

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



This chapter provides an overview of the study, including the background of the study, the research purposes, research questions, statement of the hypotheses, scope of the study, assumptions, definition of terms, and significance of the study.

1.1 Background or Rationale of the Study

1.1.1 Statement of the Problem

At King Mongkut's Institute of Technology North Bangkok (KMITNB), writing is a language skill most students have problems with. Though they had taken two foundation courses and studied English for at least nine years, they still have significant communicative problems in their English writing such as inappropriate language use, incomprehensible message and unorganized text. The evidence from the results of a small-scale study conducted by the researcher can clearly confirm this claim (Raveewan, 2005).

In the mentioned study, 30 heterogeneous ability engineering students' previous writing productions and the test scores in Writing I course were analyzed. According to the descriptive analysis of the scores by using SPSS, it was found that the mean score was only 15.99 from the total score of 30 (S.D. = 6.87 and C.V. = 42.96%). The highest score was 28.64 while the lowest score was 3.23. Moreover, the results showed that some students could not perform the direct writing task such as describing a picture. In addition, the informal interview with the writing instructors revealed that the students often repeated the same kinds of writing errors mentioned above, and the students' writing achievement seems not yet satisfying to them.

This unfortunate situation has probably been caused by the constraints of our teaching and learning context itself, particularly the large class size, heavy teaching workload, and heterogeneous group of the students.

A large class size is one of the most inevitable constraints in the English classes at KMITNB. The evidence from the registrar website, academic year 2005, showed that there were 9 to 65 students enrolling in the English courses; the majority or 60 percent of

the courses were composed of 50 students, while the average number of students in Writing I course was 30 to 45 per section. As a result, it is difficult and impractical to fully implement only teacher feedback into writing classes since teachers might not have sufficient time to give comprehensive and immediate feedback both on surface-level features and text-level features to all of the students. Research on teaching and writing reveals that as class sizes increase, it could cause the students to do less writing, less reading, less critical thinking, and less time for interaction (Melzer, 2004). This claim is supported by Stasz and Stecher's study (1996) investigating the effect of teaching mathematics and language in reduced size to the maximum of 20 students and non-reduced size classrooms on teaching practice, and the finding revealed that although teaching practices in both classes were quite similar, the analysis identified a few important differences. Teachers in reduced size classes spent more time for interaction and discussion to students individually. In relation to the present study, it could imply that constraints resulting from the number of students in each class would affect the effectiveness of teacher feedback provision in a writing course.

Moreover, each English language instructor basically has to take responsibility for at least four classes or 12 credits a semester regardless of other additional workloads. In fact, a teacher has to take charge of 6 sections (18 credits) in the first semester because of the high demand of English courses as well as a great number of students. No doubt, the consequences of large class size and heavy teaching workload of the instructors lead to low attention given to the individual, low interaction, poor and insufficient teacher feedback on student's work and lack of feedback from students (Todd, 2003; Tangsajjanuraks, 2004). As a result, it is advisable that teachers should transfer the responsibility to students, that is, let students get involved in their learning as much as possible and help them develop learner autonomy (Todd, 2003).

Additionally, the language classrooms at KMITNB are heterogeneous in nature, and this claim can be confirmed by the value of Coefficient of Variation (C.V). The greater variation or the larger C.V. means the less homogenous of the data. From the small scaled research (Raveewan, 2005), the C.V. was 42.96% indicating that there were 42.96 % of variation of the students who had significantly different mean and standard deviation values (Wikipedia, 2007). It could imply that the students in the Writing I course had different levels of writing ability. As a result, it could not be denied that the

teachers have to deal with mixed English ability students in a regular English class large in size. This situation is even harder for the teachers to handle because they will not have enough time to pay individual attention to the low proficiency students. In contrast, the high proficiency students may get bored with the slow instructions, and insufficient interaction with the teachers.

Hyland (2003) suggested that all writers are different, and we should be cautious about jumping to conclusions about students. Especially, one of the learner variables that should be taken into consideration in language teaching is a proficiency level of students because a teaching approach cannot be the same for everyone (Brown, 2001). Evidently, it is central to writing instruction that writers make progress as a direct result of the instruction they receive (Archibald, 2004).

However, a great deal of research reveals that students with high English proficiency level achieve a higher level of learning achievement than those with low English proficiency level no matter whether they learn in a traditional mode, by computer-assisted instruction, by computer assisted language learning or WBI (Sukamolson, 1998; 1998-1999; Chollatarm 1987). Therefore, it is interesting to study whether different types of peer feedback used in the research help improve writing ability of all proficiency level students.

All in all, due to the unsatisfactory writing achievement of the students, repeated writing problems and the constraints of teaching and learning context at KMITNB, it seems that the process - based approach using only the teacher feedback, which is currently applied in the Writing I course, cannot lessen such problematic phenomena.

One way to increase the students' writing achievement and overcome the teaching and learning context confinements is to shift the teacher centered approach to student centered perspective in which peer feedback pedagogy has a major role to play in the writing instructions (Chinnawongs, 2001; Padgate, 2001; National Education Act, 2002; Chaisuriya, 2003; Kamimura, 2006). Although peer feedback is not fully subscribed to in some foreign language learning and teaching contexts particularly in Thailand, it is expected that this does not only bring changes to the ways Thai students write in English, but also provides a context for Thai EFL learners to socialize and work together with their peers in collaborative environment (Thongrin, 2002).

Furthermore, as the encouragement of the Thai Education policy that technology is a must and the institute's approval that enhances students expose to technology (National Report, 2004; KMITNB Plan, 2005), the integration of the computer technology in English writing instruction and peer feedback is worth a try to solve the problems.

1.1.2 The Importance of Peer Feedback in Teaching and Learning Circumstance

In order to help ESL/EFL students to achieve writing ability successfully, feedback is one of the most inevitably important tasks to encourage the development of students' writing (Hyland, 2003). Theoretically, feedback can be defined as input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision. In other words, it is comments, questions and suggestions a reader gives a writer to produce reader-based prose as opposed to writer-based prose. This supports Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* where skills are extended through guidance and response of others or *scaffolding*. Through feedback, the writer learns where he or she has misled or confused the reader by not supplying enough information, illogical organization, lack of development ideas, and inappropriate word choice or tense.

Generally, feedback can be divided in many aspects in accordance with who generates the feedback (teacher or peer), what the focus of feedback is (content or grammar), and how feedback is provided (written or oral, paper-pencil or the Internet). However, this study exclusively focused on the peer feedback, both content and grammar aspects given through different modes – paper pencil, e-mail and web board, since the growing trend of learner-centered approach and technology come into play in Thai Education.

According to Keh (1996), peer feedback is referred to by many names, for example, *peer response*, *peer editing*, *peer critiquing*, and *peer evaluation*. Each name has a focus on the feedback differently, for example, peer response may be in the process with a focus on content and peer editing nearing the final states of draft, with a focus on grammar. In this study, peer feedback refers to the feedback toward a person's essay writing given by peers in the first draft by using the peer feedback guidelines focusing on both content and grammar editing.

Generally, in peer response groups, students share their drafts with each other as the drafts are developing in order to get guidance and feedback on their writing. The students would use comments and suggestions from their peer to write the next draft. They may be free exchanges of reaction to a given student's writing or they may work with the peer-review guidelines. It is assumed or hoped that the guidance or feedback will result in improved compositions.

Interestingly enough, several benefits of peer feedback for students both cognitive and affective aspects are mentioned in many studies and its advantages cannot be found in teacher corrective feedback. First, it encourages active learner participation, authentic communicative context, alternative and authentic audiences (Hyland, 2003). Second, it helps develop students' critical and analytical skills and increase their ability to analyze their own draft critically, and this leads to learner independence (Keh, 1996; Celce-Murcia, 2001). Third, students can learn the language of, can use for, and can respond to texts from receiving peer feedback, so students would see similar problems and weaknesses in their own writing as well as use innovative and creative ideas to which they are exposed (Mangelsdorf, 1992; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994). It also offers nonjudgmental environment and reduces apprehension about writing (Hyland, 2003). Moreover, peer feedback not only benefits students but also writing instructors. The most outstanding advantage of peer feedback is to save the teachers' time. Due to the large class size and teachers' workload, it is not an easy task for teachers to give feedback to every piece of students' papers because it takes much time and effort to completion. However, if the teachers read and grade all the students' work, they will not have time to aid the poor students, and give prompt feedback to the students. This would lead to the students' negative attitudes toward writing class.

1.1.3 The Importance of Integrating Electronic Communication and Peer Feedback

Due to the great advantages of peer feedback in teaching and learning, this explains why the issue deserves attention in the study. However, the way to provide feedback is not only restricted to written comments or face-to-face communication. In order to increase the students' interaction and facilitate the peer feedback process, e-mail

and web board were introduced as new promising alternatives for giving feedback in this study.

To come up with the ideas of providing peer feedback via e-mail and web board, the reasons are endowed with the emergence of electronic communication which has been remarkable in the teaching of composition based on a number of claims. It was reported that there is no domination in a *Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)* environment when the students exchange feedback on their peers' paper. Instead the quality and efficiency of peer suggestions for revision increased in the electronic mode of communication (Sullivan and Pratt, 1996), and result in a greater volume of written output and an improvement in fluency (Bump, 1990; Paramskas, 1993) which are not typically evident in traditional oral feedback or in traditional written feedback.

Based on the previous research, e-mail can lead to more writing practice (Dimatteo, 1990 & 1991), facilitate peer response group (Mabrito, 1991), increase interaction among students especially who are highly anxious and reticent in the classroom (Hartman et al., 1991). Moreover, Mabrito (1991; 1992) found that that high-apprehensive writers contributed more equally to e-mail discussions, made more text-specific comments in e-mail discussions, offered more ideas for revision during e-mail discussions, were influenced more by group comments received during e-mail discussions and produced better papers after e-mail discussions than face-to face discussion in the classroom.

Although using e-mail in peer feedback thrives in the area of writing instruction, some difficulties cannot be successfully eradicated especially in most EFL context. Culture seems to be the significant problem in responding to peers' writing. According to Thongrin (2002), some Thai culture traits, in particular, *kreng jai*, face preservation and harmony maintenance, influence students' positive compliment-embedded response pattern. These cultural heritages also caused some students to consider peer feedback as useless, whereas others revealed that preferences for collective voices of peers' and integrated them into regular class writing. The results conform to Carson and Nelson's study in 1996. They stated that the kinds of behaviors that Chinese students would normally exhibit in groups are different from the behaviors that are frequently desired in writing groups. Although the students in this study perceived the goal of writing groups as criticizing each other's drafts, the Chinese students were reluctant to do so. It seems

that making negative comments on a peer's draft leads to division, not cohesion, in a group. For the most part, they were more concerned with the group's social dimension than with providing their peers with suggestions for essay improvement.

Therefore, in order to solve this problem, the characteristics of web board are considered as a potential tool to fulfill the gap. Web board is a web application which is provided for discussion, someone posts a message which is visible to everyone, visitors read it and then have the option to post a reply which will also be visible to everyone in the same group. Thus, a discussion can build up without all users having to be online at the same time, and it allows visitors to post anonymously. This would help the students be more honest in responding because the reviewers could criticize writers without having to confront the writers, and it can allow students to respond anonymously. So, the reviewers felt more comfortable stating their true thoughts (MacLeod, 1999) and this probably influences their writing ability in the end.

Due to the great benefits of integrating writing with innovation, it is promising that adopting technology in peer feedback process can enhance the students' writing ability as the ultimate goal. In this study, only asynchronous mode in particular e-mail and web board peer feedback, and traditional paper-pencil peer feedback were compared in order to investigate their effects on students' writing achievement especially in EFL writing context. Furthermore, the interaction effect of students' levels of general English proficiency (high, moderate, and low) and different types of peer feedback were in our main concern since levels of proficiency have a significant impact on writing in a second language. Finally, the attitudes of the students towards the peer feedback they experienced were investigated because these, unavoidably, brings about the success or failure of second language learning.

Four research questions were addressed in this study. *Null hypotheses were set in research questions 1 and 3 because the research reviewed have not yet provided a definite conclusion about which types of peer feedback are more effective in L2 writing, at times contradictory and no prior evidence of any studies has investigated the interaction effect of types of peer feedback and levels of general English proficiency before. On the other hand, a number of research shared the same conclusion that the different English proficiency has the effect on the students' learning achievement, so there is no doubt for the justification of the second research hypothesis set: the mean*

scores from the writing achievement test of students who have different levels of general English proficiency initially are significantly different at 0.05 level. Again, research findings on the students' attitudes toward peer feedback also vary, so it is interesting to explore their opinions toward the type of peer feedback they received.

Finally, based on the rationale of the study previously discussed, it is therefore worth time and effort to investigate the effects of types of peer feedback and levels of general English proficiency on writing achievement of KMITNB students.

1.2 Research Questions

1. Is there any significant effect among paper-pencil peer feedback, e-mail peer feedback and web board peer feedback on the students' writing achievement? If there is, what is its effect size?
2. Is there any significant effect of the students' levels of general English proficiency (high, moderate and low) on writing achievement? If there is, what is its effect size?
3. Is there any interaction effect between types of peer feedback and levels of general English proficiency on students' writing achievement? If there is, what is its effect size?
4. What are the students' attitudes toward the peer feedback they experience?

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To compare the effects of paper-pencil peer feedback, e-mail peer feedback and web board peer feedback on the students' writing achievement and to investigate their effect size.
2. To compare the effects of the levels of general English proficiency (high, moderate and low) on students' writing achievement and to investigate their effect size.
3. To investigate the interaction effect between the types of peer feedback and levels of general English proficiency on students' writing achievement and to investigate their effect size.
4. To survey the students' attitudes toward the peer feedback they experience.

1.4 Statements of Hypotheses

1. The mean scores from the writing achievement test of students receiving different types of peer feedback are not significantly different at 0.05 level.
2. The mean scores from the writing achievement test of students who have different levels of general English proficiency are significantly different at 0.05 level.
3. There is no interaction effect between types of feedback and levels of general English proficiency on students' writing achievement at 0.05 level.

1.5 Scope of the Study

1. The population of the study was undergraduate Engineering students who enrolled in Writing I course as an elective course at KMITNB the first semester in the academic year 2007.
2. There are two independent variables in this study, one is the types of peer feedback which are paper-pencil peer feedback, e-mail peer feedback and web board peer feedback, and another independent variable is levels of students' general English proficiency which can be grouped into high proficiency learners, moderate proficiency learners and low proficiency learners.
3. A student's writing achievement is considered as dependent variable in this study.
4. This study focused only on the writing skills and written feedback from peers via paper-pencil, e-mail and web board. Other types of Computer Mediated Communication such as chat programs, MOOs, and listserves software were not included.
5. Four writing tasks which were focused in the writing course were narrating an event, describing a process, listing characteristics of a person or thing, and giving reasons and examples.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

1. The main limitation of this study is that the teacher cannot be excluded totally during the students' revision stage, but the levels of consistency in providing teacher feedback on the students' second drafts were maximally maintained in all the three groups. Therefore, the students gave and received peer feedback on the first drafts, and they had to revise them before submitting the second drafts to the teacher. Note

that the students' first drafts and second drafts were in the primary concern for data collection and analysis.

2. Sample size was another possible limitation of the study. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sufficient sample size with the reliability of 95% and errors not more than 5%, out of 150 as the number of population should be about 108, but the subject of this study was 90. However, it is considered sufficient as the minimum of 30 individuals per group is recommended in the experimental study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000).

1.7 Assumptions of the Study

1. It is assumed that the students in the e-mail peer feedback group and the students in the web board peer feedback group have similar and sufficient knowledge and skills on computer literacy particularly in using the Internet browser and e-mail because a computer application course is required in their first year.
2. In this study, other factors which may influence the writing achievement of students such as age, gender, and economic status are not included in this study because the students share those characteristics. Most of them are second year engineering students whose ages are about 20 in average, and both male and female students generally attend this course. Although the number of males is more than that of females, they were carefully equated in the experiment. Moreover, the students have similar educational background and are interested in engineering.
3. It is assumed that all the subjects are willing to participate in this study, and they do their best in completing the tests, answering every questionnaire item, learning log and interview cooperatively and truthfully since 10% are assigned for attendance and participation and 80% of learning is required if they would like to pass the course.

1.8 Definitions of Terms

1. **Peer feedback** refers to the feedback toward a person's essay writing given by peers in the first draft by using the peer feedback guidelines focusing on both content and grammar editing. The feedback would be comments, suggestions, critiques, and error corrections. As a result, the student would use these feedbacks from their peers to write the next draft.

2. **Types of peer feedback** refer to the feedback given by peers in a first draft and contributed by the teacher in a second draft with 3 different conditions – paper-pencil, e-mail and web board during the first drafts of each essay topic.
3. **Paper-pencil peer feedback** refers to the feedback towards a person's essay writing by using paper-pencil method which is normally used in a traditional classroom. In other words, each student would comment, suggest, critique and edit other friends' first draft essays on the paper directly.
4. **E-mail peer feedback** refers to the feedback towards a person's essay writing sent person-to-person via the Internet by every member in each group in a first draft. Each student provides and receives comments, suggestions and critiques as well as edits other friends' first draft essays via e-mail.
5. **Web board peer feedback** refers to the feedback towards a person's essay writing sent through a place on the Internet where messages are posted and read by all the members in each group. Each student provides and receives comments, suggestions and critiques as well as edits other friends' first draft essays on the web board directly and anonymously. Moreover, the web board was constructed and taken responsibility by the researcher as a web master.
6. **Writing achievement** refers to the attainment of students' learning in the objectives of the Writing I course which aim to increase the students' writing ability on a paragraph level. It is measured by the English writing achievement test constructed by the researcher. The main focus of the test is on the paragraph writing. Note that the test difficulty and content conform to the main instructional materials. The test result is used to indicate the effectiveness of different types of peer feedback used in writing instruction with heterogeneous students.
7. **General English proficiency** refers to the students' general knowledge and ability in English which is indicated by the total raw scores of English I and English II courses previously enrolled in their first year, and consist of grammar, vocabulary, communication, reading and writing skills.
8. **Levels of general English proficiency** refer to high, moderate and low levels of proficiency of learners grouped by using the total raw scores of English I and II courses previously enrolled in their first year.

9. **High proficiency learners** refer to subjects whose total English I and II raw scores are above the 75th percentile.
10. **Moderate proficiency learners** refer to subjects whose total English I and II raw scores are between 40-60th percentile.
11. **Low proficiency learners** refer to subjects whose total English I and II raw scores are lower than the 25th percentile.
12. **Students' attitudes** refer to the students' feelings, beliefs, and opinions toward peer feedback they experience in the experiment under 6 main headings which are (1) attitudes towards peer feedback, (2) perceptions of the students' writing improvement, (3) perceptions of the quality of peer feedback, (4) attitudes towards mixed ability peer feedback group, (5) strengths and weaknesses of peer feedback they received and suggestions, and (6) attitudes towards peer feedback, teacher feedback, and their preferences. Attitudes play a vital role in evaluating in the sense that they consist of a positive or negative reaction which leads to specific behaviors, and particular feelings. In this study, the students' attitudes were measured by a set of attitudinal questionnaires, interviews and learning logs.
13. **Students** refer to undergraduate Engineering students who enrolled in Writing I course as a requirement at KMITNB in the first semester of academic year 2007.

1.9 Significance of the Study

1. Theoretically, if this study can determine the effects of the integration of technology (web board and e-mail) and peer feedback on students' writing ability successfully, it can confirm the influence of social constructivism, collaborative learning and the advantages of technology assisted language learning in EFL situations, especially in the writing courses.
2. Practically, if some or all of the hypotheses are not confirmed, the results of the study can generate some benefits in several ways.

2.1 It can assist educators and writing instructors to better understand how electronic feedback can impact L2 writing and suggest ways to incorporate this writing environment as an alternative chance for students and teachers to interact both in and outside classroom into their writing programs.

2.2 The findings of this study may be useful not only for KMITNB but also for other institutes and universities as well to determine the integration of technology and peer feedback session in the curriculum, and encourage the institute to see the importance of computer and technology in teaching and learning environment in this new era.

2.3 The results can be useful for students to be aware of the benefits of the integration of technology and English language in order to increase their opportunity to exposure not only to the language, but also to develop their writing ability, and enhance computer literacy skills which plays a vital role in their everyday lives.

2.4 The findings of this study may be useful for material writers in writing instructions to add e-mail and/ or web board peer feedback activities in the textbooks or supplementary as alternative activities or tasks for teachers and students.

3. *However*, if some or all of the hypotheses are confirmed, it may also provide some advantages, as in the following aspects.

3.1 The results of the study could be a useful source of information for other researchers who are interested in the issue and would like to study this topic more-in depth in order to extend such knowledge in the field as well as eradicate or lessen some limitations of the study.

3.2 Writing instructors can alternatively apply some types of peer feedback which are most appropriate to their teaching contexts and students' characteristics into their classes, so it may help teachers to teach undergraduate composition courses more effectively and enthusiastically.

3.3 The findings of the study would provide some degrees of awareness for educators, course developers, and teachers whether to adopt the innovations into their teaching and learning environment.

