

Beliefs and Opinions about English Writing of Students at a Thai University ¹

Watana Padgate
Naresuan University

Abstract

This study explored college students' beliefs and opinions about the necessity of writing skills in an EFL (English as a foreign language) context, problems and level of difficulty in English, and the students' experience in Thai composition and opinions about the benefits of writing Thai compositions on writing in English. The participants were students from Naresuan University, Thailand, consisting of 40 English-majored students and 239 non-English-majored students. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. The findings revealed that both groups of students realized the significance of English writing and thought that it should be required for all students. However, most students perceived writing skill as being more difficult than other language skills. Their perceived major problems included limited vocabulary, lack of knowledge about sentence connectors, and lack of revising skills. It was also found that most students had experience composing in Thai and believed that they benefited from this experience when composing in English. The researcher concluded by emphasizing the significance of learners' opinions and beliefs on learning English as motivating factors. Instructors should try not to

¹ This research was funded by the Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University.

make learners feel that what they are learning is too difficult to achieve.

Introduction

Significance of English Writing Skills and Problems in English Writing of Thai Learners

Although English has been taught and learned in Thailand for a very long time, writing at the discourse or paragraph level has relatively been ignored, especially in school levels. This is probably due to the fact that most teachers “overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers” (Zamel 1985, cited in Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p. 141). As the current trend shows, teaching writing has become a separate discipline of its own as evidenced by the appearance of at least one scholarly journal, i.e. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. Writing is now seen more as a means of communication rather than just a skill for practicing grammar. In this sense, writing teachers need to understand writing theories and principles and may need to be trained to teach writing. Another possible factor that writing at a paragraph level is often ignored in school is possibly because of the concept of “communicative English.” When the focus of English language teaching/learning is on communication, people in general seem to assume the significance of oral skills. Both instructors and learners consequently pay a great amount of attention on oral communication. Students feel that they need to “talk” in order to “communicate.” However, this perception is evidently flawed since communication can also be achieved through writing. Writing skills are important and even necessary for getting a good job or continuing high-level education. The ability to write effectively has become increasingly important in the world community, and teaching writing is playing more roles in second or foreign language education (Weigle, 2002). However, writing is considered the most difficult skill since it requires a higher level of language proficiency than other skills. Writing also requires critical planning and revising skills, a process which often worries writers (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p. 161). A problem frequently found among English language learners in Thailand is that although many of the learners can relatively successfully read and communicate orally, a

smaller number of these learners can communicate effectively via writing. Based on my experience as an English lecturer, I have found that the students' writing often contains serious language problems including those concerning sentence structure, which results in incomprehensibility. It is also often found that the students' writing pieces lack coherence, unity, and logical thinking. It is possible that these learners did not have experience in writing long stretches of writing and were not trained to write composition both in Thai and in English in the school level, and the problem remained when they came to college. According to an informal survey with graduate students in a course which I taught in the English Program (unpublished personal data), writing was perceived as the most difficult among all four skills (9 out of 21 students).

In addition to proficiency in general writing, academic writing is another skill that learners in higher education institutes should possess since they are often required to produce writing tasks in their academic discipline. The format of academic writing is relatively systematic and predictable. However, background and experience of writing in the first language (L1) of learners are important for their ability to write in a second language (L2). If they have experience in academic writing in their L1, they may be able to borrow or transfer their thinking and L1 writing strategies to English academic writing. For this reason, learners' experience in L1 writing is worth studying and should be taken into account when considering their problems and strategies in writing English.

Some considerations when planning teaching English writing

When planning to teach L2 writing, planners and instructors need to consider many different factors. Teaching English writing can take place in a second-language or a foreign-language context. In the latter, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) contend that variables concerning learners are more complicated and that the following factors should be taken into account.

- the country where English writing is taught
- the previous English learning duration
- level of access to English

- the distance of language typology between L1 and English
- social and political attitudes toward English and English speakers in general
- practice and expertise of English instructors
- social practice and expectation in L1 literacy
- major or study plan in school
- potential of economic opportunity, and
- cultural expectations on learning

Since writing is a kind of communicative behavior, creating a successful piece of writing is complicated and requires controls of different language systems at the same time. Writing a good piece of essay, especially in English or other second languages, requires several factors. In addition to all aspects of language proficiency including vocabulary, grammar, and correct expressions, the writer needs to possess appropriate thinking and reasoning skills, as well as logical and interesting thoughts. Writing is, therefore, considered an advanced skill which requires formal instruction. This is different from other skills, such as listening or speaking, which learners can pick up from the environment and do not need to be taught, if language learning occurs in the situation where the learners are exposed to a great deal of target language input. Sasaki and Hirose (1996) found that there were some factors that were predictors of success in L2 writing: L2 proficiency, ability in L1 writing, and metalanguage about L2 writing as well as writing strategies. Furthermore, based on their qualitative analysis, Sasaki and Hirose found that good writers have significant differences from poor writers. That is, good writers pay more attention to overall elements of a piece of writing, write longer in both L1 and L2, write more fluently, express more confidence in writing, and wrote more L2 paragraphs while in high school. The study by Schoonen et al (2003) also reveals that L2 writing ability is highly related to L1 writing ability.

In addition to knowledge relevant to writing, the nature of the writing process is another factor that makes L2 writing challenging for most learners. Therefore, writers should have knowledge and understanding of the nature of the writing process. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) state that even skilled writers find that writing is not always easy. Some face problems when starting to write while

others have problems in revising their writing piece. Moreover, each writer has different writing techniques and strategies. For example, some like to use an outline before writing while others prefer flow charts or questions as guidelines for writing. Variability among writers is an obvious characteristic of the writing process, and this lack of definite writing patterns may make learners feel that writing is difficult and complicated.

Similarly, Campbell (1998) agrees that there is no single writing method or process. The data from observing two ESL learners of Campbell reveals that each learner has his own writing method. In general, when we think about the writing process, we may think about different steps such as planning, gathering information, drafting, revising, and editing or proofreading. However, Campbell asserts that the writing process is not straightforward or linear starting from the beginning to the end. According to Campbell, "writing is like playing pinball" (p. 10) because each time the pinball is released, we cannot predict in what direction the ball will go or what it will hit. Besides, the ball may bounce back and forth several times before running down the tube. In a similar vein, in writing there are several areas where "the academic-writing ball" may hit and bounce back and forth including participating in class, reading course materials, doing library research, brainstorming, listing, drawing mind maps, clustering, talking to classmates, talking with the professor, searching the Internet, etc. In addition, the same writer may encounter a different process while writing each time and each kind of writing. One may argue that in writing the writer may be able to control the situation better than when playing pinball; however, Campbell insists that even in the best piece of writing the writer may not be able to control all different factors and may face an unpredictable situation.

Concerning writing strategies, Campbell (1998) states that L2 writers often use a limited range of strategies and rely on previous successes rather than experimenting new strategies in a new writing context. In academic writing, the writers may have to rely on reading materials in their academic fields for writing, but Campbell notices that L2 writers often lack confidence in interpreting reading materials. Also, they may not be familiar with

the format of academic writing. These problems may result from cultural differences between L1 and L2 writing or the writers' L2 writing experience. Some L2 writers may lack experience in revising a writing piece, for example.

In any kind of learning, learning to write in English included, realization of the significance of what is being learned is important because this will encourage the learners to be dedicated to learning and make an effort to learn more. Moreover, their perception on what they are learning is important because if they perceive that what they are learning as being too difficult or beyond their ability to achieve, they may feel discouraged and may feel that success in learning is impossible. Bernat (2006) states that learners' thoughts and beliefs concerning language learning may be related to some factors such as the nature of language, difficulty, benefits of learning strategies, etc. Current research results also indicate that these beliefs have potentials in influencing the learners' attitudes on the language, language learning, learning motivation, and in determining the experience and actions in the language classroom. Mori (1999a) also found that language learners' beliefs are modestly but statistically significantly related to achievement. Learners' beliefs about what they are learning seem to affect their learning strategies as well. For example, another study of Mori (1999b) revealed that learners' perception of the difficulty of kanji learning was significantly related to the use of contextual clues. Findings from many studies demonstrate that "students' confidence in their writing capabilities influences their writing motivation as well as various writing outcomes in school" (Pajares, 2003, p. 139). Recently, Hawthorne (2008) has found that there are some factors influencing the secondary school students' beliefs about barriers to engagement with English writing as L1, though there is some difference between boys and girls and between "engaged writers" and "reluctant writers." These factors include writers' interest in the topic, their perceived relevance of task, the environment for writing, the teacher, their self-belief, and their perceived knowledge and skills. According to Hawthorne, the students need to be engaged, not only behaviorally but also psychologically, in their writing tasks. It can be concluded, therefore, that learners' beliefs have influence on learning and the outcome of language learning. Teachers can

encourage learners to realize the significance or benefits of what they are learning and may find ways to build their confidence or ensure them that what they are learning is not too difficult for them to achieve (Dörnyei, 1994).

Many learners probably feel that writing is quite distant from their daily-life tasks. They may find oral communication skills more important since Thai learners often think of these skills as the skills of those who “know English”, even though in reality English writing skills may be as significant, especially in the Thai context where English is used as a foreign language and learners may have chances to communicate in English through writing more than speaking or listening. Furthermore, writing skills are essential for studying at a higher level. If English writing skills of Thai learners are not improved or are not paid enough attention to, the learners may have problems pursuing their studies at a higher level. However, writing is challenging since it is an advanced skill requiring several kinds of knowledge including language knowledge, thinking skills, and knowledge about the writing process. Besides, learners’ opinions and beliefs can have influence on learning motivation as stated earlier; therefore, writing instructors should take these factors into account. For this reason, it seemed necessary to investigate whether and to what extent Thai students perceived the significance of English writing and to what extent and why English was difficult for them. Learners’ perception that English writing is too difficult may lead to their discouragement. This study may provide background information for teachers so that they could give suggestions to learners and could emphasize the significance of English writing skills in order to motivate the learners to learn.

From the reasons above including the fact that there were quite a small number of studies that investigated the learners’ opinions on English writing, the current researcher was interested in conducting this study with the main objective to study Naresuan University students’ opinions on English writing and with the following research questions in mind.

1. To what extent did Naresuan University students realize the significance of English writing, and why?

2. To what extent did Naresuan University students have problems in writing in English, and to what extent was English difficult compared to other skills?
3. Did Naresuan University students have previous experience in writing in Thai and to what extent did they think that this experience was beneficial for writing in English?

The term “writing” as used in this study was specifically supposed to refer to a form of writing beyond a sentence level. It was expected that the findings from this study would provide writing instructors with information about how students thought about English writing in terms of significance and difficulty so that the instructors could understand the learners more and could motivate them accordingly.

Methods

Participants

The participants of this study were two groups of learners.

1. English-majored group: The participants in this group were in the second year in the second semester of the academic year 2006 at Naresuan University. All 52 students were used as a sample; however, only 40 students (76.9 per cent) returned the questionnaire.
2. Non-English majored group: The students in this group were studying in the course Writing Academic English in the second semester of the academic year 2006 at Naresuan University. Sixteen sections of this course were opened in this semester, and 904 students registered. In determining the sample size of this group, the researcher applied the table for determining sample sizes of Darwin Hendel (cited in Suwan, 2001), which states that for the population size of 900 with the level of confidence at 90 per cent, the sample size should be 208. Since the population of this group consisted of 904 students, the researcher set as the target that the minimum of 208 questionnaires should be returned.

The reason for selecting these two groups of participants was that, in addition to two required fundamental English courses, the students had taken or were taking a course concerning English paragraph writing at the time when this study was conducted. (The English-majored group took the course in the previous semester while the non-English group was taking the course.) It was, therefore, assumed that these students had writing experience and could express their opinions about writing at the paragraph level. In selecting the sample for the second group, the researcher randomly drew eight out of 16 sections. There were 424 students in these eight sections. 35-36 sets of questionnaire were given to the instructors of these groups so that they could distribute them to the students. (The researcher was informed that usually not all students attended class each time, so the questionnaires were given only to those who were present on the date when the data was collected.)

Instrument

The instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire created by the researcher. It consisted of three parts. Part 1 comprised 10 question items asking the respondents about the benefits and necessity of English writing skills and one open-ended question asking if they thought English writing was important and why. In question one of Part 2, there were 10 items asking the respondents about their problems in writing. Another question asked the participants to evaluate the difficulty level of English writing and rank it in relation to other skills. The third part asked about the participants' previous experience in composing in Thai and asked if they thought L1 writing was beneficial for English writing and why. To ascertain the validity of the questionnaire, the researcher asked an associate professor with a doctoral degree in applied linguistics and with more than 25 years of teaching experience, including teaching writing, to review the questionnaire. The Thai version of the questionnaire was used to collect the data from the participants.

Procedure in Collecting the Data and Data Analysis

For the non-English group, after eight sections were randomly selected, the researcher gave 35-36 questionnaires to the instructors of these sections and asked them to distribute the questionnaires to the students in their class and collect the answered questionnaires. The number of the returned questionnaires was 239, which was close to the determined sample size of at least 208. The confidence coefficient (α) was 0.87. It is, therefore, assumed that the answers received were consistent. The data received from the questionnaire revealed that the respondents were from 10 academic disciplines as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The respondents' academic majors

Disciplines	Number	%
Biology	29	12.13
Chemistry	53	22.18
Physics	28	11.72
Math	19	7.95
Information Sciences for Communication	36	15.06
Geography	27	11.30
Agriculture	25	10.46
Social Development	1	0.42
Psychology	17	7.11
Electrical Engineering	4	1.67
Total	239	100

It should be noted that although 239 questionnaires were returned, some items in some of the questionnaires were missing or incomplete. Therefore, the total numbers for the analysis of some items were lower than this.

In analyzing the data on the participants' level of agreement to the question items, the following criteria were used for the interpretation.

4.51 - 5.00	highest level
3.51 - 4.50	high level
2.51 - 3.50	moderate level
1.51 - 2.50	low level
1.00 - 1.50	lowest level

Findings

Students' Opinions on the Necessity of English Writing

To answer this question, the researcher analyzed the questions in Part 1 of the questionnaire by separating the English-majored group from the non-English majored one. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3. As can be seen, the respondents recognized the significance of English writing at the *high and highest* levels. The top three items that the respondents found the most necessary are the necessity *for further study, for job application, and for wider and more opportunities to find jobs*. On average, the English-majored group realized the significance of English writing at the *highest* level (M = 4.53, SD = .47) while the non-English group realized the significance at the *high* level (M = 4.41, SD = .47).

Table 2 Participants' opinions on the necessity of English writing skills: English-majored group (N = 38)

No.	Issue	M	S.D.	Level of Agreement
1	English writing skills are useful for my study at the present.	4.53	.69	highest
2	English writing skills are useful for my daily life at the present such as on-line chatting, e-mail, etc.	4.26	.76	high
3	English writing skills will be necessary for my further study.	4.71	.57	highest

No.	Issue	M	S.D.	Level of Agreement
4	English writing skills will be necessary for my job application.	4.66	.58	highest
5	English writing skills will help me to find a more variety of jobs more easily.	4.63	.59	highest
6	English writing skills will help me to have more chances in life	4.45	.65	high
7	English writing skills will be necessary for my future work.	4.47	.69	high
8	English writing skills will provide me with more advantages over others.	4.53	.60	highest
9	College students should take a course in English writing.	4.61	.60	highest
10	English writing should be a required course for all majors.	4.47	.69	high
	Total	4.53	.47	highest

Table 3 Participants' opinions on the necessity of English writing skills: Non-English group (N = 239)

No.	Issue	M	S.D.	Level of Agreement
1	English writing skills are useful for my study at the present.	4.40	.70	high
2	English writing skills are useful for my daily life at the present such as on-line chatting, e-mail, etc.	4.06	.89	high
3	English writing skills will be necessary for my further study.	4.59	.63	highest
4	English writing skills will be necessary for my job application.	4.53	.65	highest

No.	Issue	M	S.D.	Level of Agreement
5	English writing skills will help me to find a more variety of jobs more easily.	4.56	.62	highest
6	English writing skills will help me to have more chances in life	4.39	.72	high
7	English writing skills will be necessary for my future work.	4.32	.74	high
8	English writing skills will provide me with more advantages over others.	4.40	.73	high
9	College students should take a course in English writing.	4.52	.63	highest
10	English writing should be a required course of all majors.	4.34	.74	High
	Total	4.41	.47	high

However, when applying t-test to compare the mean scores of the opinions on the necessity of English writing of both groups, it was found that the two groups were not significantly different ($t = .62$, $df = 276$, $p > .05$). In other words, the two groups realized the significance of English writing at the similar level. This finding is in accordance with the response received from a holistic question asking the participants if they found English writing necessary in the present and in the future. Most students were positive about this question as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Participants' holistic opinion on the necessity of English writing

Group	Necessary		Not necessary	
	number	%	number	%
1. English-majored group (N = 37)	33	100	0	0
2. Non-English group (N = 233)	231	99.14	2	0.86

Students' opinions on problems in writing in English

In addition to asking the students' opinions on the necessity of English writing, the researcher investigated their problems in English writing. To answer this question, the researcher used the first question in part 2 of the questionnaire. The results are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

As Tables 5 and 6 show, both the English-majored group and the non-English group perceived that they had problems in writing in English at the high level ($M_s = 3.78$ and 3.71 respectively). It should also be noted that these two groups reported the same kinds of problems. The first three problematic areas of both groups were vocabulary, ability to use transition words, and editing. In addition, when comparing the opinions of both groups by using t-test, it was found that the two groups were not significantly different ($t = -.14$, $df = 273$, $p > .05$). In other words, both groups had the same level of problems in writing in English.

Table 5 Participants' opinions on English writing problems:
English-majored group (N = 38)

No.	Issue	M	S.D.	Level of Agreement
1	I feel that my basic knowledge in grammar and sentence structure is not enough to communicate my ideas in English.	3.76	.91	high
2	I have problems in spelling English words.	3.66	.82	high
3	I don't know how to use punctuation marks.	3.47	.89	moderate
4	I have problems with vocabulary. I can't think of appropriate English words to use in my writing.	3.97	.89	high
5	I have problems with using transition words between sentences to make my writing smooth.	3.92	.75	high
6	I don't know how to edit my writing.	4.00	.62	high

No.	Issue	M	S.D.	Level of Agreement
7	I don't know how to plan my writing. I don't know how to start writing and develop the content.	3.92	.85	high
8	I have no knowledge about the format and conventions of good writing genres (e.g. paragraphs, essays). I don't know what a good paragraph or essay should look like.	3.63	.91	high
9	I don't know what to write about or have no knowledge about the topic assigned to write.	3.63	.94	high
10	I don't know how to revise my writing to make it better.	3.82	.77	high
	Total	3.78	.54	high

Table 6 Participants' opinions on English writing problems: Non-English group (N = 236)

No.	Issue	M	S.D.	Level of Agreement
1	I feel that my basic knowledge in grammar and sentence structure is not enough to communicate my ideas in English.	3.74	.87	high
2	I have problems in spelling English words.	3.70	.85	high
3	I don't know how to use punctuation marks.	3.43	.95	moderate
4	I have problems with vocabulary. I can't think of appropriate English words to use in my writing.	4.04	.91	high
5	I have problems with using transition words between sentences to make my writing smooth.	3.80	.90	high
6	I don't know how to edit my writing.	3.99	.86	high

No.	Issue	M	S.D.	Level of Agreement
7	I don't know how to plan my writing. I don't know how to start writing and develop the content.	3.71	.96	high
8	I have no knowledge about the format and conventions of good writing genres (e.g. paragraphs, essays). I don't know what a good paragraph or essay should look like.	3.47	.92	moderate
9	I don't know what to write about or have no knowledge about the topic assigned to write.	3.51	.98	high
10	I don't know how to revise my writing to make it better.	3.72	.87	high
	Total	3.71	.63	high

As for the question asking the students how difficult they thought English writing was in general, the results were shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Student's opinions on the difficulty level of writing in English

Group	Most difficult		Very difficult		Moderately difficult		Slightly difficult		Not difficult	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
1. English-majored group (N = 38)	4	10.53	18	47.37	15	39.47	1	2.63	0	0
2. Non-English group (N = 200)	20	0.00	80	40.00	87	43.50	12	6.00	1	0.5

Table 7 shows that both groups of the respondents perceived the difficulty in English writing at the similar level. If the students

who found English writing “moderately difficult,” “very difficult,” and “most difficult” are consolidated into one category, the English-majored group will account for 97.37 per cent while the non-English group will account for 93.50 per cent. It should be noted that the number of the students in the English-majored group who found that English writing was difficult is slightly higher than that of the non-English group. However, this finding is in accordance with the next question asking the respondents which English skills they found the most difficult. It is obvious in Table 8 that writing was considered the most difficult by both groups. The next difficult skills were listening, speaking, and reading respectively.

Table 8 Participants’ opinions on the difficulty level of various English skills

Group	Listening		Speaking		Reading		Writing	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
1. English-majored group (N = 40)	8	20.0	6	15.0	1	2.5	25	62.5
2. Non-English group (N = 221)	62	28.05	41	18.55	10	4.52	108	48.87

Experience in Thai composition and opinions on the benefits of Thai composition skills on English composition

As aforementioned, some research studies have indicated that experience and ability in L1 writing may help in L2 writing. Therefore, the researcher asked the respondents about their experience in Thai composition and their opinions on whether and to what extent this experience helped them in English writing. The results are shown in Table 9.

Table 9 Participants' experience in Thai composition

Group	Yes		No	
	number	%	number	%
1. English-majored group (N = 40)	39	97.5	1	2.5
2. Non-English group (N = 233)	211	90.56	22	9.44

Table 9 shows basic information that the participants of this study, both those who studied English as their major and those who did not, used to learn Thai composition in high school. Moreover, most of the participants found that Thai composition skills were beneficial for them in composing in English as shown in Table 10.

Table 10 Participants' opinions on the benefits of Thai composition on English composition

Group	beneficial		not beneficial	
	number	%	number	%
1. English-majored group (N = 38)	30	78.95	8	21.05
2. Non-English group (N = 206)	179	86.89	27	13.11

Discussion and Conclusion

One important point reflected from this study is that this group of college students, both English and non-English majors, realizes the necessity of English writing for their future study and work. This is not surprising thanks to the status of English as the most dominant foreign language in Thailand. The ability to write a research or academic paper in English is particularly crucial for those who wish to work in the academic arena. The academic work publishable at the international level will have a great impact on their future academic advancement and promotion. Furthermore, it is possible that professors in the fields of science and technology have already assigned their students to read and write in English.

This helps confirm the significance of English in general and the necessity of English writing. Besides, on-line technology, such as chat rooms, e-mails, or interactive writing including messenger programs, may be another factor that makes Thai students find English writing more relevant to them and have more chances to write in English to communicate with foreigners.

Concerning the difficulty of English writing, the findings of this study confirm the belief that learners of English find English writing difficult. One can see that both groups of students in this study thought that writing was the most difficult of all language skills. This is probably due to the fact that writing requires both top-level knowledge (such as content knowledge about the topic, conventions and format of different writing genres, and the assessment of the intention of the writer and the awareness of the reader) and bottom-level knowledge (such as language knowledge, revising ability, and writing strategies (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). The findings, showing that the students in this study had problems with vocabulary, transition words, planning ability, and revising ability the most, are in agreement with Celce-Murcia & Olshtain's comments (2000), who note that these problems often concern student writers.

Another finding worth noting is that both groups of students indicated their problems in English writing at the high level and that the difficulty level of the English-majored group was slightly higher than that of the non-English group. However, this should not be interpreted that the former actually had more problems or were less competent than the latter. It is possible that the English-majored group was exposed to English more and took more English courses and, therefore, realized their own limitations and problems more. It is also possible that this group had more expectations from learning English than the non-English group. Consequently, they thought that they had many problems in English writing. In general, the proportion of the students in the English-majored group who found English writing difficult was higher than the non-English group (Tables 7 and 8) probably because of the same reason. In other words, as they learned more, they knew more and had more expectations of themselves and of the teacher. The more they learned, the more they felt that English was difficult.

In terms of writing experience, the findings of this study revealed basic information that most of the participants had had experience in Thai composition and believed that their knowledge in Thai composition was helpful for English writing. Although this study merely investigated the participants' opinions and beliefs and did not intend to examine the relationship between these two factors, many previous studies (e.g. Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Schoonen et al, 2003) reflected the influence of L1 writing ability on L2 writing. Since the learners' beliefs in this study are in accordance with the facts that have been proved in previous studies, one can hold a belief with more confidence that writing skills and strategies can be transferred from one language to another. Although it is generally accepted that the knowledge of the target language system such as grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, is necessary for writing competence and that the writers may not be able to make use of their L1 writing skills if their language proficiency is below the threshold level, L1 writing experience is still useful in helping the learners to get accustomed to communicating their ideas at the discourse level and to some writing patterns, and then to make use of this experience when writing in L2.

Research shows that learners' beliefs play a vital role in the learners' learning strategies and their success in learning (Cotterall, 1995; Kern, 1995; Mori, 1999a, 1999b). In addition, as Hawthorne's study (2008) suggests, students' beliefs about various factors play a very important role on their engagement in the writing tasks. Learners' attitudes towards what they are about to learn and beliefs about their self-efficacy are also crucial since these factors can help motivate the learners (Dörnyei, 1994; Pajares, 2003). In this study, it was found that the learners had positive attitudes towards English writing and realized its significance for future study and work. However, they also felt that writing was more difficult than other skills. If learners feel that what they are studying is too difficult and the goal is unlikely for them to achieve, their long-term motivation might be negatively affected. Therefore, in addition to continuing encouraging the learners to realize the significance of English writing, the instructors may also need to make the students perceive that English writing is, though certainly not easy, not too

difficult to achieve. The teachers have their share of responsibility in nurturing the students' beliefs about their self-efficacy and in developing their competence and confidence (Pajares, 2003). This can be done by starting with writing activities which are not too complicated and are suitable for the students' proficiency level. Moreover, the teachers can help increase the students' writing experience by providing them with meaningful writing contexts so that the students will have more opportunities to communicate via writing such as e-mail writing, journal writing, or other forms of writing that can enhance their confidence, which will serve as a springboard for more complicated forms of writing with more demanding writing conventions or formats. In Dörnyei's terms (1994), teachers may need to motivate students at all three levels: the language level, the learner level, and the learning-situation level. At the language level, for example, the teachers may discuss with the students to make them aware of how English writing tasks are relevant to them. Since writing, especially in another language, is complicated, teachers should also motivate the students at the learner level by helping them develop self-confidence and self-efficacy by reducing their frustration with 'easier' or graded writing activities. The teachers can help by avoiding bombarding the students with all "good" writing requirements or challenges at the beginning. Finally, at the learning-situation level, the writing teacher can motivate the students by making the course syllabi and teaching materials related to the students' content area, which can be done through needs analysis, by being accepting and supportive, and by promoting group work and co-operative atmosphere in the classroom such as group writing and peer feedback activities. Another important point worth being emphasized here is that since it is rather unlikely that writing success will result without good instruction and the understanding of how to teach writing, writing teachers may need to be equipped with the knowledge and understanding about writing processes and techniques as well as the understanding about what L2 writing requires.

Since the scope of this study is rather limited and the participants were taken from only one university, the findings may not be generalized to other groups of college students in Thailand. Researchers, therefore, are encouraged to conduct a similar study

but in a bigger scale in order to achieve generalization. Furthermore, writing scholars may investigate the relationship between the English language proficiency level and the learners' beliefs on and attitudes towards English writing. They may also study the relationship between the learners' beliefs on and/or attitudes towards writing and the writing performance. More research findings may bring about better understanding about factors possibly related to English writing, which may eventually lead to more effective writing teaching/learning methods.

The author

Watana Padgate is an associate professor in the English Section, Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand. He holds a B.A. in English (Chulalongkorn University), an M.A. in Applied Linguistics (Mahidol University), and a Ph.D. in English - Rhetoric & Linguistics (Indiana University of Pennsylvania). His interests include second language writing and second language acquisition.

References

- Bernat, E. (2006). Assessing EAP learners' beliefs about language learning in the Australian context. Asian EFL Journal: English Language Teaching and Research Articles, 8(2). Available: http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/June_06_eb.php. Retrieved on September 6, 2007.
- Campbell, C. (1998). Teaching second-language writing. Newbury House: Canada.
- Celce-Murcia, M. & Olshtain, E. (2000). Discourse and context in language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Readiness for autonomy: Investigating learner beliefs. System, 23, 195-205.
- Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. Modern Language Journal, 78(3), 273-284.
- Hawthorne, S. (2008). Students' beliefs about barriers to engagement with writing in secondary school English: A focus group study. Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 31(1), 30-42.
- Kern, R. G. (1995). Students' and teachers' beliefs and language learning. Foreign Language Annals, 28 (Spring), 71-92.

- Mori, Y. (1999a). Epistemological beliefs and language learning beliefs: What do language learners believe about their learning? Language Learning, 49(3), 377-415.
- Mori, Y. (1999b). Beliefs about language learning and their relationship to the ability to integrate information from word parts and context in interpreting novel Kanji words. The Modern language Journal, 83(4), 534-547.
- Pajares, F. (2003). Self-efficacy beliefs, motivation, and achievement in writing: A review of the literature. Reading & Writing Quarterly, 19, 139-158.
- Reichert, M. (2005). English-language writing instruction in Poland. Journal of Second Language Writing, 14(1), 215-232.
- Sasaki, M. & Hirose, K. (1996). Explanatory variables for EFL students' expository writing. Language Learning, 46 (March), 137-174.
- Schoonen, R. et. al. (2003). First language and second language writing: The role of linguistic knowledge, speed of processing, and metacognitive knowledge. Language Learning, 53(1), 165-202.
- Suwan, M. (2001). Research methodology in social sciences and humanities. Bangkok : Odion Store. (written in Thai)
- Weigle, S. C. (2002). Assessing writing. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

