



Breaking EFL Writing Challenges for Competence Development

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Abstract

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Demonstrating knowledge and application of grammar and sentence structure; vocabulary and word choice; organization and structure; and content development in EFL writing is a challenging task among EFL university students. The challenges on these components stem from EFL students' lack of opportunity to practice English writing during elementary, high school, or even at university level. The goal of this study is to provide better opportunities to EFL students to achieve writing competence leading to proficiency. By breaking the EFL writing challenges, this study analyzed the challenges of EFL writing among eighty (80) volunteered respondents mirroring the struggle of EFL students in Thailand. In general, EFL writing competence can only be achieved when students learn to correctly connect and organize ideas effectively to develop a stronger voice and a more confident writing style. This study applied quantitative research design and utilized descriptive statistics, and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine the differences in means across the challenges components. The result shows that there are no statistically significant differences among all the components of challenges signifying that each EFL university student encounters specific challenges in EFL writing which makes it imperative to re-evaluate and refine their English writing pedagogy provided to EFL students to achieve university-level English writing competence.

Keywords: grammar and sentence structure; vocabulary and word choice; organization and structure; content development; efl writing challenges

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1. Introduction

English is considered foreign language in Thailand, but among the foreign languages, it is the most sought language to learn, acquire, and embrace. As English language established a strong presence in the Kingdom, acquiring effective communication skills in English gained significant traction as great marketable skill to having a good and dependable employment. The use of English language continues to spread and dominate on most international communication among businesspeople, academics, and tourists. In line with the foregoing, the demand for professionals with ability to speak and write effective English and can communicate in Thai has intensified. Most Thais often enhance their ability to speak because fluency in English can open a lot of doors leading to an employment. However, along with the speaking ability, knowing how to write in English is an essential factor in communication. Hence, it is undeniable that the ability to write in English among Thai university students has become a great instrument in their academic success and professional advancement. However, it also posits great challenge to those whose language proficiency is inadequate despite the long years of studying and learning the English language but still struggling to elevate their level of English competence. Boonyarattanasoontorn articulated that writing in English among Thai students usually generate overwhelming stress and confusion when writing task is of great extent. Likewise, Seensangworn and Chaya; Watcharapunyawong and Usaha supported the aforementioned observation that among the communicative skills, writing has been considered the most

difficult to acquire because writing in English involves expressing thoughts clearly, sufficiently, and accurately into a coherent written composition to deliver messages across to its audience affecting students with lack of writing skills. Often, generating ideas, organizing thoughts, demonstrating vocabulary knowledge and solid grasp of grammatical principles lead to demotivation because becoming effective in English writing requires sustained commitment and effort to achieve better writing results. Consequently, EF English Proficiency Index 2023 (EF EPI) placed Thailand to 101st out of 113 participating countries and categorized it under “very low proficiency,” which generally means that Thais can simply introduce oneself by its name, age, and country of origin; understand simple signs; and can give basic directions to foreign visitors. The EF EPI result can be attributed to limited exposure to English language environment like inadequate opportunities to practice English as well as the lack of enough teachers to handle and cater the needs of Thai students to acquire English skills. In line with the foregoing, Tantiwich and Sinwongsuwat asserted that proficiency of English in Thailand remains at the level of basic users. Most fall into either A1 or A2 under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In reference to the latest result of EF English Proficiency Index 2024 (EF EPI) reports that Thailand is categorized under the band “very low proficiency,” which meant that the tasks that majority can do are introduce oneself like name, age, and place of birth; understand simple signs; and give basic directions to a foreign visitor. Bridging this gap, this study focuses on developing writing skills among Thai university

students, with a particular emphasis on how to improve their understanding of grammar and sentence structure because the ability to write well in English requires a thorough understanding of grammar and sentence structure, as these elements form the foundation for clear communication. Grammar provides the rules and guidelines that influence how words are used in a sentence to convey meaning, while sentence structure, on the other hand, refers to how words, phrases, and clauses are arranged to create meaning within a sentence. Together, these two components allow students to construct grammatically correct sentences that effectively communicate ideas to readers. However, for many Thai university students, mastering these elements can be a difficult task as students commonly struggle with issues like word order, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, the use of articles, prepositions, conjunctions and sentence complexity which negatively affect the clarity of their writing. Moreover, sentence structure is not just about following grammatical rules; it is also about arranging words in a way that allows ideas to flow coherently. Effective sentence construction also involves the ability to vary sentence types and lengths that enhance the readability of the writing. Another point of consideration for writing development is vocabulary and word choice that plays an important role on vocabulary development. The correct use of vocabulary helps to understand its meaning but it also enhances the academic tone and style of writing. However, for many Thai students, vocabulary acquisition and application can also be challenging because they often rely on simple or repetitive word choices due to limited vocabulary development.

Ratnaningsih and Clara confirmed that vocabulary plays an important role in writing making vocabulary development essential in achieving English skills and any student who lacks in vocabulary development will have problems in writing. Furthermore, effective writing is also about organization and structure or how ideas are organized and presented. A well-structured essay writing allows the reader to follow the writer's train of thought with ease. But in order to achieve such, the writer has to plan carefully how to introduce ideas, develop them logically, and conclude effectively. The challenges that Thai university students often face in this area are often related to the lack of familiarity with the conventions of English academic writing, as well as difficulties in maintaining a clear and logical flow of ideas throughout their work. Li and Ngai explained that unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions serves as great anchor in establishing appropriate tone and stance in students' writing. Moreover, content development is another element that aids students to write well. The overall impact of content development is essential in academic writing because students are expected to provide detailed analysis and support to compose a meaningful narrative. A lack of content development can result in vague writing that fails to engage the reader. Considering that the development of effective writing skills in English combines interrelated elements like knowledge of grammar and sentence structure; vocabulary and word choice; organization and structure; and content development in order to express thoughts clearly, sufficiently, and accurately, most often, Thai university students often face significant challenges that hinder their ability to communicate effectively in

English which lead to weak writing performance in English. Mitigating this dilemma, this study identified the encountered challenges of Thai university students on writing in English to determine the suitable teaching pedagogy to be provided because being university student does not necessarily guarantee that the student meets the expected proficiency in English writing at the university level; additionally, it cannot also be inferred that a student who study English has the competence to utilized English in either oral or written communication. Hence, by understanding Thai university students' encountered challenges, this study aims to provide better opportunity for Thai university students to improve their English writing and develop pragmatic guidelines to bridge the gap in English writing competence of Thai university students to achieve university-level English proficiency which will address the gap on the long-standing plight how to achieve global standard of English competence for the improvement of Thailand's human resources by providing Thai university students opportunities to get better employment after graduation.

2. Methodology

This study utilized quantitative method specifically the descriptive research design. The study was conducted at one of the Colleges and the only International College of a premier university in northern part of Thailand. The total number of respondents who participated in this study is 80 participants composed of 18 males and 62 females. Among them, 48 (60%) students are in the age range of 19-20 years old; 30 (37.5%) students are in the age range of 21-22 years old; and 2 (2.5%) students are in the age range of 25-26 years old. The researcher set an

appointment to meet the volunteer respondents to inform them about the details and benefits of the study, then the study's questionnaire was distributed but it was made clear to all that only those who were willing to participate would answer and drop the survey questionnaire on designated drop box inside the College which will be available for the period of 3 weeks. Before the distribution of the questionnaire, it was first pilot tested by seventeen (17) students who voluntarily participated and not part of the respondents. The result of its reliability testing showed Cronbach's Alpha result of .829 overall and having interpretation of very reliable. The questionnaire is composed of challenges components on (1) Grammar and Sentence Structure with nine (9) question items; (2) Vocabulary and Word Choice with seven (7) question items; (3) Organization and Structure with seven (7) question items; and (4) Content Development with ten (10) question items applying the five (5) point Likert scale across the components. The descriptive statistics was applied in this study as well as the application of one-way Analysis of Variance.

3. Results and Discussion

The overall challenges of respondents in EFL writing in terms of Grammar and Sentence Structure; Vocabulary and Word Choice; Organization Structure; and Content Development resulted to having moderate challenges in English writing with means ranging from 3.1180 – 3.4179 indicating that the respondents can still be effective in their own ways regarding writing performance in English. The most significant challenges in grammar and sentence structure among the respondents were the use of different tenses in academic writing ($\bar{x} = 3.29$), as well as recognizing and editing errors ranging from simple to complex ($\bar{x} = 3.29$). With

complexity on English writing task, students may struggle with maintaining consistency especially on the shifts in tenses that would also affect coherence and clarity. Additionally, respondents expressed challenges in recognizing and editing grammatical errors to refine their writing effectively. Furthermore, the use of punctuation also emerged as a moderate challenge in applying basic punctuation rules correctly ($\bar{x} = 3.15$). Indeed, having errors in punctuation, such as misplaced commas, incorrect apostrophe use, and run-on sentences will truly affect the overall readability and accuracy of the written communication. Together with punctuation challenges, constructing different types of sentences also comes with it ($\bar{x} = 3.15$) limiting Thai university students to write well in English. In terms of vocabulary and word choice challenges, presenting precise content, messages, or meaning ($\bar{x} = 3.50$) gained the highest mean. Precision in conveying ideas into writing is essential because it makes the message clear and complete. However, many students may struggle to select words that accurately reflect their intended meaning due to limited academic vocabulary or difficulties in distinguishing between words with similar meanings but different connotations. Equally important, the respondents also reported that they have significant difficulties in incorporating newly acquired vocabulary into their writing to demonstrate depth of understanding and expression ($\bar{x} = 3.50$) which may be due to uncertainty or confusion regarding proper word usage, collocations, or grammatical structures associated with new vocabulary. Moderate challenges were also observed in utilizing vocabulary usage conventions ($\bar{x} = 3.45$) and in selecting appropriate words based

on context and audience ($\bar{x} = 3.45$) because the ability to choose words that align with the formality and purpose of a given text is a skill that requires extensive practice and guidance. On aspect of challenges in organization and structure, Thai university students indicated moderate challenges in using transitional words and phrases to enhance the logical flow of their work ($\bar{x} = 3.36$). Transitional devices serve as bridge to guides a reader to have a smooth transition from an idea to another, but some Thai university students may struggle in selecting and integrating transitions leading to writing that lacks fluidity and cohesion. Outlining or planning writing before drafting was identified as a moderate challenge ($\bar{x} = 3.34$) because most often, some Thai university students ignore the prewriting strategies, such as brainstorming, outlining, and concept mapping, help structure ideas before the drafting stage. However, many students may overlook these strategies, leading to disorganized and unfocused writing. Similarly, organizing written ideas cohesively and logically ($\bar{x} = 3.29$) was another moderate challenge reported by respondents which would hinder them to arrange their arguments in a logical sequence because developing a well-structured English writing should present a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. On area of content development, respondents reported moderate challenges in conducting research to support their writing ($\bar{x} = 3.43$) which is essential to produce a well-substantiated academic work that they need to yet some Thai university students also encountered difficulties in locating, evaluating, and integrating different sources into their writing. Thus, lack of familiarity with research methodologies,

citation practices, and source credibility assessment ($\bar{x} = 3.25$) may contribute to these challenges as their ability to anticipate and address counterarguments or alternative perspectives in writing ($\bar{x} = 3.43$) adds to their challenges. These difficulties may stem from limited exposure to argumentation strategies in their writing which makes providing adequate evidence and examples to support main points or claims ($\bar{x} = 3.33$) was also reported as a moderate challenge. Hence, without a clear understanding of how content development contributes to the overall persuasiveness and clarity of writing, Thai university students may fail to engage their readers. To clarify if there a significant difference among the means of challenges components one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine the differences in means. The challenges faced by respondents in writing compositions in English appear that grammar and sentence structure; vocabulary and word choice; organization structure; and content development have verbal interpretation of moderate challenges in Writing in English across all components. The results imply that Thai university students have varied challenges. Simply put, while some Thai university students are grappling with challenges, the challenge for some might not be the same for others. The ANOVA results reveal that these challenges are consistent across the groups studied, with no significant differences between groups in any of the four categories. This suggests that the difficulties learners face in these areas are universal rather than specific to particular groups. As such, the implications of these findings indicate that the challenges that Thai university students face in grammar and sentence structure, vocabulary and

word choice, organization and structure, and content development are not unique to any specific group. The lack of significant differences between groups also implies that the challenges in Writing in English are deeply rooted in the nature of the skills themselves. Grammar, for instance, is a complex system of rules that requires both knowledge and practice. Vocabulary and word choice demands not only knowing and familiarizing words but also understanding how and when they should be used in different context. Organization and structure requires the practice of creative thinking to logically present ideas coherently, while content development calls for critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to clearly expound ideas. These are fundamental skills that all students anywhere on earth must develop, and on the case of Thai university students, the findings suggest that all the components of challenges are equally challenging for everyone making suggestion to writing teachers that there is a need for a re-evaluation of commonly practiced teaching pedagogy because their strategies may not be addressing the skills and knowledge that current generation of Thai university students need to improve. Furthermore, writing courses in English should create an environment that encourages students to look at their challenges as opportunities for growth. Furthermore, ongoing assessments and timely feedback can lessen the struggle of students because both assessment and feedback can provide students guidance in improving their writing skills. Though, Thai university students may approach writing from a different cultural perspective that affect their writing abilities and challenges, teachers on the other hand should aim to create culturally responsive classrooms by

incorporating multicultural content and encouraging students to draw on their own experiences to feel more connected to the writing process. Overall, the implications of these findings on challenges are to address the challenges faced by students and refine instructional practices of teachers teaching writing to prepare Thai university students suitable for the demands of the modern job market like providing academic support that encourages collective learning and improvement. The challenges identified through the analysis of variance highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive rethinking of writing instruction in Thai universities. However, the challenges faced by students are not statistically significant to the writing difficulty of Thai university students because the challenges on writing in English among Thai university students exist but these challenges do not interfere on the writing ability of students because of the availability of the writing tools that they apply in the organization of their writing even before the existence of generative AI. Considering the availability of numerous writing applications available to students for free, it is not a farfetched idea because all applications provide instant support, convenience, and better output rather than their own work. Though all these applications are beneficial to the needs of the university students in writing in English, however, when students lose motivation, time, and idea to think constructively on how to develop their content, they may uncontrollably always resort to the use of writing application tools that can cater to their needs without helping them to enhance their knowledge and skills.

4. Conclusion

Achieving writing competence in English among Thai university students is a necessity to unlock the doors of opportunities not only for academic success but most importantly for better chances of getting employment. The findings of this study underscore a significant gap in the EFL writing abilities of Thai university students. While many students possess a basic understanding of English, but their writing competence often lacks the clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness. Many students struggle with constructing grammatically correct sentences, which undermines the clarity of their ideas due to limited lexical resources which often result in weak organizational skills, disjointed arguments, and poorly structured academic writing. Hence, Thai university students often experience the lack of ability to develop ideas resulting to having underdeveloped content. The deficiencies can greatly affect Thai university students' employability and professional growth because clear communication stems from articulating ideas clearly, cohesively, and persuasively. In breaking the challenges to achieve writing competence development, lecturers should provide a strong foundation in grammar, vocabulary, organization, and content development through comprehensive instruction and developing an engaging learning environment with the goal of improving writing competence to become better in writing English.

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Appendix

Table 1. Reliability Result for Components of Challenges

Indicator/Element Challenges	Cronbach's Alpha Result	Interpretation	N of Items
(1) Grammar and Sentence Structure	.790	Reliable	9
(2) Vocabulary and Word Choice	.818	Very Reliable	7
(3) Organization and Structure	.864	Very Reliable	7
(4) Content Development	.824	Very Reliable	10
Overall Components of Challenges	.919	Very Reliable	33

Table 2. Interpretation of Means for Challenges in English Writing

Mean Score Range	Interpretation	Description
5.00 – 4.50	Very High	Very High challenges in Writing in English
4.49 – 3.50	High	High challenges in Writing in English
3.49 – 2.50	Moderate	Moderate challenges in Writing in English
2.49 – 1.50	Low	Low challenges in Writing in English
1.49 – 1.00	Very Low	Very Low challenges in Writing in English

Table 3. Overall Challenges in English Writing

	Challenges Grammar and Sentence Structure	Challenges Vocabulary and Word Choice	Challenges Organization Structure	Challenges Content Development
N Valid	80	80	80	80
Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean	3.1181	3.4179	3.2696	3.3000
Std. Deviation	.77875	.71979	.76948	.82860

Table 4. Differences of Means across Components of Writing Composition in English Challenges

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Challenges on Grammar and Sentence Structure	Between Groups	(Combined)	46.873	76	.617	1.784	.357
		Linear Term	Weighted Deviation	1.175	1	1.175	3.399
	Within Groups	Total	45.698	75	.609	1.763	.362
		Total	1.037	3	.346		
Challenges on Vocabulary and Word Choice	Between Groups	(Combined)	39.848	76	.524	1.454	
		Linear Term	Weighted Deviation	.009	1	.009	.026
	Within Groups	Total	39.839	75	.531	1.473	
		Total	1.082	3	.361		
Challenges on Organization and Structure	Between Groups	(Combined)	43.500	76	.572	.524	.885
		Linear Term	Weighted Deviation	.854	1	.854	.782
	Within Groups	Total	42.646	75	.569	.521	.866
		Total	3.276	3	1.092		
Challenges on Content Development	Between Groups	(Combined)	51.140	76	.673	.651	.788
		Linear Term	Weighted Deviation	.721	1	.721	.698
	Within Groups	Total	50.419	75	.672	.651	.788
		Total	3.100	3	1.033		
Total			54.240	79			