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## Using Reflective Journal Blogging to Enhance English Writing Skill

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### ABSTRACT

There is an abundance of useful technology to enhance students' ability to practice their English skills, both inside and outside classroom. English teachers have to study these technologies in order to choose the correct technology that will fit the abilities of the students in the different classrooms. In this study, the researcher, as an English teacher chose Blogger.com as a platform for students to use for practicing their writing skill. Therefore, this study focuses on the effects of using a reflective journal in a blog format to enhance a group of university students' writing skill. The subjects in this study were fourth year – English major students at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University, Thailand. The students were assigned to write a reflective journal in association with their English for Cultural Communication class. The project encompassed the entire sixteen week semester. The class was about learning Thai culture in English and learning how to educate foreigners and tourists about Thai culture by using proper English. The results of the research are in qualitative data shown in three categories; language used, critical thinking process and knowledge of their own culture. The results show the weak points of students' language used for which teachers have to find solutions for them so they can improve writing skill. The results also show that students do not have enough skill for critical thinking to write a reflective journal. The last result shows that students still use inappropriate English to express and explain Thai culture to foreigners. The solutions are discussed in this study.

*Keywords:* English writing skill, reflective journal, blogging, technology in English classroom, critical thinking

### Introduction

Innovative technology for ESL/EFL learning and teaching such as Blog writing not only have the potential to enhance students' writing ability, but also provide opportunities for blended learning and teaching for both autonomous learning and in-class powerful teaching tools.

Weblog, or web log, evolved to the shorter term Blog that we use today. It is a type of website that was originally developed and maintained by a single person using easy-to-use online software or a hosting platform with space for writing. The first private blogs were more like personal journals or diaries and offered immediate publishing. They were known for being user friendly for readers and provided functions for feedback via comments (Solomon & Schrum, 2010).

Learning English through culture is very challenging for Thai students who have low English background proficiency. The main reason for this challenge is because some words cannot be directly translated to English. Some Thai words have to be explained in English through phrases or sentences instead of with just a single word.

Most Thai students are born in Thailand and live immersed within their own culture. Nevertheless, they still don't completely understand nor possess sufficient knowledge and skill to be able to explain to foreigners in English. Some students get more confused when they start learning other cultures and attempt to compare them with their own. "English for Culture Communication" course for 4<sup>th</sup> year English major students at UBRU is intended to help students learn Thai social structure and Thai culture in English, analysis and synthesis of foreign culture influence on Thai society and culture, to use English for communication and provide appropriate Thai culture information to foreigners. For the purpose of evaluation for this course, the teacher assigned students to write a reflective journal to reflect their opinion toward each activity throughout the semester. The teacher also tried to use technology blended into the teaching and learning methods. To this end, students were assigned to write their reflective journal using Blogger.com as a platform for blending learning.

This study shows how students use a reflective journal to improve their English writing skill and reflect their idea toward their own culture and ways they can use that knowledge to enhance their ability to explain to the foreigners who would like to learn about Thai culture.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this paper is to study the effects of using reflective journal blogging to enhance students' writing skill.

### **Research Question**

How reflective journal blogging effects students' writing skill?

### **Literature Review**

Blogs serve many purposes in education. Students have access to a ready-made audience for their writing. They provide a platform for students to practice their writing skills. Students can experience an enhanced awareness of interaction with other the teacher and other students. Working with blogs encourages students to be more active in the classroom. A blog provides a personal space for students to store their work (Stanley, 2005). Teachers should assign ample writing projects to be posted on their personal blogs because there is evidence that blogs become more proficient when the students posts to it frequently. The writing on a blog should be made into a habit through encouragement so it will not be neglected by the student.

Learning new concepts is important and that is why inspiring students to write reflective journals is an excellent tool. Reflective journals provide the teacher current feedback on the concepts the students learned. The teacher knows quickly if lessons need to be modified or supplemented to clarify the intended lesson and thus improve their teaching (Thorpe, 2005). Blogs are widely used in a variety of fields and educational environments as a medium to publish reflective thoughts. It is extremely helpful to advance critical thinking skills through English writing.

Using blogs can provide students with examples so they can model and generate fresh ideas for writing. That can contribute to the quality of writing and the development of purpose (Zhang, 2009).

A blog used for journal writing allows a student to reflect and express thoughts about experiences. Writing and reflecting activates critical thinking which could possibly provide the student with awareness of beliefs that influence their judgments. One of the benefits that attracts students to enjoying journal writing is they could receive timely feedback so the students would

know if their thinking is correct. It is thought that perhaps the journal will help connect concepts learned in a classroom with experiences in everyday life. An embodiment of journal writing is the emergence of tools used for self-web publishing which includes the weblog or blog. You are given a format to write and publish your thoughts and comments. The blog posts are archived with the most recent post on top and the rest in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be customized to fit the needs or personality of the blogger (Pinkman, 2005).

### **Research Methodology and Findings**

This section will explain about research methodology used in this study and to present the data analysis that was done in order to investigate how the blog can be an effective tool to improve writing skill.

There were 22, 4<sup>th</sup> years students from UBRU who participated in this study. They registered to study English for Cultural Communication for the last semester before they graduated. Students were assigned to register and create an account on Blogger.com to prepare as a platform for them to write reflective journal for 16 weeks. The students' English backgrounds were average based on their learning records.

The basic learning material requirement that students had to prepare were; 1) Email address provided by university (or regular Gmail), 2) Use Email to log-in into this learning platform (Google Sites) created by the teacher, 3) Create a personal blog from Blogger for academic reflective journal, 4) Create a class YouTube channel and everyone in the class can upload video to the channel

Sixteen lesson plans had been planned for this 16 week. Here are some excerpts of weekly record, finding and evaluation toward students' reflective journal blogging.

#### **First week: Introduction**

Teacher introduced students to the course and briefed all activities in each week to students. Then focus on the assignment and emphasize to students that they have to write reflective journal entry for 500-700 words on the blog every week by starting Day 1, the first day of class. Students had 2 days after the day of class to finish their journal and post. Then teacher will monitor progress and activity. Moreover, each student had to read at least 3 unique posts of their classmates and post a comment to their classmates' entry. However, in this study the researcher will only focus on the reflective journal writing not on the comments.

The findings from students' reflection via their blog on the first week show that some students had problems setting up their learning material as requested. One student mentioned that she has been using the internet on her Samsung phone for a year but she has never used Email to send any messages to anyone. For the blog, she only read other people's blogs, but had never written anything like a blog post by herself. She also had watched video on YouTube everyday but she doesn't know how to upload a personal video to it. So a review of her writing for this course showed she's very uncomfortable using technology for this class. As for other writing performances, eight students had copied content from their classmates and put onto their own blog and reposted it. Five students had copied content from other blogs not connected with the course. They edited the post in an attempt to make it their own words but they didn't know how to do it correctly, so it's very easy to identify those using alternative strategies to avoid writing themselves. Moreover, another six students had written in Thai and used Google translate to convert the post to English. The raw English translation converted by Google translate doesn't make sense and the students didn't rewrite it before they posted to their blog and published the

entry. There were only three students who did original work. They demonstrated issues with subject-verb agreement and tenses, for example, subject singular + verb-s and used present tense for past events. For all twenty students' work this week, they only wrote their opinions as descriptive paragraphs there were no reflective thoughts regarding the activities present in their writing.

At the conclusion of the first week students' performance on reflective writing can be explained according to the 4 stages; depth of reflection, use of textual evidence and historical context, language used, and conventions. Overall the 22 reflective journals in the part of the depth of reflection, students demonstrated little or no understanding of the writing prompt and subject matter. Therefore, most of the work needs to be revised. Regarding the use of textual evidence and historical context, students didn't display any examples from the project and claims made in the writing were unsupported and irrelevant to the topic assigned. In the part of language used, students used some words and sentences that were unsuitable for the content and purpose, with little or no awareness of sentence structure. Lastly, students demonstrated no control of the conventions, making comprehension almost impossible.

### **Second week: Introduction to Thailand & Ubon Ratchathani**

For this week, teacher started the class reviewing how students' performed on reflective journal. Teacher pointed out all the mistakes and errors of their writing by capturing students' work and showing on PowerPoint (without name) including reviewing ground rules of the class about cheating and plagiarism. The teacher informed the class that the work that is copied and a product of plagiarism will be graded as zero for the first week. Teacher also mentioned that there's no reflection point on their writing, then encouraged them how to write it correctly by giving them more examples.

Topic for the second week was "Introduction to Thailand and Ubon Ratchathani". Students were assigned to watch videos from Tourism Authority of Thailand used to promote Thailand and to motivate foreigners to come to Thailand. After that teacher showed some photos and videos about tourist attractions of Ubon Ratchathani. Then the students had to break into 4 groups. Each group had to brainstorm about an interesting place in town that they want to introduce to foreigners who come to visit Ubon Ratchathani for the first time, for example, temples, local market, local restaurant, public parks, etc. When students in the group agreed on a location, they have to think about how to present it using role play situations. They were required to create dialog to support the role play. The next steps were writing the script and rehearsing the dialog before going to the actual location and shooting the video. Students had 2 weeks to write their script, get it proofread by native speakers or English teachers, rehearse, shoot video and uploaded the video to Youtube. Before the class ended, teacher reminded students about keeping their reflective journal.

The findings from students' reflection via their blog showed that some students were still struggling toward the newly introduced learning style using group work, brainstorming, creating their own story and dialog and then making a video according to the script. Some students mentioned that making a video with their own role play script was totally new for them. One student said that he liked this kind of learning because only lecturing in the class didn't help him to practice his speaking skill. Making the video for this class helped him to practice his pronunciation because he had to rehearse the dialog many times before the shooting date. On the other hand, some students complained about the difficulties of using the internet both on the campus and at home. But they said it's only the first few weeks of the course, so they hope they

can adjust themselves and learn how to solve problems better in the next week. Moreover, another student wrote about how little she knows about a local temple which her group had chosen for their project. She mentioned on her blog that in the past 20 years of her life she had never been to that temple before and it was only a ten minute drive from her home. She explained that she was excited to do the project because it's new and sounds fun to learn new things.

At the conclusion of the second week students' performance on reflective writing can be explained according to the 4 stages; depth of reflection, use of textual evidence and historical context, language used, and conventions. Overall the 22 reflective journals in the part of the depth of reflection, students still demonstrated little or no understanding of the writing prompt and subject matter. Therefore, most of the work for this week still needs revision. About the use of textual evidence and historical context, students showed incomplete or vaguely developed examples to only partially support claims with no connections made between contents. In the part of language used, students still used words and sentences that were vague or imprecise for the context or purposes, with little sense of voice, and a limited awareness of how to vary sentence structure. And the last stage of findings, students demonstrated limited control of the conventions, exhibiting frequent errors that make comprehension difficult.

### **Third week: Role Play and Video Shooting (Group Work)**

The activities for students this week were group work, rehearsal and shooting the video as each group planned. After each group finished uploading the video to the class's Youtube channel that had been created the first week of the course, everyone had to write in their reflective journal regarding their experiences about how they learned how to use English to communicate in context of Thai culture.

The findings from the third week of reflective journal blogging showed that some students mentioned on their blogs that shooting a video using English for role play activities was more difficult than they expected. They expressed that they used to make videos via their smart phone for fun when they went on a trip with family or friends. They used Thai language on the video so it was not stressful. They could talk or sing freely. But when they had to make this first video for this course they felt very nervous and were too excited to run through the role play many times. They had to pause and shoot many times until the video met with their satisfaction. Part of problem they encounter concerned the internet connection, students solved the problem by using university Wi-Fi during the day and work at school where they can get strong connection and posted it before they go home. Some students wrote that they were very happy that they could work in group because they were able to share ideas and get help when they couldn't work alone.

To conclude, students' performance on reflective writing of third week can be explained according to the 4 stages; depth of reflection, use of textual evidence and historical context, language used, and conventions. The overall in the part of the depth of reflection, the students made progress demonstrating a basic understanding of the writing prompt and the subject matter. Students used examples from the activities to support most claims in their writing with some connections made between contents. Additionally, students used basic sentences with appropriate structure that contained a basic sense of voice. There was some awareness of audience and purpose and some attempt to vary sentence structure. Students also demonstrated partial control of the conventions, exhibiting only occasional errors that did not hinder comprehension.

#### **Fourth week: Review of Activities and Discussion**

In this class, students had to present their videos to the class again (after they had posted on Youtube and classmates can watch them from the past week) with their explanation about their problems and struggles while working in a group. Teacher also gave suggestions to each group so they could work better on the next project.

The findings from students' reflective journal blogging of the fourth week showed that some of students expressed their confidence to speak English during rehearsal. They also noted their desire to improve their script and make a better video. Some students liked that the discussion in the class provided them with more ideas about how to improve their performance on using English to communicate toward Thai culture. A student mentioned that she learned a lot by working outside the class, especially working in group at a location they chose. She wrote that this can be a last chance for her to have fun with friends during doing an interesting project as a student because they were going to graduate in a few months. This class activity can show the importance of friendship of classmates to work as teams to make success and create a great outcome.

To summarize, the performance on reflective writing of fourth week can be explained according to the 4 stages; depth of reflection, use of textual evidence and historical context, language used, and conventions. Most students' journal this week demonstrated a thoughtful understanding of the writing prompt and the subject matter. They used relevant examples from the project to support claims in their writing, making applicable connections between contents. However, students still use only basic sentences with appropriate structure and a basic sense of voice. There was some awareness of audience and purposes and some attempt to vary sentence structure. The students still demonstrate partial control of the conventions, exhibiting occasional errors that do not hinder comprehension.

#### **Fifth – Sixteenth Week**

The rest of semester students had been given a topic, doing group work such as writing scripts, rehearsing and making video on a topic related to Thai culture.

On the week 16, there were reviews and a reflection presentation from each group. Then students had to write their final reflective journal entry to share their ideas about how they feel about this course and any progress with their own English skills during the past 16 weeks.

The findings of the overall performance of 22 students' reflective journal blogging revealed that most students were very satisfactory with this course. Their reasons were, for example, they had a chance to work in group as team work. They enjoyed working outside the class. They feel more comfortable to speak English in front of the camera than in front of the classroom. They liked that they had a chance to use new learning tools such as blogging, video, and other social media that teacher offered in the classroom. They had a chance to learn new knowledge about their own culture that they never known before, for example, what to call different style of Buddhist temples' roof and how to make the correct "wai" gesture to people of different ages, etc. Moreover, most students mentioned that they had a better understanding and better writing skill because of the reflective journal that they had to write every week. Some students mentioned that since they studied from the first year as a student they had never written anything as long and they want to continue to practice their writing skill on the Blogger even after they graduate.

To summarize the overall students' performances throughout the 16 weeks of the course are based on the four criteria; depth of reflection, use of textual evidence and historical context,

language use and convention, it showed that students demonstrated a conscious and thorough understanding of the writing prompt and the subject matter. This reflection can be used as an example for other students. Students can use more relevant examples from the texts studied to support claims in their writing, making applicable connections between texts. The final week of the course students could use language that is more fluent and original with an obvious sense of voice, a stronger awareness of audience and purpose, and the ability to vary sentence structure. It also showed that students could demonstrate control of the conventions, exhibiting occasional errors only when using sophisticated language.

### **Recommendation**

Using the students' journal writing teacher and researcher can discover more about the linguist features that were used by the students. Then by analyzing the errors the teacher can focus more on the mistakes that were formally committed in the writing. Then adapted and modified lesson plans can be designed to overcome those errors.

Narrative and descriptive writing pattern should be analyzed. Using the completed analysis teacher can identify common errors. A method to fix those errors can be inserted into classes that are pre-requisites for taking this course.

We can become aware of the best methods for students to learn or expand their English skills using Thai culture. The vocabulary must be expanded to include new words that are unique to Thai culture. Jargon must be taught to increase understanding and words that cannot be translated directly can be transliterated into English with a comprehensive description in English of what the Thai word or phrase means.

### **Conclusion**

This was a pilot course intended to help integrate technology into the English language program. The benefits for teach and students obtained through use of reflective journal blogging were substantial. The teacher received feedback from the students through their words and also through their writing skills. Given the time of the assignments the teacher could make adjustments and modifications to the lesson for the next week. The content of the journal entries provided insight into the students' confidence levels and fears.

There was a noticeable improvement in the language used by the students after the 16 weeks. The course and experience was not enough for the students to master English but they felt much better about their capabilities.

The critical thinking aspect of the course was a major challenge mainly because it was a new skill for most of the students in the course. They had to be walked through the process slowly but surely. They did catch on regarding writing a reflective journal and using critical thinking.

It is difficult for many of the students to be able to explain Thai culture to foreigners in English in a manner the foreigner will understand. This is especially important for those who want to work as a tour guide for foreigners upon graduation. That is an area that needs more focus along with critical thinking.

The teacher found the students' reflective journal entries very revealing. The writing was personal and completely their opinions about their learning and improvements or weaknesses. This provided information that can be used to add a more personal touch to help the students in need. Also, by assigning the students to read at least 3 posts written by the classmates it gave a diversity of ideas to them.

This class should and will continue for English major students at Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University and provide benefits to teachers and students.

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