

## *A Survey of the Problems, Wants, and Abilities of Writing Skill of Secretaries*

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### **Abstract**

English language becomes an obvious key tool for success in international businesses. Secretaries play a crucial role to manage company administrative duties. Although they are exposed to the target language daily, writing problems in various types of documents still occur. Besides, the needs of English for their profession have scarcely been revealed. Specifically, only a few sources focus on English writing development for secretary. This study aims at investigating problems, wants, and abilities of the English writing skills of secretaries using quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaires were distributed to thirty secretaries and ten managers to explore problems and wants in the field. Furthermore, in order to get in-depth information, the authentic written work-related documents were submitted by the secretaries to examine their English writing abilities in terms of grammar, content, word choices, and mechanics and style. The results showed that the problems were mainly found and perceived in word choices, content, and grammar. In addition, the secretaries indicated that they wanted to improve their writing skills in content and word choices which interestingly corresponded to the managers' wants for their secretary to improve. Lastly, the abilities of writing skills in style and grammar were higher than in word choices and content. In the end, the important implications of secretary's writing skills included aspects of professional development for secretaries and course and content redesign for educators in order to serve the real needs for the better practice in the business as a whole.

Keywords: Writing Skill, Secretary, Problems, Wants, and Abilities

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## **Introduction**

English plays an important role and often commands the status of a second language in countries where it is not the mother tongue (Ahmad, 2016). Working knowledge of the English language provides people with the advantages of better education and employment opportunities (Sutnongbua, 2002). English language proficiency is also essential all sectors of Thai infrastructure including the economy, politics, society, culture, and education. Nowadays, businesses face intense domestic competition and this encourages expansion to international markets. Thus, there is greater need for employees that are capable and conversant with English language skills. Most companies require people with secretarial skills to performs various administrative duties and other important tasks that assists and supports the executive team (Steger & Erisman-Peyer, 2009). These secretaries should have good characteristics, personality, and technical knowledge, and also possess a general educational grounding in psychology, social science, economy, law, accountancy, and English language (Hiranphicha, 2019). Secretaries are expected to have an excellent grasp of the four basic English language skills of -listening, speaking, reading, and writing to facilitate their duties in today's cut-throat business environment. However, writing has been determined as the most lacking skillset, with frequent errors in documents. This is not surprising because writing is generally regarded as the most difficult English skill to master (Phuket & Othman, 2015).

This study sheds light on the extent of the problems, wants, and abilities in business sectors regarding expertise in all English language skillsets for secretarial purposes, especially writing. Secretarial competence and mastery of the English language will promote and support greater productivity in all aspects of business management.

## **Methodology**

This survey research study investigated 1) problems in English writing skills among secretaries; 2) the wants of secretaries concerning English writing skills, and 3) the abilities of secretaries in English writing skills.

The study participants consisted of two groups. The first included 30 secretaries, selected by simple random sampling technique from four private companies engaged in auditing, security services, taxation, and business administration consulting as PricewaterhouseCoopers ABAS Ltd. (PwC), EY Corporate Services Limited (EY), Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Jaiyos Co., Ltd. (Deloitte) and KPMG Phoomchai Holdings Co., Ltd. (KPMG), respectively. The second group comprised 10 managers with secretaries under their supervision from the four aforementioned private companies. Participants in the second group were also selected using simple random sampling.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Two questionnaires for secretaries and managers were first designed and then validated by experts in the fields of English language teaching and assessment. The relevant questionnaire was distributed to 30 secretaries as the main instrument to collect problems and demands concerning English writing skills for secretaries. The questionnaire adopted a five-point Likert scale and consisted of three parts as

demographic information of the respondents, problems that they encountered daily in English writing skills, and the wants to improve their written English. English writing abilities of the secretaries were determined by examination of their authentic written work-related documents. Additionally, in order to investigate the wants of English writing skills for secretaries, the manager sample group was required to answer a questionnaire divided into two parts as demographic information of the respondents and the wants to improve the English writing skills for their secretaries.

Data were analyzed by comparing results of the main secretarial duties according to the Thailand Standard Classification of Occupations: TSCO B.E. 2544, together with three practice books of English for Secretaries by focusing on writing skills, based on Communication for Business and Secretarial Students, Secretarial Office Procedures, and Webster's New World Secretarial Handbook. Exercises from the books were adapted, examined by experts, and included in the questionnaire as another research tool. This study focused on four types of secretarial duties as minutes taking, reports, letter/email correspondence, and memos. Five aspects of English writing skills were highlighted, consisting of grammar, content, word choices, mechanics and style as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of Secretary Work and English Writing Skills

Thailand Standard Classification of Occupations (Thailand)			Present Study
Occupation	No.	Work/Duties	
Secretary	1	Report	English Writing Skills: 1. Grammar 2. Content 3. Word Choices 4. Mechanics 5. Style
	2	Minutes	
	3	Letter/Email Correspondence	
	4	Memo	

Data concerning problems and wants in English writing skills were gathered from both secretaries and managers and analyzed using SPSS for Windows. Data concerning abilities in English writing and authentic work-related documents written by the secretaries were submitted for examination by three experts based on the criteria listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Criteria for Examining the Secretaries' Authentic Written Work

<b>Topics</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Grammar</b>	Excellent grammar, spelling and syntax.	A few errors in grammar, spelling and syntax.	Shows a pattern of errors in grammar, spelling, and syntax. Could also be a sign of lack of proofreading.	Continuous errors.
<b>Content</b>	Exceptionally well presented and argued; ideas are detailed, well developed, supported with specific evidence & facts, as well as examples and specific details.	Well-presented and argued; ideas are detailed, developed and supported with evidence and details, mostly specific.	Content is sound and solid; ideas are present but not particularly developed or supported; some evidence, but usually of a generalized nature.	Content is completely unsupported and missing all key detail.
<b>Word Choices</b>	There is clear use of a personal and unique style of writing, suited to audience and purpose; the paper holds the reader's interest with ease.	There is an attempt at a personal style but style of writing may be awkward or unsuited to audience and purpose; the reader may lose interest in some sections of the paper.	There is little attempt at style; reads as flat and perhaps uninteresting in content, which is usually generalized and clichéd.	No attempt at style.
<b>Mechanics</b>	Excellent punctuation.	A few errors in punctuation, but not many	Shows a pattern of errors in punctuation. Could also be a sign of lack of proofreading.	Continuous errors.
<b>Style Organization: Overall</b>	Well-planned and well-thought out. Includes title, introduction, statement of	Good overall organization includes the main organizational tools.	There is a sense of organization, although some of the organizational	No sense of organization.

	key information, transitions and conclusion.		tools are used weakly or missing.	
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## Results and Discussions

Demographic information of the respondents indicated that all the secretaries were female; approximately 33% were between 31 and 35 years old, while 70% graduated with a bachelor degree, mainly majoring in the Faculty of Arts. Most had 1 to 5 years' job experience. Conversely, around 80% of the managers were male, aged over 40 and had graduated at master degree level.

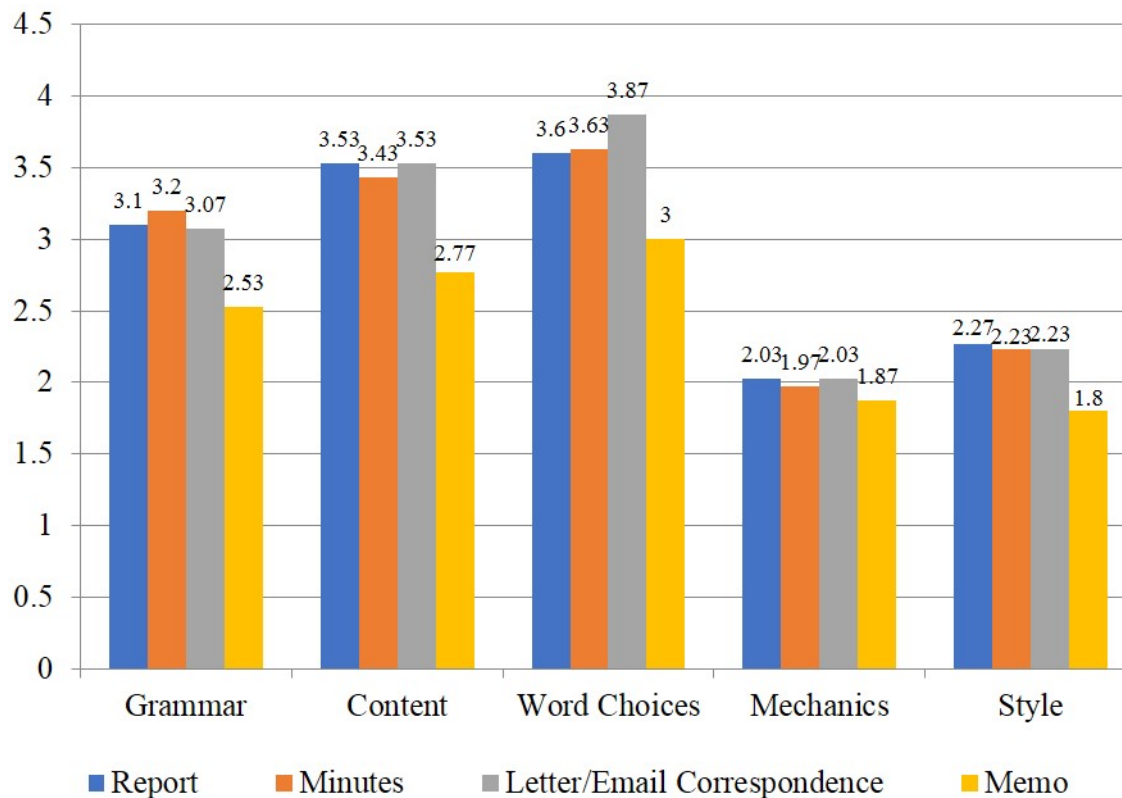


Figure 1: The Problems in English Writing for Secretaries

As shown in Figure 1, word choice yielded the highest level of problems in English writing for secretaries. The influence of their mother tongue as Thai resulted in the failure to choose words that were appropriate for the given contexts. Moreover, selecting word choices from lists of synonyms was one of the main causes of errors because some synonyms represent different meanings when applied in diverse contexts. Words in a list of synonyms are by no means interchangeable. This error resulted in the use inappropriate English words in some contexts (Phuket & Othman, 2015). Furthermore, the writing aspect that the secretaries encountered the least was style, probably because they were infrequently required to change writing formats. Thus, lack of knowledge and cognizance in this area was problematic.

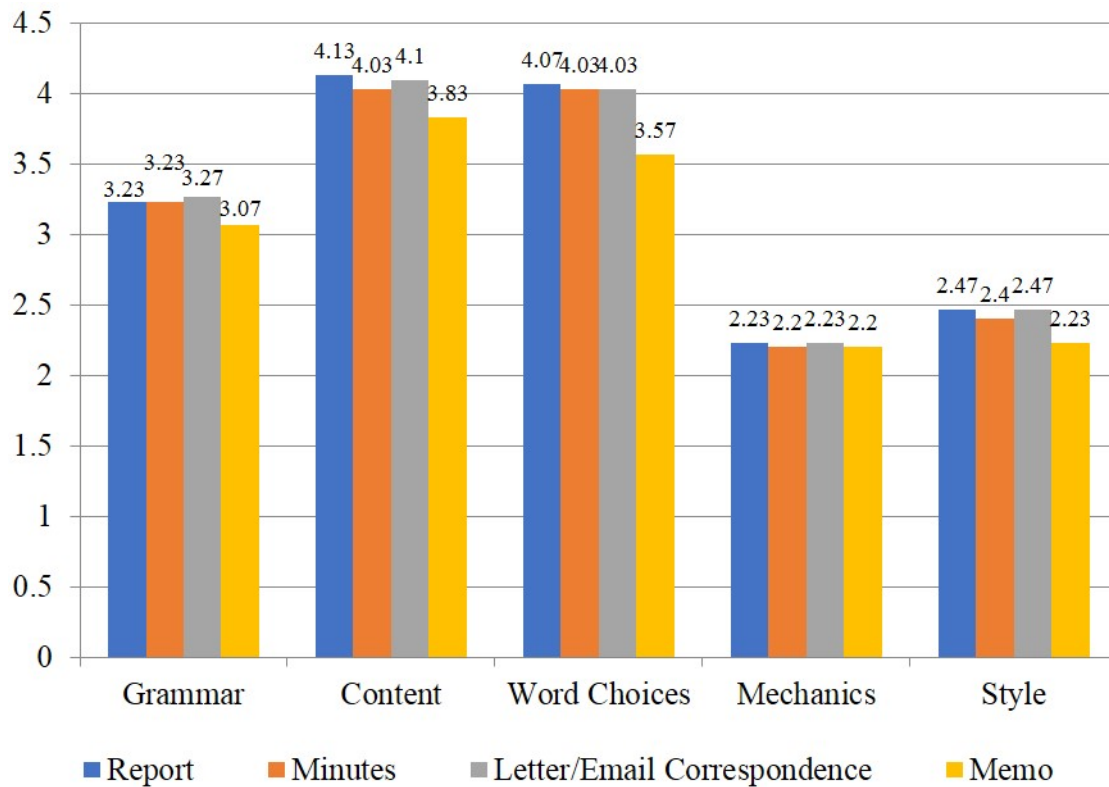


Figure 2: The Secretaries' Wants to Improve in English Writing for Secretaries

Figure 2, shows that the wants to improve English writing skills for secretaries in terms of content were at a relatively high level. Most secretaries yearn to improve their English writing skills in terms of content. Written explanation, as non-verbal language, lacks extra facets of understanding that can be communicated through gestures as body language and tone of voice. Thus, to convey complete information, via the written word, the content must be clear, unambiguous, and pertinent for the readers to correctly understand the purposes or details unambiguously. Results indicated that the secretaries wanted to improve mechanics the least. Using the available advanced technology, written reports, minutes, letter/email correspondence, and memos can now be corrected automatically in terms of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. This possibly reflected the reason why mechanics was a skill in which the secretaries desired the least improvement.

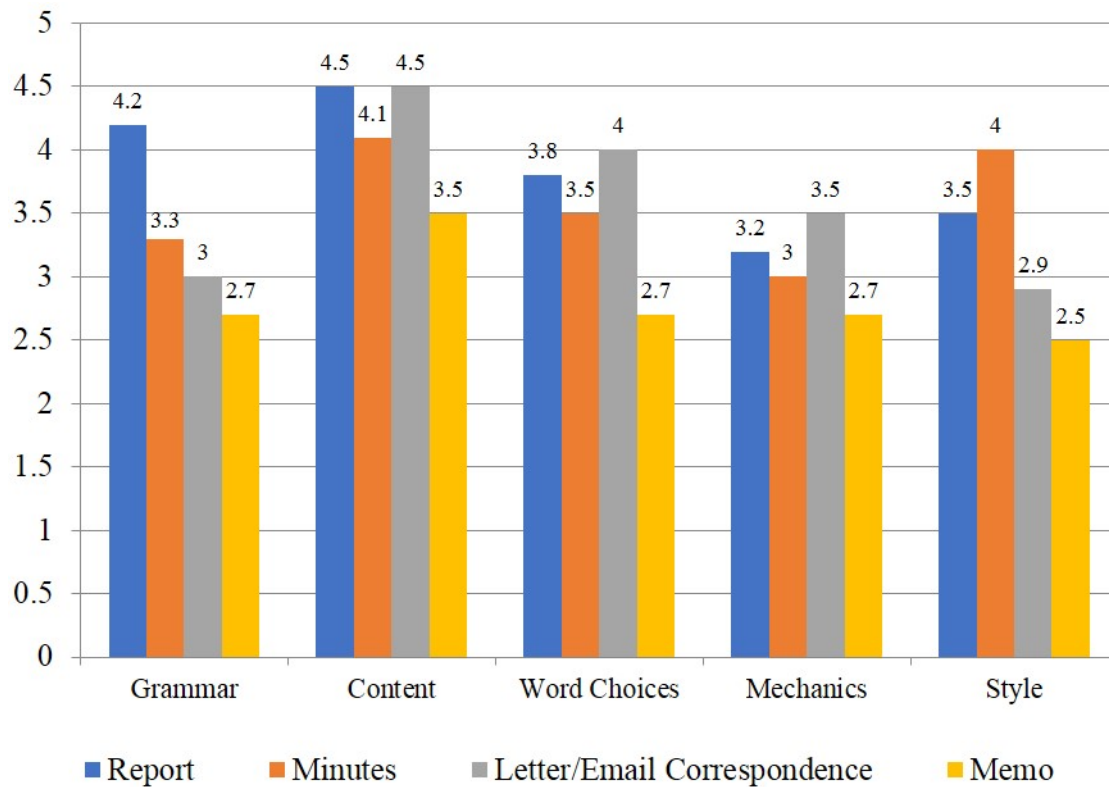


Figure 3: The Managers' Wants to Improve in English Writing for Secretaries

Results from the managers' questionnaire are shown in Figure 3. Most managers expressed similar wants toward their secretaries. Content was an aspect of English writing skills that they desired their secretaries to improve the most, probably because managers prefer to convey complete and comprehensive meaning with no minor grammatical mistakes. This finding concurred with Suraishkumar (2004) who noted that organizations required writers to be aware of both readers' and listeners' perceptions. Therefore, abilities to convey content and present relevant information were crucial since written communication must present clear intention. The least wants among managers was also mechanics in every secretarial duty including reports, minutes, letter/email correspondence, and memos. Furthermore, managers desired secretaries to improve their knowledge concerning language structure and discontinue the written use of Thai discourse particles such as ka, kha, and krub. Following Thai culture, these filial discourse particles are commonly used to show respect as good manners. Secretaries are familiar with the use of these words and feel more comfortable when they use these discourse particles in their written texts. However, English language structure does not have similar ending discourse particles and suitable word choices are selected to convey politeness.

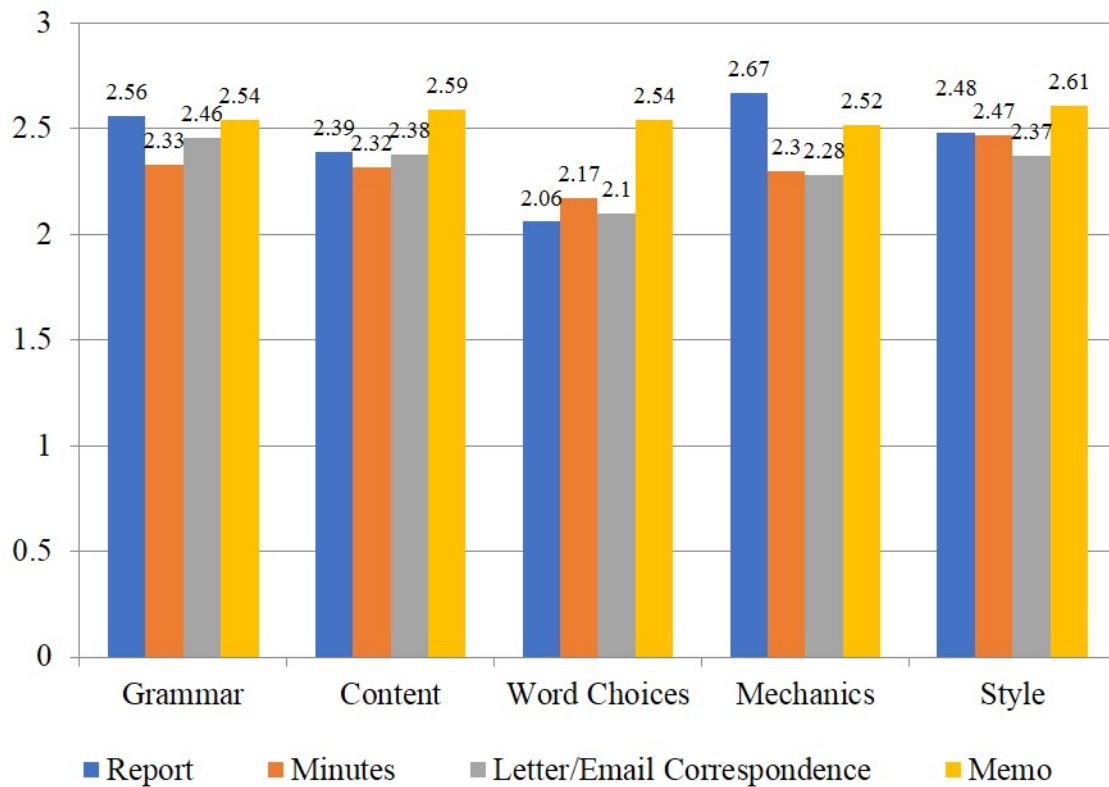


Figure 4: The Abilities of Secretaries in English Writing for Secretaries

Findings indicated that the abilities of secretaries were relatively high as shown in Figure 4. Style yielded the highest level, possibly because companies normally provided formats and styles or even examples of different types of writing. Word choice yielded the lowest level, since one English word can have several different meanings depending upon the context in which it is used. Thus, the secretaries encountered difficulties in choosing appropriate words for use in different sentences and diverse styles of writing. Word choice is a key aspect that can easily lead to misunderstanding. According to Scott and Nagy (2004), considered word choice as a crucial aspect of writing. Careful choice of appropriate words involves taking the meanings, the readers, and the hierarchy into consideration. Mistakes arising from incorrect and inappropriate word choice lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation.



## Conclusions

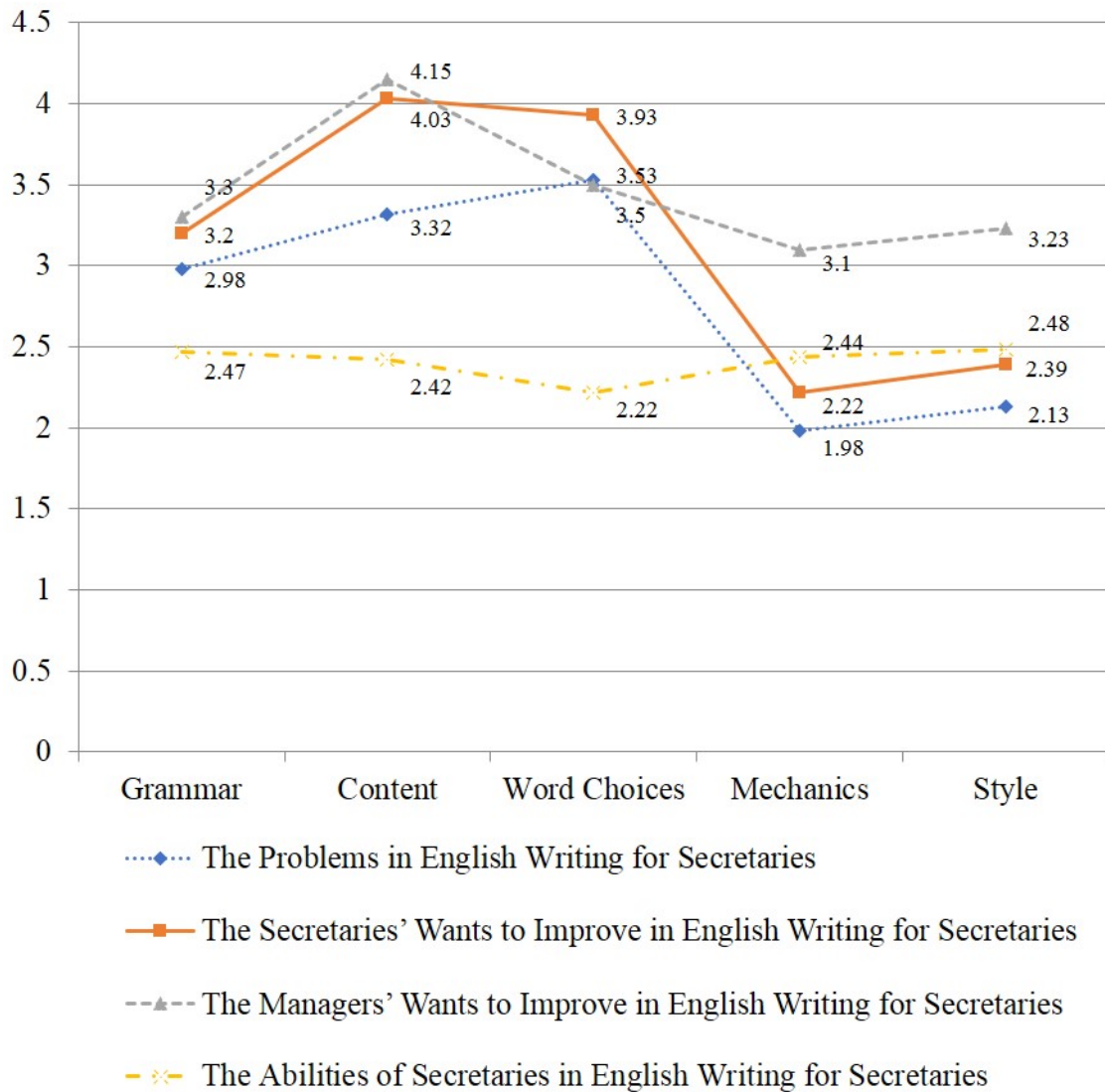


Figure 5: The Problems, Wants, and Abilities in English Writing for Secretaries

Results implied that word choice was the most problematic aspect of English writing for secretaries and marked as low score on their written abilities. The wants to improve English writing skills for secretaries further showed that message content required improvement at a relatively high level, while they desired to improve mechanics the least. For secretaries, style and mechanics were at a higher level than the problems and the wants in English writing, whereas abilities in other English writing skill aspects were lower than problems and the wants in English writing. Nevertheless, managers' wants in style and mechanics were higher than secretaries' problems, wants, and abilities in English writing.

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