Principles and Practices of Collaborative Blogging, Web-based Lessons and Electronic Feedback in the EFL Classroom: Issues for Tomorrow’s EFL Teachers

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Abstract - eLearning is rapidly developing in the education system and is widely used in many universities and research areas. However, the effectiveness of using new technologies in education is increasingly controversial due to the lack of a flexible model to underpin the learning process. This paper aims to identify and discuss the effectiveness of eLearning tools and strategies from the author’s three studies on applying three tools, namely, collaborative blogging, Web-based lessons and electronic feedback in EFL writing classes in university teaching. The author firstly presents the results from her own studies on incorporating these three tools into EFL classes for university students. In particular, the author compares the effects of the tools and strategies through the design of suitable motivating schemes in relation to students’ participation and learning patterns. The discussion further addresses the pedagogy that is important in describing the state of university teaching and students’ learning, specifically related to the theory and practices of these tools and strategies in EFL education. The discussion also focuses on the challenges that most universities face in transforming their instruction into a blended learning format. The four main barriers are identified: administrative challenges (lack of awareness, policies, plans, goals and support related to blended learning), re-designing courses and/or programs, faculty preparedness and quality assurance. The author identifies the pedagogical principles which underlie the teaching and learning activities that constitute effective eLearning in EFL classes. An analysis and synthesis of the principles and ideas behind the practice of eLearning are also presented, from the perspective of deploying effective eLearning tools as a means of EFL pedagogy.

Keywords: Collaborative Blogging, Web-Based Lessons, Electronic Feedback, EFL Writing, Blended Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

eLearning and several Web tools have been recognized as powerful instructional tools in the language classroom. Wang (2005) stated that there are many advantages in integrating technology into the classroom especially for English as foreign language (EFL) students. English as a foreign language (EFL) has employed technology to promote students’ learning performance as well as learners’ motivation for language learning. Many of these tools can be used by teachers for language learning purposes. Of these, weblog, Web-based lessons and some Web tools (e.g., email, chat rooms and social media) are familiar and recognized by many.

The four skills in language learning (listening, speaking, reading and writing) have recently been taught using various methods and technology. Technology has achieved satisfactory outcomes in language learning.
Of these four skills, it is quite agreed among EFL teachers that writing is the skill with which many teachers have the least success. Many teachers, although realizing the importance of teaching writing skills to students, also think writing tasks are time-consuming and difficult to teach. Several research studies have confirmed that Thai learners have poor performance in writing [1-3]. Similarly, Wongsothorn et al. [4] declared that pre-tertiary students produced very poor writing pieces in the national assessment. Some teachers (e.g., Cumming [5]) blamed the lack of experience in writing as the main barrier to students writing well.

Several EFL teachers have conducted studies to address Thai students’ writing problems. Results from these studies have shown that eLearning tools have recently become powerful aids in improving both students’ learning performance and their motivation to learn. For example, blogging is the activity which uses weblogs to create an interactive learning environment. This tool has been used particularly to support learners to write collaboratively [6]. Another effective tool for enhancing writing skills in the EFL classroom is Web-based lessons. This tool has normally been developed in terms of its content by the teacher and functions as a course supplementary. Web-based lessons in writing courses can be used for various purposes. One of the most interesting uses for Web-based lessons is teaching and providing extra exercises on language structure (e.g., types of sentence, relative clauses, etc.). In addition, several tools (Web, blogs, social media, email, etc.) used together can be an efficient tool in providing feedback on EFL learners’ writing. This paper analyzes and discusses the values and practice of collaborative blogging, Web-based lessons and electronic feedback in the EFL classroom. The data concerned with this discussion and analysis are drawn from the studies in which the author has been involved and from additional study of related and recent work in this area.

2. USING THE THREE EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY TOOLS TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS OF EFL STUDENTS

The computer has enormously influenced the way teachers and students organize classes. Computer technology alleviates issues of access to information and learning resources. Due to this fascination, the computer has become an educational tool supporting the strong belief that it could improve students’ attention and interest in learning. Technology also makes the lesson more efficient when used appropriately in the classroom. Several kinds of technology have been successfully used in the EFL classroom; however, this paper focuses on blogging, Web-based lessons and electronic feedback for improving the writing skills of EFL students.

A. Collaborative blogging

Blogs have existed on the Internet since 1998. Later, in August 1999, Blogger, a free blog hosting service, was launched. This fostered the rapid growth of blog sites [7]. A blog is an online personal journal that can be updated as frequently as the author wishes. Blogs are popular in several areas and therefore it is no wonder that education cannot afford to ignore this development. As blogs provide space and tools for writing, EFL writing can employ blogs as a powerful teaching tool.

Blogs could be a replacement for the traditional cycle used to manage a writing class. The traditional writing classroom normally involves the lodgment, marking and return of student assessment. These procedures have been done manually and require a great deal of effort by the instructor to manage the papers. Moreover, the teacher needs to be aware of the turnaround time. The worst problems are accountability, and assignment tracking and security. It is also worth mentioning that this way of managing a writing class requires a lot of paper for the drafting, writing and feedback.
Blogging, similarly to online chain discussion groups, is an easy way to engage with students’ writing in the classroom. It is an effective way to manage the lodgment, marking and return of student assessment with no fuss [8, 9]. Blogging using Google’s Blogger.com, LiveJournal.com and WordPress.com is free and easy to set up, manage and update without additional support. As many students are active users of Facebook, Twitter or hi5, they have become familiar with blogging [8].

The rationale behind blogging is that it is very convenient for a user to check the changes that have been made to his/her blog. While with other tools, a user needs to “check in” occasionally to see if there is any new content posted, blogs make use of a “publish-subscribe” model in which the subscribers receive notifications when new content has been posted. In the writing classroom, therefore, blogs are qualified as a pedagogical tool [10].

In addition, blogging in the writing class can replace the cycle of steps in developing an essay: brainstorming, writing, submitting, receiving feedback, revising writing and resubmitting. Blogs clearly benefit the writing classroom. They enable the instructor and students to communicate through and about writing. Both sides can easily update online writing.

These findings are in accordance with several recent works. For example, due to its ease of management, blogging in the EFL writing class enables students to exchange feedback. This is a characteristic of collaborative writing [11]. Both students and teacher learn how to negotiate [12-14] through blogs on the extent of student control and teacher intervention. In comparison with the traditional EFL class, it has been found that blogging promotes peer response activities [15] and that student’s develop autonomous language learning ability [16]. Students have the opportunity to learn complexity and lexical diversity through feedback [17]. As noted by Bloch [18] and Pennington [19], it has been observed that students are highly motivated to write and to write well as a result of the nature of the online writing context.

To promote collaborative writing in class, the teacher may need to consider the activities suggested in the following table.

**TABLE I**

**ACTIVITIES THAT PROMOTE COLLABORATIVE WRITING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities that Promote Writing in New and Emerging Contexts</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Create writing tasks that take advantage of the collaborative potential of social networking tools such as Facebook’s status update or Twitter’s microblogging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create writing tasks that simulate real-world collaborative writing tasks, including the kinds of tasks that groups of professionals in workplace contexts might use to work on projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create writing tasks for lower- to higher-level writers to collaboratively construct knowledge in managed spaces, including wikis, Google Docs, and blogs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create writing tasks for higher-level writers to actively contribute to real-world wikis and blogs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Kressler [20]

**B. Web-based lessons on conjunctions**

The popularity of the use of Web-based instruction has expanded due to the fact that Web-based instruction enables access with no limitations on place and time [21,22]. In education, the availability of the form of Web-based instruction or eLearning provides useful information to help students gain knowledge. According to Khan [23], Web-based instruction is an innovation which transfers instruction to audiences living in other places by using the Web as a transferring tool. It creates education on the Web by using the Web as a medium in learning and contact [24]. In addition, it combines today’s technology and instructional design methodology to increase learning effectiveness and solve problems of time and place [25, 26]. Moreover, Web-based instruction was defined as “the application of a repertoire of cognitively oriented instructional strategies implemented within a constructivist theory” by Perkin [27]. In other words, Web-based instruction is based on constructivist theory. In addition, Web-based instruction implements
collaborative learning in which information and resources are utilized from the Web [21]. Web-based instruction is also known as a hypermedia-based instructional program creating a learning environment which encourages and develops people’s knowledge by using the Web to access resources and information Khan [28]. In addition, Web-based instruction connects teachers and students, even though they live apart from each other, to resources by the use of computers and communication networks [29]. Web-based instruction is known by several different terms, such as, online instruction, Web-based training (WBT), learning over the Internet/intranet and distance learning [29]. In addition, Web-based instruction is referred to as Internet-based training, Web-based training, distributed learning, advanced distributed learning, online learning and eLearning [28]. With reference to these definitions, Web-based instruction is an innovative instrument using to create a new learning environment by employing the Internet and the Web, together with Web-based instruction, to connect teachers, students and resources any time anywhere. In addition, it has the characteristics of both constructivist theory and collaborative learning. Consequently, Web-based instruction may be considered as the integration of a new form of instruction with the Internet and the Web.

Due to the fascinating characteristics of Web-based instruction, it is considered a powerful tool for addressing the problem of using conjunctions in writing in the EFL classroom. In Thai schools, English grammar is taught from the elementary level: hence, by the time students commence their university studies, they would have knowledge of some basic grammar. High school students should ideally know some English usage and be able to construct simple, compound, complex and compound-complex sentences by employing aspects of grammar (e.g., tenses, articles, word ordering). At university level, students are expected to be able to apply and use grammar correctly and effectively in their communication. Thus, grammar at this level tends to be more difficult and challenging for them. Students should be able to extend their knowledge and accumulate many aspects of grammar to convey their communication.

However, in reality, although students have some knowledge of grammar, they make grammatical errors even in a simple sentence [30].

According to research on Thai university students’ English usage, many Thai researchers (e.g. Paicharoen [31] and Pornvarin [32]) have found that Thai students always make grammatical errors in sentences. Building sentences can be complicated as there are four types of sentence. Thus, several studies (e.g., Bennui [33] and Bootchuy [34]) have reported that students construct compound, complex and compound–complex sentences incorrectly, and one of the causes of incorrect sentence construction comes from the use of conjunctions.

In addition, the problems with conjunctions were found by several other researchers (Bootchuy [34], Paicharoen [31] and Bennui [33]). Bootchuy [34], and Bennui [33]) stated that the two outstanding problems related to conjunction usage were incoherent and fragmented sentences. Fragmented sentences occurred because students hurried to complete sentences without considering that they were producing incomplete sentences. This is the effect of interference from the students’ mother tongue language which was also consistent with the findings by Paicharoen [31] who claimed that students’ mother tongue language influenced their thinking process when writing in English. In addition, students do not know the relationship between sentences, so they combine sentences using the wrong conjunctions, placing them in the wrong position [35] and sometimes omitting conjunctions in sentences [34].

The integration of Web-based instruction in learning and teaching is one effective teaching method [23] which is expected to help students to improve their use of conjunctions. The recommendations below are related to the application of Web-based lessons to the use of conjunctions:
1) **Commitment:** There should be strong commitment between teachers and students. Since there is no coercion from teachers, students should be convinced or encouraged to join the Web-based lesson. Teachers should inform and lead students to believe that learning through a Web-based lesson also affects their learning. Teachers might emphasize the extra points that students would gain or the improved learning outcomes achieved through using this material as it would help them to develop their understanding of language use.

2) **Characteristics of a Web-based lesson:** The activities in a Web-based lesson should be made attractive to increase students’ motivation. The Web-based lesson should provide students with interaction. The Web-based lesson should also provide activities in which students can interact with their friends. These activities might come in the form of an online discussion or peer review. Teachers might raise some topics and let students respond to these topics. Students should be explicitly informed about both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. For example, they should be directly tested on what they had learned in the Web-based lesson. This would intrinsically motivate their desire to learn through the Web-based lesson. Furthermore, extra points should be separately allocated without being included within other grading criteria. This could lead to students giving precedence to learning through the Web-based lesson. Since the design of the Web-based lesson could attract students’ attention, the Web-based lesson should be well designed. Sound, animation or stimulating activities could be added to the Web-based lesson to gain students’ attention.

3) **Motivation in learning with Web-based instruction:** Students studying under a learner-centred approach need more intrinsic motivation. Weimer [36] gave an example of intrinsic motivation with students being intrinsically motivated if they were tested on what they had learned on the course. Students studying under a learner-centred approach should actively engage in all activities and raise their level of responsibility for learning.

4) **Web-based instruction and social media:** The Web-based lesson should be applied within well-known social networking services such as Facebook or Twitter in order to provide easy access to students. These services are fashionable and widely used by many people. With Facebook or Twitter, teachers and students would be able to easily connect to each other. They can both share interesting information and comment on their friends’ status. Therefore, if the accounts for these subjects are registered with these social networking services, teachers would be able to reach their students and also to use these services as a medium for learning.

**C. Electronic feedback**

Electronic feedback is a method in which teachers apply technology to give feedback [37]. Technology is applied to improve traditional written feedback and reduce its limitations. Electronic feedback seems to have advantages in improving students’ writing and to be capable of addressing the limitations of traditional feedback. Firstly, after receiving feedback, students are able to review their feedback and to make the decision about whether they want to accept it. Consequently, the limitation of errors being corrected without any learning occurring could be solved. Secondly, the process of electronic feedback is done online. Students might feel more comfortable receiving comments without losing face which might be the case with
classroom feedback. Moreover, the electronic method saves more time because students can check the feedback online, and they can ask for more information by using the advantages of technology. In addition, teachers can more easily check whether students have copied their work from the Internet by searching for doubtful phases or sentences using a search engine to find the original source. Therefore, plagiarism could be reduced. In addition, Microsoft (MS) Office programs allow those providing feedback to more clearly comment on students’ compositions. The clarity of feedback would positively affect students’ writing of compositions. Lastly, since all processes for providing feedback are performed using a technological method, spell check, the MS Office program and electronic feedback might encourage students to write more. As a result, they would gain writing experience.

Electronic feedback is therefore expected to help improve writing skills in the Thai EFL context. In fact, a number of researchers have made critiques of Thai strategies for teaching writing [38]. Strategies applied in the teaching of Thai EFL writing mainly focus on grammar and the writing content [39]. Nevertheless, this usual strategy might not be effective enough for developing students’ writing abilities. This might relate to providing feedback which is a main process in writing teaching strategies [40]. Hand- written and individual oral feedback, the main methods in the Thai EFL context, have limitations in improving students’ writing abilities. For example, students might correct the errors according to feedback given by the instructor without learning the issues behind the errors [41]. Moreover, written feedback is related to cultural issues [42]. In Thai culture, students might think that they have lost face when they are given feedback in writing. In some strategies, teachers might give both written and oral feedback to students individually. These strategies might make students feel embarrassed. In addition, traditional feedback takes time. Students have to wait for their teacher’s feedback before they rewrite their compositions. The process of giving feedback might also be problematic in terms of the amount of time consumed. Moreover, if students are not clear about the feedback provided, they may have to wait for a week to meet their lecturers again in order to discuss the unclear. Hand-written feedback might not be clear because of the limited space available in traditional written feedback. These problems might cause misunderstandings between the feedback givers and receivers. Therefore, the traditional way of giving feedback in the Thai EFL context could be considered as a potential cause of problems in the Thai EFL students’ writing performance.

The following section discusses findings that are of interest and recommendations on the application of electronic feedback to improve EFL students’ writing:

1) **Effectiveness of electronic feedback:**

   Giving electronic feedback on students’ writing allows students to see their mistakes and guides them on how to solve their errors. This might help them to improve their writing abilities in terms of both grammatical structure and composition content. Technological support in the EFL classroom has been discussed by studies such as those by Albirini [43]. These studies explained that technological support might contribute to an effective EFL classroom as teachers and students interact with each other more comfortably and teaching techniques such as the giving of feedback are supported. Therefore, this could explain why electronic feedback is effective in improving students’ writing abilities. Giving feedback to students electronically plays an important role in the improvement of students’ writing ability. At the very least, it is helpful in supporting the EFL writing classroom as confirmed by Yeh and Lo [44].

2) **Other tools allied with electronic feedback:** Technology is a possible
method for supporting the giving of feedback in Thai teaching of EFL writing. Furthermore, electronic feedback might be a good alternative method for solving problems such as students’ copying habits since students have to consider the feedback before they accept it. In addition, posted links and PDF files guide them in learning how to solve their problems in writing. Moreover, as this method uses MS Word 2007 to give feedback to students, the software functions support the giving of feedback. Consequently, students can more clearly see their feedback, and the limitations of traditional feedback in terms of limited feedback space would be solved. Furthermore, the whole process is done online: students do not have to make an appointment to receive feedback which is what was usually done with traditional feedback. Therefore, the problem of the amount of time consumed could be solved. The use of this method is therefore recommended to address issues related to strict rules, for example, grammar and organization. In fact, it is an effective alternative method for solving writing errors in the Thai EFL context. This method seems to address the limitations of traditional feedback, dealing with errors in strict grammatical rules and organization.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper is intended to provide insight into the wealth of educational technologies and their power in language teaching and learning. These tools have been used and have confirmed their potential particularly in improving EFL writing skills. The author expects that, at the very least, the paper will raise awareness of the need to reflect upon new ways of language teaching and learning.

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