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## **Worries of novice researchers in writing research papers**

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### **Abstract**

Due to 'pressures' to publish research papers, a group of novice researchers ( $n=9$ ) was encouraged to attend a 'Write right' workshop. The participants were asked to fill out a self-report anxiety questionnaire to understand their worries in writing research papers in English. Afterwards, they were asked to write an essay on situations that provoke their anxiety when writing research papers. Descriptive analysis of the survey questionnaire revealed their worries on the process of research paper writing and evaluation. Additionally, responses of the participants in the open-ended question included their worries on the following situations: grammar usage ( $n=6$ ), appropriateness of word-use ( $n=4$ ), weak English writing skills ( $n=3$ ), negative perception of the readers, writing arguments, writing the discussion, difficulty of the research topic, lack of research background, unsure of methods in writing 'arts' research, unsure if its research, difficulty of finding the topic, data analysis, writing a sentence, and designing the paper. Such worries were thematized into technical writing-related worries, research writing-related worries, research knowledge-related worries, and negative perception. Further, error analysis, which was used to explore their written outputs, showed grammatical, lexical and syntactic errors. Data triangulation confirmed that their writing apprehensions are due to lack of writing skill and lack of confidence in writing research papers. The responses of the participants were used to redesign the workshop as series of group and individualized sessions to respond to their needs. Some resources on technical and research writing, research methods and publishing papers are also recommended.

**Keywords:** Writing Anxiety/ Novice Researchers/ Research Papers

## **Background of the study**

“Publish or perish” is becoming a common phrase in higher education as lecturer-researchers need to publish research papers to maintain their status, to apply for academic positions or to ask for research grants. In addition, as universities compete for national, regional and global recognition, research outputs are expected to be published in recognized national (TCI-Indexed), regional (ACI-Indexed) or international journals (ISI- or Scopus-Indexed). So research papers are heavily used for various purposes such as research grants, university rankings, among others.

To support lecturer-researchers in Thailand, the government has established Thai Research Fund (TRF) in 1992 to “assist the development of researchers and research-based knowledge” (Thailand Research Fund, n.d.). It awards seven grants such as TRF Grant for New Researcher, TRF-CHE Research Grant for New Scholar, TRF-CHE Research Grant for Mid-Career University Faculty, Research Career Development Grant, TRF Basic Research Grant, TRF Research-team Promotion Grant, and Royal Jubilee Ph.D. Grant. In the university level, research support has been enormous. For instance, in a top-ranked university in Bangkok, about 200 million baht was initially allocated for research fund. Grants are also available for lecturers who published in recognized journals, for example, TCI- and Scopus-Indexed journals.

In spite of the available resources, the number of publications by Thai lecturer-researchers is found below average. In a university in Southern Thailand, Sirasathitkul and Sirasathitkul (2015) reported an increasing trend in the publication output of the academic staff from 2007 to 2014 in ISI- and Scopus-Indexed publications. However, the ratio in publication per academic staff is very low, which varies from 0.08 to 0.15 for ISI publications and 0.12 to 0.24 for Scopus-Indexed journals. Similarly, in the field of English language teaching in Thailand, only 28 articles were published in Scopus-Indexed international journals between 2000 to 2010 (Jaroongkhongdach, Watson Todd, Keyaravong, & Hall, 2012).

Some insights could explain the low volume of published papers by Thai lecturer-researchers. Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012) identified potential problems in the quality of articles published by Thai researchers found in the literature review, methodology, and discussion sections. Accordingly, the levels of coherence, informativeness, appropriacy and justification in the literature review were found lower than that of articles published by international authors. Also, the levels of strength and reflection in the discussion section seemed problematic. Further, the authors surmised other

problems from previous literature including lack of time, lack of resources or funds, lack of connections, bias against scholars from peripheral countries, and parochialism.

It could be possible that the publication outputs of novice lecturer-researchers (subsequently referred to as novice researchers in the paper) may have affected the ratio of publication as well as the quality of published articles in internationally recognized journals. It is expected that novice researchers face daunting tasks in writing publishable articles and that could result to unprecedented stresses in their career and lives. Therefore, in this paper, it attempts to know the experiences and insights of novice researchers to understand their worries in writing research papers in English and publishing articles in national or international recognized journals.

### **Anxiety in writing research papers**

Language anxiety is a common phenomenon among non-native speakers in speaking, reading, listening and writing. Generally, it is an experience described as “feelings of worries, apprehensions, nervousness and tensions” (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p.125). For specific situations, anxiety experienced in language learning contexts is labelled as situation-specific anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Foreign or second language anxiety, for example, English, could be due to the cognitive difficulties (Sparks & Ganschow, 2007), cultural orientations (Tseng, 2012), low proficiency in the target language (Kunt & Tum, 2010), teacher’s feedback (Mak, 2011), dictation test (Matsuura, 2007), fear of making mistakes (Liu, 2016), among others. It is widely published that anxiety negatively affects language learning or language performance of university students as well as young learners (Cheng, 2002, Elkhafaifi, 2005; Mak, 2011; Liu, 2016).

In writing, little has been known with regards to anxiety among lecturer-researchers as well as its effects on their ability to write research papers in English.

### **Methods**

To understand the phenomenon above, a group of novice researchers voluntarily agreed to participate in the data collection during the “Write right” workshop, a 30-hour academic writing course organized by an arts department in a university in Bangkok. A novice researcher, in the present study, is comprised of the first two-stage researchers as defined by European Commission. Accordingly, First Stage Researchers are supervised, and Recognised Researchers are PhD holders

with some significant level of independence (European Commission, n.d.). In the study, nine lecturers (two PhD and seven MA holders), who have zero published papers in refereed journals, were asked to share their worries in writing research papers.

A self-report writing research anxiety scale was distributed to the participants during the workshop. The scale was adapted from Choi's (2013) study on writing anxiety in second language. Future studies may validate the proposed anxiety scale for novice researchers due to the limited number participants ( $n=9$ ) in the current study.

The scale consists of items concerning worries in writing, difficulties experience in writing, among others (see Table 1). The self-report anxiety was rated in a 5-point Likert-scale: 5 - strongly agree, 4 - agree, 3 - somewhat agree and disagree, 2 - disagree, and 1 - strongly disagree. The self-rating results were analyzed quantitatively – descriptive statistics. Negative statements (items 1, 2, 5 and 6) with higher scores mean the participants have adverse views on writing or publishing. On the other hand, lower scores indicate their favorable attitudes towards writing or publishing. Positive statements (for examples, items 7, 11, and 12) which received low scores mean negative views on writing or publishing.

The participants were also asked to write an essay about their worries in writing research papers. Their written outputs were analyzed qualitatively by coding the errors. Also, their written insights of their worries in writing research were thematized accordingly.

## **Results and discussion**

This section reports the results and discusses salient findings.

### *Self-report anxiety scale*

As shown in Table 1, the novice researchers seemed to have positive attitudes in writing research papers (see items 3, 4, 8, and 9). For instances, the novice researchers look forward to writing their research papers, submitting their research papers, writing research papers by themselves or with their colleagues. Four statements, items 1, 2, 5 and 6, are stated in negative form. It means that the novice researchers agree that expressing their ideas through writing is a waste of time ( $M=3.89$ ), avoid writing research papers ( $M=3.44$ ), worried on the evaluation results of their research paper ( $M=3.33$ ), and 'blank minds' when they start to write a research paper ( $M=3.0$ ). In addition, the

mean scores of three items were found below 3.0. In other words, the novice researchers had difficulty writing their research ideas (Item 11,  $M=2.89$ ), they thought that writing a research is a ‘not’ fun (Item 12,  $M=2.67$ ), and they experienced lack of confidence in expressing their ideas clearly in written forms (Item 7,  $M=2.56$ ).

**Table 1** Descriptive analysis of anxiety scale

Item	Description	Mean score	SD.
1	I avoid writing research papers.	3.44	0.68
2	I worry of my writing being evaluated.	3.33	0.67
3	I look forward to writing my research paper.	3.11	0.99
4	Submitting my written research output makes me feel good.	3.22	0.92
5	My mind seems to go blank when I start to write a research paper.	3.00	0.67
6	Expressing my ideas through writing is a waste of time.	3.89	0.87
7	I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing a research paper.	2.56	0.83
8	I like my colleagues to read what I have written.	3.22	0.63
9	I’m not nervous about writing research papers.	3.00	0.67
10	I enjoy writing research papers with colleagues.	3.33	0.67
11	It’s quite easy to start writing my research ideas.	2.89	0.74
12	Writing research paper is a lot of fun.	2.67	0.82

### *Error analysis*

Error analysis was utilized to understand common errors in their essays. Three levels of errors were found in their written outputs (see examples 1 and 2) including grammatical, lexical, and syntactic (refer to Table 2).

### *Example 1*

The things that make me nervous about writing a research from 2 main reasons. Research skill, my background was from practice base study. Most outcome of study was measure and evaluated by oral presentation, by explain and demonstrate. Lack of vocabulary and grammar skills in English in English, this I’m not blame other but myself. To solve this, I need more practice.

Example 2

That is the grammatic writing that make me anxious when I write a research paper. I may worry the way I use Thai language is much different from academic English way. Then I worry the readers can't understand exactly what is the meaning in my explanation. Some discussions or important argumentations in my incomplete writing are ambivalent interpreted.

**Table 2** Levels of error

Levels of error occurred	Examples	No. of occurrence
<b>Grammatical</b> (inappropriate verb tense, conjugations, capitalization)	I rarely used Another things	22
<b>Lexical</b> (spelling, wrong word usage with inaccurate meaning –semantic)	Flied (field) Abot (about) I thing (I think)	19
<b>Syntactic</b> (discourse level) (coherence, sentence fragment )	Research skill, my background was from... That is the grammatic writing that make me anxious when I write research paper.	11

*Insights from the participants*

Coding of the participants written outputs was conducted. Worries identified by several participants include grammar usage ( $n=6$ ), appropriateness of word-use ( $n=4$ ), and weak English writing skills ( $n=3$ ). It appears that the situations identified above are related to the codes reported under error analysis (see preceding section).

As shown in Table 3, four themes and 13 sub-themes were elicited. The first theme focuses on 'Technical writing-related worries' such as grammar usage, appropriateness of word-use, weak English writing skills, and sentence writing. Next, 'Research writing-related worries' includes writing arguments, writing discussion and data analysis. 'Research knowledge-related worries' was also coded including difficulty of finding a research topic, difficulty of the research topic, lack of research background, unsure of methods, and unsure of research topic. Lastly, 'Negative perception' focuses on the possible negative evaluation of readers.

**Table 3** Elicited themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Technical writing-related worries	Grammar usage, Appropriateness of word-use, Weak English writing skills Writing a sentence
Research writing-related worries	Writing arguments, Writing discussion, Data analysis
Research knowledge-related worries	Difficulty of finding a research topic, Difficulty of the research topic, Lack of research background, Unsure of methods, Unsure of research topic
Negative perception	Negative perception of readers

Based on the elicited codes above, it is not surprising to know that the participants were worried on technical writing as reflected in their written outputs. Similar to the results in Jaroongkhongdach et al's (2012) study on the quality of Thai published papers, findings related to research writing included worries on writing arguments, discussion and analysis. The participants' seemingly low writing competence aggravated by their lack of confidence in designing research studies may have resulted to zero publication outputs in English.

It can also be established that there is a profound effect of research writing anxiety on their attitude to writing research. Among the participants, there seems to be a high level of agreement that writing their research ideas is 'a waste of time' as they might not have enough time due to their teaching and administrative workloads. It could also be explained by their writing proficiency as shown in the levels of error coded from their written outputs. As a result, they avoid writing research papers. It is expected that they are apprehensive of negative perceptions of the readers (as indicated in the elicited themes) or when their outputs are evaluated (item 2 of the survey).

Although they are worried of many writing-related variables, they appear to have positive outlook after the academic writing workshop, for instances, looking forward to write a research paper, submitting their research output, and collaborating with their colleagues (see Table 1). It is highly recommended that individual, department or faculty-driven research initiatives should be encouraged.



### *Implications on the writing workshop*

Before the survey, the workshop was designed for group sessions only. Afterwards, it was reorganized and divided into two parts - group sessions for academic writing, and individual sessions for research discussions and feedbacks on research proposals. Having individualized sessions yielded very positive results including the submission of at least five (collaborative) papers for international conferences.

### **How can novice researchers begin to address their writing problems?**

Self-initiated writing practice maybe helpful for novice researchers, for example, accessing free online writing resources. Downloading online guidelines, and reading previous literatures can be worthwhile. The following list of technical and research writing resources below are highly recommended.

1) The Purdue Online Writing Lab ([www.english.purdue.edu](http://www.english.purdue.edu)) contains useful materials including general writing resources, academic writing, sentence level organization and style, grammar topics, punctuations, among others. It also includes resources on how to use citation and format style such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and Modern Language Association (MLA).

2) The School of Liberal Arts (SoLA), King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) has an online learning resource – <http://salc.kmutt.ac.th>. Non-students may also register as visitors in [www.myenglish.kmutt.ac.th](http://www.myenglish.kmutt.ac.th) to access language learning materials, do self-evaluation, among others.

3) Dr. Richard Watson Todd, an associate professor in the School of Liberal Arts, KMUTT, has some Research PowerPoints that can be downloaded from <http://arts.kmutt.ac.th/crs/index.php?p=/research/powerpoints>. Examples of topics posted include 'Publishing in refereed journals', 'A new methodology for Thailand', 'Classroom research', 'Drawing implications', 'Mixed-methods data analysis', among others.

4) Wallwork's English for Writing Research Papers published by Springer in 2011. The book covers comprehensive topics for researchers (inexperienced and experienced) in any discipline concerning writing a research paper in English. Other guidelines are given on how to reduce grammatical mistakes, planning and organizing the paper, deciding on what to include in each section of the paper, highlighting claims and contributions of the research, avoiding ambiguity, among others.

5) To avoid pitfalls in writing literature review, Jaroongkhongdach (2013) has written ten common mistakes. His paper can be downloaded from [http://arts.kmutt.ac.th/crs/downloads/article\\_repository/20160303164333-idea-sharing-ten-mistakes-to-avoid-when-writing-a-literature-review.pdf/](http://arts.kmutt.ac.th/crs/downloads/article_repository/20160303164333-idea-sharing-ten-mistakes-to-avoid-when-writing-a-literature-review.pdf/).

Novice researchers may also seek mentorship or collaborate with other experienced researchers in other departments or faculties within the university. Attending research workshops relevant to their research interests organized by the university or faculties could be also be beneficial.

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