

## **UNDERSTANDING TEACHER TRAINEES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS WRITING ACTION RESEARCH REPORTS IN ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY IN LAOS<sup>12</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to investigate the attitudes of Lao teacher trainees towards and their needs in academic writing in English. For many years, the English language curriculum in teacher training colleges in Laos has focused on general English skills such as grammar, speaking, listening and reading. With respect to writing, it focuses mainly on sentence level, or at most paragraph level, writing. A recent change in curriculum in one of the eight teacher training colleges requires its teacher trainees to write longer academic texts, including the writing of an action research report based on their teaching practicum. But how well these teacher trainees have been equipped to write such long texts and what their attitudes are

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towards this new task are unknown. In order to understand their attitudes towards, their knowledge about, and their difficulty in academic writing in general and the writing of the action research report in particular, a survey questionnaire was administered to 110 teacher trainees. Results found that while these teacher trainees understood the importance of academic writing, they felt that their training and supervision were inadequate to help them write their action research reports. Additionally, results revealed their lack of confidence in their competence in English writing. The findings of the study should be useful for helping teacher trainers design better training programmes for academic writing. The study should have implications for curriculum design for academic writing in the teacher training colleges in Laos and in similar institutions in other parts of the region.

Keywords: Academic writing, teacher training, action research, needs analysis, Laos

## **Introduction**

In institutions of higher learning, writing, often hailed as the hallmark of an educated person, is prevalent in students' academic life as it often constitutes an essential part of students' academic requirements (Deng, 2009). This prevalence is probably based on the premise that writing helps promote thinking and intellectual development, sustain the knowledge learnt from a subject area, and achieve a sense of ownership for the education received (Barnett & Rosen, 1999). While the need for the teaching of academic writing skills has well been established in many parts of the world, this same need is relatively less felt in post-secondary institutions in many developing Asian countries, including Laos, probably due to their lack of contact with the outside world in the past and their lack of human and structural resources to teach academic writing skills (Goh & Vonechith, 2003). However, the need for training their students to write in English has nowadays started to gather pace as there is great interest in learning English among the population in the region (Ho, 2003) and as these countries increasingly engage with one another and the rest of the world via English (Wong, 2004). As a result, an increasing number of studies have been done in recent years on various aspects of the teaching of writing in the region such as needs analysis (Ali & Yunus, 2004; Hudson & Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen & Hudson, 2010) and instructional approaches (e.g., Tan, Emerson, & White, 2006).

The teaching of academic writing has undergone a number of major changes in terms of theories and methodologies. These changes come from a number of different sources, including, for example, first and second language composition studies (Johns, 1990; Silva, 1990; Matsuda, 2003) and English for Specific and Academic Purposes (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993). Three major approaches have typically been noted: product, process, and genre (Badger & White, 2000; for slightly different classifications, see Silva, 1990; Matsuda, 2003; Hyland, 2003).

Product-based approaches see writing as mainly concerned with knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development as mainly the result of the imitation of input, in the form of texts provided by the teacher (Badger & White, 2000; Hyland, 2003). One such approach, which was popular in the 1960s, typically used controlled composition, whose main focus was on sentence-level accuracy (e.g., Pincas, 1964). Later approaches in this strand began to focus on the writing of paragraph elements such as topic sentences, support sentences, concluding sentences, and transitions and on paragraph development through particular organizational patterns such as narration, description, classification, and comparison and contrast (e.g., Kaplan, 1970; see Silva, 1990; Matsuda, 2003; Hyland, 2003).

Process-based teaching of writing, however, shifts this focus on linguistic knowledge such as knowledge about grammar and text structure to a focus on writing skills, such as planning, drafting and revising, and emphasize on the content, ideas, and the negotiation of meaning (Badger & White, 2000). In this approach, writing is not considered to be a simple straightforward process with only one single draft, but a complicated process which involves a long process of idea generation, multiple drafts, interaction with other people (including the teacher and peers), revising and editing (Flower, 1989; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Zamel, 1983).

The third major approaches, the genre approaches, see writing as attempts to communicate in social contexts. Various contextual factors such as the purpose, the subject matter, and the relationships between the writer and the reader provide a range of constraints and choices within which a writer can operate in producing a text (Hyland, 2003). Three different genre approaches have often been identified based on their different theories, practices, and sometimes places of origin (Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2003). The most sophisticated genre pedagogies are undoubtedly those designed by the Australian Genre Approach, or the Sydney School (Johns, 2003). Such pedagogies provide detailed descriptions for

some elemental factual genres such as recount, procedure, description, and report, and their main audiences are primary and secondary school children (Macken et al., 1989) and adult migrant second language learners (Feez, 2002). Thus far, they still have not exerted a great influence on ESL/EFL writing classes in tertiary education settings despite their great potentials.

The second genre approach is what is often called English for Specific Purposes, or the ESP approach (Hyon, 1996). This genre approach provides detailed structural and linguistic analysis of genres in academic and professional settings, including, for example, experimental research articles (Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004), master of science dissertations (Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988), and business letters (Bhatia, 1993). Applications of this approach have mainly been in English for academic purposes curricula designed especially for ESL/EFL graduate students (Swales & Freak, 2000, 2004) and in English for professional communication classrooms (Bhatia, 1993; Rogers, 1995). The third genre approach, the New Rhetoric, concentrated principally in North America. It has focused on the situational contexts in which genres occur rather than on their forms (Hyon, 1996) and has sometimes argued against the explicit teaching of genres (Freedman, 1994). Most of its applications have been in L1 classrooms, where native speakers of English learn to engage in an analysis of various elements of a particular context before and during the writing process (Coe, 1994, 2002). Its influence in ESL/EFL writing classes has been minimal.

The present study examined the attitudes of a group of teacher trainees in one of the eight teacher training colleges in Laos towards academic writing in English. This research context was chosen as a result of a large collaborative project between the National University of Singapore and the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Lao PDR, funded by the Temasek Foundation, Singapore. This project, which lasted for a total of 15 months in 2011-2012, aimed to enhance the competence of 15 teacher trainers from five teacher training colleges in different provinces in Lao PDR in the teaching and research of academic writing in their contexts. As part of this large project, the two mentors and the three mentees were required to identify an area of research that is situated in the teaching context of the teacher training college of the mentees, conduct the research and then write up a research report. Thus the current study was directly borne out of the research part of this collaborative project.

For many years, the English curriculum for teacher trainees majoring in the English language in the teacher training college in this present study consists of two major courses: English Methodology and General English, with the former

taking up 320 hours and the latter 544 hours spanning the whole duration of students' training in the college. Other minor courses in English which last for one or two semesters include Independent Learning, Study Skills, Genre, and Presentation. The English curriculum focuses mainly on general English skills in the form of reading, listening, and speaking. Although writing is also part of the syllabus, it is less emphasized and is largely restricted to sentence level or, at most, short paragraph writing. The concept of academic writing was relatively new, even to the teacher trainers, when it was introduced to them at the workshops conducted in early 2011. Those workshops were provided as part of the larger project and included such themes as the teaching, research and assessment of academic writing.

Based on the observation made during the needs analysis conducted for the large project, the English proficiency of the teacher trainees in the colleges was found to be low, ranging from beginners' level to intermediate level. In the teacher training college for this particular study, only 13 (or 10%) out of the 126 trainers have a master's degree from either local or overseas institutions, with the rest having only a bachelor's degree or lower level of education.

The Action Research course was introduced in 2009 as part of the teaching practicum requirement in the final year of the programme. The main aim of the course is to prepare trainees to conduct classroom-based action research during the eight weeks of their teaching practicum in a lower secondary school and to write and present an action research report. Although the textbook used for the course was written in Lao and the medium of instruction was also Lao, the trainees were expected to write their report in English. In order to help the trainees conduct their research and write their research reports, a system of one-on-one and group-based supervision was put in place, where trainees could seek assistance from their supervisor at every stage of their research process and the writing of their research report. In this sense, the course seems to assume some features of genre-based (ESP) and process-based approaches to the teaching of writing. First, the textbook provides some basic generic features of action research reports, including the writing of different sections of such reports such as introduction, method, results and conclusion, although all the information is laid out in the Lao language. Second, teacher feedback is made available throughout the research and writing process, despite the fact that students are not given chances for peer review and multiple drafting of the same report.

However, several questions remain. How effective were the course and the supervision in preparing the trainees for their research project and for the writing of their research report? What were some of the difficulties these trainees encountered in conducting the research and writing the report? What were their attitudes towards the whole research process and specifically towards the writing of the action research report in English? This study aimed to answer these questions in the hope of better understanding EFL learners' challenges in conducting an action research project and writing a research report. With such an understanding, curriculum developers will be in a better position to design courses suitable for the learners' needs and levels of competence in English academic writing. The insights gained from this study should shed light on ways to effectively develop a curriculum to teach academic writing.

## **Method**

The study used a questionnaire which consisted of both multiple choice questions and qualitative questions. The quantitative questions focused on five main areas: 1) attitudes towards the writing of the Action Research Report in English, 2) knowledge about the writing of the Action Research Report, 3) support from the trainer (in Lao) in the writing of the Action Research Report, 4) support from the supervisor in the writing of the Action Research Report, and 5) attitudes towards academic writing in English after the writing of the Action Research Report. The questionnaire was initially designed in English and then translated into the Lao language. The Lao questionnaire was then piloted with a small number of final year teacher trainees to see whether the questionnaire items were understood without ambiguity.

For the quantitative part of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to the 11 course objective statements, based on a five-point Likert scale with one for "strongly disagree", three for 'neutral' and five for "strongly agree". The qualitative questions elicited students' feedback on the difficulties they encounter in English writing in general, in writing the action research report in particular, as well as the areas where they think the training programme and the supervision process could be improved.

Altogether, 110 final year teacher trainees participated in the study. They were asked to complete the questionnaire after they had finished their eight weeks of teaching practice in a lower secondary school. They were asked to answer the questionnaire in their native language in Lao. This was intentional as we would like the participants to be able to express their views without the hindrance of using a foreign language. Later some typical answers to the qualitative part of the

questionnaire were then translated into English for illustrative purposes in this paper.

## Results and Discussion

### *Quantitative Questionnaire Analysis*

#### *Attitudes towards the Writing of the Action Research Report in English*

In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to the six statements on their attitudes towards the writing of the Action Research Report in English.

Table 1 Attitudes towards the Writing of the ARR in English

	1	2	3	4	5
Writing the ARR in English was very important	.9%	.9%	9.1%	31.8%	57.3%
When I had difficulty in the writing of the ARR, I asked my supervisors for help.	1.8%	1.8%	14.5%	41.5%	40%
I worked hard on writing my ARR.	0%	3.6%	10%	40.9%	45.5%
I really enjoyed writing my ARR.	6.4%	7.3%	21.8%	39.1%	25.5%
I revised my ARR after I received feedback from my supervisor.	1.8%	2.7%	7.3%	36.4%	51.8%
I really enjoyed writing in English in general.	9.4%	5.7%	33.0%	34.0%	17.9%

In general, a large majority (89.1%) of the 110 students who answered the questionnaire either agreed or strongly agreed that writing the action research report in English was very important (see Table 1). Most of them were also willing to spend time and efforts on writing and revising their action research reports. Specifically, 86.4% of them indicated that they worked hard on writing their ARR. When they had difficulty in the writing of the ARR, most of them (81.5%) would ask their supervisors for help. After receiving feedback from their supervisor, a majority of them (88.2%) would revise their ARR.

While they recognized the importance of writing the ARR in English and would work hard on writing and revising their ARR, a comparatively smaller percentage of students actually enjoyed English writing in general and writing ARR in particular. Only a little over half of the 110 students (51.9%) either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement that they really enjoyed writing in English in general. A slightly bigger percentage of students (64.6%) indicated that they really enjoyed writing their ARR.

#### *Knowledge about the Writing of the ARR*

In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to a set of nine statements on their knowledge about the writing of ARR.

Table 2 Knowledge about the Writing of the ARR

	1	2	3	4	5
I knew the overall structure for the ARR.	9.5%	22.9%	30.5%	28.6%	8.6%
I knew how to describe the background of the study	10.5%	14.3%	39.0%	28.6%	7.6%
I knew the purpose of my study.	4.7%	7.5%	30.2%	33.0%	24.5%
I knew how to design research questions.	6.6%	10.4%	26.4%	39.6%	17.0%
I knew what methods to use for collecting my data.	.9%	10.3%	29.9%	35.5%	23.4%
I knew how to analyze my data.	8.4%	25.2%	43.0%	20.6%	2.8%
I knew how to report my findings or reflect on my teaching.	6.7%	10.5%	45.7%	29.5%	7.6%
I knew how to write the conclusion of my report.	6.5%	27.1%	38.3%	23.4%	4.7%
I knew how to write recommendations to teachers as well as to students.	5.6%	14.0%	56.1%	14.0%	10.3%



As shown in Table 2, it is apparent that a great many students lacked knowledge about the writing of the ARR. Only about one third of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to organize their ARR (37.2%), how to describe the background of their study (36.7%), how to analyze their data (23.4%), how to report their findings or reflect on their teaching (37.1%), how to write the conclusion of my report (28.1%), and how to write recommendations to teachers as well as to students (24.3%). This is not surprising as insufficient instruction on the writing of the ARR was provided by the supervisors, who themselves lacked the knowledge and experience in the teaching of writing this type of genre, according to our teaching trainer informants (see below in the section on support from the supervisor in the writing of the ARR in English).

However, surprisingly, about half of the students indicated that they knew what they needed to do (57.5%), how to design their research questions (56.6%), and what methods to use for collecting their data (58.9%). This is probably due to the fact that the purpose and methodology parts of their research require less rhetorical work. In addition, our teacher trainer informants commented that they were familiar with these parts of the ARR and tended to spend more time with their trainee students on these sections.

*Support from the Trainer (in Lao) in the Writing of the ARR*

In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to a set of seven statements on the instructional support they were provided with by their trainer in Lao in the writing of the ARR. As mentioned earlier, the instruction was given in the Lao language and the textbook and materials used for the instruction were also written in Lao.

Table 3 Support from the Trainer (in Lao) in the Writing of the ARR

	1	2	3	4	5
My trainer was able to explain the overall structure of the ARR clearly.	13.1%	12.1%	30.8%	28.0%	15.9%
My trainer gave me good examples of the ARR.	10.9%	5.8%	25.2%	31.1%	8.7%
My trainer gave me useful advice before the writing of my ARR.	23.6%	11.8%	24.5%	29.1%	10.9%
My trainer provided clear instruction on the writing of each section of the ARR.	0.9%	13.6%	33.6%	20.9%	10.9%
The textbook/teaching materials for the training programme were useful.	0.9%	7.3%	25.7%	33.0%	33.0%
The content of the textbook	9.2%	10.1%	34.9%	33.9%	11.9%

Teaching materials was suitable for my level.					
The duration of the training programme was adequate.	33.0%	30.3%	26.6%	7.3%	2.8%

As we can see from Table 3, while around two thirds of the students (66%) found the textbook for the training programme useful with slightly less than half (45.8%) regarding it as suitable, many students seemed to be dissatisfied with the actual delivery of the materials. This is shown by the fact that well below half of the students indicated that the trainer was able to 1) explain the overall structure clearly (43.9%), 2) give useful advice before the writing of their ARR (40%), 3) give them good examples of the ARR, and 4) provide clear instruction on the writing of each section of the ARR. The most striking result is that only one tenth of the students (10.1%) considered the duration of the training programme (i.e. 32 hours altogether with two hours per week for a total of 16 weeks) to be adequate. This result should not come as surprising, as equipping students adequately for writing an academic research report may need a series of courses and programmes, especially considering the fact that the English proficiency of these students is relatively low.

#### *Support from the Supervisor in the Writing of the ARR in English*

In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to a set of seven statements on the support they were given by their supervisor in using the English language to write the ARR.

Table 4 Support from the Supervisor in the Writing of the ARR in English

	1	2	3	4	5
My supervisor was able to explain the overall structure of the ARR clearly.	6.4%	15.5%	30.9%	22.7%	24.5%
My supervisor gave me good examples of the ARR.	10.0%	14.5%	31.8%	22.7%	20.9%
My supervisor gave me useful advice for the writing of my ARR.	5.5%	11.8%	21.8%	35.5%	25.5%
My supervisor provided clear instruction on the writing of each section of the ARR.	12.7%	11.8%	31.8%	25.5%	18.2%
My supervisor taught me appropriate language (e.g. grammar, vocabulary and sentence structures) for the writing of my ARR.	17.4%	10.1%	29.4%	27.5%	15.6%

My supervisor provided useful feedback for my ARR.	4.6%	8.3%	33.0%	35.8%	18.3%
The supervision of the writing of the ARR in English was adequate.	13.8%	18.3%	32.1%	27.5%	8.3%

In general, students found that the supervision of the writing of the ARR in English was not very adequate, as only 35.8% of them either agreed or strongly agreed that this was so (see Table 4). This is somewhat supported by the findings that less than half of the students felt that their supervisor was able to provide clear instruction on the overall structure of the ARR (47.2%) and on the individual section of the ARR (43.7%), to give them good examples of the ARR (43.6%), and to teach them appropriate language for the writing of their ARR (43.1%). However, a comparatively high percentage of students treasured their supervisor's general advice for the writing of their ARR (61%) and feedback on their ARR drafts (54.1%). This may explain why students lacked knowledge about the writing of their ARR and did not enjoy writing the ARR, as shown in previous sections.

#### *Attitudes towards Academic Writing in English after the Writing of the ARR*

In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to a set of five statements on their attitudes towards academic writing in English after the writing of their ARR.

Table 5 Attitudes towards Academic Writing in English after Writing the ARR

	1	2	3	4	5
I can write more fluently now.	14.0%	23.4%	52.3%	8.4%	1.9%
I can write more accurately (with few grammatical errors) now.	14.0%	26.2%	47.7%	11.2%	0.9%
I know how to write a research report in English.	12.8%	30.3%	41.3%	12.8%	2.8%
I enjoy writing in English more.	6.5%	13.0%	24.1%	25.0%	31.5%
I feel more confident in writing in English.	14.7%	24.8%	37.6%	17.4%	5.5%

In general, students still seem to have great difficulty and lack confidence in English writing after they have finished the writing of their ARR. Specifically, only a very tiny percentage of students indicated that they could write with greater fluency (10.3%) and accuracy (12.1%) (see Table 5). Similarly, a small proportion of students (15.6%) reported that they knew how to write a research

report in English. This result is surprising as we would expect that students should know how to write a research report well after actually completing one. We attribute this result to the provision of the instruction on the writing of ARR in Lao rather than in English. Another surprising result is that very few students (22.9%) had confidence in writing in the English language after writing their ARR. We suspect that the experience of writing an ARR in English did not help a great deal to enhance their confidence in writing in English as many of these students had not received adequate instruction and guidance in the writing of this genre in English. Although the writing of ARR in English did not seem to contribute to the enhancement of their ability of and their confidence in English writing, it has helped students enjoy writing in English more, as slightly higher percentage of students reported that they enjoyed writing in English after writing their ARR (56.5%) than before writing one (51.9%) (see section on attitudes towards the writing of the ARR in English).

### ***Qualitative Questionnaire Analysis***

In addition to the quantitative data collected, we have also obtained some qualitative comments teacher trainees provided to the four open ended questions.

#### *Difficulties in English Writing in General*

In response to the open question of what difficulties they encounter in English writing in general, the teacher trainees noted at least three main areas of difficulty. The most frequently mentioned area of difficulty is English learning in general, with more than half (i.e., 62 or 60%) of the 110 students commenting on it. Below are some examples of answers from the trainees:

- *My English ability is not enough for writing action research.*
- *It is very difficult to write this action research in English.*
- *My English skills are very poor.*

This result is hardly surprising as the level of English competence is generally low and the curriculum for the English programmes focuses mainly on listening, reading and speaking. Even when writing is taught, it focuses on the sentence level writing rather than on the production of paragraphs or essays.

The second most frequently mentioned area of difficulty for this group of students in English writing in general is grammar, with 58 of them (i.e. about 53%) commenting on their lack of competence in using correct English grammatical structures. Below are some typical responses from the students:

- *I face difficulties in using English grammatical structures.*

- *I am really weak at English grammar.*
- *The grammatical patterns are horrible for me.*

The third major area of difficulty for the students is vocabulary, with 20 students (i.e. 18%) mentioning their lack of vocabulary for writing their action research reports, as shown in the following examples:

- *I do not have enough English academic words for writing the action research report.*
- *We have difficulty in using English vocabulary in writing action research reports.*
- *My English vocabulary is very poor; I don't think I can write my action research report in English.*

It seems clear that many of the students in this study found themselves not ready to write in English as they were still weak in basic English language skills including grammar and vocabulary. Without a drastic improvement of their proficiency in English, writing in English will continue to pose a great challenge for them.

#### *Difficulties in Writing the Action Research Report*

In response to the question of what difficulties they encountered in writing the action research report, the students reported that they had great difficulty in not just the writing of the different parts of the action research report, but also the entire process of the action research proper. Most of the comments for this question mentioned their lack of knowledge, skills and experience in the action research process and research writing. With respect to the research process, many trainees commented that they had difficulty in not only the implementation of the action research (n=38 or around 35%), but also data collection and data analysis (n=24 or around 22%). Here are some typical comments from the trainees on the difficulty in their research process:

- *I have never done this kind of activity before so I face difficulty in actually writing it.*
- *I do not know how to conduct this kind of research.*
- *When learning in class, I have never done data analysis in class but when conducting real action research; I am asked to do it.*
- *For me, all parts of action research are difficult but the most difficult part is to do the data analysis.*

- *I found difficulties in data collection, for example the use of instrumentation in conducting action research. This is the first experience for me.*
- *Generally, I really have great difficulty in data analysis and reflection.*

With respect to the writing of the report, our trainees found the background of the study and the conclusion to be the two most difficult parts to write. Specifically, 23 trainees (21%) found writing the background of the study difficult while 27 trainees (25%) found writing the conclusion of their report difficult. The following are some examples of their comments in this area:

- *I really found a huge problem in writing the background of the study.*
- *I do not know what kind of information should be put in this step.*
- *I do not understand what to write on the background.*
- *I found the difficulty in writing the cause of the problem.*
- *I really get confused about writing reflection and conclusion.*
- *I have a big problem with doing the research and writing the conclusion.*
- *I do not know how to write the conclusion.*
- *I found that all parts are difficult because this is the first time for us to write the action research report.*
- *All parts of action research are complicated.*

#### *Suggestions for Improving the Training Programme*

When asked to provide their suggestions for improving the training programme, almost half of the trainee respondents (n=50 or 45%) commented that they would want actual English samples of an action research report, to serve as their models in the writing of the report, as illustrated in the following four comments from these trainees:

- *I suggest that teachers should teach us how to conduct practical research in class not just teach the theory.*
- *The supervisor should provide the action research model.*
- *Teaching this subject in English and giving models in English.*
- *We need this subject to be developed again and provide some models of action research reports.*

More than one third of these trainees also expressed their desire to have more time in learning how to write an action research report (n=18 or 16%) and to have the action research writing course conducted in English rather than in Lao (n=15 or 14%). Here are some example comments from the trainee respondents:

- *I think action research should be taught in English.*

- *Teachers should teach this subject in English.*
- *This subject should be taught in English and examples of action research reports in English should be provided as well.*
- *I learned this subject in Lao but I have to write it in English. Why? This is not fair for me.*
- *Teaching this subject in English and giving models in English.*
- *We really don't have enough time in learning this subject so we need more time for this subject.*
- *I need more time for learning this subject.*
- *Add more time for this subject.*

Over one tenth of the trainees (n=12 or 11%) also commented that the trainers themselves should have adequate experience in conducting an action research and writing an action research report in order to offer effective advice for their trainees.

- *I think the supervisors who are responsible for giving advice should be good at action research, provide clear explanation of each step and give concrete examples of action research reports.*
- *The supervisor should have experience in conducting the action research.*
- *I think this subject should be taught by experienced teachers.*

#### *Suggestions for Improving the Supervision Process*

The trainees were also asked to offer suggestions for improving the supervision process. In this regard, our respondents focused mostly on four main areas: 1) clear instruction on what needs to be done at every stage of the action research process, 2) concrete advice on the structure of an action research report, 3) actual experience of conducting an action research in their training college before they are asked to do one for their teaching practicum in a secondary school, and 4) a caring attitude towards the trainees from the supervisors.

More than one third of the trainees (n=36 or 33%) expressed their desire to be given clear explanation of what needs to be done at every stage of the action research process. Here are some of the suggestions made by the trainees for improving the supervision process:

- *I really would like supervisors who guide us during teaching practicum to give us specific procedures on how to conduct the action research.*
- *They should explain clearly and give examples for each step.*
- *Provide clear explanation, useful and reliable advice.*

Besides suggestions on the research process, a slightly less than a third of the trainees (n=31 or 28%) also requested that they be given concrete advice on the structure of an action research report:

- *The supervisors should provide us with a clear structure of action research reports and be confident in showing us the action research format.*
- *I am not sure about the action research format because teachers often change it during the orientation period at the college and then during the practicum period.*

Around 25% of the respondents (n=27) suggested that they should be given an opportunity to practice conducting an action research before being asked to do so in their teaching practicum in a secondary school. This suggestion is well expressed by one of our trainee respondents, “*We need to conduct action research at college under the guidance of trainers or supervisor before being asked to conduct one alone in lower secondary schools.*”

Finally, not a small number of our trainee respondents commented that their mentors or supervisors did not really help them much. Here are two comments from them:

- *Mentors or supervisor should take care of us. I mean when we ask their help; they should spend time on advising us.*
- *My mentor did not care me when I asked his help.*

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to find out how well teacher trainees in a Lao teacher training college are equipped with the skills they need in writing a long academic report for their action research conducted during their teaching practicum in secondary schools. Specifically, we sought to evaluate their attitudes towards academic writing and especially the writing of the action research report they are required to do at the end of their study in the teacher training college.

In terms of their attitudes towards the writing of the action research report, we found that while these trainees recognized the importance of writing the long report in the English language and were willing to work hard on the writing project, they did not enjoy the writing as much.



As regards their knowledge about the action research report genre, we found that though many of these trainees had a good understanding of the process of the project, as this had been taught to them in Lao, a majority of them lacked knowledge about the writing of the report in English, including practically all the different parts of the report, ranging from the organization of the report, to the description of the background of the study, and to the writing of the conclusion.

With respect to the support the trainees received from their trainer, who was the sole instructor of the course entitled Action Research, most trainees found the support to be inadequate. Specifically, while some trainees found the textbook, which is written in Lao, to be helpful, most of them considered the course to be inadequate in the explanation of the overall structure of the report, the provision of good examples, and the instruction of the writing process. Most importantly, almost all trainees found the course duration to be too short for preparing them to write the action research report. In addition to the help they received from the course, our trainees were also provided with the one-on-one supervision for the writing of the research report in English. In this regard, we found that most of the trainees were not satisfied with the supervision provided. Although some of them found their supervisors' advice and feedback on their writing to be helpful, not many of them were happy with the supervisors' instruction of the structural and language features of the report.

Our trainees' attitudes towards writing in English did not seem to have changed much after they had completed the writing of their action research report. They still had great difficulty and thus lacked confidence in writing in English. We believe this result is attributable to the lack of adequate teaching and supervision in English they had received before and during the writing of their report.

A similar picture emerges with respect to the qualitative comments provided by our teacher trainees. They attributed their difficulty in writing in English to their low English proficiency and their difficulty in writing a long academic report to the lack of knowledge, skills and experience in the research process and the writing of the research report writing. They suggested that they be provided with research report samples and instruction of the structural and linguistic features of such writing in English rather than in Lao. They also suggested that the supervision of their writing should be provided by trainers who had the experience in conducting an action research as well as in writing an action research report.

It is apparent from the findings of this study that in order to prepare trainees adequately for the task of writing an academic report in English, a revamp of the English language curriculum is probably needed. The overarching objective of the existing English language curriculum is to improve the general English proficiency of the trainees with a major focus on listening, speaking and reading. When writing is required, it is restricted to the sentence level, or at most paragraph level, writing. Such writing is further restricted to informal or non-academic genres of writing, such as letter writing or writing instructions for making food. While the emphasis on general English proficiency may be needed in the early stage of students' learning of the English language, it would be necessary to gradually incorporate elements of academic writing in the curriculum before they are formally taught to write a full research report. As regards the Action Research module, if the expected output is an English research report, then the textbook should necessarily be written in English and the medium of instruction should also be in English, so that trainees would be adequately exposed to the kind of writing style they are expected to produce. As to the supervision for the trainees, trainers who provide the supervision would also need to gain experience in conducting an academic research and writing an academic research paper. In this regard, this collaborative project between the Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore and the Lao Ministry of Education funded by the Temasek Foundation is a first step towards this goal of equipping the trainers for better teaching and supervision of academic writing in their contexts. More training needs to be provided for these trainers to acquaint them with different approaches to the teaching of academic writing so that they will be able to design a course which incorporates appropriate features of these approaches to better cater to the needs of their trainees (see for example, Deng, 2005).

Developing the writing expertise of English as a Foreign Language learners and in particular the expertise of writing academic research reports is, understandably, not a straightforward process. It requires repeated practice, close analysis of relevant samples, guided production of target genres, provision of quality oral and written feedback from both peers and instructors, and the availability of varied opportunities to apply the genre of writing in realistic contexts (Tardy, 2009). While all this takes time and effort, this study, in a way, provides empirical support for innovation and renewal of current practices in the teaching of academic writing in a teacher training college in Laos. It should also be valuable for similar curriculum innovation and renewal projects in other parts of the world.

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