

# AN ANALYSIS OF THAI LEARNERS' WRITING OF RECOUNTS AND INFORMATION REPORTS

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## Abstract

This small scale study looks at some of the major strengths and issues of genre writing of a group of Thai high school students. The study was limited to *recount* and *information reports* genres as these are considered to be among the prototypical genres in educational settings. The findings indicate that many of these high school students were able to construct text at the level of the basic linguistic features of the genres but needed to develop the nominal groups for elaboration and expansion. However there were issues in organizing and contextualizing of their writing which are only touched upon in this study although important for the development of their writing skills in other genres.

**Key words:** Thai learners, genre, verbal processes, nominal groups, writing development.

## Introduction

Learning English in Thailand focuses on learning traditional grammatical principles such as form based structures and vocabulary. As Conlon (2009) suggested Thai-English teachers believe that to teach English is to teach grammar rules, not to teach students communication. Many Thai high school learners seem not to be able to effectively express what they think through writing as writing is viewed as one of the most difficult tasks for them. One important issue in learning English is a lack of opportunities to use English in real situations both in and outside the English classes. For writing activities, Thai teachers usually use a course book. However there are still problems in terms of the 'purpose' of the writing. Most of students are not exposed to a model text or given an explanation of how to construct texts for different purposes. Thus, many Thai learners are not likely to have

a clear understanding in terms of using language in context, selecting language features appropriate to the purpose of the intended goal.

This study aims to examine Thai students' writing to identify two of the basic genre writing in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of the language features and organization. The following section will outline the theoretical framework used in this study.

## Literature Review

Referring to Derewianka (1990), Genre-Based Approach has as a major objective to encourage the learners to use language in the real world. Derewianka (1990) suggests six genres including information reports, recount, narrative, instruction, explanation and argument. To assist the learners to be able to create writing in a systematic way, they are required to understand purpose, text organization and language features of the target genre as a framework. In this study because of limited space only information reports and recounts will be examined.

Information Reports: this genre is used to provide facts about the phenomena of the world, animals, plants and non-living things in general. This text type consists of various kinds of information, for instance, classification, functions, giving examples, describing components. At the beginning, a general statement is given to facilitate the overall information. Other details excluding personal comments are discussed in the following paragraphs. Generally, present tense, material processes (action type verbs), linking verbs (relational processes), adjectives, adverb group of time, place, manner and accompany are usually found in this genre.

Recount: the writers can apply recount to tell or report what happened. The series of events are organized by time sequence. The writers can begin by providing background to make readers understand writers' ideas. The writers can mention about who or what was involved in this story, where and when the story takes place. Next, the main information including other details is presented. In this study, personal recount and imaginative recounts were selected. Language features include specific participants, past tense, action verbs and linking words of time are found in this genre.

Table I is a summary of the two genres with their purposes, text organization and language features.

Table I Text Organization and Language Features of Genres.

| Genre                   | Purpose  | Text Organization                                   | Language Features                               |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|
| 1.) Information Reports | Provide facts about the phenomena of the world, animals, plants and non-living things in general | General statement or Orientation<br>Facts, aspects  | Present Tense                                   |
|                         |  |   | Action verbs (Material Processes)               |
|                         |  |   | Linking verbs (Relational Processes)            |
|                         |  |   | Nominal Group                                   |
|                         |  |   | Adverb of manner, place, accompany and duration |
| 2.) Recount             | Tell what actually happened  | Orientation<br>Series of events<br>Personal comment | Specific participants                           |
|                         |  |   | Simple past tense                               |
|                         |  |   | Action verbs                                    |
|                         |  |   | Time-relationship words                         |
|                         |  |   | Nominal Group                                   |

In this small scale study only certain key features will be examined as a detailed account would take up too much space. .

### Research Question

What language features are found in the students' writing of information reports and recount?

### Data and Methodology

#### *Research Participants*

The fifteen participants were grade 10 students whose ages are between 16-17 years old. There are prerequisite courses for them, but they had learned English from Grades 1 to 9. Most of the activities in the class in this study involve applying grammar rules through fill-in the blank exercises, multiple choices exercises including practicing doing the tests to prepare students for university entrance examinations in two hour sessions twice a week.

The data have been obtained from the written texts generated by high school students without any direct input on genre theory of writing. Each participant was required to create four texts consisting of two Recounts and two Information Reports. Every week, the researcher prepared one writing topic for the English teacher who teaches Special English Class for speaking. At the end of the class, writing activity was assigned as homework. The participants had one week to complete the writing. This cycle took four weeks. In the fourth week, all the participants received their essays back together with feedback from the researcher. The researcher used the writings to analyze and explore the major genre writing problems.

For data analysis, the students' writings were analyzed in terms of text organization and two major linguistic features linguistic using Derewianka's (1990) approach to text organization and language.

This section presents the text organization and language features in information reports and recount.

The tables below illustrate major strengths including clause structures, the variety of material processes and various categories of nominal groups.

Table I Summary of **clause structures** found in the writing of **information reports** in percentage of each student (S)

| Genre                          | Information reports |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| No of occurrence in percentage |                     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Criteria                       | S.1                 | S.2 | S.3 | S.4 | S.5 | S.6 | S.7 | S.8 | S.9 | S.10 | S.11 | S.12 | S.13 | S.14 | S.15 |
| Topic 1                        | 4.                  | 4.9 | 4.0 | 3.6 | 8.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 8.9 | 8.5 | 6.1  | 6.1  | 6.5  | 8.1  | 12.6 | 4.9  |
| Topic 2                        | 7.                  | 7.5 | 6.2 | 4.1 | 6.2 | 6.6 | 6.2 | 10  | 7.1 | 5.4  | 5.4  | 9.5  | 6.2  | 5.4  | 7.1  |

The range of variability of the students' use of clauses is indicated by the shaded areas

Table 2 Summary of **clause structures** found in the writing of **recount** in percentage of each student (S)

| Genre                          | Recount |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|--------------------------------|---------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| No of occurrence in percentage |         |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Criteria                       | S.1     | S.2 | S.3 | S.4 | S.5  | S.6 | S.7 | S.8 | S.9 | S.10 | S.11 | S.12 | S.13 | S.14 | S.15 |
| Topic 1                        | 8.8     | 10  | 8.8 | 7.1 | 2.9  | 2.9 | 8.2 | 4.7 | 4.1 | 5.9  | 5.3  | 9.4  | 6.5  | 7.1  | 8.2  |
| Topic 2                        | 2.6     | 1.3 | 5.2 | 5.2 | 12.9 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 5.2 | 5.8 | 4.5  | 10.3 | 3.9  | 8.4  | 10.3 | 11.6 |

The range of variability of the students' use of clauses is indicated by the shaded areas

*Clause Structures*

In order to identify the writing strengths of the students, the researcher did not allow the teacher to teach or provide direct language input. The results seem to indicate that most of the students can produce 11-20 clauses or 57.9 per cent for the first writing of information reports. The maximum clause written in present tense is 12.6 per cent or 31 clauses and the minimum is 3.6 per cent or 9 clauses. For the second topic, this research found that the maximum is 10 per cent and 4.1 per cent as the minimum. Most students produce 11-20 clauses or 76.3 per cent.

Many students seem to use three clause structures in the writing of information reports such as S+VI+S+ can/may + bare infinitive and there is/there are. For recount, the highest use is 10 per cent is and the lowest is 2.9 per cent found in the first writing of recount. Overall, the students can create 11-20 clauses or 74.1 per cent. From the second recount writing, the study found that most of the students can generate 1-10 clauses or 46.5 per cent.

*Material Process (He stopped the car from crashing)*Table 3 Summary of **material processes** found in the writing of **information reports** in percentage

| No of occurrence in percentage | No of occurrence in percentage |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Topic 1                        | Topic 2                        |
| 46.7                           | 33.3                           |
| 33.3                           | 46.7                           |

Table 4 Summary of **material processes** found in the writing of **recount** in percentage

| No of occurrence in percentage | No of occurrence in percentage |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Topic 1                        | Topic 2                        |
| 33.3                           | 10                             |
| 53.3                           | 80                             |

As seen in Table 3, in the first writing of information reports, the researcher found that the students can employ appropriate materials processes up to 46.7 per cent. For the second topic, number of material processes is similar 46.7 per cent. For recount, according to Table 4, there was some variation in the number of material processes ranging from 80 per cent to 10 percent.

According to the analysis, the majority of the students seem to be able to use material processes (action verbs) which they would have studied during primary, junior high-school and high school. Consequently, this sample of Thai students are likely to have syntactic knowledge which seems to be able to support them to learn more advanced genres, for example, recount, and information reports. Such genres are often characterized by the extensive use of material processes and the development of the nominal group.

Since the basic clause structure consists of N+V, the importance of the nominal group in a clause to describe or elaborate is essentially

dependent on the ability to expand the nominal group as in: D+N+E+C+H+pp+ng (*This first little baby boy from Mongolia*)

D (deitic) + N (numerative) + E (epithet) + C (classifier) + H (head word) + post modifier (pp+ng, finite, and non-finite relative clause)

Examples of nominal groups used by the students in the data

| <u>Noun/Pronoun</u> | <u>Example</u>                  |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| <u>D+H</u>          | <u>Deitic + Head</u>            |
| <u>N+H</u>          | <u>Numerative +Head</u>         |
| <u>E+H</u>          | <u>Epithet + Head</u>           |
| <u>C+H</u>          | <u>Classifier + Head</u>        |
| <u>D+N+H</u>        | <u>Deitic+ Numerative+ Head</u> |
| <u>D+E+H</u>        | <u>Deitic+ Epithet+ Head</u>    |
| <u>D+C+H</u>        | <u>Deitic+ Classifier+ Head</u> |

Post modifier: pp+ng (*the old car of the general*)

Post modifier: finite relative clause (*the man who was lost*)

(adapted version from Foley 2011)

Table 5 Summary of **nominal groups** found in the writing of **information reports** in percentage

| No of occurrence in percentage | No of occurrence in percentage |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Topic 1                        | Topic 2                        |
| 60.0                           | 40.0                           |
| 40.0                           | 46.7                           |

A majority of the students seem to use nominal groups with one-element or two-element premodifiers and head with post-modifiers. This study found that one-element premodifiers especially (N+H) appears in the students' writing most frequently. On the other hand, the lowest one-element premodifiers is the category of (C+H). For two-element premodifiers, the study indicated that the category of (D+E+H) is used

quite frequently and (D+N+H) rarely. The analysis also found the students employed the category of prepositional phrase (pp +ng), for examples, *without plane ticket, in E-book, in front of the check in zone, of this room* etc. and the relative clause, such as, *who want to watch the national show...*, *who wait for check-in*. For the second writing of information reports, the research found the categories of the post modification through prepositional phrases or relative clause are major elements in the developing descriptive writing. In premodifiers, the category of (D+H) is used very often as well as (C+H), for example, *cell rooms, high-quality jewelry, checking machines*, (D+E+H), for example, *the famous musician, a favorite room, a good Wi-Fi, a good day, the most beautiful flower, 5 stars hotel*.

Table 6 Summary of **nominal groups** found in the writing of **recount** in percentage

| No of occurrence in percentage | No of occurrence in percentage |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Topic I                        | Topic 2                        |
| 40.0                           | 6.7                            |
| 46.7                           | 73.3                           |

Referring to Table 6, this research found that many students can use nominal groups with one- element, two-element premodifiers and noun with postmodifiers. For premodifiers, the category of (D+N) and (C+H) are used with (D+E+H) as the most frequent. In terms of noun with post modifiers, there are two categories, (pp+ng) and (relative clause), used by the students. For the second writing, the category of (D+H) and (C+H), for example, *wildlife animals, animal mind, forest areas, human population* seemed to be structures that the students were quite familiar with. Premodifier (D+E+H) category was found but little used. In terms of post (pp + ng) and (relative clause), both again were the most popular categories found in the students' writing.

The analysis also reflects that the students seem to have an understanding using modifiers, such as deitic (*the, a, this, that, these, those*), numerative (*ordinal number, cardinal number and some of, a lot of*), epithet (descriptive adjective, *blue white green, big*), Classifier (adjectives such as *Thai, Chinese, government*) and postmodifiers.

Consequently, to develop language ability, the teacher needs to support the students in focusing on expanding the head noun with three-element (D+E+H) and four-element (D+N+E+H) pre-modifiers in context rather than using adjectives in an isolated clause or fill-in-the blank exercises.

### *Information Reports*

Other findings from the analysis indicate that these Thai students can use the basic language features of information reports. Students seem to be able to use the timeless present, material processes, relational processes, extended nominal groups and adverb of place including adverb of duration and manner.

### *Recount*

The students can use language features of recount to retell their past experience. The students utilized the simple past tense in their major clause structures. Material processes tended to dominate with linking words of time to organize the events in time sequence.

### *The Major Genre writing problems*

Provide background information

Table 7 Summary of **text organization** found in the writing of **recount** in percentage

| Aspects of Background Information                        | No of occurrence in percentage |                           |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
|  | First Writing of Recount       | Second Writing of Recount |
| Provide all necessary background information             | 20.0                           | 20.0                      |
| Provide some necessary background                        | 53.3                           | 33.3                      |
| Provide irrelevant information as background information | 13.3                           | 0.0                       |
| Not provide background information                       | 13.3                           | 46.7                      |

According to Table 7, it can be seen that many Thai students have a general overview of the pattern of contextualizing that they write. But do not seem to have a real understanding in terms of text organization in detail. It would, therefore, be useful for the teacher to focus not only on the grammatical features of the writing but also the contextual requirements to make the text communicatively effective.

## Conclusion

The findings from this small scale study and therefore cannot be generalized indicate that these Thai students seem to be able to use English to create effect communication at a basic level. For Information reports, most students seem to be able to provide additional information when required by using pre and post modifiers, using nominal groups as in English both pre and post modification of the Head word is possible. It would be expected that some issues would arise in areas such as the order of the pre-modifier (*door green* rather than *green door*). The students also showed that they could use the appropriate verb processes such as 'action' verbs (material processes) often quite dominant in genres such as the one's under review in this study (information report and recount). The indications from these limited findings are that this group of Thai students is likely to have some degree of syntactic awareness which would enable them to learn more advanced genres that are required in higher education. However, many students seem to have problems in term of text organization and their providing background information. This would involve using the organizing features of adverbials of for example manner and duration (*when, how*) together with more complex premodifiers such as D+N+E+H (*the first important thing*) or N+E+C+H (*plenty of great life experience*). As indicated, the noun group is really the part of the grammar within the clause structure that is essential for elaboration or description and this has to be taught directly. To be effective writers in academic disciplines later in their careers students would need mastery of the generic structure of the disciplines they are studying. This is important for all users of English but even more so for Thai EFL students in order to develop effective communication skills in real life situations.

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