	coherence, fluency, clarity, logical sequencing	20%
Vocabulary	richness, appropriate register, word form mastery	20%
Language use	accuracy (a usage of articles, word order, tenses, prepositions, sentence constructions)	25%
Mechanics	paragraphing, spelling, capitalization, punctuation	5%

The detail of writing evaluation scales for each component is illustrated below:

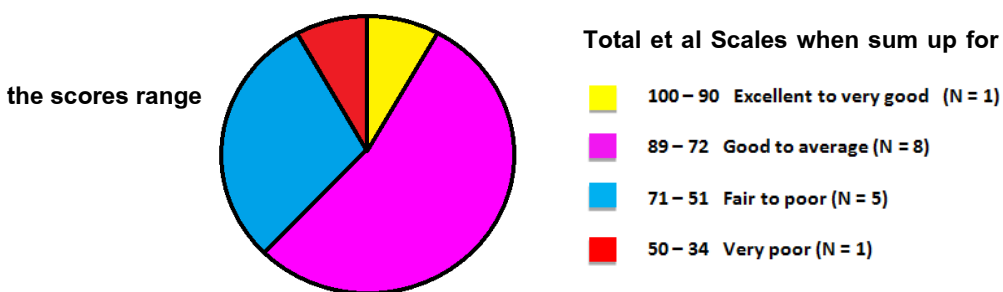
Content	Score Level	Criteria
	30-27	Excellent to very good: knowledgeable* substantive *thorough development of thesis*relevance to assigned topic
	26-22	Good to average: some knowledge of subject *adequate range*limited development of thesis * mostly relevant to topic ,but lacks detail
	21-17	Fair to poor: limited knowledge of subject*little substance*inadequate development of topic
	16-13	Very poor: does not show knowledge of subject*non-substantive*not pertinent*OR not enough to evaluate
Organization	20-18	Excellent to very good: fluent expression*ideas clearly stated/supported *succinct*well-organized*logical sequencing*cohesive

	17-14	Good to average: somewhat choppy*loosely organized, but main ideas main ideas stand out * limited support*logical ,but incomplete sequencing
	13-10	Fair to poor: non fluent" ideas confused or disconnected* lack logical sequencing and development
	9-7	Very poor: does not communicate*no organization*OR not enough to evaluate
Vocabulary	Score level	Criteria
	20-18	Excellent to very good: sophisticated range*effective word/idiom choice and usage*word form mastery*appropriate register
	17-14	Good to average: adequate range*occasional errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage but meaning not obscured
	13-10	Fair to poor: limited range* frequent errors of word/idiom, form, choice, usage*meaning confused or obscured
	9-7	Very poor: essentially translation* little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, word form*OR not enough to evaluate
Language Use	25-22	Excellent to very good: effective complex construction*few errors of agreement, tense, number word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions
	21-18	Good to average: effective but simple construction*minor problems in complex instructions*several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions, but meaning seldom obscured
	17-11	Fair to poor: major problems in simple/ complex constructions*frequent errors of negation, agreement ,tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions and o/or fragments, run-ons, deletions *meaning confused or obscured
	10-5	Very poor: virtually no mastery of sentence construction rules*dominated by errors*does not communicate*OR not enough to evaluate

Mechanics	5	Excellent to very good: demonstrates mastery of conventions*few error of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing
	4	Good to average: occasional errors of spelling, punctuation ,capitalization, paragraphing,*poor handwriting*meaning confused or obscured
	3	Fair to poor: frequent errors of spelling, punctuation capitalization, paragraphing,*poor handwriting*meaning confused or obscured
	2	Very poor: no mastery of conventions*dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing*handwriting illegible* OR not enough to evaluate

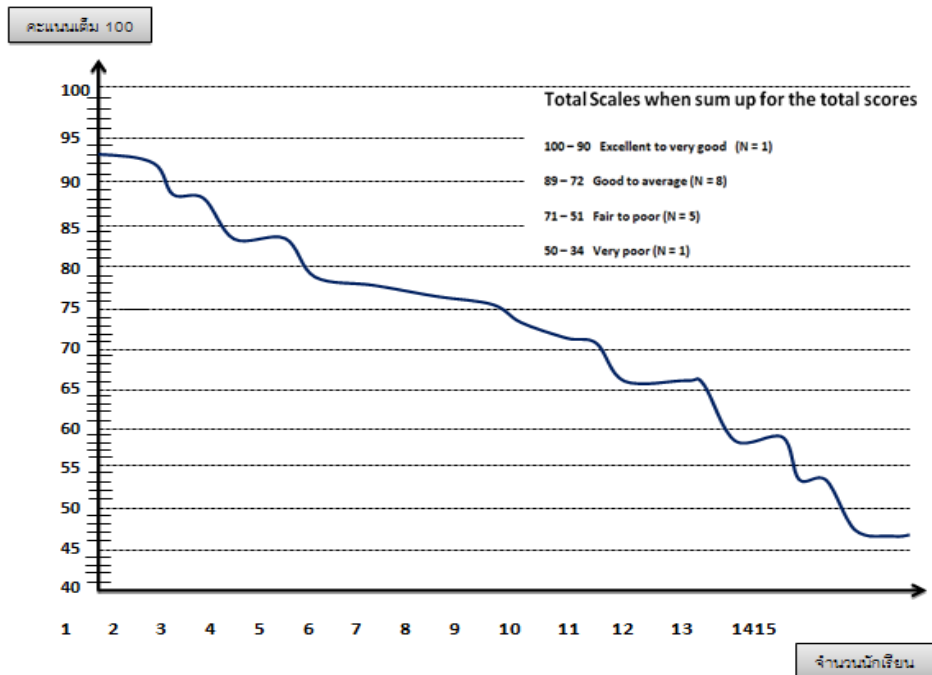
The findings revealed that most of the participants' writing ability was at a good to moderate average level. With an exception of two students; one was at the highest or excellent level, and the other was at the poorest level respectively. All together 14 participants or 93.33% of the population were able to write and express their ideas clearly because the topic was about themselves. However; when analyzed in detail according to Jacobs 'writing evaluation scales, it was found that many of the participants' writing abilities varied as can be illustrated in the following Figures and Tables below:

Figure1. The Participants' Writing Ability Based on Jacobs' (1981) Evaluation Scales



As presented in Chart1, the yellow color represents the participant whose writing got the top scores of 92% .This is considered excellent according to the Jacobs' et al (1981) evaluation scales. The poorest one represented by the red color got the lowest scores of 47%.The rest of the participants' writing ability was considered good to fair level. For clarity, the overall profile of the participants' writing ability in this study can be seen in Figure2. below:

Figure2. Overall Profile of the Participants' Writing Abilities



The profile presented above shows that this group of students have ability to communicate in English, and there was one participant whose writing was considered excellent according to Jacobs' evaluation scales, which are internationally recognized. With reference to Figure 1 & Figure2, there were 8 participants or 53.33% whose writing was considered good to fair whereas 5 participants or 33.33% of the participants whose writing was considered fair to poor. Therefore; it is worthwhile to investigate the scores of each component of their writing in details as shown in Table 1. & Table 2. to find out which component the students need help the most to improve their writing and communication skills.

Table 1. Scores of 3rd Year Business English Majors' Free Expository Writing

Composition Title:	Content 30%	Organization 20%	Vocabulary 20%	Language use 25%	Mechanics 5%	Total 100
“Whom Am I?” Participant No.	Extent, relevance, subject knowledge	Coherence, fluency, clarity, logical sequencing	Richness, appropriate register Word form mastery	Accuracy (a usage of articles, word order, tenses, prepositions, sentence constructions)	Paragraphing, spelling, capitalization, punctuation	

1.	28	19	18	20	3	88
2.	30	18	18	22	4	92
3.	24	18	18	20	3	83
4.	22	18	16	16	3	75
5.	24	18	16	16	3	77
6.	24	17	16	16	3	76
7.	20	16	14	14	2	66
8.	23	18	14	20	3	78
9.	26	18	16	20	3	83
10.	22	16	16	15	4	73
11.	22	15	14	18	2	71
12.	15	12	12	12	2	53
13.	16	14	12	14	2	58
14.	14	10	10	12	1	47
15.	20	15	14	14	3	66

Discussion

As shown in Table1 most of the participants were able to write well based on Jacobs' evaluation scales of each writing component, except the ones who got poor scores in every component. When closely analyzed, it was found that some participants had weaknesses in their use of vocabulary. They made frequent errors of word form or usage, but the meaning was not obscured, such as “fun” and “funny”, “sell” and “sale”, “learn”, “study”, “face” and “facials”. But their most common and serious mistakes and weaknesses were language use and mechanics which can be illustrated in Table2. below.

Table 2. Types of Grammatical Errors Found in the Participants' Writing

Accuracy of Language Use	Articles	Prepositions	Word Order	Vocabulary	Sentence Structures	Tenses	Mechanics	Total
	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Number of Errors Found	Errors Found
Participant No. 1.	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	5
Participant No. 2.	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	3

3.	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	4
4.	2	0	0	1	4	1	0	8
5.	1	0	2	0	3	0	0	6
6.	1	0	0	0	3	0	1	5
7.	2	2	0	0	3	1	2	10
8.	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	4
9.	0	4	0	0	3	2	1	10
10.	1	0	1	3	4	0	1	10
11.	0	0	1	1	4	0	1	7
12.	0	0	0	0	4	2	1	7
13.	1	2	1	2	0	0	3	9
14.	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	6
15.	2	4	0	1	0	3	4	14

Apparently, data from the findings in Table 2 showed that, ranging from each type of errors, sentence structures were the most common mistakes found in the participants’ free expository writing, and next on the list were articles, prepositions, and mechanics, respectively. When closely examined, the nature of the errors found in the participants’ writing indicated that the mistakes were various, starting from parts of speech, subject/verb agreement as well as wrong use of infinitives and gerunds. The participants mixed up all parts of speech from verbs, adjectives, and even singular/plural nouns as can be illustrated below:

A. Errors on Sentence Structures: I’m speak a little English.

B. Correction: I speak a little English.

A. Errors on Sentence Structures: My hobbies is take a picture and read.

B. Correction: My hobbies are taking pictures and reading.

A. Errors on Sentence Structures: My favorites color is red.

B. Correction: My favorite color is red.

A. Errors on Sentence Structures: My name’s Rochaya Thanon my nick name yaya I’m 19 year old.

B. Corrections: My name’s Rochaya Thanon, and my nick name is Yaya. I’m 19 years old.

A. Errors on Sentence Structures: I like fruits is apple, banana, mango and water melons.

B. Corrections: The fruits I like are apples, banana, and water melons.

A. Errors on Prepositions: My Birthday 26th May 1996.

**B. Corrections: I was born on May26, 1996. or
My Birthday is on May26.**

In addition, the participants did not understand when to use in, or at as shown below:

A. Errors on preposition: I live with my parents at Samutprakarn.

B. Correction: I live with my parents in Samutprakarn.

A. Errors on Prepositions. I study English in Southeast Bangkok College

B. Correction: I study English at Southeast Bangkok College.

Mistakes on the use of articles and mechanics varied from a/an/the, and spelling, capitalization, punctuation, comma spice, and run-on sentences.

Conclusion

The findings discussed earlier have answered the two research questions which can be restated with answers one by one below:

Research Question1: Can Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales differentiate the participants' writing ability level?

Answer: Jacobs' et al (1981) evaluation of writing scales (1981), can significantly classify the participants' writing ability very well. It was an effective way to identify the level of the participants' writing abilities at different levels from excellent to very poor with specific components of writing scales as have been mentioned 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 will be suitable for the students to develop their writing and communication skills. In this respect, Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales can make judgments about the participants' writing skills for scoring purposes and thus provide detailed information about the students' writing performance better than the single score of a holistic rating.

Research Question2. What are the participants' most serious weaknesses in their writing?

Answer: The findings revealed that Jacobs' evaluation of writing scales can underpin the participants' most serious weaknesses as discussed earlier in details. 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. Serious attention needs to be paid on how to reinforce the students' knowledge about grammar through different exercises. 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. This will be useful and more practical 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. The outcomes of the study had many implications that reflected some critical teaching pedagogies in Thailand. Taking into consideration though the participants 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, and 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 content and assessments and standards evaluation must be implemented to gauge students' learning achievement. Thus a task-based approach should be adopted. Griva & Semoglou (2012 : 33) points out that English is an important tool for life learning and career advancement that can create a healthier nation as well as advance economic development. Many studies have found similar weaknesses on language use, prepositions, articles, and mechanics among non-native speakers of English

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