

Implementation of Critical Literacy for English Writing Classes in the Thai Context

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Abstract

Low motivation has always been a cause for concern in EFL teaching in Thailand. In fact, learners' low English proficiency mainly results from their low motivation to learn. Research points to many factors to this problem, such as lack of exposure to an English environment, impractical curricula, and learners' insufficient background knowledge; however, this paper finds that the absence of an interactive, student-centered approach in the writing classroom is the most impactful. Critical literacy has proved to be an effective way to increase learners' motivation by promoting meaningful, independent learning, which, in turn, helps learners acknowledge the purposes and significance of acquiring English language skills. However, due to cultural differences, an adaptation of critical literacy or a middle ground between this approach and traditional teaching will provide more positive, effective outcomes in the Thai context.

Keywords: critical literacy, Thai EFL writing classes, student-centered approach

บทคัดย่อ

แรงจูงใจในการเรียนต่ำมักเป็นอุปสรรคหลักในการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างชาติในประเทศไทย ที่จริงแล้วประสิทธิภาพทางภาษาอังกฤษที่ด้อยของผู้เรียนส่วนใหญ่เป็นผล มาจากแรงจูงใจที่ต่ำ งานวิจัยหลายชิ้นบ่งชี้ถึงปัจจัยหลากหลายที่นำไปสู่ปัญหานี้ เช่น การขาดโอกาสที่จะได้ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ หลักสูตรการศึกษาที่ไม่สามารถนำไปปฏิบัติได้จริง และความรู้พื้นฐานทางภาษาที่ไม่เพียงพอของผู้เรียน อย่างไรก็ตาม บทความชิ้นนี้พบว่า การขาดการเรียนการสอนที่เพิ่มแรงจูงใจให้แก่ผู้เรียนได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ โดยเทคนิคการสอนรูปแบบนี้ส่งเสริมการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง และช่วยให้ผู้เรียนตระหนักถึงจุดมุ่งหมายและประโยชน์ของการพัฒนาทักษะภาษาอังกฤษของตน อย่างไรก็ตาม เนื่องจากความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรม การประยุกต์ใช้ หรือผสมผสานการเรียนการสอนเชิงวิพากษ์กับการเรียนการสอนแบบดั้งเดิม จะช่วยให้เกิดผลที่มีประสิทธิภาพมากยิ่งขึ้นในบริบทการเรียนการสอนของไทย

Introduction

Thai learners' lack of English competence has always been a cause for concern. Despite having spent years studying English in schools and despite education reform efforts, Thai English proficiencies are still low (Noom-ura, 2013). This manifests itself in students' difficulty in expressing their ideas and their unsatisfactory writing performance even at a basic level (Sersen, 2011). In business, employers expect employees who think critically, possess good communication skills, and are able to make good decisions. Unfortunately, many Thai graduates fail to acquire those qualifications due to a lack of critical skills and motivation to learn. Research points out that even though conventional, teacher-centered instruction may help develop students' linguistic skills, it does not contribute to students' writing proficiencies – to become critical, independent writers, the critical literacy needs to be promoted (Bahous, 2011; Behrman, 2006; Brown, 1999; Cheng & Dornyei, 2007; Falout & Marutama, 2004; Huang, 2011; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Critical literacy refers to a process of learning and teaching that promotes learners as the center of their learning, scaffolds teacher-student relationships with teachers as facilitators, and transforms learners into critical thinkers of English (Brown, 1999; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Wolk, 2003). Despite all the advantages, only a small number of Thai English teachers are willing to embrace this student-centered approach (Hallinger, 2012). This hesitancy can be explained by Thai social hierarchies. Since Thailand is a hierarchical society, in which young people are expected to respect older people, teachers usually have difficulty with the implementation of critical literacy. That is because cultural norms designate the teacher as the voice of authority in the classroom. As a result, students tend to have passive learning habits and are heavily dependent on their teachers. Thai people are sensitive about their social relationship, which causes them to be more considerate and agreeable in order to avoid conflicts (Boonnuch, 2007).

Typical EFL Writing Classes in Thailand

Many research studies indicate that although learner-centered, interactive classrooms have been shown to be more successful, they are still not the norm in Thailand (Hu, 2011; Jones, 2004; Khairy, 2013; Kulsirisawad, 2012). Kulsirisawad (2012) describes the Thai education scene as teacher-dominant and passive. Teachers usually consider themselves as a transmitter of information and consider their students as recipients. Therefore, Thai teachers rely heavily on rote learning and memorization of grammatical rules. Most teachers and students believe that teachers possess all the knowledge and that it is considered disrespectful to question authorities. As a result, students choose to be silent in class, avoiding asking too many questions and challenging authorities, even though they know that teachers can be wrong as well. This belief stems from a norm in the Thai hierarchical society, in which children should obey their parents and students should respect their teachers. It is acceptable to speak up and be inquisitive as long as students are aware of their position in the classroom and do not cross the line. Obviously, encouraging students to be interactive, critical learners contradicts Thai people's fixed beliefs and

assumptions about authority. It is wrongly believed that centering on students empowers them and undermines teachers' authority. As a consequence, a student-centered approach is not widely accepted in Thai culture. As mentioned earlier, teachers are expected to know everything even though they clearly do not. In order to maintain their respectability and save face, students are not encouraged to be too inquisitive and ask questions beyond teachers' knowledge. Furthermore, it is easier and safer to teach students what to do, rather than how to do it. For these reasons, rote learning and memorization are preferable among Thai teachers.

Rote learning and memorization teaching strategies, according to Kulsirisawad, have been prevalent in language classrooms in Thailand for a long time. She states that teachers choose their instructional approach by their previous experience of learning and training. Since such methods of learning and teaching worked well for them, teachers tend to assume that these methods should work for their students, as well. Falout and Maruyama (2004) also note that teachers' self-image has a profound impact on their students. In this sense, English writing teachers' previous learning experience might have an important role in shaping their current ideologies and pedagogies. In other words, teachers, once students, are likely to adopt a teacher-centered approach from their former teachers and apply it to their own students. Regrettably, this teaching approach, despite being common and popular in EFL writing classrooms, seems insufficient and also discourages students from learning English. Social norms aside, when students feel that the classroom contributes nothing to their improvement, they tend to be passive and are not eager to broaden their knowledge outside of the classroom. Learning a language is a long-term process. If not properly motivated, students can easily get off track.

Critical Literacy in EFL Writing Classes

A fully student-centered approach may not seem to be the most acceptable way to teach in the Thai context due to some cultural obstacles mentioned above. Despite this concern, an adaptation of critical literacy is a plausible way to increase students' motivation to learn and develop their writing proficiency. It is worth noting that empowering students does not mean undermining students' sense of respect for teachers, as student-centered learning is focused on helping students to take a bigger part in their own learning in order to find the best possible way to achieve their learning goals. Once students find their learning meaningful and enjoyable, their motivation, which is necessary for acquiring English skills, will greatly increase (Hu, 2011; Wolk, 2003). In this light, the student-centered approach is not as frightening or threatening as many teachers may think. Instead, it is highly beneficial to Thai students if appropriately implemented. In this case, adopting and adjusting critical literacy to the Thai context can be satisfactory to both students and school stakeholders. With selected choices offered to students, and with sufficient guidance from teachers, students can begin to take responsibility for their own learning without undermining culturally entrenched educational and societal norms. In fact,

Nonkukhetkhong, K., Baldauf, R., & Moni, K. (2006) report that the approach helps create positive attitudes towards English learning through communicative, interactive activities. However, he notes that in order to make the student-centered approach successful, teachers must be familiar with various teaching techniques and learning materials, and have a good understanding of the approach. To ascertain whether the approach was practical in the Thai EFL classroom, Jantrasakul (2012) conducted a qualitative study in relation to critical literacy and successfully proved that the approach greatly motivated Thai learners to study English. Jantrasakul implemented critical thinking-based lessons in her EFL classes over a period of one academic year. Most of her participants were low proficient users of English and had very poor motivation to learn the language since their concentrations were in physics and mathematics. She allowed her students to take part in commenting and sharing their ideas on the given textbook and discussion topics. In doing so, she tried to limit herself as more of a facilitator than an instructor. However, in order to comply with the main objective of the class set by the university and avoid conflicts with any stakeholders' interests, Jantrasakul had to limit a critical thinking-based lesson to 45 minutes to 1.5 hours of the 3-hour class. In class, the participants were allowed to use a combination of their mother tongue and the target language, mainly because she wanted to ignite their self-exploration in EFL and help them become critical of their cultural standpoints, rather than focusing totally on grammar and structures. Furthermore, during given topic discussions, the participants showed sign of frustration at no definite answers at the beginning. But gradually, they became much more comfortable. The results of her findings reveal that the participants stopped their disruptive behaviors, such as taking a nap and looking at their cellphones, and became fully engaged in their learning. Their cooperation indicated that the critical thinking-based lessons successfully gained the student involvement and, to some degree, empowered their learning. Most importantly, the relationship between the teacher and learners can be strengthened through the student-centered approach as shown in Jantrasakul's findings. This relationship leads to a positive learning environment with a low affective filter, which initiates learners' engagement and willingness to push themselves harder to acquire the language skills.

As a way for teachers to embrace and adapt critical literacy to their teaching, this paper provides a better understanding of learning motivations and proposes some strategies that can help transform students into critical, proficient writers of English and also support teacher-student relationships. As Hooks (1994) remarks, the spiritual and intellectual growth between teachers and students should be focused on in order to promote meaningful learning.

Motivation

Acquiring English writing skills is a long-term process and requires a large amount of determination. Most Thai students start learning grammar and writing English in elementary school, but many of them fail to improve their proficiency even after they

graduate from college, still unsure why they never achieved mastery of the language. Despite being aware of the importance and advantages of English writing abilities, many Thai students still feel discouraged to learn due to their slow learning progress. Research indicates that this failure to become a proficient English speaker decreases students' motivation to learn the language (Bahous, 2011; Falout and Maruyama, 2004; Hu, 2011).

According to Csizer and Dornyei (2005), there are two types of motivation: intrinsic/internalized motivation and extrinsic/non-internalized motivation. First, internalized motivation is a long-term motivation and consists of the qualities a learner would like to possess, such as hopes, aspirations, advancements, desires, and accomplishments. This category of motivation has a promotion focus. If learners desire to become proficient writers of English, then they exhibit a highly active learning habit. Intrinsic motivation is a strong drive for learners to try to achieve their goals and encourages them to put more effort into their learning in spite of hardship and difficulties. The acquisition of English proficiencies requires internalized motivation because learning a language is a continuous, long-term process; it requires a commitment and great determination. Second, extrinsic motivation focuses on outside factors, such as fear of punishment, sense of duty, responsibilities, obligations, and safety. While learners with intrinsic motivation voluntarily try hard to master English for the sake of self-improvement, learners with extrinsic motivation are forced to fulfill their duty to avoid conflicts and usually feel unmotivated to make improvements. For instance, students taking an English writing course may take it just to fulfill the school's requirements and learn very little or nothing at all from the class if they feel they have no control over their own learning.

Unfortunately, Thai students' extrinsic motivation has often overtaken their desires to develop their English language abilities. Since the Thai language is used as a medium in teaching in most colleges, even in many EFL classes, Thai students are usually unaware of the importance of English language skills until they enter the work force or further their education. In higher education, textbooks and research articles are written in English. In the same vein, English is a medium of communication in the tourism industry, on which the Thai economy largely relies (Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2001). The sooner students become aware of this, the more likely they are to seek intrinsic motivation for their learning. For EFL teachers to promote long-term motivation among their students, they first need to create a meaningful classroom.

Implementing Critical Literacy in the Classroom

Teacher as a Mentor

Dueraman (2012) mentioned that EFL Thai learners' quality of being considerate might have an impact on their learning a language. Writing is a crucial aspect in the

learning of a language and critical writing helps in developing skilled writing. One important method of critical writing is peer reviews where students review each other's work in order to improve. This is relatable to a hands-on experience in writing. However, the learner's quality on being considerate hinders the benefits of this method. A study conducted by Thongrin shows that Thai students would give only positive, unconstructive feedback to their peers' writing in English because they felt considerate and did not want their friends to feel discouraged (as cited in Dueraman, 2002, p. 269). As a result, most of the time Thai learners will feel like they are on the fence; on one hand, they want to give their friends a sincere response to their work so that they can see problems in their writing and make improvements. On the other hand, they do not want to upset them or are afraid that they might take it personally.

Thai EFL learners' lack of confidence in expressing their ideas also stems from the hierarchical and authoritative society in Thailand. At home, children are expected to obey and respect their parents. At school, students should give the same respect to their teachers and elders. Arguing with elders is considered inappropriate, even if the argument is constructive and reasonable. Since children are taught to believe what elders say and refrain from questioning and challenging authority, it is no surprise that students become passive in classrooms and are unconfident in thinking for themselves and taking their own stand. This norm in Thai society prevents learners from developing their critical skills as they always depend on their teachers who should be highly respected for their thorough knowledge of the subject matter. As long as this practice is still present in classrooms, the hopes for student-centered classrooms are still far from achievable. Unfortunately, neither Thai culture nor the educational system prepares Thai students to become critical, independent thinkers or writers of English.

The very first step to critical literacy in Thai EFL writing classrooms is to break the wall between the authority – the teacher – and the subordinate – the student. The traditional teacher-student relationship should end and the teacher should shift their function from an informer to a mentor. It is extremely difficult to change Thai culture and Thai society as a whole, but it is possible to promote self-independence and promote respect for individualism in the classroom. Once teachers let down their guards, diminish their sense of authority, and prioritize their students' learning, they can help students become aware of the importance and of actively taking part in their own learning. In doing so, teachers might face another challenge of how to promote individualism in a culturally appropriate way and still gain the respect of students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. The best suggestion is for teachers to find a middle ground between critical literacy and traditional approaches. Individualism is appreciated as long as students do not cross the line and remain respectful to teachers and, in some cases, their classmates. Thus, it is required that teachers clarify their position on this new ground at the beginning of a class and constantly remind their students to be open-minded and participate in respectful manner. Some students might find this new classroom environment unfamiliar and strange. To help ease

them into it, teachers should give them some time to adapt and guide them closely along the way. There are times of uncertainty and fear students have to face while struggling to find how to conduct themselves appropriately. Notwithstanding those challenging times of their lives, useful, applicable guidance from teachers might be a turning point for them. Teachers should ponder what they expect students to gain from learning; what the ultimate goal of learning is and how it might create an impact on their lives.

The benefits of self-independence in learning are too crucial to overlook. Students' ability to take control over their learning encourages them to develop their own styles and strategies of learning, which in turn enables students to rely less on an instructor as a main source of knowledge (Chan, 2001; Little, 2007; Vanijdee, 2003). This allows students plenty of opportunities to seek the best way to achieve their learning goals. In a second language-learning context, it is very important that EFL/ESL learners are taught to take charge of their learning styles because each individual has different ways to develop their language proficiency. Being able to identify their most suitable way to learn, and promoting students' metacognitive awareness, can increase their internalized motivation and sense of meaningful learning (Csizer & Dornye, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Jiao, 2005).

Awareness and Thinking Patterns

According to Williams (1994), learning a foreign language requires more than just learning skills, rules, and grammar; it requires a modification of self-image, the reception of new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being, which crucially affect the social nature of the learner. The differences in cultures obstruct students' confidence in expressing and writing their thoughts, since they are unaware that their thinking patterns are different from those of native speakers.

Cultural awareness is rarely taught in class and students are unaware of cultural differences between their thinking patterns and those of proficient English speakers, many of whom reside in the West. As a result, many Thai students cannot fully develop their writing expertise, which also relies on knowledge of Western culture, even though they memorize the usage of grammatical structures and rules.

In a similar vein, Sun's (2010) findings show common problems with teaching in EFL/ESL classrooms. She mentions two main problems that make it difficult for Chinese students to express their ideas in English: different thinking patterns and a lack of understanding in a new language environment. While English discourse is direct and deductive, Chinese discourse is more indirect and inductive, which can lead to a mismatch when students apply their first-language discursive patterns to English writing. Thai thinking patterns are similar to those of Chinese; they are circular and inductive in style. In

typical English essay writing, for example, writers, - in a step-wise, highly organized order, with clear topics and well-supported details - show readers what they want to deliver and convince them to agree with their arguments by providing strong facts throughout the essay. Conversely, in Thai writing, writers tend not to state the main topics explicitly and usually come back to the same points throughout the process, instead of grouping each point into a clear, distinct order. Thai EFL students are neither aware of this difference of writing styles nor properly guided by their teachers. As a result, they typically apply Thai circular thinking patterns in their English essays (Bennui, 2008). In addition, most students think that it is acceptable to translate Thai phrases into English. Students will write their ideas in Thai on a piece of paper and then translate them into English letter by letter with the consultation of monolingual dictionaries or online translation tools. As a result, their messages are misinterpreted by native speakers since the word order and semantics are misused, students are unaware of words with multiple meanings, and software fails to accurately use an English rhetorical style. Following are excerpts from the writer's student's essay to show how actual Thai students write in English by thinking in Thai: "...This book is the book that difficult most for I because be the book that read hard and have vocabulary high very much". As it is shown, there are so many errors to be fixed in those sentences, but the thinking patterns should be discussed most. Those sentences can be put into a more proper sense as: "This is the most difficult book for me because it is very hard to read and contains high-level vocabulary." If the original sentences are read by a Thai, considering them as Thai sentences directly transposed with English words, it makes sense. But it is almost unintelligible if read by a native speaker.

When students have a better understanding of the differences in thinking habits and apply English thinking patterns to their writing, they will find it easier to express their ideas and reduce the chances of miscommunication. However, with excessive emphasis on conventional literacy, i.e. grammatically correct English, and less on cross-cultural contrastive rhetoric in writing, students will keep making the same rhetorical and discursive mistakes without realizing what is wrong with their writing.

Making Critical Literacy Relevant

Even though conventional literacy instruction helps develop students' linguistic skills, it does not promote students' writing expertise. Rote learning techniques might be easy for teachers to teach and for students to follow but they do not give students a chance to challenge themselves. Most Thai EFL students feel that learning writing in English is boring and undemanding. They feel obliged to write in order to pass the course and make very little improvements or none at all. Typical Thai EFL classrooms are teacher-centered and students have little interaction with their teachers. Most of the time students must write on topics they do not like or do not care about, such as how to make something and their most memorable moments. In a sense, these topics sound easy to write on because they are related to students' own experience and require little critical thinking skills. However, they

are overused and do not produce much thought-provoking impact, as they are procedural and descriptive, rather than analytical or critical. They are also lacking in consideration for any audience other than the teacher, and have no relation to contemporary, technology-enhanced, and “fun” writing tasks that many students engage in their first language outside of class, like texting, blogging, and combining visual and textual genres in their online, day-to-day communication with friends and family. Usually, students could not care less about writing these topics in their first language, so it may be assumed that they may not be very eager to write them in English, either. If the topics are more interesting and students are allowed more choice, students would be more engaged by and learn more from writing tasks (Bahous, 2011). When they write, they would want to present and share their work with a variety of readers, and not only their teacher, because their writing represents their own interests. Similarly, when someone likes a song so much they often want to share it with others and persuade them to listen to it by giving convincing reasons.

Teachers’ assessment of students’ written work is also part of students’ slow learning progress because grades for correct grammatical usage account for a large proportion of the total grades when compared to grades for creativity (Cohen, 1994) or style. Teachers tend to focus heavily on surface-level correcting of students’ grammatical mistakes in their essays and rarely pay attention to their ideas or essay content. In an English writing class, teachers mark all students’ errors in their work and require them to revise the essay according to the corrections given. By giving students direct feedback on their mistakes, Kulsirisawad (2012) found that critical processing is not promoted and that it is the work of the teacher that gets evaluated, rather than that of the students. As a result, students’ English writing development cannot advance to the fullest despite their having studied the language for many years in school. This very slow improvement shows that conventional teaching techniques simply do not encourage writing expertise – critical literacy is highly needed.

Teachers should connect critical literacy to the lives of students, helping them understand the connection between what they have learned in class and their own lives, by exploring topics such as prejudice, oppression, and gender equality (Wolk, 2003). In order to succeed in this, teachers need to center on the overall concepts of an issue rather than small facts, which can easily be forgotten. In EFL classes in Thailand, these important social issues are usually overlooked and not considered very relevant to English learning. However, in order to foster critical literacy in Thai EFL students, this assumption must be changed. Teachers can start from any controversial topic, either national or global, that they think students might know of. Take the topic of double standards for women as an example. Discrimination against women is an on-going problem which consistently occurs in Thai society and is experienced by every Thai person in one way or another. They might be the one receiving more privilege than others, or the other way around, depending on their social status, gender, and wealth. These critical literacy-based EFL classroom activities offer a great opportunity for students to think, read, and write critically, enabling

them to become conscious of the purposes of writing and their English thinking processes.

Conclusion

Conventional literacy and critical literacy are concurrent and not at odds. Promoting critical literacy in the writing classroom can be a big challenge, because it questions entrenched values. Nonetheless, the lack of critical literacy in Thai classrooms is much more worrisome than losing the grip of power – the classroom needs to be enriched with creativity and diversity in ideas in order to create well-rounded, open-minded learners, particularly in a competitive inter-Asian and global job market where English skills are crucial and innovative thinking, rather than rote memorization and performance, is needed.

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