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The Effects of Process Writing Approach on Performance of an Overcrowded EFL Writing Class at a University in Thailand

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study was carried out based on a pretest-posttest one group design with two purposes: (1) to investigate the effect of the process writing approach (PWA) on the essay writing performance of students of English in an overly large class at a Thai university, and (2) to explore the participants' opinions towards the PWA. The participants were 55 third-year students of English purposively selected for the study. The experimental procedures for the investigation lasted 10 weeks. The data with regard to the dimension of writing performance were obtained via evaluation by two experts based on Jacobs et al.'s (1981) ESL Composition Profile of academic essays generated by the students at the beginning and end of the treatment. Data pertaining to the participants' opinions were collected through the Process Writing Approach (PWA) questionnaire. The pre-and post-test scores were computed for mean score differences using a paired sample t-test, and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the questionnaire data. The results showed that the process writing approach had a significant effect ($p<.05$) on the writing performance of the students in an overly large class, and the students expressed very positive opinions towards the PWA. Implications for the use of process writing approach in an overcrowded EFL writing class and recommendations for further written expression studies were offered.

Keywords: Large classes, Process Writing Approach, EFL writing

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and rationale

Writing is a difficult language skill for learners. The difficulty is partially the result of the focus of writing activities in schools on formal features. To give priority to content characteristics in the act of writing which focuses on transferring a message is, therefore, preferable. Currently, the Process Writing Approach (PWA) has been generally

accepted and extensively used as a teaching approach to teaching writing especially at the paragraph and essay levels. Many university courses require the students to showcase their proven writing skill at the paragraph level before they can be allowed to take a more advanced course of writing–essay writing. A well-written paragraph is therefore more or less an indicator of a student's basic writing ability that determines his or her academic success. To generate an effective paragraph, the students need to write a good topic sentence, and develop it into a complete paragraph by providing supporting sentences that indicate support points, and related examples. Literature indicating the paucity in research focusing on the organizational error of paragraph writing (Hinnon, 2015; Sattayatham & Ratanpinyowong, 2008) shows that though the students may be proficient in using the target language, for example English, they still need systematic practice on writing a well-developed paragraph; that is the ability to express ideas with reasonable coherence and accuracy (Celce-Murcia, 2001)

According to Juzwiak (2012), what weakens the student's paragraph is poor topic sentence, poor support points, and poor related examples. A topic sentence is not effective because it lacks appropriate controlling idea, asks a question, makes and announcement, and is a fragment. The support points are not effective because the writer student leaves out important key words, changes key words, and adds other inappropriate information to them, and combines them with the related examples. The related examples are not effective because they are not discussed one at a time, lack minor transitional expressions, and do not have specific details to make them lively and convincing.

It has been six years (as of now while this paper is being written) since Todd (2012) studied the effects of large EFL class sizes on the students' learning and found that large classes had significantly negative effects on Thai EFL students' learning. As a result of his study, Todd proposed the threshold number of a seemingly-effective English class at 25 - 45. A class of more than 45 students is therefore regarded as overcrowded or overly large. However, over this long span of time, no research has been conducted to investigate the effect of an overly large class of English learning of Thai university EFL students, especially on the writing performance of English major students. This is quite surprising given the fact that most English classes in Thailand's universities comprise at least 30–50 students.

However, teaching writing to a large or overcrowded class of EFL students is generally perceived as daunting and ineffective. One disadvantage of teaching writing to a large class is that the teacher is unable to provide timely and effective feedback and evaluation. Another negative impact of large classes on teaching-learning is students' engagement in the learning process. In large classes, "students have less active role

in interactions with their teachers and are less attentive to their teachers as well" (Bamba, 2012, as cited in Fatma, 2016). This means that larger class sizes provide students with limited individual attention, the focus being on active students more than the shy ones, putting the other students in the state of passive learners. Recent research by Todd (2012) also confirmed the adverse effect of class size on learning.

Researchers; therefore, have explored ways to increase the efficiency of teaching writing to a large English class and suggested several practical principles. One suggestion included using process writing based on cooperative learning (Puengpipattrakul, 2014; Shi, 2008). However, little research has been carried out in the Thai university EFL context where large classes of writing were taught through process writing approach. Most research focused on the small to medium sizes of class, where 15 - 25 students were involved. A large or overcrowded class of 50-60 students doing a writing course and acting as the research setting has never been launched to investigate if the PWA would be effective in improving the writing ability of the students in such classes. This template is designed to assist author(s) in preparing their manuscript; it is an exact representation of the format expected by the editors. To use this template, just *Save As* to your document, then copy and paste your document here. Manuscript content should, in general, be organized in the following order: Abstract, Key words, Introduction, literature review (hypotheses development), research methods, and Discussion, Conclusions, Acknowledgments (optional) and Reference

1.2. Purposes

This research was aimed at investigate the effect of process writing approach(PWA) on the essay writing performance of third-year Thai students of English at a university in Sakon Nakhon province, in the northeast of Thailand. Particularly, the investigator wanted to know if the PWA would have a significant impact on the writing performance of the participants who were taught writing in an overcrowded class. The participants' opinions towards the PWA were also investigated. To this end, the following two questions are addressed in this research:

1. Does the process writing approach have a significant effect on the writing performance of the students in a large class?

2. What do the students think about the process writing approach applied to a large class?

2. Literature Review

2.1. What is process writing approach?

Process writing approach–PWA– is a method of writing teaching that emphasizes the process rather than the products. With the writing process, learners become more cognizant of themselves, and discover how to generate the writing. Throughout the process, learners may explore appropriate strategies that measure up to their learning styles. Brown (2001) posits that PWA is a reflection of the notion that writing is a thinking process in which a writer undergoes the thinking process before he or she produces a final piece of writing based on their thought. To bring home to the point, the PWA "provided a way to think about writing in terms of what the writer does– planning, revising, and the like– rather than what the final product looks like (patterns of organization, spelling, and grammar)" (Applebee, 1986, p. 96).

2.2. Steps involving Process Writing

Basically, the four basic writing stages are incorporated in Process Writing; these are planning, drafting (writing), revising (redrafting), and editing. However, the teacher can also impose three other stages on the students, namely, responding (sharing), evaluating, and post-writing) as can be seen in Figure 1.
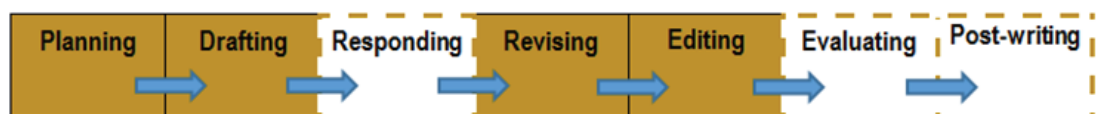

Figure 1: Four Stages of Process Writing (adapted from Diliduzgun, 2013).

Planning includes several activities such as brainstorming in the form of clustering, question generating, listing, and free writing in order to narrow the assigned topic. After determining the purpose and the audience, the controlling idea and support points are identified and organized as a plan. The next stage, drafting, involves the students' looking at the plan and starting to write their tentative first drafts without having to edit or revise. At the responding stage, the teachers' or peers' initial reaction to students' drafts are carefully considered before they proceed to revise. On the basis of the feedback given in the responding stage, texts are revised for the content and idea organization with the emphasis on unity, support points, and coherence. The editing stage deals with "how you write" and the written pieces are thoroughly checked for spelling, punctuation, parallelism, style, grammar, and mechanics such

as capitalization. Students should know the criteria for evaluation, depending on the purpose of which a numerical score or grade is assigned. The same essay should be written at least three times (first draft, second one after revising, and final product after editing). Students' essays written in legible handwriting/typed go to the public through sharing, publishing or using a portfolio.

However, through the WPA, students are hardly constrained to follow the fixed sequence of writing stages linearly because they have to move back and forth among different writing steps in order to come up with better ideas. This idea is supported by Flower and Hayes who posit that:

> Writing processes may be viewed as the writer's tool kit. In using the tools, the writer is not constrained to use them in a fixed order or in stages. And using any tool may create the need to use another. Generating ideas may require evaluation, as may writing sentences. And evaluation may force the writer to think up new ideas. (1981, p. 376, as cited in Scott, 1996)

2.3. Some drawbacks of the PWA

Though the Process Writing Approach has been widely used in ESL / EFL writing contexts, it is still viewed as wanting in some aspects. For example, it is argued by Badger & White (2000) that learners have to spend quite a long time in order to complete just one piece of writing in the classroom. They do not have clear understanding about the specific traits of writing and are not provided with sufficient linguistic input to write in L2 successfully in a certain text type. However, in this regard, the teachers could help alleviate this weakness of the PWA by modifying it in some way. For example, they should provide learners with some examples of the text type that they are assigned to write so that they can have a clear understanding of the aim and the framework of a particular writing type. In addition, instead of spending too much time on one piece of writing in the class because it may decrease students' learning motivation and impede them from learning other writing types, Tangpermpoon (2008) suggested that they should train the students who are old heads on young shoulders to develop a concept of audience by taking turns giving comments on their classmates' written works. To address this seem-to-be problem more directly, the present investigation drew on Juzwiak's (2012) systematic presentation of step-by-step writing of topic sentence, support points, and related examples. The students could spend as much time as they wanted studying these examples among themselves both in class and outside of class.

2.4. Large classes and language learning

As pointed out by Todd (2012), a large class size had a negative effect on language learning. Though there is no consensus on to what extent a large class size affects learning achievement of EFL students, literature abounds in relation to the negative opinions teachers have towards teaching or dealing with large-sized classes.

Pertaining to the improvement in communicative skills, it was reported that students in a reduced-size class outperformed the students in a large class in terms of reading, listening, and speaking (Heejong, 2008). On the teachers' part, having to teach or deal with an overly large class was something horrible, thus rendering them opposed to teaching large classes to the extent that they believe that large classes offer few opportunities for teachers to use quality teaching and learning environment for learners (Blatchford et al. 2002; Hattie, 2005; Pedder, 2006).

2.5. Previous studies

Previous studies recognizing the effectiveness of PWA in improving the students' essay writing performance were extensively carried out, but most of them had fewer than 45-50 students as participants. Meeampol (2005) compared the writing abilities of 27 second-year students who received the process-based writing instruction and those who did not. After 14 weeks of the treatment, it was found that the experimental group outperformed the control group in all three tests, especially in the writing quiz 2 and the posttest statistically significant differences were found. Diliduzgun (2013) explored the effect of PWA activities on the writing skills of 34 prospective Turkish teachers at a university in Istanbul using their essays as performance assessment tools. The results showed that the participants had significantly improved scores in all writing skills. Bayat (2014)'s investigation of the effect of PWA on the writing success and anxiety of the first-year pre-school teaching students revealed that the PWA had a significant effect on their writing success and anxiety, particularly the remarkable reduced level of anxiety about writing by the students.

Past research also showed the students' positive opinions towards writing instruction based on PWA. The participants in Meeampol's (2005) study reported their positive attitudes towards the process-based method, pointing out they could help them write better and make the class more interesting. Puengpipattrakul (2014), reported in her study that PWA instruction helps change a competitive learning atmosphere to a more collaborative on the classroom, encourage students' writing performance, raise awareness of their own learning processes, and develop their socio-cognitive

skills. The participants in the study carried out by Diliduzgun (2013) also reported their positive opinions towards PWA, particularly in terms of the systematic thinking and learning about how to analyze texts for their unity and coherence. On the whole, the students who underwent Process Writing Approach gained higher writing performance and positive opinions towards the approach. Surprisingly, no previous research has investigated the effect of PWA on the students' writing performance in relation to the class size.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The research design adopted for the present investigation was a pretest-posttest one group

design. Though a control-group pretest-posttest design is ideally regarded as more reliable, it could not be used in this study because there was only one class for the writing students at the venue where the research was conducted. From a success rate of point of view, it was also difficult to match the students from other departments and do the study with more than one class due to time constraint and other circumstances. The researcher implemented all the experimental procedures in this study for 10 weeks.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this research were **55** third-year students of English at Kasetsart University, Sakon Nakhon province Campus, in the northeast of Thailand. All the participants were enrolled in Advanced Integrated English Reading and Writing Skills, a follow-up course for the third-year students who passed Integrated English Reading and Writing Skills, in the first term of the academic year 2017.

3.3. Data collection tools

3.3.1. Students' academic essays

The first data collection tool was the students' academic essays they were required to write. To determine the students' writing performance, they were provided with the topic King Bhumibol to write at the outset and at the end of the intervention.

The essays were evaluated by two experts. The evaluators were academic staff with doctorates in English and English language studies, and more than four years of experience teaching writing to undergraduate students of English at the Department of English at Rajabhat Sakon Nakhon University and the Department of Thai and Foreign Languages at Kasetsart University in Sakon Nakhon. The researcher adopted the Jacobs et al. (1981) rubric, which is the most widely used and agreed on rubric for scoring non-native essay writing. This rubric contains five components: (1) content, (2) organization, (3) vocabulary, (4) language use and (5) mechanics. Each component has a four level score corresponding to four sets of criteria. The total score is 100. The average scores among the two scorers were the ultimate scores. After that, their scores were collected and analyzed.

3.3.2. Process writing approach questionnaire (PWA questionnaire)

The second tool was the Process Writing Approach Questionnaire (PWA Questionnaire) which was constructed by the researcher for the purpose of this investigation. The questionnaire was a five-Likert scale format with 10 close-ended statements and one open-ended statement. The close-ended items prompted the participants to indicate their level of agreement ranging from 5–strongly agree, 4–agree, 3–uncertain, 2–disagree, and 1–strongly disagree. The open-ended statement left empty lines for the participants to freely write their opinions. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated to be.928. As a result, the PWA questionnaire was found to be a sufficiently valid and reliable tool to use in this study.

4. Procedures

Before the intervention, a pre-test was administered to the students, who were required to

write a five-paragraph essay on any of the five topics. They were notified of their freedom of choice in terms of the pattern or organizations to draw on for their essays. The test lasted three hours, and that covered the first week's session. Then the intervention followed suit from the second week onwards. The participants were allowed two weeks to finish off their essays on the topics clearly identified and chosen. Some participants, however, could finish the essays earlier than the fixed time. Not many participants found it too difficult to complete the essays in due course. The researcher went over the rubric with the students before they began the assignment. However, the point value for each category of the rubric was covered so that all

the students would **not** know what parts of the rubric were the most important. The participants were given scaffolds and support throughout the treatment period in such forms as guidance and feedback. The participants wrote academic essays every week throughout the experimental period. No serious or heavy engagement in conversations between the instructor and the students took place during the process of writing. Only answers for questions about writing were sporadically available. However, to help facilitate the cooperative learning among the students, the research prepared a checklist of items the students could use to share and discuss ideas relevant to an essay format, organization and presentation of ideas, vocabulary and language use, as well as writing mechanics. After the students completed the essays, the evaluation was conducted and then feedback was given. The researcher made sure that the topic headings were general and without details that constrained the possible scope of the essays. To this end, the students wrote essays on topics with similar attributes. The post-test was administered in the last session which also lasted for 3 hours. The writing topics for the post-test were the same topics assigned for the pre-test. The completed essays from the students were evaluated by the two scorers and then the scores each student gained were prepared for the data analysis.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Data from the pre-and post-tests

The scores from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using descriptive statistics for percentage, means, and standard deviations. Dependent samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test.

5.2. Data from PWA questionnaire

Descriptive statistics analyses were conducted to demonstrate the students' responses to the PWA close-ended questionnaire items. The data from the questionnaire were calculated for arithmetic means. The means are used to interpret the students' opinions towards PWA based on the following criteria: The means of 1.00 – 2.33 mean the students' opinions towards PWA are negative; 2.34 – 3.67 positive; and 3.68 – 5.00 very positive. The responses to the open-ended questionnaire item were analyzed using content analysis which involved open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

6. Results

The first research question asks: Does the process writing approach have a significant effect on the essay writing performance of the participants? This question was investigated quantitatively based on the results of the pre-and post-tests. The data were examined through dependent samples t-test to determine if the participants' pretest-posttest scores on their essay writing performance were significantly different. Accordingly, the pre-test mean score of the participants (50.22) and their post-test mean score (63.04) were derived for analysis.

TABLE 1: Results of paired samples t-test comparing the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants.

Test	N	Mean	S.D.	df	t	P
Pre-test	55	65.01	3.27	54	-17.224	0.000
Post-test	55	71.99	3.78			

The paired samples t-test reveals that there is a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores of the participants ($t_{(54)=-}17.224$; p<0.05). Based on these findings, the answer to research question 1 was derived. In other words, the process writing approach had a significant effect on the writing performance of the students in an overly large class.

Research question 2 asks: What do the students think about the process writing approach? To answer this research question, the responses to the PWA questionnaires by the participants in the experimental group were analyzed. Regarding the students' opinions towards PWA and its usefulness, the students' responses to the 9 items in the questionnaire obtained a lowest mean of 2.63, a highest mean of 4.30 and a mean of 3.80 from all the items. Although the average mean of 3.80 from all the items was not considered a high rating, the students' responses showed very positive opinions rather than negative in all categories. In general, a considerable percentage of students indicated that PWA brought them more knowledge of systematic essay writing (M = 4.30, S.D. =.72), and useful feedback from the teacher for improving their use of English (M = 4.30, S.D. =.60). Making more effort to use English correctly was also highly acknowledged by the students (M = 4.04, S.D. =.64). However, as indicated in Table 2, most of the students did not regard PWA as a time-consuming method (M = 2.63, S.D =.96).

The open-ended statement in the questionnaire yielded the students' responses categorized into general comments on the benefits of PWA and the teacher. The students' comments included, for example, systematic thinking and the teacher's professional knowledge about teaching writing. As a result of the findings here, it was

TABLE 2: Students' opinions towards PWA (N = 55).

Statements	Mean	S.D.	Meaning
1. PWA is a time-consuming method of writing teaching.	2.63	.96	Positive
2. PWA is a new method of writing teaching.	3.30	.86	Positive
3. Because of PWA, I know better how to systematically write an essay.	4.30	.72	Very positive
4. Because of PWA, I get useful feedback for improving my use of English.	4.30	.60	Very positive
5. Because of PWA, I make more effort to use English correctly.	4.11	.42	Very positive
6. Because of PWA, I do more practice of systematic thinking.	4.04	.64	Very positive
7. Because of PWA, I know how to appraise an essay of mine and others'.	3.67	.67	positive
8. Because of PWA, I become more active in cross-checking the use of words, phrases, and sentences.	3.78	.50	Very positive
9. Because of PWA, I use more resources of language reference such as dictionaries.	4.07	.47	Very positive
Overall	**3.80**	**0.64**	**Very positive**

sufficient to confirm that the students had very positive opinions towards learning with PWA.

7. Discussion

One conclusion derived from the present investigation is that the process writing approach affected the success in paragraph writing in a very positive and statistically significant way. As the process writing approach focuses on the process of text construction, many aspects that are central to writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) have been closely investigated in the studies where this approach was employed. The significant improvement in the students' paragraph writing could be attributed to steps in the PWA. The steps systematically involved the students in their attempts to turn out the written products, hence enhancing their writing performance. Past researchers (Puengpipattrakul, 2014; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007) recognized that the overall steps in the PWA were conducive to the one important stage in which the students got engaged on a team basis; that is brainstorming. As reflected by a high mean for item 3 in the PWA questionnaire, when the students brainstormed the ideas for writing, they got directly involved in a systematic thinking stage. This explanation was supported by writing teachers who indicated through Kunaprasit and Kannasut (2005)'s study that process writing directly affects the students' brainstorming and

revising. Diliduzgun (2013) also concluded in coincidence with the findings in this study that process writing could improve the students' thinking because they knew how to think about what to write, and a text analysis added to the brainstorming activities. The participants in this study were taught to analyze the structure of a text as part of a class activity to raise awareness of how a text has been planned and organized, hence their significantly improved writing performance.

The teacher's intervention during the writing process could also attribute to the obvious improvement of the students' writing performance. In this study the researcher as a teacher intervened by providing not only written but also oral feedback. Particularly, the oral feedback played a pivotal role in this research where the researcher asked reminder questions which focused on both content and language to the whole class. This intervention took place before the students wrote their first drafts, during their revision, and before submitting their final drafts. Syananondh and Padgate (2005) claims that one advantage of the process writing approach is that it allows opportunities for the teachers to intervene and support their student-writers in every stage. Intervening in the process therefore could help the students to realize the important and necessary elements while they are developing their drafts.

The significant improvement of the students' writing performance in this study was also attributable to cooperative learning which was indispensably incorporated in the PWA. This was supported by previous research (e.g. Ali, 2017; Nudee et.al, 2010; Sabarun, 2011) verifying that students' improved writing ability was a direct result from cooperative learning, especially when they had peer interaction, generated ideas together, construct sentences together, and these activities further led to a better understanding of the topic to write as well as positive attitudes towards writing activities. In the questionnaire that supports the study in a qualitative aspect the students opined that they had learned the planned method of writing, they could understand and evaluate the texts more easily, analyzing how they were written, they became more cognizant of the title, unity, and coherence and they knew what to write and how to write more systematically. One comment by a student that "I have learned to look and think by asking myself this support points goes very well with the controlling idea or not" supports the idea that process writing also improves systematic thinking. The findings in this study helped to confirm in the literature pertaining to the advantage of PWA in that it decreased students negative opinions towards writing, as supported by Yayli (2009 as cited in Bayat, 2014) who found in his study that the lessons using process writing decreased students' negative views about writing.

The participants also expressed their very positive opinions towards the feedback for English improvement from the teacher (PWA Questionnaire Item 4), and this revelation could help explain why the essay writing performance of the students significantly improved. It was worthy to note that in providing feedback to the students' written works, the teacher did not simply write symbols or any short phrases indicating if the checked parts–words, phrases, or sentences–were correct or incorrect, but he wrote long sentences to explain why the errors were counted there, and he also suggested a source of language reference for the students to crosscheck their errors among their groups especially in the revising stage. Ismail (2008) found that even a minimal constructive feedback was helpful and gave a platform for students to do self-revision, let alone full constructive feedback.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the present study indicate that Process Writing Approach could significantly enhance the writing performance of Thai EFL students in an overly large class setting. On top of this, the students reported having very positive opinions towards undergoing PWA in such a learning condition, rendering themselves more knowledgeable of systematic essay writing. The findings of the present study upholds previous research findings regarding the effectiveness of the PWA in improving the writing performance of EFL writing students in an overcrowded class reinforced by cooperative learning among student-writers. Based on the findings, the following recommendations can be put forward.

1. Writing teachers who teach an overly large class of EFL writers should draw on the very positive advantage of process writing approach. Special emphasis, however, should be put on cooperative learning among the students being taught the writing approach. To this end, teacher's intermittent intervention through well-prepared example texts and constructive feedback is encouraged.

2. The threshold size of an EFL writing class should be between 25-40. Though the findings in this research seem unopposed to teaching writing to a very large class, the researcher of the present study would still insist that teaching writing to a large class is daunting and very time-consuming.

3. Future research in this line of interest could be replicated. To this extent, a pre-test and post-test with control group design could be adopted in order to establish the more generalized findings, which will add to the richness of literature in the fields of EFL/ESL writing instruction.

Acknowledgement

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