

Purnima Iyer (2013). Effects of collaborative blogging on communicative skills in writing of Thai University EFL students. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 14(39).

## **EFFECTS OF COLLABORATIVE BLOGGING ON COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS IN WRITING OF THAI UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS**

Purnima Iyer, Payap University, Thailand

This study explored the effects of collaborative blogging on communicative skills in writing of Thai EFL students. The participants were 12 fourth year university students studying English as their major field of study. The participants wrote a total of eight blog assignments, completed two questionnaires, one before the start of the study, and the second after writing all the blog assignments. An interview was also carried out at the end of the study. The results revealed that most participants had not written blogs before, and were relatively new to the concept of blogging. The findings brought to light the fact that the communicative skills in writing, based on the four codes chosen for the study, namely creativity, critical thinking, voice, comments and contributions, improved as a result of collaborative blogging. The participants, however, did face problems with the blogging interface and since they were already familiar with social networking sites such as Facebook, the current study suggested that blogs could be merged with Facebook allowing for a more convenient way for the participants to write and communicate with one another.

**Keywords:** blogs, collaborative blogging, communicative skills, attitude

### **INTRODUCTION**

Writing is one of the four skills that students use to communicate, whether it is on paper or on the computer. These days many students use social networking sites such as Facebook, myspace and hi5. With English being used as a global language for communication in education, business and technology, it is essential that students need to be able to communicate in English. Good writing skills are, therefore, important in today's world of technology where people want to share ideas and communicate over the internet. According to Kroll (1990) writing is a task that is difficult for any person and ESL students, even in native English speaking countries, find academic writing

challenging. If that is the case, then EFL students should find this to be quite a difficult feat (Thonus, 1993). This section, thus talks about the problems that EFL students face in writing.

According to Torwong (2003) the emphasis in teaching EFL in Thailand is more on the grammar, punctuation and spelling being accurate than the ideas being communicated. There is a need to focus on the fluency too and to give the students a chance to think about the errors and how to improve their writing ability. Creating student blogs and incorporating them in the coursework may then give students an opportunity to focus on fluency in writing and improve their general writing ability by reading other's posts and comments, as well as responding to those.

This leads to another important problem in teaching writing in Thailand and that is using a teacher-centered approach (Torwong, 2003). This approach may not help learners in becoming autonomous and taking control of their own learning. According to Holec (1981,p.3) learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". There needs to be a focus on the learner, allowing the learners to make mistakes and for the teacher not to be correcting every single mistake in their writing but acting more like a facilitator in helping the students rectify their mistakes. Blogs can be then seen as a tool to foster learner autonomy as students take charge of publishing their work and also make decisions about what to write and how much to write (Lee, 2011).

Another problem that Thais as well as other non-native learners of English encounter is the difficulty they have in expressing their thoughts while writing in English because of the interference of their first language. The interference from the first language into a foreign language can cause a lot of anxiety for Thai students and this may hinder them from becoming confident writers in English. According to Sheets (1999), the learning activities could be done online which would help students to learn in a relaxed stress free environment. It is important to not only motivate students to write, but also make them feel comfortable, and give them confidence to write in English. Taking this into regard, in this study the students were given topics

that they could relate to, so that they felt comfortable and motivated in writing about those topics.

Blogging is still a relatively new teaching concept in the classroom. However, there have been a few studies carried out on the benefits of using blogging in the classroom such as studies by Dawson, Drexler and Ferdig (2007) and Tse, Yuen, Lo, Lam and Ng (2010). The studies above have investigated motivation among students from the feedback received as a result of the blogging process and the impact of blogging on the reading skills of students. The results of these studies have been positive and this influenced the researcher to use blogs in her study which aimed to focus in depth on the effects that the collaborative blogging can have on the students' communicative skills in writing.

As mentioned above, EFL students face problems such as anxiety in writing in L2, not receiving explicit instructions before beginning to write in L2, written output corrected more for accuracy than fluency, writing in teacher-centered classrooms and writing about topics that students cannot relate to. The current study attempted to find a solution to the above problems by incorporating blogging into the writing courses, helping students to improve their writing as well as their communication through writing. This was done by focusing more on what the participants wrote and replying to the ideas and thoughts that they displayed in their blog assignments, rather than looking for errors in grammar and syntax, and commenting on those. This also helped lower the participants' anxiety and they felt free to express their ideas in their blogs. The study also helped solve the problem of teacher-centered classrooms by focusing on a student-centered approach, allowing the participants to decide the topics for the blog assignments themselves by discussing with one another and then agreeing on a common topic for each assignment.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The idea of integrating technology for communication in education has been accepted by teachers and educators worldwide. The benefits have been recognized both inside and outside the classroom. The current study was conducted based on the two main

concepts: writing in the second language (L2) and blogs. Based on the above two main concepts, the study focused on the related concepts of learning to write in L2, challenges of writing in L2, collaborative writing in L2, CALL (Computer assisted language learning), collaborative blogs and communicative skills in writing through online collaboration.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. In what way does using collaborative blogging contribute to the communicative skills in writing of Thai university EFL students?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards using collaborative blogging?

## **METHOD**

The current study was qualitative to investigate in what way collaborative blogging contributed to the communicative writing skills of the students and also their attitudes towards collaborative blogging in depth and detail. The instruments that were used for collecting data were blogs, interviews and questionnaires. The data were analyzed using the constant comparison method. The sampling method for this research was a convenient sampling method, as the participants were already available and had enrolled for a writing course at the university.

## **Participants**

The setting of the current study was a government university in the northeastern region of Thailand. The participants were fourth year English major students enrolled in the Argumentative and Expository Composition course, which was offered as an elective subject. The participants had already taken Basic Writing, Paragraph Writing and Narrative and Descriptive Composition courses as pre-requisites for this course.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

The data collection procedure took place for a period of 17 weeks from November

2011 to February 2012. In week 1 the participants were introduced to the blogging project by the course teacher and Blogger was introduced to the participants in class. The email notification feature was also shown to the students and Questionnaire I was handed out in class. Participants were shown how to set up their blogs and how to add other blogs to their own blog.

Following this, in the second week, blog assignment 1 was posted on the researcher blog and participants started writing in their own blogs and posted two comments on two other participants' blogs. The students could write the blog assignments at their homes if they had internet or write them in the computer lab in the university or wherever they had convenient access to the internet.

In week 3 the participants as well as the researcher gave feedback on the participant blogs in the comments section on Blogger. The same process was repeated for blog assignments 2 to 8. Then the course instructor and researcher printed out and collected the blog assignments for analysis. In week 17 the second questionnaire was given out to the participants and the interviews were also carried out.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative method was used in this study. The data were analyzed for categories, patterns and themes that were related to all areas of the phenomenon under enquiry. Regarding the qualitative analysis, the researcher and course teacher read the participant's blogs and analyzed them based on the codes: creativity, critical thinking, voice and comments and contributions. The above codes were taken from blog rubric-coding schemes online that were found suitable and appropriate for the current study. The rubric coding schemes were two blog rubrics (Franks, 2011; ELT Blog Evaluation, n.d.) which were retrieved online by the researcher. The codes had been used for evaluating student blogs in other studies, in order to assess the effectiveness of the students' written work on the blogs. Therefore, they were adopted for data analysis in the current study.

The above codes of creativity, critical thinking, voice and comments and contributions were chosen to study the communicative skills in writing because of the following reasons. Firstly, creative writing is thought to bring out new ideas and communicate one's imaginative thoughts to others. It may also encourage the reader to be imaginative and teach persuasiveness. Secondly, critical thinking through writing is seen to enhance the means for expression of thought. Following this, expressing one's voice through blogs may give the opportunity to communicate ideas and opinions to others and for others to brainstorm those ideas, and develop good relationships with the blogger. Lastly, comments and contributions in blogs are thought to be vital for studying how well readers communicate with the blogger and whether they follow up and contribute further to the ideas expressed by the blogger.

The data from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using constant comparison analysis. This method involved the researcher to take one piece of data and compare it to other pieces of data to find the relationship between them. The researcher took one interview transcript and then looked for certain codes in the interviews. The interview was then compared with other interviews to see if there were similar or different codes and in what way the similarities and differences arose. The codes for analyzing the interviews were grouped under five different categories which were learner-perceived advantages of the blogging project, learner-perceived disadvantages of the blogging project, learner reactions to the teacher's comments on their blogs, learner reactions to students' comments on their blogs and usefulness of reading other students' blogs. The categories and codes were adapted from a study by Pinkman (2005) which was similar to the current study in terms of using blogs with EFL students outside the classroom and studying their usefulness among students. The study also explored EFL students' motivation to communicate through blogs. The questionnaires were also analyzed along with the interviews using descriptive statistics and the results were expressed as percentages. There was an 'other' category for coding data that did not fit into any of the codes that were used for analyzing the data.

## RESULTS & FINDINGS

### Communicative Skills in Writing

As described in the data collection procedure, the blog assignments of the participants were used to study in what way collaborative blogging contributes to the communicative skills in writing of Thai university EFL students. The findings from the blog assignments were classified into the following codes: creativity, critical thinking, voice, and comments and contributions.

### Creativity

As defined by a blogger on the internet, the more time students give to blogging and delivering to the community, the more opportunity they get to become creative writers (Goins, 2011). The participants took the first few weeks to get into the mode of blogging and get familiar with it. Once they understood how it worked and grew more confident of posting and commenting on others' blogs, they started getting more comfortable to write creatively in their blog posts. The following criteria were taken from a study by Arnold (2011), to measure the participants' creativity:

- Does the title surprise the reader and catch their attention?
- Are metaphors used in the title or in the content of the blog assignment?
- Does the participant use other forms such as pictures, poems etc. to express their ideas in the blog assignment?
- Is the content of the blog assignment unique and memorable?
- Does the content of the blog assignment engage the audience?

Based on the above criteria, the researcher analyzed the participants' blogs and found three types of creativity. They were creativity using metaphors, through poems, and through non-fictional writing.

### Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a form of realistic and perceptive thinking that focuses on deciding what to do and how to do it. It has also been defined as thinking of a

particular quality, namely good thinking that meets specified criteria or standards of competence and precision (Bailin, 2002). In relation to writing Bean (1996, p.17) says that in order to appreciate the connection between good thinking and good writing, one needs to see knowledge as something other than discrete bits of information to be studied and stored. According to Bloom's Taxonomy of Higher Thinking (1956), critical thinking has been categorized into knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Along with creativity, collaboration and communication, critical thinking seems to be one of the most important components of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The following criteria which were adapted from a study by Lai (2011) were used to measure the participants' critical thinking skills.

- Does the writer consider both sides of an issue when writing about a topic or commenting on others' ideas?
- Is the writer open to different viewpoints when making a decision or solving a problem?
- Is the writer able to identify conclusions, reasons and assumptions?
- Does the writer ask reasonable clarifying questions when writing about a topic or responding to others' comments?
- Does the writer display a sense of inquisitiveness where he wants to enhance his personal wealth of information?

The four different types of critical thinking that were found in the participants' based on the above criteria were analytical critical thinking, evaluative critical thinking, critical thinking through enumeration and critical thinking through internalization.

## **Voice**

Voice is defined as the substance of one's writing self (Amezotchi, 2009). It is a form of self-expression, by using mere words on paper. The voice that is expressed by a writer in a text is the sum total of all the language, experiences and thoughts that he is exposed to over his lifetime. With regards to blogging, a writer's voice is defined as a feel or style that is suggested in his writing, which makes it personal to the lives of the reader (Goins, 2011, p.5 ). The five different types of blogging voices that were found in the participants' blogs were informative, friendly, humorous, inspirational and dreamy.

## **Comments and Contributions**

Comments and contributions are the sections in blog posts, typically immediately following the post entry, where readers can provide their reactions to the content of the post. It is a two way communication between the reader and the writer, where both sides voice opinions, leading to further discussion. Blog commenting helps in promoting a healthy, active and interactive community with lots of reader input. Comments are what makes the blog social in nature and helps in developing the blogging community as well as the writer's online presence. The different types of comments generated in the participants' blogs were disputative, non-disputative, critical, subjective, positive and negative.

The participants generally showed a positive attitude to blogging. The process of reading and commenting on other's blogs helped the participants to improve their speaking and writing skills. It also gave them new ideas for what to write on their blogs, and helped in communicating with each other freely outside the classroom. By displaying the different types of creativity, critical thinking, voice and comments and contributions in their blogs, the participants' communicative skills through the blogs improved and they developed good friendship and communication skills outside of classroom hours.

## **Participants' Experiences and Attitudes**

The first questionnaire aimed to find out personal data about the participants, for instance, their English learning experiences, and their experience in using the Internet and blogging. The results showed that the participants started studying English since they were in primary school and three out of thirteen students had also learnt English at home.

The participants responded that they wrote generally about themselves, their feelings, everyday experiences, travel experiences, their friends and insights on love. They also communicated with foreign teachers on Facebook, by sending short notes to their teachers. The results showed that eight out of thirteen participants had never kept a journal. The five participants who stated that they had kept a journal wrote in their journals once or three times in a week. The participants wrote in their journals about

activities with which they were impressed, stories in which they had overcome a problem, traveling, and anything new that they learnt.

With regard to using the internet, all thirteen participants used the internet to find information in English and also for logging onto social networking websites like Facebook. All participants, except for one, had been using Facebook for at least four years. Eighty-three percent of the participants said that they used Facebook essentially for communicating with their friends. In addition to Facebook the participants also visited other websites such as YouTube, hi5, Google, Puntip and Hotmail.

Lastly, the results of the first questionnaire also showed that only two out of thirteen participants had used blogs before the current study took place. One of those two participants wrote in the blog once a week and shared interesting information. The other participant wrote in the blog twice a week about their favorite songs and hobbies among other things.

### **Participants' Attitudes after the Collaborative Blogging Project**

The second questionnaire was distributed to the participants after the blogging project was over and was used to find out the students' attitudes toward collaborative blogging. The collaborative blogging project was found to be enjoyable by 83% of the participants. The questionnaire also revealed that 92% of the participants felt that reading others' blog assignments helped to improve their writing skills. One participant expressed that reading others' blog assignments helped improve reading skills, since he had to analyze and understand the text fully, before commenting on the blog. Commenting also helped him to improve his writing skills, because he had to be careful about what he commented on his friend's blog. Ideas from three other participants confirmed that by reading others' blogs, they had an opportunity to learn new ideas and tried to use them in their daily lives.

Regarding the process of commenting on others' blog assignments, 75% of the participants stated the activity helped them in writing their own blog assignments. Another 83% of the participants felt that commenting on others' blog assignments helped to improve their general writing skills. In addition, having others comment on their own blog assignments motivated them to write better. The collaborative

blogging project was found to also help the writing skills of the participants. Seventy five percent of the participants stated that reading others' blog assignments helped improve their writing skills, since they had to check their grammar before they posted on the blogs. If they were unsure of the grammar, they asked their friends or English teachers to correct it. Regarding speaking skills, only one participant found that it helped in improving their skills.

The results from the open ended questions in the questionnaire revealed that 25% of the participants felt that the blogging project helped to improve their communicative skills in writing. Thirty-three percent of the participants stated that the process of blogging and commenting helped them in interacting with other learners and to improve their relationship with other participants.

Regarding the usability of Blogger most participants stated in their interviews that they encountered difficulties in using the website. One participant suggested that Facebook should be integrated with Blogger to allow for more effective communication among the participants. In relation to this, another participant suggested that Blogger should have a chatbox like Facebook to allow for participants to communicate with each other when they log onto Blogger.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Discussion**

The communicative skills in writing of the participants were studied based on four criteria: creativity, critical thinking, voice, and comments and contributions. With regards to the first criteria of creativity, fifty percent of the participants were found to display creativity in their blog assignments. According to Boonkerd (2003), teachers should give activities to students that encourage them to write. The topics for the blog assignments were chosen in such a way that it encouraged the participants to start writing, and gave them an opportunity to display their creativity as well. The findings revealed that once the participants started writing, they got used to the style of writing the blog assignments and commenting on others' blogs. Eventually, some participants

started displaying creativity in their writing too. This led to more comments being exchanged on the blogs and brought about communication among the participants through their writing. There were two participants who displayed more creativity when writing the blog assignments and also when commenting on other's blog assignments, and did their assignments on time. These two participants might have had a general attitude for taking their work seriously, and this showed in the blog assignments. The rest of the participants completed all the blog assignments too and found the process of commenting on other friends' blogs enjoyable.

Based on the results in the area of critical thinking, the participants displayed a certain degree of critical thinking, depending upon their topics of their interest and possibly their background knowledge and experiences on that topic. The topics such as money and Valentine's Day seemed to bring about more interest and more discussion was generated from these blog assignments. This showed that if the participants were given topics that related their own lives, they felt motivated to carry on communicating through blogs.

Regarding the display of participants' voice in their blog assignments, there was a varying degree in the participants' contribution, and a reason for this might have been anxiety while writing on the blogs. According to Fernsten (2008) students should not be anxious while writing and should feel comfortable and motivated to write. Some students might have a natural flair for reading and writing well, which might have led to some participants having the confidence to bring about their inner voice in the blogs.

The comments that were generated from the participants in the blog assignments were varied depending upon the topic, and also upon how much attention was brought to the blogs posts. There were occasional instances when one of the participants did not think of the comments given by another participant as positive, and was a little offended. However, the comments itself were not offensive, and the participant had the nature of adding a lot of humor and satire to their comments. Generally, comments that had humor in them generated more discussion. A possible reason for the participants' general positive contribution might have been because the participants were not being checked for accuracy in their writing, and the focus was fluency.

According to Torwong (2003), there is a need for teachers in Thailand to focus on fluency, to allow the students to write freely and feeling less anxious.

Overall, it was found that writing the blog assignments in their own time encouraged the participants to feel less anxious and contribute to the study. According to Brooks and colleagues (2004), it is the nature and convenience of blogs might that encourages participants to write more with ease.

With regards to the usefulness of writing the blog assignments and commenting on other's blogs, most participants felt that it helped them to communicate with other participants more than before and improved their relationship outside of class. The study also showed that the participants showed a positive attitude to reading others' blogs. It helped them to get ideas for writing their own blogs and also to learn the style of commenting on other's blogs. According to the studies done by Kavaliauskiene et.al., (2006, 2006b, 2007) and Wu (2005), students improve their language skills and become more aware of using the language after reading and commenting on others' blogs. The results revealed that the participants were open to receiving comments from others. Most of the participants found it enjoyable with the exception of one participant who was a little offended by the satirical comments that one other participant made on their blog.

As regards problems in blogging, some participants mentioned that they did not have access to computers and a good internet connection outside the university campus and were not able to complete the blog assignments on time. In addition they encountered difficulties in using Blogger as it was not as user friendly and familiar to them, compared to social networking sites like Facebook which was used for frequent communication. Regarding the problems of user interface and comments disappearing from time to time, a similar problem was found in a study by Lee (1998) in which the participants wrote that they needed more time to learn and get accustomed to new software. In the present study the participants were given explanation on how to use Blogger by the course teacher demonstrating it in class, in the first week, after which the participants were told to start writing the blog assignments from the second week. A solution to this problem could be by giving more time to the participants in the

training session, and giving them sufficient time to encounter bugs and other problems which could be addressed in class.

Another issue that this study wished to address was Thai students not being able to take charge of their own learning. A way to foster learner autonomy in this study was by giving a chance to the participants to choose their own topics for the blog assignments after the initial blog assignment which was decided by the researcher. Only one participant took the lead in suggesting topics to the others. Some participants agreed to the topics and there was one participant who had some disagreement regarding the suggestions, which was communicated through messages between the course teacher and the participants on Facebook. Eventually the participants found the process to be challenging and let the one participant suggest all the topics. In the interviews many participants mentioned that the teacher should suggest the topics and it was not possible for all the participants to agree with and come to a decision about one topic for each blog assignment. The participants when asked, if they had suggested any topic that they would like to write about, said that they just agreed with any topic and this way it would be easier. A possible reason for this might be the participants not getting enough opportunities to be able to think for themselves and be given the chance to take charge of their learning.

### **Pedagogical Implication**

Blogs have become quite popular among university students and adults alike in the past few years. Recently many blogging websites have come up such as Tumblr, Xanga and Twitter. Websites such as Twitter can be linked to other websites and social networking sites such as Facebook. The blogging websites allow users to communicate with another in a collaborative manner and sites like Tumblr have also added features similar to Facebook such as ‘Liking’ posts on blogs and allowing these posts to be reposted on one’s own blog site. Posts from other websites such as Twitter and RSS feeds can also be imported into Tumblr. All these features provide a platform for collaboration, and educators could take advantage of this communicative nature of blogs and incorporate them into their own classrooms. Learners can share their experiences on their blogs with teachers as well as other students, providing opportunities for teachers to keep communicating with their students outside the

classroom. With the blogging websites adding new features with time, and providing option for posting photos and videos, this could be used to give a more personal touch to the communication.

The results provided by the current study give a further insight into providing some pedagogical implications for the future. The participants generally welcomed the collaborative nature of blogging and stated that it helped them to get to know more about their friends and learn from others' experiences. This could then be used as an initiative for the teachers to incorporate blogs in their classrooms as well as outside of class, and allow themselves to also communicate with their students.

Secondly, the results of the written products showed that the participants provided more output when writing about topics that were interesting to them and ones they could relate to their own lives. These assignments generated more discussion and comments from their friends. Taking this into regards, teachers can carefully assign topics that the students might be familiar with, for writing assignments. According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) and Graves (2000), learners should be given activities that are more personalized and ones that they can relate to. This is also a step in helping learners become autonomous. Once the students start taking interest in the activities, they can gradually be allowed to plan the activities themselves. The teacher can be allowed to take a step back and try to be a facilitator, helping the students when necessary.

Next, the participants stated in their interviews that since they were already on Facebook, teachers could create a Facebook group for various courses they teach. This would help the teacher as well as the students to communicate online and to discuss any problems outside of classroom hours. The participants also suggested that Facebook should be linked to Blogger to improve communication and allow them to be notified of any new posts or new comments on existing posts. This is a feature that Facebook could hopefully incorporate in the near future.

Lastly the participants faced problems with the comment feature on Blogger. The comments seemed to disappear sometimes and this was a frustrating experience for both the researcher as well as the participants. The participants also had problems

logging into Blogger, changing the interface from Thai to English and following their friends' blogs. The experience of Blogger could be made better in the future by giving more time for orientation for the students before they start writing the blog assignments, and address any issues that come up in the initial stages. Teachers could also be included as part of this training, so that they could be made aware of how to incorporate blogging into their own classroom.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This section reports the recommendations for future studies, based on the findings of the current study. Firstly, the results of the current study were obtained on carrying it out only with Thai students. The findings thus cannot be generalized for EFL students, who might consist of non- Thais too. The study could be replicated with other EFL students, both Thai and non-Thai. Secondly, it was seen that the scores given to the participants for the blog assignments motivated them to write in their blogs. The current study could be replicated in the future without assigning any scores for the blog assignments and the written output of the participants could then be observed.

Lastly, this study was carried out to observe how collaborative blogging contributed to the communicative writing skills of the students taking a writing course. With blogging sites being updated all the time and with all the new features being added to the sites, it would be interesting to see the results when the blogs are extended to other course and other classrooms, such as in conversation classes, reading classes as well as in other subjects such as Business English, History, Psychology to name a few.

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# RESUME

Name: Purnima Iyer  
Place of Birth: India  
Education: M.A. TESOL  
Institutions Attended: M.V. J College of Engineering, Bangalore, India  
Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand