

การวิเคราะห์ดัชนีปริจเฉทในบทสนทนาออนไลน์ของนักศึกษาไทย: กรณีศึกษา
ของนักศึกษาสาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น
An Analysis of Discourse Markers Used in Chat Texts by Thai Students:
A Case Study of English Major Students at Khon Kaen University

สุภาพร ทองกำพรา* และกรวิภา พูลผล
คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น

Supaporn Thongkampra* and Kornwipa Poonpon
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อ 1) หาความถี่ในการใช้ดัชนีปริจเฉทในบทสนทนาออนไลน์ของนักศึกษาไทย 2) ศึกษาหน้าที่ของดัชนีปริจเฉทในบทสนทนาออนไลน์ของนักศึกษาไทยโดยกลุ่มตัวอย่างของการศึกษานี้คือนักศึกษาสาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ ชั้นปีที่ 4 คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น จำนวน 40 คน นักศึกษาแต่ละคนได้สนทนาโต้ตอบกับชาวต่างชาติโดยการพิมพ์ข้อความผ่านโปรแกรมสนทนาออนไลน์และใช้ Concordance Program เป็นเครื่องมือวิเคราะห์ข้อความสนทนาเพื่อหาความถี่และตำแหน่งของดัชนีปริจเฉทในบทสนทนาออนไลน์ของนักศึกษาไทย ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าดัชนีปริจเฉทที่พบได้มากที่สุดที่สุดในบทสนทนาออนไลน์ของนักศึกษาไทยคือ “and” พบว่าถูกใช้ 26% “so” ถูกใช้ 16% และ “well” ถูกใช้ 9% นอกจากนี้จากการวิเคราะห์หน้าที่ของดัชนีปริจเฉททั้งสามตัวได้ผลสรุปดังนี้ 1) หน้าที่ของดัชนีปริจเฉท “and” ถูกใช้มากที่สุดเพื่อเพิ่มข้อความที่ต่อเนื่องมาจากข้อความเก่า 2) หน้าที่ของดัชนีปริจเฉท “so” ที่ถูกใช้มากที่สุดเพื่อสรุปข้อความในบทสนทนา และ 3) หน้าที่ของดัชนีปริจเฉท “well” ที่ถูกใช้มากที่สุดเพื่อเป็นการโต้ตอบบทสนทนา โดยปัจจัยที่อาจทำให้เกิดความแตกต่างในด้านความถี่และหน้าที่ในการใช้ดัชนีปริจเฉทของนักศึกษาไทยคือความอิสระของหัวข้อการสนทนาและลักษณะการสนทนาผ่านโปรแกรมสนทนาออนไลน์

คำสำคัญ : บทสนทนาออนไลน์ ดัชนีปริจเฉท

* ผู้ประสานงานหลัก (Corresponding Author)
e-mail: supapon_f@hotmail.com

Abstract

The purposes of this study were 1) to study the frequency of discourse markers used in online chats by Thai learners, and 2) to study the functions of discourse markers used by Thai learners in online chats. The sample of this study was 40 fourth-year Thai students majoring in English from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University. Students were required to have English conversations with foreigners by typing messages through an online program. The concordance program was used as a tool to study frequency and position of discourse markers used by the students in the conversation. Findings revealed that the discourse markers “and” was used most frequently (26%), followed by “so” (16%) and “well” (9%). Moreover, the investigation of the discourse marker functions showed that 1) “and” was used mainly to continue the former information; 2) “so” was used majorly to make conclusion; 3) “well” was used mostly as a filler. The factors which possibly caused the difference between the frequency and function of discourse markers used were the freedom in chat topics and the characteristics of interaction through the online chat programs.

Key words : chat texts, discourse markers

Introduction

In 2015 Thailand will be a part of ASEAN (Association of South East Asia Nations); therefore, English will play more important role in several aspects such as trading, education and job opportunity. (Grubbs, Chaengploy & Worawong, 2008; Hart-Rawung & Li, 2008; Wiriyachitra, 2002) For this reason, Thai government supports English as a compulsory subject at all levels in order that Thai students will gain better English communicative ability. One of several ways to enhance the ability of English communication is providing tablets to the first grade students in primary school to help students learn English with more activities than only in classroom. Consequently, it can be obviously seen that accessing the Internet in teaching and learning English is popular as students can practice their English by themselves and not only at school but also at home or anywhere they can access the Internet. Since the Internet provides several types of programs online to access (e.g., Line, Skype or Facebook), students can choose one or

more to interact with their native partners so that they can improve their English communicative skills by chat texts which is considered as an effective way to enhance students' communicative ability (Yiamkamnuan, 2010)

It was shown that the online community seems like a surrounding society dimension and have been widely used for they have several advantages in encouraging language learning (Harasim, 1993 as cited in Jones, 1999). Several studies in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) suggested that on-line chatting can assist learners to gain competence in the aspects of oral interaction (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Negretti, 1999; Pellettieri, 2000; Sotillo, 2000; Warschauer, 1996 as cited in Tudini, 2003).

The language in chat texts is the hybrid form between spoken and written which is considered as spoken style in written form (Blake, 2000; Corazon, 2006; Jepson, 2005; Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003; Tudini, 2003 as cited in Yilmaz, 2008). Since chat provides real-time context for interaction and because of its real-time nature, chat texts are considered as similar to face-to-face interaction (Corazon, 2006). Nevertheless, text-based chatting appears to be missing the non-verbal, so some interlocutors create new methodology to show whose turn will chat next and discourse markers such as “like”, “well”, “but” or “oh” are claimed to signal the relation of contrast, implication, or elaboration between the speakers (Tudini, 2002)

Discourse markers were “sequentially dependent elements, which bracket units of talk” by relating what has just been said to what is about to be said next such as marking the beginning of a new topic (Schiffrin, 1988 as cited in Cohen, Giangola & Balogh, 2004). Müller (2005) found that discourse markers help to perform complex discourses of spontaneous speech and interaction smoothly and efficiently. Furthermore, discourse markers are used as a tool to help both interlocutors predict the direction of upcoming discourse from the partner (Nystorm, 2003) In term of communicative ability, it is suggested that non-native speakers who are competent in using discourse markers will be more successful in an interaction than those who are not (Fraser, 1999; Nookam, 2010)

As the importance of discourse markers shown previously, it can be advantageous for Thai students to study and develop communicative English ability. There are some researchers conducted studies of discourse markers in various languages in many aspects. For example Liao (2008) analyzed the pattern of discourse markers used by Chinese students comparing to native speakers in order to encourage an appropriate use during

the conversation for the students. Additionally, (Moreno, 2001) studied discourse markers used by Spanish students and concluded that to be successful in English communication, discourse markers should be acquired by non-native speakers as it is a crucial element to gain communicative ability. Nookam (2010) revealed the use of discourse markers in role plays with business context between native and non-native speakers in her study. It was found that the discourse markers used the most frequently by Thai students were “and”, “oh”, “but”, “so” and “well” respectively. The result of her research can be used to assist teachers in creating lessons to raise the learners’ awareness of the important roles of discourse markers in talk and to provide the appropriate use of discourse markers in conversation.

The study of discourse markers used by non-native speakers could be different from native speakers because of the misunderstanding or their lack of knowledge. Therefore, the result of the discourse markers’ functions in various situations in this study could be used in English class in order to encourage students to use discourse markers in an appropriate context and naturally interact to each other as close as native-like in daily life conversation. The result of the study could also indicate the text chatting as an interesting activity for students to practice and enhance English communicative skill outside class.

In conclusion, Thai students have rare opportunity to practice a face-to-face conversation with foreigners as the native teachers providing in Thai schools are limited (Wiriyaichitra, 2002) Moreover, a number of students in one class and short period to learn English each time can be crucial reasons that Thai students hardly have an interaction or practice English with native speakers (Chuaykum, 2013) Thus, finding a chance to practice English communication by text chatting through the Internet tends to be more popular and widely used as today’s conversation channel.

Purposes of the Study

1. To explore the frequency of discourse markers used in chat texts by non-native speakers through the Internet.
2. To investigate functions of discourse markers used by non-native speakers in chat texts.

Research Methodology

1. Participants

Forty Thai speakers from English major from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Khon Kaen University who frequently chat through synchronous online community with their native speaker partners were purposively asked to be volunteers in this study. Every participant had to pass the 411331 English Conversation and Discussion I course which emphasized formal and informal English conversation and discussion in different situations as well as oral reporting techniques.

2. Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study were an online chatting program and a concordance program.

Chatting Program

In this study the participants communicated with their partners by any chatting programs such as Facebook Messenger, Line, Skype or Yahoo Instant Messenger. The program used by the participants allowed them to interact with their partner in chat texts by typing the messages which could be occurred through the Internet by both computer and cell phone.

Concordance Program

A Concordance program used in this study was AntConc. AntConc is a freeware, which handles txt files (.txt) and html files (.html), used as a tool for finding the frequency and the position of the discourse markers in this research. This could help identify patterns and relation of the discourses used by Thai students.

3. Data Collection

Data collection of this study consisted of 3 stages.

Stage 1 Recruiting Participants

Forty non-native speakers were the fourth year Thai students from English major of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences from Khon Kaen University. The participants who frequently chat through online community with native speaker partners would be asked purposively to attend the study by e-mail with the description of the purpose of this study and what they had to do during the data collection briefly.

Stage 2 Describing Detail to the Participants

After the participants decided to participate in the study, the information of what the participants had to do was informed thoroughly. They would be asked for one time chatting with English native speakers for at least 30 turns. Chatting could be interacted via any program through the Internet such as Facebook, Line or Skype. Place and time depended on their convenience.

Stage 3 Collecting Data

The messages of each pair would be copied by the participants. Then the copy was emailed to the researcher and all chat texts were collected and saved as .txt files.

4. Data Analysis

After the data collection, each chat text was uploaded into freeware called AntConc which was used as a tool to find the frequency and position of discourse markers used by Thai students. Then the discourse markers, “well”, “so”, “and” occurred at the initial of the discourses, phrases or sentences used by Thai students were analyzed how previous and upcoming discourses were related to each other. Then, the discourse markers could be investigated for their functions according to Table 1 and checked how often the discourse markers used in the conversations. The following table shows the discourse markers checklist used to record the frequency and code functions of each discourse marker used by non-native participants.

Table 1 The Form of Discourse Markers Checklist

Participant _____ Grade _____					
WELL		SO		AND	
Function	Frequency	Function	Frequency	Function	Frequency
Giving turn/ taking turn		Repetition		Giving turn/ taking turn	
Switching topic		Indicating new/old information		Confirming information	
Making offer		Continuing old information		Eliciting information	
Agreeing/Disagreeing		Making conclusion		Continuing old information	
Marking response/ Reaction		Other		Making offer	
Correcting misunderstanding				Making a request and responding to a request	
Other				Other	
Total		Total		Total	

Results of the Study

In this study, forty chat texts used by native and non-native speakers were collected and investigated. A total of 36,087 words were used in the chat texts. In this part, the information of the frequency of the use of discourse markers “and”, “so”, “well” employed by Thai students are displayed. Also, additional information of other discourse markers found in the chat texts are shown.

Table 2 The Number of Words and Discourse Markers Used in Chat Texts
by Thai Students

Discourse Markers	Number of Use	Percentage of Use
And	84	26%
So	53	16%
Okay	50	15%
Yeah	36	11%
But	30	9%
Well	28	9%
Oh	19	6%
Ah	13	4%
Um	6	2%
Mhm	5	1%
Right	3	1%
Total	327	100%

Table 2 shows all discourse markers used in chat texts and their frequency. Eleven discourse markers were found in the chat texts but only three of them – “and”, “so” and “well” were focused on and investigated in this study. The reason that the function of “and”, “so”, “well” were investigated is each of these three discourse markers have more various functions in different situations than other discourse markers appeared in Table 2. Firstly, Table 2 indicates that the frequency use of discourse markers “and” is 84 times

(26%) which is the most frequently used by the participants in this study. Secondly, the discourse marker “so” is used 53 times (16%) in the chat texts. Finally, “well” appears 28 times (9%). The total of frequency use of three discourse markers in this study shows that the participants used them 165 times (51%) out of all occurrences of discourse markers (327 times). There are 8 other discourse markers found in this study – “ok”, “yeah”, “but”, “oh”, “ah”, “um”, “mhm” and “right”.

The discourse markers’ functions of “and”, “so”, “well” were checked in which functions they were used by each Thai. Each table shows the frequency use of the discourse marker’s functions and the examples which were extracted from the real chat texts of this study were demonstrated with the description. The result started with the functions of “and”, “so”, “well” respectively.

The Function of “And”

According to Table 3, the discourse marker “and” mainly serves 4 functions (out of 6) including giving and taking turns, confirming information, eliciting information and continuing old information. Firstly, “and” was used the most frequently to continue old information (51 times, 61%). It was used 13 times (or 15%) in giving and taking turns and 11 times in eliciting information. Finally, “and” was used 9 times to confirm the previous information. The following information shows the functions, frequency use and the example of the discourse marker “and”.

Table 3 The Function of “and” Used by Thai Students

Discourse marker “and”	Function						
	Giving turn/ taking turn	Confirming Information	Eliciting information	Continuing old information	Making Offer	Making a request and responding to a request	Other
84	13	9	11	51	-	-	-
100%	15%	11%	13%	61%	-	-	-

“And” Used in Continuing old Information

In this study, the discourse marker “and” was found to be used most frequently in the function of continuing the former information as shown in the following excerpts.

Example 1:

- Chat partner: what r u doin?
 have you had a dinner yet??
 btw i hope my sayin dear doesnt bother u
- Participant: haha no no it isn't bother me in anyway ,
 andi'm doing a study plan for this semester ,
 and chatting with you
- Chat partner: haha oh ok wow a study plan miss aun im very
 impressed how dedicated u r to ur studies
- (An extract taken from Participant # 12)*

The example shows the use of “and” the participant #12 employed to continue old information from the previous sentence of her chat partner. From this conversation, it seems as if the chat partner asked two questions at once. Therefore, the participant replied to both questions by using “and” to link her information to the previous sentence and to show that she tried answering both questions.

The following example demonstrates the use of “and” in the function of continuing information which shows the pattern of communication in chat texts. It shows the overlap during the conversation which is rather different from face-to-face communication because both participant and her chat partner cannot see each other; therefore, an overlap during an interaction could happen.

Example 2:

Chat Partner: haha
 well...
 its the truth
 sometimes a girl dumps u...
 sometimes u dump a girl...
 it happens

Participant: I see

Chat Partner: yup
 How about you... ?
 any bf?>

Participant: I always have a complicated relationship

Chat Partner: oh...why?

Participant: and never in a relationship with

Chat Partner: hmm..? with

Participant: anyone I liked at that time
 haha
 so If we like sb, we should tell directly,
 to make a relationship clearer

Chat Partner: yes...for sure
 to get it in the open

(An extract taken from Participant # 28)

In this extract, the overlap happened during the discourse of participant #28 while answering the question from her chat partner. She did not finish her expression but her chat partner asked her a new question which means the following discourse does not continue from the previous one. “And” in this conversation was used to continue the information which related to the old information of her discourse but it was interrupted by the question of her partner.

It was found that the function “and” was used the most for continuing old information by Thai students. They used “and” to add more information to the previous

discourses to probably make the message clearer or more understandable. The function of “and” used for making an offer and making and responding to a request did not appear in the chat texts. As the participants in this study were Thai students who intended to practice their English, the contexts during chatting were mostly requests for help. Some participants asked for help from their native chat partners for their English homework, whereas, offering any help was not found in chat texts in this study.

The Function of “So”

The discourse marker “so” was used for various purposes. From the 4 functions, 3 were found in the chat texts in this study. Firstly, “so” was used the most to make a conclusion to the information (25 out of 53 or 47%). It was used 20 times (38%) in indicating new and old information, and 8 times (15%) in continuing the former information. “So” used for repetition was not found in this study. The following information shows the functions of discourse marker “so” and an example of its use by the participants.

Table 4 The Function of “so” Used by Thai Students

Discourse marker “so”	Function				
	Repetition	Indicating new/old information	Continuing old information	Making conclusion	Other
53	-	20	8	25	-
100%	-	38%	15%	47%	-

“So” Used in Making Conclusions

The function of “so” used to make conclusions was the most frequently used by the participants in chat texts.

Example 3:

Participant:	What do you do?
Chat partner:	I’m a designer haha
	U?
Participant:	A student
	<u>So you are so creative, right?</u>
Chat partner:	Yes I’m alright haha I guess
	Nice what do you study?
Participant:	English major
	About linguistic
Chat partner:	Wow!!
Participant:	^^
Chat partner:	Ur English must be really good
Participant:	May be not

(An extract taken from Participant # 35)

The extract shows the use of “so” in the function of making conclusions. “So” in this conversation showed a conclusion about the previous information that both participant #35 and his chat partner had chatted together. Participant #35 used the clue in the previous message to predict the answer and used “so” to signal that his prediction from overall previous information was correct or not.

It was not surprising that “so” was used the most in the function of making a conclusion which was similar to the studies of Nookam (2010). However, in her study, “so” was use only in one function, to conclude the previous information. The result of her study could possibly because the topics concerning business were designed before having a conversation in a role play. It could possibly be that the business language had its pattern; therefore, the opportunity of using “so” by the participants in her study was

limited. However, in this study, the participants could chat with no topic set which seemed more natural. Thus, the use of “so” in this study was found in more different functions.

The Function of “Well”

The result of the discourse marker “well” showed that it was used the most to make responses and reactions (15 out of 28 or 54%). It was used 4 times (14%) in giving and taking turns, and 3 times (11%) in agreeing and disagreeing as well as correcting misunderstandings. “Well” was twice used to switch topics (7%). Apart from the main 5 functions of “well”, it was also used to function as “other” (once). In this study, “well” was not used to make an offer. Table 4 displays the functions of the discourse marker “well” and its frequency used by Thai students. Then an example demonstrates how “well” was used for making responses and reactions

Table 5 The Function of “well” Used by Thai Students

Discourse marker “well”	Function						
	Giving turn/ taking turn	Switching Topic	Making offer	Agreeing/ Disagreeing	Making Response/ reaction	Correcting misunderstanding	Other
28	4	2	-	3	15	3	1
100%	15%	11%	13%	61%	-	-	-

“Well” Used in Making Responses and Reactions

In this study, “well” was used the most frequently to make responses or reactions.

Example 4:

Chat partner: What do you study at the college ?

Participant: English

Chat partner: Ah

What do you want to do later ?

Job

Participant : Well, I’m here to find new experience but still don’t know what I really want to be. But, I’ve planned with my friend to travel Italy first when I graduate, it might find new way to go:))

(An extract taken from Participant # 15)

This example shows the use of “well” in the function of making a response and reaction. In this conversation, “well” was used to signal the information which is a response to the previous question. The discourse marker “well” may be used since participant #15 was finding the discourse to answer his chat partner. Therefore, “well” was used when the participant needed time to answer the question and arrange the discourses while replying.

In this study, “well” was used the least compared to other three discourse markers. The use of “well” is mostly found in oral conversation whereby the interlocutors generally use it to buy time to think of a response or answer before they speak. “Well” in chat texts of this study was sometimes also found when Thai students were thinking of an answer to the previous question which was similar to a real-time conversation. In chat texts, the participants just typed the word “well” and then clicked “enter” to stretch time and signal that other discourses would come up soon but the writer needed time to think and consider before giving a subsequent message. From this result, it could be possible that “well” used in chat texts was similar to face-to-face interaction in this function. Also,

the use of language in chat texts may be close to real-time conversation that the students can practice chatting English with native speakers to enhance their communicative language.

Conclusion

Forty Thai students majoring in English from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University participated in this study. There were 36,087 words from forty chat texts and the discourse markers “well”, “so”, “and” used by the participants were found in 165 occurrences (51%).

“And” was the discourse marker used by the participants the most. It was found in 84 occurrences (26%) and used for four functions in this study. The function most frequently used was continuing old information, giving and taking turns, eliciting information and confirming information, respectively.

“So” was found in 53 occurrences (16%). The discourse marker “so” was used in three functions by the participants. It was used to make a conclusion, indicate new or old information and continue the former information, respectively.

“Well” was found in 28 occurrences (9%). The function which was used the most by the participants was making responses and reactions, giving and taking turns, agreeing/disagreeing, correcting misunderstandings and switching topics, respectively.

The purposes of this study were to explore the frequency of discourse markers and investigate the functions of discourse markers used by non-native speakers in chat texts. According to the results, it can be observed that even if each discourse marker provides various functions, there was a limitation of discourse markers use by Thai students. Hence, it could be advantageous to encourage English learners to use discourse markers in a greater variety of functions so that learners could possibly enhance their communicative English ability. In addition, the Internet can be an effective tool for English learners to practice their English communicative skill as it provides the language use which is similar to real time conversations. Therefore, communicating by chat texts through the Internet could possibly encourage English learners to be aware of using discourse markers in appropriate frequency and situations in order to make their conversations smooth, natural and more likely to be native-like.

Discussion

Based on the studies of Nookam (2010), the results of frequency use of discourse markers showed that among the use of “and”, “so”, and “well”, the first two discourse markers were most common. “Well” was the discourse marker found in chat texts in this study but did not appear in the study of Nookam. The difference between two studies in using “well” could possibly be because of the research methodology. In the study of Nookam, the data collected from the participants involved topics set in the role play business situation which the participants were asked to have a conversation. From this type of topic, it could be possible that the characteristics of language use during the conversation should be formal or semi-formal as the interlocutors in the role play had to pretend that they did not know each other before and they had to discuss about business together. Moreover, the use of business language was likely to be a pattern and each business situation was communicated with the similar vocabulary or sentences. Therefore, this setting topic could possibly be the factor of discourse markers used by the participants. During the conversation in a role play, it seemed like the dialogs were prepared by the participants before they were recorded. So, it might be possible that the participants rehearsed communicating before the role play and could remember some parts of the dialog. For this reason, the use of “well” was not found in the Nookam study since “well” is mostly used to expand time to think before answering. If the interlocutors in Nookam’s study could remember the dialogs, then there is no need to buy time during a conversation. The participants could perform what they had prepared.

On the other hand, in this study the participants were asked to chat with their native chat partners only once for one pair. While chatting, the topics were not set for the participants and their chat partner; thus, both could have a conversation as they wished on any subject freely and naturally. As a result, “well” which was used to indicate response and reaction could be found in this study. The discourse marker “well” was generally used in real-time conversation to buy time to think or consider the information in mind before answering or responding to the partner. The chat texts in this study were similar to face-to-face conversation; therefore, sometimes “well” was found in the positions that showed hesitation or time stretching to signal that there would be the following messages. In short, the factor that could possibly make the different result

between the Nookam study and this study was due to the fact that the conversation in this study was not set the topic but let it flow naturally and the conversation was prepared in advance. It was found that the use of the discourse marker “well” could be found more in the conversation with no setting.

Recommendations

In this study, the participants were volunteers from only English majors from the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University. Therefore, the findings might not be generalized for other groups of samples. For further study, the participants might be included from other majors or faculties. Secondly, further study could collect more information of the participants which might be age, sex or their experiences in studying abroad. This may possibly shows the different results of the insight information of discourse markers used by participants according to various backgrounds. Finally, there were only three discourse markers focused in this study –“well”, “so”, and “and”. There should be a study of other discourse markers’ frequency and functions used by Thai students.

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คณะผู้เขียน

นางสาวสุพาพร ทองกำพัว

คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น
123 ถนนมิตรภาพ ตำบลในเมือง อำเภอเมือง จังหวัดขอนแก่น 40002
e-mail: supapon_f@hotmail.com

ดร.กรวิภา พูลผล

คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น
123 ถนนมิตรภาพ ตำบลในเมือง อำเภอเมือง จังหวัดขอนแก่น 40002
e-mail: korpul@kku.ac.th