CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rationale and Statement of the Problem

Languages are tools that people use to communicate; they may listen, speak, read and write to achieve the purposes of the communication. Writing is one way to communicate and it is also one of the most needed skills for people who are working, and especially for students in all levels of education. As the technology is getting more advanced, people are likely to be connected via the Internet. But in order to get the benefit from the Internet, people need to be well literate. They have to be able to read and write effectively. And the language that plays a very important role in the online world and in most settings, whether career or education, is English.

As the level of education increases, the value of being able to write effectively also increases through compulsory education to higher education (Weigle, 2002). Ironically, many students feel that they are not good enough in this language skill and lack the confidence to write. And this causes problems because the mediocre writing can cause confusion, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the readers (Utthangkorn, 2003).

Many research studies have been conducted to study the factors affecting writing. Weigle (2002) pointed out that there were literature about the roles of affective variables and motivation in second language learning. In terms of other

affective variables, perhaps the most salient was writing anxiety, or writing apprehension (Utthangkorn, 2003).

Transferring knowledge and ideas through writing is not easy, especially when the language used is not one's native tongue. The same is true for a Thai classroom; students are worried about many aspects in writing such as grammar and spelling. These things inevitably impair the confidence to write and the quality of the written work.

Suggestions for the aforementioned problems were made. Boonkerd (2003) stated that one way to help students to improve skills and ability in writing was to develop activities that promoted writing skills. Ngerndee (2004) suggested a similar solution. She pointed out that the activities correlated to the development of students and allowed students to incorporate their knowledge into their lives were important because they helped reduce anxiety in the learning. As most of the students in the tertiary level are the NET Generation people - people who were born between 1978-1994 (*The Economist*, 2008), they are likely to have spent some part of the day online (Sheets, 1999) and; therefore, the learning activities that could be done online would help them to learn less anxiously.

Incorporating a weblog or blog into language teaching is one type of activities that promote writing and also integrate students' knowledge into classroom learning. Previous studies showed that incorporating weblogging into English classes yielded benefits to improving listening, reading, and writing skills (e.g. Fellner & Apple, 2006; Kavaliauskienė et.al. 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

Using weblogs in language education is still a new way of teaching in many institutions and it has become an interest of many researchers and educators. There are many studies about the benefits of weblogs in promoting language learning,

particularly in foreign language classrooms, for example studies by Fellner and Apple (2006) and Kavaliauskienė et.al. (2006a, 2006b, 2007). A review of literature regarding studies on weblogs revealed that most studies investigated participants' responses after using weblogs as a medium in learning. But studies that investigated the effects of using weblogs on the improvement of students' writing skill were rare. Therefore, this study proposed to investigate the effects of incorporating blogs into a classroom on Thai EFL students' written production.

Purposes of the Study and Research Questions

This study primarily attempted to investigate EFL students' written production. It also aimed to survey EFL students' attitudes towards the use of weblogs in classroom.

In particular, the study addresses the following research questions:

1) What are the effects of using weblogs in classroom on EFL students' written production?

2) Is there any part of written production that Thai EFL students can do well after using weblog?

3) What do EFL students think about the application of blogging in classroom?

Significance of the Study

A review of prior studies (Ellison & Wu, 2008; Farmer et.al., 2008; Kavaliauskienė et.al., 2006a, 2006b, 2007) revealed that most researchers relied on the results from questionnaires, which were mostly self report.

Nevertheless, a comparatively small number of quantitative studies have been done. The test scores were compared in order to indicate the progress of the participants. For those studies which the test scores were used, the focus of the studies was on writing fluency (e.g. Fellner & Apple, 2006).

This study attempted to further this line of research by probing into the new area of incorporating weblogs in classroom, that is, students' written production. For one thing, incorporating weblogs into English writing class was proved to be beneficial to EFL students (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Wu, 2005). For another, many of the previous studies were done in EFL teaching settings which were the same setting as this study, but the focus were different. Besides, Kavaliauskienė et.al. (2007) claimed that using the application of blogging to accomplish various assignments may encourage students to think about their performances in class activities. The present study attempted to investigate Thai EFL students' written production through blogging. The results of the study would be beneficial to Thai EFL instructors who want to incorporate blogging activities in classroom and curriculum developers who want to put activities in the syllabus in order to supplement some particular language skills.

Scope of the Study

The participants of this study were university students who enrolled in a fundamental English course in the second semester of the academic year 2008 at a university in the north of Thailand.

The study focused on Thai EFL students' written production which, in this study, focused on three aspects: ideas, sentence fluency, and an organization of the writing.

The assignments were assigned to the students as a part of course requirements.

Definitions of Terms

Thai EFL students are Thai students who study English as a foreign language.

Weblog or blog is a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal online journal for an individual. It is typically updated daily. Blog often reflects the personality of the author. The weblog used in this study is *myspace*.

Weblogging or blogging is an activity of writing something, for example journal or scrapbook in the blog page.

Written production in this study is defined as a piece of the participants' written work. The focus in this study is on the quality of ideas, sentence fluency, and organization of the participants' written work.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presents the rationale and problems of the present study, which is writing difficulties among EFL students. This problem leads to the application of blogging to assist the classroom learning in order to help improve EFL students' writing ability. In addition, due to the novelty of an application of blogs in a Thai EFL classroom, a survey of EFL students' attitude would help reveal how the students think about using them in a classroom. However, research studies about using blogs in Thai EFL classroom at the present time are very limited. Therefore, the current study was conducted in order to answer the research questions, 1) What are the effects of using weblogs in classroom on EFL students' written production? 2) Is there any part of written production that Thai EFL students can do well after using weblog? and

3) What do EFL students think about the application of blogging in classroom? The scope of this study was limited to one section of students enrolled in a fundamental English course in a university in northern Thailand. Significance of the study and definition of terms were also listed.

The next chapter presents the conceptual framework of this study including related studies.