Improve Writing Performance for EFL Learners with the Enhanced Use of Synonyms and Antonyms

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ABSTRACT: This study attempts to investigate the impacts of the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms on writing performance for third-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education during the second term of the academic year 2020-2021. This study employed a quasi-experimental research design with the use of questionnaires and tests as research instruments. A group of 29 out of 58 students were invited to participate in a ten-week experimental course during which they did supplementary exercises related to synonyms and antonyms. The data collected from the Pre-test and Post-test revealed that the participants not only had positive attitudes toward using synonyms and antonyms in their writing but also improved their writing performance. The results collected from questionnaires also revealed positive feedback from the students towards the use of synonyms and antonyms as well as the helpfulness of supplementary exercises during the experimental course.

KEYWORDS: Writing, Writing performance, Paragraph, Synonyms, Antonyms

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

The ultimate goal of learning English is to make communication. In more detail, communicative abilities consist of four skills, namely listening, reading, speaking and writing. However, writing is the most complicated skill for learners to achieve. The reason is that students who want to become good writers have to meet various high demands of writing such as generating ideas, using a range of vocabulary, spelling, avoiding grammar mistakes, using collocations, and ensuring cohesion and coherence. Despite the fact that synonyms and antonyms are one of the most important factors to upgrade students 'lexical resources in writing, they cannot always be mastered by all students. To solve this problem, the study was conducted to improve writing performance for third-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education with the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms.

1.2. Aims of the study

This study aims to improve writing performance for third-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education with the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms.

1.3. Research questions

The researchers outlined two main research questions:

   i. *What is the current situation of using synonyms and antonyms among English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education?*
   ii. *To what extent does the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms have an impact on students' paragraph writing performance?*

1.4. Participants

Fifty-eight third-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education were invited to participate in the study.

1.5. Significance of the research

The findings of this study might bring about benefits for third-year English majors since they provide them with an opportunity to improve their writing performance with the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms. The results of this study might also be helpful for teachers because they can bring them some techniques when teaching synonyms and antonyms. Moreover, the findings of this study might be beneficial to future researchers because they reveal the impacts of the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms on students' performance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The concept of writing

Writing is the sharpest instrument for communicating with language and emotion through symbols and patterns. Writing in a language is based on numerous factors such as vocabulary, grammar, and structure, as well as coherence and cohesiveness, with the addition of a dependent system of signals or patterns.

Communication is one of the most important pillars of many activities. Writing is one of the most powerful communication methods. It helps people convey thoughts, feelings, and ideas in each language. According to Calkins & Ehrenworth (2016), if a writer wants to effectively connect with their readers in a foreign language, they must incorporate knowledge of the issue, lexical resources, grammar, and structural range.

Heaton (1979) claimed that writing skills are sophisticated and difficult to learn since they need not just the precise use of grammatical structures, but also the use of a range of talents such as stylistic and mechanical expertise. Style skills may be described as the capacity of authors to use sentences and language effectively, whereas automated skills are the ability to apply language rules accurately such as punctuation, spelling, and tenses.

2.2. The concept of writing performance

Writing performance can be understood as a process carried out to accomplish a writing task, and the results can be measured. In other words, writing performance can be the writer's ability to accomplish a writing task (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). This means that learners can use language to express thoughts and emotions as well as gather information and ideas.

2.3. The concept of synonyms

The words are called "synonyms" when they have similar parts of speech and similar meanings. However, these words are not identical in meanings because although they can share a similar denotational, they may differ in terms of connotation.

On the one hand, "synonyms" are classified into two types: strict synonyms and loose synonyms. Strict synonyms are terms that can be used interchangeably in all situations. There were no changes in the content, style, or connotation of phrases when they were substituted with other terms known as synonyms (Jackson & Amvela, 2000). It is clear that precise synonyms are difficult to come by, if not non-existent. Kreidler (1998) stated that no two words can share every related property of language. A loose synonym is a term that has a similar meaning but cannot totally replace each other in all instances (Jackson & Amvela, 2000).

On the other hand, according to Hoang Tat Truong (2005), there are five different types of synonyms: semantic synonyms, stylistic synonyms, semantic-stylistic synonyms, phraseological synonyms, and territorial synonyms.

2.4. The concept of antonyms

In "Basic English lexicology" (2005), Hoang Tat Truong defined that antonyms are two or more than two words that have a similar part of speech, style, and distribution, but their denotative meanings are opposite or contrast. Based on meanings, derivation, and parts of speech, antonyms are classified into various kinds.

Based on meaning: Antonyms consist of several different types of oppositeness of meaning. There are four types of antonyms based on meaning: gradable antonyms, contradictory or Complementary antonyms, relational or conversive antonyms and directional antonyms.

Based on the derivation: antonyms are classified into two main types: Root word antonyms and derivational antonyms.

Based on parts of speech, there are four kinds of antonyms: antonymous nouns, antonymous verbs, antonymous adverbs and antonymous adjectives.

2.5. Previous research

It is undeniable that there were various techniques that can be applied to improve the students' writing skills. Annisa Oktaviani (2017) supposes that Think-Pair-Share is regarded as a great way to assist students learn and get the knowledge from their partners or friends. In an indirect way, Think-Pair-Share assists students to develop their knowledge of the topic. Moreover, according to Merchelina Astheri, Dahlan Rais and Teguh Sarosa, Think-Pair-Share is an effective method to teach writing lessons because it gives students more opportunities to consider their ideas about the topic, share them with their partners, learn how to debate to protect ideas as well as accept great ideas from others.

In another research work, Mun Yee Lee investigated the impacts of teaching paraphrasing ability on students' summary writing. The results of the study showed that students were not good at paraphrasing, which can assist them effectively to address the task of writing. In addition, other factors such as culture contributed to the paraphrasing ability partially. Twenty-two students, who were put in the lower immediate level of English, were willing to take part in the experiment. Participants were required to summarize a piece of writing related to their paraphrasing ability. The results of the Pre-test illustrated the level of analyzing the passage, synthesizing the

information and paraphrasing ability. However, the results revealed that the ability helps students in an unequal way. The awareness of students about the tasks assigned may not completely reflect the students' paraphrasing ability.

Another research work carried out by Hillocks (1986) indicated that writing skill was not improved by teaching grammatical rules. This traditional technique was examined and the study gave unexpected results. It seems that not all students could receive the benefits of classical grammar instruction. This was also the reason why the students still had to deal with many other difficulties when only taught to enhance their grammar in writing. However, Greijda and Hannafin (1992) also asserted that we had an indirect effective way to enhance writing skills. In more detail, students can identify their grammar mistakes and correct them when typing on the computer. Therefore, students will be easier to enhance their grammar mistakes instead of teaching traditional grammatical methods. Additionally, in the synthetic analysis, Graham and Perin (2007) also stated that the participants, who are students from grade 4 to grade 12 improved their quality of writing by using computers, compared to used papers. However, these techniques only help students meet the demand of grammatical criteria in the writing score rubric. In fact, writing is affected by many factors such as vocabulary, cohesion, cohesion, and structure range. Therefore, grammar teaching and using computers just impacts partially on improving students' writing performance.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted based on a quantitative method. On the other hand, tests and questionnaires were used to carry out this study. Fifty-eight students, who were third-year English majors at That Nguyen University of Education, Vietnam, were invited to participate in this study. They were classified into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. All of them were required to do the pre-questionnaire, the pre-test to investigate the current situation of using synonyms and antonyms when writing paragraphs well as their initial level of writing performance. In addition, the experimental group was asked to take part in the 10-week experiment course in order to practice the use of synonyms and antonyms. At the end of the experiment, students from the experimental group were required to do the Post-test in 40 minutes, and the post-questionnaire was also delivered to the experimental group to investigate their attitudes after the 10-week experimental course. Finally, the researcher collected the data and did an intensive analysis to give findings and conclusions.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
4.1. The current situation of using synonyms and antonyms among English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education
4.1.1. The results of the Pre-questionnaire

The results of the pre-questionnaire revealed that most students who were invited to participate in the study were aware of the importance of using synonyms and antonyms when writing. Nevertheless, the lack of practice as well as study resources is the most challenging factor for third-year English majors. In addition, some other difficulties that made students have trouble using synonyms and antonyms when writing were identified such as various kinds of synonyms and antonyms, habits of plagiarism, and lack of interest.
4.1.2 The Pre-test results

Table 1. The results of the Pre-test

Students' code	Scores	Synonyms/Antonyms		Students 'code	Scores	Synonyms / Antonyms	
		Frequency	Accuracy				
A1	5.0	3	2	A30	6.0	4	3
A2	5.5	4	2	A31	5.5	3	2
A3	5.0	3	2	A32	5.0	2	2
A4	6.0	3	3	A33	5.5	3	2
A5	5.5	3	2	A34	5.0	3	2
A6	5.0	3	2	A35	5.5	3	2
A7	5.0	2	2	A36	4.0	2	1
A8	4.5	2	1	A37	5.5	3	3
A9	5.5	3	2	A38	5.5	3	2
A10	5.5	2	2	A39	5.0	3	2
A11	5.5	3	2	A40	6.0	3	3
A12	6.0	4	3	A41	5.0	4	1
A13	6.0	3	3	A41	5.5	3	2

A14	6.0	3	3	A43	5.5	2	2
A15	5.5	2	2	A44	5.0	2	1
A16	5.5	3	3	A45	5.0	3	2
A17	6.0	4	2	A46	5.0	2	1
A18	6.5	3	3	A47	6.0	4	1
A19	6.0	3	2	A48	5.0	3	2
A20	5.0	2	2	A49	4.5	2	2
A21	6.0	4	2	A50	5.5	3	2
A22	5.5	2	2	A51	5.5	2	2
A23	5.5	2	2	A52	5.0	2	1
A24	6.0	4	2	A53	6.0	3	2
A25	7.0	4	4	A54	6.0	4	1
A26	6.5	4	4	A55	6.0	3	2
A27	5.5	3	1	A56	5.5	3	3
A28	5.5	2	2	A57	5.0	2	2
A29	5.0	2	2	A58	5.0	3	2
Average score: 5.437				Average score: 5.120			

The results from the table show the students' initial level of writing performance was poor in general according to five levels of writing performance: Excellent users (Score 8.5-10.0), Good users (Score 7.0-8.4), Satisfactory users (Score 5.5-6.9), Poor users (Score 4.0-5.4), and Failure users (Score 0.0-3.9). In addition, the frequency and accuracy of using synonyms and antonyms were about 2-3 times in both two groups.

4.2. The impact of the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms on students' paragraph writing performance
4.1.1. The post-test results
Table 2. The post-test results

Experimental Students' code	Scores	Synonyms / Antonyms		Control Students 'code	Scores	Synonyms / Antonyms	
		Frequency	Accuracy			Frequency	Accuracy
A1	8.0	5	5	A30	6.5	4	3
A2	8.5	5	5	A31	5.5	4	2
A3	7.0	5	4	A32	6.0	5	3
A4	7.0	4	4	A33	8.0	5	4
A5	7.5	4	4	A34	5.5	4	4
A6	8.5	5	4	A35	5.0	3	3
A7	7,5	3	3	A36	6.0	4	4
A8	7.5	3	2	A37	6.0	4	3
A9	7.0	3	2	A38	6.0	5	2
A10	7.0	3	2	A39	5.5	4	2
A11	7.5	3	3	A40	6.5	5	4
A12	8.0	6	5	A41	6.0	4	4
A13	8.0	5	5	A41	6.0	4	3
A14	8.0	5	4	A43	7.0	4	4
A15	8.5	5	4	A44	6.0	3	2
A16	9.0	6	6	A45	6.0	4	3
A17	7.5	5	4	A46	5.5	2	2
A18	9.0	6	5	A47	6.5	3	3
A19	8.5	5	5	A48	5.5	4	2
A20	6.5	4	3	A49	6.5	5	3

A21	7.5	4	3	A50	5.0	4	1
A22	7.5	3	3	A51	6.0	5	4
A23	8.0	5	5	A52	7.5	5	5
A24	9.0	5	5	A53	6.0	5	5
A25	9.0	5	5	A54	6.0	5	4
A26	9.0	7	7	A55	8.0	6	6
A27	8.5	6	5	A56	7.5	6	6
A28	8.0	5	5	A57	6.0	3	2
A29	8.5	6	5	A58	8.0	5	5
Average score: 8.563				Average score: 6.834			

The table above indicated that there was a significant change in scores in both two groups. In general, the experimental group level was above 8.5 (Excellent users) after taking part in the experiment course while the control group level was below 7 (satisfactory users) after the traditional teaching method. Moreover, there was a relationship between the scores and the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms. In more detail, the students' average scores of the experimental group increased with the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms.

4.1.2. The results of the post-questionnaire

The results of the post-questionnaire indicated that after treatment most students who participated in the experimental group had a significant increase in scores. They admitted that they can use more synonyms and antonyms in their writing on different topics. In more detail, thanks to doing supplementary exercises, they can use synonyms and antonyms with more accuracy and higher frequency. As a result, students became more confident whenever they had to deal with a difficult topic. Furthermore, students spent most of their interest on doing multiple-choice exercises when doing supplementary exercises.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMANDATIONS

The results of the study show that the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms had a positive impact on the students' improvement in writing performance. In more detail, experimental students got higher scores with the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms. Whereas, the control group just had a smaller change compared to the control group in both average score and the enhanced use of synonyms and antonyms.

The below recommendations are suggested based on the results of the study:

Firstly, in the post questionnaire, the researcher designed some types of questions to collect the students' answers about their expectations. According to the results from the post-questionnaires, it can be concluded that many students hope to expand the experimental course for freshmen, sophomores, or non-English majors. More importantly, all students are interested in multiple-choice exercises during the experiment course. Partially, the students guess the meaning of the words easier. In other words, students can remember these words with their meaning as well as their usage in each context.
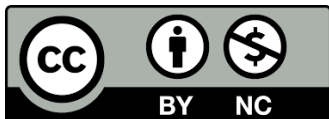
Furthermore, this method will be more effective if students are taught synonyms and antonyms before doing exercises. There were different levels of students in the class; therefore, there were some words that make weaker students feel difficult. Teaching synonyms and antonyms can help weaker students get an understanding of these words, and students of higher levels can remember them for a long time by repeating words. Encouraging learners to write sentences with synonyms and antonyms is necessary. This makes better understanding when students apply these words in their writing.

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