

Journey Around the Research Wheel: Narration of Transformative Learning

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The Dissertation-- E-mail Peer Responses in Collectivist Thai Culture: Task, Social and Cultural Dimensions

Action is the sun, reflection is the moon, but both move in a large circle. When you have the sun and you have the moon, and they work together. They create water, they create clouds, they create rain and rainbows, they create life. (Cororado, 1988; cited in Paratacharya, 1998)

When Life Began

“Saneh, continue your study and come back teaching at our school” my late fourth-grade teacher told me. At that time, I was attending a small public school in a quiet, pastoral corner of Thailand. Too young, I did not know what he really meant. What I did know was every night I loved to lie down on the wooden floor with a small black corroded oil lamp dimly lit, letting my imagination wander through books about Thai legends and literature. I never knew that my late fourth-grade teacher’s expectation and that little old oil lamp would play an extremely decisive role in my professional life later on. What I knew was I had a long journey to Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, to continue my study as a fifth grader.

Living in Bangkok and learning in two new schools there were just like vigorously swimming against lots of fearful waves in the

ocean. No matter how rough it was, I kept swimming until I earned my bachelor's degree with honors from Chulalongkorn University and my master's degree from Mahidol University. As Gloria Anzaldua (1987) said:

One takes on a compulsive, repetitious activity as though to busy oneself, to distract oneself, to keep awareness at bay . . . repeating, repeating, to prevent one from "seeing." One does not 'see' and awareness does not happen. One remains ignorant of the fact that one is afraid, and it is fear that holds one petrified, frozen in stone. If we cannot see the face of fear in the mirror then it cannot be there. The feeling is censored and erased before it registers in our consciousness. (p. 45).

Life should have been settled because I got a permanent and thus secure teaching position at Thammasat University, one of the leading universities of Thailand. However, I came to perceive a problem with my listening and speaking skills when it was necessary to interact with English-speaking teachers. I did not know what to say. I did not know what they were talking about. My mind whirled. I just stood frozen because I could not understand native speaker English. My anxiety started to grow. Coming from schools with no English exposure and graduating from universities in Thailand, I was aware that my competence in English reading and writing was far better than my listening-speaking skills.

This awareness motivated me to develop myself professionally. With a full scholarship from the Royal Thai Government, I then began

a long journey—to embark on study for my Ph.D. in the Rhetoric & Linguistics Program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Along this rough road, I kept my cognitive interest focused and kept the seed of my curiosity growing. I felt and touched my inner strengths. I completed the coursework extremely satisfactorily. But the learning process of doing the dissertation was only just beginning.

On the Research Wheel

Research Background

Educated in Thailand, a hierarchical, collectivist society with teacher-centered classrooms, I, as a student, did not experience collaborative learning, technology-integrated instruction or any instruction that fostered student autonomy. Yet, I felt that most knowledge I have gained resulted from self-directed learning. Becoming a teacher, I always reflected on the belief that such self-attempts, one way or another, shaped most of my academic and professional success as a student and teacher. This led me to the initiation to explore teacher-and peer-reviewed writing in 1997, where I found that no matter how students could learn from peer language, they did not seem to depart from teacher-directed instruction (see Thongrin, 1997, 2001b). This finding again encouraged me to further search if there were some ways that I could support my students to depend more on themselves and less on teachers. Very much

influenced by the theories of the social constructionist view of writing and computer-mediated instruction, I was very interested in peer responses via electronic medium, which became the focus of my dissertation.

In 2001, I investigated the implementation of peer responses through e-mail with nine Thai female EFL case-study students who were enrolled in EG. 332: Argumentative Writing at Thammasat University (Thongrin, 2002). The purpose of the study was to explore whether Thai students could learn EFL writing through innovation. To accomplish this goal, I examined the students' task, as well as the social and cultural dimensions related to the task, including the readers' stances toward the writers' text, language functions and content of peer responses, implementation of peer responses, changes and resistances of the participants, benefits and problems the participants perceived, the perceived roles of the responders, and their attitudes toward peer responses.

The participants completed two on-going tasks, writing and sending their essays to the other group members, and responding to peer essays via e-mail. Throughout a semester, I analyzed the students' scripts of e-mail responses, interviewed them individually via e-mail, informally talked to them both individually and collectively, observed their regular writing class and jotted down what I observed

in field notes and research log, discussed students writing with the teacher of the class, and reviewed their class writing. At the end of the data collection process, I conducted a group interview to share our thoughts and interpretations, where I could see the whole picture of the findings more clearly. I then analyzed the data based on two dimensions. First, with an inductive approach by Glaser and Strauss (1967), I examined the students' tasks in terms of the reader's stance toward the writers' text, language functions and content of each student's responses, and the implementation of peer responses. Second, from all the data sources, I also discovered the students' roles while on task, their perceived benefits and critical problems, resistances and changes, and attitudes toward e-mail peer responses.

As a result of the data analysis, I acquired a picture of the way participants participated in e-mail peer responses, which consisted of ten findings underlined by three-dimension perspectives: task, social and cultural.

Research Findings: Task Dimension

Through the task dimension, I examined the students' responses in terms of language functions, characteristics and patterns of responses, perceived changes and student attitudes.

First of all, the dominant language functions of the students' responses included (a) giving positive compliments, (b) giving opinions

and general information, and (c) stating difficulties with language and comprehensibility, as well as suggesting solutions to those difficulties. The students put more emphasis on positive compliments because they primarily wanted to show support to peers to continue writing, and, most importantly, they did not want to humiliate peers. This is because, in Thai culture, overt criticism is not common and is considered a way to "break one's face." Criticism, then, affects personal relationships. As such, the students were concerned with their peers' feelings and tried to please them with compliments. Also, maintaining personal relationships or harmony, resulting from Buddhist teaching, also influenced the students to soften the tone of their responses, as they feared that straightforward comments would break their personal relationships.

They also communicated minor language functions, including (a) summarizing what the writers wrote, (b) asking for clarification and confirmation, (c) directing the writers, (d) revealing uncertainty of their feedback, (e) complaining of problems, (f) making excuses for late replies and providing the execution of meaning for negative feedback, and (g) teasing. In relation to all of the language functions of their responses, the students showed three types of peer responses to the writers: interpretive, prescriptive, and negotiating. The highest degree of interpretive responses generally occurred when the readers

based their comments on their personal views about writing components, while the authoritative responses took place when the readers pointed out mistakes mostly on grammar and suggested their solutions in a prescriptive manner. They sometimes negotiated with the writers for more clarification and confirmation. These stances directly related to what the readers talked about, as in the research question two.

The students' comments were text-oriented. They primarily discussed ideas for writing. Their talk also included issues of style, organization, language, persuasiveness and reader awareness. It was evident that they generally stayed on task. All of them felt that ideas were very important, especially for argumentative writing. They also saw peer responses as a way to help them see how they could generate ideas rationally. Interestingly, they also stated that, besides viewing ideas as an essence of essays, talking about ideas was one way to avoid discussing grammar. This was because they were weak in grammar and not confident to discuss it publicly/online. If writing is to discover meaning, discussions about ideas for writing--the content of the students' talk, accidentally became a focus of expressive writing which is not the way writing is taught in Thailand. That is, Thai students are encounter problems at a very basic skill level.

Undoubtedly, they view writing as the most difficult skill for them to master.

The students seemed to view learning to write through electronic peer responses as helpful, since they mentioned positive changes they had experienced as my research progressed. Those changes included writing-related changes, perception-related changes and auxiliary skills. For writing-related changes, three students (Fai, Ta, Wat) expressed that they gained more spontaneous thinking and responding skills and more language awareness while writing. Also, Mod, an average student, had longer responses, and Pear, a weak one, said that her writing skills improved. These benefits seemed to result from reading-writing connections, where the students said that they learned about style, organization, structural patterns, and word choices from reading peers' essays and responses and from responding to peers' essays. Such benefits also came from collaborative learning, where less competent writers learned from the more competent peers, and vice versa. Regarding perception-related changes, all but one felt that they had more flexible perspectives when generating ideas for writing. Also, most students trusted peer comments, felt comfortable in providing straightforward comments, had more positive attitudes toward peer feedback, and revealed more familiarity with peer responses through e-mail. Two students, Note and Ta, indicated

having gained technology skills as a result of participating in the research. These indicate a good sign that it might be possible for EFL students to learn writing through electronic peer responses.

As a result of these changes, all students stated that they benefited from peer responses via e-mail. They gained thinking skills (Aim and Ple), language awareness (Mod, Fai, Wat), writing fluency (Fai, Ta, Wat), and writing improvement (Pear). All of the students perceived peer writing as a model for style, organization and grammar, while Mod, Aim and Ta learned about word choice in addition to these three writing components. Surprisingly, I found that some less competent writers like Pear, Wat, and Ta, learned from more competent counterparts, and more competent writers like Tum, Note and Fai also learned from the less competent ones. Wat, Ta, Tum and Pear also showed more participation in the peer community. Some students stated experiences beyond the classroom. Ta and Note gained technology skills, which led them to self-directed learning through cyberspace. Ta inferred information about people's personalities from the ideas stated in their writing. A very weak student like Pear had intrinsic motivation to write for other classes, and Fai was encouraged to think about study in America. Most students expressed the need to practice free, creative writing.

Research Findings: Social Dimension

In addition to many research findings on the task dimension, I looked at responding to peers' writing on the social dimension as well. The way that the students responded to peer essays reflected the roles they perceived while on task. Tum, Note and Fai, the competent writers who seriously contributed their responses to peers and, in turn, took peer comments into consideration, perceived themselves as both teachers and students. These students seemed to make effective use of peer comments as they viewed peer responses as a complete cycle of providing comments to peers as readers and integrating peer comments into their writing as writers. Also, Ta and Wat, average students, perceived themselves as an investigator and a swimmer respectively, who both expressed the need of a model for responding. Although they did not feel confident enough to respond to peer essays, both Ta and Wat seemed to do their best as readers who provided their responses to the writers and as writers who made use of peer comments. In addition, Pear was another student who considered peer feedback helpful. She viewed herself as a very sick patient and needed peer teachers to correct her grammatical mistakes, and peer comments seemed to fulfill her need. Mod, unlike Pear, discredited peer comments, although she perceived herself as a student whose errors were correctible by peer teachers. This was because she viewed peers as EFL students with limited language ability. Like Mod, who did

not value peer responses, Ple and Aim also rejected peer feedback due to their lack of confidence in their peers' ability. Ple perceived herself, so to speak, as a policewoman who arrested grammar culprits, while Aim was rather like an editor who tried to find faults of new journalists' writing. Both Ple and Aim shared a commonality in that they viewed writing only as structural patterns that were pieced together. They considered peer responses an activity in which readers only found grammatical mistakes in essays.

Research Findings: Cultural Dimension

Cultural perspectives lent me a number of critical and helpful research findings: responding behaviors, peer-feedback evaluation and the students' perception to the innovation.

Responding behaviors were essential for me to see how I could adapt the western innovation with Thai students more effectively. All but Mod, who generally showed agreements or disagreements with the writers, shared the same pattern of responses. They integrated positive comments into the responses, as introductory parts of the responses, presuppositions before providing negative feedback, an execution of meaning after such negative feedback and at the end of responses. This finding closely relates to the first finding in that some Thai cultural concepts seem to foreshadow the students' response patterns. As I discussed earlier, the students did not want to hurt the

writers' feelings, but wanted to preserve peers' face and maintained smooth relationships with peers. They, however, wanted to tell peers about their writing. The cultural factors and the need to present actual intentions therefore drove them to rely more on compliment-embedded comments as the middle ground that compromises two extremes according to Buddhist teaching.

Moreover, peer-feedback evaluation could be worth an effort. On the one hand, five students considered peer feedback very helpful for them to integrate into their regular class writing. These students seemed to make use of peer responses in terms of generation and organization of ideas, style, word choice and structural patterns. In this pole, Pear, a student who perceived herself as very sick patient and in need of an intensive grammar treatment, claimed that most peer responses were of importance to her to improve her own writing. On the other hand, the other students considered peer comments helpless. Tum, a competent writer, felt that she received only short vague comments consisting of too many compliments, whereas Aim, Ple, and Mod, average students, discredited peer responses and downplayed peers as EFL students with limited language knowledge. These students seemed to strongly believe that only teachers could help them with writing problems. This inhibited them from considering

peer responses as valuable although they sometimes agreed with those peers' voices.

Also, the students revealed frustrations stemming from specific problems. First, all students except Fai showed discontent with very vague, insincere comments which were driven by the students' concern about peers' feelings and their need to preserve peers' face or to maintain personal relationships. These cultural concerns led the students to achieve both the need not to hurt peers' feeling and the need to respond to peer essays by relying heavily on such strategies as (a) giving positive compliments to reduce the writers' anger, (b) giving indirect comments to save the writers' face, (c) using the execution of meaning to prevent any discontent, (d) using a Thai final particle *na ja*, emoticons and teasing to soften the tone of negative feedback, and (e) avoiding the points that would cause the writers to lose face. Second, All students except Fai and Note were frustrated with very short peer comments, resulting from the students' language constraints. Third, some students revealed a lack of responding fluency due to the unfamiliarity with e-mail feedback, electronic text format, and technology-incorporated language learning. Fourth, Mod seemed to resist using technology for language learning, and this personal belief partly led to her discrediting the reliability of peer comments. The students also had frustrations as a result of the low

capacity of the Internet in Thailand, their tight schedules, too many essays to respond to, too few topics for writing and limited challenges and choice of preference.

Worst of all, some students, Tum, Aim, Mod and Ple, showed resistance to e-mail peer responses. Tum revealed her frustrations as a result of short vague peer comments she often received. This slowly developed into resistance to the activity. The others' resistance resulted from their beliefs about teachers' authority status, which seemed to downplay peer comments. Most students in my study regarded the teachers as the only ones with answers to questions and the solutions to any writing problems. For example, Ple admitted why she did not take peer comments into account: "I think teacher is the best who can tell me what is right or wrong especially when I learn writing I think about teacher only." In short, they did not trust, but rather, resisted peer language although feeling that some peer comments sounded rational.

As a result of both benefits and problems, the students' attitudes toward peer responses via e-mail were mixed. On the one hand, most students revealed very positive attitudes toward the practice of e-mail peer responses due to a variety of benefits they perceived, such as gaining improved thinking, responding and writing skills, having motivation to write for other classes and for further study, seeing

positive compliments as affective factors for learning, and having closer relationships within the peer community. The implementation of e-mail peer responses, on the other hand, also tipped the scales to the unfavorable. These negative attitudes, however, have more to do with some cultural and technical constraints than with the innovation per se.

To sum up, my research portrayed three major perspectives. Peer responses under the task dimension seemed to reflect the students' cognitive, writing skills as a result of learning writing through electronic peer response. As reviewers, they provided their peer writers with text-related comments with such various language functions as giving opinions and information, critiquing mistakes, directing/suggesting solutions to those mistakes, requesting clarification and excusing for such negative feedback. Although a few students produced vague, less helpful comments, most of the students were able to comment on peers' essays with a quite systematic pattern. They diluted their peers' resentment for the mistakes with positive compliments related to the text, pointing out perceived mistakes but ending the comments with the execution of meaning for the negative feedback to lessen any potential personal conflicts or tensions that the writers might have felt. Best of all, most students expressed positive changes in relation to writing skills. They agreed

that taking the multiple roles as not only the writers, but also readers and reviewers had some positive effects on their thinking skills, language awareness, writing fluency, and writing improvement. Although I did not measure these positive changes quantitatively, consistent classroom observations and evaluation of their written products convinced me that what they felt was likely true.

The social dimension was the second focus I had in data interpretation. That the writers metaphorically perceived themselves as various doers ranging from teachers who gave peers a hand for writing, investigators and policemen who telescoped for mistakes in writing, swimmers to a student who merely waited for peer comments, as well as a very sick patients who really needed grammatical surgery. Through email peer responses, these dramatic actors shared and traded their comments in the peer community with diversity of ideas as many bolts that connect each student to the electronic village.

The third dimension, however, acted was like a yellow light that delayed the students' engagement for a very short while. This cultural dimension indeed indicated student resistance to peer response writing as a result of very vague, insincere comments and discredibility on peer comments resulting from the authority of teachers. Not surprisingly, those perceived positive gains for writing improvement led to the students' favorable attitudes toward the innovation; such

culture-related resistance the unfavorable ones. All these research findings helped me understand how the Thai students in my study participated in e-mail peer responses in the task, social and cultural dimensions. Without any one of such dimensions, the picture of the efficacy of innovative implementation would be incomplete. This seems to reflect the classroom practice that not only cognitive but also social and cultural factors are indispensable for teachers to take into consideration.

Research Experience

Great things are done when men and mountains meet. (William Blake)
Reality of Doing Research

I confidently and enthusiastically headed for the study site as I had planned carefully my research methodology, step-by-step procedures, and clear calendars to accomplish the collection process, writing tasks, preliminary research questions, tentative interview questions, and more. On site, I changed a few things. Instead of asking Thai teachers to recommend eight student participants who were in intermediate writing courses to participate in my research, and without any class observations, as was originally planned, I was given a generous hand by a new English-speaking teacher, who let me not only work with the students in his advanced writing course, but also observe every class meeting. I fully appreciated his offer, realizing that

more advanced writing course students, who would learn writing at the discourse level, would fit the very novel writing activity, and that class observation would lend me more dependable data. This led me to have a better research design-- having nine advanced writing students as the participants and class observation as an additional data collection method. I conducted a pilot study and explored the kinds of problems that might occur in the actual research, such as clarification about response procedures and e-mail implementation, as well as the time line for the participants to complete writing and responding tasks.

Then I began the actual study and all went well during the first period of collecting the data. I subsequently encountered some difficulties, the major two of which were the students' very tight schedule and heavy workloads and the somewhat intolerable Internet in Thailand. Their time constraints often caused very late responses from some students, especially a few who showed resistances to the innovation. Moreover, the students were often too busy to let me interview them face-to-face. "*What if I can't interview them?*" This question drove me to rely completely on electronic interviews. Through e-mail, I sent an open-ended initial interview and many follow-up in-depth interviews, each of which varied depending on the particular perspectives of each participant.

As a result of the interpretive and the feminist models of interviews, where I tried to figure what each event mean by creating collaborative relationships with a more open, loosely structured research methodology, I found some unexpected phenomena emerging from the interviews: one of which was how Thai cultural attitudes affected the way the students made use of e-mail peer responses. This view became a key finding of my research.

E-mail interviews could have worked well if the Internet had not been unreliable, causing the students' frustrations. However it was, e-mail seemed to be the main access to the research data. I completely depended on it to see how the students responded to peer essays and hear their attitudes toward this innovation. Extremely frustrated. Extremely patient.

I became even more frustrated when all but one explicitly showed their unwillingness to revise their essays partly due to their time constraints. I kept asking the question: "*How can I know whether e-mail peer responses are good or bad if they don't bother to revise their essays?*" Then, I created some questions to elicit their attitudes toward peer comments. I started to feel hope when hearing the students' remarks:

I copy friends' styles in my writing.

I use peer comments in other writing class.

I learn from peer comments.

I ignore their comments.

Closer examination on these helped me see things more clearly despite the absence of their revisions.

I felt the students' burden when they, again, begged me not to continue the other two tasks due to the upcoming exams and internships during the semester break. Although I wanted to see more complete data from all of the four tasks, I sympathized with their frustrations.

As a result of two inner forces—namely, being ethical and estimating that I had enough data to illustrate phenomena--, I let the students stop the responding process. With this regard, I learn well when a researcher should stop collecting the data. To understand the importance of solution, I as a researcher must understand that of problems.

Learning at All Stages of Life

Acquisition of skills, possession of knowledge, attainment of culture are not ends; they are the marks of growth and means to

its continuing. (John Dewey)

Hard Times as Good Stories and Good Stories as Rich Lives

Through the phase of working on this research, I have learned what it meant to be a qualitative researcher and gained at least five

aspects of experiences. First and foremost, I have learned that my previous experiences were useful for me to adjust myself to emerging themes and research questions and to solve attendant difficulties. While I observed the class, my teaching experience helped me understand the students' reaction to the tasks, evaluate their essays, understand the purpose of their responses, create interview questions that led me to the detailed meaning and interpret what was meant by those phenomena. When I encountered ups and downs during the journey, the research skills I developed in the three prior studies helped me make decisions about how to I solve such dilemmas. I decided to study the participants from the Argumentative Writing class, a more advanced writing class than the one I had planned to study, as soon as the teacher of that class expressed his intention to let me work with his students. I kept all of the nine original volunteers as participants although I originally wanted only eight. I struggled against my desire to collect as much data as possible because the participants asked me not to revise their essays. Since the participants had very tight schedules, I shifted from individual, face-to-face interviews to individual, electronic interviews. I also changed group interviews, originally planned for the middle and at the very end of the study, to a single group interview at the final stage. The participants asked me, as exams approached, not to continue the journey.

Understanding and caring, I had them complete only two responding tasks, as feeling their worries, and estimating that I had collected enough data to explain research phenomena. I felt that the study had come to its end, not because of a certain time frame, but really because the data was enough to answer and illustrate all the research questions. Without my teaching and researching experiences, I would never have made such reasonable decisions.

Second, keeping a sharp-eye was vital for me to float over the trap of familiarity. Undoubtedly, I appreciate what an anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn, once said: "The fish would be the last creature to discover water." This statement (cited in Erickson, 1985, p.8) once again reminds me of what I must observe thoroughly. Without this attentiveness, I would never have realized how my native culture foreshadowed negative aspects of e-mail peer responses, grabbed the gist of student voices and actions from interviews and class observations, and manifested itself in themes that occurred throughout the data collection process. Accordingly, I completely understand why some scholars (e.g. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988) consider the researcher an important instrument for the qualitative research.

Third, I have learned that researcher ethics are necessary for me to maintain my participants' comfort. Their willingness to volunteer as

a result of trust between us led the students to complete two tasks willingly, despite being frustrated with their tight schedules and coming exams. Without my sincere openness, these things would not have occurred. Undoubtedly, ethical issues are really important for a qualitative researcher to maintain relationships with participants and achieve the research goals. Fourth, I perceived the value of class observations and individual and collective interviews where I saw and heard actual data. In class observations, I studied each participant's performance carefully, which was helpful for me to make references in relation to research findings. Along the same lines, I also realized the significance of student voices, which disclosed some unexpected issues, such as Thai cultural concepts acting as chief hindrances of e-mail peer responses. Their collective voices from group interviews confirmed the merits and the drawbacks of the introduced innovation and the causes of student frustrations. Multiple interpretations--having some students as my research assistants, was also helpful and pleasing since I learned that they were very thoughtful and lent me very critical, rational, interesting perspectives. These research methods helped me obtain the data rich enough to explain the whole picture of electronic peer responses in a collectivist culture like Thailand. In the data analysis, it was the first time I had experienced

the need to review the data over and over again before I came to the final conclusion.

Last but not least, I learned to verify my own bias that I brought with me. Immersed in the practice of using e-mail to learn to write, I tended to believe in its effectiveness and had positive biases with the peer response group via e-mail sessions. However, I also realized that my subjectivity could do no harm and could not be viewed as a failing that should have been eliminated. Rather "it is an essential element of understanding" (Stake, 1995, p. 45) as qualitative inquiry is subjectivity-oriented. Also, I could validate the research results by means of three components: (a) my emic perspectives as a teacher in the research setting, (b) the triangulation of data and (c) the way the participants and I collaboratively checked our interpretations. I, through all of these verifications, could handle biases successfully. I feel that the skills of doing qualitative research are additional experience to those I have gained from the quantitative studies I conducted previously.

Doing Research: The Landscape of Change

As Gross (1977) says, "Everyman who rises above the common level has received two educations, the first from his teachers and the second, more personal and most importantly, from himself" (p. 174),

which means to me that learning opens the door for life change.

Accomplishing my research has shed the greatest light on my teaching skills in three important areas.

First of all, as teacher of general content, I do not step into the classroom naked. I grew closer to the teaching. I have a responsibility to take the best of my knowledge and put it into the seeds of growth, a new light for Thai learners, the future generation of my society. To repeat, knowledge from higher education indeed helps me figure out what and how I help students understand classroom lessons step by step. I have gained an understanding of the dynamics of my teaching as a result of learning theories and real practice I gained in helping these classes emotionally and intellectually. Best of all, I, as an EFL writing teacher in particular, have learned that to introduce innovation and teach EFL writing effectively, I need to take a number of factors into consideration. First, I need to accommodate to the culture in devising the foreign innovation successfully. However, I would never consider changing my or students' culture, since changing culture means changing identity. Rather, by understanding student backgrounds, including the academic and sociocultural, I certainly understand the causes of their actions. In doing so, I believe I can familiarize students with, minimize their negative attitudes toward, and accommodate them to the merits of innovation. Second, I underscore students' affective factors, which keep them motivated to learn further. Reflecting on experiences as a student and teacher and seeing chief phenomena from this research, I believe that students'

positive attitudes will steer them to the final goal of learning. Third, in teaching, I need to create a student involvement atmosphere with (a) a combination of face-to-face and electronic interaction and (b) an alternate between teacher-directed and peer-reviewed writing and (c) a variety of topic choices and meaningful tasks. As such, I see the value of a heterogeneous class consisting of students with different levels of learning ability. If the zone of proximal development by Vygotsky (1962, 1978) really exists, and the finding that less and more competent students could learn from one another confirmed such a premise, I believe that having students make use of peer language in challenging tasks should bear positive consequences. With support from their peers and myself, my students are able to learn EFL writing confidently and affectively. I hope that the students, with self-confidence, can develop their abilities not only to think critically, write effectively, and respond rationally.

The process of my life tends to take the form of order-to-order transition from one pattern to another, as I do not confine myself only in the classroom walls. Writing becomes my priority not only because I extend my role as a writing teacher but also because I became a writer producing scholarly journal articles (Thongrin, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2005 a, 2005b, 2006) as a result of classroom reflection and research. No wonder, I also share my research findings with academic

communities in various international conferences. I start to become known among scholars locally and internationally. At the end of some conferences, I was sometimes approached to join some international projects. Life seems more worthwhile as a result.

My cumulative experiences with writing my dissertation allows me to further extend my role as a trainer of any type of writing—academic, business, technical and scientific writing—to not only graduate students of various universities but also professionals in many organizations. Previously, I never thought that I could apply knowledge from the Rhetoric & Linguistics Program to something very technical and especially scientific. However, I have learned that I can transfer my knowledge and experience with writing to new environments. Teaching professional writing to those in the workplace is extremely challenging for me as my trainees are those who earned their Master or Doctorate in specialized areas like general and medical science, engineering and mechanics, accounting and economics. However rough it is, my workplace writing workshops are always evaluated very positively. I have become a teacher to many scientists, researchers or physicians who attend my professional-writing workshop. Without doubt, I see the value of my further education at IUP. I experience transformative learning which occurs through my critical, self reflection as I revise old and develop new ways of seeing

the world. As a result of my transformative, critical learning, emancipatory knowledge, and wider view, it comes as no surprise that whenever such organizations as the National Science and Technology Development Agency, National Metal and Materials Technology Center, National Electronics and Computer Technology Center, the Ministry of Science and Technology, The Railways Authority of Thailand need help with technical writing, I can offer them help through my workshops.

Research, Teaching and Discovery of Self

People whose motivation is primarily external anchor their existence on a pose, which is another way of saying that their existence is based on nonexistence. External motivation is edged out intrinsic satisfaction. Life is punctuated by reaching plateaus, which are not by themselves desirable—they may exist only to prompt us to make the next move. (Hayes, 1968, 19)

Classroom teaching allows me to see some of the missing parts of myself. I have further opened my eyes to the depth and breadth of research knowledge. I am thus touched by the powerful transformation of learning. Experiences from doing the dissertation have fully strengthened the research skills I gained before I earned my doctorate. Seeing problems in any class, I figure out how to look for something to solve them. For me, teaching and experimenting always go hand in hand to explore a better way of teaching. Teaching a course on Reading For Information with a large class, for example, I,

as a research leader, led other three teachers to explore a combination of a large class lecture and small-group discussion—modified teaching technique we came up with—to solve the problem of teachers' workload (Thongrin, et al, 2005a). From the study, we found that the modified technique could work well for a department that needed to serve a large number of students' need for learning English. I also modified electronic peer responses (Thongrin, 2006) to suit Thai students with the consent of Thammasat University. In this project, I integrated collectivist perspectives in the class. Over the course of a year of data collection, the students learned to write in group work, then pair work and finally individual work through electronic and face-to-face peer responses with American students and Thai peers. I found peer responses in both modes yielded more positive results when the students worked in groups. Although I found from the dissertation that some Thai cultural concepts did block Thai students to learn writing through electronic peer responses, I found some ways to dilute such cultural constraints in this project instead.

Changing a threat to an opportunity once again encourage me to take on another project (Thongrin, research in progress) in which I had Thai language major students, uasually very weak English students, in my English writing class. I made use of their ability in Thai composition and guided them to selectively and intelligently integrate

some in English composition. In this project, we did contrastive analysis between Thai and English. I felt that the students could improve their English composition although I did not verify their performance empirically. Clearly, researching and teaching help me look at any classroom problems in the bright side.

Closely related to the cognitive gains in my social growth, I recall the words of Todd (1968) that: "The individual is a totality and cannot be separated as to intellect, motor, and social functions. They are all interrelated" (p. 3). In this regard, my experience is sought by graduate students of many universities and teachers in various high schools, teachers' colleges and universities. Hence, I often accept invitations from external academic communities. Yet no matter how busy I am, I continue to participate.

I have become even more ingenious when I weave myself farther into the academic community. Another example of my integration in the academic community is the invitation I received to join the English Language Contacts Scheme for East Asia (ELTeCS) sponsored by the British Council of Vietnam to train Vietnamese teachers to do classroom research. Although my main purpose was to train Vietnamese teachers to construct some research tools such as a questionnaire, interview questions and classroom observations, I also gave greater weight to our professional discussion. I gained something

academically and spiritually as I met teachers from various parts of Asia. We became aware that we, EFL teachers, still have many problems to solve. Not only were multiple regional academic bonds formed, but many friendships too. And growing from this contact, I have been invited to submit my proposal for the book project which intended to uncover writing problems in Asian areas (Thongrin, book chapter in progress), where I will formulate what I have internalized from peer response writing.

Becoming a more competent teacher, writer, trainer, and researcher not only widens my academic community, but also strengthens my psychological growth. The notion of self-image comes into play since I have acquired academic status. This self image then governs my self- perception and helps build up my action. Viewing Maslow's hierarchy of needs, I am now reaching the peak of what some people do not even experience—self- actualization. My academic strengths, my expertise contributing to outsiders, and my openness to any additional knowledge all fortify my confidence day by day. This confidence, however, never causes me to fly over others. The more I become confident, the more I understand those with no or less academic possession. The more I understand the essence of knowledge and life, the more I prefer to have economically and intellectually poor students in my class. Most importantly, the more I

become confident, the more I want to learn. I believe that seeing our own self and value drives us to be satisfied, happy and productive, all of which can contribute to life accomplishment later on.

Concluding Remarks

The fool who persists in his folly will become wise. (William Blake)

My exploration-oriented personality, coupled with the prior experiences of hearing the value of students' voices, convinces me to believe that students, to some extent, have capacities to learn themselves. With this belief, I set forth the implementation of peer-reviewed writing by e-mail with the nine Thai students and arrived at a number of conclusions that could be drawn from the study. On the one hand, it was possible for teachers to put power in students' hands with careful planning about such factors as cultural obstacles. On the other hand, it was obvious that the introduced innovation could not be used as blanket approach for all learning situations. Whether the innovation provided the students either opportunities for democratic and self-reliant learning, or frustrations and resistances, seemed to depend mostly on how teachers put the innovation to use and manipulated it with attention to cultural accommodation, techno access and power structures. These findings, however, do not come to an end. Getting the ball rolling, I hope that the results of my study will shed more light

on teaching EFL writing in Thailand as well as other EFL settings, and especially that my research experiences will be of use to Thai EFL researchers who are conducting qualitative research. I further hope to see more constructions or re-constructions of EFL writing theories. The latter, as a pedagogical challenge, however, seems to lead teachers and researchers to limitless lines of inquiry, where changes are undeniable.

Looking Back before Looking forward: Reflection of Learning

The expatriate will be transformed from an exotic fish in a small pond to an insignificant minnow in the corporate sea. (Raffael cited in Storti, 1997, p. 73)

There are moments when we look back our own lives, reflecting on the flow of lives over a period of time, and smile as we recognize our personal breakthrough. I now know what "necessity creates great inventions" means. The journey of my learning process does not simply give me data or information, knowledge or insight. Instead, it gives me wisdom. I agree with Longworth (1999) who asserts that further learning pushes learners forward from the acquisition of skills to wisdom.

The long journey for my doctorate began merely because of my frustration with my speaking skills. I remember how I got in touch with the fear to walk past any English speaking teachers. My journey

to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the land of opportunity, opened the door even more widely as I not only gained language skills—the very basic need I always beg for—but also saw my own moving self—the multiple roles I can now serve my society. When thinking back on how I become who I am today, I appreciate how learning constructs and reconstructs my expertise. Looking back where my motivation began, I perceive myself differently. If I could go back in time, I would tell my late fourth-grade teacher how well I accomplished my goal.

Teacher, I made it. I am now a teacher. I have many workplaces, one permanent, many temporary. But none of them are our small school as you always hoped. I have long been embarking so far away that I can't get back to the place I started—the school where you wanted to see me as a teacher. However, my journey will never end as I still have that old oil lamp in my mind metaphorically though the real one had gone. Voices echo in a translated Thai verse (author unknown) and a perceptive statement by Hayes (1998) are still in my mind.

The Thai verse goes:

Knowledge is a priceless lot,

Buried faraway.

At pains to put your best foot forward,

Yes, you get it some day.

Hayes (1988) said:

Learning is an act of becoming, and lifelong learning yields the richest dimension of human experience available to use.

Learning through our own volition throughout our lives is the key to a meaningful future. (p. 301)

I might burn the midnight oil again. Maybe.

Acknowledgements

I am particularly grateful to Dr. Jerry G. Gebhard, my research advisor, Dr. Carole B. Bencich and Dr. Gian Pagnucci, my research committees for their invaluable comments and moral support. Also, my special thanks goes to Thammasat University that granted me a full-ride scholarship. Without support from these important parties, I would not have accomplished my goal. I dedicate the value of this article, if any, to all teachers, who taught me academically, humanly and morally in my entire life.

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