

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale for the Study

Writing paragraphs or essays in English is regarded as an important skill for anyone to organize the reality of the world and express their feelings and thoughts to others in an English-speaking social setting, both formally and informally. It is undeniable that we live in a global village and that English is a means of uniting, communicating and sharing ideas and information (Crystal, 1997). Writing in English is traditionally taught in schools and colleges as a means of advanced and organized expression, and to do so skillfully requires considerable talent. In Thai colleges and universities, students are required to write different genres including summaries, term papers, research abstracts and proposals. In particular, medical students need to use English in almost all of their courses. Therefore, they need to be equipped with this demanding academic talent.

In spite of these facts, several studies have suggested that Thai students have problems with writing in English (Lush, 2002). Lush found that Thai students have five major problems with writing in English: the misuse of definite and indefinite articles, singular and plural nouns, tense usage, subject-verb agreement and prepositions.

Apart from having problems with constructing linguistic structures, ESL learners also have difficulties in putting ideas together in their compositions. More often than not students feel that they need to demonstrate the depth of their knowledge when asked to write compositions (Pilus, 2002), so they place sole importance on “what to present” (the content), but overlook “how to present” (the overall organization). Therefore, it is likely that students who have this belief will always produce lengthy texts with a disorganized presentation of the content. A good example to illustrate such students’ misconception about writing is shown in Pilus (2002). Pilus maintained that her students in Malaysia believe that good writing depends on the number of words they write. She noted a common expression heard

among students upon being given writing assignments. 'If I write more, I will get good marks.' As a result, it is of no surprise that we often see irrelevant ideas and deviations from the topic in their texts.

In addition, studies conducted both in Thailand and abroad (Barber, 2002; Lush, 2002; Srichai, 2002; and Thongrin, 2002) have placed an emphasis on the word or sentence level but not on a higher level of discourse. Also, very often students are exposed to the basic techniques of writing, for example, writing topic sentences, thesis statements, paragraphs. Nevertheless, they are still unable to apply what they have learned when it comes to actual writing. Thus, there is a need to reevaluate these skills with reference to students' errors in order to teach students how to produce a good piece of writing, and how to use linguistic devices to produce coherent texts. It is important to note that if there are frequent grammatical errors or if the writing is verbose and lengthy then, readers would hardly be able to reach the writer's intended meaning or would mistakenly interpret the text.

Currently, students are taught structural accuracy and accuracy in usage. Many ESL/EFL students think that grammar is the only tool they can use in their essays (Lee, 2002b). This is congruent with what is found by Simpson (2000) that language learners tend to worry about correct usage of grammar, spelling and punctuation. However, according to Celce-Murcia (2001), the writing process necessary for being a successful writer in a second or foreign language is the ability to express ideas with reasonable coherence and accuracy. Apart from that, to be a good writer also means to have judgement skills. This includes students' ability to use correct registers which is very important at advanced level of writing. Some examples of different forms of registers are colloquialisms, legal language, standard or formal English language, business English, etc. Nevertheless, writing is often the last skill to be introduced in language teaching as recognized by Barber (2002). Hence, students often have problems with proper understanding of its cultural and social appropriateness. In other words, students often face problems when applying social and cultural knowledge in their texts (Thongrin, 2002).

Although several studies on the analysis of ESL learners' writing in terms of cohesion and coherence have been carried out, there are only a few studies which analyze the cohesion and coherence of Thai ESL students' writings. Also, researchers

have widely acknowledged that students' instructional backgrounds or prior experiences, their linguistic knowledge and their writing strategies play very important roles in L2 writing. Thongrin, (2002) stated that students from different cultural and instructional backgrounds may compose distinct rhetorical patterns as a result of their instructional experiences. Furthermore, it might be helpful if we look at the written texts produced by students from different instructional backgrounds as to see whether their writing patterns for all writers are uniquely specific to certain cultures or if they are simply universal phenomena. This idea is based on the premise that speakers with different cultural backgrounds and native languages have different world views. Moreover, learning a second or foreign language involves challenges of one's self concept, cognition, motivation, attitude, learner strategies, and stages of culture and language shock (Major, 2005). Consequently, these factors will affect the way students write.

There are studies which look at these issues based upon a West - East analysis of students' differences (e.g. Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Major, 2005). Hellsten and Prescott (2004) carried out a study in an Australian context to compare 48 students from 16 countries. Among these, there were students from China, South Korea, USA, Japan, Germany, Vietnam, Thailand, Taiwan, Sweden, Sri Lanka, Spain, Singapore, Malaysia, Kenya, Indonesia and Hong Kong. Hellsten and Prescott pointed out that Asian students' cultural traits posed certain problems to them when studying abroad. These problems included poor English language and academic literacy skills. Asian students also lack critical skills including questioning, criticizing, refuting, arguing, debating and persuading. These students avoid participating in collaborative learning (i.e. discussions), and seem to be content with rote learning. All of these factors are sociolinguistic characteristics for academic achievement in English-speaking cultures.

Major (2005) supported Hellsten and Prescott's (2004) research stating that Asian students find it more difficult to adjust to academic life in Western countries than other international students. Besides, Major characterized the Asian educational experience as teacher-dependent, passive, receptive and unquestioning. Asian students were of postulated to lack crucial positive learning traits. As Thailand and Malaysia are Asian countries, we might see some of the above elements regarding cultural experiences reflected in their written compositions. The researcher also took this into

consideration when analyzing the data collected from the participants involved in this study. For example, the researcher examined how far the students used their critical skills to argue and criticize on the topic written in a coherent way which makes the text easier for the reader to follow.

This study therefore examined data collected from students of two countries: Malaysia and Thailand. One of the important reasons for selecting these two countries was to fulfill the requirement of bilateral cooperation between the Thai- Malaysian Association and the Malaysian-Thai Association in 1998 which aim to promote cooperation between the people of the two countries in various fields such as business, education and sports (National News Bureau). The researcher hopes that the results of this study, can at least, offer some insights to the Malaysian and Thai English teachers in order to improve English education within these two countries. The other reason was that geographically, Malaysia and Thailand are adjacent to each other yet their levels of development differ considerably, in terms of technological standards, educational standards, economic stability, and peaceful co-existence of diverse cultures (L. Naomi, personal communication, June 16, 2005). Also, language is a key to communication and exchanging ideas, and English is one of the world's most common methods of communication. By exploring language, we find "cultural memes" which foster or impede language acquisition and development (L. Naomi, personal communication, June 16, 2005).

Specifically, the researcher selected medical students because it was assumed that medical students in Malaysia and in Thailand were always the best learners of English compared to other non-English major students. Besides, they also need to use English in almost all of their courses. Because of this, the researcher was interested in analyzing the data of the so called "best group of learners in Malaysian and in Thailand." Thus, this research can generate beneficial academic outcome.

There is no research study as of yet which clearly shows whether or not Malaysian and Thai students have similar perceptions about language learning and writing in particular. Although there were a few studies on cohesion and coherence of Malaysian and Thai English essays (Johnson, 1992 and Indrasuta, 1988b), these studies compared Asian writers with Western writers. For example, Johnson (1992) compared the cohesion and coherence in English essays written by Malaysian and

American students. Indrasuta (1988b), on the other hand, conducted comparative research on the cohesion and coherence in English essays written by Thai and American students. No such study has as of yet been conducted to investigate the similarities and/or differences between two Asian countries. Therefore, this study compared English essays written by students of two Asian countries. By doing this, the researcher hopes to give some insight into the cultural thought and world view which influence language learning with implications for the educational development of these two nations.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

- To find out the frequencies and types of cohesive devices used in essays written by Malaysian and Thai medical students
- To identify the similarities and differences of coherence and the frequencies and types of cohesive devices used by the medical students of these two countries
- To investigate whether there is a relationship between the number and types of cohesive devices used in these compositions and the overall textual coherence

1.3 Research Questions

With the assumption that different educational, cultural and instructional backgrounds might produce different patterns in English compositions, the researcher tried to investigate this assumption by examining the compositions of non-native English speakers of two different educational, cultural and instructional backgrounds. The study, therefore, includes data from students of two countries: Thailand and Malaysia. This study focuses on the following research questions:

1. Between Malaysian and Thai learners, which group uses more cohesive devices in their essays?
2. What types of cohesive devices are most prominent in essays written by Malaysian and Thai students?

3. What are the similarities and differences of frequencies and types of cohesion and coherence in essays written by Malaysian and Thai students?
4. Is there a relationship between the number of cohesive devices used and the text coherence in the compositions written by Malaysian and Thai medical students?

1.4 Expected Results

It is expected that the results of this study will indicate cohesion and coherence patterns in written texts as well as similarities and differences found in texts written by Thai and Malaysian medical students. Also, the results obtained from this study will open the door to inspire Malaysian and Thai English teachers to reevaluate the way students are taught writing especially the use of connective elements in compositions, and thereby raise students' awareness about how to produce a good piece of writing. In addition, this research also acts as a source to promote and develop useful new methodologies in the teaching of writing.