L2 Learner's-Instructor's Win-Win Tactics through Alternative Assessment of Writing

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Abstract

The utilization of alternative assessment with English-language achievement and proficiency tests in Thai higher education has been few and far between. This study aimed at examining English-language writing skill development, particularly in fluency of written content and ideas, of L2 learners from a Thai university. To comprehend the tacit knowledge of English of the voluntary 1st-year undergraduate Thai learners who had difficulties in producing ideas in English language writing, the study utilized an alternative assessment of writing in the form of dialogue journals. Based on the authenticity as an outstanding feature of dialogue journals, the qualitative results supporting the quantitative ones, in the triangulated study, are derived from the content analysis of journal entries and interview responses. The results revealed some L2 learning strategies and implicit learning stages of the learners and their views of the use of dialogue journals. Discussion and implications for ways to utilize alternative assessment to enhance L2 learners' English language writing skills are provided for L2 learning and teaching communities.

Keywords: *Alternative Assessment, Writing, Dialogue Journals, Thailand*

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กลวิธีที่เป็นประโยชน์ต่อผู้เรียน-ผู้สอนภาษาที่สอง
โดยการวัดและการประเมินผลทางเลือกทางการเขียน

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บทคัดย่อ

ในระบบการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทย ยังไม่มีการนำเครื่องมือการวัดและ
ประเมินผลตามสภาพจริงมาใช้ร่วมกับการวัดและประเมินผลจากแบบทดสอบวัดความสามารถ
และความสัมฤทธิ์ทางการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเท่าที่ควร งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาการพัฒนาทักษะทาง
การเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ โดยเฉพาะในด้านความคล่องทางการคิดและถ่ายทอดเนื้อหาผ่าน
ทางทักษะการเขียนของผู้เรียนภาษาที่สองจากมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศไทย เพื่อให้เข้าใจ
ถึงการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษซึ่งเป็นกระบวนการที่ยากจะมองเห็นได้ชัดเจนจากภายนอกของ
กลุ่มผู้เรียนไทยที่ติดปัญหาในด้านการถ่ายทอดและการคิดเนื้อหาในงานเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ
งานวิจัยนี้จึงใช้การประเมินผลตามสภาพจริงทางด้านทักษะการเขียนโดยใช้การเขียนบันทึก
แบบการสนทนากับกลุ่มผู้เรียนอาสาสมัครชาวไทยระดับปริญญาบัณฑิตชั้นปีที่ 1 เพื่อใช้สนับสนุน
ผลวิจัยเชิงปริมาณ ผลการวิจัยเชิงคุณลักษณะในการศึกษานี้ได้รับจากการวิเคราะห์ทางเนื้อหา
งานเขียนในสมุดบันทึกแบบการสนทนาและในบทสัมภาษณ์ของผู้เรียน ผลวิจัยเชิงคุณลักษณะ
แสดงให้เห็นถึง กลยุทธ์ทางการเรียนรู้ภาษาที่สอง ช่วงระยะกระบวนการการเรียนรู้ที่ยากจะ
มองเห็นได้ชัดเจนจากภายนอกของผู้เรียน และมุมมองของผู้เรียนที่มีต่อการใช้การเขียนบันทึก
แบบการสนทนา สำหรับกลุ่มประชาคมการเรียนการสอนภาษาที่สอง ผลการวิจัยที่พบจากการ
ศึกษานี้ได้อภิปรายไว้พร้อมกับการเชื่อมโยงวิธีการนำการวัดและการประเมินผลตามสภาพจริง
ไปใช้ให้เกิดประโยชน์ในการทำให้ทักษะทางการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียนนั้นดีขึ้น

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Introduction

Great emphasis has been placed on the attainment of English language proficiency as a yardstick for monitoring the quality of English language education in several non-native English speaking countries (Wongsothorn et al., 2002; Ministry of Education, 2012). Like in Thailand, the significance of proficiency in English is stated in a chapter of the Educational Reform Act 2002 that Thai learners should have English literacy and be able to communicate in English as a part of the eligible world citizens. Under instruction in the four communicative English skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing has been considered the most complex skill in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) acquisitions (Krashen, 1984; Nunan, 1990; Makalela, 2004). However, one of the existing problems that needed to be urgently solved was the inadequate proficiency in English-language writing of Thai learners (Wongsothorn et al., 2002; Bhangananda, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2012). In order to support learners' L2 acquisitions, teaching and assessing L2 writing become indispensable in ESL and EFL classroom teaching and education. This is because the learners' L2 writing ability is regarded as a predictor of their future academic and professional success (Weigle, 2002).

Alternative Assessment of L2 Writing

A shift of more communicative language learning and instruction has simultaneously occurred with the changing trend on forms of language assessment in ESL and EFL contexts. The trend of traditional forms of assessment (e.g. quizzes or exams) is transitioned towards alternative forms of assessment. Alternative assessment has been more voiced as a result of the limitations of traditional assessment: time limitations of unfamiliar writing topics in tests and no universal writing tests covering all writing genres and measuring L2 learners' actual ability to write (Weigle, 2002). To transcend such limitations, the alternative assessment offers realistic and dynamic measurement for the learners to be aware of their linguistic development and learning processes (Burton & Carroll, 2001; Richards & Renandya, 2003).

The changing trend between the traditional and the alternative forms of assessment brings about the shift of L2 teaching and learning assessment as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: A Comparison between Traditional and Alternative Forms of Assessment

Traditional Assessment	Alternative Assessment
▪ Focus on language	▪ Focus on communication
▪ Teacher-centered	▪ Learner-centered
▪ Isolated skills	▪ Integrated skills
▪ Emphasis on product	▪ Emphasis on process
▪ One answer, one-way correctness	▪ Open-ended, multiple solutions
▪ Tests that test	▪ Tests that also teach

Adapted from Richards & Renandya (2003: 335)

Alternative assessment can be considered the best of all types of assessment since it provides the measuring tools which are closely linked with authentic learning phenomena of students (Kirk & Miller, 1986). The alternative forms of assessment help provide teachers with more authentic forms of assessment like journals, self-reflection, learning portfolios and logs to evaluate their students' learning involvement and independence (Richards & Renandya, 2003). Furthermore, alternative assessment can be a research resource for critical language assessment (Shohamy, 2001b). Reichmann (2001) also pointed out the use of dialogue journals as an alternative assessment for critical discourse analysis in language learners' writing. Although the issues of validity, reliability and objectivity of the authentic assessment are debatable, an issue of objectivity of standardized tests is still challenging. Human factors are, however, inevitable in the processes of standardized test and test rubric design.

In Thailand, according to the National Educational Act 1999, alternative forms of assessment needed to be utilized in classroom English language instruction since teachers can do their evaluation of their learners' language learning and ability while teaching. On the other hand, summative assessment or traditional testing at some specific time in English language courses by the use of such tools as quizzes and standardized tests or exams cannot thoroughly measure L2 learners' actual language learning and ability. Alternative assessment is also known as authentic assessment since learners are assessed when they are involved in real-life learning activities (Wongwanich, 2003). Teachers need to design or utilize the measuring tools of authentic assessment in relation to what their learners are going to learn and

be tested on. The tools should additionally facilitate the teachers' testing and motivate their teaching as the form of teacher professional development (Hamp-Lyons, 2008).

Dialogue Journals and Writing Skills

Communicative English language learning and instruction promotes interactive language learning and teaching through authentic communicative activities. Journal writing represents the authenticity of communicative writing activities for learners. The term authenticity covers the meaningful connections between classroom learning and real-life learning (Edelsky, 1993: 548-549).

Many of the ESL and EFL studies attest to the fact that journals are utilized as a classroom learning tool. It is suggested that a useful learning tool should be reflective of learning through writing or a record of how students perceive their own learning (Freeman, 1998; Marefat, 2002; Brown, 2004). Given the importance of in-depth reflection, journals are categorized as one of the important introspective tools in a language classroom research. This means that journals signify the process of observing and reflecting on students' thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states that influence the students' behaviors (Nunan, 1990: 231).

In terms of writing skill development, Burton & Carroll (2001: 4-5) assert that writing journals can be frequently used to lessen a deficiency of English language writing skills. Oshima & Hogue (2007: 181-183) point out that a journal writing activity helps L2 students generate as many ideas as possible for acquiring writing fluency. Journal writing practice promotes L2 students' writing fluency and communicative ideas (Trites, 2001; Marefat, 2002; Brown, 2004; Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). In an ESL study by Trites (2001) with the U.S. advanced graduate students from different levels of English ability and from diverse disciplines, students' journals were graded for content, not grammar. In the journal content, the students' class progress and their writing abilities and difficulties were evaluated. The issue of fluency-based journal writing is also advocated by Marefat's (2002) study with 80 Iranian EFL students' dialogue journal entries telling the students' areas of interests and helping improve students' writing.

Dialogue journals achieve important pedagogical purposes: practice in the mechanics of writing, using writing as a 'thinking' process, and communication-like dialogue with the teacher (Vygotsky, 1978; Brown, 2004: 261). With such nature of 'dialogue' per se, dialogue journals are also equipped with a key feature of critical language testing (Shohamy, 2001b: 376-377). Carroll & Mchawala (2001) conducted a study with the groups of the foreign students who were studying in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses in Australian universities. They found that dialogue journals were primarily focused on students' reflective ideas on content prior to language accuracy and also used to promote the students' motivation to write in English. Additionally, the journals serve as an interactive tool to bridge the gap between student-teacher written conversation and the classroom tasks of essay (Marefat, 2002: 118; Vickers & Ene, 2006). Quirke (2001: 6) asserts the inclusion of dialogue journals to develop students' language learning and stimulate students' and teacher's collaboration and reflection.

The Study

1. Context and Purposes

This study was conducted in a University in Thailand. In most of the university bachelor's degree English language curricula, first-year Thai university students are generally required to complete compulsory English courses prior to taking further English language courses for academic purposes. In a conventional Thai academic context, a compulsory English class normally contains undergraduates of some homogeneous aspects in terms of year of study and/or academic discipline.

In Thailand's tertiary education, alternative forms of writing assessment have not been utilized much to measure L2 learners' writing skills in classroom-based writing pedagogy as expected. Alternative assessment through the use of dialogue journals was used, in the study, to assist Thai undergraduate university learners, who had difficulties in producing their writing ideas in English, to be able to achieve writing fluency required in a fundamental English language curriculum.

The study aimed at investigating the writing fluency and the opinions about English language learning after practicing dialogue journal writing of the learners who had difficulties in producing their writing ideas in English.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

This study employed dialogue journals in an English language writing class in the year 2011. The participants were twenty-seven Thai first-year university undergraduate students from the faculty of Science. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary. They were further asked to sign in a consent form for the provision of their own personal details in dialogue journals, writing test scores, and interview responses. All twenty-seven voluntary participants were assigned to attend a journal writing workshop prepared for training the participants in how to write dialogue journals.

However, in this paper, only seven of them who had difficulties in producing ideas in their writing tasks and whose scores of writing content in the pre-test were low were selected as volunteers following the dictum of purposive sampling.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The research instruments used to collect data for this triangulated study (Creswell, 2003) were the participants' writing pre- and post-test scores, dialogue journal entries, and an interview. The data from the scores of the writing pre- and post-test and of the second section of the dialogue journals were quantitatively analysed using the writing rubrics (i.e. content, organization, and grammar) of the course. Since the ability to produce writing ideas is principally focused in this paper, the participants' writing improvement is measured by the increasing scores of the writing content from a writing topic to another writing topic (Table 2). In addition, the data from the first section of the journal entries and the interview were qualitatively assessed through content analysis (Sections 3.1a and 3.2).

Before starting the ten-week writing workshop, the writing pre-test was administered to the participants. Since the participants did not have any experience on writing dialogue journals, a teacher spent extra time on explaining how dialogue journals worked to the participants. Then, the participants were assigned to write dialogue journals on a writing-class basis. They needed to write in their dialogue

journals at the end of each class session. In the total ten sessions, the participants wrote in two sections: their own reflections on their English language learning and teaching in class and their expressing-opinion writing in accordance with three assigned writing topics— "*Should Students be Paid for Good Grades?*", "*Teenagers and Brand-Name Products*", and "*Should Parents Stop their Children from Using the Internet?*" The participants experienced writing in the three topics, all of which required writers to add one more idea of their own in addition to the given two sources of information relevant to the writing topics in the writing task.

In the writing treatment, after the participants submitted their dialogue journals, the teacher wrote them back in the way of discussing and giving comments and/or suggestions. The teacher made comments in the first section of the journal and provided her written feedback on the participants' writing in the second section of the journal. In the second section of the journal, the participants' writing was assessed in terms of three writing rubrics—content, organization, and grammar. The writing process was done when the participants submitted their revision after reviewing the teacher written feedback.

After completing the writing workshop, the writing post-test was administered to the participants. A week later, a focus group interview was given to the seven selected participants for insightful qualitative data.

3. Results and Discussion

In this mixed-method study, the quantitative results were in Section 3.1 b) and the qualitative ones in Sections 3.1 a) and 3.2.

3.1 Dialogue Journals

a) Section One: Self-Reflection

Referring to the content analysis of the participants' dialogue journal entries in the first section, with the theme: *What did you learn from our writing workshop? And how did you feel about the workshop?*, all participants shared their favourable views. They suggested that the teacher's dialogue journals provided them with opportunities to practice their writing and this helped improve their writing

skills. The participants also revealed their hidden aspects that may rarely appear in normal standardized tests. The unspoken aspects cover the participants' self-monitoring and their satisfaction with the development of their language fluency after their teacher's comments in both sections of the dialogue journals. To illustrate, participant S2 reported:

> Although I haven't been satisfied with my grammatical accuracy because
> I still made errors in word spelling and others... a kind of my carelessness,
> I am satisfied with my ability to produce more writing ideas after
> corresponding with my teacher's comments and rewriting my journals.

Despite having some of their grammatical problems in writing, the participants admitted that they felt more confident to write and found that they could produce more writing ideas in English. The journal excerpts also revealed some of the participants' memory strategies for writing fluency – that is, mind-mapping outlining, abbreviations, and some useful codes (Oxford, 1990: 39). The participant S5, whose favorite subjects were mathematics and science, described his feelings about the writing workshop through his mind-mapped drawing instead of narrating his feelings in sentences. The dialogue journal of the participant S6 also pointed out the participant's memory strategy employed in the form of a scientific code, 'H2O' instead of a simply written word 'water'. As categorized in Oxford (1990), when a language learner could create mental linkages by placing new words into a writing context, and/or apply images to keywords in writing, the learner adopted memory strategies in his or her writing.

b) Section Two: Ability to Express an Opinion

In addition to the seven participants' increasing post-test scores, the quantitative analysis of their average writing scores in terms of content in three writing tasks indicated upward trends as represented in Figure 1.
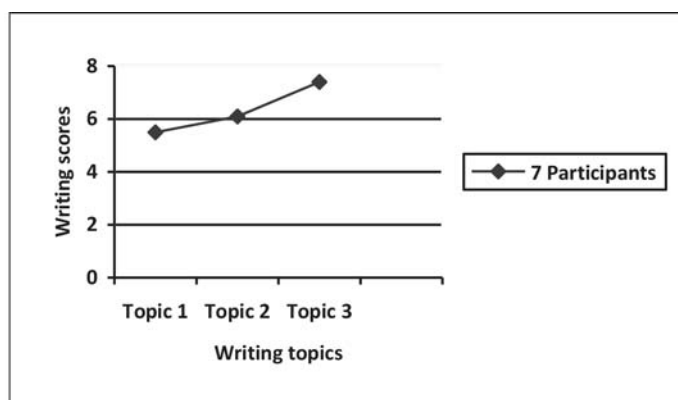
Figure 1: Average Content Score Trend of Seven Participants

From Figure 1, the line graph can be interpreted into the average writing scores in terms of content of the seven participants as in Table 2.

Table 2: Average Content Scores of Seven Participants from Three Writing Topics

| Participants | Dialogue Journals: Average Score of Content (10) | | | | | |
	Writing Topic 1	Writing Topic 2	Development (From Topics 1 to 2)	Writing Topic 2	Writing Topic 3	Development (From Topics 2 to 3)
Science students (n = 7)	5.5	6.1	(+ 0.6)	6.1	7.4	(+ 1.3)

In Table 2, the results show that there were the increasing movements in the participants' writing content scores. The mean scores of content from writing topic 1 to 3 of the seven participants were 5.5, 6.1, and 7.4. The upward trend represents the development sequence in the participants' writing content in dialogue journals. This developmental writing sequence could enhance language acquisition (Dam & Legenhausen 1999: 90).

Based on the quantitative results of the study, the skill of writing in terms of writing fluency of the participants was developed after they had practiced writing the journals. The participants who wrote the journals needed to try out with words, sentences and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively.

3.2 Interview

As found in the study of Genesee & Upshur (1996), students' dialogue journals were an interactive written communication between the students and teachers, and a means for students' self-evaluation in language learning. In the present study, the participants revealed their additional views on the use of dialogue journals through their interview responses, in which all of them found dialogue journals in the teacher's writing workshop to be beneficial to their writing development. The majority of them (five out of seven) revealed that they were disappointed by the limitation of the writing workshop's duration. They believed that if the writing practice time had been extended, their writing skills would have been developed much further. These interview responses could signify the participants' awareness of their language learning.

Due to the dialogue-like nature of the journals, all of the participants agreed that the use of dialogue journals was considered a bridge between them and their teacher to be able to communicate in a nonthreatening environment (Trites, 2001: 59). As a part of dialogue journal features, an interactively written communication between students and teachers can be done through written dialogues or responses (Brown, op.cit.), thereby creating a mutual relationship between students and teacher (Staton, 1987; Shohamy, 2001b). As Trites (2001) stated, a good student-teacher relationship could bring about the situation of autonomous learning.

Self-reflection is a mode of acquisition leading to autonomous learning (Dam & Legenhausen, 1999; Marefat, 2002; Vickers & Ene, 2006). A prerequisite for independent learning is that students have to be aware of how they learn (i.e. reflection on their strengths and weaknesses and progress in various linguistic skills). Examples of the participants' excerpts are:

- After I tried to understand my teacher's feedback and had chances to talk to her, I turned to more understand and be cautious about my writing errors than before.
- ... In the process of rewriting, I had checked the accuracy with grammatical books and rewrote before submitting the revision.

3.3 Learners to Instructors: Writing fluency to Professional Development

With regard to L2 writing pedagogy, this study was designed to provide L2 learners' opportunities to reflect on their L2 learning by writing dialogue journals in English. Through the use of dialogue journals for alternative assessment, a good rapport between learners and an instructor was established during the writing workshop. This could lead to the learners' language learning awareness and finally their autonomous learning. In addition to an increasing chance of the learners' writing practice, the qualitative results of this study through dialogue journal entries and interview responses revealed that the learners were quite satisfied with this choice of alternative assessment in that the learners did not feel that they were assessed or tested. Due to this, the levels of their anxiety were low, thereby increasing their opportunities to willingly learn and write in English confidently. The content analyses of the dialogue journal entries and interview responses also provide the teacher with some insights into her learners' learning strategies and their implicit learning stages of L2 writing fluency development. More importantly, the qualitative results on the learners' interview responses, which they could produce writing ideas and write more fluently, can confirm the validity and reliability of the quantitative results on the increasing average scores of the writing tasks and the post test.

However, the utilization of alternative assessment should be realistic and relevant to learners' learning situations and contexts. It should be also adaptable and applicable to the learners' interest and skill development. Using dialogue journals at the beginning of L2 classes is suggested since a teacher can initially perceive learners' L2 learning and learning strategies. In the learners' journals, what and how the learners have learnt including the strategies employed when they learnt are reported. These can at least guide the teacher to choose, design and/or re-design learning activities relevant to the learners' learning strategies. The learners will find the selected learning activities meaningful and thereby learning L2 actively and better when the activities match their favourable strategies.

The effectiveness in using alternative forms of assessment could produce a win-win situation for L2 learners and teachers. Learners can gain L2 writing fluency and language learning awareness through their journal writing process.

Simultaneously, teachers are able to reflect on their L2 teaching through learners' voices in the journals. Teachers can also gain professional development through updating teaching strategies to suit learners' learning needs.

3.4 Directions to Assessment: Validity and Reliability

Referring to the results of this study, the adoption of triangulation is suggested in coming up with sensible research design. Through alternative assessment, the qualitative results of the study could empower teachers to understand and realize their L2 learners' developmental language learning and those aspects that are hard to find out in quantitative results. Simultaneously, these qualitative results obtained from dialogue journals could in turn imply how well teachers' instruction can be applied in classroom activities. More importantly, those qualitative results could take a further complementary role to ensure a more accurate spectrum of L2 learners' writing skill profiles.

To be more flexible and dynamic in L2 writing instruction, it was suggested to implement more various forms of authentic assessment or mix and match those forms of the authentic assessment with quantitative studies. In this study, in addition to dialogue journals, other forms of alternative assessment – learners' logs or writing portfolios are also suggested to be used in classroom instruction as appropriate. The qualitative data gathered from these authentic tools can re-confirm the quantitative results and subsequently the validity and reliability of research studies. Providing more varied tools of the authentic assessment can be relevantly included in quantitative studies of research work, the credibility of which will be without doubt.

4. Conclusion and Implications

Analysing students' L2 learning is a complex and dynamic process. Only the use of summative assessment in the form of testing scores from quizzes or exams may lead to generalizations about the students' levels of L2 competence. To avoid biasing data interpretation of the students' competence, teachers need to design or make use of the measuring tools of alternative or authentic assessment in relation to what students are assessed when they are involved in real-life learning activities. Apparently, writing in dialogue journals is believed to enhance students' thinking

and L2 learning processes.

This study was conducted based on the issue of L2 or non-native English speaking students' difficulties in English-language writing skills, particularly in writing fluency of ideas. Although the use of dialogue journals to enhance students' writing skills has been widely spread in native English speaking countries, most non-native English speaking learners are relatively unfamiliar with such use. However, the application of dialogue journals as one of the formative assessments is proposed in a writing course. Through the introduction of dialogue journals, teachers are able to know their students' language learning and writing ability more. The students can simultaneously reflect on their own language learning and writing process. Teachers and students can fulfill their language teaching and learning commitment respectively.

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