An Analysis of How Thai Undergraduate Students Use Personal Pronouns in Their English Academic Writing

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Abstract. To write academic text needs one necessary element: coherence. To achieve coherence—logical connection of ideas—writers can use various types of technique to create a good piece of writing. The use of personal pronouns is one of the most commonly used techniques as it substitutes the repetition of referring to the same person(s) or thing(s) after being aforementioned. In English writing, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) normally learn how to use personal pronouns at the early stage of English study. Still, many learners including those in university levels are struggling to use them correctly. This study therefore aims to investigate how Thai undergraduate students use personal pronouns and what problems are found in terms of the use of personal pronouns in their academic writing. Fourty opinion essays of Thai undergraduate students studying in an international programme in a Thai university were collected and analysed with both quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods. The results show that subjective pronouns were mostly used, followed by objective pronouns. Also, it is found that Thai students have had difficulties using various types of pronouns as there are nine patterns of the problems in using personal pronouns. "The use of pronoun agreement" seems to be the most problematic as more than half of the sample students made errors in this issue. Another two significant problems were "vague pronoun references" and "little or no use of pronouns".

Keywords: academic writing, coherence, coherence techniques, coherence devices, personal pronouns

INTRODUCTION

It is inevitable to admit that English writing appears to be the most challenging skill —of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing— for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) across the world. This particularly results from the fact that writing is a complicated process that requires layers of elements. To write a piece of text means students must go through different stages and to learn how to write consists of difficult and complex series of processes. To master this skill, writers must express their ideas in a written text by paying attention to many things such as idea, concept, vocabulary, and grammar [1]. In addition, writing is a very complex cognitive activity as writers must show their control of many influential factors e.g. content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling throughout their writing [2]. It is widely accepted that writing is actually a thinking process of how to formulate ideas and express them in text formats that consist of good use of words with logical orders to make statements clarified for readers [3, 4]. Therefore, to produce a good academic text is not an easy procedure for EFL learners as it requires many compositions: idea, concept, vocabulary, and grammar [5]. This is the reason why writing is considered the most difficult skill to master as the reason of such fact is that writing processes require numerous aspects as mentioned, thereby making the skill very challenging for EFL learners and teachers to learn and teach effectively [6].

One of the important elements of writing is coherence. To achieve coherence in writing, writers must consider how they can create the flow of ideas or the movement from one sentence to the next must be logical and smooth [7]. Also writers in general use cohesive devices in their writing to create cohesion or flow of ideas in their texts. One of them is the use of pronouns, which are words that are used to substitute noun phrases, when it is unnecessary or impossible to use a more precise expression [8]. This results in the use of consistent pronouns becoming one important cohesive device for writers since they function as replacements for nouns or noun phrases for the reason that they possess necessary roles in English sentences [7]. That is, they are used to avoid unneeded repetition, help saving time, and create sentence flow and unity.

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In general, pronouns are categorized into seven categories: personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, reciprocal pronouns, interrogative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, and relative pronouns [9]. However, the researchers focused on the use of personal pronouns only as they are very commonly used in all kinds of communication.

Personal pronouns are used in the four skills of communication, because of such aforementioned reasons, in all languages including English writing. EFL learners basically learn how to use this type of pronouns at the early stages of their learning; however, a number of studies [10-13] have shown that many EFL learners worldwide still have problems in using personal pronouns in their English writing. Not surprisingly, Thai students, in addition, are of no exception.

The researchers, English instructors in a Thai university, have found from many years of teaching English writing that many of them, despite the knowledge of how to use personal pronouns, have struggled to apply them in their writing correctly and efficiently. This has led to countless erroneous uses of personal pronouns whenever they have engaged in any writing production. As a consequence, this study was conducted to answer two research questions as follows:

1. How do undergraduate students use personal pronouns in their academic writing?
2. What problems are found in terms of the use of personal pronouns in their academic writing?

The findings of this study are expected to help the researchers understand how well the students can use the personal pronouns in their academic writing and identify any problems of such use. Also it will lead to the possible solution to help students to better use personal pronouns in their writing in future.

Types of Personal Pronouns in English Language

English language has five types of personal pronouns, each of which possesses a different position and function. For instance, the first person singular personal pronoun in English used as a subject position is 'I' while an object position is 'me'. Below is the Table that shows the five different types of personal pronouns in English language [14].

TABLE 1. Types of personal pronouns in English language

Persons	Number	Subjective Pronouns	Objective Pronouns	Possessive Adjectives	Possessive Pronouns	Reflexive Pronouns
First Person	Singular	I	me	my	mine	myself
	Plural	we	us	our	ours	ourselves
Second Person	Singular	you	you	your	yours	yourself
	Plural	you	you	your	yours	yourselves
Third Person	Singular/Masculine	he	him	his	his	himself
	Singular/Feminine	she	her	her	hers	herself
	Singular/Neuter	it	it	its	its	itself
	Plural/All Genders	they	them	their	theirs	themselves

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample of the study was 40 fourth year Thai undergraduate students of the School of Architecture and Design (SoAD) of King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thonburi (KMUTT), Thailand, who were randomly selected for this study. All programmes of the School are international programmes. It is requisite that all undergraduate students have to enroll in LNG 107: Academic Reading and Writing since this is one of the compulsory courses for every student who studies in any international programme of KMUTT. This LNG 107 course aims at developing learners' academic reading and writing skills. Students are taught to produce various types of writing piece and long essay. They learn how to use references and citations throughout their writing processes. After studying this course, the students are expected to be able to communicate their ideas logically and write well-organised essays with appropriate citations.

The range of English proficiency of these students' levels was between intermediate to upper intermediate (according to their standardized test scores submitted to SoAD during their enrollment). Based on the scores, their English skills were supposed to be good even though they were not English-major students.

Materials and Instruments

The researchers assigned all SoAD students who enrolled in LNG 107 to write an opinion essay of the same topic as the topic of their final examination. Thus the 40 essays of these randomly selected students were collected and examined for the analysis in terms of the use of personal pronouns.

The controlled topic for this exam was "Online learning can be our mainstream learning platform in the near future. In your view, what changes could be made for better online learning for learners?"

The reason the researchers selected this topic was that it was in compliance with the situation that these students were experiencing during the time of their study. All conventional, physical teaching and learning methods and environments were suddenly transformed into online platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Analysis

The researchers analysed the use of personal pronouns in these students' opinion essays by using the quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods. Each essay was examined thoroughly on the frequency of the use for each type of personal pronoun. Thus, the researchers analysed whether or not each personal pronoun was used correctly and effectively in the context. Each correct and erroneous use was counted. In case of there was an error of use, the researchers then analysed how it was misused in order to find out the types of problem that occurred. This would lead to patterns of problems found in terms of the use of personal pronouns of these students and possible causes of the problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part of the research discusses its results regarding the use of each type of pronouns and the problems found in students' writing. The findings are presented in 6 different tables below.

The Use of Each Type of Personal Pronouns in Academic Writing

Below are tables that show the frequency of the use of each type of personal pronouns: subjective pronouns, objective pronouns, possessive adjectives, possessive pronouns and reflexive pronouns.

Subjective Pronouns

A subjective pronouns serves as a subject of clauses.

TABLE 2. Frequency of use of subjective pronouns (times)

Subjective Pronouns	Correct Use	Wrong Use	Total
I	38	0	38
you	42	16	58
we	94	0	94
they	45	28	73
he	0	0	0
she	1	0	1
it	74	28	102

Table 2 shows that the most used subjective pronoun in the students' writing was "it" with the frequency of 102 times. "It" is a third person pronoun used to refer to a singular or an uncountable noun. The pronoun was frequently used because the students used it to refer to anything that was not human. Some students even incorrectly used "it" to refer to a plural noun. This explains why 28 cases of wrong use were found.

The second most used subject pronoun was "we". Even though its frequency of use was high, there were no wrong use at all.

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Objective Pronouns

An objective pronoun serves as an object of a verb or an object of a preposition.

TABLE 3. Frequency of use of objective pronouns (times)

Objective Pronouns	Correct Use	Wrong Use	Total
me	1	0	1
you	11	5	16
us	30	0	30
them	20	21	41
him	0	1	1
her	0	0	0
it	20	9	29

Table 3 shows that the objective pronoun that was mostly used in the sample essays was "them". However, half of the use was found incorrect as many students used this pronoun to refer to a singular noun which is grammatically wrong.

Possessive Adjectives

A possessive adjective serves as an adjective to modify a noun and shows possession.

TABLE 4. Frequency of use of possessive adjectives (times)

Possessive Pronouns	Correct Use	Wrong Use	Total
my	9	1	10
your	11	16	27
our	34	2	36
their	67	30	97
his	1	0	1
her	2	0	2
its	5	0	5

Table 4 shows that the most used possessive adjective was "their". Its frequency of use was significantly higher than the other words of the same type, but wrong cases of use were also high. This result was in line with that of the use of objective pronouns due to the misuses of "their" and "they" to refer to a singular noun.

Possessive Pronouns

A possessive pronoun serves as a subject, the object of a verb, or the object of a preposition. Unlike possessive adjectives, a possessive pronoun may stand by itself, with no following noun to modify.

TABLE 5. Frequency of use of possessive pronouns (times)

Possessive Pronouns	Correct Use	Wrong Use	Total
mine	0	0	0
yours	0	0	0
ours	1	0	1
theirs	0	0	0
his	0	0	0
hers	0	0	0
its	0	0	0

From Table 5 it is clearly seen that possessive pronouns were hardly used in essay writing. Compared with the result shown in Table 4, possessive adjectives seemed more preferable by the students when expressing possession.

Reflexive Pronouns

A reflexive pronoun is a words ending in -self or –selves. It is used when the subject and the object of a sentence are the same. It can serve as either a direct or indirect object. Another function of a reflexive pronoun is to emphasize that the subject, not someone or something else, is the one that performs the action (verb) of the sentence.

TABLE 6. Frequency of use of reflexive pronouns (times)

Reflexive Pronouns	Correct Use	Wrong Use	Total
myself	0	0	0
yourself	11	4	15
yourselves	0	0	0
ourselves	1	2	3
themselves	11	10	21
himself	0	0	0
herself	0	0	0
itself	3	0	3

According to Table 6, "themselves" was the most used reflexive pronoun while "myself", "himself" and "herself" were not used at all. Of all the use of the pronoun "themselves", half was found incorrect. The result was repeatedly consistent with those of the use of objective pronouns and possessive adjectives.

Total Number of The Use of Each Type of Pronouns

TABLE 7. The total number of times of use of each type of pronouns

Types of Pronouns	Total
Subjective pronouns	366
Objective pronouns	118
Possessive adjectives	178
Possessive pronouns	1
Reflexive pronouns	42

Table 7 shows types of pronouns and their frequency of use. Of all the five types, subjective pronouns were mostly used. The result was not surprising as subjective pronouns are used to represent the subject of a sentence which is an essential part of English sentences. The use of objective pronouns was significantly lesser than that of subjective pronouns. The fact is not every sentence needs an object. Some sentences are complete without any object.

Possessive pronouns were used the least for the students preferred using possessive adjectives to express possession as can be seen from the table that the frequency of use was substantially greater than that of the possessive pronouns.

It can be concluded that every type of the pronouns in this research was used in the students' writing; however, the frequency of use varied according to the importance and complexity of the use of pronouns.

Patterns of Problems in Using Personal Pronouns in Academic Writing

From analysing the use of pronouns in the essays written by forty students who were the subjects of this study, the results reveals that the students had difficulties using different types of pronouns correctly as most of them made a number of errors in their writing. Those errors can be classified into the nine patterns in the table below.

TABLE 8. Patterns of problems of the use of pronoun regarding the number of students and cases

No.	Problem Patterns	No. of Students	No. of Cases
1	Incorrect pronoun agreement	28**	79**
2	Inconsistent pronouns	10	14
3	Using a second personal pronoun to refer to a third person	3	3
4	Vague pronoun references	15*	17*
5	Little or no use of pronouns	15*	17*
6	Overuse of pronouns	4	5
7	Unnecessary use of pronouns	4	4
8	Pronouns refer to things but use verbs suitable for people only	3	3
9	Wrong spelling of pronouns/wrong grammar use with pronouns	2	3

Also the researchers discuss each problem pattern in the following.

Pattern 1: Incorrect pronoun agreement
The personal pronouns must match their antecedents in terms of case, person, number, and gender. This process is called agreement [15]. However, some of the students failed to apply this rule in their writing. Ten students used singular pronouns to refer to plural nouns/noun phrases, and eighteen students used plural pronouns to refer to singular nouns.

Example 1
Students may turn on their camera and microphone. It creates interaction between students and teachers
[The pronoun **"it"** is known to be used to refer to a singular noun. For this example, the pronoun **"it"** was used to refer to **"their camera and microphone"**, a plural noun phrase.]
Example 2
We also cannot have more detailing comment from the professor since they are not seeing the real work.
[In this sentence, the pronoun **"they"** which is a plural pronoun was used to refer to **"the professor"**, a singular noun.]

Pattern 2: Inconsistent pronouns
Using consistent pronouns is one important element of essay writing that creates coherence in essay's content. However, it was found that some students confusingly used various pronouns to refer to a particular person/persons, causing their essays incoherent. A few examples below are used to clarify this problem.

Example 3
We can manage our course and balance of work and studies easier. Because of on line course flexible schedule, you can manage you class and time by yourself and you can shift it when you have your business.
[In this example, the writer used both **the first (we, our) and second personal pronouns (you, yourself)** to address his/her readers.]

Example 4
Online class doesn't have a teacher to control in class. It means a study by myself but has teacher advice. If we not setting a goal to study it hard to have the motivation to study.
[The writer used both **"myself"** and **"we"** to address his/her readers. In fact, the two pronouns conveyed different ideas. When using **"myself"**, the writer isolated himself/herself from the readers, while the pronoun **"we"** created the sense of unity between the writer and readers.]

Example 5
Secondly, students are more punctual in the online class but there are not work as hard as they did in the classroom. Students don't have to prepare much to study online, we can just wake up then study, which makes the class run their program smoother
[The writer used both **third personal pronouns (they and their)**, and **second personal pronoun (we)** to refer to **"students"**. In this case, the pronoun and possessive adjective **"they"** and **"their"** are more appropriate since the word "students" is mentioned as a third person.]

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Pattern 3: Using a second personal pronoun to refer to a third person
   A few students used the second personal pronoun "you" to refer to a third person which, in this place, is "student".

   Example 6
First, <u>student</u> can start with the basics and ensure you know how to use a computer.

   Example 7
Online learning require <u>student</u> to go into the internet each time you want to read a lecture, download materials or submit work.

Pattern 4: Vague pronoun references
   When using a pronoun, there must be clarity in the use of an antecedent. It means that the relationship between the pronoun and its antecedent must be plain [16]. The antecedent of a pronoun is the noun that it refers back to. The antecedent is usually mentioned in the text before the pronoun. In this study fifteen out of forty students were found using pronouns without clear antecedents. Below are examples of vague pronoun references.

Example 8
<u>Online learning</u> *is just another method of learning.* <u>The objective</u> *is still the same. It is about self-improving. It is to make understanding about something we interested in.*
[In this example, it is not clear whether the pronoun **"it"** refers to "online learning" or "the objective".]

   Example 9
Also, to make other people have the same understanding what you mean, you need to have clear communication skills. You might be able to explain what it is.
[In this sentence, it seems impossible to identify which noun is the antecedent of the pronoun **"it"** as there is not any singular noun that can be replaced by this pronoun.]

Pattern 5: Little or no use of pronouns
   Fifteen students were found not using pronouns to refer to key nouns in their writing. They kept repeating the nouns throughout their essays.

   Example 10
Firstly, student discipline is primary stage of keeping the learning on track. Student have to planning their program since wake up throughout sleeping. Study online might be hard because there is no instructor beside student, so it's can lose learning information easily. Therefore, student discipline must be helpful for student effectively. Especially, learning on each of the subject, due to program and time schedule. Including after finish online learning, student have to practice more out of the class, to get more comprehension and usefulness.

   Example 11
One way that will improve online learning is by creating learning applications to support out-of-class learning. Every media application: VDO, animation, and youtube live: can stimulate learning of learners. For example, creation the quiz games that learners can learn about vocabulary. Fun games will help children learn better. Another example is youtube live that learners can learn the lecture on any topic and be downloaded on YouTube for replay. The last example is meeting chat room as Zoom that learners can have a discussion in the detail that is not understood.

Pattern 6: Overuse of pronouns
   When writing a sentence, using the same word more than once can be considered repetitive and make the sentences uninteresting. It was found that four students in this study used personal pronouns and possessive adjectives too frequently.

   Example 12
   Because of on line course flexible schedule, you can manage your class and time by yourself and you can shift it when you have your business. From that flexible reason make you can spend time to work, family, and friends. Next reason is you can study online course anytime and anywhere. Last reason it accessible you can access study from home and without transportation it safe the time and you can use that time to do everything else.

Pattern 7: Unnecessary use of pronouns
  Four students used a pronoun where unnecessary. This is considered grammatically incorrect.

Example 13
Some people may not be ready, may still go to the computer shop to work. Which it causes a lot of inequality in learning…
[In this sentence, the pronoun **"it"** is not needed in this position since the relative pronoun "which" already functions as the subject of the verb. Therefore, the pronoun **"it"** is unnecessary and makes this sentence grammatically incorrect.]

Example 14
But there still remain some trouble along the process which reflect on my our life which can be improve to create the better life in the future.
[In this sentence, the possessive adjectives **"my"** and **"our"** are used together, making this sentence confusing and grammatically incorrect.]

Pattern 8: Pronouns refer to things but use verbs suitable for people only
  Three students used pronouns that referred to things but used verbs that suitable for persons.

Example 15
Every classroom has to be on time, because it can miss the content and get the full knowledge.
[In this sentence, the pronoun **"it"** refers to "every classroom". However, the noun "classroom" is a thing and cannot use a verb suitable for persons like "to miss".]

Example 16
Study online might be hard because there is no instructor beside student, so it's can lose learning information easily.
[In this sentence, the pronoun **"it"** refers to "study online", which is not a person. Therefore, the verb "to lose" cannot be used with this antecedent.]

Pattern 9: Wrong spelling of pronoun/wrong grammar use with pronouns
  Two students were found misspelling and using pronouns ungrammatically.

Example 17
The problem of not understanding the teacher in class and need to repeat a lot of time will be gone. Students can replay the video to learn to there best many times.
[In this sentence, the writer intended to use the possessive adjective **"their"** but misspelt it as "there", which has a different meaning.]

Example 18
Last reason it accessible you can access study from home and without transportation it safe the time and you can use that time to do everything else.
[Both pronouns **"it"** in this sentence were followed by adjectives (accessible and safe), so they needed a helping verb to make the sentence grammatically correct.]

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The nine patterns of problems above emphasise that Thai students have had difficulties using various types of pronouns. The use of pronoun agreement seems to be the most problematic as more than half of the sample students made errors in this issue. When pointing out the errors to them, it appeared that they knew the rule of pronoun agreement but were unaware of using it for their mother tongue (Thai language) does not classify nouns as singular or plural. Therefore, it can be said that this type of errors was caused by the interference of the native language of users (L1 Interference) [17, 18].

Another two significant problems were "vague pronoun references" and "little or no use of pronouns". Firstly, the problem of "vague pronoun references" generally happens when writers do not make antecedents absolutely clear. According to the research finding, most cases of this problem occurred when the students used the pronoun "it" since the pronoun can be used to refer to a variety of things, including an object, an animal, a situation.

For the cases of "little or no use of pronouns", they occurred when the students repeatedly use key nouns instead of using pronouns to represent those key terms in their essays. The result of the study reveals that the more the students

repeated key nouns, the less they used pronouns. In contrast to the "little or no use of pronouns" problem, some students overused pronouns. However, the user's number was significantly lesser.

Using inconsistent pronouns was also another major type of errors that the students made. They confusingly employed first, second, and third personal pronouns in their essays which led to content incoherence.

In conclusion, the sample students found difficulties in using pronouns in their writing. Most of them encountered more than one problem. One possible reason to explain this was that they did not understand some rules of pronoun use. Without some understanding of grammar, students would not be able to do anything more than uttering separate items of language for separate function [19]. Even though they knew the rules, they were unaware of applying them as the students were influenced by their native language. This has led the researchers to recognize that these problems are necessary to solve and improve immediately for their better academic writing. Another possibility for researchers is the further study on how to enhance students' competency concerning the use of personal pronouns in their academic writing. For EFL teachers, they should start to emphasize the importance of the use of personal pronouns—despite being considered basic grammatical features in English language use—in their writing classes and find out proper teaching methods to effectively handle this problem with their learners.

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