

# Thai EFL Learner Writing Errors : A Pre-research Study of Thai High-intermediate Undergraduate Writing Errors, Attitudes to Writing and a ‘Genre’ Based Solution

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## Abstract

A survey of 31 Thai high-intermediate undergraduate writing learners reveals that Thai learners not only have difficulty with grammar when writing in English, but also have difficulty with organizing and structuring their ideas, and with vocabulary and comprehension. This paper presents the results of a questionnaire which examines the learners' sources of information, details their specific problems and briefly investigates their attitudes to writing. The paper also reviews the current state of writing pedagogy in relation to Thailand and suggests that a 'genre approach' to teaching writing could be more effective at intermediate levels than the 'current-traditional' rhetoric and 'process' writing approaches currently being used today. The paper gives examples of how such an approach could be applied and suggests avenues for further research.

## บทคัดย่อ

จากการศึกษาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาไทยที่มีระดับการเขียนระดับกลางและกำลังศึกษาอยู่ในระดับปริญญาตรีจำนวน 31 คนแสดงให้เห็นว่า นักศึกษาไทย ประสบกับปัญหาการใช้ไวยากรณ์ การเรียนรู้ การเรียนรู้ การจัดกรอบแนวคิดตลอดจนการเลือกใช้คำศัพท์และความเข้าใจความหมาย รายงานผลการวิจัยฉบับนี้ มุ่งนำเสนอผลการศึกษา จากแบบสอบถามซึ่งนำมาใช้ในการศึกษาวิเคราะห์แหล่งข้อมูลที่นักศึกษานำมาใช้ในการเขียน และมุ่งนำเสนอปัญหาเฉพาะของนักศึกษาในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษและวิเคราะห์ ทัศนคติของนักศึกษาดังกล่าวที่มีต่อการเขียน นอกจากนั้นยังได้วิเคราะห์วิธีการสอนเขียนที่ มีใช้อยู่ในประเทศไทยและเสนอว่าวิธีการสอนเขียนแบบ (Genre approach) จะเป็นวิธีการสอนที่ มีประสิทธิภาพและเหมาะสมสมสำหรับการสอนเขียนสำหรับนักศึกษาโดยที่มีความ สามารถในการเขียนอยู่ในระดับกลางมากกว่าวิธีการสอนเขียนอื่นที่ใช้ในปัจจุบัน เช่น วิธีการสอนตามแนววิชาศาสตร์ (Rhetoric) หรือวิธีการสอนโดยเน้นกระบวนการ (Process approach) รายงานฉบับนี้ได้นำเสนอตัวอย่างการนำเสนอวิธีการสอนเขียนแบบ Genre approach ไปใช้ในการสอนเขียนและนำเสนอช่องทางในการทำวิจัยต่อไปสำหรับ ประเด็นดังกล่าว

## 1.0 Problems with writing

Many EFL learners have difficulty with ‘writing’ and there is a general consensus among the English majors at Thammasat University that writing is the most difficult skill to master. As a lecturer at Thammasat University I recently completed a 16-week “Expressive Writing” course, coded EG332 for administrative purposes, which focused on “argumentative and persuasive” writing rhetoric. My methodology combined both ‘current-traditional rhetoric’ and ‘process’ approaches in that I focused on thesis statements and topic sentences and encouraged the learner’s exploration of ideas during brainstorming activities and advised on drafting and editing their texts during feedback sessions. Grammatical errors were dealt with mostly on an individual basis during this feedback, though occasionally common errors were highlighted and discussed globally in the class. Concepts of context, purpose and audience were discussed in class but not systematically, and I often felt that the exchanges left the learners none the wiser. This course is the last compulsory writing course that English majors take at Thammasat University before they move to the optional 4<sup>th</sup> year ESP and EAP writing courses (which include Report Writing, English for Journalism and Creative Writing) so in this context their ‘audience’ was their teacher and their ‘purpose’ was often simply to get through the course. My own post course assessment of teaching EG332, the findings from the questionnaire and my interests in the different approaches to language teaching have led me to question the effectiveness of current approaches to teaching writing at the high intermediate level and left me wondering whether a change in methodology would be of value to Thai learners.

EG332 requires learners to produce approximately 10 – 12 assessed essays on a variety of social ‘issue’ based topics and current affairs during the 16-week semester. Though the following observations are intended to form part of a more intensive research study into Thai writing errors, learning styles and writing pedagogy, as a writing teacher I felt that there were a number of areas where the learners were having difficulty and these are summarized below.

- Learners have studied thesis statements and topic sentences in previous courses, but, in general, first drafts of their essay revealed that many had difficulty in organizing and developing their ideas coherently or logically.
- Though learners have been introduced to the concept of audience, they lacked an awareness of the amount of shared knowledge between the reader and writer so that many terms and ideas in their essays were undefined or unexplained.
- Learners have not systematically studied the differences between speaking and writing, so many tended to write their essays in a style more suited to a ‘woman’s’ magazine. Learners used contractions and slang inappropriately in their written texts because they seemed to write as they speak.
- Learners chose the wrong words, not because the meaning was inappropriate, but because the context precluded it.
- In general, grammar and syntax were weak and some sentences were unintelligible.

- Learners lacked an awareness of Western culture and ideology.

These observations have accrued from teaching several writing courses to Thai learners and were not confined to this one class. Writing requires a great deal of effort from learners and the increasing awareness of learner styles and strategies in language pedagogy led to me to devise an end of course questionnaire for 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors at Thammasat University who had recently completed the EG332 'Expressive Writing' course. The aims of the questionnaire were to ascertain the sources of their information for their essays, to gauge the learner's own assessment of their problems across a range of variables and to briefly examine their attitudes to writing in English. Although the survey itself and its objectives were limited, the findings revealed some surprising results and raises many questions in relation to teaching writing at intermediate and high intermediate levels.

## 2.0 The questionnaire: (See Appendix A)

### 2.1 Methodological issues

Reliability and validity are crucial issues in questionnaires, which must be piloted and revised before any verifiable conclusions can be reached. It must be emphasized that the survey reported in this exploratory paper was carried out on a preliminary basis both to test the feasibility of a more intensive study and to suggest avenues for such research. Any findings from this preliminary survey must be viewed as extremely tentative and are intended only as background research.

The questionnaire itself was divided into 4 sections and can be categorized into 'Basic Details', 'Information Sources', 'Grammar

and Text', and 'Learning Styles'. 'Information Sources' asked learners to identify and rank the sources of the information used in their essays according to the following rating system; 'Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely or Never'. The sources were listed as "the Internet, CD-ROM's, Library books, Newspapers, Magazines and TV/Radio". No attempt was made to quantify the results or provide any correlations between frequency and learner writing performance, though this would have been relevant in a more intensive study. The content of previous writing course tended to rely on the learners' own experience but at the EG332 level of writing, learners are expected to broaden the content base of their English writing schemata by independent research. In practice, many of the topics are negotiated between learners and teachers though learner choice is regarded as a motivating factor to ensure interest in the course. Since much of the learner's work is done outside class, leaving more time for in-class explanation and feedback, the survey also tried to discover how they used their sources of information; i.e., whether they made notes, copied sections or summarized the information. Open-ended questions do not lend themselves to anything other than cursory analysis and are better dealt with by interviews, though again, they indicate areas of future inquiry. The third section, 'Grammar and Text' specified a number of standard grammatical items, such as 'tenses', 'articles', 'prepositions', etc., other factors connected to the text itself, including 'organization of ideas', cohesive references, 'connectors' and 'formality', and finally categories related to vocabulary and comprehension. The items in this section were chosen to examine the psychological construct of 'confidence' with each item, though the wording in the questionnaire

used the term 'problem'. Again, no attempt at this stage of the survey was made to determine the exact nature of the problem – i.e., whether learners had problems simply understanding the terms listed or whether they had problems in using them in their work, and a more thorough survey would need to address these issues. However, none of the respondents seemed to have any queries regarding during the administration of the questionnaire as the terms are commonly used in classroom meta-language.

The fourth and final section asked the participants for a short written summary of the main problems in the course, their opinions of rewrites and focused on their expectations of their writing teacher. The final question on the role of 'speaking' in writing class is of local significance as my colleagues and I often queried why learners seemed reluctant to speak in their writing classes, as they seemed to have no difficulty in speaking in their 'Listening/Speaking' classes

## 2.2 Procedure

A total of 35 questionnaires were given to two out of the four classes that had completed the 'Expressive Writing' course during the last class while the teachers were present. Writing classes at Thammasat typically comprise around 15 – 18 learners in each class: 31 of the questionnaires were returned, though two had only completed the first page. The learners are used to completing such questionnaires as the university has its own course evaluation form for learners to complete, so this type of questioning was not unusual.

## 3.0 Questionnaire Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Participant Profile

A total of 31 participants completed the questionnaire: 29 females and 2 males, all aged between 19 and 21. All but one were 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors at Thammasat University, the other being an Economics major in his final year whose minor was English. Other minors were varied and included Psychology, Information Systems, Journalism, English Literature, History and Chinese. Grade point average (GPA) ranged from 2.15 to 3.7, with two not given. The GPA mean was 3.06, standard deviation 0.37 and the median and mode both 3.0. The majority of the learners had previously completed 4 writing courses at Thammasat University while 6 had completed 5 and the English minor had only taken 3. Only 2 had taken writing courses outside Thammasat University, and 4 learners had lived in an English speaking country, either for one year or a few months. In many ways, the participants made up a typical class at Thammasat University.


### 3.2 Information Sources

The results are shown in Chart 1. (See Appendix B for the raw data for all the charts).

It is immediately evident that the Internet has become the major source of information for Thai undergraduates at Thammasat University, though individual CD-ROMs were infrequently used. Nearly 90 % of the participants always or usually used the Internet as their source of information. The use of library books was limited, though books, magazines and newspapers tended to be used in equal amounts. A significant proportion of learners (over 20%) always or usually used TV/Radio as sources of information for their essays. 'Other sources' of information included 'the teacher' and friends. In terms of use, the majority of learners stated that they highlighted relevant parts of their readings

from the Internet and used the ideas in their essays, or summarized the main points in their own words. This is relevant in that summarizing and comprehension of 'English texts' were seen as problematical

for the learners in the survey (See 3.3). Three learners stated that they copied relevant information directly from their sources.



*Chart 1 : Learner Sources of Information*

### 3.3 Grammar and Text

In terms of a 'needs analysis' it is always useful to find out where learners feel they are having difficulties, though trying to specify the specific nature of the problems using a questionnaire format is extremely difficult and an in-depth study would need to be dealt with by interviews. However, the results are interesting in that the 'never' column was rarely ticked in any of the 20 categories and tends to suggest that learners have difficulties with numerous aspect of writing. The categories were presented to the learners as a complete block, though this paper separates the categories into 'Grammar', 'Text' and 'Comprehension' for


ease of analysis. Answers of 'Never' and omitted answers are not included in the charts in this section.

In his study of low-intermediate Thai learners' grammatical writing errors, Lush (2002) found that 95.25% of the recorded problems occurred with respect to 'articles, single/plural nouns, past and present tenses, subject verb agreement, incorrect tenses and prepositions'. Word order, confusion with the use of the verbs 'be' and 'have', and sentence fragments made up the list of identified problems, though only accounted for 4.75% of the errors. In terms of frequency, 'articles' accounted for over 241

for 4.75% of the errors. In terms of frequency, 'articles' accounted for over 241 errors in the sample of 30 essays, while 'incorrect tense' use accounted for 57 errors. Though the grammatical categories between Lush's (*Ibid.*) study and this questionnaire varied slightly ('tense use' in

this survey was conflated to include all tenses and no distinction was made between subject-verb agreement and single and plural nouns), learner perceptions of their problem areas (See Chart 2) were similar to the errors noted in the quantitative study.


**Chart 2: Perceived Learner Errors: Grammar**



Learners identified 'tense use' and 'articles' as major problem areas, while syntax, subtitled in the questionnaire in the survey as 'word order', verb/noun distinctions and prepositions usually gave learners problems. Subject-verb agreement and sentence fragments were perceived to cause fewer problems while over 60% felt that they rarely had problems with active and passive voice distinctions, which were not included in Lush's (*Ibid.*) study.

### 3.4 Perceived Errors: Text

Previous writing courses at Thammasat have tended to rely on the learner's own schemata in terms of content for their topics but at the EG332 level, they are encouraged to produce more detailed essays, typically around, 4 or 5 A4 pages of text (around 1,500 – 2,000 words), and issues of organization, cohesion and 'style' come to the fore. This is reflected in the findings (see Chart 3.)



**Chart 3. Perceived Learner Errors: Text**

Learners often have to examine issues from several points of view and deal with complex moral, social and political arguments, such as the causes of crime in Thailand, whether abortion should be legalized, euthanasia, and education reform, etcetera. Though 'organization of ideas' was seen to be a problem for over 69% of the learners, it was no surprise that 'level of formality' was identified as the second largest cause of error, especially since, in my own classes at least, the learners seemed to have difficulties grasping the interrelationships between context, purpose and audience. Topic sentences and thesis statements were both seen as problematic and there seemed to be a general area of concern with starting and ending an essay.


Cohesive references (given as 'if', 'they' etc. on the questionnaire) and 'Connectors' ('Moreover', 'also' etc.) were not perceived to be major problems.

### 3.5 Vocabulary and Cognition

Chart 4 shows the difficulty learners have with vocabulary and comprehension of native English texts. Though learners have been exposed to authentic texts throughout their degree course, this level demands independent research from a variety of sources. Not only do learners have to deal with idiomatic phrases in cultural contexts that they may not be familiar with, they also have to deal with specialized vocabulary and both these categories are perceived to be problem areas. Though comprehension of

the texts was sometimes seen as problematic, summarizing the information was always or usually a problem for 60% of

the sample. This may account for some of the reticence from learners in discussing the topics in class (See 4.0).



**Chart 4: Perceived Learner Errors: Vocabulary and Cognition**

Though the charts have been divided into three sections, an overall view reveals that learners have problems with all of these areas to some extent and suggests that current approaches to teaching writing are not particularly successful in dealing with the learners' concerns about their writing.

#### 4.0 Attitudes and Learning Styles

The written summaries of the main problems learners faced in the course can be summarized as 'organizational', 'grammatical', and 'topic related'. 'Organization' of ideas was cited by 12 of

the learners as the most difficult aspect of the course, and many added that they had problems with finding thesis statements and/or topic sentences. Three learners stated that they did not understand differences in writing styles or the 'structure' of argumentative essays. Eight of the participants cited 'grammar' as their main problem, while five stated that they had problems with the 'topics' in that they found them "difficult", or had trouble either "finding" or "thinking of" enough supporting evidence or information. A lack of time (in relation to examinations) and

“vocabulary” made up the other replies, while one learner stated that she didn’t understand why she “had to define everything in every essay”.

Attitudes to rewrites were generally positive in that the majority of the sample thought they were “good”, though many qualified their statements with the additional comments such as “but boring” or “disheartening”. In a few cases, learners saw them specifically as a means of improving their grade. Only one learner thought that rewrites were of “no help”. The majority of the learners thought that the teacher’s role in the classroom was to “explain” or “teach”, usually the structure of writing or the topic itself (cited 8 and 4 times respectively). The other main function of the teacher was to correct learner errors. Motivation and “care” were cited by three of the learners.

Approximately 2/3 of the survey had positive views of ‘speaking’ in writing classes, citing their use in sharing ideas or in understanding the topic, while significantly 9 learners stated that speaking was either “not necessary” or of “limited importance”. A few thought that discussing topics was “difficult” because they had no opinion on the subject or had “nothing to say”.

## 5.0 Writing Approaches: Current Theory

As a writing teacher my interests lie in the application of linguistic theory to the EFL classroom and the effects it will have on pedagogic methodology. Pedagogic theory on teaching writing has gone through a number of phases and it is relevant to differentiate between first and second language theories of writing before examining the situation in EFL. Johns (in Kroll, 1990) distinguishes three approaches to first language teaching: “process”

approaches which stress fluency and individualism, “interactive approaches”, where a text is the result of combined interpretation between reader and writer, and a “social interactionist” view which takes this view a step further in that a text is a “social act” (op cit.: 27) constrained by context, purpose and audience. In terms of second language writing, Silva (in Kroll, 1990) identifies four main approaches; “controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, process approaches and English for academic purposes”. Swales’ (1990) study of ‘genre’ in academic and research settings made an important contribution to the latter approach and links genre to discourse communities. Genre studies, as outlined by Martin (1993) and Christie (1989) in Australia, widen the scope of genre and base it on Halliday’s Functional Linguistics, where “a semantically driven grammar” is pivotal in building meaning into texts (Christie, op cit.: ix). Genre theory has seen the proliferation of linguistic research identifying the features of particular genres, such as the use of nominalization in scientific texts (see Halliday, 1994: 353), and research studies that show the benefits of genre based instruction (see Paltridge: 2001: 7-10). Most of the reported studies have taken place in ESP and ESL contexts, but there have been very few studies in SE Asia and even fewer generally that introduce genre studies at the high intermediate level. Silva (15: in Kroll, 1990) states that the current-traditional rhetoric approach to teaching writing is probably dominant in ESL writing materials and classroom practices, and in spite of the recent and increasing interest in genre studies, I believe that this statement is still probably true for EFL writing methodology in Asia and the Far East.

## 6.0 Learning in Thailand

As with any democratic country there is wide public debate on the state of the education and in Thailand and several pressure groups exist to stimulate reform. A parallel can be drawn between Thai cultural learning styles and the teaching of English at primary and secondary levels in Thailand where teacher centered lecturing, rote learning and memorization have been criticized in favor a more learner centered approach based on an atmosphere of creativity and individualism. Learners come to university with such learning styles firmly in place and are, from my observations, sometimes difficult to change, especially in EFL writing classes. In terms of learner expectations and classroom practice at Thammasat University, they do not usually write in their 'Listening/Speaking' classes and seem reluctant to speak in English in their writing classes, often reverting to L1 during their group work and peer correction, even though the teachers discourage this practice. The findings from the questionnaire seem to suggest that learners expect their teacher to 'explain' writing in English during the lessons, which is consistent with their previous learning experiences.

## 7.0 Why Genre in Writing?

Writing is difficult at high intermediate and advanced levels because EFL learners not only have to deal with their usual problems of grammar, syntax and organization, but are also confronted with complex issues that are compounded by cultural differences and require a broader knowledge of vocabulary and Western culture. Many of the topics discussed in the EG332 writing course may be new in terms of L2 schemata, though not necessarily to the learners' L1. Learners have studied various rhetorical patterns of comparison and contrast, cause and effect, description, instructions and so on, in their

previous courses but cannot readily apply these patterns to longer and more detailed essays which require a discussion of several complex and related factors. The room for creativity and individualism currently given many EFL learners under the current-traditional rhetoric and process approaches fails to systematically deal with the myriad of text sources Thai learners use in their research and, therefore, I feel learners lack any organizing principles that are based on a different cultural framework.

The use of the term genre, and associated concepts of 'style', 'text type', 'register' and 'domain', has, however, left many people confused (Lee, 2001) and the questions that immediately spring to mind are what exactly would a 'genre approach' entail, how could it help learners who face a myriad of obstacles in their attempts to 'write well', and what would genre based classroom materials actually look like? More fundamental is the question of how learners would react to a more functional approach in learning how to write.

An 'approach' implies a unified theoretical foundation and methodology; given the varied interpretations of 'genre', it is perhaps more expedient to summarize its features (see Paltridge, 2001 for a full discussion). In essence, a genre approach to teaching writing would broaden the framework of text analysis to encompass spoken and written texts, to examine the socio-cultural processes that give rise to different genres and to examine their communicative purpose. Analysis of authentic texts in terms of their generic structure, textual features and grammar, and relating such aspects of text to its function is fundamental aspect of genre in the classroom. Given the difficulties learners have with organization and grammar, it

would also be relevant to introduce some Hallidayan meta-language from Functional Linguistics, including concepts of 'theme and rheme', 'given and new' information, and nominalization (see Halliday 1994 and Bloor and Bloor 1995). How Thai learners might deal with such an introduction of new meta-language, and whether a genre approach would improve their writing skills would be an interesting area of research. Given some of the learner's reticence to speak in writing classes, it would also be interesting to find out whether such an approach increased learner participation, motivation or understanding.

## 8.0 A Framework of Analysis: Genre in Action:

One of the tests of a pedagogic approach must lie not only in its theoretical foundation but its application to the classroom as a framework for analysis and understanding. The following sample texts (which have been copied verbatim) demonstrate how such an analysis might take place in an EFL context at intermediate levels. *Sample Text 1* was taken from a learner's essay, which discussed whether Thai values had been adversely influenced by Western culture. The learner was aware that an 'academic' text was necessary and the concepts of lexical density and nominalization were briefly discussed, though only in relation to nouns and verbs rather than nominal groups (see Halliday, 1994: 41)

For culture, I admit that the culture of eating in Thai society is more likely to be Western. Yes, we have MacDonald, KFC, Starbucks or Pizza, but I don't think that our own culture of eating will be declined. It is just that sometimes we change to eat western

foods. It is not that we eat western food every meal.

### *Sample Text 1: Essay: Discuss the influence of Western values on Thai culture*

Though the 'topic sentence' is reasonably clear, the whole paragraph reads like a spoken text, and is almost conversational in style. It lacks nominalization in that the number of content words per clause is low. In other words it has a low lexical density; in fact, none of the clauses have a lexical density of greater than 3.0 (see Nunan, 1991: 85). The sample borrows elements of spoken language that are inappropriate for an 'academic' text. It also lacks any facts or statistics to support the claims and so appears purely subjective. Learners who have not analysed the differences between spoken and written texts are unlikely to have noted their grammatical features and characteristics and as a result, I feel they are more likely to transfer spoken patterns to their writing. In this example, learners need explicit knowledge of nominalization rather than an hazy reference to their audience.

*Sample Text 2*, which is taken from one of my learner's first draft essays discussing the legalization of abortion, finds the writer distinguishing between surgical operations and the use of pills in the medical procedures available.

Surgical way is a way to have an abortion by using the equipment like pliers thrust into the vagina and pull a fetus out.

### *Sample Text 2: Should abortion be banned?*

The graphic nature of the expressions cannot be maturely dealt with by vague references to 'style' or 'formality'. Paltridge (2001:120) points out that "Attention is not always given to the ideological dimensions

of genre in language learning classrooms" and this is a case in point. Notions of women's rights are not as well developed in Asia as they are in many western countries, and it is sometimes easy to assume that learners will know about the existence of active competing pressure groups concerned with this issue and the emotive language that they may use to get their message across. Examining the lexicogrammatical characteristics of texts in terms of their 'genre' would allow for a more systematic framework for learners to choose appropriate lexis ('forceps' instead of 'pliers' in the example) and attend to matters of lexical cohesion in their own written texts. The choice whether to use the term 'baby' or the more clinical term 'fetus' in discussions of abortion, for example, depends on the ideological point of view of the writer and this was a point often missed by the learners in their essays.

*Sample Text 3* from the introduction to an argumentative essay on gun control, demonstrates how an awareness of Hallidayan notions of the information unit and 'given and new information' may help learners organize their writing at the clausal level.

After the tragic situation of deadly school shooting including the April 1999 massacre of 14 students and a teacher at a suburban Colorado high school took place, American people concerned much more about gun control laws.

**Sample Text 3: Free Essay: Gun Control**  
Given or shared information is defined as knowledge that the reader is expected to know, and usually starts the clause, new information is the focus of the writer's message, and usually ends the clause (Bloor and Bloor 1995:67). In the example, although the writer assumes that the reader

knows about the Columbine high school massacre, the learner seems to have confused which item is intended to be new; i.e. whether it is the fact that 14 students and a teacher were killed, or that American people are more concerned about gun control laws. Focusing on given and new information at the clausal level might give learners better control of the meaning they intend. The choices given to the learner could be expressed as demonstrated in *Table 1*, where new information is given in italics and gives them a grammatical tool for future guidance.

1. After the tragic shooting of 14 students and a teacher at a high school in April 1999, *Americans are more concerned about gun control.*
2. A tragic shooting took place at a high school in April 1999 *where 14 students and a teacher died.* Since then, *Americans have been more concerned about gun control.*
3. Since the tragic shooting at a high school, *where 14 students and a learner were killed,* *Americans are more concerned about gun control.*

**Table 1. Given and New Choices**

Organization was cited by the learners in the survey as causing problems in their writing and it is clear that the 'thesis statement and topic sentence' outline proffered by current-traditional rhetoric is leaving learners unsure of how to proceed. Halliday's functional linguistics classifies the *structural* component of language into two areas: 'given and new' (which controls the information structure and focus) and 'theme and rheme', which controls its thematic structure (see Bloor and Bloor, 1995:87) The theme is defined as the point of

The theme is defined as the point of departure for the clause and the rheme constitutes the rest of the message. While Bloor and Bloor (1995) highlight the progression of theme and rheme in various patterns, the concepts can also be used to analyse and explain learner errors. In *Sample Text 4*, the writer is discussing the arguments against abortion with reference to the rights of the fetus. However, the 'constant theme pattern' is interrupted by the new theme of 'mother's rights (although it is actually in rheme position; see Halliday, 1994:51), and it is almost possible to imagine the extract as a transcription of a heated discussion.

It has the capacity to feel pain, thus qualifying it as a human person. But what of mother's rights? Women have to carry the child, give birth to it so should have the rights to control over their own bodies and decide whether to keep the child or not. To appeal to the child's right to live, we have to consider first whether a fetus has rights or not, or can really be called a 'child'.

#### ***Sample Text 4: Misplaced Theme***

I feel that the examples illustrate the usefulness in introducing Hallidayan concepts into the learner's meta-language, but also highlight the obvious difficulties in using such meta-language in a classroom situation. Such terms would have to be introduced very carefully into any writing course, made relevant to the learners writing and form part of an overall strategy or approach.

Questions relating to classroom materials need to be examined in relation to the type of class, the purpose of the course and the kinds of texts learners are expected to deal with. Though genre is more associated with

ESP contexts, the approach is slowly beginning to filter down into more general EFL classes and there is a growing collection of genre informed materials not only in bookstores but also on the Internet (see Caudery, 1998). Exploitation of a genre approach does not necessarily require the introduction of Hallidayan functional linguistics; rather it implies the exploitation of authentic texts from a macro level, in terms the social processes that bring them about, to the micro level, in terms of grammar and lexis. This exploitation could take the form of identifying discourse structures, transformation exercises, examinations of the shared understanding between participants and include a focus on grammar and structure (see Paltridge, 2001, for further details.)

#### **9.0 Conclusion**

That Thai learners have specific problems with grammar, text and comprehension when writing in English is suggested by the results of the pre-research questionnaire and the survey seems to suggest that the combination of process and current-traditional rhetoric approaches is not providing the learners with the skills they require to deal with texts from different sources. The paper also suggests that the application of a genre approach would be more effective in dealing with these problems. However, the only way to determine whether such an approach would be beneficial for Thai learners is to implement a full version of a genre based program, including the introduction of Hallidayan functional meta-language and to conduct intensive and in-depth research not only into the products of the learners work but also their perceptions of its efficacy.

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**Appendix A**  
**The Questionnaire**  
**EG332 Pre Research Survey**  
**Participant Profile**

I am undertaking my PhD into 'Writing Genres' in an attempt to help Thai learners improve their writing skills. I will be using your papers to identify some of the problem areas faced by Thai learners and I would appreciate your co-operation in this research by completing the participant profile questionnaire below.

*Please note that all information will be treated confidentially.*

**1. Basic Details**

1. Age	
2. Sex	
3. Nationality	
4. Major	
5. Minor	
6. Year at Thammasat	
7. GPA	
8. Number of writing courses taken at Thammasat University	
9. Number of writing courses taken outside Thammasat University	
10. Have you ever lived in an English speaking country? If yes, for how long?	

**2.0 Information Resources**

2.1 Which resources do you usually use as sources of information for your essays?

*Please tick*

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. The Internet					
2. CD-ROM					
3. Library books					
4. Magazines					
5. Newspapers					
6. TV/Radio					

2.2 If none of the above, what do you usually use as your sources of information?

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2.3 Briefly describe how you use your sources of information.

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### 3.0 Grammar and Text

3.1 Identify which areas of writing give you most problems.

**Please tick**

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Tense use					
Syntax (word order)					
Passive /Active Voice					
Verb/noun distinctions					
Articles					
Prepositions					
Subject / verb agreement					
Sentence fragments					
Organization of ideas					
Thesis statements					
Topic Sentences					
Introductions					
Conclusions					
Cohesive references (it, they etc.)					
Connectors (Moreover, also, etc.)					
Level of formality required					
Vocabulary					
Idiomatic phrases					
Comprehension of English texts					
Summarizing English texts					
Other (please state)					

### 4.0 Learning styles

4.1 Briefly summarize the main problems you have had in the EG332 Expressive Writing Course.

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4.2 How do you feel about rewrites and second rewrites?

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4.3 In your opinion, what should be the role of the teacher in your writing classes?

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4.4 How do you feel about 'speaking' in writing classes?

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**Thanks for your help**

## Appendix B Raw Data

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No Answer
<b>The Internet</b>	20	7	2	0	0	
<b>CD-ROM</b>	0	1	3	5	19	1
<b>Library Books</b>	3	7	16	2	1	
<b>Magazines</b>	2	6	15	4	1	1
<b>Newspapers</b>	3	7	11	7	1	
<b>TV/Radio</b>	2	5	8	9	5	
					<b>Never / No answer</b>	
<b>Tense Use</b>	9	7	8	5		
<b>Syntax</b>	0	10	11	7		1
<b>Passive/Active Voice</b>	0	5	5	17		2
<b>Verb/Noun distinctions</b>	3	7	11	6		2
<b>Articles</b>	8	7	11	3		
<b>Prepositions</b>	3	8	15	3		
<b>Subject/Verb Agreement</b>	2	7	8	12		
<b>Sentence Fragments</b>	2	8	8	11		
					<b>Never/No answer</b>	
<b>Organization of ideas</b>	2	16	7	4		
<b>Thesis Statements</b>	3	9	11	6		
<b>Topic Sentences</b>	0	7	9	12		1
<b>Introductions</b>	4	6	16	2		1
<b>Conclusions</b>	4	9	14	2		
<b>Cohesive References</b>	1	3	8	16		1
<b>Connectors</b>	3	3	7	14		2
<b>Level of Formality</b>	1	12	10	4		2
					<b>Never/No answer</b>	
<b>Vocabulary</b>	8	12	7	2		
<b>Idiomatic phrases</b>	7	10	10	1		1
<b>Comprehension</b>	3	7	17	2		
<b>Summarizing</b>	3	14	9	2		1