

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

As the lingua franca of business, science, and international communication, English is essential in today's globally interdependent world. In an increasingly international professional environment, greater demand for the ability to access and utilize English language resources at universities, international scientific seminars conducted in English and research articles published in English, a higher level of proficiency in English has become essential for the professional development of university students. Particularly, there is a need among professionals to improve their English writing skills, in order to reach professional and career goals and objectives with greater ease.

Judging by Thai ESL learners' interest in academic writing courses in English, and evidence gathered during interviews, class discussions and through questionnaires during the pilot study, non-English major Thai learners lack writing strategies. Many learners feel that this is their greatest barrier to becoming proficient academic practitioners in English.

Conventional course literature on academic writing, rarely offer practical and holistic solutions to learners. This study evaluates the contemporary, holistic approach to the development of writing development and language proficiency,

through meta-cognitive strategy training. This approach directly addresses participants' writing and language learning needs at the beginning of their undergraduate studies, and involve learners in their own learning, practice and progress, so that students and professionals can improve their English writing and independent learning ability

Strategies better equip learners for lifelong learning and to be more autonomous in their approach, as mentioned in the *National Educational Act (1999)* in Section 7 - that Thai students should become *self-reliant*, creative, and acquire a thirst for knowledge, and *develop a capacity for self-learning* on a continuous basis.

Section 8 - that educational decisions should be based on principles such as

1. "*lifelong education for all*" and

3. "*continuing development of the bodies of knowledge and the learning process*"

Meta-cognition implies self-knowledge, knowledge of tasks and of strategies, as well as experience in self-regulation. The researcher aims to provide these by:

- Providing training and practice opportunities for reflective practice (self-knowledge)
- Training learners in strategies such as rubric use, reflective practice, mind-mapping and paragraphing (knowledge of tasks and of strategies)
- Providing training and practice opportunities in peer-editing, self-editing and rubric use (experience in self-regulation)

The benefits of training learners in meta-cognitive strategy use, is that strategies improve learners' systematic thinking ability, which may increase their chances of success in learning. By learning methods to solve problems, learners are also better equipped for lifelong learning and more autonomous in their approach. Competence in strategy use signifies improved writing ability, which is accomplished by the use of mind-maps, rubrics and writing questionnaires (reflective practice). The development in writing ability as well as in autonomy, is evident from the data discussed in greater depth in chapter four.

Writing is a complex process and can lead to learner frustration when they are not confident or experienced in using relevant strategies. As with speaking, it is necessary to provide a supportive environment for learners. This approach requires that ample time be spent on writing and strategy training in class. In order to prevent learners from reacting negatively to reworking the same material, activities done over the course of the study were kept varied and the objectives clear. After clear discussions, explanation and practical experience, learners have started to recognize the value of the meta-cognitive strategies, as their written work improved.

Meta-cognitive strategies will develop learners' writing ability and learner autonomy, not only in English language learning, but also in other academic areas. The introduction and practice of meta-cognitive strategies improve the

writing ability and learner autonomy of learners, and prove to be beneficial to learners both with regards to their language learning, as well as their intellectual development and secondary skills such as research and means of conveying information clearly and meaningfully.

Learning, in previous studies, is linked to meta-cognition by reflecting on learning and intentionally applying the results of their reflection to further learning (Demos, 2005). Because there is a lack of clarity regarding these processes (Clegg, 2004; Ecclestone, 1996), there is a need for research to provide better understanding of the concept of teaching meta-cognitive strategies, and whether and to what extent it may benefit learners' writing skills and ultimately learner autonomy. A strategy training program should be set up to develop learners' writing ability and learner autonomy, to enable us in formulating meaningful and useful ways of improving learners' writing ability, research needs to be done in the area of meta-cognition, and in the training of students in specific meta-cognitive strategies. The effects of such strategy training in writing and learner autonomy, is evaluated in this study, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

The methods of teaching that can help develop learners, are reflective practice, mind-mapping, peer-editing and self-editing. This study evaluates two aspects that are, according to a pilot survey, important to young professionals enrolled for academic writing courses such as IELTS preparation courses. These are strategies to improve their writing proficiency (meta-cognitive strategies) and the

ability to work, learn and practice their writing skills independently (learner autonomy). Techniques facilitating these ends, include reflective practice, mind-mapping, paragraphing, rubric use, peer-editing and self-editing. These techniques enable learners to more effectively complete writing tasks, such as those set in international English proficiency tests like the IELTS, or tasks such as writing e-mails, blogs, scripts, or cover-letters for job or study applications.

The study related to meta-cognitive strategies is appropriately conducted with university students; because these strategies are the most commonly used by adult learners, and particularly focus on the development of the thinking process. What makes the group of participants suitable for this study, is not only their academic writing and learning needs at the beginning of their university careers, but also because most learners are aware that in order for them to pursue further studies or professional careers abroad, they will need a high average score on an international language proficiency test such as IELTS, which is an important motivating factor for students. This partly prompted the main foci of this study, namely the effects of meta-cognitive strategy training on writing and learner autonomy.

During this study, learners were taken through various steps, learning specific meta-cognitive strategies, with the implied goal of scaffolding learners for the achievement of greater learner autonomy. By learning and using meta-cognitive

strategies, learners may become more autonomous, capable of expressing themselves clearly and independently in writing.

The study aims to evaluate the impact of meta-cognitive strategy training on learners' writing ability and on their autonomy as learners.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The objective of the study is to evaluate the effects of meta-cognitive strategy training on:

- a) learners' writing ability and
- b) learner autonomy

1.3 Scope of the study

1.3.1. The Target Group

The target group was 23 first year B.Sc. Software Engineering students enrolled for a 45-hour writing course at the College of Arts, Media and Technology at Chiang Mai University. The meta-cognitive strategy training and data collection was done over a 24-hour (4 week) period, and 16 of the subjects handed in full sets of data and attended class regularly enough to be included in the study. The ESL course for adults stretched over 6 weeks. Most learners were at a pre-intermediate level.

1.3.2 Writing Ability

The ability of students to write essays that successfully reflect the criteria stated in the writing rubric, and that reflects the use of meta-cognitive strategies, are evaluated in this study.

1.3.3 Learning Autonomy

The ability of learners to plan their own learning by using four meta-cognitive strategies, namely planning, monitoring, evaluating and planning for future improvement, are evaluated in this study.

1.3.4 Meta-cognitive strategy training

This research focuses on meta-cognitive strategies related to *planning, monitoring, evaluation and planning for future improvements* of learners' writing, based on Oxford (1990). Meta-cognition in the context of this study, deals with *self-evaluation, the identification of problems, and finding solutions*. Self-evaluation entails the use of rubrics, which learners use as a guideline for self-editing and self-evaluation. The identification of problems is facilitated not only by the use of the writing rubric, but also by the feedback learners get from peers and from the instructor. Filling out the writing questionnaire also gives learners the opportunity to identify problems in their approach and possible solutions. Finding solutions refers back to the meta-cognitive strategies in which learners receive training.

Meta-cognitive strategy training include the following techniques:

- Reflective practice (questionnaires)
- Mind-mapping
- Paragraphing
- Rubric use
- Peer-editing
- Self-editing

The above is defined in more detail under *Terms and Definitions*.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study will have significance to learner-centred language learning facilitators, curriculum developers and independent language learners, by way of establishing the effects of reflective writing practice and the incorporation of meta-cognitive skills training in writing courses. The conclusions of the study can help course writers in their planning.

The knowledge of meta-cognitive strategy use and a raised awareness of developmental strategies and increased learner autonomy, will encourage and motivate learners in their tertiary studies, by developing a positive attitude towards the concept of lifelong learning, nurturing a receptiveness to new ideas, decisions, skills and behaviours.

1.5 Definitions of Terms

1.5.1 *Reflective practice* is a technique used in teaching learners meta-cognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, evaluation and planning for future improvements, through the use of a questionnaire. Each question in the writing questionnaire (see Appendix 4) relates to one of the four meta-cognitive strategies (see Appendices 5 and 7) and reflect on or refer to learners' strategy use, through guided and open-ended questions.

1.5.2 Creating *mind-maps* is a technique used in teaching meta-cognitive strategies. Learners use mind-maps to plan and organize their ideas before starting to write their essays. A mind-map is a diagram that represents semantic or other connections between portions of information. By presenting these connections in a radial, non-linear graphical manner, it encourages a brainstorming approach to organizational tasks, eliminating the hurdle of initially establishing an intrinsically appropriate or relevant conceptual framework in which to work.

1.5.3 *Rubrics* are scoring tools for subjective assessments. It is a set of criteria and standards linked to learning objectives, used to assess learners' performance in writing. Rubrics allow for standardized evaluation according to specified criterion, making grading simpler and more transparent.

According to the rubric used in this study (see *Appendix 6*), the main criterion, which are suited to the needs of Thai learners, are used to evaluate learners' writing performance, focus on the following:

- Clarity of content
- Language use
- Sentence control and content organization
- Length / number of words

1.5.4 *Peer-editing* is a technique used in training learners' meta-cognitive strategies. Learners use the writing rubric (see *Appendix 6*) to edit and evaluate each other's essays.

1.5.5 *Self-editing* is a technique in which learners use the writing rubric (see *Appendix 6*) to edit their own essays and evaluate the quality of their own writing.

1.5.6 *Meta-cognitive Strategy Training* is the program designed to teach learners meta-cognitive strategies that can be used in writing, such as planning, monitoring, evaluating and planning for future improvement.

These strategies are focused on the development of learners' thinking processes, to enable them to identify and solve learning problems by themselves. An ability of learners to use these strategies successfully, imply a degree of learner autonomy.

1.5.7 The *components of meta-cognitive strategies* include knowledge of the task, learning strategies, and that of the learners themselves. The meta-cognitive experiences of self-management this study focuses on are the following meta-cognitive strategies, based on Oxford (1990):

- **Planning:** (using a mind-map and/or a writing rubric to plan essays; to identify and solve problems in advance, to be selective; goal prioritization and content structuring and organization)
- **Evaluation:** (learners judging their own progress; judging own writing ability and outcomes; being conscientious of the planning and monitoring of performance; of completing tasks and the attainment of goals)
- **Monitoring:** (monitoring the clarity of content in essays; monitoring language use, content organization, and sentence control; error-monitoring; performance-monitoring; strategy use; problem-solution)
- **Planning for Future Improvement:** (using current knowledge of strategies and experience from mistakes and tools such as a writing rubric)

1.5.8 *Teacher feedback* is the feedback that the instructor provides, discussing possible improvements and common errors in learners' writing, according to the criteria in the rubric. This feedback is given during one-on-one sessions with learners.

1.5.9 *Writing Ability* is the ability of students to write essays that successfully reflect the criteria stated in the writing rubric, and that reflects the independent

use of meta-cognitive strategies in writing, that includes paying attention, planning, content organization, searching for practice opportunities, the use of mind-maps and rubrics, as well as self-evaluation, monitoring errors and planning.

1.5.10 *Learner Autonomy* is the ability of learners to plan their own learning by using four meta-cognitive strategies, namely planning, monitoring, evaluating and planning for future improvement. These are based on Oxford (1990).

1.5.11 *Paragraphing* is a method of organizing ideas within a paragraph, according to Oshima and Hogue (1997) a paragraph should basically contain a topic sentence, supporting sentences and developmental sentences.

During the study, learners focused on writing five- paragraph essays, which are a formal format of written argument, and a common requisite in assignments at university level. The format requires an essay to have five paragraphs: one introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs with topic sentences, support sentences and development sentences (i.e. reasons or examples), and one concluding paragraph.

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