Using Facebook in an EFL Business English Writing Class in a Thai University: Did It Improve Students' Writing Skills?

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Abstract

Facebook, a social media web 2.0 technology, is a popular social network in ASEAN countries currently playing an important role by being integrating and utilised in education. This study investigated whether Facebook influenced writing performances of university students enrolled in an English for Business Course in Thailand. Data results from written pretests and posttests were analysed by applying T-Test, ANOVA and Scheffe´. Results indicated that students with low, medium and high level of wring proficiency significantly improved their writing performances after interacting via Facebook. However, when comparing the three groups, there is a significant difference in the level of improvement between the three groups. Based on this particular aspect, it is evident that further research investigating the factors affecting the high, medium and low achievers would be beneficial as a means of enhancing students writing ability.

Introduction

Many institutions have introduced technology into the classroom with positive effects with technology literacy becoming one of the vital skills required in the 21st century. However, this technology is not always something new or unusual for the majority of students who obtain many of the skills outside the classroom. E-learning is now integrated and emphasised in the majority of classrooms as it enables interactive, formal and informal learning communication between teacher and students and among students themselves: it is also a vehicle for encouraging student-centred classrooms (Fisher, Exley, Ciobanu, 2014). A number of studies have been undertaken reporting and explaining the benefits and challenges of online learning in higher education (Warschauer, 1998; Koller, Harvey & Magnotta, 2006; Jung, Kudo, Choi, 2012; Ya-Ting, Gamble, Yu-Wan, Tzu-Yun, 2014).

Online learning is defined as a model of instruction that integrates the use of computer technology to enhance and support teaching, learning and assessment in an actual classroom (Balcikanli, 2009). This includes the application of Web 2.0 technologies including social network sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc., blogs, video sharing sites, and web applications. (McCarthy, 2010). These inventive technologies allow people to exchange knowledge, attend online meeting and undertake discussion in real time, never having been possible previously for a learning environment (Shih, 2013). When considering social network sites, Facebook is the most popular social networking site with 1.79 billion active users during September 2016 (Facebook, 2016). Facebook provides the opportunity for people to connect, communicate, comment, entertain and react with people around the world. Features of Facebook include" live", "photo", "check in", like", " love", "haha", " angry", "sad", "profile", "news feed", "messages", "events", "find friends",

"groups", "comment", "share", and "update status" helping people to communicate face-to-face or by written conversation, present and share ideas, undertake discussions through the online discussion board and connect with each other.

Statista (2016) in May 2016 **tracked social network services and found that** among ASEAN countries; Indonesia (77.58 million users) is the top Facebook users following with Philippines (44 million users) and Thailand (35 million users). In addition, Thailand is one of the highest users in terms of members accessing social network platforms with 85.63% of the members accessing Facebook regularly. Interestingly, Thailand is one of 47 countries with more than 50% of its population using Facebook (ZocialRank, 2015).

It becomes apparent, as Facebook allows people to communicate and interact with each other at their own pace and time in a digital culture and environment it is an ideal tool to be integration into education.

However, it seem not easy or successful in some cases, a number of research findings revealed a negative effects on students, for example, Facebook bullying and privacy breakdown (Brydolf, 2007), being unable to separate academic and social life with insufficient time to access Facebook due to the workload from other subjects (Ivala & Gachago, 2012), distraction from studying in the absence of socially supported learning (Gray, Annabell, Kennedy, 2010).

In contrast, the use of Facebook in the classroom was explored resulting in a number of positive indicators. It enhanced developing students' independent learning, motivation, English language competency, cultural understanding, student engagement with the course content, real-life and realistic experience, and personal relationship (Esteves, 2012; Hurt, Moss, Bradley, Larson, Lovelace & Prevost, 2012; Shih, 2013; Hamada, 2013; Razak & Saeed, 2015).

In Thailand, the use of Facebook in face-to-face instruction in higher education has shown positive effects on students' learning and Facebook was integrated in a small number of courses: English Reading Class for non-native learners of English (Boonkit, 2011), XML & Web Services Course (Saikaew, Krutkam, Pattaramanon, Leelathakul, Chipah & Chaosakul, 2011), English oral presentation in a Biology class (Chaovanapricha, 2012), Management Information System (MIS) Course (Ractham, Kaewkitipong & Firpo, 2012). In addition, a study of the relationship between Facebook addiction and mental health among Thai high school students was investigated (Hanprathet, Manwong, Khumsri, Yingyeun & Phanasathit, 2015). It was found that Facebook addiction could cause problems among Thai high school students such as nervousness, lack of sleep, and other personality disorder.

Integrating Facebook in a classroom instruction seems a feasible means for teachers to collaboratively work, communicate and connect with their learners with the ultimate goal of language development, especially in the areas of writing competency as Facebook motivates learners to comfortably practice their second/foreign languages outside the classroom gaining more confidence in participating in language discussion (Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011).

To date, there has been limited empirical research in Thailand on how to effectively implement Facebook in assisting learners in enhance their writing performance in a Business English writing classroom.

Literature Review

An understanding of the relationship between second language methodology and learning theory is crucial as this study focuses on EFL learners (English as a Foreign Language) and its integration with Facebook to plays a role in English writing.

The literature review examines a conceptual framework as follows:

1. Constructivist theory
2. Social constructivist theory
3. Benefits and challenges of student engagement with Facebook
4. Writing in EFL/ESL contexts

1. Constructivism

Chapter 4 of the Thailand National Education Guidelines of the National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) and Amendments (Second National Education Act B.E. 2545 (2002) emphasise student-centred learning, autonomous learning and self-paced learning. In addition, it is a requirement of educational institutions to promote creative thinking and problem solving skills, create a supportive and pleasant **atmosphere** for learning in order to foster well-rounded learners, allowing teachers and students to learn from each other with a variety of instructional media, resources and equipment (Office of the National Education Commission, 2003). The above national education guidelines confirms the major perspectives of learning and instruction related to a learning theory called "constructivism" which promotes meaningful learning with the core concept of individual learning based on learners' prior knowledge and individual experience (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). The authors argued that learners in constructivism build and create meaning and knowledge by applying and connecting the knowledge to the previous experience, yet when the learners are unable to connect the new knowledge with the past knowledge, they will try to alter or adapt the new information to their present knowledge. In other words, they are trying to break the way of thinking by building an understanding of the world around them and this can enhance learners' creative thinking and problem solving skills (Gray, 1997). Pritchard (2005) cited that Jean Piaget, one of the leading supports of constructivism, described the creation of knowledge both by connecting to old knowledge as *assimilation* and by reconstructing knowledge as *accommodation*. In addition, a teacher who is a facilitator in a constructive environment plays an important role in supporting and mentoring during learning process (Wang, 2008).

One of the main features of integrating Facebook as educational tool is to allow people to communicate, interact and share knowledge within a group and this technology enhances learners to use their existing knowledge with a self-motivated approach to discover new knowledge for themselves (Shih, 2013). Ribeiro, Casanova, Nogueira, Moreira, & Almeida (2010) also pointed out that sharing and assimilating knowledge in Facebook enables individuals to construct knowledge and negotiate the meaning outside classroom at any time. Facilitators can enhance the benefits by acting as a guide and a supporter encouraging students the opportunity to seek their own sources of knowledge, information and learning paths.

2. Social Constructivism

Social constructivism was developed from constructivism by Lev Vygotsky who saw that learning depends on social activities in daily life and cultural factors and this leads to the way learners construct knowledge by themselves (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). The authors further stated that individual learning takes place when learners work actively and collaboratively in and outside the classroom, share knowledge, and perform social interaction in cultural surrounding. In other words, they learn to formulate knowledge by their experience through social interaction. In addition, to construct knowledge and understand the world around them, learners need to have a social interaction with more capable learners (i.e., parents, peers, teachers, etc.) and this helps by enhancing

thinking skills and problem solving skills of learners (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). The supporting process for learners to promote learning is called *scaffolding* which is the way that multiple forms of guidance and assistance from the more mature people help to maximize the learner's current level of understanding (Javis, 2005). Not only more knowledgeable people but also a variety of information sources (i.e., virtual learning environment, books, films, video clips, etc.) can be effective and suitable input that fosters learners to perform their knowledge construction. This model of internalised, intellectual and cognitive development is called Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Martin, 2012). Alternatively, the ZPD shows two methods to solve the problems: one with assistance and the other using their own experience/knowledge. According to Lev Vygotsky, scaffolding is a temporary assistance; it will be employed in the beginning to help students to explore the problems and as soon as students can work independently, it will be withdrawn (Martin, 2012).

The use of Facebook in academic engagement offer an opportunity for learners to construct knowledge through social interaction by seeking help from peers and teachers to gain more understanding, particular for homework or ideas (Selwyn, 2009). Facebook allows learners to develop friendship and broaden academic interaction and understanding outside the classroom through an online learning environment (McCarthy, 2010). By helping student to achieve their learning goals, Facebooks assists learners to learn from their peer' work and allows learners to discuss issues outside the regular class time (Shih, 2013).

It is clearly shown that **the above characteristics of** Facebook **promote student-centred learning with knowledge construction occurred in a social interaction environment and the student's active involvement** in their own process of learning.

3. Benefits and challenges of student engagement with Facebook

In current learning situation, it is vital to understand the learners' characteristics as the world has changed rapidly and the Internet has a significant impact not only teaching and learning but also the teachers and students' roles. Students nowadays like to connect, communicate and socialise with friends and acquaintances, share messages and get information through the Internet (Namsu, 2010). In addition, students become more autonomous, enthusiastic in online learning and comfortable in employing technology for communication (Wozniak & Silveira, 2004; Bryer & Chen, 2010). Therefore, instructors need to discover instructional methods that will best suit students with the use of the Web and social networking technologies (Erdem and Kiber, 2014).

There has been considerable research that integrated blended learning focusing on Facebook as a part of educational tool in the learning environment and the findings revealed both benefits and challenges as follows:

3.1 Benefits

For *Instructional Design course* of the Faculty of Education, Erdem and Kiber (2014) pointed out that Facebook is convenient and easy to access as it forms a part of most students' lives and promotes communication between students concerning content of the course. Such findings are consistent with Saikaew, et al. (2011) who reported that students feel comfortable, accessible and approachable learning through learning *XML & Web Services course* with the use of Facebook as a supplementary tool.

The success of implementation of Facebook in learning English language shows that EFL university students "improve their grammar, structure and content,

organisation, and vocabulary" (p. 840) together with teamwork skills development and stress and anxiety reduction (Shih, 2011), the improvement of students' motivation in EFL writing, student engagement and interaction among learners and teacher (Razak, Saeed, Ahmad, 2013). These findings concur with Shih's (2013) view that integrating Facebook in *English for Business Communication Course* increases students' learning motivation and interest, promotes an increase in student interaction, and develops knowledge construction and teamwork. Jackson (2012) revealed that Business School students who are Facebook users have higher levels of retention than the non-members of Facebook.

In summary, Facebook increases positive student engagement, boosts communication and interaction outside classroom between students and the teacher, develops confidence and motivation of learners, fosters knowledge and opportunity to exercise thinking skills and writing skills, and creates meaningful learning experiences through sharing information (Yunus, Salehi, Chenzi, 2012).

3.2 Challenges

Despite these benefits, a number of researchers argue the benefit of integrating Facebook into the classroom due to concerns of distraction in the classroom, student's failure to see the advantages of Facebook in an educational context, safety and privacy for individual students, and the inappropriateness of teacher-student interactions using Facebook.

Facebook can distract students away from their learning as they spent time surfing the social networking site and enjoyed their time on the Internet that leads to the academic work reduction and the disruption of learning process (Shih, 2011; Yunus, et al., 2012). However, Gray et al. (2010) advised that educators should be aware of this interruption and guide students to use Facebook correctly in a virtual learning environment.

According to Wit, Verhoeven & Elen (2013) undergraduate students in Belgium failed to see that Facebook might be advantageous to their learning; they could not explain or understand how Facebook could possibly enhance their learning in higher education. Nevertheless, Wang (2013) suggested it is a function of the teachers to overcome this resistant and highlight the advantages Facebook may have on their academic lives.

Malita (2011) raised the potential issue of privacy matters and online safety for students while using Facebook as a part of course activities. Dixon (2012) stated that many students are not aware of potential dangers regarding the disclosure of private and personal information and the use of online security and the potential in some cases of cyberbullying. The author further advised educators to provide student training and to monitor student online activity to ensure cyber security.

Finally, there were concerns of the appropriateness of teacher-student interaction on Facebook (Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011; Dixon, 2012). According to Teclehaimanot & Hickman (2011), the reluctance to interact with teachers on Facebook can create a negative impact on students' learning achievement. The researcher's findings suggested that communication with their teacher on Facebook seems to be more acceptable to male than to female students. However, the researchers also commented the teacher need to be aware of the individual's attitudes of interaction using Facebook and should be specific regarding the particular activity and inform students of the advantages of the particular online tasks.

In conclusion, it is important to address the challenges of Facebook and methods to successfully integrating this into the classroom. It has been demonstrated

that employing social media in the classroom is a practical and influential addition of education for students'.

4. Writing in EFL/ESL contexts
4.1 English situation in Thailand
English language has become the global language (Northrup, 2013) as globalisation influences the world's politics, economy, education, culture, technology and society, English is being used as the common language by people from different countries and culture to communicate (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries including Thailand, English is mandated as the working language (Baker, 2012). Therefore, English has become a vital language in Thailand to open a variety of career opportunities for Thai people. The importance of the English language has been known since 1895, it was introduced into Thai education as a core course for the Thai Education curriculum and it became a compulsory subject in 1996 (Simpson, 2011). Furthermore, English is the language in all international curricula in Thailand and for intercultural communication (Baker, 2012). However, research has indicated low academic achievement for Thai students in English subjects due mainly to problematic teaching, learning procedures, insufficient budget, ineffective classroom management, poor English proficiency of teachers, poor learning skills, and the low confidence of learners (Simpson, 2011; Baker, 2012).

4.2 Writing skills for Thai students
Writing is the most effective method of communications to enhance learners in expressing ideas and opinions, either in their mother tongue or in a second language. Writing reflects the language acquisition as learners have to write using vocabulary learnt in the classroom, sentences structure, paragraphs together with integrating grammar (Bello, 1997)

Writing in English for Thai students is challenging with high school students having little or no knowledge of writing in English (Dueraman, 2012). The author commented; while studying at university unless they are students majoring in English language they are unlikely to have any training in how to compose an English paragraph or essay. Students not majoring in English may experience English language by private tutoring or attending additional courses outside their core subjects. A number of studies have reviewed the problem of writing skills and concur that the basic levels of Thai university students is below standard (Sersen, 2011; Watcharapunyawong& Usaha, 2013).

The teaching of writing should begin as a first step for all academic courses with several approaches introduced to teach writing in the classroom using EFL/ESL contexts. Writing focusing on the product and process approach and academics agree that these two concepts could be used in EFL/ESL an educational contexts. This will enhance the students' English language writing especially in a mixed ability group of students with a few hours of learning per week (Hasan& Akhand, 2010).

In relation to the literature review regarding benefits and challenges of Facebook as an educational tool, it is clearly shown that research into Facebook integrated among EFL/ESL learners in writing is limited (*see also* Shih, 2011, Yunus, et al., 2012; Razak, et al., 2013; Shih, 2013). Since most EFL/ESL learners are familiar with Facebook (Boonkit, 2011), this study implemented Facebook as an online discussion board where learners posted their written draft and received feedback from their peers and teacher, errors were discussed, reflection and clarifying

ideas were also raised and discussed. This online discussion board was outside the classroom context and allowed the learners to engage in an active, productive and supportive learning environment. Razak & Saeed (2014) described the use of Facebook as a communication platform that promoted learner's cognition and writing development and enhanced the learning experience.

Research Questions
This research aimed to answer the followings:

1. Does the use of Facebook influence the overall Thai students' writing performances?
2. To what extent does Facebook influence students having high, intermediate or low levels of writing proficiency?

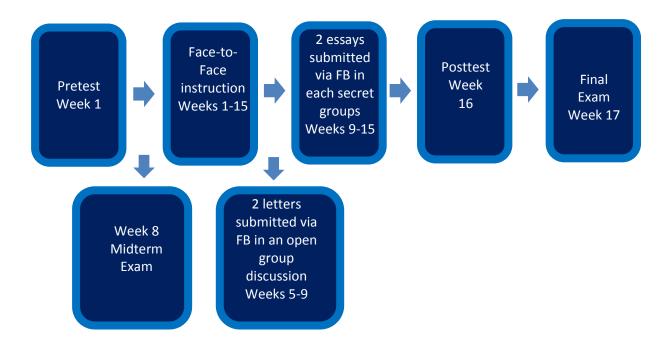**Methodology**
1. Research participants
The participants of this study were 50 third year students majoring in English, Faculty of Humanities at a public Thai University. Students' were allocated into 3 groups based on their grades from the Essay *Writing Course* undertaken in the 2014 academic year. (Group High = Grade A & B+, Group Medium = Grade B & C+, Group Low = Grade C and below). A survey at the beginning of the research identified all participants as extensive users of Facebook. They regularly logged on to Facebook posting their photos, comments and chatting with friends, all were familiar and confident with all of Facebook's features.

2. Research instruments: Pre-Posttests of English writing skills
These tests developed by the researcher who at the same time was an instructor having taught the English for Business course for more than 4 years. The researcher reviewed the test content to ensure it matched the course objectives and the test specification (Brown, 1996), the test questions originated from the previous academic year midterm and final tests. The pre and posttests was the same test and given to all students at the beginning and the last week of the semester. In both tests, the students were required to write a letter and an essay on business. The scoring criteria used in this study reviewed five main points: content, organisation, structure, vocabulary and spelling.

3. Data collection procedure
The duration of this study was 17 weeks (August – November, 2015), consisting of 15 instruction weeks,1 week for midterm examination and 1 week for final examination. From weeks 9-15, Facebook was implemented. The research procedures shown in Figure 1.

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│          │    │ Face-to- │    │ 2 essays │    │          │    │          │
│          │    │  Face    │    │submitted │    │ Posttest │    │  Final   │
│ Pretest  │ →  │instruction│ → │ via FB in│ →  │  Week    │ →  │  Exam    │
│ Week 1   │    │Weeks 1-15│    │each secret│   │   16     │    │ Week 17  │
│          │    │          │    │ groups   │    │          │    │          │
│          │    │          │    │Weeks 9-15│    │          │    │          │
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┌──────────┐    ┌──────────┐
│          │    │ 2 letters│
│  Week 8  │    │submitted via│
│ Midterm  │    │ FB in an open│
│  Exam    │    │  group   │
│          │    │discussion│
│          │    │Weeks 5-9 │
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In August 2015, the 50 students enrolled in *English for Business Course* were requested to join the open group discussion on Facebook using a forum created for their review and input. The purpose was to allow the researcher / teacher to contact the group, to post feedback to each student and to allow all students to see each other's work, consisting two letter-writing assignments in weeks 4-9. In addition, students could also share and exchange ideas related to their regular studies in an informal socialising space. Prior to week 9, and for the following weeks (9-15) they were to divide and create their own secret groups (9 groups in total) with each group containing an equal number of members from high, middle and low levels of writing proficiency. Only the individual members of each could see their posted essays on Facebook. Students gave their secret group names, for example, Business English #1, Business Empire #2, Business Navigator#3, etc.

During Weeks 4-9, the teacher taught face-to-face in the classroom following the course content and the course syllabus; in addition, extra tasks were posted on the Facebook group. Students was required to write and present their work, scheduled two days a week during 8.00-11.00 pm, the teacher would give feedback to each student and discuss points of interest related to the online assignments. Each student was required to contribute feedback to at least 5 members for each of the two letters before a final comment was offered by the teacher. To submit the final draft, students were encouraged to ask and discuss via two channels: private message through Messenger (one of Facebook's features) or an open discussion room. The final draft for each student and each letter was then posted on the Facebook page including the final comment from the teacher.

Weeks 9-15, besides attending regular class, the students were requested to write two essays on business to be posted in their own secret groups for feedback from their peers. Each member of each group must give feedback to each of their group. After rewriting and resubmitting there letter online, the teacher responded to everyone the following day. The appointment of online chat was scheduled for three days a week

during 8.00-11.00 pm. commencing week 9. They could ask questions or give comments in the live group conversation using Messenger. The completed draft was posted in their secret groups with the final comment from the teacher. Every participant was encouraged to socialise online daily.

Data Analysis

For this paper, the data derived from the pretest and posttest was analysed by using Paired T-test for comparing the differences between pretest and posttest and Scheffee for examining whether there was a significant difference on writing proficiency between three groups: low vs high, low vs medium, and middle vs high.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the current study according to the two research questions:

1. Does the use of Facebook influence the overall Thai students' writing performances?

The quantitative analysis of the pre-posttests indicated that the use of Facebook made the difference in the writing performances for three groups of participants (Table 1).

Table 1: The comparison between pretest and posttest of each group

High-level group

Test	Mean	S.D	t	Sig
Pretest	24.33	1.97	12.002**	.000
Postest	42.67	4.30		

** $p < .01$

Medium-level group

Test	Mean	S.D	t	Sig
Pretest	18.85	4.27	18.112**	.000
Postest	37.75	2.27		

** $p < .01$

Low-level group

Test	Mean	S.D	t	Sig
Pretest	11.94	4.95	34.010**	.000
Postest	34.35	3.16		

** $p < .01$

As the results of the paired T-test indicate, there are differences between the means of the pretest and posttest results of the three groups and there are statistically significant differences at the level of 0.01. To clarify, this pointed out that the improvement in the test scores of posttests of the three groups is apparent.

2. To what extent does Facebook influence students who have high, intermediate and low level of writing proficiency?

The investigation of the value of significant difference of writing performance of each group of participants after the treatment was conducted (Table 2)

Table 2: The comparison of posttest between groups

Group	Scores		F	Sig
	x̄	S.D.		
High	42.67	4.30		
Medium	37.75	2.27	21.13**	.000
Low	34.35	3.16		

** p < .01

In the above table, there were statistically significant differences between the means of the three groups on the posttests of writing as determined by one way ANOVA (F= 21.13, p < .01). To determine which specific groups had any significant differences in their writing performance, Post-Hoc Scheffe's Tests are run to compare where the differences occurred between groups (Table 3).

Table 3: the comparison of the significant difference of the three groups' writing performance

Group	Mean Difference (MD)	Sig
Low vs High	10.523**	.000
Low vs Medium	5.607**	.001
Medium vs High	4.917*	.023

*p < .05
** p < .01

Based on the results displayed in Table 3, it represents that after the treatment, there was significant difference between the low and high groups (p < .01)**.**

There was a significant difference between the low and the medium groups on the posttest of writing (MD = 5.607, p < .01). Therefore, there is significant difference between the two groups.

Similarly, there was significant difference between the medium and high groups (p < .05) on the posttest of writing.

From the above graphs, it is clear that the use of technology in the classroom has supported and strengthened the learning process of EFL. Facebook as a learning tool can enhance collaborative learning and meaningful interactions leading to knowledge construction (Saaty, 2015). In this study, the teacher gave opportunities for students to ask questions and ensured meaningful individual feedback through discussion using online Facebook. Students were encouraged to ask about their mistakes and assisted in correcting themselves with guidance from their group members or the teacher. Interacting with students of mixed ability, reviewing and commenting on each other's writing assignments as well as access to their teacher, they not only shared content and ideas but also topics related to writing proficiency together with the rules of English usage. Facebook facilitated the social communication between peers and the teacher and involved changes in cognitive process and abilities through discussion. In addition, students seemed more relaxed and more open in their discussions. Facebook in conjunction with the student interaction and assistance from the teacher genuinely enhanced student participation in the learning venture (Hou, Wang, Lin, Chang, 2015). Evidence showing the gain in writing skills is supported by Hamada' (2013)

project undertaken with Japanese university students utilising Facebook. In addition, evidence showing the writing proficiency corresponded to the findings of Ping (2015) in her study on the effectiveness of Facebook group discussions on English writing performance in Malaysia.

It is clearly shown that even though Facebook was only partially used in the teaching of writing, it had a positive influence on each of the three groups. The analysis showed significant unequal differences in the increase of each group. This means there are other factors affecting the students' writing abilities such as; the level of English proficiency, time spent on online discussion, motivation of learners, support and feedback given by teacher, or other students', or interpersonal interaction.

Further research to investigate the factors affecting the high, medium, and low achievers' performance in writing would be beneficial in developing the use of Facebook as an effective means to improve learning.

Conclusion

In this paper, the results of utilising Facebook as a learning tool has shown that the high, medium and low achievers significantly improved their writing performance. However, when employing multiple comparison tests, there were significant differences among the posttest scores of three groups. This has real implications for the classroom requiring the need to examine the factors that affected the performance of different achiever levels.

It is important, also, to address the limitation of this study. These results are only a portion of the whole research, which also investigated how Facebook facilitated the students' collaboration and interaction and the perception of students towards the student-teacher interaction of Facebook.

Future research might investigate the use of Facebook in other skill of English language study as well as integrating this approach into other areas of education in Thailand.

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