

BOOSTING EFL STUDENTS' POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD WRITING IN ENGLISH: THE ROLE OF JOURNAL WRITING WITH PEER FEEDBACK

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Abstract

Since students' English writing ability improvement is influenced by their positive attitudes toward writing in English and vice versa (Petric, 2002), this paper pedagogically raises teachers' awareness of the utility of journal writing, with peer feedback, to create EFL writing classes where students' English writing ability development and their positive attitudes toward writing in English meet. The data was collected from the responses of 42 Mathayomsuksa 3 students at a secondary school in Thailand to the pre- and post- treatment attitude questionnaires. The findings indicated that the students had positive attitudes toward writing in English both before and after the treatment with a significant increase following the treatment. Their positive attitudes toward four aspects of writing in English were significantly boosted after the treatment: writing as a means of self-expression, the importance of learning to write in learning English, self-perceived writing ability, and self-satisfaction with English writing.

Key Words: English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' attitudes, journal writing with peer feedback, writing in English

บทคัดย่อ

เนื่องจากทัศนคติเชิงบวกต่อการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษส่งผลต่อการเพิ่มขีดความสามารถในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียน และในทำนองเดียวกัน ขีดความสามารถในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนที่เพิ่มสูงขึ้น ก็ส่งผลให้ทัศนคติต่อการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นไปในทิศทางบวกมากขึ้น (Petric, 2002) บทความนี้ช่วยให้ครูตระหนักถึงประโยชน์ของการใช้การเขียนบันทึกและการประเมินโดยใช้

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ผลย้อนกลับจากเพื่อน เพื่อพัฒนาความสามารถในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษควบคู่ไปกับการส่งเสริมทัศนคติเชิงบวกต่อการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ ข้อมูลในการวิจัยครั้งนี้ได้มาจากการตอบแบบสอบถามทัศนคติของนักเรียนชั้นมัธยมศึกษาปีที่ 3 จำนวน 42 คน จากโรงเรียนมัธยมศึกษาแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศไทย ผลการวิจัยพบว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างมีทัศนคติเชิงบวกต่อการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษทั้งก่อนและหลังการเขียนบันทึกและการประเมินโดยใช้ผลย้อนกลับจากเพื่อน โดยทัศนคติเชิงบวกดังกล่าวได้เพิ่มขึ้นอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งใน 4 ด้าน คือ ด้านการเขียนในฐานะเครื่องมือในการถ่ายทอดเรื่องราวของตนเอง ด้านความสำคัญของการเรียนการเขียนในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ ด้านความสามารถในการเขียนตามการรับรู้ของตนเอง และด้านความพึงพอใจในความสามารถในการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของตนเอง

คำสำคัญ: ทัศนคติของนักเรียนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ, การเขียนบันทึกและการประเมินโดยใช้ผลย้อนกลับจากเพื่อน, การเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ

INTRODUCTION

English is one of the world's important languages because of its influence all over the world (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009). With its great power, English literacy is becoming significant in both the academy and communication (Weigle, 2002). Still, students' negative attitudes toward writing in English as well as their lowest interest in learning to write are found (Schneider, 2009; Tuan, 2010). Specifically, academic writing is recognized as "a time-consuming and unpleasant chore" (Yong, 2010, p. 47).

Different reasons for the students' negative attitudes toward writing in English have been proposed. Gebhard (1996) explains that the students themselves believe that they have no capacity to write in the target language. This is a result of their previous experience in formal academic writing exposure (Petric, 2002). In academic writing, the students learn about the language; they do not learn how to

write in the target language (Shih, 1999). Moreover, the nature of writing itself also makes this language form the most difficult or the last language skill to be acquired or mastered by both native and non-native speakers (Byrne, 1979; Hedge, 2000; Norrish, 1993). Apart from that, a focus on a formulaic writing in teaching writing to increase the standardized test scores also makes the students lose interest in writing (Schneider, 2009). Petric, therefore, points out that such negative attitudes toward writing in English influence the students' writing proficiency. Conversely, their English writing proficiency in turn affects their attitudes toward writing in English in a positive way.

One of the language teachers' jobs is to develop the students' writing ability to enhance their positive attitudes toward writing in English and vice versa (Blanton, 1987). Teachers should also raise their awareness of the importance of writing in English in both the academic area and in everyday life in or-

der to primarily cultivate students' positive attitudes toward writing in English (Yong, 2010). Blanton suggests three activities in teaching English writing: learning log writing, essay writing, and journal writing. The use of journal writing in teaching writing to promote students' positive attitudes toward writing in English is also proposed by Spack and Sadow (1983, p. 590) in that "journal writing has had a positive impact on ESL students' writing attitudes and habits". Although a great amount of literature claims that the students prefer journal writing, there will always be some students who perceive such an activity as busy work (Bean, 1996). Hence, Bean suggests that journal writing practice should be driven by the students' intrinsic satisfaction or motivation. Also, learning styles, grade orientation, and failure to integrate journal writing into the language classrooms are considered as the three factors affecting the students' motivation toward journal writing.

Positive attitudes toward journal writing as well as peer feedback of the students in both ESL and EFL academic contexts were reported in several studies (e.g. Li, 2011; Liao & Wong, 2010; Lin & Yang, 2011; Tuan, 2010; Wakabayashi, 2008). These studies, however, revealed no findings related to the issue being captured in the present study. In addition to investigating the students' attitudes toward writing in English, the present study examined whether the students' experience in journal writing with peer feedback would have any influence on their attitudes toward writing in English.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The subjects in the present study were 42 Mathayomsuksa 3 (Grade 9) Semi-English program students from a secondary school in Thailand. All of them were female native Thai speakers at the average age of 14. Their formal English educational exposure ranged from 9 to 12 years.

In the journal writing with peer feedback activity, each subject individually wrote a journal entry on any topic on a piece of colored paper for 30 minutes once a week, totalling 8 weeks. For the peer feedback activity, all of them were oppositionally paired up according to their writing proficiency based on their pre-test scores. Hence, there were 21 designated pairs.

Instruments

In order to investigate if the subjects' attitudes toward writing in English would be positively and significantly affected by the use of journal writing with peer feedback, two research instruments were employed in the present study: an attitude questionnaire and a test of writing.

1. The attitude questionnaire, used both as pre- and post- treatment questionnaires, was adapted and developed from the work of Birjandi (2010). The 15-item attitude questionnaire was in the form of a Likert-rating scale ranging from 5 (Strongly Agree) to 1 (Strongly Disagree). According to Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha, the reliability of the questionnaire was .82.

2. The one-hour test of writing, used as

both pre- and post tests, consisted of 2 sections: a free writing test in the form of a short paragraph writing test on the topic "Someone I Admire" and an error recognition and correction test covering 15 grammatical aspects.

Data Collection

The present study was conducted from May to September for 11 weeks in the academic year 2011. First, the attitude questionnaire was given to the subjects as a pre-treatment questionnaire to elicit their attitudes toward writing in English before the use of journal writing with peer feedback. Then, the subjects took the test of writing as a pre-test. After that, they were asked to write the journal entries and exchange them with their designated partners' in order to give both content and grammatical feedback using both written feedback in English and oral feedback in Thai, on a weekly basis for 8 weeks. This activity took about 60 minutes each time. After 8 weeks of the journal writing with peer feedback practice, the attitude questionnaire was given to the subjects again to elicit their attitudes toward writing in English. In the last week of the study, they took the test of writing as a post-test.

Data Analysis

Forty-two subjects' responses to the pre- and post- treatment attitude questionnaires were computed for the mean scores. The mean scores of their responses were interpreted according to a five-point Likert scale: 4.21 - 5.00 = strongly agree; 3.41 - 4.20 = agree; 2.61 - 3.40 = neutral; 1.81 - 2.60 =

disagree; 1.00 - 1.80 = strongly disagree. Moreover, the mean scores of their responses to both the pre- and post- treatment attitude questionnaires were compared by using a paired samples t-test to find out if their attitudes toward writing in English significantly and positively changed after the treatment.

The subjects' writing pre- and post- tests were scored by three raters (two native speakers and the researcher) based on the analytic scoring scale devised by John Anderson from an oral ability scale found in Harris (1968) (as cited in Hughes, 1989). Then, the mean scores of their pre- and post- tests were compared by employing a paired samples t-test. The result shows that the subjects' overall writing ability significantly improved after an eight-week journal writing with peer feedback experience.

RESULTS

The subjects' attitudes toward writing in English before and after the use of journal writing with peer feedback are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 illustrates that the subjects had positive attitudes toward writing in English both before and after the treatment with a significant increase ($p < .01$) in the positive attitude following the treatment. This means that they had significantly higher positive attitudes toward writing in English after they had some experience in journal writing with peer feedback. The mean scores of their responses to 4 items significantly increased after the treatment. That is, their attitude toward writing as a means of self-expression in the target language significantly in-

Table 1: Subjects' Attitudes toward Writing in English before and after the Use of Journal Writing with Peer Feedback

Statement	Before			After			t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	S.D.	Level	Mean	S.D.	Level		
1. I enjoy writing in English.	3.74	.73	Agree	3.76	.91	Agree	.184	.86
2. I like English writing because it is another way to express my ideas.	3.62	.70	Agree	3.88	.77	Agree	2.213	.03*
3. I think that learning writing in English is important in learning English.	4.07	.78	Agree	4.64	.66	Strongly agree	3.736	.00**
4. The activities I do for learning how to write in English are useful to me.	4.24	.88	Strongly agree	4.40	.83	Strongly agree	1.361	.18
5. The activities in English writing courses are important to enhance my English writing ability.	4.48	.59	Strongly agree	4.38	.70	Strongly agree	-.813	.42
6. I do my English writing assignments carefully.	3.67	.79	Agree	3.74	.80	Agree	.503	.62
7. When I have a problem in writing in English, I will always enthusiastically solve the problem.	3.52	.74	Agree	3.52	.89	Agree	.000	1.00
8. I can do very well in English writing activities.	3.12	.60	Neutral	3.19	.71	Neutral	.771	.45
9. I think I have sufficient English knowledge to be able to write easily.	2.95	.79	Neutral	3.29	.77	Neutral	2.646	.01**
10. Compared to my classmates, I think I do pretty well in English writing.	2.34	.79	Disagree	2.56	.90	Disagree	1.939	.06
11. I am satisfied with my English writing.	2.90	.93	Neutral	3.33	.95	Neutral	2.672	.01**
12. I always look forward to my English writing classes.	3.17	.76	Neutral	3.26	.91	Neutral	.628	.53
13. I would take English writing courses even if they are not compulsory.	3.48	.99	Agree	3.64	1.03	Agree	1.096	.28
14. English writing skill is important to me.	4.31	.72	Strongly agree	4.50	.63	Strongly agree	1.309	.20
15. I think writing in English is important in my future career.	4.64	.58	Strongly agree	4.79	.42	Strongly agree	1.635	.11
Average	3.62	.41	Agree	3.83	.51	Agree	-3.903	.00**

** p < .01, *p < .05

creased, but still fell into the level of *agree* (item 2, $t = 2.213$, $p < .05$). Moreover, their attitude toward the importance of learning writing in learning English significantly increased and fell into the level of *strong agreement* in the post-treatment while it was in the level of *agree* in the pre-treatment (item 3, $t = 3.736$, $p < .01$). In addition, the subjects' attitude toward their own ability to write in the target language and their satisfaction with their own English writing ability also significantly increased although they still remained in the same level of agreement: *neutral* (item 9, $t = 2.646$, $p \leq .01$; item 11, $t = 2.672$, $p \leq .01$).

DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

According to the findings, the subjects had positive attitudes toward writing in English both before and after the integration of journal writing with peer feedback in the writing classroom. However, their positive attitudes after the treatment significantly increased. This can be attributed to the pedagogical merit of journal writing with peer feedback in the writing classroom.

Moreover, some issues deserve greater attention here. That is, the use of journal writing with peer feedback significantly boosted the subjects' positive attitudes toward 4 aspects of writing in English: writing as a means of self-expression (item 2), the importance of learning to write in learning English (item 3), self-perceived writing ability (item 9), and self-satisfaction with English writing (item 11).

1. Writing as a Means of Self-Expression

The subjects' attitude toward writing as another way to express their ideas in English significantly increased after the journal writing with peer feedback treatment. Their practice reflects their recognition of writing as a means of self-expression. This echoes the role of journal writing as a form of self-expressive writing (Lorch, 1981; Massi, 2001). Journal writing is regarded as "personal writing", not "an assignment" from the teachers (Bumgardner, 1996, p. 85).

Pedagogically, this attitude helps motivate the students to practice and improve their writing ability. That is, using journal writing as creative writing in an academic setting boosts their enthusiasm to practice writing more, and, hence, enhancing their writing ability in the target language (Schneider, 2009).

2. Importance of Learning to Write in Learning English

After the subjects had gained some experience in journal writing with peer feedback, their attitude toward the importance of learning writing in learning English positively and significantly increased. In this case, the subjects probably realized that writing is an important skill in learning the target language as it is one of the four main skills needed in order to master the target language. More importantly, they probably recognized the importance of this language skill through the journal writing with peer feedback activity. Through journal writing, they learned how to communicate their ideas in written form in the target language. Through peer feedback, they learned from their own experience and their peers about their writing problems as well as their weaknesses in writing. Thus, the impor-

tance of learning to write in the target language was increased in their perception.

This finding sheds light on the subjects' enthusiasm to develop their English writing skill in learning English. Pedagogically, this calls for careful lesson preparation on the part of the teachers to meet the students' needs. Moreover, it also raises an interesting issue in writing pedagogy. That is, although writing is considered as the most difficult and last language skill to be mastered or acquired by both native and non-native speakers (Byrne, 1979; Hedge, 2000; Norrish, 1993), this language skill still plays a significant role in language pedagogy.

3. Self-Perceived Writing Ability

From the subjects' responses to the attitude questionnaires, the integration of journal writing with peer feedback in the writing classroom significantly led to a higher positive perception of their own writing ability. Due to the fact that the subjects' writing ability after the treatment was increased from where they were. No doubt, they perceived that they possessed sufficient knowledge to be able to write in the target language more easily. In line with the study of Zhou and Siriyothin (2009), their students' writing skill development stemmed from journal writing practice, a type of writing related to their personal background and existing capacity. This affirms what Freeman and Freeman (2003, p. 7) state, that to develop the students' English writing ability is "to build on what students bring to the classroom – their language, culture, and previous experience – to help them develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed academically".

With this aspect of the subjects' attitude

toward writing in English, the language teachers should pay close attention to the students' different writing proficiency levels in the writing class. In order to teach writing in such a class, it is more effective to develop their writing ability by building from the foundation of their existing ability. Journal writing with peer feedback, therefore, could be regarded as an alternative activity to serve this point. In so doing, it helps promote a positive attitude toward their own writing ability, their motivation to learn to write in the target language, as well as their enthusiasm to improve their writing ability in the target language.

4. Self-Satisfaction with English Writing

The use of journal writing with peer feedback in the writing class also increased the subjects' satisfaction with their own English writing. Two factors contributed to this phenomenon. First, it was probably because of the nature of journal writing itself. The subjects used their existing knowledge and ability to write in the target language in the journal writing activity. This, therefore, made them realize that they had a certain ability to write in the target language. As a result, their satisfaction with their own writing increased. Second, the subjects probably perceived that their English writing improved through collaborative learning in the peer feedback activity. Hence, peer feedback helped increase their satisfaction with their own English writing.

The promotion and increase of the students' satisfaction with their own English writing through journal writing with peer feedback has pedagogical implications. With higher positive satisfaction with their own English writing, the students are more motivated to go on developing their English writing ability.

CONCLUSION

The present study reports EFL students' attitudes toward writing in English before and after the use of journal writing with peer feedback. Some interesting points are worth noting as follows.

1. The students had positive attitudes toward writing in English both before and after an eight-week journal writing with peer feedback activity.
2. A significant increase was found in the students' attitudes toward writing in English after the use of journal writing with peer feedback.
3. The student attitudes toward the four aspects of writing in English: writing as a means of self-expression, the importance of learning to write in learning English, self-perceiving writing ability, and self-satisfaction with English writing were significantly promoted through journal writing with peer feedback.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to gratefully acknowledge Assoc. Prof. Dr. Thanyapa Chiramanee for her guidance, assistance, and patience. My sincere gratitude extended to Mr. Augustus Richard Hall for his constructive comments to polish the final draft.

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