

THE USE OF MULTILEVEL WRITING TASKS IN AN EFL  
CLASSROOM

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**Abstract**

The diversity in language learners not only includes demographic factors such as age, gender and educational background, but also includes psychological aspects; namely interest, need, and motivation. However, it is often the learners' mixed language proficiency which causes major problems in the classroom. The current study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the design and implementation of a series of multilevel writing tasks, created to address the issues of mixed-ability groups, by offering choices for learners to work on the task levels appropriate to their proficiency. The findings from the analysis of the learners' texts suggested that in-task supporting features helped to facilitate the participants' fulfilment of task demands; hence, increased task manageability. Additionally, it was found that these supporting features assisted with the learners' development of writing proficiency by raising their awareness of text structures and associated language forms.

**Introduction**

Learner diversity is inevitable in any classroom. It has also become a dilemma for teachers. On one hand, diversity should be

preserved as it creates great classroom dynamics. On the other hand, it is not desirable, for it brings about difficulty in classroom management and materials selection. In a classroom which consists of learners of different language proficiency, teachers often need to find a good balance of instruction in order to assist with the improvement of weaker learners as well as to facilitate the development of advanced learners at the same time.

The multilevel-task approach, which is central to this study, was born out of my teaching experience where I was dealing with mixed-ability groups of learners. This approach aimed at providing flexibility in terms of classroom materials while maintaining specific learning goals. That is, three levels of the same writing task were designed to offer learners choices to work at the task levels which they considered appropriate. Through the multilevel-task approach, each learner is allowed to develop proficiency at his/her own rate.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Tasks and language learning***

In language classrooms, tasks have been employed by teachers to promote opportunities for learners to process meaningful input as well as produce meaningful output (Van den Branden, 2006). Several writers advocate the use of classroom learning tasks to bridge the gap between the current language ability of the learners and the required skills to succeed in the target tasks (Long & Crookes, 1993; Tomlinson, 1998; Hyland, 2003). To facilitate the development of these skills, learning tasks should be presented in sequences, where each task has an increasingly closer approximation to the target task (Long & Crookes, 1993). It is also imperative that tasks be sequenced in such a manner that their difficulty is gradually increased so as to suit learners' growing proficiency (Skehan, 1998; Duran & Ramaut, 2006). The gradual increase of task difficulty serves the

principle of task design, which emphasises that tasks should be sufficiently challenging yet attainable to learners (Prabhu, 1987; Graves, 1996).

A number of factors may affect the levels of task difficulty. Brindley (1987) claims that topic relevance, complexity of task procedures, amount of context provided, complexity of language, amount of help available, degree of accuracy expected, and time allotted are among the major contributors to task difficulty. Skehan (1996) proposes that the factor of communication stress, which may be influenced by the level of control the learners have while performing tasks and the stakes involved in the task outcomes, be added to Brindley's list. Nunan (2004), meanwhile, focuses on the factors dealing with input such as length of texts, speed, numbers of speakers, explicitness of information, propositional density, amount of unfamiliar vocabulary, and clarity of discourse structure.

Ellis (2003) points out four areas where task difficulty can be adjusted; namely, input, conditions, processes, and outcomes. Similarly, Duran and Ramaut (2006) place emphasis on the adjustment of three main parameters: the requirements for task performance, the world presented in the task, and the linguistic input features. This suggestion coincides with the notion of flexible learning materials proposed by many practitioners and researchers from the field (Hemingway, 1986; Nolasco & Arthur, 1988; Prodromou, 1992; McKay & Tom, 1999) in that various versions of the same learning activity can be achieved through the modification of texts, task, or performance level. These scholars advocate the idea of creating one learning task which can be operated in a classroom at various levels so as to accommodate learners of mixed proficiency.

When learners are presented with tasks that are appropriate to their levels, this ensures that they are able to cope with the performance demands and are likely to have sufficient

attention capacity to learn effectively from the tasks (Skehan, 1998). Additionally, it is believed that an appropriate level of challenge in the learning activities will crucially enhance learners' motivation since the learners' are exerting efforts toward achievable goals (Williams & Burden, 1997; Dörnyei, 2001). Moreover, allowing learners to acquire skills at their own pace can minimise stress from competition as well as address individual needs at the same time (Dickinson, 1987).

### ***Scaffolding learning***

Since language is a social activity where meanings are learned and expanded (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), language learning implies the social process of teacher-student collaboration to construct, interpret, and negotiate meanings (Thai, 2009). Teachers are believed to have a crucial role in this process as they explicitly intervene, where necessary, to 'scaffold' learners, enabling them to gain expertise (Feez, 1998). The notion of scaffolding advocates the importance of teachers' temporary support to assist learners in their development of new understanding and new ability (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Scaffolding aims to enable learners to succeed with the task at hand and to equip them with the necessary knowledge so that they can accomplish a similar task on their own at later stages.

The concept of scaffolding derives from the work of Vygotsky (1978), who puts forward the idea that there are two levels of learners' development: a level of independent performance and a level of potential performance. The gap between these two levels is thus called the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD). According to Vygotsky, the ZPD sets the boundaries within which new learning best occurs. To explain, if the instruction is beyond the ZPD; that is, it is too difficult, learners are likely to give up. On the other hand, if it is below the ZPD; in other words, too easy, learners are not presented with

any challenge and hence are unlikely to progress (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). It is imperative that learners be allowed to work within their own ZPD, which is slightly above their existing levels of independent performance. With the teacher's support, learners can gradually progress through ZPD to their potential performance (Feez, 1998). Scaffolding is seen as having a temporary nature since its main objective is to assist learners' progression through their own ZPD. As the learners increase their mastery of the task, this specific support can be withdrawn in a gradual manner.

### ***Discourse-oriented approach to writing instruction***

According to Hyland (2002), discourse refers to the purposes and functions which specific linguistic forms serve in the written texts. The discourse-oriented paradigm views writing as a social action with a communicative purpose. Hence, texts are used as resources to convey the writers' intention and to establish relationships with the readers. According to this paradigm, each communicative purpose is associated with a set of distinct textual elements. In other words, texts which share the same communicative purpose also share the same underlying structural pattern, or genre (Butt et al., 2000). Since the rationale of each genre is derived from the recognition of the discourse community (Swales, 1990), texts of a certain genre are often constructed in a socially-accepted manner so that they form a basis for readers' expectations when reading (Tribble, 1996). Similarly, writers also draw from their prior knowledge and acquaintance of genres in order to reproduce the texts on later occasions (Johns, 2003).

As a result, a discourse-oriented or genre-based approach suggests the explicit instruction of text structure. This is done especially at the early stages of learning a new genre so that novice writers can gradually gain control of the genre through

repeated experiences (Hyland, 2004); that is, being exposed to it, remembering what it entails, and finally constructing it themselves. Also influenced by the notion of ZPD and scaffolding, advocates of a discourse-oriented approach often employ a learning cycle with a number of sequential stages through which learners can progress so as to gain control of a particular text type.

Several authors who have previously created a text-based syllabus (e.g. Hammond et al., 1992; Feez, 1998; Thai, 2009) suggest the stages of a teaching-learning cycle as follows: (1) understanding the context of text; (2) understanding text; (3) constructing text; and (4) applying text. To clarify, stage one aims to introduce the learners to the social context of the target text so that they can gain familiarity with the writing situation. Next, at stage two, learners gain knowledge of the structural patterns and language features that commonly appear in the target text through an explicit modelling and deconstruction of the text. Later on, at stage three, learners' construction of texts is supported by guidance and collaboration; that is, the teacher's scaffolding. As the learners moving toward the final stage where they are able to construct the text independently, teachers can gradually withdraw their support and guidance. Nevertheless, this proposed teaching-learning cycle is considerably flexible in that the learners' entry point to the cycle can take place at any stage depending upon their level of competence with regard to a given text type (Hammond et al., 1992; Feez, 1998). Also, this cycle has a recursive nature, which makes it possible for learners to move back and forth between stages as needed (Thai, 2009).

### **The study**

The present study proposed the use of multilevel writing tasks to address the issue of classroom diversity as well as to promote the development of writing proficiency through

scaffolding. Multilevel writing tasks offer choices for learners to work within their own ZPD. Weaker learners may work at a less challenging level than the high-proficiency ones so that every learner has an equal chance to accomplish the tasks. Levels of writing tasks, which are differentiated by the amount of support provided, can be viewed as scaffolding, assisting learners in achieving their potential; that is, to be able to produce the texts independently.

### ***Participants***

The study took place in a compulsory 16-week English course which was offered to all non-English major students at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. There were 28 learners in the class with various levels of proficiency, ranging from beginner to high intermediate. I was the instructor of the class.


### ***Multilevel writing tasks***

The aim of creating multilevel writing tasks was to offer different versions of the same learning materials so that the learners were given choices to work on the task levels that they believed were most suitable for them. Hence, careful measures were taken when designing each version of the material. To specify, tasks which required many steps to complete or which demanded learners to think about too many things were seen as more difficult than the ones which required a few simple steps. Implicit instructions or instructions written in complicated language structures and/or with unfamiliar vocabulary were also considered a factor contributing to task difficulty. Meanwhile, tasks with high manageability were perceived as easier than those which appeared too challenging.

Essentially, the three task levels were differentiated by the amount of support provided within the task. To illustrate, writing

tasks at Level A (Supported Writing) offered the highest degree of support in that explicit instructions, language samples, and in some cases, partial texts were provided to assist with learners' performance. On the other hand, writing tasks at Level B (Guided Writing) contained a moderate degree of support in that the instructions were relatively explicit; however, neither samples of language patterns nor partial texts were supplied. Lastly, writing tasks at Level C (Free Writing) displayed a minimal degree of assistance. At this level, learners were provided with guideline questions, instead of instructions, to implicitly suggest the text structure and language features. Examples of multilevel writing tasks are shown in Figures 1-3.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ ID \_\_\_\_\_



**Unit 1: What's the Story? Task 1: Postcard to a Friend (A)**

*Think of a trip you have taken to a different province or overseas.*

Write a postcard (about 100 words) to tell a friend about the trip.

- > First, you need to think about all the fun things you did or the exciting/ surprising/ disappointing experiences you had during this trip.
- > You can use the guided writing to begin and end your story.
- > After a short introduction of where you are and how you feel about the overall trip, you can begin to write about the things you saw, activities you did or people you met etc. - use adjectives and/or adverbs to describe how you feel such as *beautiful scenery, strange people, meet unexpectedly or moving too slowly.*
- > Remember to use Past Tense - you are telling a story that already happened!
- > You may arrange the information according to the order it happened - use time expressions and phrases such as *first, next, then, later, in the end* etc.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am at \_\_\_\_\_ with my \_\_\_\_\_

I'm having a \_\_\_\_\_ time here. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_


\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I \_\_\_\_\_ it. This is the \_\_\_\_\_ trip of my life.

Wish you were here!



**Figure 1:** Level A writing task





expected language use that is conventional to the certain text type. In a pedagogic task, the linguistic goal usually concurs with the task objective and expected outcome, as it is designed to develop the discrete skills required in the accomplishment of real-world tasks (Hyland, 2003). To illustrate, in Unit 1 Task 1: Postcard to a Friend, the structure of 'recount' was anticipated as the appropriate text structure for the task, implied by the task demand which required the recollection of events. Accordingly, the language use typical for a recount, such as past tense, chronological timeline or evaluative remarks, was also anticipated for the completion of this writing task.

Joyce (1992) proposes that, since each type of text is concerned with different language features, the assessment of learners' developmental progress should focus on their ability to control these relevant elements of each text type. It could be assumed that learners who were to succeed in fulfilling the task demands would possess some level of text control and would be able to demonstrate it effectively in their writing. On the other hand, the learners who had not yet developed control would fail to demonstrate it in their writing and were unlikely to satisfactorily fulfil the task demands. Based on this notion, the analysis of learners' texts was conducted separately for each task, using the assessment criteria developed from task-specific communicative and linguistic goals. The analysis of Unit 1 Task 1: Postcard to a Friend is presented as an example in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Text analysis of Unit 1 Task 1

Groups	Criteria	Sample texts
Effective control of text	Produced a personal message to maintain the relationship	<i>"Hi, it's me, [name]"</i> <i>"I wish you could be here and see sunset with me."</i>
	Told a friend about a trip	<i>"I am at Samui with my friend."</i>
	Wrote a recount	<i>"On the morning I walked to the beach. The weather was fine. The sea was very beautiful. I loved it."</i>
	Used past tense and time expressions	<i>"On the second day, we went to the Grand Palace."</i>
	Made evaluative remarks	<i>"I had seen the Forbidden City. I think it so enormous. I can't imagined how can the human built this city."</i>
Ineffective control of text	Did not produce a personal message	<i>"Amphawa is a city in Samutsongkhram province."</i> <i>"Therefore this place is interesting for tourist to visit..."</i>
	Did not tell a friend about a trip	<i>"I have a stomachach. The doctor tell me that I have to rest at the hospital for a week. So I want you to come and visit me"</i>
	Did not write a recount	<i>"My boyfriend take me to Siam Center for celebrating our first anniversary. I feel so lucky having Somchai to love."</i>
	Did not use past tense for past events	<i>"Today I come to Chumphon with my friend. I go to the Hard Sai Ree beach. It is buatiful."</i>
	Did not make evaluative remarks	<i>"Manaw Gulf was War area between Thai Army and Japan Army it have the Airforce history 503 Park and monument of Airforce here."</i>

**Findings and discussion**

Through the analysis of the learners' texts, both successful and struggling performances were found. Two main themes emerged from the analysis of successfully-constructed texts. First of all, the learners who were able to achieve the communicative goals of the tasks appeared to possess greater awareness of writing situation. These learners were able to adopt a language style appropriate for each text type (e.g. postcard or newspaper article) and intended audience (e.g. a close friend or the general public). Secondly, the successful participants demonstrated their understanding of the relationship between form and function by producing appropriate text structures and linguistic features for the intended purposes of communication.

As for struggling performances, three main themes emerged from the analysis of these texts. First, the texts failed to achieve the communicative goals. This failure was a result of the learners' misunderstanding of the task purposes and lack of audience sensitivity. Consequently, these learners supplied a large amount of irrelevant content and used inappropriate language styles to address their audience. The second theme common in struggling performances was the students' inability to break down task requirements. This inability led to the construction of inappropriate text structure or the incompleteness of tasks. Lastly, the struggling writers appeared to be those who did not possess sufficient English skills for the completion of the tasks. Some of these learners had such limited writing ability that they were unable to compose comprehensibly.

It was apparent that, to some extent, the design of multilevel task features had positive effects on the learners' construction of texts. In general, the instructions provided within the tasks were able to assist learners in fulfilling the task demands both in terms of communicative and linguistic goals. The concept of multilevel writing tasks was developed on the

basis that there was a common task goal among the three levels of the task. Accordingly, all three levels which belonged to a set of a given task had identical statements of task requirements positioned at the top of the task sheets as the primary instruction (refer to Figures 1-3). The factors distinguishing one task level from another were task characteristics (e.g. guided writing or free writing) and writing directions, which were provided in various degrees of details and explicitness (refer to Figures 1-3). These directions, i.e. secondary instructions, essentially simplified the task demands stated in the primary instruction and translated the task requirements into practical writing steps. Consequently, each learner was able to complete the task regardless of which level he/she was working at. The following are sample texts taken from three learners: Student A, Student AA and Student N. These three learners worked at task level A, B and C, respectively.

**Dear mother**

**I am at** Amphur Pai **with my** friends. **I'm having a good time here.** I like this place very much. I want to have you with me. It is very cold here and beautiful place. I saw sunset in the morning and a nice sundown in the evening. Here food very delicious and beautiful girls. It made me happy and miss someone. I enjoy being here and having a good time with my friend.

[WU1T1(A)-Sa]

Dear [name]

This is me [name]. I am at Samui beach with my friend. I stayed in hotel. It near the beach. On the morning I walked to the beach. The weather was fine. The sea was very beautiful. I loved it. Later, on the evening I saw the sunset. It was very beautiful. I loved it again. I wish you could be here and see sunset with me. The next day I backed to my home. The sunset is still in my mine. Lastly, I want to go there again if I have a chance.

[WU1T1(B)-Saa]

**Dear [name]**

Surprise! Now, I'm at Hua Hin with my family. It was so bad that you couldn't come and join us so I decided to write this postcard to share my happy time with you. You'd love the white sand beach! It's awesome! However, there's not much people so me and my sister wear bikinis and then sip some Mojito after the sunset. At the night, we sit around the bonfire. The stars are bright and the moon reminds me of you. It would be great if you could be here with me.

[WU1T1(A)-Sa]

As can be seen from the three excerpts above, each learner was able to produce an appropriate text structure which featured language patterns commonly appearing in postcard writing. These successfully-completed tasks, to some extent, suggested that the three learners were able to utilise the instructions provided within the task to assist them in their text production. It could be said that these instructions functioned as a scaffolding to help the learners navigate and manage their tasks.

Previous studies have shown that second language writers have also benefited from the explicit instruction of generic structures (e.g. Cotterall & Cohen, 2003; Kongpetch, 2006; Firkins, Forey & Sengupta, 2007). These researchers claimed that their learners were able to develop greater control of the focused texts and successfully transfer their schematic and lexicogrammatical knowledge from the explicit display of models to reproduce the texts independently. In the present study, it was found that the learners were also able to apply their knowledge of text structure, promoted by the task features, to their examination tasks, which resembled two of the writing tasks in the set. Below are excerpts of Student BB's texts for Unit 4 Task 3 and the final examination task, which both involved the expression of agreement/disagreement with the given topic. For

the classroom task, Student BB chose to work on task level A, which consisted of partial texts (in bold) as a skeleton for writing. However, she was later able to produce the appropriate text structure for the same writing task without the skeleton during the examination.

**Television is a big influence in lives of most of us. People, young and old, spend hours every week watching television programs. I agree that watching television is bad for children. I think watching television is bad for children because of these reasons. First of all, most of children need a time to learn something new more than just sitting to watch a cartoon show or somethings that useless... ..In conclusion, I believe watching television is risk for children because we don't really know that they will learn bad things or good things from the TV show if we don't look after them closely.**

[WU4T3-Sbb]

I strongly agree with university students and volunteer work because of these reasons. First of all, I think a volunteer work can be develop our skill in many of activities like Sara she has broadened her horizons. She learn how to cook, teaching other people that she never done it before... ..In conclusion, I strongly agree with university students and their volunteer work. All of it can make their life much [illegible] in a social in nowadays.

[EF-Sbb]

Apart from drawing the learners' attention to the generic structures which commonly occurred in certain text types, the design of in-task support also reinforced the knowledge and practice of language points specified in the syllabus. To illustrate, the use of speculation modals (e.g. could have, might have, etc.) was one of the language focuses stated in the required textbook. Accordingly, Unit 5 Task 2: Magazine Column was specifically designed to deal with the topic of Stonehenge's mystery. It was anticipated that, to address this particular topic, the learners

would likely use the focused language point. In the writing directions of all three-levelled task sheets, modals of speculation were suggested, in various degrees of explicitness, as one way to report speculative information. The findings from the analysis of learners' texts revealed that the majority of learners had applied this suggestion to their writing. The following excerpts, taken from three learners, who were working at different task levels, all contained the use of speculation modals (underlined).

There were no stones in that area of England, so the stones must have been moved. The stones may have been broken in to small pieces and brought to the site by oxen. The Stonehenge may have been built by Beaker Folk because of their use of drinking pottery. It may have been built as a burial ground and astronomical observatory or as a religious site.

[WU5T2(A)-Sy]

It is very wonderful because Stonehenge located in a wild field without any stones so the stones might have been transported from somewhere very far away without any vehicle.

[WU5T2(B)-Sf]

Scientists and researchers suggest from all these facts that it may have been built by an ancient religious group.

[WU5T2(C)-Sn]

The correct form and appropriate usage of speculation modals in these three examples suggest the facilitative function of in-task support in reinforcing the recently-learned grammar point. The language suggestions provided in the design of in-task support not only reminded the learners of the newly-acquired, discrete language points, but also helped them relate the forms to the contextual usage. Nunan (2004) asserts that it is essential that classroom tasks encourage learners to mobilise their



linguistic knowledge in order to convey meaning. Pedagogical tasks should facilitate the learners' transition from reproductive to creative language use by providing the opportunities for the learners to draw on their emerging language in an integrative way. According to this notion, it could be said that, while performing Unit 5 Task 2, many learners were able to perceive a meaningful connection between the form and the usage of the speculation modals and consequently produce such form in the texts where appropriate.

Furthermore, the continuous practice, promoted by the implementation of the multilevel-task approach, was found to assist with the learners' development of greater fluency and accuracy. According to the pedagogical assumption of task-based learning, it is believed that, through an effort to communicate, learners will be inclined to notice the language input as well as output and incidentally acquire new linguistic knowledge or restructure existing knowledge (Widdowson, 1998; Samuda, 2001; Ellis, 2010). The findings which emerged from the analysis of the learners' texts seemed to support this notion, as there was evidence of learners' noticing of lexical input (i.e. reproduction of words/ expressions) and restructuring of output (i.e. gradual production of accurate forms) in this study. To exemplify, Student E seemed to struggle with the particular structure of 'make' + object + adjective. The following excerpts illustrate his attempts to produce this grammatical structure in an early task (Week 6) and a later task (Week 13).

Mobile phone makes our life convenience. We can take photos, listen to the radio and also take a memo as a portable computer. Anyway, sometimes mobile phone makes us be impersonal and caused of cancer. Furthermore, the new models of mobile phones are very expensive.

Actually, we need technology to make our life be better, but everything always have two sides; good and bad. We should consume them with bright acknowledgement and be enough.

[WU2T2-Se]

...when I just want to relax, I can rest on my sofa and watching TV. It also has cartoons which make me relax and happy.

[WU4T3-Se]

The two excerpts suggest Student E's improvement in the production of this particular structure. In the first excerpt, taken from Unit 2 Task 2: Newspaper Article assigned in Week 6, Student E evidently struggled to produce the correct structure. He attempted to use 'make', followed by an object and a noun (convenience). Then, within the same piece of writing, he also tried 'make' + an object + 'be' + adjective (see underlined texts in the first excerpt). However, in Week 13 when he constructed the second excerpt, taken from Unit 4 Task 3: Essay, Student E was able to 'fine tune' his knowledge and produce the structure correctly (see underlined text in the second excerpt).

## **Conclusion**

Proficiency is seen as the degree of skills with which a person can use a language (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1999). However, when writing skills are believed to be culturally transmitted (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) and written texts are viewed as socially constructed (Johns, 2003), proficient writers tend to

draw on their prior knowledge about the context of communication, social practice as well as language system in their creation of texts (Tribble, 1996). In this sense, the development of writing proficiency should not be strictly perceived as an increase in fluency, accuracy or complexity of writing. By contrast, it should include the learners' demonstration of functional knowledge (i.e. how language is used to achieve a communicative purpose), sociolinguistic knowledge (i.e. how language is used in different contexts), and textual knowledge (i.e. how language is used to construct texts) (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). The findings from the present study show that the design of multilevel-task support features, which contained suggestions of schematic steps and linguistic features as well as clarification of the task goal, played an important role in enhancing learners' writing proficiency. Nevertheless, the various degrees of explicitness in these support features still allow the individual learner to work within his/her ZPD and to progress at his/her own pace through the three levels of writing tasks.

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Apiwan Nuangpolmak is a lecturer at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, Bangkok, Thailand. She has recently obtained a Doctoral Degree from the Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Australia. The study described in the current paper was a part of her Ph.D. thesis, entitled "*Facilitating Language Learning through a Multilevel-Task Approach.*"

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