

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Rationale and Statement of the Problem

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 writing in the English classrooms in Thailand, is more on the accuracy of the grammar, punctuation and spelling than the communication of the ideas. The teachers only correct the grammatical errors of the students' writing and focus on the accuracy. Torwong (2003) states that grammar and spelling errors that are corrected by teachers are in the student's memories for only a short time. 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. According to Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) ESL/EFL teachers may comment on organization and content while students perceive it as a focus on grammar and other details. This calls for the ESL and EFL teachers who teach writing to set a common ground, for instance giving explicit instructions to students before they start writing. They could also respond to the students' writing in such a way that it guides the students to improve their writing and makes them responsible for producing a well written product. This, however, is probably easier said than done and more often than not teachers are not able to come to this common understanding (Kroll, 1990).

This leads to another important problem in teaching writing in Thailand, 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: 3) learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". The teacher – centered approach may then hinder the importance of learner autonomy which is highlighted in the 1999 National Education Act of Thailand by the

Bureau of National Education Committees. 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. According to Bennui (2008) thinking in English when writing in English is a very difficult task for Thai students as their default cognitive process is still Thai. However empirical research shows that some amount of use of the first language in translation when planning and writing may actually improve the final product if the topic is related to the students' culture (Friedlander, 1990). For Thai students the translation would mean carrying over all the aspects of their language into English. This L1 interference may cause problems in the way they write in English.

Moreover, 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. A solution is found in the work of Boonkerd (2003) who states that one way to help students to improve writing skills and writing abilities is to develop activities that promote process writing skills. According to Sheets (1999), the learning activities could be done online which would help students to learn in a relaxed stress free environment. The Economist (2008), a weekly magazine, supported that people who were born between 1978 and 1994 are likely to have spent some part of the day online. 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. According to Fernsten (2008), students should be able to express themselves and their identity in their writing.

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 Drexler et al.(2007) and Tse et al.(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. The positive nature of the results 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, for instance, anxiety in writing in L2, lack of explicit instructions before beginning to write in L2, emphasis on accuracy in the correction of written output, teacher-centered approach in writing classes and assignment of uninteresting topics for writing. 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.

## 1.2 Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this study were to investigate Thai EFL university students' communicative skills in writing as a result of using blogs and to explore the students' attitudes towards using collaborative blogging.

## 1.3 Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

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

## 1.4 Significance of the Study

Although the integration of CALL and research in writing skills using blogging has increased in recent years, there is still not much research which focuses on investigating student's communicative skills through writing in blogs. In addition, with the number of blogs that are available on the internet these days for sharing information to the public, it seems appropriate to study the communicative skills in students' writing through their blogs. With so much information available just from blogs on the internet these days, the exploration of student variables regarding blogging can be reconsidered and stretched out to find out how the integration of collaborative blogging in and out of the classroom can be applied in Thailand.

Furthermore, there is research that has explored the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of both students and teachers toward collaborative blogging and benefits of blogging in the classroom, for instance studies by Drexler et al. (2007) and Tse et al. (2010). However, studies that investigated the communicative skills in students' writing and their becoming autonomous through the process of writing on blogs are still limited. The present research aims to bridge these gaps.

The results of the current study may also help solve the problem of teacher-centered approach in writing classes 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. Lastly, the current study could also act as an impetus to motivate educators and curriculum developers to include blogging as an integral part of the ESL/EFL curriculum.

## 1.5 Scopes of the Study

The participants of the study were fourth-year English major students enrolled in the Argumentative and Expository Composition course, which was offered as an elective subject at a university in the northeastern part of Thailand. This study focused on the students' communicative skills in writing using blogs, the skills being creativity, critical thinking, voice and comments. The time period for evaluating the benefits of using collaborative blogging was one semester which was a period of 17 weeks from November 2011 to February 2012.

The themes or topics for the blog assignments were the following: current events, travel, a topic of one's own interest, dating and relationships, New Year's resolutions, Children's Day, money and Valentine's Day. The first two themes were assigned by the researcher, with the remaining being chosen by the participants.

## 1.6 Definition of Terms

### Attitude

Attitude is a settled way of feeling or thinking with regards to a person or thing. In this study attitude represented the attitudes of the participants towards the use of collaborative blogging.

### Blog

A blog is a short term for web log. It is like an online journal, a blog space that anyone can set up for free, and post text, links, photos, and videos. Others can comment on the posts and paste links too.

### Collaborative Blog

The collaborative blog is a type of weblog in which posts can be contributed by more than one author and the authors work in a group. These posts are usually centered around a single theme.

### Comments

Comments are the sections in blog posts, right after the post entry, where readers can type out their reactions to what they read in the blog post (Junelius, 2013).

### Communicative Skills in Writing

Communicative skills in writing in this study is defined as skills that a writer possesses to be able to communicate their ideas and thoughts in a group in a form that is meaningful and readable and work as a group while writing. The writing skills that this study focused on were creativity, critical thinking, voice and comments.

## Creativity

Creativity in terms of blogging is defined as a perfect platform for bringing out one's ideas and discovering the potential to reach out to others (Makim, 2011).

## Critical thinking

In this study, critical thinking has been classified as creating, evaluating, analyzing, applying, understanding and remembering ideas when blogging, in which the higher order thinking skills are creating, evaluating, and analyzing.

## Voice

A writer's voice is a form of self-expression and in terms of blogging it is seen as a feel or style that is suggested in one's writing, which makes it personal to the lives of the reader (Goins, 2011).

## Writing

Writing is the act of representing and communicating of language in the form of signs and symbols that are readable and meaningful. In this study writing represented the content that the participants typed out in their blogs and the comments on others participants' blogs.

### 1.7 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter described the rationale and statement of the problem, which are the problems that EFL students face when it comes to writing in English. 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 problem by incorporating blogging into the writing courses, helping students to improve their writing as well as their communication through writing. Since blogging is a relatively new concept, and empirical research investigating this topic in Thai classrooms is rare, the results from the current study would be beneficial to teachers. This study was carried out to find out: 1) the effects of collaborative blogging on the communicative skills in writing of Thai EFL university students and 2) the students' attitudes towards collaborative blogging. The scope of this study was a group of English major students studying a writing course in north eastern Thailand. In addition, the significance of the study and the definition of terms were also presented in this chapter.