

An Investigation into Aspects of Improvement of Basic Paragraph Writing Skills

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This paper describes a classroom-based study designed to investigate the aspects of improvement in students' English language writing abilities from five Paragraph Writing Skill Labs, organized in 2015. The labs were specially designed to train students to produce a well-organized paragraph based on the framework of Oshima and Hogue (1988, 1991), i.e. introduction by the topic sentence, supporting details and the conclusion as well as other basics of English writing such as accuracy and coherence. The two research questions were: 1) How did the students in the Paragraph Writing Skill Labs write their paragraphs (based on Oshima and Hogue's Framework)?; and 2) In what areas of composing did students show signs of writing improvement? The study revealed that the aspects that could be improved more easily than the grammar aspect (Rank 7) were those of paragraph structure (topic sentence, body and conclusion), which alternately ranked 1, 2 and 3 in the sample groups of participants out of the seven aspects measured by the rubric used. Based on the results, teachers of writing are therefore recommended to spend a significant portion of class time training students in paragraph organization, while encouraging students to review and revise their own grammatical errors.

Keywords: *writing skills, paragraph writing, writing problems*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

To produce a piece of decent written work in English, students should integrate all essential abilities such as developing appropriate paragraph structure as required in the target language, designing a smooth flow of thoughts (readability), maximizing accuracy, and conveying acceptable content, all of which depends very much on one's vocabulary power. However, it is not always easy for students to master paragraph writing as they are dealing with a totally different language from their mother tongue. A large number of errors occur as a result.

The following written examples illustrate the kinds of errors Thai students often make in their writing. These errors include singular-plural, verb tenses, adjectives-adverbs, articles and choice of words.

Example 1: An Event that I Always Remember

I have many an events that good and bad I always remember. My good event that I remember have two event. First, I got prize of good student studing number one of years. Second, I got prize of competition cycling roadbike number one in the southern part. My. This is my event that I always remember.

Example 2: The Season I Like

I love winter very much. I have five main reasons for it. First, the colding of winter is make me to calm-hearted. Second, winter is not make to sad like the rainy season. Third, colding does not make me too easy angry like the summer. Fourth, winter is make me to feel comfortable on sleeping. Finally, winter is make me to can thinks many idea. Winter is season I love.

Often, teachers of writing will find such pieces of writing a nightmare to deal with and are not sure where to begin their help for students to improve their written work. What is puzzling is why these errors still occur despite the students' 10-plus years of learning English.

Clearly, the pieces of writing above have a large number of errors which some teachers believe are a result of the interference of the Thai language--our mother tongue--that influences us to write in the ways that are characteristic of the Thai language. For example, many sentences in the Thai language do not need a subject, and it is not always necessary to arrange sentences in the subject-verb-object order. In addition, it is known that the subject-verb agreement or verb tenses are not required in the Thai language by the aspect of inflection. From my experience, if asked about how they wrote, many students would admit that they literally translated from Thai to English. Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) identified many Thai EFL students' writing errors in different text types and found that the majority could be attributed to the interference of the first language.

The two pieces of Thai students' writing used as examples reflect Yunping (2002)'s analysis of students' errors in writing which show the use of inappropriate grammatical structures as well as poor vocabulary. Al-Buainuain (1988b and 2007) stated that these mistakes were common among EFL and ESL students. His Iranian students also produced sentence-level errors involving verbs, relative clauses, articles, fragments, noun modifiers and prepositions. In a similar vein, Elraggas (2014) stated that Libyan graduate students in the U.S.A. found grammar the most difficult issue in trying to write effective paragraphs and essays. In summary, student errors seem to be unavoidable, and this aspect makes teachers of writing feel unsuccessful in their teaching. Talking about the role of the teacher, Casanave (2007, p.7) believes that it is the teacher's full responsibility to help students learn better. However, Willis (2003, p. 7) cautions that eliminating errors in students' writing is not the teacher's only job.

It can perhaps be concluded that most teachers are unhappy with how their students write a simple paragraph, and there are no clear directions as to how students can best improve their writing and which aspects should be first attended to. This study thus aimed to investigate what writing aspects would be the easiest for students to deal with at the basic paragraph writing level.

Objectives of the study

This study originated from the concern of the researcher to find out ways to help students improve their own writing. Therefore, it is worthwhile to find out how much and in what areas students have learned after the teacher’s input about basic paragraph writing techniques. The research questions for this study are:

1. How did students in the Paragraph Writing Skill Labs write their paragraphs (based on Oshima and Hogue’s Framework)?
2. In what areas of writing did students show signs of improvement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review firstly discusses a paragraph and what makes a good paragraph, and the areas of difficulty in writing.

A paragraph and what makes a good paragraph

According to Oshima and Hogue (1991), a paragraph is “a basic unit of organization in writing in which a group of related sentences develops one main idea (p. 16)” and it “has three major structural parts: a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence” (p. 17). A good paragraph consists of good content, good organization and readability, together with grammatical accuracy, as illustrated in the diagram below.

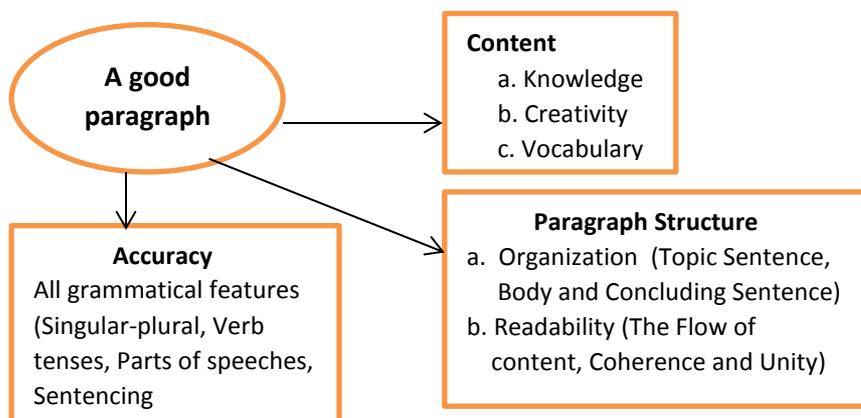


Figure 1 Advanced skills required in producing a good paragraph

The areas of difficulty in writing

The following table shows what experts in the field/ teachers of English think writing is, and the major abilities that students must have:

Table 2
Definitions and essential aspects of writing

Harris, 1997, p.52	Writing is a <i>powerful multipurpose tool</i> that helps us discover and explore more fully <i>what we are thinking</i> so that we learn as well as <i>express our feelings and thoughts</i> .
Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000, p.161	Writing requires <i>careful planning and revising skills</i> .
Wiriyaichitra, 2002, p.1	Writing must show <i>clear content and organization, effective use of grammar, correct sentence structures, correct grammar and mechanics and appropriate vocabulary</i> .
Al-Buainain, 2006, p.1	Writing is a <i>productive skill</i> , one of the most difficult and frustrating subjects to teach in an ESL/EFL programme.
Padgate, 2008, p.8	Writing requires a <i>high level of language proficiency</i> .
Adas and Bakir, 2013, p.254	Most students in the Arab world cannot communicate their ideas effectively—they do not have <i>good vocabulary power and creativity in writing</i> .

To conclude from the table above, writing requires a combination of many skills. To write well, good content is as necessary as accuracy.

Writing in a foreign language is difficult for most students, as they have to deal with a new alphabet as well as attach meaning to strings of words in another language. Most resort to translation from the mother tongue to the target language. Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2014, pp.200-201) employed think-aloud protocols to identify the difficulties faced by Thai EFL English major students when writing argumentative essays. Interestingly, vocabulary (70%), grammar structure (66.7%) and providing solid evidence (53.3%) emerged as the top three difficulties for students. When Ka-kan-dee and Kaur (2014, p.202) conducted interviews to confirm the results after the think-aloud protocols, students confirmed that vocabulary was their biggest problem, followed by providing solid evidence and grammar structure. When the participants were asked what type of help they needed most from the teacher, providing a model in writing, opportunity for practice and teaching academic vocabulary and examples for usage topped their lists.

The vocabulary problem stems from infrequent use of the language and not enough exposure to reading and writing in a different style from the mother tongue. Students lack the adequate stock of English vocabulary and creativity in

writing (Adas and Bakir, 2013; Al-Khasawneh, 2010). Besides, “they do not write very often and most of what they write is classroom-bound” (Adas and Bakir, 2013, p.254).

As for grammar, surprisingly, based on my personal observations, when students have been taught how to organize their thoughts by brainstorming, they can quickly understand what is necessary when preparing to write a paragraph, but their grammar does not show signs of improvement. They tend to forget the right forms quickly, to the extent that they are blind to what is right and what is wrong. Their English use is not yet automatic, so the same mistakes keep coming back. Look at the following examples of common grammatical mistakes students usually make:

1. *Songkla can travel all a day.* (Direct translation from Thai)
→ We can travel to Songkla in one day.
2. *Saw most star* in the sky is a beautiful sight. (Subject form and number--singular/plural)
→ Seeing most stars in the sky is a beautiful sight.
3. To top it off, *educate students others.* (Problem with meaning due to wrong arrangement of words)
→ To top it off, we can educate other students in this way.
4. To me, *sightsee place* is fun. (Proper expression)
→ To me, sightseeing is fun.

Rass (2015, p.55) found from her study that “first-year students faced difficulties in writing a general statement that includes a topic and a comment (direction of the paragraph) as it is required in English. Instead, they transferred the style of Arabic, which is characterized by being indirect, very personal and emotional most of the time. It is not easy for them to write a concluding sentence either.”

Thus, in my opinion, as a teacher of English, one must be selective about what points to highlight with limited class time. In other words, how to make students learn to write quickly, with understanding, should be our main goal. Experience has convinced me that to perfect writing, students must spend lots of time working outside of class, as there are many aspects of writing to take care of on their own. For example, they have to read extensively and learn the writing styles from the texts they have read. Phuong (2011) shared a similar idea, saying “Students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning and became aware of their own strategies.”

The framework of basic paragraph writing

Four major points were considered in designing the framework of basic paragraph writing: how to write a good paragraph (Oshima and Hogue, 1988, 1991), the conflict between fluency and accuracy (Ferris and Hedgecock, 2011),

writing as a product or a process (Ferris and Hedgecock, 2011), and the significance of error correction and feedback (Hyland and Hyland, 2006).

a. Elements of a paragraph

According to Oshima and Hogue (1991), a paragraph “has three major structural parts: a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence” (p.17). The researcher adopted this framework as the main focus of this lab, although there may be criticism that it is of a traditional paradigm (Ferris and Hedgecock, 2011, p.4).

b. Fluency vs. accuracy

In writing, fluency and accuracy are often in conflict (Ferris and Hedgecock, 2011). Between ‘a fluent writer who is not accurate’ and ‘an accurate writer who is not fluent and lacks creativity’, who is the better writer? For many writing teachers, however, a paragraph full of seemingly good ideas but littered with grammatical mistakes such as wrong verb tenses and sentence fragments would lead to a judgment on the marker’s part that this is a badly-written piece of work. Reflecting a similar idea, Leki (1995) notes that despite knowing what good writing is (showing creative content and expressing one’s voice alongside good grammar), writing instructors tend to focus persistently on features of writing that can be seen, counted and easily corrected such as grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. Grammar and readability were thus used as two criteria in paragraph assessment.

c. Product and process approach of writing

Teachers of writing often choose to adhere to one of two philosophies--writing is a process or writing is a product--based on their personal beliefs about writing, although many textbooks today claim that the process approach is more beneficial as creativity, the ability to express one’s voice, is a major characteristic of writing as a channel of self-expression. This study, however, is not designed to investigate whether writing is a product or a process. The researcher used both approaches where appropriate. That is why good style is used as a criterion in the rubric, while accuracy of the piece of writing is also evaluated.

d. Error correction

Nordin et al. (2010, p. 62) conclude, “Feedback has and will continue to protrude as a thorny problem to researchers and practitioners of L2 teaching because it is a question of what type, when and why for each situation.” Ferris (2006) found that if given and used appropriately, feedback on errors can help students reduce their errors in five categories--verb tenses, verb forms, lexical errors, articles and sentence structure. Lee (2003) suggests that the teachers should choose the feedback style (comprehensive or selective marking) that works best with their students, and that the teachers themselves need to be trained. In the writing labs, which were used as the study research site, the

researcher gave feedback by selecting errors that were commonly made by students and explicitly explaining how to correct them at the beginning of class. The researcher tried to raise students' awareness by pointing out how certain sentences should be worded or grammatically used. In other words, feedback was used as a teaching technique at the beginning of each lesson.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as a classroom-based research to investigate aspects of improvement in students' English language writing from five Paragraph Writing Skill Labs, organized in 2015, with a total number of 212 students (Group 1, 62; Group 2, 35; Group 3, 36; Group 4, 37; and Group 5, 42). For confidentiality, the five groups in the study were given pseudonyms, as Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter and the Rainy Season.

The setting and the Writing Skill lab

In each General Education English course at a university in the south of Thailand, five hours of time was allocated as shown in the table below:

Table 3
Number of hours of an English course

Lecture	Small group tutoring	Skill lab of students' choice
1 hour	2 hours	2 hours

The Paragraph Writing Skill Lab which was the focus of this study was one among the six skill labs offered—Role-play Skill Lab, Exam Skill Lab, Critical Reading Skill Lab, Presentation Skill Lab and Listening Skill Lab. The name “*Skill Lab*” was borrowed from PBL advocates. A “skill lab” is where medical students learn specific skills like giving an injection to a patient, and dressing a wound or doing the stitching. Since writing in English is not easy for Thai students, the Paragraph Writing Skill Lab was an attempt to give a focused type of instruction. Contrary to what some observers may think, these labs did not do away with the creativity of the students. They could simply shape their paragraphs with their preferred content. Understanding how a good paragraph is written is believed to contribute to improvement in terms of organization, unity and coherence.

The Paragraph Writing Skill Lab at a university in southern Thailand was designed to train students to produce well-organized paragraphs focusing on individual paragraph structure based on Oshima and Hogue (1988; 1999), i.e. introduction by topic sentence, body and conclusion, as well as other basics of

English writing such as language accuracy and expression. The lab gave students additional practice in writing.

Each group met once a week for six weeks, and each time they met for two hours, so there were 12 total practicing hours. The class teacher was the researcher. In one two-hour training session, there were three parts as shown in the table below:

Table 4
One training session

Time allocated	Things to do
30 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The researcher discussed learning features such as writing good topic sentences from the topics given and writing the concluding sentences as well as how to move smoothly from one idea to another. • The researcher also discussed the good and weak points found in students' selected previous assignments.
30 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students revised their previous draft.
1 hour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students practiced writing one or two paragraphs based on the topics assigned in each session. Slow students would do one, while faster ones would do two.

These practice sessions were conducted for six consecutive weeks, and at the end of Week 6 students took a written test.

Data

The data for this study was 636 writing pieces of five groups of students in the Paragraph Writing Skill Labs. The labs offered 6 sessions/weeks of training in paragraph writing. Each group of students was given one topic to write every two weeks, Week 2 (Topic 1), Week 4 (Topic 2) and Week 6 (Topic 3). In total they were given three written assignments, and each group was assigned different writing topics, because the study was not aimed at comparing the performance of the five groups on the same topic, but how each group dealt with the topics assigned. They were required to demonstrate their writing techniques and skills. The following table shows the topics assigned to each group in Week 2 (Topic 1), Week 4 (Topic 2) and Week 6 (Topic 3).

Table 5
Writing assignments of each group

Groups	No. of students	3 topics of writing for each group	No. of written work
1. Spring Group	62	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why Do I Choose to Study at This University? 2. My Most Memorable Event 	186 pieces

		3. A University Degree	
2. Summer Group	35	1. My Happiest Time 2. My Most Frightening Experience 3. The Internet	105 pieces
3. Autumn Group	36	1. The Season I Like 2. The Event that I Always Remember 3. The Best Time of the Year	108 pieces
4. Winter Group	37	1. Junk Food 2. My Happiest Time 3. Benefits of Travelling	111 pieces
5. Rainy Season Group	42	1. The Person I Love 2. The Internet 3. What I Like to Do on a Rainy Day	126 pieces
	TOTAL 212 students		TOTAL 636 pieces

The rubric for assessing students' paragraphs

The design of the rubric was based on the qualities of a good paragraph suggested by Oshima and Hogue (1988 and 1991). It was designed to check (1) the structure of the students' paragraphs, and (2) the language accuracy at three levels, namely poor (1 mark), fair (2 marks) and good (3 marks).

The first point to check is *Paragraph Structure*. A good topic sentence will show clearly what the writer is talking about and in what directions (controlling idea). The body shows reasonable details that support the topic sentence, and the concluding sentence will end the paragraph properly. For *Language*, the writer carefully designs the flow of their thoughts—how he/she expresses them, especially in an orderly, unified way. *Accuracy* indicates the level of the writing ability. *Good Style* and *Overall Quality* need to be assessed because they show clearly how well a paragraph is written. Especially, style will be outstanding if the writers can use sentence markers such as sentence sequencers, cause-effect or giving additional information. All quality aspects assessed had been taught in the labs.

The rubric shown below is used to assess the holistic quality of a piece of writing, as writing is not only a display of grammatical accuracy but also the quality of a writer's thought and the ability to organize and express his/her ideas. The researcher marked all the written work herself.

Quality Assessed	Poor (1)	Fair (2)	Good (3)
Paragraph Structure			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Topic sentence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No introduction No indication of what topic to write about 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With introduction of the topic of the paragraph Direction not clearly shown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With introduction of the topic of the paragraph Clear direction of how the idea is developed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content not about the topic No coherence of the sentences in the paragraph 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content developed based on the topic sentence Weak coherence of the sentences in the paragraph 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content developed based on the topic sentence Clear coherence of the sentences in the paragraph
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No conclusion Abrupt ending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With some conclusion but not strong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With an appropriate concluding sentence
Language			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Readability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No unity of sentences Unreadable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unclear flow of thoughts Partly readable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear flow of thoughts Readable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accuracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With lots of grammatical errors, especially errors in number, subject-verb agreement and verb tenses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With some grammatical errors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With few grammatical errors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without the use idiomatic expressions or improper vocabulary use Too-basic vocabulary No varied sentence styles (simple, compound, complex sentences) No focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With few idiomatic expressions; with some vocabulary that matches the context No varying sentence styles With some focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With some idiomatic expressions, vocabulary that matches the context With the use of varied sentence styles (simple, compound, complex sentences) Showing an acceptable controlling idea
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unacceptable paragraph Unreadable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Readable but with errors that damaged writing quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Readable with a good flow of thought
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TOTAL 			

Figure 2 The rubric used to evaluate writing quality

Data analysis

The students' pieces of writing were assessed for their writing quality using a rubric specifically designed for the purpose. Based on the scores, the pieces of writing were analyzed to identify the aspects which have shown the tendency to have improved, or vice versa.

FINDINGS

The following tables show whether or not students effectively addressed a topic, provided a coherent and well-organized discussion and used vocabulary and grammar to achieve their purposes. The collected paragraphs were marked with the rubric (Figure 2). The analysis of the data showed that they had improved in some aspects of paragraph writing, primarily paragraph structure.

The mean scores of each aspect in the assessed rubrics of Task 1, Task 2, and Task 3 are shown in the tables below.

Table 6
Findings of the Spring Group (N=62)

Quality Assessed	Paragraph Writing Task 1 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 2 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 3/ Final Task (Mean Score)	Order of the Mean Score (from highest, 1 to lowest, 7)
<i>Paragraph Structure</i>				
Topic Sentence	1.67	1.80	2.58	1
Body	1.54	1.77	2.37	3
Conclusion	1.51	1.87	2.43	2
<i>Language</i>				
Readability	1.45	1.70	2.25	6
Accuracy	1.32	1.58	1.64	7
Good Style	1.38	1.75	2.32	4
Overall Quality	1.40	1.74	2.29	5

Table 7
Findings of the Summer Group (N=35)

Quality Assessed	Paragraph Writing Task 1 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 2 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 3/ Final Task (Mean Score)	Order of the Mean Score (from highest, 1 to lowest, 7)
<i>Paragraph Structure</i>				
Topic Sentence	1.71	2.08	2.80	1
Body	1.54	1.68	2.37	2
Conclusion	1.17	1.54	2.31	3

<i>Language</i>				
Readability	1.34	1.48	1.65	6
Accuracy	1.14	1.17	1.28	7
Good Style	1.28	1.42	1.82	4
Overall Quality	1.30	1.45	1.80	5

Table 8
Findings of the Autumn Group (N=36)

Quality Assessed	Paragraph Writing Task 1 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 2 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 3/ Final Task (Mean Score)	Order of the Mean Score (from highest, 1 to lowest, 7)
<i>Paragraph Structure</i>				
Topic Sentence	2.25	2.30	2.52	1
Body	1.88	1.94	2.33	3
Conclusion	1.86	2.02	2.38	2
<i>Language</i>				
Readability	1.50	1.63	1.77	4
Accuracy	1.38	1.47	1.52	7
Good Style	1.52	1.58	1.55	6
Overall Quality	1.44	1.63	1.63	5

Table 9
Findings of the Winter Group (N=37)

Quality Assessed	Paragraph Writing Task 1(Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 2 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 3/Final Task (Mean Score)	Order of the Mean Score (from highest, 1 to lowest, 7)
<i>Paragraph Structure</i>				
Topic Sentence	2.10	2.37	2.29	1
Body	2.02	2.16	2.24	2
Conclusion	2.10	2.27	2.16	3
<i>Language</i>				
Readability	1.70	1.32	1.54	6
Accuracy	1.62	1.54	1.43	7
Good Style	1.54	2.10	1.75	5
Overall Quality	1.54	1.72	1.78	4

Table 10
Findings of the Rainy Season Group (N=42)

Quality Assessed	Paragraph Writing Task 1 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 2 (Mean Score)	Paragraph Writing Task 3/ Final Task (Mean Score)	Order of the Mean Score (from highest, 1 to lowest, 7)
<i>Paragraph Structure</i>				
Topic Sentence	1.78	1.85	2.09	1
Body	1.45	1.71	2.02	2
Conclusion	1.64	1.73	1.80	3
<i>Language</i>				
Readability	1.47	1.57	1.73	4
Accuracy	1.21	1.23	1.38	7
Good Style	1.21	1.28	1.50	5
Overall Quality	1.21	1.38	1.42	6

Based on Tables 6 through 10, which show the scores of students in three paragraph writing tasks of the five groups, it can be concluded that the aspects of writing that students could improve consisted of writing the topic sentence, organizing the details in the body of the paragraph and writing the concluding sentence. These results are confirmed by the mean scores of Paragraph Writing Task 3 and the order of the mean scores. Readability, Good Style and Overall Quality categories improved when students successfully dealt with their organization. However, it is also apparent that the category that took the bottom order was Accuracy, as shown by the mean scores. There was slight improvement at the end, but not to a level that the teacher in charge of the lab would have been satisfied with. This shows much more work involving accuracy is necessary.

DISCUSSION

This part of the paper shows the results of the study in response to the two research questions:

1. How did students in the Paragraph Writing Skill Labs write their paragraphs (based on Oshima and Hogue’s Framework)?
2. In what areas of writing did students show signs of improvement?

The study found the value of the Paragraph Writing Skill Labs in bringing about students’ writing improvement in the paragraph organization aspect. The data from this classroom-based study showed that the paragraph structure element could be improved if the teacher directly taught the students to pay special attention to the various paragraph components. In all five labs, the highest mean scores were found in the “Paragraph Structure” aspect. When students were made aware that they needed to have a topic sentence at the beginning, they tried to produce it for their paragraphs. The findings of the study showed

that the majority could use proper paragraph structure as had been taught, to the satisfaction of the teacher. The mean scores obtained and the order of the mean scores for the seven aspects assessed indicated that students found paragraph structure more writer-friendly. In a study by Xuelian and Jeong-Won (2014), a similar finding was reported. In addition, students believed that teacher's corrective feedback could help them greatly with revision in organization, vocabulary and grammar.

However, the problems that remained were still basic grammatical issues such as punctuation—students did not seem to learn that a comma could not be used to combine sentences. Or when the word 'flower' was used, should it be 'flower' or 'flowers'? Or 'Lipe is a beautiful island' or 'Lipe is an island beautiful.'? Grammatical mistakes were repeatedly made despite the frequent use of group and individual feedback techniques by the teacher. It is obvious that although students seemed to understand why they had made certain mistakes and how to avoid repeating the mistakes, they did not master these aspects. Simple mistakes such as singular-plural and verb tenses showed no signs of diminishing. Similarly, Murad and Kharil (2015, pp.475-481) found that Arab learners of English committed four types of errors in varying degrees: content and organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanism. The most frequent error type, 'language use', consists of word order, negation, copula and auxiliary omission, subject-verb agreement and prepositions. These errors are attributed to inter-lingual factors (negative transfer). Students demonstrated their mother tongue's strong interference from the way words in the sentences were ordered. Compared to Readability and Good Style, the students found writing the topic sentence, the details and the conclusion not too difficult.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results, writing teachers should not yet give up. There may be a few things to prioritize. First, it is important to show the differences between the two languages (the target language and the mother tongue). Students must be made aware of the differences. In other words, there are things they can do and things they cannot do when dealing with both languages in writing. How much corrective feedback students should get seems to vary from one group to another. With reference to this point, Salteh and Sadeghi (2015) point out that the teachers in their study preferred correction of content errors, but students' preference was correction of all errors, both major and minor. For writing errors, teachers of writing should flexibly use different techniques of correction, as drills and exercises can simply leave students bored (Phuong, 2011). Students must correct their own grammatical errors. Quite interestingly, according to Chin (2007, p. 54), a student interviewed said:

I do not want my teachers to correct my errors. Error correction frustrates me and inhibits my willingness to perform in the language.

This issue is thus worth exploring further because the study on the Paragraph Writing Skill Labs indirectly revealed that students needed to do their own error correction to improve as quite a lot of corrective feedback was given but did not match the degree of improvement. Accuracy took the bottom rank in the study in all classes. Giving feedback to students is found to be necessary. One technique that could be useful is to have a conference with each student, look at the work together and give the person detailed feedback on the grammatical mistakes. The teacher should not write the correct words for the student—let him or her do it. What is most urgent is students should be trained to see where the mistakes are, to explain why such mistakes have been made and how they should correct them.

This sounds like a very traditional method but it is necessary. Students should not imagine words or expressions they want to use without realizing that the English language has its unique structure. Learners must understand how the English language works. Therefore, the sub-systems of the English language such as word order and the meaning verb tenses bring into the language should be well-taught. The surface error correction, which is time-consuming, may not hit the nail on the head.

To conclude, it may be a good investment for writing teachers to spend class time preparing and practicing students with brainstorming for ideas, designing good content and smooth flow of ideas as well as the knowledge regarding the differences between L1 and L2 linguistic properties.

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