

A Process Approach to Writing to Develop Thai EFL Students' Socio-Cognitive Skills

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Abstract

In a competitive and product-driven EFL classroom context, more and more teaching approaches have been geared primarily toward assisting students to master language skills rather than building up their socio-cognitive skills. Both blended skills are crucial to students' future academic and professional success. This paper reports on a study investigating whether and how a process approach to writing instructions helps develop the socio-cognitive skills of 24 first-year Thai Sports Science undergraduate students. The study also explores the students' opinions about this approach to their socio-cognitive skills development. The quantitative data from the scores of group writing tasks, socio-cognitive skills and self-assessment indicate that in addition to the students' improved writing ability, the approach enhanced their socio-cognitive development at different degrees. Three underlying causes of such degrees are discussed. The qualitative results from ten students' interview responses show that the process-approach instruction was viewed as a useful means to develop their affective, social, and cognitive processes. The paper concludes with implications and recommendations for further studies.

1 Background

Due to the coming economic integration of Thailand into the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, there has been increasing recognition of the pressing need to produce quality graduates with greater English competency from educational institutions, particularly at tertiary levels. In the Thai Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, the institutions are required to promote the basic features of becoming "quality global citizens" (i.e. ethics and morals, knowledge, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and responsibility, and numerical analysis, communication and information technology skills) to their students (Chulalongkorn University, 2009).

Although the institutions have tried to respond to such educational needs, they must face the fact that challenges of teaching language skills in EFL classrooms still exist. Based on most university English-language curricula of foundation English courses in Thailand, writing has been conventionally taught through the product-oriented approach emphasizing mainly summative assessment in the form of test or exam scores. However, one illustration of Thai learners' unsatisfactory English proficiency is their average scores for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL; Educational Testing Service, 2007) compared with the higher average scores of some ASEAN member countries such as Malaysia and the Philippines. As a result of Thai learners' lower English proficiency, the effectiveness of the product-oriented approach has been questioned, and instructional approaches have been changed to be more process-oriented.

In the large EFL classes, most individual students frequently strive to pass English-skill exams and/or to be the best. The classroom atmosphere has thus become much more competitive. Students then seem to lack in social interaction with classmates and in motivation to learn English in class, thereby, unsuccessfully mastering communication skills. Moreover, students scarcely develop cognitive skills as they tended to possess a recitation style of learning rather than a critical-thinking style. These challenges can be obstructive to the promotion of students' English language proficiency in communication as well as their social and cognitive skills. To help students achieve both language and socio-cognitive skills, the process approach is also believed to be able to improve language instruction. However, this process approach has rarely been implemented in Thai EFL classroom instruction in which the learning product (e.g. scores and grades) is often more emphasized than the learning process (e.g. learning activities and classroom participation) specified in the English language curriculum.

2 Related literature

2.1 Process approach to writing instruction

In English language teaching, writing is considered a skill included in core academic skills and the most complex skill to be mastered when compared to the other three communicative skills – reading, listening, and speaking (Krashen, 1984; Makalela, 2004; Nunan, 1990). The term “writing” is viewed as a meaning-created process (Zamel, 1982). In an EFL writing class, language teachers need to not only teach the English language but also simplify the complex writing process for their students. In order to facilitate the students' language learning process and writing skill mastery, a process approach to writing should be introduced in the writing process.

In classroom practice, the process-oriented instruction includes the decisions writers make about the audience and topic during a sequence of writing steps: prewriting, drafting, writing, and rewriting (Goldstein & Carr, 1996, as cited in Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007; Oshima & Hogue, 2006). When foreign language students experience the ideal approach, they will generally learn how to generate ideas, write them in English, and then edit their writing in a writing task. Previous studies have pointed out the benefits of the process approach. The steps in the approach help the students learn how to write systematically and effectively (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007; Sokolik, 2003) and subsequently enhance students' writing fluency (Bello, 1997; Chandrasegaran, 2002) and language accuracy (Carroll & Swain, 1993; Chandrasegaran, 2002).

It is suggested that process-oriented writing instructions need to address emotions surrounding writing, build confidence and motivation in writers, and teach writing skills (e.g. sentence construction, organization, or ideas and content). The purpose in process approach instruction is for “cognitive and psychological skills to become automatized for writers so that they do not have to start from scratch with each new writing event” (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007, p. 30). Additionally, the process approach has been considered more effective than other approaches in terms of helping learners to be active in discovering and understanding a target language (Bourke, 2008), improving writing attitudes (Littlewood, 2009), and achieving learning outcomes (Myles, 2002; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007).

2.2 Socio-cognitive skills development

Social and cognitive aspects in language development are inter-related. In the social cognitive theory, language learning and acquisition and cognitive skills mastery occur in a social context through interaction (Bandura, 1989). With today's communicative features in learning and mastering writing skills, social interaction has become indispensable in the classroom (Richards & Lockhart, 1995). This implies that classroom interactions between a teacher and students and among the students themselves are inevitable. Teacher-student and student-student interactions produce mutual communication, promoting cooperation and collaboration. Ideally, students are assumed to have an even chance to interact with one another in class. But in reality, the amount of natural in-

teraction among students in a class is not always equal owing to their patterns of interactional competence. Students' abilities to interact in the classroom through learning patterns of interaction and classroom behavior or interactional competence cover the knowledge of "the etiquette of classroom interaction," "the rules of individual and collaborative work," "when to ask and answer questions," "how and when to get assistance or feedback in completing a task," and "appropriate rules for displaying knowledge" (Tikunoff, 1985a, 1985b, as cited in Richards & Lockhart, 1995, pp. 141–144).

In the interactions of learning a language, students are expected to work together in groups to share information, solve a problem, complete a learning task, receive feedback on task performance and achieve a learning purpose (Littlewood, 2009; Reid, 1993). Group writing is one of the suggested writing activities that activate interaction among students themselves (Yung, 2010). According to Vygotsky (1978), group interaction promotes the learning process and, subsequently, cognitive development. In group writing, conversations between a teacher and students and among students themselves can enhance students' social interaction and critical thinking.

In a writing class, teaching the process approach contributes to students' cognitive process. Cognitive process is referred to as "any mental process which learners make use of in language learning such as inferencing, generalization, deductive learning, monitoring, and memorizing" (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1999, p. 60). In the process-oriented approach, students are given opportunities to use their cognitive processes or their ability to compose content or express ideas (Silva, 1997) and to think, decide and apply their writing content to a topic, as well as revise language structures to write more accurately (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). In this paper, it is believed that students' socio-cognitive skills can be developed through the intervention of group writing throughout the process-oriented approach to writing instructions. Four main aspects of the socio-cognitive skills (adapted from Johnson & Johnson, 1996) consist of facilitates understanding, intellectual challenge, cooperative attitude, and leadership skills, each of which contains particular features as shown in Table 2.

3 The study

This study was carried out at a university in Bangkok, Thailand, at the beginning of the first semester of the 2012 academic year. The procedure was divided into three stages: the development of research instruments, the implementation of these instruments and the adoption of a process approach, and the evaluation of the process-approach instruction to develop students' socio-cognitive skills.

3.1 Participants

From the total of 26 volunteers enrolled in Foundation English I, two were finally excluded from the data analysis due to their incomplete participation in the study. Thus, the participants were 24 first-year Thai undergraduates students from the Faculty of Sports Science: 16 females (67%) and 8 males (33%).

In group writing activities, all of the 24 participants were divided into six groups of four. Within each group, the participants were further divided into two groups: competent users (C) and less competent users (LC) based on their university entry scores of English proficiency.

3.2 Instruments and data collection

The research instruments of this study were designed to collect triangulated data: quantitative data (i.e. the scores from students' group writing tasks, socio-cognitive skills checklist, and students' self-assessment) and qualitative data (i.e. semi-structured interview responses). It should be noted that prior to the actual use of these instruments, the validity and the reliability of the instruments were verified.

To assure the content validity of the instruments, the researcher adjusted the content as suggested by three experts and revised it after a pilot study. Regarding the pilot study, the instruments were tested to establish their reliability with 30 first-year Sports Science students, who were not the participants of this current study, in the first semester of the 2011 academic year. The instruments were statistically analyzed using the formula of the Cronbach alpha coefficient. The reliability indices of the socio-cognitive skills checklist and the self-assessment checklist were .80 and .81.

3.2.1 Group writing tasks

Writing tasks were assigned to the participants in accordance with the writing lessons of the compulsory English I course. The tasks contain three writing types: narratives, pros and cons, and opinions. Each writing type covers two writing topics. The total number of the assigned writing tasks was six pieces (i.e. three group tasks and three individual tasks). Through group writing, the participants had writing experience in three assigned writing topics: *Most Memorable Experience*, *Mobile Phones*, and *TV Turnoff Week* on narratives, pros and cons, and opinions, respectively (see Table 1). The three writing topics were assigned in class so that the participants could have an opportunity to practice process writing in groups.

3.2.2 Socio-cognitive skills checklist

After a teacher had guided the participants on how to perform the process-oriented writing, group writing tasks were assigned based on the three writing types. During the group writing of each writing type, the 18-item socio-cognitive skills checklist, adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1996), was utilized by the teacher (see Table 2).

3.2.3 Self-assessment checklist

The participants were assigned to do their self-assessment after the completion of each group writing task. To cross-measure the socio-cognitive skills development, the 10-item self-assessment checklist, adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1996), was utilized based on the same four aspects as noted above: facilitates understanding, intellectual challenge, cooperative attitude, and leadership skills (see Table 3).

3.2.4 A semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted for additional in-depth data as the last step of data collection. The interview aimed to examine more about participants' opinions about their socio-cognitive skills development following the use of the process approach to writing instructions. Two groups of five participants (i.e. five in the competent group, and five in the less competent group) participated in the interview (see Table 4).

These instruments were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data based on three research questions:

- 1) Does the process approach to writing instructions help develop first-year undergraduate students' socio-cognitive skills? If so, to what extent can the process approach help develop their socio-cognitive skills?
- 2) How can the process approach to writing instructions help develop the students' socio-cognitive skills?
- 3) What are the students' opinions about the process approach to writing instructions on their socio-cognitive skills?

3.3 Data analysis

In this study, the process approach to writing instructions was regarded as an independent variable, while the participants’ socio-cognitive skills development was considered a dependent variable. With regard to the research questions, the average scores of the three group writing tasks (i.e. narratives, pros and cons, and opinions) were assessed based on the writing criteria (i.e. content, organization, mechanics and grammar) of the course. Other quantitative data were analyzed from the responses in the teacher’s socio-cognitive skills checklist and student’s self-assessment checklists using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program for such descriptive statistics as percentage and mean values. For the qualitative data, the content analysis was employed in the participants’ interview responses.

4 Results

The results of the research questions in this study are derived from the classroom interaction in the form of group writing. The diagram of classroom interaction in the study is illustrated in Figure 1.

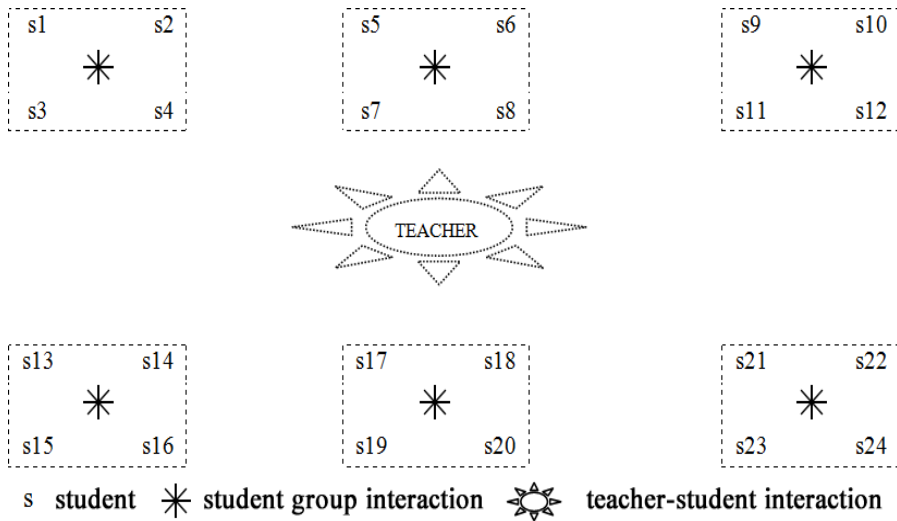


Fig. 1. Classroom interaction: Teacher-student, student-teacher and student-student

All relevant data were collected in the classroom setting to answer the following research questions.

4.1 The extent of process approach to writing instructions developing socio-cognitive skills

4.1.1 Group writing task scores

The first quantitative analysis on the participants’ group writing was employed through three assigned writing tasks – narratives, pros and cons, and opinions. The writing assessment of the group writing tasks was made based on the writing criteria (i.e. content, organization, mechanics and grammar). The average scores of the participants’ group writing tasks, derived from the teacher intra-rating with a two-week interval per group writing task, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' group writing task scores

Group no.	Narratives (10)		Pros & Cons (20)		Opinions (25)	
	Topic 1: "Most Memorable Experience"	Topic 2	Topic 1: "Mobile Phones"	Topic 2	Topic 1: "TV Turnoff Week"	Topic 2
1	6.5	N/A	13.25	N/A	16.25	N/A
2	8	N/A	15	N/A	20	N/A
3	7	N/A	16	N/A	17.25	N/A
4	7.5	N/A	16.25	N/A	19	N/A
5	8	N/A	16	N/A	21	N/A
6	7	N/A	15.75	N/A	18	N/A
Mean scores of writing tasks	7.33 (≈ 73%)		15.38 (≈ 77%)		18.58 (≈ 74%)	
Mean score of the overall group writing	←----- ≈75% -----→					

Notes. 1. Group writing Topic 1 scores of three writing types were merely focused in this study.
 2. N/A = Not applicable due to the individual students' different writing topics for Topic 2

The average scores of the group writing tasks by percentage, presented in Table 1, can be plotted in the bar graph as shown in Figure 2.

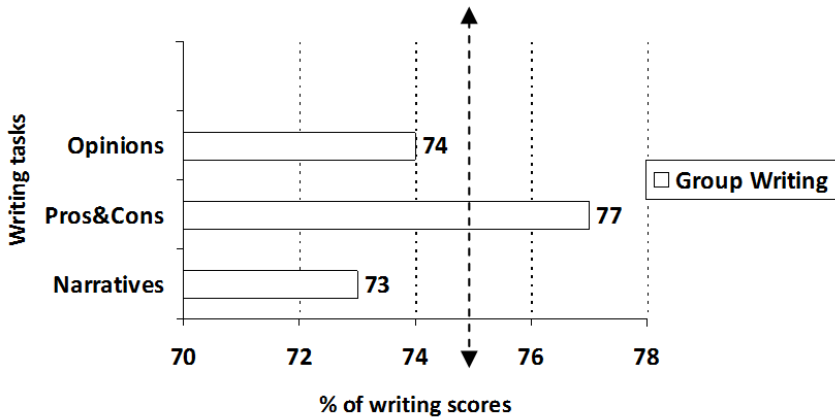


Fig. 2. Participants' average written task scores

Three group-writing tasks of six participant groups, in Table 1, were scored at an average of approximately 73%, 77%, and 74% on narratives, pros and cons, and opinions, respectively. Overall, it can be seen that the participants' group writing performance is agreeable in terms of their average score of all three group-writing tasks of approximately 75%, which falls into the above-average range of 70%.

4.1.2 Socio-cognitive skills checklist scores

Some students informed their teacher that they felt uncomfortable being videotaped for this study. A decision was then made not to videotape their group writing activities. In order to ensure accurate assessment and to facilitate the assessment process on the students' socio-cognitive skills, the students were required to wear their number tags (i.e. from numbers 1 to 24) every time they undertook group writing activities. At a time when the participants were producing each group writing task (i.e. narratives, pros and cons, and opinions), their teacher roamed around the class and evaluated their socio-cognitive skills through a checklist (adapted from Johnson & Johnson, 1996) for the entirely 1.5-hour class time. In the checklist, the participants' socio-cognitive skills were measured at three levels: Needs Improvement (N), Satisfactory (S) and Excellent (E) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participants' socio-cognitive scores through group writing

Skill (n = 24)	Narratives			Pros and Cons			Opinions			Skill Interpretation
	N	S	E	N	S	E	N	S	E	
1. Facilitates Understanding	N (Mean = .65)			S (Mean = .71)			S (Mean = .71)			
1.1 Seeks/corrects accuracy	.54	.46	0	.25	.46	.29	.25	.75	0	S (Mean: .69)
1.2 Relates new learning to old	1.0	0	0	.29	.71	0	0	.50	.50	
1.3 Helps group recall knowledge	.87	.13	0	.13	.83	.04	0	.83	.17	
1.4 Checks for understanding	.17	.83	0	.04	.83	.13	0	.75	.25	
2. Intellectual Challenge	N (Mean = .64)			S (Mean = .70)			S (Mean = .77)			
2.1 Criticizes ideas, not people	.50	.50	0	0	.58	.42	0	.79	.21	S (Mean: .70)
2.2 Differentiates members' ideas	.58	.42	0	0	.79	.21	0	.75	.25	
2.3 Integrates members' ideas	.63	.37	0	0	.71	.29	0	.75	.25	
2.4 Asks for rationale, justification	.83	.17	0	.29	.71	0	0	.79	.21	
3. Cooperative Attitude	S (Mean = .61)			S (Mean = .85)			S (Mean = .69)			
3.1 Stays with group, no wandering	0	1.0	0	0	1.0	0	0	1.0	0	S (Mean: .72)
3.2 Takes turns	.83	.17	0	0	.83	.17	0	.67	.33	
3.3 Is positive about group work	.33	.67	0	0	.83	.17	0	.70	.30	
3.4 Is willing to help others	.46	.54	0	0	.79	.21	.13	.54	.33	
3.5 Shows courtesy towards others	.33	.67	0	0	.79	.21	.13	.54	.33	
4. Leadership Skills	N (Mean = .67)			S (Mean = .66)			S (Mean = .70)			
4.1 Contributes ideas, opinions	.46	.54	0	0	.71	.29	0	.79	.21	S (Mean: .68)
4.2 Requests others' ideas, opinions	.58	.42	0	.29	.63	.08	0	.79	.21	
4.3 Summarizes, integrates	.63	.37	0	.33	.59	.08	0	.75	.25	
4.4 Encourages others' participation	.83	.17	0	.21	.71	.08	.08	.59	.33	
4.5 Supports, gives recognition and praise	.87	.13	0	.25	.67	.08	.08	.59	.33	

Note: N= Needs Improvement S = Satisfactory E = Excellent

In Table 2, the results indicate that the average levels of all participants' socio-cognitive skills development following group writing practices were at the Satisfactory Level. The means for Cooperative Attitude, Intellectual Challenge, Facilitates Understanding and Leadership Skills were .72, .70, .69 and .68, respectively.

4.2 How process approach to writing instructions developed socio-cognitive skills

4.2.1 Self-assessment checklist scores

To determine how the process approach to writing instructions through individual types of group writing affected the participants' socio-cognitive skills development, the quantitative results in Table 3 are from the 24 participants' self-assessment checklist scores. The scores in each socio-cognitive behavior represent the frequency that the participants assessed their own socio-cognitive behaviors following the completion of each group writing activity. In the checklist adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1996), there are ten selective socio-cognitive behaviors to be rated, by the participants based on three levels of the self-assessment: Needs improvement (N), Satisfactory (S), and Excellent (E), and also evaluated by the teacher based on four main aspects of socio-cognitive skills: Facilitates Understanding, Intellectual Challenge, Cooperative Attitude, and Leadership Skills.

Table 3. Participants' self-assessment scores

Behavior (n = 24)	Narratives			Pros and Cons			Opinions			Socio-Cognitive Skills Measurement
	N	S	E	N	S	E	N	S	E	
1. I understand the task.	.21	.46	.33	0	.29	.71	.13	.54	.33	Facilitates Understanding: S
	S			E			S			
	(Mean = .43)									
2. I am thinking aloud by explaining step by step how to complete the assignment.	.54	.38	.08	.21	.50	.29	.21	.58	.21	Cooperative Attitude: S
	N			S			S			
	(Mean = .49)									
3. I search for new information and understanding.	.29	.50	.21	.42	.58	0	.21	.50	.29	Facilitates Understanding: S
	S			S			S			
	(Mean = .53)									
4. I complete work on time.	.33	.38	.29	0	.42	.58	0	.62	.38	Cooperative Attitude: S
	S			E			S			
	(Mean = .47)									
5. I check work.	.46	.33	.21	.33	.42	.25	.21	.41	.38	Facilitates Understanding: S
	N			S			S			
	(Mean = .39)									
6. I welcome challenge.	.54	.29	.17	.50	.44	.08	.50	.37	.13	Intellectual Challenge: N
	N			N			N			
	(Mean = .51)									
7. I accept responsibilities.	.54	.46	0	.17	.58	.25	.21	.54	.25	Leadership Skills: S
	N			S			S			
	(Mean = .53)									
8. I strive for high quality work.	.46	.25	.29	.25	.54	.21	.17	.49	.34	Intellectual Challenge: S
	N			S			S			
	(Mean = .43)									
9. I ask for help appropriately.	.42	.37	.21	.33	.54	.13	.25	.50	.25	Intellectual Challenge: S
	N			S			S			
	(Mean = .47)									
10. I participate in discussions.	.17	.62	.21	.13	.58	.29	0	.62	.38	Cooperative Attitude: S
	S			S			S			
	(Mean = .61)									
Total Average Socio-Cognitive Behaviors	N (mean = .49)			S (mean = .53)			S (mean = .53)			

Note: N= Needs Improvement S = Satisfactory E = Excellent

The participants rated their socio-cognitive skills development after experiencing writing Narratives at the majority level of Needs Improvement (mean = .49), Pros and Cons at the majority level of Satisfactory (mean = .53), and Opinions at the majority level of Satisfactory (mean = .53). Regarding the participants' socio-cognitive behavior as shown in Table 3, nine out of ten socio-cognitive behaviors were rated at the Satisfying (S) Level with different mean values. Among the different mean values of the Satisfying Level, the highest mean value (mean = .61) falls into the socio-cognitive behavior number 10 ("I participate in discussions."), demonstrating the aspect of Cooperative Attitude in the socio-cognitive skills. Obviously, there is only one socio-cognitive behavior rated at the Need Improvement (N) level (mean = .51) from item number 6 ("I welcome challenge.") possessing the aspect of Intellectual Challenge in the socio-cognitive skills.

4.3 Opinions about process approach to writing instructions to their socio-cognitive skills

The qualitative data involving the opinions about process approach to writing instructions to developing the participants' socio-cognitive skills were analyzed based on two groups of the participants, the competent (C) and the less competent (LC) groups. The semi-structured interview contained two structured interview questions and one open-ended interview question based on what the researcher found interesting and relevant to this current study. The data from the first interview question are the participants' opinions on whether the process approach to writing instructions can develop their socio-cognitive skills, the data from the second interview question are their views on how the process approach to writing instructions can develop their socio-cognitive skills, and the data from the third open-ended question are their further comments (if any) on the process approach to writing instructions.

Extracts from the content analysis of the interview responses of both groups of participants show that they all agreed that the process approach to writing instructions could develop their socio-cognitive skills. They further revealed that they could learn how to write systematically from their teacher and classmates.

- C4: ... Although I sometimes felt kind of spending too much time on group writing discussion, I had learned more than before like how to write systematically in each type of writing. ...
- C5: ... After learning how to writing systematically, I started to check my writing before I submitted my written tasks in class. Understanding the process approach could help me more cautious about writing in English. ...
- LC1: ... I could learn how to write narratives, pros and cons, and opinions step by step from classmates and the teacher. I felt good when I was assigned to write in group ...
- LC 2: ... Sometimes when I couldn't follow the workshop, during the group discussion, I could ask my group classmates and learned how to write from them... I mean, I could learn from sharing ideas during group discussion before starting to write ...

Both groups were also aware of their own learning and writing processes and of the usefulness of the process approach to developing their writing ability and enhancing their social interaction.

- C1: ... Having a chance to practice the process approach of writing in English helped to remind me of the writing processes and the writing components in each writing type... Also, I enjoyed working with my classmates though we sometimes disagreed with some points of writing content. ...
- C2: ... When I worked with classmates in group writing, I could learn through group discussion. I realized that I did not know and sometimes misunderstood some points of English language grammar as well as writing components ...
- LC1: ... Learning how to write step by step like this is really new to me. I never had such writing training before. It is really good ...

- LC2: ... I found writing the most difficult skill of English for me. Quite often, I had nothing to say during group discussion because I couldn't think much writing content, nor did I know much grammar ...
- LC3: ... I think writing is still the most difficult skill for me. By the way, it is good to learn how to write step by step. ...
- LC4: ... I think practicing writing through process approach in group is a hard job. I felt less confident when discussing with those classmates who seemed to be more knowledgeable. ... Well, I think I still have problems with understanding written feedback because my grammatical knowledge is rather weak...
- LC5: ... Practicing process writing really helped me cautious more about writing in English. I also found that before learning the process approach, I had spent so much time on writing without any direction. But now, I knew that each writing type has its own purpose. When I had such direction, writing became easier than before. ... Thank you for letting me know how to write systematically. The workshop is really useful to me. ...

The process approach was considered to boost the participants' confidence in their writing ability and their attitudes to collaborative writing and social interaction with their teacher and their classmates.

- C3: ... After I joined the writing workshop, I found that I could finish my writing within the time limit. This made me feel more confident about writing in English in class, especially in exams. In the past, I understood what I had to do in writing exams but I couldn't finish writing in time. Oh, yes, I think time management was an obstacle of my writing scores before. ...
- C5: ... I enjoyed the workshop with classmates. That's good! ...
- LC3: ... hmm, ... I think I felt more confident after doing group writing. Perhaps, having more writing confidence when doing group writing than doing individual writing ...

Further comments made by the participants in both groups show that the process approach motivated them to develop their writing ability

- C2: ... This workshop is already good. If there were more time, I wanted to practice writing more. ...
- C3: ... I feel thankful for introducing me the process approach. If possible, I want to practice writing more. ...
- C4: ... If there were more time than this, I wanted the workshop to include argumentative writing or any other writing types which can be daily used. ...
- LC4: ... I need more time to practice my writing. Only class time is not enough for me. ...

As Reid (1993) points out, the process-oriented approach to writing instructions encourages students' awareness of their writing ability while they are involved in the writing processes. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) add that the process approach enables students to utilize their cognitive and psychological skills in subsequent writing tasks. In other words, the process-oriented approach can develop students' writing attitudes, outcomes, and motivation to write.

5 Discussion

5.1 Process approach to writing instruction and socio-cognitive skills development

Both the quantitative results derived from the satisfactory levels in the participants' socio-cognitive checklist, self-assessment checklist and the improved group writing average scores, and the qualitative results from the interview responses indicate that the process-approach instructions

helped develop students' socio-cognitive skills. Thus, these results cover pertinent issues in the Thai EFL composition classroom context.

Based on the quantitative results, all of the interrelated scores of group writing tasks (Table 1), of socio-cognitive skills (Table 2) and of self-assessment (Table 3) were used to account for the different levels of the participants' socio-cognitive skills development. Three major causes of such different degrees of development could be from the provision of the assigned group writing roles, the characteristics of different types of writing and the encouraging sequences of process approach through group writing.

From the provision of the assigned group writing roles as the first cause of the differences in socio-cognitive skills development, it was found as shown in Table 3 that most participants failed to respond to the purpose of creating their own group roles for their first group writing activity. Although the participants were studying in their first year in the foundation English course, the researcher believed that it would be challenging to let them initiate their own group roles naturally to explore their socio-cognitive skills. What the researcher found, at their first narrative writing activity, was that most participants were reluctant to initiate any group role on their own. Then, the researcher decided to assign roles to the participants when they worked in groups for the next writing tasks (i.e. pros and cons and expressing opinions). Interestingly, the participants' socio-cognitive skills were least developed after completing group narrative writing (mean = .49) compared with their pros and cons and opinions writing (mean = .53 for both). The least degree of socio-cognitive development through narrative writing could be due to the fact that most of the participants were reluctant to initiate any group roles themselves. However, when they were subsequently assigned group roles in pros and cons and opinions writing practices, they did perform better in both writing and socio-cognitive practices. As can be seen in Tables 1 to 3, the scores of their group narrative writing performance and socio-cognitive skills after completing group narratives appear lower than those from pros and cons and opinions writing practices. As Richards (2005) rationalizes, the process-approach instruction is both content-based and task-based. With the writing content, organization and language that students and their group mates need to negotiate while doing writing tasks, they are also expected to create interactive roles in accordance with types of writing tasks. Thus, assigning group-writing roles to the inexperienced participants is necessary, thereby likely affecting the participants' socio-cognitive skills development.

In regard to the second cause of different socio-cognitive levels, each type of writing possesses different writing features and patterns that could boost the participants' social and cognitive skills. In the current study, there are three types of writing: narratives, pros and cons, and opinions. Basically, a learner can write a narrative to describe an event or tell a story, a pros-and-cons essay to inform and discuss benefits and drawbacks of something, and an opinion essay to point out his or her opinions in a writing task (Oshima & Hogue, 2006). From the differences in average scores in the three group writing tasks (Table 1 or Figure 2), an upward trend from narratives to pros and cons writing scores could be due to the fact that in the pros and cons writing task, two sources of information were provided as the fixed writing content, whereas in narratives, the participants who had no writing experience prior to the group writing were required to create their own writing content without any given sources. Moreover, since narratives are based on personal experiences, it may be challenging for the participants in each group to make a unanimous decision and to choose only one group member's written narrative to be presented as their group narrative task. However, the quality of each group's selected piece may not match the teacher's assessment which is based on the writing criteria. Next, a downward movement from pros and cons to opinions writing scores was likely due to the fact that the participants had to add their self-created content in addition to the two given sources, while in pros and cons writing, there was no extra content to be added; merely two given sources had to be used. From the passable writing performance of all three group-writing tasks, it could be affirmed that the participants' group interaction may be furthered by the characteristics of the different types of writing generating different discourse processes such as clarification, exemplification, and paraphrase (Ellis, 1984).

The third underlying cause of the participants' improved socio-cognitive skills could be derived from the encouraging sequences of the process approach through group writing. As the results from checklists of the socio-cognitive skills and self-assessment show, the Cooperative Attitude aspect was rated at the highest level in socio-cognitive skills development. These results implied that both the teacher and students totally concurred that the process approach through group writing stimulated social interaction, turn-taking, positive opinions and feelings about group work, willingness to help group mates, and good manners and behaviors. These particular features correspond closely to Tikunoff's (1985a, 1985b, as cited in Richards & Lockhart, 1995) interactional competence. The process approach to writing instructions normally concentrates on learners' use of psychological and cognitive skills in writing tasks. (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007; Reid, 1993) and allows learners to share the concept of cooperative and collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the current study, the participants generated their social and cognitive skills from brainstorming in the prewriting step to editing in the rewriting to be able to complete their group writing practices. In four chronological steps of the process approach, the participants had chances to share and discuss ideas from their own experiences in group narrative, pros and cons, and opinions writing. In addition to their own experience, they could further search for extra information from other sources to help express their ideas when writing opinions. They could also decide to choose and apply writing content to suit a writing title and give feedback on their English language use in writing. It should be noted that in the group writing, learners are expected to be trained through the process-oriented approach from prewriting to editing steps. As Kurzweil and Scholl (2007) state, in the editing step, feedback is a critical part of the learning process. Learners can learn from their teacher's written feedback, reflect on it, and in turn use it in rewriting their own tasks. In the learning process, Chandrasegaran (2002) suggests that teacher intervention in the writing process is also necessary to improve learners' learning interaction and critical thinking processes. All in all, the process approach, in this current study, motivated the participants to use and share their social and cognitive skills through group writing.

5.2 Opinions about the process approach and socio-cognitive skills development

In the aspect of socio-cognitive skills development, most of the participants (i.e. Participants C1, C4, C5, LC1, LC2 and LC5) stated in the interview that they could learn how to write systematically from their teacher and classmates while doing process writing in a group. As formerly described by Reid (1993) and Seow (2002), the process approach to writing instructions offers learners the opportunity to read, write, discuss writing ideas, and finally be aware of how to write systematically. Ellis (1984) adds that in second-language teaching, learners' interactions and their affective variables such as attitudes and motivation are inter-connected. In the current study, the interview responses (e.g. Participants C3, C4, LC1 and LC5) showed the participants' positive attitudes toward writing in the process approach (Littlewood, 2009) as well as their mutual responsibility and respect for negotiation and cooperation (Littlewood, 2009; Reid, 1993). Obviously, Participant C4's interview response demonstrated her writing responsibility taken from group writing. She also pointed out that group writing could at least motivate and blend classroom learning with real-life learning as stated in her interview extract (i.e. "... If there were more time than this, I wanted the workshop to include argumentative writing or any other writing types which can be daily used...").

Furthermore, most participants (i.e. Participants C2, C3, C4, LC2, LC3, LC4 and LC5) asserted in the interview that the process writing approach could raise, to some extent, their language learning awareness. Some participants (i.e. Participants C1, C3, LC3 and LC4) stated in the interview that after they experienced the process approach through group writing, one of them, Participant C1, felt relaxed and open about the group writing discussion; moreover, Participants C3 and LC3 felt more confident about their English language writing and better time management of their writing. Storch (2001) explains that in classroom group interaction, a more capable learner tends to assist a less capable one to become a part of the learning process so the less capable one could then

achieve a higher level of development. Noticeably, in the interview responses, Participant LC4 had a different experience. She admitted that she felt less confident when participating in group writing discussions, particularly with higher English-proficient classmates. Interestingly, from her interview response (“... I think practicing writing through process approach in a group was a hard job. I felt less confident when discussing with those classmates who seemed to be more knowledgeable ... Well, I think I still have problems with understanding written feedback because my grammatical knowledge is rather weak...”), the researcher found that the process approach to writing instructions still produced a positive outcome in the way that the process-approach instructions made Participant LC4 at least realize her actual level of grammatical knowledge.

The participants from both competent and less competent groups were aware of the usefulness of the process approach through group writing with those aforementioned merits. The interview responses in this study could reflect and be categorized according to the statement of Littlewood (2009) that the process-oriented approach to instructions helps activate several processes in the EFL classroom setting. These processes involve affective processes (i.e. positive attitudes, relaxed atmosphere and self-confidence), social processes (i.e. mutual understanding and teacher-student cooperation) and cognitive processes (i.e. language learning awareness, challenging ideas and critical thinking).

6 Limitations

This study is limited to three areas. First, the 24 students in the study of learners’ socio-cognitive skills development may be statistically considered a small sample size. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to all first-year Thai undergraduate students. Second, the short duration of the three individual types of writing in the process approach practice may be inadequate for the students to master the writing skills within only one semester. Last, the students who were assigned to the competent or less competent groups based on their university English entry score levels may not be regarded as competent and/or less competent participants when their other skills like reading, listening or speaking are measured.

7 Conclusion and implications

This study examines process-approach group writing employed as an intermediate teaching tool for developing the socio-cognitive skills of a group of Thai EFL university students. Through group writing, the process approach helps change a competitive learning atmosphere to a more collaborative one in the classroom, encourage students’ writing performance, raise awareness of their own learning processes, and develop the students’ socio-cognitive skills. These results highlight the following implications:

First, as the students’ affective processes, in addition to their social and cognitive processes, co-emerged from the utilization of the process approach through group writing practices, the influence of learners’ use of L1 specifically in written communication needs to be further investigated. The use of L1 in communication may be a primary source of affective processes transforming a competitive classroom atmosphere into a more relaxing and supportive one in collaborative writing, thereby, motivating students’ second language writing and writing ability.

Next, the students’ interview responses in this study have shed light on further consideration of students’ group culture, including peer pressure and cultural barriers. As language and cultural knowledge are interdependent, the issue of learners’ cultural group writing is also worth investigating in future studies. Additionally, with reference to the limitation of the sample size in this study, it could be helpful to investigate the effects of different class sizes on learners’ socio-cognitive skills development and their writing performance through process-approach group writing. Depending on the uncertain number of students in each setting, the design of the process writing activities through group writing may not be exactly the same as that of this current study.

Another thought-provoking point drawn from both the teacher’s and the students’ assessments on socio-cognitive development checklists and the interview is that intellectual ability, leadership

skills and learning responsibility appear to be three aspects the students need to develop further. Since these three aspects can be involved in good characteristics of autonomous learners, further research on how to reinforce these aspects for learners could be helpful for all parties, learners, academics and relevant stakeholders.

Lastly, on account of the relatively large class size in the EFL university context and the dynamic learners with various levels of English proficiency, it is a real challenge equating what a teacher teaches with what individual learners learn. Hence, in a heterogeneous classroom, fostering learners' learning autonomy is suggested to narrow the difference between faster and slower learners.

The process approach to writing instructions through collaborative writing in the current study can help develop Thai EFL students intellectually, emotionally and interactively. This study suggests that equipping non-native English speaking learners with social and cognitive skills through the process-oriented approach to collaborative writing probably represents a contemporary practice that is a response to the challenges of ELT in heterogeneous and large classes. Strengthening the learners' socio-cognitive potential can be deemed to be one of the achievable goals of promoting learners to have both eligible IQs and EQs to become "quality global citizens."

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