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Teaching Strategies Used by Thai EFL Lecturers to Teach Argumentative Writing

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Abstract

Knowledge about argumentative teaching strategies is not adequately descriptive to be effective in instructing EFL students to be proficient in writing. There is a critical need to investigate and develop effective teaching strategies to develop students' writing competence. This study used a semi-structured interview and a stimulated recall interview to collect detailed information from two Thai EFL lecturers about the challenges in teaching argumentative essays, with the teaching strategies used to help improve their students' writing skill. The types of teaching strategies used by the Thai EFL lecturers indicate avenues that can further develop their teaching activities to meet the writing needs of EFL students (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Leighton & Gierl, 2007). The findings of the study reveal that both Thai EFL lecturers admitted that their most consistent problems were with their students' inability to produce a clear thesis statement, because they were not familiar with this genre. Their students encountered problems due to insufficient knowledge of grammatical structure, lexical features and argumentative features. Moreover, they encountered difficulties in putting together organised ideas and producing solid evidence to write a well organised essay. These weaknesses were the main barriers for Thai EFL students to write an argumentative essay. Furthermore, Thai tertiary students had less experience with argumentative writing as this genre was not taught to them while they were in school. The findings reveal that the two lecturers used the following strategies to teach argumentative writing to their students: (1) using different inputs and activities in class in order to motivate students to become active learners, including pair work, group discussion, explanation, illustration and debate in class; (2) analysing sample texts and presenting their understanding in class; and (3) understanding their students' learning styles and providing what they need to develop their writing skills. The implications of the findings suggest that university EFL lecturers need to acknowledge the full repertoire of teaching strategies available to teach argumentative writing effectively. Importantly, this study highlights that enabled EFL learners can build effective social and cognitive bridges when writing argumentative essays using effective scaffolding, while receiving close

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guidance from teachers in the writing classroom.

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1. Introduction

Argumentative writing has been proven by researchers to be the most difficult model in writing (Ferretti, Andrews-Weckerly & Lewis, 2007; Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008). This genre of writing is crucial for tertiary students to articulate their own ideas in academically appropriate patterns and approaches. Unfortunately, both ESL and EFL learners at the university level often face difficulties in the use of complex syntactic forms and appropriate elements in producing argumentative writing. Consequently, due to the failures in language teaching approaches of the past, particularly in teaching argumentative writing skills, a number of research studies (Lertpreedakorn, 2009; Promwinai, 2010) have investigated and demonstrated how argumentative writing can be developed by employing effective strategies to measure the weaknesses of Thai EFL students' writing competence. There is a need to better understand the specific difficulties students face when writing academic arguments. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research on argumentative writing difficulties, as research has mainly concentrated on the diagnostic assessment of writing. Hence, there is a critical need to explore the use of effective strategies in order to improve students' argumentative writing ability at the tertiary level. Moreover, research studies on argumentative writing difficulties in Thailand are scarce resulting in a deficiency of insights about the difficulties that Thai EFL students encounter with academic writing tasks. The results of this study would promote some recommendations and suggestions to enable university students in Thailand to develop their argumentative writing competence.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Writing Instruction in ESL/ EFL Contexts

In the area of second and foreign language instruction, teaching writing has long been a controversial issue. Although there are a number of approaches for writing instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL hereafter) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL hereafter) contexts, not many ESL/ EFL writing instructors have explicit insights on writing approaches. Therefore, much of writing instruction still focuses on a traditional approach, predominantly concerned with knowledge about the pattern of language and writing improvement as the result of the imitation of directions, in the form of texts provided by the instructor. It is said that ESL/EFL writing is a difficult, intricate and demanding process. This difficulty and intricacy in ESL/EFL argumentative writing arises from the reality that writing includes seeking out a thesis, promoting support for the claim, drawing up, modifying, and finally editing the thesis to ensure an effective, error free writing output. Additionally, ESL/EFL argumentative writing is one of the most important genres of language instruction. As claimed by Coffin. (2004, p.3), "students' academic writing continues to be at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, but it is often an invisible dimension of the curriculum; that is, the rules or conventions governing what counts as academic writing are often assumed to be part of 'common sense' knowledge students have, and are thus not explicitly taught within disciplinary course." To provide an effective ESL/EFL argumentative writing instruction is the main responsibility of instructors, researchers, programme coordinators and textbook writers in the area of foreign language instruction. However, producing a textbook for most ESL/EFL students is a difficult task because the writing process needs an extensive knowledge of cognitive and linguistic methods of which ESL/EFL students are largely unaware of. Moreover, research studies about ESL/EFL writing have undergone much change over the last 40 years, specifically between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. As a result, writing has now changed into an interdisciplinary area of question. Generally, there are three main forms of ESL/EFL writing strategies comprising the product approach (Silva, 1990; Brown, 2001), process approach (Silva, 1983) and genre-based approach (Hyland, 2003a; Hyland, 2003b).

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