

## Journal Writing with Peer Feedback:

### A Friend or A Foe for EFL Learners

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#### **Abstract**

A number of writing techniques have been employed in teaching writing in both ESL and EFL writing classrooms in order to improve students' writing ability as well as to promote their positive attitudes toward writing skill. Journal writing with peer feedback was presented as one of those in the present study. After the use of this writing technique for 8 weeks, the responses to the questionnaire on the attitudes of 42 Mathayom Suksa 3 (Grade 9) Semi-English Program students at a secondary school in the south of Thailand were quantitatively analyzed. Apart from the increase of the students' writing ability, the findings revealed that the students had positive attitudes toward both journal writing and peer feedback. This pedagogically spotlights a great start to employ this writing technique to cultivate collaborative learning and student-centred learning in the EFL context, particularly in the Asian academic writing setting.

**Keywords:** Journal writing with peer feedback, attitudes, collaborative learning, student-centred learning

## **1. Introduction**

Learning a second or foreign language involves four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Among these, writing is considered as the most difficult language skill to be developed or even mastered (Hedge, 2000; Norrish, 1993). As a result, students' attitudes toward this language skill are shown negatively.

In Thailand, English is taught as a main foreign language. Teaching writing is practically recognized as teaching grammar. In the writing courses, students learn about the language rather than how to write in the target language. The focus of teaching writing in the Thai EFL classrooms is, hence, on the knowledge of the language, not on the communicative purposes. As Shih (1999) indicates, in Asian academic setting, writing is usually taught by traditional approaches, including grammar translation, audiolingual, and teacher-centred approach. Unquestionably, students, being taught under such approaches, are not able to communicate their ideas in a written form in the target language although they know its rules and have been practicing those rules for years. This is a common problem of students learning writing in Thailand. Apart from that, the focus on formulaic writing in teaching writing is considered as another serious problem concerning students' writing (Schneider, 2009). Teaching writing is represented by teaching a five-paragraph essay writing in order to increase students' standardized test scores in Thailand. In so doing, however, it decreases students' motivation and enthusiasm to write and learn how to write in the target language. Undoubtedly, writing is ranked as the least interesting language skill by students.

In order to solve the two main problems mentioned above, journal writing with peer feedback is suggested as an innovative technique to help improve EFL students' writing ability (Kulprasit & Chiramanee, 2012). Through the activity, students have an opportunity to gain the real experience in practicing writing in the target language on the topics of their own interests in order to enhance their writing ability, built on their existing ability. Moreover, the use of journal writing with peer feedback promotes creative writing as well as collaborative language learning and skill development into the writing classes. In so doing, it helps increase students' motivation in learning the target language and students themselves could take responsibility for their own language learning and skill development which later could lead to the development of autonomous language learning.

Positive attitudes toward journal writing and peer feedback are found in several studies (Li, 2011; Liao and Wong, 2010; Tuan, 2010 and Wakabayashi, 2008). To the best of our knowledge, there have been few, if any, studies investigating students' attitudes toward journal writing with peer feedback in the Thai EFL academic context. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore and analyze their attitudes toward the activity in details for the benefit of pedagogical implications in teaching writing in the Thai EFL academic setting apart from the report on their writing ability development through the activity according to Kulprasit and Chiramanee (2012).

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Subjects*

Forty-two Mathayom Suksa 3 (Grade 9) students in the Semi-English (SE) Program at a secondary school in the south of Thailand were the subjects of the study under the convenience sampling method. They all were female Thai native speakers with the average age of 14. Their formal English exposure ranged from 9 to 12 years. Thirty-eight of them (90.48%) had no previous experience in English journal writing while only four (9.52%) had some. Journal writing with peer feedback was, therefore, considered as a new experience for most of them.

## *2.2 Research Instruments*

Three research instruments were used in this study: a writing test, an error recognition practice test, and an attitude questionnaire. The writing test used both as a pre- and post-tests test consisted of two parts. The first part was a short paragraph writing of approximately 150 words on the topic “*Someone I admire*” and the second part was 30-item error recognition and correction tests. The error recognition practice test covering each subject’s five most frequently problematic grammatical aspects, based on their performance on the writing pre-test results, was used to equip the subjects with grammatical knowledge to ensure that they were able to give grammatical feedback when doing peer review. The attitude questionnaire, based on Liao and Wong (2010), Tuan (2010), and Wakabayashi (2008), was in the form of a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). It consisted of 2 sections. The first section elicited the subjects’ attitudes toward journal writing and the second one elicited their attitudes toward peer feedback. The questionnaire was employed as post-treatment questionnaire.

## *2.3 Data Collection*

Week 1: The subjects took the writing test as the pre-test for 1 hour in order to measure their writing proficiency before the treatment and to find their five most problematic grammatical aspects in writing.

Weeks 2-4: All the subjects were equipped with the 15-grammatical aspect practice by the use of two practice tests of error recognition and correction for 3 weeks to develop their grammatical knowledge for peer feedback. These 15 grammatical aspects were found as each subject’s five most problematic grammatical aspects based on the result of the pre-test of writing.

Weeks 5-12: Journal writing with peer feedback

Each subject was asked to write a journal entry on a piece of color paper about any topic they wanted for 30 minutes of allocated time each week. This activity was done on a weekly basis for 8 weeks.

Then, the subjects were paired up according to their writing proficiency based on their pre-test scores. The higher writing proficiency subjects were paired up with the lower ones. There were twenty-one designated pairs to do peer feedback activity. Peer feedback process was described as follows. Each subject was asked to exchange her journal entry with her designated pair in order to give both content and grammatical feedback in the written form in

English on her partner's journal entry. To give content feedback, the subjects were required to write about their reactions after reading their designated partners' journal entries. For grammatical feedback, they either marked their designated partners' grammatical errors, corrected them, or even did both. Then, each pair sat together to give oral feedback regarding the written feedback they received in their native language, Thai. The overall peer feedback activity took approximately 30 minutes, on a weekly basis after the journal writing activity for totally 8 weeks.

Week 13: The subjects took the writing test again as the post-test for 1 hour in order to measure their writing proficiency after the treatment and to find out whether their five most problematic grammatical aspects in writing reduced after the treatment.

Week 14: The attitude questionnaire was given to the subjects to elicit their attitudes toward the treatment: journal writing and peer feedback.

#### *2.4 Data Analysis*

The subjects' pre- and post- tests of writing were graded by two native speakers and one of the researchers according to the analytic scoring scale devised by John Anderson based on an oral ability scale found in Harris (1968) (as cited in Hughes, 1989). The mean scores of the pre- and post- tests were compared by using a paired samples t-test.

The subjects' responses to the attitude questionnaire were computed for the mean scores. The mean scores were interpreted based on the following criteria: 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.

### **3. Results**

It was found that journal writing with peer feedback significantly improved the subjects' overall writing ability. From a total score of 300, the subjects' total post-test mean score was 223.64 (S.D. = 34.54), which was significantly higher than their total pre-test mean score: 156.9 (S.D. = 46.28). The score of improvement was 66.72 ( $t = -10.752$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

The subjects' attitudes toward journal writing and peer feedback were reported in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

Table 1. Subjects' Attitudes toward Journal Writing

Statement	Mean	S.D.	Level of Agreement
1. I enjoy writing journals.	3.76	.88	Agree
2. I like journal writing because I can decide my own writing topic.	3.76	1.01	Agree
3. I like journal writing because I could share it with my partner.	3.88	.97	Agree

4. Journal writing is useful to me.	4.52	.68	Strongly agree
5. Journal writing makes English writing more meaningful and fun.	3.86	.90	Agree
6. Journal writing promotes my English writing attitude.	4.05	.70	Agree
7. Journal writing enhances my English writing ability.	4.39	.67	Strongly agree
8. I feel more confident to express my ideas in English writing through journal writing.	3.83	.82	Agree
9. Journal writing through peer feedback improves English writing through collaborative learning.	3.95	1.03	Agree
10. I view things in a more in-depth way through journal writing.	3.74	.77	Agree
11. Journal writing should be an activity in all writing courses.	4.02	.98	Agree
12. I will keep on writing journals in the future.	3.95	1.06	Agree
*13. Journal writing is a burden for me.	2.64	1.08	Neutral
*14. Journal writing does not improve my English writing ability.	1.43	.59	Strongly disagree
*15. Practicing journal writing is a waste of time.	1.26	.50	Strongly disagree
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.54</b>	<b>.84</b>	<b>Agree</b>

\* Negative value is adjusted.

In Table 1, the ranges of the subjects' mean scores were between 1.26 and 4.52. The average mean score of their overall attitudes was 3.54, indicating an agreement on journal writing. Particularly, the subjects highlighted the usefulness of this activity, especially in terms of improving their English writing ability as the strongly agreement of their responses to item 4 (mean = 4.52) and item 7 (mean = 4.39).

In addition, the subjects agreed with the following statements, acknowledging the benefits of journal writing. That is, the utility of journal writing in the English writing class was a meaningful and fun activity as well as it made them view things in a more in-depth way (item 5, mean = 3.86; item 10, mean = 3.74). Through a self-selected topic journal writing and journal exchange, they enjoyed the activity and their confidence in self-expression in English

increased (item 1, mean = 3.76; item 2, mean = 3.76; item 3, mean = 3.88; item 8, mean = 3.83). The value of the activity in terms of promoting positive attitudes towards English writing and improving English writing via collaborative learning was also confirmed (item 6, mean = 4.05; item 9, mean = 3.95). Therefore, journal writing was suggested by the subjects as an activity in all writing courses and they would keep doing it in the future (item 11, mean = 4.02; item 12, mean = 3.95).

Interestingly, the subjects' perception of journal writing as a burden was reported as neutral (item 13, mean = 2.64). All in all, their strong disagreement on the negative statements toward journal writing practice, item 14, mean = 1.43, item 15, mean = 1.26, reinforced its usefulness and their positive attitudes toward the activity.

Table 2. Subjects' Attitudes toward Peer Feedback

Statement	Mean	S.D.	Level of Agreement
1. I enjoy reading my partner's journal entries.	4.26	.94	Strongly agree
2. I enjoy giving feedback on my partner's journal entries.	3.67	.87	Agree
3. I enjoy reading peer feedback on my journal entries.	4.17	.82	Agree
4. It is more fun to write a journal for someone to read than not to be read.	4.02	.98	Agree
5. Peer feedback task is useful in journal writing.	3.88	.95	Agree
6. My partner is able to give me useful feedback on my journal entries.	3.60	1.08	Agree
7. I feel more relaxed to receive peer feedback than teacher feedback in journal writing.	3.60	1.13	Agree
8. I could learn more grammar points from peer feedback.	3.50	.89	Agree
9. I read and understand what my friend corrected and suggested.	4.15	.77	Agree
10. Peer feedback should be used as a strategy in promoting learners' English writing ability in English writing courses.	3.67	.90	Agree
*11. I feel uncomfortable for my partner to read and give feedback on my journal entries.	1.33	.57	Strongly disagree

*12. I find it difficult to give feedback on my partner's journal entries.	2.67	1.18	Neutral
13. I prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback in journal writing.	3.66	1.02	Agree
14. I think that my journal writing could be more improved through teacher feedback.	3.81	.94	Agree
15. I think I could learn more grammar points through teacher feedback in journal writing.	3.86	1.00	Agree
*16. I feel that teacher feedback brings negative attitude toward learning to write in English.	2.17	1.01	Disagree
<b>Average</b>	<b>3.50</b>	<b>.94</b>	<b>Agree</b>

\*Negative value is adjusted.

Table 2 shows the mean scores of the subjects' responses ranging from 1.33 to 4.26. The average mean score was 3.50, reflecting their positive attitudes toward peer feedback in general. Specifically, the subjects expressed their enjoyment in doing the activity as they strongly agreed that they enjoyed reading their partners' journal entries (item 1, mean = 4.26). In addition, the subjects also agreed with the following statements. They enjoyed both giving and reading feedback since it was more enjoyable to write the journal entries for someone to read than not to be read (item 2, mean = 3.67; item 3, mean = 4.17; item 4, mean = 4.02). They even perceived the value of an integration of peer feedback in journal writing because they received useful and understandable feedback from their partners, especially about grammar (item 5, mean = 3.88; item 6, mean = 3.60; item 9, mean = 4.15; item 8, mean = 3.50). Therefore, peer feedback was recommended as a strategy to help improve students' writing ability in English writing courses (item 10, mean = 3.67).

Although the subjects were more relaxed to receive peer feedback than teacher feedback in journal writing, teacher feedback was still considered as their preference and they disagreed that teacher feedback brought negative attitudes toward learning to write in English (item 7, mean = 3.60; item 13, mean = 3.66; item 16, mean = 2.17). This is because they realized that their journal writing could be more improved and they could learn more grammar through teacher feedback (item 14, mean = 3.81; item 15, mean = 3.86). The subjects even reported neutral agreement on their ability to give feedback on journal entries written by their partners (item 12, mean = 2.67). Nevertheless, the way the subjects strongly disagreed that they felt uncomfortable with peer feedback supported their overall positive attitudes toward the activity (item 11, mean = 1.33).

To sum up, all the subjects had positive attitudes towards journal writing and peer feedback. All of them perceived the values of journal writing with peer feedback. They showed great

interest and enjoyment in the activity. They believed that journal writing improved their overall writing ability in a collaborative atmosphere and they would keep on doing the activity in the future. Through journal writing, the subjects could view things in a more in-depth ways through the contents they wrote in their journal entries. Through peer feedback, they learned more grammar points to improve their own writing. No doubts, they agreed that journal writing with peer feedback could be one of the activities to promote learners' ability in English writing courses.

The findings of this study are in line with Liao and Wong's (2010), Tuan's (2010) as well as Wakabayashi's (2008) studies. Liao and Wong showed the improvement of learners' writing ability after the use of dialogue journal writing. Their subjects also showed positive attitudes toward dialogue journal writing. In Tuan's study, EFL learners' writing ability was enhanced with the use of journal writing. In Wakabayashi's study, which investigated the effects of peer feedback on EFL Japanese university students' writing, the subjects perceived the merit of peer feedback in improving their ability and reported a positive perception of peer feedback.

#### **4. Pedagogical Discussion**

An integration of journal writing with peer feedback in the EFL writing classroom promoted the subjects' positive attitudes toward the activity. They recognized the value of the activity; their writing ability improved through a self- and collaborative learning atmosphere. This spotlights the use of journal writing with peer feedback in the EFL writing classes as a writing-to-learn-about-writing activity. Through an eight-week experience in the activity, the positive perception of journal writing was shown in the present study; journal writing was regarded as a free-selected topic, meaningful, and fun writing activity. Moreover, it developed the subjects' confidence in expressing ideas in the target language, boosted their positive English writing attitudes, as well as enhanced their in-depth perception of the surroundings. Regarding peer feedback, peer feedback was positively recognized as a collaborative language learning and writing skill development activity, which made the best out of social interaction in the language classroom.

The subjects' responses to the questionnaire pedagogically shed light on some issues regarding the benefits of the utility of journal writing with peer feedback in the Thai EFL academic context, particularly at the secondary school level as described as follows.

##### **1. The role of creative writing in the academic setting**

Employed in the language classroom, journal writing brings the role of creative writing into the realm of the academic context. That is, academic writing should not be perceived as a single technique used to improve students' writing ability in the target language. Creative writing can also find its role in such a setting as well. With the use of creative writing, teaching writing is more meaningful and fun. Schneider (2009) emphasizes the importance of both academic writing and creative writing to help improve students' writing qualities. More importantly, creative writing positively promotes students' motivation toward writing.

##### **2. From a grammar class to a real writing class**

Teaching writing in Thailand is more or less teaching about the language or grammar rather than teaching students how to write in the target language. Hence, writing class is recognized as another grammar class for students to learn about the target language. Regarding this issue, Shih (1999) highlights the lack of communicative purposes in teaching English writing either as a second or foreign language in an Asian academic context. As a result, though students have gained quite a great amount of knowledge about the target language for a certain length of time, they cannot write in that language. This problem can be solved by the application of journal writing with peer feedback in the writing class. With the use of the activity, students can have a real experience in writing in the target language. Specifically, journal writing is “not merely as an exercise in writing for writing’s sake” as other writing exercises (Zhou & Siriyothin, 2009, p. 303). It is a real writing to be read and it is related to one’s own individual experience or background.

### 3. Writing to learn about writing

Through journal writing with peer feedback, students can learn how to write in the target language by having their real writing experience in that language. Although this experience is considered rather difficult for some students in the first place, particularly for those with low language proficiency, a great support from the teacher and their peers as facilitators could help them overcome such a problem. For instance, students can gain the benefits of the integration of peer feedback in this writing activity and become aware of their writing problems for further improvement. For the start, the teacher should provide them with some writing topics or writing prompts in a fading-process to ease the students who have had no experience in this activity. After that, the students will learn to write on any topics of interest as the expertise reversal effects of journal writing found in the study of Nückles, Hübner, Dümer, and Renkl (2010) that, as the students became more skilled at journal writing, its prompts were getting less important; so it should be done in a fading-process.

### 4. A bridge between writing skill improvement and language knowledge development

Students’ knowledge about the target language can be assessed via journal writing with peer feedback. What students have already known and mastered as well as what they cannot can be reflected in their writing and feedback on their journal entries. Furthermore, their language knowledge developed through the activity can be recognized. This means we can see how students apply what they have known or mastered (language knowledge) to express themselves through their writing skill to improve their writing ability. In so doing, a bridge between their writing skill improvement and language knowledge development emerges along the way they are engaged in the activity.

### 5. Traditional/ Teacher-centred setting

In spite of their positive attitudes toward journal writing with peer feedback, an activity which relied on their own language learning and skill development, the subjects in the present study reported a preference for teacher feedback, a traditional or teacher-centred setting, to peer feedback. This commonly happens in the Asian academic context as described in the studies of Tsui and Ng (2000), Alavi and Kaivanpanah (2007), and particularly in Puakprom’s

(2010) study that the students preferred teacher feedback to peer feedback. However, they showed positive attitudes toward peer feedback because they recognized its benefits for their language learning and skill development. That is, even if the subjects were staunch supporters to teacher-centred setting, their mind opened to the new technique: journal writing with peer feedback in their classroom. This possibly displays a shift from the traditional approach to the student-centred approach in the EFL Asian academic context and it possibly means a great cooperation from both teachers and students.

#### 6. Cultivating Western concepts of language learning in an Asian academic context

The use of peer feedback in journal writing brings collaborative language learning and students-centred learning into the spotlight of the writing class. Through peer feedback in journal writing, the main role of language learning and skill development was thrown on students. In so doing, students themselves learnt about the language and developed their own language skill via peer feedback in a collaborative learning atmosphere. Their positive attitudes toward the activity, therefore, paved the way for cultivating and developing the Western concepts of language learning: collaborative language learning and students-centred learning in the Asian academic context, particularly in the EFL context. However, an adoption of the Western concepts of language learning to help improve students' language and skill mastery should be done properly with a well-planned orientation and instruction.

#### 7. A question of one's own ability to do the activity

In the present study, the subjects' positive attitudes toward journal writing with peer feedback came together with the question of their own ability to do the activity. This could possibly be assumed that it was the first time for them to have an experience in this type of writing activity, which relied on their own language ability and responsibility for language and skill development. As dependent learners, who formerly relied on the teacher in the traditional setting of language learning, students, undoubtedly, felt unconfident of being independent learners in doing the activity. Therefore, it probably requires a longer period of time to make them familiar with the activity and realize their own potential to do the activity.

### 5. Conclusion

An integration of journal writing with peer feedback in the EFL writing classroom is a springboard to cultivate the new concepts of learning to write in the target language; that is, collaborative language learning and skill development as well as students-centred learning. In addition, the role of creative writing is brought into the language classrooms to help teach writing in English. More importantly, the students' positive attitudes toward both journal writing and peer feedback pedagogically signal greater movement from learning about language in a passive way to learning how to write in the target language in a more active way under a collaborative atmosphere. The shift to communicative purposes in teaching writing, therefore, emerges.

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