The Use of COCA to Promote Thai EFL Public University Students' Autonomous Learning

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Abstract

This study investigated whether the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) can promote Thai EFL public university students' autonomous learning in a paragraph writing course. Thirty third-year students participated in this study, and they were from Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University in Bangkok, Thailand. They were asked to complete three writing assignments. Each assignment included the first draft and the final draft, and when they finished the first draft, they were required to use COCA to discover usage patterns and revise their work based on teacher feedback they received. The questionnaire was used to find out self-report data regarding the implementation of this concordance program on promoting their autonomous learning based on the process of autonomous learning by Knowles (1975). Additionally, the semi-structured interview was employed to investigate their perceptions of COCA as a tool for promoting autonomous learning. The results from the questionnaire showed that this concordance program could promote their autonomous learning based on Knowles' (1975) framework. They strongly agreed that they could formulate learning goals by themselves (M = 3.63, SD = 0.55) and use it as a material resource for learning writing (M = 3.50, SD = 0.56). The semi-structured interview also revealed that their perceptions of using COCA as a tool for promoting autonomous learning were positive because it can increase their confidence in their writing due to the use of authentic data. When they are confident of their writing skills, they are willing to continue practice writing through the use of this concordance tool.

Keywords: autonomous learning, COCA, EFL public university students, paragraph writing

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Introduction

Due to the English language education policy in Thailand, all university students are prepared to have English language skills for work in the future. Among the four skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing), writing is the most difficult, so EFL students and teachers should not neglect it (Al-Gharabally, 2015). The differences between English and Thai languages pose major challenges for Thai EFL students in terms of writing skills. Another important factor which influences the development of writing skills is learner autonomy. Learner autonomy refers to an ability which enables learners to control over the process of their learning (Benson, 1997, as cited in Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). It is essential for students' writing improvement because if they have an ability to reflect on their own learning, they can notice their strengths and weaknesses and then find the solutions for their learning problems. Additionally, learner autonomy is related to a special attitude. The learning process occurs when students are willing to improve themselves to achieve their own goals (Dueraman, 2015). Nevertheless, it is not easy for EFL teachers to measure learner autonomy. It will be more effective to investigate activities that students can do rather than the degree of their ability, and therefore, instead of learner autonomy, autonomous learning should be promoted in developing writing skills (Chiu, 2012; Tham, 2021).

Literature Review

Autonomous learning, which is a synonym for self-directed learning (Benson, 2001), can be described as a process that requires individuals, especially adult learners, to determine their learning needs (Knowles, 1975, as cited in Uz & Uzun, 2018). The process of autonomous learning by Knowles (1975) includes 1) diagnosing learning needs 2) formulating learning goals 3) identifying human and material resources for learning 4) choosing and implementing learning strategies, and 5) evaluating learning outcomes. To be specific, when students have learning needs, they will identify what to learn, which learning materials and strategies to use, and how to evaluate their learning. Since autonomous learning plays a crucial role in English language learning, it should be promoted in EFL writing classrooms. In order to enhance autonomous learning, teachers should focus on the three dimensions of the autonomous learning model by Garrison (1997). That is, teachers should provide students with feedback so that they can implement learning strategies and evaluate their learning outcome. Besides, teachers should give opportunities to students to identify resources for learning on the internet. Moreover, teachers should give opportunities to students to diagnose learning needs and formulate learning goals by themselves. Accordingly, teacher feedback, the internet, and learning objectives are necessary in promoting autonomous learning in EFL writing classrooms.

The internet plays an important role in promoting autonomous learning in EFL writing classrooms because students can identify resources for learning by themselves on the internet. According to Moradi (2018), the internet allows students to reach a large number of learning resources conveniently. Students can choose many online learning tools to help improve their writing skills. They can surf the internet anywhere and anytime to learn more about how to write accurately. To be specific, language examples on the internet are authentic; that is, they

are used in the real situations. A corpus is among the most effective online tools for students to enhance their writing skills. A corpus is a collection of texts, both spoken and written, that are used to study language (Spiri, 2012). A corpus can be used to verify and improve grammatical accuracy by providing users with a large number of language examples to compare their writing to (Yoon, 2011). Students can search for language examples which are originally based on various online resources from a corpus and learn how to write accurately from them. During this process, they have opportunities to explore a lot of language examples which are presented in the form of concordances. As a result, a corpus which is a resource for learning on the internet can promote autonomous learning in EFL writing classrooms.

In Thailand, it has been found in many universities that students have problems with autonomous learning. According to Prabjandee and Inthachot (2013), students lack autonomous learning due to the culture of learning. In Thailand, teachers have traditionally had the obligation to evaluate, so students have inadequate experience of the self-evaluation process (Suwanarak, 2018). They cannot diagnose their learning needs and evaluate their learning outcomes. Moreover, students always believe that the teacher is the best source of knowledge, so they do not try to learn something by themselves, and thus, they do not have opportunities to enhance their creative thinking skills (Prabjandee & Inthachot, 2013). When students lack autonomous learning, they do not have opportunities to exchange and share knowledge with others (Rampai, 2013). Besides, some teachers prevent students from autonomous learning because they do not believe in the students' ability.

As a result, this study aimed to promote autonomous learning among Thai EFL learners by using a corpus, one of the most effective technology tools, as a medium. A corpus can provide assistance for both learners and teachers. This is in line with the study by Xiao and Chen (2018), which showed that teachers can use the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) as a tool to solve problems in relation to teachers' overload of correcting students' essays, and a corpus provides the opportunities for students to practice writing via self-assessment which helps students develop autonomous learning ability. Moreover, according to Liu and Jiang (2009), the British National Corpus (BNC) has been useful in promoting inductive learning since students can observe grammar usages in concordance data, and then they can discover usage patterns and rules. As a consequence, a corpus enhances discovery learning.

In summary, this study attempted to find a method to improve Thai EFL public university students' autonomous learning in a writing classroom. Before the researcher conducted the study, previous research was studied, and it was found that there had been a lack of research on the use of COCA, a widely used concordance tool for EFL researchers, to improve autonomous learning in a paragraph writing course in Thailand. Therefore, Thai EFL public university students and teachers should not neglect this concordance program, so promoting the students' autonomous learning through COCA in a paragraph writing course should be primarily taken into consideration, and the findings of this study will have important implications for teaching EFL writing.

Research Objectives

1. To study the results of the use of COCA on promoting Thai EFL public university students' autonomous learning in a paragraph writing course.
2. To explore Thai EFL public university students' perceptions toward COCA on autonomous learning in a paragraph writing course.

Methodology

1. Research Design
The researcher conducted a mixed-method study and used quantitative and qualitative information in order to investigate the results of the use of COCA on students' autonomous learning and their perceptions toward this concordance program on autonomous learning. Data collection included a) quantitative data from a questionnaire and b) qualitative data from a semi-structured interview.

2. Population and Samples
Approximately 90 third-year students enrolled in a paragraph writing course, but only 30 were selected to participate in this study. All participants were from the same English program at Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University in Bangkok, Thailand, and the same writing background. All participants had previously enrolled in and passed a controlled and formulaic writing course.

3. Instruments
COCA: The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), a widely used concordance tool for EFL researchers, was chosen as it represents American English and is freely accessible online. Keyword in context (KWIC), one of COCA's seven functions, was selected for the experiment because it allows users to identify structural usage patterns by examining concordances. This can help students solve grammatical problems.

Questionnaire: A questionnaire from Wang et al. (2013) was adapted to collect self-report data on how COCA impacted students' autonomous learning in a paragraph writing course. The questionnaire was based on Knowles' (1975) model of autonomous learning and used a four-point Likert scale, with 4 indicating "strong agree" and 1 indicating "strong disagree". The questionnaire was validated by three experienced EFL writing teachers based on the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). They rated each statement for congruence. In case they thought that some statements were unclear, they provided comments and suggestions, and the researcher revised the statements accordingly.

Semi-structured Interview: A semi-structured interview with 10 participants was conducted to collect qualitative data on whether COCA could promote Thai EFL students' autonomous learning in writing. Three interview questions were validated by three experienced EFL writing teachers based on IOC. They were asked to rate whether they thought that all questions were

congruent and easy to understand. In case they did not agree with some questions, they provided comments and suggestions, and the researcher revised the questions accordingly.

4. Research Procedure

Participants in this study completed three writing tasks. At the beginning of the study, they were required to complete the first writing task. According to Lai (2009, as cited in Wang et al., 2013), there are three stages of the writing process including an introductory session, a writing session, and a revising session. Following this process, participants only had to write two drafts for each writing task. For the first draft, they were given a topic by the researcher and had one hour to write and submit it online.

After one week, participants received feedback from their teacher on the grammatical errors in their writing. There were two versions of teacher feedback. For the first version, the researcher indicated the location of each error by circling words. An error correction code was not given to errors because the researcher would like participants to write the error correction code by themselves. They were asked to look at each circle and consider which error correction code should be used. After participants finished writing the error correction codes, the researcher gave the final version of teacher feedback which included both circles and the error correction codes. Participants needed to check whether they wrote the correct error correction code or not.

After receiving teacher feedback on their grammatical errors, participants revised their first drafts using COCA. They used the KWIC function to identify patterns in the language and correct any errors. The circles in the teacher feedback indicated which words to search for in the concordance lines. For example, the circled word was "because". Participants had to type this word, and then they had to search for concordance lines to learn how to use this word in each sentence. Participants should be able to learn by themselves based on the process of autonomous learning by Knowles (1975). Consequently, this activity was designed based on the three dimensions of the autonomous learning model by Garrison (1997) because those dimensions (i.e., self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation) support the process of autonomous learning by Knowles (1975). In order to promote self-management, the researcher presented a material resource, which was COCA, to participants. Moreover, since COCA is an online learning tool, it promotes self-monitoring. Furthermore, in order to promote motivation, the researcher gave participants opportunities to identify their learning needs as well as to select their learning goals based on teacher feedback that they received.

Participants had four hours to revise and submit their final draft online after completing the first writing task, which was due in two class sessions. They had to complete three writing tasks in total, which took six consecutive weeks. This same process was repeated for the second and the third writing tasks. One week after completing the third writing task, participants were required to complete a questionnaire, and one week later, the researcher selected ten participants for the semi-structured interview.

5. Data Analysis

Questionnaire: The frequency of responses to the questionnaire was calculated to collect self-reported data on the results of the use of COCA on Thai EFL public university students' autonomous learning. The analysis employed the descriptive statistics method. To be specific, means and standard deviations were calculated.

Semi-structured interview: The semi-structured interview was conducted and analyzed using qualitative content analysis to examine the participants' experiences with and perceptions of using COCA for autonomous learning. All ten participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to investigate their perspectives on its impact on Thai EFL public university students' autonomous learning.

Results

1. The Results of the Use of COCA on Students' Autonomous Learning
The research results presented in this section were obtained from the questionnaire. Self-report data were used to provide the results regarding the use of COCA on autonomous learning. As can be seen in Table 1, the results can be illustrated clearly when looking at questionnaire questions 1-5. The participants showed that they strongly agreed with most of the items. They strongly agreed (M = 3.43, SD = 0.59) with the overall statements. According to Knowles' (1975) framework for autonomous learning, the participants strongly agreed that locating an error correction code by themselves helped formulate their learning goals (M = 3.63, SD = 0.55). Furthermore, they strongly agreed that COCA could be a material resource for learning writing (M = 3.50, SD = 0.56). Most of them also believed that they could diagnose their learning needs after the teacher asked them to write an error correction code by themselves (M = 3.40, SD = 0.55). Furthermore, they strongly agreed with the statement "I can examine my own writing weaknesses by myself after I practice writing through COCA." (M = 3.40, SD = 0.49). Nevertheless, they agreed less on their ability to choose and implement appropriate learning strategies after learning to write via this concordance program (M = 3.20, SD = 0.79).

Table 1
The Results from the Questionnaire of COCA on Autonomous Learning

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	*M*	*SD*	Meaning
1. After the teacher asks me to write an error correction code by myself, I can diagnose my learning needs.	13 (43.33%)	16 (53.33%)	1 (3.33%)	0 (0%)	3.40	0.55	Strongly agree
2. After the teacher asks me to write an error correction code, I learn to formulate learning goals by myself.	20 (66.67%)	9 (30%)	1 (3.33%)	0 (0%)	3.63	0.55	Strongly agree

Table 1 (Continued)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	*M*	*SD*	Meaning
3. I can identify COCA as a material resource for learning writing.	16 (53.33%)	13 (43.33%)	1 (3.33%)	0 (0%)	3.50	0.56	Strongly agree
4. I can choose and implement appropriate learning strategies after I learn to write via COCA.	12 (40%)	13 (43.33%)	4 (13.33%)	1 (3.33%)	3.20	0.79	Agree
5. I can examine my own writing weaknesses by myself after I practice writing through COCA.	12 (40%)	18 (60%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.40	0.49	Strongly agree
	Overall				3.43	0.59	Strongly agree

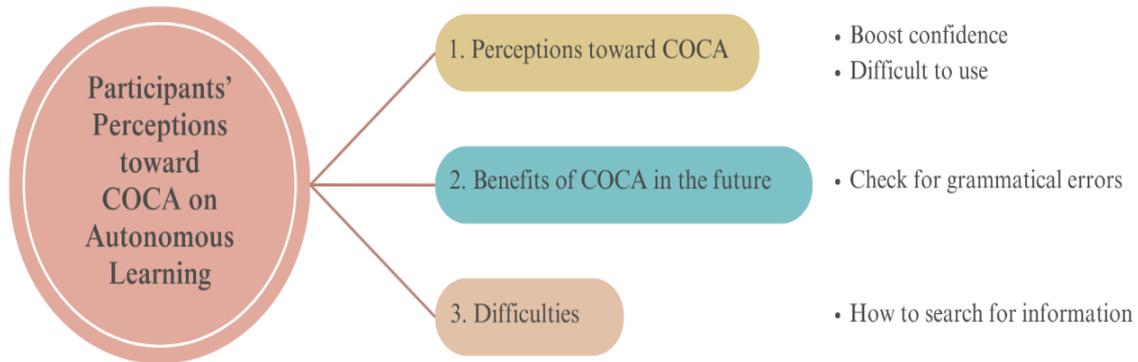*2. Students' Perceptions toward COCA on Autonomous Learning*

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants to explore their perceptions of COCA for autonomous learning in Thai EFL public university students. The interviews were conducted after the participants completed a questionnaire. Regarding the participants' perceptions toward this concordance tool on autonomous learning, the participants were required to answer the following three questions.
1. How do you feel about using COCA in a paragraph writing course? Why?
2. How confident are you that COCA will improve your writing skills for your future studies and work?
3. What difficulties have you met after you practiced writing through COCA? How did you tackle these difficulties?

Dörnyei's (2007) qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the semi-structured interview responses to those three questions. Qualitative data were coded and categorized under frequently mentioned themes. The hierarchy of codes related to the participants' perceptions toward COCA on autonomous learning is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Category Codes Organized into a Tree Diagram Regarding the Participants' Perceptions toward COCA on Autonomous Learning

2.1 Perceptions toward COCA

Most participants agreed that COCA could help them improve their autonomous learning, particularly their writing confidence. However, one participant had a negative response. According to the results obtained from interviewing participants about their positive perception, the reason included that it boosted confidence in their writing.

S16: I think I have more confidence in my writing skills. Every time I used COCA to help correct errors, I learned many things especially grammar. Furthermore, when I wasn't sure if I wrote it correctly, I always turned to COCA for some grammatical points.

S26: I didn't understand why the teacher asked us to use it at first. However, after using it, I found that it was helpful. Sometimes I used it before receiving teacher feedback to make sure that I used correct grammar.

Only one participant had a negative perception. He felt that it was difficult for him to use COCA.

S10: I think it is difficult for me to use COCA because sometimes I cannot find what I need in concordances. Moreover, there is a limit on the use of COCA if we don't get registered.

2.2 Benefits of COCA in the Future

All of the participants' responses about their confidence in using COCA to improve their writing skills in the future were positive. They thought that they could use concordances from COCA to help check for grammatical errors in their writing. Below are responses from participants.

S9: In the future, I am sure that COCA can improve my writing skills. I think I will use COCA to check the use of grammar in my sentences.

S17: I think it is important for me to have a tool like COCA to help me use correct grammar in the future for work and study.

S24: I will use COCA in the future because it is an effective tool to check grammar in my writing. I am confident to use it.

S28: I will use COCA to help avoid grammatical errors in my writing. I will search for examples to check for the use of verb forms.

2.3 Difficulties

On the question that asked the participants' difficulties after they practiced writing through COCA, most of them had difficulties when they searched for information. They had difficulties with some specific codes, and they tackled those difficulties by asking friends or the teacher. However, some of them tackled those difficulties by themselves. Below are responses from participants.

S8: I had difficulties when I typed some specific codes. When I didn't know which specific codes needed to be used, I always asked my friends. Sometimes my friends asked me too. We helped each other to tackle those difficulties.

Discussion

1. The Results of the Use of COCA on Students' Autonomous Learning

Self-report data from the questionnaire revealed the results regarding the use of COCA on autonomous learning. The questionnaire was distributed after the implementation of this concordance program. The results were shown by using the calculation of descriptive statistics including the mean score and standard deviation. According to Knowles (1975), the process of autonomous learning includes 1) diagnosing learning needs 2) formulating learning goals 3) identifying human and material resources from learning 4) choosing and implementing learning strategies and 5) evaluating learning outcomes.

With regard to the impact of COCA on autonomous learning, the results reveal that it could be a material resource for learning writing, and the students could choose and implement appropriate learning strategies after learning to write via this concordance tool. According to Garrison (1997), an online environment should be given to students in EFL classrooms in order to promote self-monitoring. Consequently, COCA can be considered to be an effective tool to develop autonomous learning. The point is supported congruently with the study of Khodary (2017). An online learning tool allows students to independently choose and implement appropriate learning strategies. Finally, the results showed that the students could examine their own writing weaknesses by themselves after they practiced writing through COCA. The explanation of this study can be supported by Haidari et al. (2019). They explained that students are provided with an independent way of learning through the use of technology, so promoting autonomous learning by using technology can activate a sense of individual accountability.

2. Students' Perceptions toward COCA on Autonomous Learning

The majority of students interviewed said that COCA could help them become more confident writers, and they were willing to continue practicing English writing through the use of this concordance program. The results in this study are also in line with the study of Yoon and Hirvela (2004). One of the reasons can come from common usage of words. According to Yoon (2011), a corpus provides authentic language, and thus, it can be considered to be a reference tool for students to check and follow grammatical patterns. When students are confident that they gain and increase their knowledge of writing, a corpus will be of great use to them for

their further study and work (Tsai, 2021). They can consult it to verify grammatical patterns whenever needed.

Although most of the students responded that COCA was as effective tool to promote autonomous learning in their writing, some of them reported that they had problems while using this concordance tool. The results of the semi-structured interview indicated that some students reported some difficulties after practicing writing through COCA. They said that they were confronted with it before and after they searched for words or phrases. Tung et al. (2015) explained that students may encounter difficulties in analyzing concordance lines and understanding unfamiliar words in concordances. In addition, they may not find information they need when they use a corpus (Bridle, 2019).

Conclusion

This study has developed a new method for integrating COCA into a paragraph writing course in Thailand. This method is more efficient than previous methods since it does not only provide usage patterns to help Thai EFL public university students solve problems in their writing, it also promote autonomous learning. These findings have implications for teaching EFL writing. COCA can be implemented in EFL writing classes to promote students' autonomous learning by following the process of autonomous learning by Knowles (1975). Moreover, this concordance program is beneficial to students because it can boost confidence in their writing due to authentic data. When students have problems in their writing, they can search for words or phrases that they would like to learn from it. When they know how to write correctly and accurately from authentic data, they will have confidence to correct errors. In addition to correcting errors, COCA boosts confidence in producing more writing. When students are confident of their writing skills, they are willing to continue practice writing through the use of this concordance tool. In case they are not sure of writing some sentences, they can use it to help check those sentences. As a consequence, receiving teacher feedback and finding correct patterns or usage from concordances can promote autonomous learning. However, teachers should be resourceful when students encounter difficulties in some steps of how to use COCA, so they should be able to give some good advice when students have problems.

Recommendations

Future research should be carried out with students who have different levels of English proficiency, such as high, intermediate, and low levels. This would determine correlation between their English proficiency and the development of autonomous learning after the learning through COCA. In addition, since a corpus investigated in the present study was the Corpus of Contemporary American English, various concordance programs should be employed as other sources of concordances so that the results of the research can be generalized.

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