

# Class Blogs in EFL: A Project for Writer/Audience Interaction and Cultural Exchange

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## Abstract

This paper describes and reviews an English class blog exchange project between two classes of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing students at Kyoto Sangyo University and students at two universities in Thailand. The participants created English blog articles introducing aspects of their own culture, read the articles of their international EFL peers, and exchanged feedback through the form of blog comments. Incorporating blog writing into EFL courses is an effective activity for improving the writing experience of students. Publishing and linking class blogs of student articles creates an on-line community of learners, which establishes an audience for student writing, provides a means of interaction with this audience, and integrates the practice of IT skills with English study. Class blogs can also serve as a medium for cultural exchange through writing.

**Keywords :** EFL, class blog, writing, writing audience, cultural exchange

## Introduction

### 1. The use of blogs in EFL

Internet weblogs, also known as blogs, provide a forum for publishing that can be accessed and commented on by readers with an Internet-connected computer anywhere in the world. Users of blogs publish their writing and other multimedia, read the work of others, and interact with their audience.

Language instructors can use blog writing and reading activities in the classroom as a supplement to an established curriculum, or easily design a complete course based around blog writing (Johnson, 2004). In comparison to standard writing tasks, "the permanent nature of publishing online encourages students to pay more attention to the content and language in their blogs" (Zhang, 2009, p.68). The public and collaborative aspects of blog writing have been shown to encourage students to write more than they would in traditional assignments (Walker, 2005).

Campbell (2003) identified three potential uses of blogs for ESL/EFL learners: the tutor blog, the learner blog, and the class blog. Campbell explains that the class blog, created by the combined efforts of an entire class, could "be useful for facilitating project-based language learning, where

learners can be given the opportunity to develop research and writing skills by being asked to create an online resource for others." The use of a class blog creates a collaborative environment for the members of a class, and also has the potential to join a larger on-line community of learners because different class blogs are easily linked to each other (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Campbell (2003) indicates that this linking feature of class blogs "could also be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange."

## **2. The importance of a writing audience**

After deciding on a topic, the most basic question for any writer is: For whom am I writing? Having an expected audience for a composition and some knowledge about that audience influences key decisions concerning content and writing style. Unfortunately, the concept of audience is rarely considered in EFL writing instruction. Johns (1994) described this situation and its consequences: "Too often, ESL/EFL students are exposed to few audiences (the teacher and fellow students) confined to composition classrooms. Not incidentally, limitations upon audience and context can also limit students' purposes and motivations for writing" (p. 392).

For a typical assignment in an EFL writing course, students are aware that only the instructor will read their work, likely with a focus on writing mechanics and error correction. Some modern writing texts and instructors have improved upon this situation by incorporating peer-review exercises and class time for students to share their compositions with several other class members and exchange comments. However, in many cases, all students in a class are writing about the same topic, so they may not be gaining new information by reading the work of others. To improve upon these circumstances, instructors can utilize a project-based approach, creating collections of student-authored materials, such as class newspapers or collections of music reviews, for which the entire class becomes the audience for each student (Hubert & O'Neill, 2007). This is a significant improvement compared to teacher-only or small-scale student readership, but the audience is still limited to the confines of the classroom.

Internet blogs open the compositions of EFL students to a prospective worldwide audience. However, simply publishing student writing to a blog in no way ensures that someone will read or respond to it. Furthermore, this publishing potential does not give student writers information about the audience or their prior knowledge on a topic, which is essential when writing about aspects of a foreign culture in English (Kitao, 2002). Therefore, the realization of the potential that blogs have for students first requires a partnership of instructors to bring together groups of EFL writers and to create a framework for content and audience interaction.

### **3. Audience interaction and feedback**

Student writers require a response from their audience to determine if they have successfully expressed their ideas through writing. Instructors can correct grammatical and stylistic errors, but students also need feedback indicating that they have effectively communicated their ideas and created interest in their audience. Real audience feedback serves as a form of assessment beyond the instructor that helps students develop regulation skills to continue learning throughout life (Boud, 2000). Rather than receiving feedback in a single one-way exchange, it is desirable to create a collaborative dialog and two-way feedback system where meaning is negotiated between writer and reader (Rollinson, 2005). Blogs can be used to design this type of system because they feature a comment posting function, which enables readers to comment and pose questions to authors. This function also provides writers with the ability to answer and respond to their audience. The interchange of writer/audience feedback is available immediately to both sides since comments are viewable as soon as they are posted to a blog,

### **4. KSU Department of Cultural Studies ELT program**

Students in the Department of Cultural Studies at Kyoto Sangyo University take 10 credits of required English Language Training (ELT) courses: four separate-skill courses in their first year, and one combined-skills course in their second year. Students must also complete an additional eight credits from a variety of English elective courses before graduation. The purpose of this intensive English language curriculum is to enable students to use English as a means to study foreign cultures and effectively communicate ideas about Japanese culture through English to others.

As only a limited number of students will participate in an extended study abroad program during their university years, there is a need to incorporate cultural content and exchange into the ELT curriculum. Additionally, an increasing amount of real-world communication takes place over the Internet through e-mail and web pages, calling for more incorporation of Internet-based activities into basic courses so that students gain skills and experience using English in conjunction with information technology.

To improve the English language learning experience and increase the cultural and IT experience of students in the ELT program, blog writing activities began to be incorporated into first-year writing courses in the 2008 academic year

## **The Blog Exchange Project**

### **1. Partnership and preparation**

A blog writing exchange project was held between KSU Department of Cultural Studies students and students at Hong Kong Polytechnic University during the 2008 academic year. The blog exchange was well-received by students, but differences in academic calendars limited the amount of time available for the project and necessitated a search for other exchange partners. Following a paper presentation on the project given in August at the 7th Asia TEFL International Conference in Bangkok (Hubert & Wong, 2009), new partnerships were established with attending faculty members from Khon Kaen University (KKU) in Thailand and the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC). After an initial meeting and later correspondence by e-mail, a collaboration was formed based on a shared interest in improving the EFL writing experience and motivation of learners, and in creating a forum for cultural exchange between Thai and Japanese students.

Over the next several months, the instructors created the framework for a blog project to be conducted at the end of the second semester of the 2009 academic year. In planning the project, consideration of the different curricula, academic calendars, and needs of the participating students was necessary. Each instructor selected writing classes from their schedule of university courses that they believed would most benefit from participating in the project. It was decided that the blog article topics should be related to a traditional or modern aspect of the students' native Thai or Japanese culture.

Decisions concerning allocation of class time for the project, teacher evaluation of students, and grading were left for each individual instructor to administer according to the guidelines of their institution and course curriculum.

### **2. Participants**

The Thai student participants in the exchange included one class of 29 second-year writing students from Khon Kaen University majoring in languages other than English, and one class of 35 second-year writing students of various majors from the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce. Additional data on standardized English test scores or writing experience of the Thai students was not available.

Two classes of first-year students in the Department of Cultural Studies at Kyoto Sangyo University participated in the blog exchange as part of their required writing course. Class 11 was composed of 23 students with a mean Pre-TOEFL score of 423 recorded in April 2009. Class 13 contained 30 students with a mean Pre-TOEFL score of 383 on the same exam. A survey of self-

reported English writing experience was administered to both groups of KSU students on the first class day in April 2009. Among the 23 respondents in Class 11, six students reported experience writing at the sentence level, seven students reported experience writing paragraphs, and ten students reported experience writing multiple-paragraph compositions of one page or longer. From the 25 respondents in Class 13, eight students reported experience writing at the sentence level, ten students reported experience writing paragraphs, and seven students reported experience writing multiple-paragraph compositions of one page or longer.

In an initial discussion of the upcoming project, all of the KSU participants reported being familiar with reading blogs. Three students reported having experience writing their own blog in Japanese, but none reported having blogged in English. Both classes had been studying writing techniques for descriptive and explanatory paragraphs earlier in the semester and would apply these skills to the blog project to communicate ideas about Japanese culture through English to their Thai counterparts, and in turn read and comment on the articles about Thai culture written by the Thai students. Their blog article and comment writing would be incorporated into the homework portion of their grade for the semester. Assessment criteria for the assignment included an evaluation of the content and writing mechanics of the blog article and the total number of comments written by each student.

### **3. Blog creation**

The first practical issue to address was how to author the blog pages. After surveying the various blog creation methods available, the instructors agreed to utilize Blogger (<https://www.blogger.com>), a free publishing tool provided by Google. Blogger provides easy publishing and administration of blogs, and also allows considerable customization and creative controls. Publishing to Blogger requires users to have a Google mail account, so all participating students were assisted in opening their own personal account. Each instructor created the basic blog page for the individual classes and became the administrator of the website. Students were then invited through their mail accounts to register as authors on the blog. When each instructor had completed the basic blog page for their class, the URLs were shared with the other instructors and links to the other university blogs were clearly posted to allow easy accessibility for students. To maintain the integrity of the blog, only students invited as authors could publish articles, and as administrators, the instructors could control access to viewing the blog and comment writing. Instructors also had the ability to moderate or delete any inappropriate comments posted by students.

Rather than have each student publish their writing individually, which would have resulted in a very large number of articles to be read and commented on, it was decided to have students

form pairs or groups of three and collaborate in their research and writing. Student groups were asked to choose a topic relating to an aspect of their own culture that they would enjoy writing about and sharing with their international partners. In the case of overlapping topics within a class, negotiation between groups was facilitated by the instructors to ensure a wide variety of topics on the blog.

KSU students were given a set of guidelines and instructions for the project in the middle of November and allowed one week to form project groups and choose their topics. Two writing class periods were scheduled in a computer-equipped classroom to instruct students on how to create Google accounts, practice using the features of Blogger, and begin working on their articles. Students were assigned to complete their articles and post them as drafts on the class blog page by the first week of December. They were provided with comments and suggestions for improvements on their drafts from their instructor before making them publicly viewable on the page. The Thai students began publishing their articles in the second week of December, but many were not completed until January, after the year-end school break. Before they had completed the publishing of their articles, all student participants were given a set of guidelines to assist them in the comment writing process.

#### **4. Comment guidelines**

Students may naturally feel apprehensive about sending critical observations on the writing of others, especially in a foreign language. Additionally, network etiquette or misinterpretation of comments can be a factor in student blogs, as in any type of blogging (C. Wu, 2006). Therefore, the establishment of clear comment guidelines for the project was determined to be important. Based on a previous study of EFL student blogging activity, Pinkman (2005) suggests that a method of required commenting be used and that instructors consider verifying the student comments. In this project, KSU and Thai students were instructed to use their real names for their blog identities to encourage responsible comment posting and also to establish a friendly rapport with other participants. As part of the blog assignment, students were required to post comments to at least three articles from their partner universities' blogs and the use of their real names would also facilitate the confirmation of the number of individual student comments.

In a study on blog peer-review, W. Wu (2006) showed that students are reluctant to engage in the activity for the purpose of error correction, and recommended that commenting emphasize meaning over form. Since the goal of this blog was an exchange of cultural ideas, students were requested to write comments focusing on article content, making cultural observations, and asking questions rather than address writing mechanics. The following comment guidelines were agreed

upon by the instructors and distributed to all the student participants:

1. Give some positive feedback about the article. What did you find interesting? What did you learn from reading it?
2. Ask questions to clarify anything that you can not understand in the writing. Give suggestions on information that you think should have been included.
3. Ask questions about the students' interest in their article topic and other related ideas that you might be curious about.
4. Include your name in the comments that you send so that the students know who you are and so you can get points for your grade.
5. Check the blog again to see if the students respond to your questions/comments. You can reply to each other as many times as you like.
6. Be sure to check your own blog for new comments and please answer any questions or respond to the students by making comments on your own blog article.

An additional class was scheduled in a computer-equipped classroom for the KSU students to begin reading the Thai students' articles and writing comments. KSU students began receiving comments in the second week of December, and continued to write comments back to the Thai students into January.

## **Results**

KSU students published 24 articles, students at Khon Kaen University published 26 articles, and students from the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce published 13 articles. The average number of words per article was 368 for KSU Class 11, 400 for KSU Class 13, 755 for KKU students, and 460 for UTCC students. Although an objective instrument for comparing writing ability between the groups was not available, the fact that the Thai participants were all second-year students could account for the greater average length of their articles. A minimum length was not specified in the assignment guidelines.

KSU students received a total of 115 comments from Thai students. The separate comment total for each university could not be determined because not all Thai students posted comments using their real names. The average number of comments received per KSU student article was 5. One article received no comments and the highest number of comments for a single article was 13. KSU students posted 68 comments to the Khon Kaen University class blog and 60 comments to the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce class blog, for a total of 129 comments. This was an average of 2.4 comments per KSU student, which was less than the 3 required in the blog assignment. However, KSU students did post an additional 26 replies to the questions and comments that they received from the Thai students on their own articles. Although students were not assigned to do so, students from KSU and both Thai universities also posted comments to their classmates' articles.

The comments ranged from single sentences to longer multiple-sentence posts on all of the class blogs. The average number of words per comment was 31 for KSU Class 11, 29 for KSU Class 13, and 43 for KKU and TUCC combined.

**Table 1**  
***Number of blog articles, article length, comments and comment length by participant group***

	Articles	Avg. Words/ Article	Received Comments	Written Comments	Avg. Words/ Written Comment
KSU (Class 11)	12	368	72	58	31
KSU (Class 13)	12	400	43	71	29
KKU	26	755	68		
TUCC	13	460	61	* KKU+TUCC = 115	* 43

\* KKU and TUCC totals and averages are combined because of pseudonyms used in comment posts.

The following are examples of comment exchanges from a KSU student blog article about Japanese animation:

*Thai Student Comment 1:*

Japanese cartoons are always light up my imagination whenever I watch it.

There are many popular Japanese cartoons or Japanese animes in Thailand.

And many of them inspire me to try new things!

I've ever seen Doraemon when I was very young and Maruko both in Cartoon version and TV

series that perform by Japanese actors and actresses.

They remind me of my old memories when I was a little girl,sat in front of a television and waited for my favourite cartoon after school.

That was such a good time...~

I still love watching them until today.

Thank you for your interesting info.

*KSU Student Reply:*

Hello (name).

When I was a child ,I also sat in front of a television and looking forward to start cartoons. Of course, I like them now too.

Thank you for your comment!

*Thai Student Comment 2:*

Doraemon is my favorite cartoon. I love it.

Thanks cartoonist.

I would like to know who is create this cartoon?

I'm amazed wirh their creative thinking!

Even though there is long time ago, their Cartoon is still famous.

I never see this cartoon feel tired all.

It's fun. It helps create my imagination.

Thaks for info.

*KSU Student Reply:*

Hello, (name).

Doraemon was created by Fujiko F Fujio.

He is already dead, but his cartoons are very popular still now! "Pa-man" is also his famous work. If possible, you shold try to watch it.

Thnk you for your comment.

The second comment and response show an example of using the comment function of the blog to request and receive additional information about the topic. Many comments contained grammatical, spelling, and typing errors. However, they can be considered as a type of conversation in which students use English for spontaneous communication and interaction.

The URLs for the complete student class blogs are listed for further reference at the end of this paper.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Student experience**

Although it is difficult to measure the effect that the blog exchange had on student writing ability, all of the students involved in the project did complete the task of publishing an English article to their class blogs. Of the various writing assignments that the KSU students were given over the course of the semester, this was the only assignment completed by every student. This could be due to the high level of student enthusiasm for the project witnessed by all of the instructors involved, and also an effect of the collaborative process students engaged in to write their articles as members of a group. Students from all three universities expressed an eagerness to receive and read comments on their articles, and many of the student blog comments reveal that they acquired new knowledge about the other culture or identified cultural similarities and shared interests. Additionally, there were no derogatory comments posted by the participants and no moderation control or deletion by instructors was necessary. For many student participants, this project was their first experience of seeing their writing in a published format and using English writing to communicate with individuals from another culture.

### **2. Cultural observations**

Most of the KSU students had only a vague concept of Thai culture before participating in the blog exchange. They were surprised at the high level of knowledge that the Thai students possessed about Japan, their interest in Japanese popular culture such as animation and music, and also the popularity of Japanese foods in Thailand. Many of the Thai students' articles were about Thai festivals and holidays and the blog comments reflect student observations of the similarities and differences in the celebration of traditional Thai and Japanese events.

### **3. Areas for improvement**

The average number of comment posts written by students fell short of the three required in the assignment instructions. This was partially due to a loss of momentum in the project caused by the year-end vacation break, and the fact that many of the Thai students' articles were not posted until January. When KSU courses resumed in the new year, the focus of class was on preparing for the final writing exam which was only a week away. Although some students posted more than

the minimum amount of comments, this requirement could have been set to a higher number. In addition, starting the project earlier in the semester would have allowed more time and on-campus computer access for students to continue comment writing. A longer period of time for continuing the blog project and a higher target number of comments could also prevent the case of an article receiving no comments, as one KSU student article did in this project. While a lack of comments is unfortunate, allowing students freedom to post comments to articles of their choice is an important factor in creating motivation to share a piece of writing that they believe will appeal to their audience and represents one type of assessment of their work.

#### **4. Future application**

Since this project was conducted as a supplemental activity in courses that had other objectives and assignments, the amount of class time that could be devoted to blog writing and commenting was limited. The creation of a special writing elective course designed around class blog exchanges would allow interested students to publish many articles and comment exchanges over the course of a semester. The new cultural knowledge and experiences that students gain from a blog exchange could also be used as a basis for other writing and discussion activities in the classroom.

The instructors who participated in this blog project all expressed a desire to continue class blog exchanges in the future. It would greatly expand the audience interaction and cultural experience of students to welcome new collaborators from other countries into future exchanges, creating a larger webbing of student class blogs from around the world.

### **Class Blog URLs:**

Kyoto Sangyo University Class Blogs:

<http://ksu-bunkaclass11.blogspot.com/>

<http://ksu-bunkaclass13.blogspot.com/>

Khon Kaen University Class Blog:

<http://englishforminorsii-2009.blogspot.com/>

University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce Class Blog:

<http://communicativewritingii.blogspot.com/>

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## EFLのクラスブログ： 作者／読者の対話と異文化間交流を可能にするプロジェクト

ヒューバート ラッセル ポール

### 要 旨

本研究は、京都産業大学の2つのEFLクラスと、タイ王国（タイ）の二つの大学のクラスとの間で実践された英作文ブログによる交流プロジェクトの報告と検証を行うものである。このプロジェクトでは、英語を学ぶ両大学の学生が英語ブログを通して自国の文化を紹介し、国際EFLのピアとして英文記事を読み合い、ブログコメントとしてフィードバックを交わし合った。EFLの授業においてインターネットブログ作成を取り入れることは、学生の英語作文学習経験の質を向上させる上で、効果的なアクティビティーである。学生による英文記事をクラスブログとして発行し、他のクラスブログとリンクさせることは、オンライン上に学習者コミュニティを作り上げ、英作文の幅広い読者（audience）を確保し、読者同士のコミュニケーションも可能にし、英語学習にITスキルを身につける練習をも統合することができる。また、クラスブログは、英作文による異文化間交流を可能にする効果的な手段でもある。

キーワード：EFL、クラスブログ、英作文、ライティング、オーディエンス、異文化間交流