

Utilizing Facebook to Teach Thai EFL Students' Writing Skills: A Case Study

Kanasin Tunsakul

School of Liberal Arts,

Walailak University, Thailand

Email: kanasin.t@hotmail.com

Abstract—The use of social networking sites such as Facebook has earned a number of pedagogical benefits in today's EFL classrooms. This study focuses on employing Facebook as a tool in teaching English writing to Thai EFL learners whereas they were encouraged to provide feedback or comments on their peers' work. This ongoing research aims to explore how beneficial Facebook is in teaching writing, whether the students can make helpful comments on their classmates' writing assignments, and what students perceive as benefits and barriers when using Facebook in their writing class. The participants were 20 students enrolling in an English reading an writing course. Pre-test and post-test results were compared to see whether the participants improved their writing. The students were required to complete all writing assignments and provide feedback on their peers' work. A survey questionnaire was used to analyze the students' perception towards using Facebook in the writing class. Focus group interviewing was used in order for the researcher to identify problems the students encountered throughout the semester.

Keywords-Facebook; EFL students; writing skills

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of Internet communication has earned a number of pedagogical benefits such as larger opportunity for students to be more engaged in the learning process than in mainstream classroom activities. Moreover, Internet-mediated environments allow language instructors to serve as classroom activity designer and facilitator with whom students can also interact outside the classroom. Currently, the popularity of Facebook makes it an effective means for reducing barriers to communication and social inhibitions (McCarthy, 2010). People can almost instantly discuss and share all sorts of information and knowledge through the share status function, which is similar to an online discussion board or forum. Student interactions in online discussions can facilitate a learner-centered approach to teaching and provide students with an opportunity to practice and learn knowledge and skills in an encouraging environment (Stacey, 2002; Birch & Volkov, 2007; Moore & Iida, 2010). Facebook can be employed as a beneficial tool in teaching a second or a foreign language. It offers an opportunity for students to share ideas, knowledge, and individual and group activities (Cloete, Villiers, & Roodt,

2009). According to Fovet (2008), Facebook has become extremely important for students with their adaptation to school and their management of peer relations. According to Black (2005), most online discussions comprise sharing and comparing information, and providing feedback to each other. Instructors may consider peer feedback as an instructional strategy, requiring students to provide feedback to one another while simultaneously encouraging them to use Facebook as a platform to improve their writing through interaction with their peers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Influences of Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites have grown in popularity because it allows people to socialize and interact with peers in the comfort of their own homes. Among these social networking sites, the user interface features and popularity of Facebook make it an effective platform where students are able to benefit from collaborative learning. According to Pew (2007) the most used feature of many users' Facebook page is the Facebook 'wall'. Here users can exchange short text messages with their 'friends'. Students therefore often develop social networking skills between their peers at university and from previous institutions they have attended through Facebook. It has been suggested that Facebook offers the opportunity to engage students with their learning – promoting a 'critical thinking in learners' about their learning (Bugeja, 2006). Other educational benefits of Facebook have been seen to include its ability to connect learners with each other into new networks of collaborative learning. Benefits for language classrooms include providing constructive educational outcomes, instant opportunities to interact with peers, instructors, and native speakers of a variety of foreign languages, and developing social pragmatic competence in communication (Blattner & Fiori, 2009). Kabilan et al. (2010) conducted a research investigating if Facebook can be a useful and meaningful learning environment that could support or enhance language learning in English. Their findings show that students' confidence, motivation and attitudes improved significantly. Students claim that using Facebook has boosted their confidence especially in terms of writing. Overall, Facebook

has been shown to boost confidence, motivate and foster a positive attitude towards English language learning.

B. EFL Writing Instruction in Thailand

Writing usually appears a discouraging task for many EFL students. To produce acceptable written texts, EFL students may encounter problems occurring from their unfamiliarity with different genres of written English, and from the lack of provision for practice of the writing skill in class. Besides, many EFL teachers view teaching writing as a difficult task to perform, especially when time constraints take the lead. According to Wichadee (2012), the students have never learned from the errors they made in their writing after receiving the papers with discouraging red pen. Leki (1990) reports that when presented with written feedback on content, students react in three main ways. The students may not read the annotations at all, may read them but not understand them, or may understand them but not know how to respond to them. Teacher comments on content are of little use if students do not know what they mean or how to use them productively to improve their skills. To help Thai EFL learners improve their writing skills, many research studies have been conducted. For instance, certain studies focus on writing error types frequently made by student writers at both sentence and paragraph levels (Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007; Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008; Jenwitheesuk, 2009), while others emphasize how to increase L2 writers' writing accuracy, many of which are related to teacher feedback and peer revisions (Torwong, 2003; Kaweera & Usaha, 2007; Wang & Usaha, 2009; Ho & Usaha, 2011).

III. METHODOLOGY

This research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study was conducted with 26 students enrolled in an English reading and writing at Southern College of Technology, Thailand. As the core assessment of the course, all students were required to use Facebook to complete their writing assignments.

A. Instruments

The instruments used in this study constitute (1) the pre-test and post-test of English paragraph writing, (2) writing assignments including weekly journal writing and giving opinions on 3 discussion questions (all writing assignments had to be done using Facebook), (3) survey questionnaire, (4) focus group interview.

Four types of scoring rubrics were employed by two raters to assess the students' writing assignments: (1) The Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP) used for students pre-test and post-test of English paragraph writing, (2) a scoring rubric for student's weekly journal writing, (3) a rubric used to categorize types of peer feedback on weekly journal writing, and (4) a rubric used to grade student's opinion writing.

B. Data Collection

The data collection procedures are described as follows

Pre-test

To initiate this study, a pre-test of English paragraph writing was administered during the second week of the class. All the participants were required to write about what they expected to learn from the course. After that, all students were divided into 3 groups based on their pre-test scores (6 points total); high score group (5-6 points), medium score group (3-4 points), and low score group (1-2 points). The students who were found cheating; copying their friends, were grouped together with low score students.

Weekly Journal Writing

After placing the students in three different groups, the researcher had them apply for a Facebook account in order to access their own web page every time they did their Facebook assignments. The students were required to write journals on their Facebook page message box weekly instead of doing it daily because giving students adequate time to write is the most important part of teaching writing (Wood-Ray, 2006). Every student was also required to read and make comments on every journal story of their group members as much as they could. Meanwhile, the researcher served as a facilitator evaluating and commenting on students' work and responses.

Opinion Writing

Apart from weekly journal writing, 3 discussion questions on which the students could give their opinions would be posted on the 3 Facebook walls in weeks 4, 5 and 6. Each group was given the same questions to discuss. The questions were (1) Should English be the second language of Thailand? (2) What would the world be like without technology?, and (3) Why travel to Thailand?.

Post-test

This time, the students were required to write a paragraph about what they had learned from the course.

Survey Questionnaire

Once the participants had completed all the above requirements, they were asked to answer a 20-item survey questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale and 1 open-ended question. All the questions were intended to explore students' perception towards using Facebook to enhance their writing skills in order to answer the research question 3: What do students perceive as the benefits and barriers when using Facebook in their writing class?

Focus Group Interview

The researcher conducted a post-semester focus group interview by inviting representative sample of students enrolling in the course to talk openly, express their own opinions freely, and also respond to questions posed by the researcher regarding learning problems the students have encountered throughout the semester. This method allowed the researcher to identify their English learning problems and their attitudes towards the course requirements.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As there were problems with data collection caused by students with many absences, loss of Facebook interaction and class participation, only 20 participating students were selected for data analysis based on the frequency of student participation in class and Facebook interaction.

The findings in this study consisted of (1) the mean scores and the standard deviation of writing pre-test and post-test, (2) students' weekly journal writing on Facebook, (3) students' opinion writing on 3 discussion questions, (4) students' feedback on Facebook, (5) students' responses to the 20-item survey questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale (5=strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=neutral; 2=disagree; 1=strongly disagree), and (6) students' responses to the open-ended question.

A. Findings from Pre-test and Post-test of English Paragraph Writing

The score evaluation criteria for pre-test and post-test were divided into 3 categories: text type; comprehensibility; and language control. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare results of pre-test and post-test of English paragraph writing. There was a significant difference in the scores for pre-test ($M=3.45$, $SD=1.19$) and post-test ($M=4.15$, $SD=0.93$) conditions; $t(19) = -3.90$, $p = 0.001$. These results suggest that the participants improved their English writing skills.

B. Findings from Weekly Journal Writing on Facebook

According to the scoring rubric, students' weekly journal writing focused on message comprehensibility, spelling and grammar, and punctuation. Bar graphs were used to illustrate the results of students' writing assignments. The analyzed data of weekly journal writing are presented in Figures 1-3.

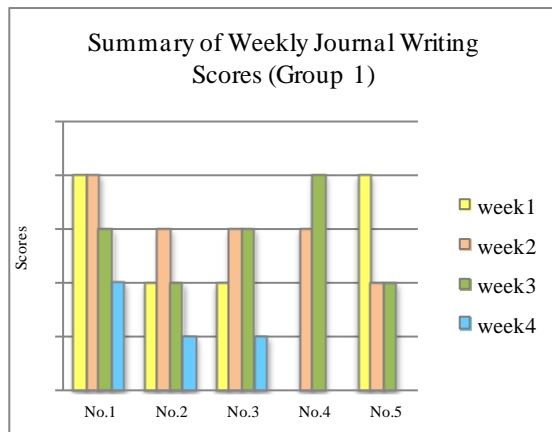


Figure 1. Summary of Weekly Journal Writing Scores (Group 1)

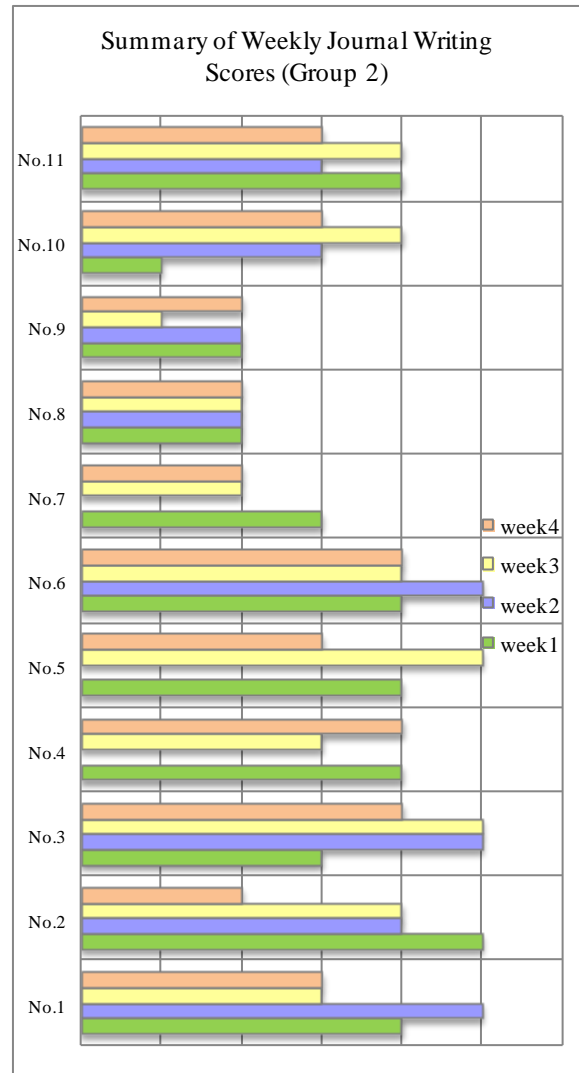


Figure 2. Summary of Weekly Journal Writing Scores (Group 2)

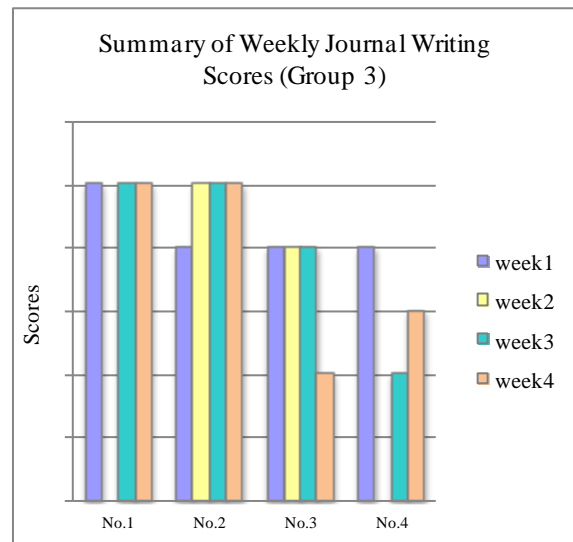


Figure 3. Summary of Weekly Journal Writing Scores (Group 3)

According to the data shown in Figures 1-3, there were 5 students in Group 1. Only 3 students completed their four-week journal writing (Students 1, 2, 3). Student 1 received the highest score and Students 4 received the lowest score due to incomplete assignment.

In Group 2 there were 11 students. Only 3 students (Students 4, 5, 7) did not complete their assignments. Two students (Students 3, 6) received highest scores and 2 students (Students 7, 9) earned the lowest score.

Group3 had the least number of students (4 students). Student 2 earned the highest score of two other groups and only 1 student (Student 4) received the lowest score.

C. Findings from Opinion Writing

Each group of participants was given 3 questions on which individual students could give their opinions. These same questions were posted on the three Facebook page walls in 3 different weeks.

The questions were (1) Should English be the second language of Thailand? (2) What would the world be like without technology?, and (3) Why travel to Thailand?. The analyzed findings are presented in Figures 4-6.

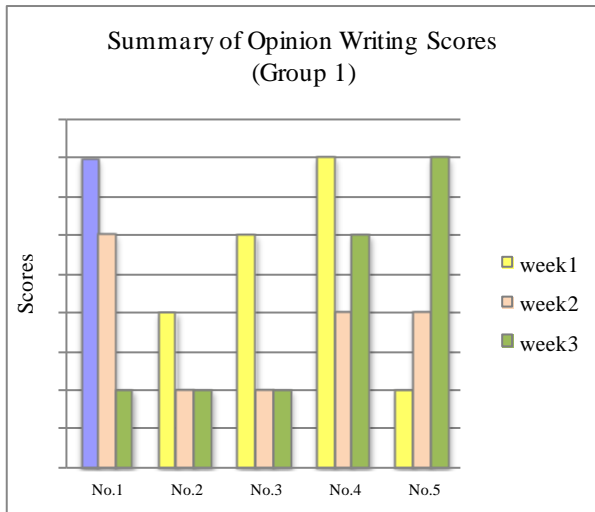


Figure 4. Summary of Opinion Writing Scores (Group 1)

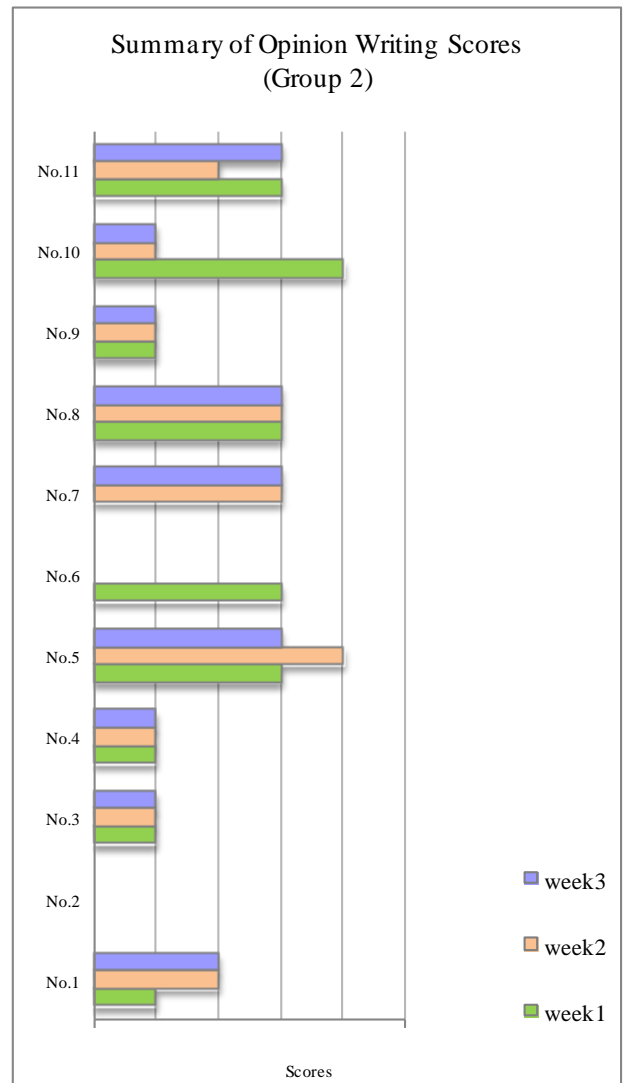


Figure 5. Summary of Opinion Writing Scores (Group 2)

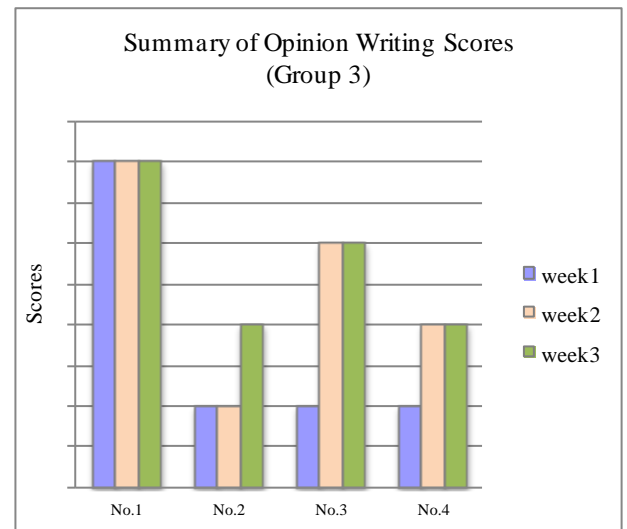


Figure 6. Summary of Opinion Writing Scores (Group 3)

As can clearly be seen from the data in Figures 4-6, all the students in Group 1 completed their assignment, but only 1 student (Student 2) got the lowest score. Only 1 student in Group 2 (Students 5) got the highest score. Student 2 was the only one who ignored to answer the questions posted on Facebook. In Group 3 there was 1 student (Student 1) scoring full points and 1 student (Student 2) scored the lowest on this assignment.

D. Findings from Survey Questionnaire Investigating the Students' Perception towards the Use of Facebook

In order to investigate the students' perception towards using Facebook to enhance their writing skills, the students were given a survey at the end of the course. Twenty participating students completed the survey. The first part of the survey consisting of 20 items required 5-point scale responses. The second part required responses to an open-ended question.

The results of the first part of the survey indicate that most students strongly agreed that the teacher's guidance and assistance helped them in learning English writing (M=4.15; SD=.489) and they will be communicating in English through Facebook in the future (M=3.90; SD=.553). The results also show that the students were motivated to learn English writing on Facebook (M=3.85; SD=.745) and there were more confident in English writing after using this approach (M=3.80; SD=.768). However, a few students agreed that were able to learn English grammar and structure and how to write a paragraph through Facebook (M=3.40; SD=.681).

To conclude, the students' perception towards the use of Facebook with their writing course as a whole was moderately to highly positive. The students showed high satisfaction with the teacher's guidance and assistance. Their motivation for learning English writing was high based on the results of the survey questionnaire

E. Finding from Responses to the Survey Open-Ended Question

The second part of the survey consisted of one open-ended question. This question required responses on the students' opinions about the implementation of Facebook learning approach for the English writing course: *What do you think of the implementation of Facebook learning approach for the English writing course?*

The researcher re-categorized the students' responses into 'Benefits' and 'Barriers' as shown in Table 1.

TABLE I. SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Barriers</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Working faster 2) Motivating students to work 3) Ability to work with the Internet 4) Practicing the use educational technology 5) Improving students' English writing and typing skills 6) Learning English vocabulary through Facebook 7) Exchanging knowledge among peers 8) Ability to get information from different types of online sources 9) Becoming more confident to write in English on Facebook 10) Becoming an active learner 11) Learn more things about Facebook 12) Keeping oneself updated with global situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Useless for some students with no background knowledge of English 2) Depending too much on electronic assistant.

According to the students' responses shown in the above table, there were a number of advantages to using Facebook learning approach for their writing course. However, this approach did not suit some students' language proficiency level due to their inadequate background knowledge of English.

F. Findings from Focus Group Interviewing

As all the students did their writing assignments without providing any comment on their peers' work, focus group was employed in order to investigate what had caused student writing problems and to find out why some of the students could not complete class requirements and meet the deadlines. Ten students from the 3 groups participated voluntarily in the focus group to discuss learning problems they had encountered throughout the semester. Problems identified and attitudes of the focus group participants are described below.

Doing Writing Assignments on Facebook

The students said that they all have their own computers. They use the computer for 4-5 hours a day. All of them preferred that their writing assignments be evaluated by the teacher so as to know what level of improvement they were at, and to learn what they did wrong. Sometimes they did Facebook assignments on their own and sometimes with their friends.

The Students' Problems with English Writing

The students all agreed that English grammar is the most difficult to learn whereas vocabulary knowledge is the most

important. Most of them often used free online language translation because it could reduce their time looking up words in a dictionary, and because they had difficulty typing in English. Most of them had little knowledge of sentence organization in paragraphs as well as that of using conjunctions and punctuation marks.

Factors motivating them to write in English include: 1) their awareness of the importance of English in their future career, for instance, they may be filling out online application forms, and any official documents, 2) their desire to make friends around the world, 3) their vocabulary knowledge, 4) assignment deadlines, 5) impact on their assignment completion scores, and 6) what topics to talk about: they prefer to write anything based on their experience or what affects their lives directly.

The Students' Preferences Regarding their Writing Assignments

Some students preferred to select their own topics to write about. Some preferred writing on any given topics as classroom practice, and their chosen ones as their homework. The students admitted that they didn't like commenting on their peers' journals. Sometimes they just simply used the 'LIKE' function to make the journal writer feel good that his or her posted text was already seen. Unless it was something that caught their eye, they would not 'like' or comment on that post. Some students would prefer to comment on a picture with a caption or short description rather than on a single text (without any picture), because this can make them lazy to read the entire text.

How Providing Feedback and Comments Caused Problems on Writing Assignments

Most students wanted both the instructor and their peers to read their posts, but they preferred to receive teacher advice or teacher error-correction feedback. Some students followed the teacher advice. Some ignored it, and some hesitated to make corrections. Some students admitted that if none of their friends in the same group 'liked' or commented on their posts, they would get upset or frustrated, while the others said that they didn't want to comment or give any feedback because they were lazy to read every single post. However, every student confessed that the main reason they didn't comment on their peers' journals was because those posts had mostly been translated using online translation without having their texts revised. Thus, they were completely unintelligible.

V. CONCLUSION

Overall, this case study research reveals that Facebook can be utilized to teach Thai EFL students' writing skills as Facebook probably offers a more conducive learning environment where students are able to practice and collaborate with others.

The results showed that the participants in this study improved their performance in the writing post-test, but their

Facebook writing scores did not improve much since most of the students lacked confidence in generating a piece of writing or providing comment on their peers' writing assignments and they procrastinated from time to time. This was caused by the students' inadequate knowledge of good English writing. Regardless of their low English language proficiency, the students expressed positive attitudes towards using Facebook in their writing class as the use of Facebook could enhance their motivation as demonstrated by the results of this survey questionnaire. Because of its popularity, the students have been more motivated to participate in the study or have enjoyed the learning process. However, one of the most important things that contributed to students' satisfaction with the course was the instructor's teaching, guidance and assistance.

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