

Native Language Interference in Writing: A case study of Thai EFL learners

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Abstract

The interference of the native language in acquiring a foreign language is unavoidable. In an attempt to explore the phenomenon why this occurs, the study was conducted in English as a foreign language writing. The study also investigated how the native language interference occurred in the writing process. In fact, this qualitative study explored the reasons and the process of native language interference in writing performances of EFL learners. The data were collected from Thai undergraduate students through semi-structured interviews. Results obtained from the analysis of this study suggested that the reasons of native language interference in EFL writing were found in three main themes: learning strategies of language learners, inadequate knowledge of the target language, and attitude towards English. Furthermore, the interference of the native language appeared in the initial stage and repeatedly occurred throughout the entire writing process. Finally, the suggestions related to the teachers' awareness of the problematic area, the use of English as the classroom language, and the use of monolingual dictionary are offered to the EFL writing instructors in order to help their EFL students to minimize the errors caused by the native language interference.

Keywords: Native language interference, EFL learners, writing, foreign language, language learning strategies

Introduction

With its international role, English has been a language that is necessary for people around the world. Cook (2003) explains that “It should be remembered that the English language is often in a unique situation, being the only language that can be used almost anywhere on the globe between people who are non-native speakers.” (p. 1). In Thailand, English is considered as a foreign language in which its knowledge and proficiency affects personal and professional lives of people. In using any language efficiently, language learners are required to master four basic skills: speaking, reading, listening and writing. Of these four skills, writing has been recognized as the most complicated language skill to master. The difficulties are driven from the process of generating ideas and converting the ideas into comprehensible texts, and writing requires such skills as grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling (Richard & Renandya, 2002). Due to this complex nature of writing, the foreign language learners have faced with difficulties and problems in acquiring English writing skills. Recent research studies greatly pay attention to second language writer variables. Among these variables, language transfer and native language have long been emphasized (Liki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008). The interference of native language in learning a target language is not a new aspect in the field of second language acquisition. However, it is a crucial influence needed to be consistently considered in learning and teaching process of EFL writing. As Ellis and Shintani (2014) suggest, “it is clearly necessary to accept that the first language will play a major role in most learners' inner world” (p. 243).

Literature Review

Native language interference

In learning a new language, the knowledge of the previous learnt language is the influencing factor as Butzkamm (2003) addresses that “This much is true: Every new language is confronted with already-existing mother tongue” (p. 31). The interference of the native language occurs when EFL speakers or writers apply the linguistic elements, structures or rules of their native language in the production of the target language. In other words, native language interference is derived from the learners’ use of previously learnt knowledge to succeed in learning a new language (Littlewood, 2002). As a result, errors from using incorrect rules of the target language are manifested. The evidence of native language interference is likely to be shown in the learners’ speech and written productions. Numerous studies have revealed the rationales of native language interference in different perspectives. Solano, Torres, Suva, Beltran, Cuesta, Jaramillo, Jaramillo, and Cordova (2014) analyzed the written texts produced by the Spanish students and concluded that the native language can hinder the progress in the writing of EFL learners. The study also discovered that the sources of native language interference were the learners’ strategy of thinking in Spanish and word-for-word translation into English (Salano et al., 2014). While Salano and her colleagues (2014) argue that the interference occurs because of learners’ strategies of target language learning, Harmer (2001) claims that there are two potential causes of native language interference: learners’ limited knowledge of vocabulary and code switching as the natural development of language acquisition.

In the contexts of Thailand, many studies have studied the native interference gravity in writing among Thai EFL students in term of its effects without any implication of the reasons for such interference. Recently, Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) analyzed writing errors caused by the interference of the Thai language in three writing genres: narration, description, and comparison/contrast. The results revealed that the native language interference caused errors in sixteen language components: verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, modal/auxiliary, singular/plural form, fragment, verb form, pronoun, run-on sentence, infinitive/gerund, transition, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparison structure, respectively. Bennui (2008) investigated errors in writing tasks composed by Thai EFL students and reported that learners’ knowledge of the Thai language led to such errors in the levels of word, sentence, and discourse. Likewise, Jenwitheesuk (2009) explored the syntactic errors in the written essays composed by Thai university students and revealed that the major source of errors in Thai EFL students’ writing was the NL interference. Jenwitheesuk (2009) concludes that “the most frequent errors in writing were due to the interference of Thai language. This is because the learners applied the structures of their mother tongue when they write in English. The differences in both vocabulary and the structures of the two languages cause the problems in writing the second language.” (p. 986). The aforementioned studies highlighted in the context of Thai EFL learners provided the evidence of the interference of the native language. The investigation of the possible causes of the native language interference has not yet been conducted.

Learning English writing in EFL context

Learning English as a foreign language is a challenging task. Most EFL learners in the environment where their native language is used in daily communication experienced the limitation of exposure to English which is restricted to the classroom. In the worst possible case, EFL learners may have merely three hours a week to learn English in the classroom. More often, EFL learners are taught English skills through memorizing but not having the connection to the actual use of the language. Most second language acquisition theories have agreed that language

learners need to be massively exposed to the language before it can be acquired. According to Ellis (1997), language input that learners uncover is necessary in making the occurrence of their language learning. Emphasizing more narrowly on the exposure to English writing, Dueraman (2015) explains that due to the limited number of English teachers who have sufficient language competency to teach English writing, English writing skills are introduced to Thai EFL learners in their years in a university, and it is only offered to those who are in English major. As English writing is initially taught at the tertiary level to a particular group of students, the chance of Thai EFL learners' exposure to English writing gets even smaller while the degree of native language involvement may get stronger.

In brief, it is obvious that the errors in writing resulted from the interference of the native language are an inevitable occurrence which a majority of EFL learners have experienced. Unfortunately, such interference often causes the inaccuracy and the incomprehensible meaning of the written texts. Consequently, errors in writing and the interference of the native language have become a central issue that many researchers in the field of linguistics and language learning have made tremendous efforts in exploring ways to help the EFL learners to overcome writing difficulties. However, research study of the reasons and the process of the native language interference in writing performances of EFL learners is scarce, causing a lack of insights on the native language interference phenomenon. Therefore, this study aims to explore the reasonable grounds of native language interference. This study also seeks to reveal the process of the native language interference. Eventually, the study provides EFL teachers with some useful suggestions that can help language learners to reduce the effects of native language interference. The research questions are as follows:

1. Why does native language interference occur in the writing of EFL students?
2. How does the native language interference occur in the writing of EFL students?

Methodology

Participants

In Thailand, only students majoring in English Language are taking writing courses in their junior and senior years. Therefore, the seniors were determined as the population of this present study because they have taken some writing courses. In considering the sample size for the qualitative study, Patton (2002) suggests that the sample size is normally small, even one participant who is purposefully selected. Therefore, five university students majoring in English Language at two universities in Thailand, were selected for semi-structured interviews in this qualitative study. The participants were female at the age of 21 and 22 years. They study English in the classrooms where Thai is used as the medium of instruction, and Thai is their native language. Both of them used only Thai language for daily communication and they were exposed to the English language only in the classrooms.

Tanya

Although she had been studying English for fifteen years, she had no writing experience before the undergraduate level. At the time of the study, she had completed two writing courses: Basic Writing and Paragraph Writing. She performed well and earned "B" grade in both of previous writing courses. During her years in the high school, she attended some special English classes outside, and the lessons mostly involved grammar. However, she found that applying accurate grammar rules was the greatest difficulty she encountered while writing.

Marisa

Marisa was also a senior who had been studying English for fifteen years and started to learn English writing at the university. She had never participated in any special English classes outside. Before the interview, she had completed the same writing courses as Tanya. Facing the difficulties in applying the grammar rules and the limitation of vocabulary, she earned “B” grade in Basic Writing and “C” in a Paragraph Writing. She found that English writing was the most difficult skill to achieve.

Tommy

Tommy is a monolingual who is only fluent in Thai and uses Thai in his daily communication. He had been learning English for fifteen years in the regular classroom, and he had never participated in any special English classes outside. Moreover, he had never taken any writing course before attending the university. However, he performed well with all “A” grade in four completed writing courses, including Writing I, Writing II, and Advanced Writing.

Sue

Sue is a bilingual who is fluent in Thai and Malay languages and normally speaks Malay at home and Thai in the community. Sue had been learning English for fifteen years in the formal system of education. In addition, she took some special English classes outside when she was in the secondary and high school. She had performed well in grammar tests, but not writing. Sue started to learn English writing at the university and had finished three writing courses, and she made a “B” grade in Writing I, a “C” in Writing II, and a “C” in Advanced Writing.

Lila

Like a majority of Thai students, Lila is a monolingual who fluently uses Thai language as a mean of daily communication and studies English as a foreign language in the formal school. She attended some special English classes outside when she was in secondary and high schools. However, she first started to learn English writing in the university, and her performances in the previous writing courses were average with a “C” grade in all writing courses.

procedure

Before the interview, the participants were asked to select a topic out of three given choices and compose a narrative essay of 300-500 words within one hour and a half without using a dictionary. The semi-structured interview, which its contents of questions were emphasized on the participants’ retrospective reflections on writing practice and process of their completed writing task, was used as the major instrument to gather the qualitative data for the analysis of the study. The interviews were scheduled based on the participants’ convenience. Two participants were asked questions to describe their performance in writing an essay with the focus on applying the linguistic elements of their native language in the English writing task. The interviews were conducted in Thai, and the participants were interviewed individually by the researcher. Each interview took approximately thirty minutes, and the interview took place in a private setting where it had the positive atmosphere. The audio aid was used, with the participants’ consent, to record answers. The student interview was aimed to uncover and capture the students’ views on English writing related to the native language interference. After each interview session, the interview record was transcribed immediately, and a thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. The procedures of the thematic analysis were adopted from the thematic analysis guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006:108).

Results

The interview transcripts were systematically coded data that were relevant to the study. Then, the researcher considerably combined coded data to form themes that emerged from the data. Eventually, the existing themes were defined and presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Thematic Analysis of the Study*

Sample Items	Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I normally start with the outline to gather my ideas on the scrap paper. Then, I form the sentences and rearrange them into paragraphs. I do all the steps in Thai language first, and later translate them into English. (Marisa) - I usually write my first draft in Thai and translate into English. (Tanya) - Definitely, I had to translate the topics to comprehend. (Tommy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Word-for-Word Translation - Clarifying the topic by translating into Thai - Generating ideas in Thai - Making an outline in Thai 	1. Language Learning Strategies

Sample Items	Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - After that, I started to generate my ideas in Thai, wrote my first draft in Thai, and translated into English. (Lila) - I began my essay by trying to understand the topic in Thai, then main ideas in Thai and used them to build the translated English sentences. (Sue) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing the first draft in Thai 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I have to know many English words which I don't know as much as I know Thai vocabularies. (Tanya) - I didn't know many vocabularies. (Marisa) - I use Thai-English to find an unknown word and use English-Thai to find the meaning of a word. English-Thai gives me clear definition. (Marisa) - I have to know many English words which I don't know as much as I know Thai vocabularies. (Tanya) - I end up don't know the meaning of other words in English-English dictionary and have to go back English-Thai anyway, too much work. (Marisa) - On the internet or a Thai-English dictionary. (Lila) - I prefer to use the online search...mostly to find unknown words. (Sue) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Use bilingual dictionary - Limited knowledge of English words - English-Thai to search for the definition of a word - Thai-English to find the unknown words 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I understand the grammar and know the rule, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited knowledge 	2. Inadequate

<p>but I have a problem using them. (Sue)</p> <p>- I don't really understand some of the rules and structure, and I also forget when and how to use a particular tense. (Marisa)</p> <p>-I know that have/has followed by past participle is present perfect tense, but I am not confident to use. (Tanya)</p> <p>-Those exceptions make me confused. (Lila)</p> <p>-I always get confused in using correct tense. (Lila)</p> <p>-My other problem is the vocabulary. Frequently, I struggle with not knowing the words in English, and it makes writing even harder. (Tommy)</p> <p>-And I end up using a wrong word frequently. (Sue)</p> <p>-I also don't know a lot of English words, and I have to search for English words every time I write. (Lila)</p>	<p>of grammar and vocabulary</p> <p>-Turn to the native language for help</p> <p>-Guessing</p>	<p>Knowledge</p>
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Sample Items	Codes	Themes
<p>-If I don't know what tense to use, I simply use the basic form of the verb as we do with Thai writing. (Tanya)</p> <p>- I just use what I know. I make a lot of guesses. If I really don't know English structure, I often look at my first draft in Thai language and translate it. (Marisa)</p> <p>- I make a guess when I don't really know the rule. (Tommy)</p>		
<p>- We make errors in Thai language sometimes, and English is a foreign language. Making errors in English is acceptable. (Tommy)</p> <p>-Thai is my mother tongue. It is already in my head. English is just a foreign language. It's OK to make errors. (Tanya)</p> <p>- I was born with the Thai language, English is just what I need for my education and a future career. (Marisa)</p> <p>-If I made a mistake in Thai language, it would have been considered a serious problem. In English, all Thai students make errors, so it is no big deal. (Lila)</p>	<p>-The Thai language is a privilege.</p> <p>-English is simply a foreign language.</p>	<p>3. Attitude toward</p>
<p>- I begin my English essay by translating the</p>	<p>-Using Thai at the</p>	<p>4. The role of</p>

<p>topic into Thai. (Marisa)</p> <p>- I normally generate my thoughts and contents in Thai, write and organize those ideas in Thai sentences and paragraphs, and translate into English. During my translation into English, I still think in Thai if I want to add some more ideas to my writing. (Marisa)</p> <p>-I begin an essay the same way, by translating the topic into Thai, but I only make a list of the main ideas and start constructing sentences and organizing paragraphs in English... Well, I use Thai language during my paragraph writing to think about the meaning of a word. (Tanya)</p> <p>-I try to understand the topic first. Of course, I have to translate to Thai to thoroughly understand it. Then, I try to get the main ideas. Yes, I still think in Thai. I list the main ideas in English though. Then, I start to write by thinking each sentence in Thai and translate to English. (Tommy)</p> <p>-The only time I think in English is when I am writing a sentence. Other than that, I think in Thai. (Sue)</p>	<p>very beginning stage of writing</p> <p>-Thinking in Thai in every step of the writing process</p>	<p>the native language in the writing process</p>
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Discussion

The findings of the analysis allow the researchers to answer the research question: 1) Why does native language interference occur in the writing of EFL students? The explanations of the reasons of the occurrences of native language interference are as follows.

Learning strategies

In the learning process, language learners use various strategies to understand the contents being learnt. Those strategies that EFL learners employ in learning a foreign language refer to language learning strategies (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Learning strategies include the learners' efforts to overcome the difficulties and problems in their writing (Dueraman, 2012). Sometimes learners systematically and successfully select language learning strategies but in other times, especially in desperate situations, the learners carelessly employ the strategies that negatively affect the learning process. That is to say, if Thai EFL learners use generalization, which is the learners' application of the general rule of one item to the other items, as a language learning strategy, they may make overgeneralization errors if they are incautious with an exception to the basic rule (Littlewood, 2002). For example, the EFL learners learn to form a plural noun by adding "s". However, if a learner writes "There were many childs", he or she has committed an overgeneralization error, as child is one of the irregular plural forms. The findings of this study revealed that EFL students frequently employed two language learning strategies which caused the interference of their native language, namely word-for word translation and the use of a bilingual dictionary.

Word-For-Word translation

Understanding that the best way to learn a new language is through the learners' native language (Cook, 2003), many language learners use translation as their learning strategy. In this study, the participants made the effort to yield a word-for-word translation of the written Thai version into English. When they were asked why they had to write in their NL first before they could carry out in English writing, both participants gave the same reason that doing so facilitated their English writing process. From the findings of this study, it is possible to conclude that EFL students relied on their native language to simplify the process of learning a target language. Although Carreres (2006) asserts that translation into a target language "can help learners to systemize and renationalize a learning mechanism that is taking place anyway" (p.6), it is possible on another side of the coin that the strong involvement of the native language can hinder the learning achievement of the EFL learners. The problem of using word-for-word translation was that the participants did not follow the rules of the language they were translating into, and the linguistic components of Thai and English are not equivalent.

Use of bilingual dictionary

Bilingual dictionary in this context refers to an English dictionary with Thai translations as it is called an English-Thai or Thai-English dictionary. These bilingual dictionaries provide one-word definition without a wealth of explanations that allow the users to understand the actual meaning of a word. According to the findings of this study, Thai EFL students have faced with the limited knowledge in English vocabulary. Their best way to find the unknown English words was the use of a Thai-English dictionary. Furthermore, Thai EFL students are reluctant to use a monolingual dictionary because they need to know more vocabularies to translate definitions. Such condition grants the advantage of bilingual dictionary of being less confusion. In fact, the use of a bilingual dictionary may offer Thai EFL students a solution to the problem of vocabulary limitation. However, it resulted in selecting appropriate words that did not convey accurate semantic meanings due to the fact a bilingual dictionary contains the translation, and there is no equivalence between languages. Therefore, this study argues that the use of a bilingual dictionary can lead to the negative transfer of the semantic forms of the native language into English words although bilingual dictionaries may provide clear and better understanding of the meaning of a word.

Inadequate knowledge

An effective writing involves a number of components such as following rhetorical conventions, using the appropriate grammatical system, organizing content at the paragraph level, and editing and revising the initial draft, and selecting an appropriate style (Nunan, 1999:273). In writing, learners need to choose the accurate grammatical device from the complex linguistic system, and they also need to select the right choice of words (Hedge, 2005:119). Having insufficient knowledge of grammatical rules and structures and a limited choice of vocabulary, ones could find it is difficult to create an effective written work without any type of error. Frequently, the EFL learners are found to understand the linguistic rules and structures of the target language, for they have been studying English for several years. However, they have encountered with the usage complexity and unsuccessfully apply those rules and structures in producing texts resulting in committing errors. The thematic analysis of this study revealed that the EFL learners have learnt the grammatical rules and structures, yet they have failed in using correct English grammar that accounts for writing accuracy.

On frequent occasions, the EFL learners have tried their best to use the accurate target language rules as much as their knowledge granted. Unfortunately, the writing difficulties

consistently exist. When The EFL learners were asked about their solutions to the difficulty in learning a target language, they use their knowledge of the native language to help (Ellis, 1997). It is even worse than that. Thai EFL students not only depended on using the knowledge of their native language, but they also took a risk in completing a writing task by guessing.

Attitude towards english

The language which is first brought to our lives is the native language. Learning a foreign language and acquiring a communicative competency in using it is a new aspect of life that calls for a combination of requirements, including attitude towards the target language. Ellis (2008) suggests that language learners have different attitudes towards a target language, and learners' attitude has influenced the level of target language learning achievement. In the light of this study, Thai EFL students perceived their native language not only as a facilitating means of learning, but as the dominant and privileged language. English, in contrast, was believed to be simply a necessary accessory in the academic and professional journeys. The learners' attitude can drive positive or negative motivation to learn something. Littlewood (2002:53) explains that motivation plays an important role in language learning because it determines the learners' energy and engagement in learning the target language. If the learners have negative motivation, their success in learning can be least expected.

To answer the second research question: How does the native language interference occur in the writing of EFL students?, the study explored the use of learners' native language in the process of writing, and analyzed the strength of the native language engagement in the EFL writing process.

The role of the native language in the writing process

For the EFL learners, the native language has naturally immediate access to their speech or written performances in the target language. Nation (2003:1) suggests that the native language plays a small role in target language communication. Nevertheless, the finding of this study revealed that native language had played a major role throughout the writing process. More specifically, the EFL learners use their native language to help in understanding the given topic, brainstorming to generate the thoughts, translating the ideas to sentences. The target language is actually used only when the learners are writing the sentences. The finding of this study also suggested that the EFL learners converse two languages around while writing in the target language. That is, they think in their native language, translate into English, and write a sentence, and they switch to the native language, translate into English again, and write an English sentence. This process repeatedly continues until the writing task is completed. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the native language has taken a major part in the process of target language performance. In addition, it seems to be impossible to reduce the strong involvement of the native language in EFL writing process. Thai EFL learners almost always think in their native language, and this cognitive process seems likely to be unexceptional for the advanced level learners. The EFL learners felt that there would be little chance for them to think, generate their ideas in English or automatically use it. Despite of their realization of the discrepancy between the two systems of the native and target languages, the EFL learners insisted on using and thinking in the native language in the EFL learning process. This is because "thinking in English when writing in English is very difficult for Thai students. Their Thai language structures and culture inevitably interfere with their written English." (Bennui, 2008, p. 73).

Implications for research and practice

Currently, English writing is in demand in many Asian countries for professional and academic purposes (Manchon, 2009:2). In Thailand, acquiring writing skill is considered the necessary engagement for the twenty-first century. To be able to write effectively, EFL learners are required to validate two crucial elements such as the ability to choose the correct words or vocabulary and to construct the text which retains grammatical and syntactical accuracy. A challenging phenomenon in acquiring a writing skill is the interference of the native language. The reasons behind this have been revealed in the study. With regard to the results of this study, learning strategies of language learners, inadequate knowledge of the target language, and attitude toward English were reported as the main sources of native language interference. These findings also revealed that the interference of native language extended from the initial stage and continuously repeat to the final stage of writing. The negative effects of the native language seem to be impossible to eliminate. However, there are many probable ways for teachers and educators to minimize the errors in writing resulted from learners' native language. The following suggestions should be somehow useful:

Awareness of the problematic area

Native language interference is unavoidable in teaching and learning English because most EFL students prefer to use their native language as a means to thoroughly understand the contents of the foreign language being learnt. It is necessary that EFL writing teachers, lecturers, and educators should have some knowledge of the problematic linguistic items in which the learners most likely to make errors in order to handle them successfully. In most cases, grammar seems to be the complicated area that EFL learners use their native language to simplify. Teachers or lecturers should base their selection of teaching method and strategy on the level of learners' knowledge and their frequent errors. Furthermore, teachers and lecturers should provide feedback to help the learners reduce errors resulted from native language interference and improve their writing.

Using English as a classroom language

Frequent exposure to English should provide EFL learners to practice English grammar usage as well as help learners to improve vocabulary and learn new words. English should be used as a classroom language in EFL learning. By doing so, EFL learners can actually be obliged for learning a target language instead of depending on their native language. El-dali (2012) suggests that the overuse of the native language can be a language learning barrier and hinders the learners' fluency in using the target language.

Using a monolingual dictionary

Nation (2003) explains that EFL learners need to study English for at least five to six years to achieve the knowledge of 2000 words in order to use the monolingual dictionary effectively. Therefore, EFL students at the tertiary level should be encouraged to use an English / English dictionary to gain learners' understanding the sense relation of a word and their correctness in selecting a word that truly conveys the intended meaning. Some EFL learners may strongly prefer bilingual dictionaries; however, their use should be minimized.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study was based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews of two Thai EFL students at the tertiary level of education. The genuine value of this research study is the provision of insights on the reasons and the process of native language interference

occurrence in the writing of EFL students, especially Thai EFL students. The findings of the study suggested that the use of learning strategies, particularly word-for-word translation and bilingual dictionary, inadequate knowledge of the target language, and attitude toward English were the reasons of the occurrences of native language interference in the writing of Thai EFL students. Furthermore, the study highlighted that the native language involves in every stage of the EFL writing process as the learners habitually think in their native language. For pedagogical implications, writing instructors should be aware of the interference of students' native language is undeniable as long as the students' preference in using their native language as a learning tool is incredibly strong. Writing instructors should be able to identify the students' errors resulted from the native language interference and reconsider the learning activities and materials. Instructors also should increase the use of English as the classroom language which allows the students more exposure in practicing English. The use of a monolingual dictionary should be promoted to reduce students' dependence on their native language.

The present study was based on the semi-structured interview of two Thai EFL students. As such, the analysis was limited in the EFL context of Thailand with the small sample. Future research should involve a larger sample in the different EFL environment and thinking-aloud protocol should be employed to identify the participants' actual encounters while they are planning, writing, revising and editing an essay. A quasi-experimental study on the effects of using different types of dictionary should receive further attention, as well as the studies on types of exposure to improve EFL writing.

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