

AN INVESTIGATION OF TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' SHARED KNOWLEDGE OF METALINGUISTIC TERMINOLOGY IN A WRITING COURSE

การศึกษาความรู้ร่วมเกี่ยวกับคำศัพท์เฉพาะทางด้านภาษาศาสตร์ของอาจารย์และนักศึกษา¹
ในรายวิชาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ

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Abstract

This study compared teachers' expectations and students' awareness of metalinguistic terms in a writing course. Fifty terms which existed frequently in the investigated course were collected and used in a questionnaire. The data analysis involved three main areas: a comparison of teacher expectation about student knowledge, student awareness of the terms, and the application of the terms in the classrooms. The findings showed that the teachers used the metalinguistic terms frequently in their classrooms. Student responses showed the awareness of some basic terms. However, there were many other complicated terms which were not explained by students or lacked examples. The results implied that students had insufficient knowledge of the metalinguistic terms used in the writing course and that metalanguage should be used more frequently in the classroom. Based on the findings, this paper discusses some implications for the teaching of writing to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners as well as some implications for future research.

Keywords: Metalanguage, Metalinguistic terminology, English Writing for Daily Life Course

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาครั้งนี้เปรียบเทียบความคาดหวังของผู้สอนกับการรับรู้ของนักศึกษาเกี่ยวกับคำศัพท์เฉพาะทางด้านภาษาศาสตร์ในรายวิชาการเขียน ผู้วิจัยได้รวบรวมคำศัพท์ภาษาศาสตร์ที่พบบ่อยในเอกสารประกอบการเรียนการสอนรายวิชาที่ศึกษาและบรรจุในแบบสอบถามจำนวน 50 คำ การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากแบบสอบถามแบ่งออกเป็น 3 ด้านหลัก คือ การเปรียบเทียบความคาดหวังของผู้สอนเกี่ยวกับความรู้ของผู้เรียนต่อคำศัพท์ ความรู้ที่แท้จริงของผู้เรียน และการใช้คำศัพท์เหล่านั้นในชั้นเรียน ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ผู้สอนมีการใช้คำศัพท์เฉพาะทางด้านภาษาศาสตร์บ่อยครั้ง ในชั้นเรียน ข้อมูลจากการวิเคราะห์แบบสอบถามของผู้เรียนพบว่า นักศึกษามีความรู้ความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับคำศัพท์บางส่วน อย่างไรก็ตามยังมีคำศัพท์อีกบางส่วนซึ่งมีโครงสร้างที่ซับซ้อนที่นักศึกษายังไม่ได้ให้คำอธิบายหรือแสดงตัวอย่าง ซึ่งผลจากการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่า นักศึกษายังขาดความรู้ที่เพียงพอเกี่ยวกับคำเฉพาะทางในรายวิชาการเขียน อ้างอิงจากผลการศึกษาในครั้งนี้ผู้วิจัยได้เสนอแนะแนวทางการจัดการเรียนการสอนรายวิชาการเขียนในบริบทการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศและแนวทางการศึกษาวิจัยในครั้งต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: ความรู้ร่วมเกี่ยวกับคำศัพท์เฉพาะทางด้านภาษาศาสตร์ คำศัพท์เฉพาะทางด้านภาษาศาสตร์ วิชาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษในชีวิตประจำวัน

Introduction

Despite its importance, English has long been a problem for students at tertiary level. Particularly, writing skills are often the challenge for non-native learners (e.g. Changpueng & Wasanasomsithi, 2009; Katip, 2009; Kulprasit & Chiramanee, 2013; Nuangpolmak, 2012; Piriayasilpa, 2012). In a writing classroom, different language forms are presented according to different goals (Caudery, 1995; Piriayasilpa, 2016). The classroom communication involves the use of language to explain or talk about those forms. As English writing has different forms, many different linguistic terms and vocabulary which are not common in general writing are used and may not be familiar to students. To familiarise students with the terms required in writing certain types of text (metalinguistic terminologies—Roshan & Elhami, 2016), the understanding of the language used in classroom communication

to talk about those terms (metalanguage) is imperative. This study investigated the application of the terms necessary in a writing course, and compared teacher expectations about student awareness of those terms with students' actual knowledge.

Literature review

Metalanguage is defined as the use of language terminology to describe the learnt language (Ellis, 2004). It includes any language used to talk about language, which may refer to basic grammar expressions like “noun”, “verb”, “subject” or other specialised terminology such as “phoneme” or “phonotactics” (Ellis, 2016: 144). The use of these forms and terminology requires shared understanding of both teachers and students.

While metalanguage includes the concrete terms used to describe language, metalinguistic

knowledge is explicit knowledge about language (DeKeyser, 2009). It involves the learners' ability to correct, describe, and explain about the language, reflecting the learner awareness of the linguistic terms (Alipour, 2014: 2,640).

Scholars (e.g. Ellis, 2016; Hu, 2011; Roshan & Elhami, 2016; Schleppegrell, 2013; Tokunaka, 2014) argue that language which describes the target of instruction is tacitly understood to be necessary. By using such language frequently, metalinguistic knowledge helps to raise student awareness, familiarise them with the terms, and support language learning. Moreover, metalanguage can be used in the classroom for communicative purposes as well as creating the meaning-focus atmosphere (Schleppegrell, 2013). Metalinguistic technology involves the use of language form for an explanation and communication of lesson content between teachers and students, allowing the use of linguistic vocabulary that is familiar and understood by both to be used as metalanguage, and creating mutual understanding of the language learnt as well as the course goals, teacher expectations, or criteria for assessment (CF. Salteh & Sadeghi, 2015).

Especially for students who do not major in English, their opportunities of English writing is insufficient (Sermsook, Liamnimitr & Pochakorn, 2017: 107), resulting in students not fathoming the meaning of the vocabulary used in the writing course, which may affect their learning. The knowledge of metalinguistic terms therefore has the potential to help students improve their writing skills (Nagy & Anderson, 1995; Zipke, 2007).

Previous studies on the use of metalinguistic

knowledge in writing classrooms focused mainly on participants who had levels of proficiency between intermediate and advanced. The study of Berry (2014), for instance, examined awareness in the metalinguistics of second-language learners in the context of Hong Kong. In Iran, Roshan & Elhami (2016) examined the effect of teacher metalanguage on learners' ability to comprehend the grammatical points, and the study by Alipour (2014) aimed at providing further insight into the relationship between metalinguistics and linguistic knowledge.

Tokunaka (2014) explored the metalinguistic knowledge of low to intermediate level of EFL learners in Japan. The study found correlations between students' proficiency test scores and their metalinguistic knowledge, and that students had limited knowledge of some linguistic terms.

Even though the study of Tokunaka (2014) focused on EFL beginning learners, further study is still needed and there has not been any study conducted in the context of Thailand. To satisfy the gap of research in this area, this study aimed to compare the expectations of teachers about their students' understanding of metalinguistic terms and students' recognition. The research aimed to answer three research questions below:

1. Is there any consistency between teachers' expectation of metalinguistic terms and student awareness?
2. How much do students know and understand about the metalinguistic terms used in the English Writing for Daily Life Course?
3. How often do teachers use such terms in their classes?

Methodology

The course investigated in this study was the English Writing for Daily Life Course, an elective

course for students studying in three faculties: Technical Education, Engineering, and Business Management and Information Technology.

Table 1 Student participants' information

Classes	Business			Engineering		
		No	%		No	%
Total number of students: 118	Accounting class A	29	24.58	Industrial engineering	42	35.60
	Accounting class B	26	22.03	Mechatronics	21	17.79
	Total	55	46.61	Total	63	53.39
Level of English proficiency: Low intermediate	Accounting class A A	4	3.38	Industrial engineering A	2	1.69
	B	14	11.86	B	12	10.16
	C	10	8.47	C	28	23.72
	D	1	0.84	D	-	-
	Accounting class B A	8	6.77	Mechatronics A	2	1.69
	B	10	8.47	B	6	5.08
	C	-	-	C	8	6.77
	D	-	-	D	5	4.23
Year of study	3 rd year			2 nd year		
Age range	20-23			20-23		
Other courses taken prior to the English Writing for Daily Life Course	English Study Skills and Development			English Study Skills and Development		

The study involved two participant groups: teachers and students. The four teachers who were teaching the English Writing for Daily Life Course to students from the two faculties

agreed to take part in this study, and student participants included four classes of Business and Engineering students (46.61% and 53.39%, respectively). These student participants had

undertaken the English Study Skills and Development Course prior to the investigated course. Their age range was between 20 and 23 years old. The participants' proficiency level ranged from beginner to low intermediate (see Table 1).

The investigated course

The English Writing for Daily Life Course aims to train and raise student knowledge of writing processes, paragraph writing, vocabulary usage, and letter and short messages writing. The contents of the course included: paragraph elements, paragraph writing process, paragraph organisation, letter writing, form filling, and short message writing.

As the English Writing for Daily Life Course is compulsory for students whose major is not English, the teachers stated that the classroom communication involved the use of first (L1) and second language (L2). That is, the linguistic terms which existed in the textbooks were introduced to students explicitly together with the explanation of meaning in L1. For some complicated terms, the teachers continued the explanation using the L1 metalanguage.

Research instruments

The research instruments used in this study included the course textbook and course's midterm and final examinations, questionnaires and semi-structured interview forms.

To construct a questionnaire, the textbook and course examinations were analysed. Fifty linguistic terms which appeared frequently in these sources were selected to use in teacher

and student questionnaires. The teacher questionnaire focused on their expectations on student knowledge of the terms and their use of those terms in the classrooms. The student questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one required students to fill in their personal details, namely: name, class, telephone number (for later contacts), and ages. Section two asked if students knew the terms provided; and for those who indicated their awareness of the terms, the explanations of the use of those terms or examples were required.

Data analysis

The responses from both teachers and students were analysed quantitatively in percentages, interpreted and compared between teacher perceptions and student responses. For some interesting findings, the participants were interviewed selectively. The answers to the interview questions were used to support the quantitative findings from the questionnaires.

Results

The discussion of research findings will be made based on the three research questions set above.

Is there any consistency between teachers' expectation of metalinguistic terms and student awareness?

In order to answer research question 1, the data were analysed in two different areas: the match and mismatch between teacher expectation of student knowledge of the linguistic terms and students' answers to the question:

“Do you know these words?” in a questionnaire. The initial analysis focused only on student responses to the question to indicate their awareness by ticking the answer “yes”.

The findings showed that most of the teachers shared mutual expectation on student awareness of the terms while responses from students varied. The discussion will be made, based on the number of teachers who agreed for student expectations.

The first group included the thirty-five out of fifty terms (70%) which were expected by most or all of the teachers (70.00%-100%) for student recognition. Out of these thirty-five terms, twenty-six terms (74.28%) were agreed by all of the teachers for student awareness (bolded-see Table 2).

Table 2 Words expected by most of the teachers for student awareness

Noun, pronoun, adjective, verb, adverb, adverbial phrase, conjunction, fragment, preposition, capitalisation, time order, article, singular form, plural form, present simple, present continuous, present perfect, present perfect continuous, past simple, past continuous, past perfect, future simple, compound sentence, complex sentence, imperative sentence, dependent clause, independent clause, topic sentence, supporting sentence, concluding sentence, concluding signals, comma, exclamation mark, question mark, punctuation

Table 2 shows that words which were expected by most of the teachers for student awareness included the vocabulary items for writing at sentence level, terms useful for writing at paragraph level, and terms related to tense. These findings reflect the consistency between teacher expectation and the course descriptions, emphasising student knowledge of basic terms of English writing at sentence and paragraph level.

Consistently with teacher expectation, student responses to the questionnaire indicated their awareness of certain basic terms (e.g. “noun”, “pronoun”, “adjective”, “verb”, and “adverb”). Especially, a number of students agreed that they were aware of the linguistic terms of writing at paragraph level. However, there were some simple terms which were indicated by only few students as being known, even though they are very basic terms for English writing (e.g. “capitalisation” and “article”). In addition, only few students showed their awareness of the terms related to grammar and tense.

The second group included words which were expected by half of the teachers for student knowledge. These included the ten terms (20%) related to grammar and tenses, namely: “gerund”, “interjection”, “prefix”, “suffix”, “past perfect continuous”, “future continuous”, “future perfect”, “future perfect continuous”, “active form”, and “predicate”. These terms were more complicated than those terms in the first group, and consistently with

teacher expectation; the responses from students also showed that only few of them were aware of these terms. When analysing further into the responses, it was found that more engineering students had indicated their awareness of the terms than those in business groups.

Finally, there were five terms which were expected by only one teacher or none of them for student awareness, namely: “run on”, “nominalisation”, “affix”, “passive form”, and “transition”. The five terms are complicated linguistic terms which are necessary for academic writing and require higher skills and knowledge of the language. The low expectation from teachers is consistent with the responses made by students in that only few had indicated their awareness of the first four terms, yet more than half of the students had indicated their awareness of the term “transition” (52.54%).

How much do students know and understand about the metalinguistic terms used in the English Writing for Daily Life Course?

After selecting ‘yes’ to indicate their awareness of the terms, students were asked to explain about the terms or give examples. Further analyses were made by examining if the examples and explanations given were correct.

Consistent findings were found in the responses from both groups of students that even though many students had indicated that they knew some terms as expected by the teachers; out of the fifty terms, there were only four terms that more than half of the students had made correct explanations. These

terms included “noun”, “verb”, “comma”, and “question mark”.

While business students demonstrated their understanding by illustrating some terms correctly, engineering students did not explain nor provided examples of most of the terms that they had ticked “yes” to show awareness (e.g. “compound sentence”, “complex sentence”, “dependent sentence”, “independent sentence”, and “concluding signal”).

Further analyses of student responses to other terms which were expected for their awareness by fewer teachers were made, and it was found that most students could not provide explanations or examples of the terms.

How often do teachers use such terms in their classes?

One section in the teacher questionnaire asked if the listed linguistic terms were used in classroom communications. It was found that the teachers used most of the terms frequently. Further explanations were made by the teachers that those terms were introduced explicitly in the classroom through classroom instructions and communications. However, eight terms, namely: “interjection”, “past perfect continuous”, “future continuous”, “future perfect”, “run on”, “transition”, “affix”, “passive form” were used in the classroom by only one of the teacher participants, and none of the teachers had used the term “nominalisation”.

When analysing student responses, it was found that some students from both groups ticked ‘yes’ to reflect their awareness of these terms, however; most of the students did not

provide any examples or explanations, and when the examples or explanations were given; most of them were incorrect. For instance, the term “transition” was indicated by more than half of the students (52.54%) as being known, but there was only one student (0.84%) who could make a correct explanation of the term. The rest either gave wrong explanation (2.54%) or did not provide any examples (49.15%).

Discussion

Some implications can be drawn from the findings and the discussion will be made below. **Business students showed better understanding of metalanguage in the investigated course**

The findings showed that even though more engineering students had indicated their awareness of the terms, business students had made more correct explanations to show their understanding. When examining student backgrounds, business students showed higher level of proficiency by having more students who attained grades “A” and “B”. The finding implies that these higher level learners had more understanding of the linguistic terms used in the course. The finding is consistent to previous study (e.g. Tokunaka, 2014) which found that higher level learners tend to understand and use more metalanguage than lower level groups. It is important to note here as well that even though the findings from this present study confirm the claim from previous study, it was conducted as a case study investigating specific groups of learners. Further study including a

variety of learner groups is therefore needed to confirm the finding in this area.

Students had limited knowledge in basic metalinguistic terms used in the writing course

The findings showed that there were other basic linguistic terms which students did not show their awareness by answering ‘no’ or ticking ‘yes’ but not providing examples of the terms.

Upon the semi-structured interviews, many students who had ticked ‘yes’ without explanations or examples explained that they heard the teacher used the terms sometime in the classroom, but did not really know the meaning nor had sufficient understanding of the terms. Interestingly, there were a few basic terms of English (e.g. “capitalisation”, “article”, “singular”, and “plural form”) which many students had stated that they did not know the meaning or had shown their recognition without giving examples. For instance, many students got confused between the meanings of a “capital city” of a country, and the term “capitalisation”. The findings reflect students’ limited knowledge of metalanguage used in the classroom, as well as the limited knowledge of basic English terms of Thai students. The findings are consistent with the results from other previous studies conducted in a Thai educational context, for example, Foley (2005) or Sermsook, Liamnimitr & Pochakorn (2017). Foley (2005) explained that students’ writing ability is considered low in Thailand, and similarly with this study, Sermsook, Liamnimitr & Pochakorn (2017) argued that the

mistakes which were most frequently found in Thai students' writing included 'punctuation', 'articles', 'subject-verb agreement', 'spelling', 'capitalisation', and 'fragment'. Similarly, Tokunaka (2014) investigated metalinguistic knowledge of EFL learners, and found that students had very limited knowledge of the linguistic terms. Even very simple metalanguage, such as 'noun', 'adverb' and 'article', was not recognised by many of the participants.

Students' limited knowledge of linguistic terms used in the writing course may affect their learning and understanding of the instruction; however, teachers should not avoid using metalanguage in the classroom, but rather find ways to scaffold it appropriately (Ellis, 2016: 149). Different strategies should be applied to help raise students' awareness of the terms. With these low level learners, the use of L1 might be used in the beginning stage to help in grammar explanation, and reduced later on while increasing the use of the target metalanguage. In addition, teachers have to consider the types of tasks or activities employed in the classroom that will best suit the use of each metalanguage in each lesson to support students' understanding of the terms and contents. Previous studies of Kulprasit & Chiramanee (2013) used journal writing and peer feedback activity to help students improve their writing ability, and Piriayasilpa and colleagues set up a grammar clinic to support students with basic knowledge of language and grammar. Moreover, Nuangpolnak (2012) designed multi-level tasks to help students with different levels in a writing class. These

previous studies have demonstrated positive findings in terms of students' language learning development, in particular writing skill, thus could be taken as a model for organising activities to increase more knowledge and understanding of terms and the learnt language.

The frequency of metalanguage used has the influence on student awareness

The results from the questionnaire analysis showed that there were many basic terms for writing in English which all of the teachers expected students to know, but most of the students did not show their awareness of those terms. Meanwhile, the term "transition" was agreed by most of the teachers that students would not have the recognition, yet more than half of the students had indicated their awareness of the terms. To explain this, further investigation has been made in the contents of the English Writing for Daily Life Course. It was found that those basic terms as well as the complicated grammatical terms that students did not show awareness appeared only in the introductory part of the textbook where the basic knowledge of English was fore-grounded. None of these terms existed in the main contents of the course. The term "transition", however; appeared frequently (36 times) in the main contents of the book, especially in unit 1-3 (paragraph elements, paragraph writing process, paragraph organisations). This means that students were exposed to the use of this term through explanations and exercises, thereby becoming familiar with and had indicated their awareness of it. The findings reflect that the frequent

exposure to the linguistic terms could help students better understand and raise their awareness, implying that the more frequent use of metalanguage is needed in classroom instructions and learning resources.

Need of metalinguistic terms in the classroom

It was found in this study that teachers had set high expectations for student awareness of the linguistic terms used in the course while students' responses showed that they had the shared knowledge of only a few words. From the interview with the teachers, those linguistic terms were used in classroom communication together with the explanation in Thai, and frequently the classroom communication was conducted using L1. This reflects the insufficient use of metalanguage in the classroom communication, which may result in students not recognising the terms.

As far as the instruction in an EFL classroom is concerned, Kulprasit & Chiramanee (2013: 92) explain that in Thailand, as well as other countries in Asia, writing instruction is offered under the traditional approach. Teaching writing through this approach involves a mixture of grammar translation method, audio-lingual method, teacher-centred as well as product oriented approach. Through such approach the mother tongue would be the dominant language in the classroom, and students may lack sufficient opportunity to take part in class communication and negotiation through metalanguage, resulting in the learning and teaching process being conducted through monolingual method. While the findings imply a monolingual learning

atmosphere, a number of scholars have argued for the creation of bilingualism in the classroom in that the communication of language about language could familiarise students with the terms and create mutual understanding or shared knowledge between teachers and students, leading to successful learning. In this context of investigation, teacher expectations were mainly contrast to students' responses. This reflects the overestimation of students' skills and knowledge which may result in teachers not being aware of student problems, and implying the need to use metalanguage more often in the writing classroom. With this low intermediate level group, the second language (L2) metalanguage could be used gradually after students become familiar with the terms (Ellis, 2016).

PANYAPIWAT Conclusion

This study has been conducted as a case study of a writing course in a university in Thailand. The study has provided some useful implications in terms of language learning; however; it has some limitations which can be pointed out in three areas.

To begin, the small number of participants could limit the generalisability of the findings. While the same course is offered to different groups of students, the findings from this case study could be limited to only the investigated groups. Future studies which include more participants are needed to confirm the findings from the present study. Another limitation of this study is concerned with the method of

how students' awareness of the metalinguistic terms were investigated. This study identified student knowledge of the terms by asking students to explain or provide examples. By doing so, their recognition of the terms could be assessed, but according to Roehr (2007), metalinguistic knowledge involves learners' ability to correct, describe, and explain second language (L2). This means that the investigation of learner awareness of metalinguistic terms should involve more than one method. Future study could employ other mediums of assess-

ment such as cloze test (for example, in the study of Alipour, 2014) or error analysis to compare the findings with this present study or the study of Alipour.

Finally, the findings gained to answer research question 3 do not seem to be sufficient to explain 'how often' the terms were used as metalanguage in classroom communications because the data were gained based on self-report. Other modes of evidence, for example classroom observations, to explain the frequency of teachers' use of these terms are needed.

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