

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The present study addressed three important issues in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education: cross-cultural understanding, writing skills development, and critical thinking. These three factors have salient roles in students' pursuits of their academic and professional successes, so EFL pedagogy should integrate them in the lessons and facilitate acquisition of cross-cultural awareness, as well as language and cognitive skills development.

Culture is an important topic in Second Language (L2), including EFL education; however, it is an underinvestigated concept (Atkinson, 1999). Research suggests that knowledge of sociocultural contexts could facilitate language acquisition and deepen students' understanding of the language they study; moreover, it could support effective cross-cultural communication (Atkinson, 1999; Scovel, 1994). As the world is growing more transcultural, an important goal of EFL education in the context of globalization should help students to develop significant sociocognitive thinking tools which could assist them to succeed in cross-cultural communication.

In addition to cross-cultural understanding, writing skills are important for Thai university students majoring in English as they are crucial for them to achieve successes in academics and careers. However, writing appears to be one of the most difficult skills for students to acquire, and they need to take great efforts and a long period of time to practice and build the skills (Leki, 1992). Therefore, EFL instructors have to implement an effective teaching method or techniques in order to help students to master their writing skills. The goals of EFL curriculum, however, should not solely focus on facilitating language learning. EFL university students need to develop their critical thinking skills as well because the skills are important in the university and workplace

(Pally, 1997). Thus, it will be beneficial for EFL pedagogy to incorporate critical thinking with language learning activities, especially writing.

Journal assignment can integrate cultural studies, writing, and critical thinking in EFL lessons. Students are encouraged to use writing as a tool to critically explore, discuss, analyze, and argue about cultural topics they have studied. Therefore, journal writing can be a promising learning tool which fosters students' writing, thinking and learning skills (Casanave, 1994; Myers, 2001; Stevenson & Jenkins, 1994).

### **Background and Context of the Study**

Journal writing was introduced to the English-Major sophomores who were enrolled in the course "Western Culture" in the Applied Arts program at the Faculty of Industrial Education, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang in Bangkok. The course aims at providing the students with cultural knowledge and raising their cross-cultural awareness. It is based on the assumption that language and culture are interrelated and that understanding the culture of the target language could foster students' language learning and cross-cultural communication skills (Atkinson, 1999; Kramersch, 1998).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2011) defines culture as "the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human beings, value systems, traditions and beliefs." Culture is also an important issue in L2 and EFL education; nonetheless, it seems to be an inadequately emphasized topic. The methods and approaches to study cultural models, social practices, and cultural heterogeneity and differences are not well-known in this field (Atkinson, 1999). TESOL experts criticize

the approach that stereotypes culture and dichotomizes Western culture as opposite to Oriental culture (Kubota, 1999; Zamel, 1997; Spack, 1997). Therefore, we need a rational view of culture in this context. The approach to cultural studies should recognize interconnectedness and multiculturalism of world's people (Ingold, 1994). In essence, culture should be viewed as flexible, ever-changing, and nondeterministic (Zamel, 1997). The notion of transculturalization suggests that approaches to cultural studies should celebrate differences, uniqueness, and creativity of cultural diversity (Pratt, 1991).

Taken from the fields of cultural studies and critical anthropology, Atkinson (1999) reformulated the notion of culture and proposed six principles of a revised view of culture which were used as a guideline for the present study's research and teaching. The first principle states that all cultural groups are composed of individuals, and individual heterogeneity and difference within their culture groups should be put into account. This is to avoid reducing individuals into typical cultural types and stereotyping their cultural practices. Second, people's thoughts and feelings are always molded and influenced by their biography, social context, and historical situations in the culture they live in. Individuals often reflect cultural assumptions of the society they grew up in a variety of ways. Third, social group membership and cultural identity of a society are multiple, complex, contradictory, and dynamic. There exist conflicting values and roles within individuals. People can do and take any position in social practices in everyday life, and they may modify, resist, or ignore cultural norms. Fourth, members in society often share certain social life and cultural assumptions. Fifth, approaches to studying cultural beliefs, assumptions, values, practices, heterogeneity and differences should be context bounded, qualitative, and ethnographic. Sixth, it is important to remember that even though language and culture are mutually implicated, culture is in fact multiple and more complex.

Cultural themes in this class centered on historical background, lifestyles, religious beliefs, world views, social values, norms, arts, economics and politics in the Western world. The selected topics were interesting and they invoked discussions and critical thinking. Learning resources were drawn from various sources relevant and useful for cultural studies, namely written texts and multimedia. Media sources included movies, documentary films on *the History Channel*, news reports on television, and Christian hymns.

The documentaries on *the History Channel* included *Athens*, *the Romans*, *the British Empire: Blood and Steel*, *The Mayflower*, *Thanksgiving*, *Christmas*, and *Abraham Lincoln*. The students could freely download the videos from the Internet to study again at home. At the end of the semester, the students worked in a group of four members, chose an American movie to review cultural aspects, and gave a presentation in class. The students identified historical, economic, social, religious and controversial issues presented in the film. They analyzed, interpreted, discussed and compared them to their own experience and culture. The movies of their choices were such as *Spanglish*, *What a Girl Wants*, *Confession of a Shopaholic*, *American Teens*, *Milk*, *The Parent Trap*, *Mean Girls*, *Juno*, and *A walk to Remember*. Movies could capture their attention and encourage critical thinking and meaningful reflections.

Media contain assumptions of society related to politics, economics, social relations, conflicts, and unresolved issues (Pally, 1997). They provided rich resources for authentic cultural studies which could successfully hold students' interests and attention in learning. The students watched, discussed and compared them with their experience; thus, the activities seemed to foster their language and critical thinking skills. Media sparked discussion in class and initiated the students' expressive writing in their journals (Stempleski, 1990; Stoller, 1992).

Besides providing cultural knowledge, the course also focused on critical thinking and writing skills development. Journal writing was used as a means for the students to record their summaries of course content, make personal connections to the topics studied in class, and explore the issues in various dimensions. Journal writing offered them extra opportunities to practice writing regularly to develop fundamental writing and critical thinking skills before taking formal writing courses in the subsequent semesters.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The present study intended to examine the opinions of Thai university EFL students about their journal writing experiences. It also examined the benefits of journal writing for these students by conducting an in-depth qualitative analysis of the content in their journal entries.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The current study, therefore, addressed two relevant research questions:

1. What do the students think about their journal writing experiences in the course?
2. What are the benefits of journal writing for these university English-Major students based on the content analysis of selected journal entries?

### **LIMITATION**

The study was classroom-based and quasi-experimental in its nature; therefore, it did not attempt to control the variables. The research relied on a single group of participants who were not selected randomly; moreover, pre and posttest quantitative

measurements of the students' writing proficiency were not used in the design.

Therefore, the research findings of this single sample group cannot be generalized.

On the other hand, the study intended to qualitatively examine potential benefits of journal writing in the samples of students' journal entries which they wrote throughout the course. The in-depth qualitative analysis focused on content and evidence of writing improvement as manifested in their journal entries. The findings can provide some useful insights into EFL research and instruction in Thai context.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITURATURE

In Western context, the applications of journal writing are extensive in various fields. Journal writing has been reported to be an effective learning tool in various academic disciplines and settings as it provides learners with useful learning exercises (Stevenson & Jenkin, 1994). Science instructors use journals to assist students in deepening their observations about the environment; mathematic teachers ask students to reflect on their understanding and experience of solving mathematic problems; and many instructors in teacher education programs and psychology require students to write about how they connect course contents to practice and life experience. English and literature teachers often ask students to keep journals to record their thoughts and feelings about the authors' ideas or to analyze literary techniques used in the essays, short stories and novels. Besides these, journal writing is often used to encourage adult learners to reflect on their professional development and understanding of academic theory.

Journal writing can be an introspective tool which instructors can use to support reflective and critical thinking. Reflective learning is the process that learners are internally exploring contents studied in class or issues of concern and they reflect meaning in relation to their experiences. To foster critical thinking, transformative pedagogy encourages examination of deep meanings, personal implications, and social consequences of any knowledge, theme, method, etc (Pally, 1997). In cognitive psychology, critical thinking stresses understanding the principles of cause and effect, consequences, and criteria for judgment and choices (Mohan, 1990). Critical thinking practices in English for Academic Purposes emphasize comparison and contrast,

categorization and differentiation, and the ability to write in the conventions of an academic discipline (Leki, 1993).

The application of dialogue journal writing is supported by the theory of Lev Vygotsky (1978) which explains that human learning is mediated through interaction with other people in sociocultural contexts. Students are encouraged to reflect their thoughts in writing and teachers provide embedded assistance to help them progress. In this view, a dialogue journal could support students' language development, content-based learning, and critical thinking when the teachers who have more experience provide guided assistance to the students in the forms of responses to content in their journal entries and demonstrate correct modeling of linguistic forms. Through interaction with the teachers in the written form in their journals, students internalize language, make sense of their learning, and mold and shape their knowledge. Then, students could gradually move toward greater independence in learning.

Journal writing is a popular literacy practice in the Western world and its benefits have been reported extensively; however, research on journal writing in ESL and EFL contexts is still limited. Casanave (1994) examined changes in the writing skills of a small group of intermediate English students over three semesters in an intensive language program in Japan. The researcher informed that the writing of all students in their journals changed over time, but in a variety of ways which could not be predicted by T-unit analysis. The researcher suggested that only quantitative measurement in terms of group average scores could not clearly explain improvement in samples of the students' writing. Casanave (1994) also suggested that students' writing improvement must be identified in a variety of ways and across individual writers.

Stevenson and Jenkins (1994) conducted a research study with international teaching assistants who were studying in the U.S.A. in order to examine the benefits of

journal writing. The study analyzed content of daily journal entries of twenty participants to determine whether journal writing could contribute to the needs of international teaching assistants. Journal writing proved to be a promising technique for students to develop their language skills, acquire course content, and reflect on educational and personal experiences. The majority of students acknowledged that they benefited from journal writing, particularly in improving their confidence and fluency in language use. Nevertheless, there was little evidence of reflective and analytical writing. The researchers suggested that teachers who use the journal writing technique should encourage greater reflectivity.

Myers (2001) reported mixed research findings on journal writing. The study was conducted with fifteen ESL college students in Taiwan. The students wrote their journals over a three-month period. The majority of students said that journal writing was a good exercise to help them to generate ideas, reason for their viewpoints, develop critical thinking, make connections, improve organization skills, and enhance academic writing and research skills. The study reported that generally students became active thinkers and energetic writers, and some students gained confidence as writers who wrote to a real audience. Students also reported that journal writing provided the impetus to research and they searched other sources and read about various topics before writing. When writing in their journals, students thought about themselves, their learning processes, interests, current events, social life, and environment. Besides helping them to memorize the information, students said that journal writing helped them to become more independent thinkers and realize the importance of thinking. Students also stressed that thinking was an important aspect of the writing process. Myers recommended instructors to provide students with feedback to correct errors and to suggest students to

revise their writing and reread their journals. As a result, students can fully appreciate the advances they have made in their writing and thinking.

Dantas-Whitney (2002) studied fifty-four audiotaped journals of eighteen ESL students in a content-based English course in Korea. She asked her students to reflect on the content by summarizing the central themes in each lesson and then react to them. Students built connections between the themes explored in class and engaged in critical and reflective thinking in light of their own experiences, values, and beliefs. The spoken journals are effective in linking the academic issues and personal reflective and critical thinking. Students employed critical thinking skills to analyze topics studied in class and examine the issues analytically. The study also reported that students took more active and participatory roles in learning as they made conscious about the issues they wished to explore and the strategies they would use to monitor and evaluate their learning. Generally, they perceived that spoken journals provided a positive learning activity.

Despite the fact that journal writing is overwhelmingly supported by research and educational experts, it is not always a favorable activity for every student. Moulton (1995) conducted an ethnographic study to explore the efficacy of journal writing from college-ESL students' view point. The majority of students in the study agreed that journal writing provided several benefits. Moulton (1995), however, reported a typical case of university ESL students who gave negative feedback to journal writing. This individual student represented a view contrary to current claims about the benefits of dialogue journal writing. While this student benefited from and enjoyed formal writing assignments, he resisted and disliked the informal writing of the dialogue journals. Implications from the case suggested the need for researchers and practitioners to consider students' perspectives when employing nontraditional and informal writing assignments like dialogue journal writing.

Even though a large body of research claims that journal writing can foster students' literacy development, critical thinking and academic growth, journal writing has not been widely adopted as a tool for Thai university students to practice writing and critical thinking. Evidence from empirical investigations to support journal writing in our context is not adequate to confirm that it is a valuable learning tool which could improve students' writing skills and enhance their critical reflection on course content.

Cadet (2009) investigated the effectiveness of journal writing among Thai college students. The study reported that journal writing supported personal writing before the students engaged in academic writing. The participants in her study were 36 university non-English majors, enrolled in the Reading and Writing I course. They were purposively-selected to participate in the study. The pretest academic essays were graded and the study used Matched Pair sampling the two groups to rank the students into three sub-groups: good, average, and weak. The experimental group practiced personal writing; on the other hand, the control group was taught academic writing. At the end of the course, the participants were assigned to write a posttest academic essay. The pretest and posttest academic essay scores were compared in order to assess their English writing ability, and syntactic and vocabulary development. The findings show a statistically significant difference in overall writing quality within each group, and between the subgroups of the good level. Nevertheless, no significant difference was found when the gain between the two groups was compared. The study did not find a statistically significant difference in syntactic and vocabulary development within the groups and between the subgroups. Nonetheless, data from questionnaires and interviews informed that practicing personal writing in journal before academic subjects was beneficial.

Little research on journal writing of Thai university students, especially the English-Major students, has been conducted. This present study, therefore, intended to investigate the benefits of journal assignment to ensure its merits for these students. The findings will provide EFL professionals with invaluable information related to the advantages and drawbacks of journal writing assignment.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study surveyed the students' opinions about their journal writing experience and the benefits of the assignment. This study focused on a single group of participants who were purposively chosen. The study was quasi-experimental in its nature and it did not attempt to control the variables. Pre and posttest quantitative measurements of students' writing proficiency were not used in the design. On the other hand, the study intended to qualitatively examine potential benefits of journal writing in the samples of students' journal entries which they wrote throughout the course. The in-depth qualitative analysis focused on content and evidence of writing improvement as manifested in their journal entries.

#### **The Participants**

Thirty-six sophomores in the English-Major, Applied Arts Program at the Faculty of Industrial Education, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang participated in this study. The participants were enrolled in the course entitled "Western Culture". Five of them were males and thirty-one were females. Their English proficiency was at an intermediate level. Their age range was between nineteen and twenty-one years old.

#### **Research Tools**

A questionnaire was designed to study the students' opinions on their journal writing experience and the benefits of journal writing in improving their English writing skills. It asked the participants to rate on a Likert-scale which had five points.

**Data Collection Procedure**

At the beginning of the course, the students were instructed to summarize main points in the lesson and write their reflections on relevant issues and topics studied in class. The students employed an informal writing style to write in their journals. Every week, each student wrote one entry, typed, printed out, and submitted it the following week. As an instructor of the class, I read the students' journal entries, responded to their ideas, and provided grammatical corrections. Then I returned the entries the following week and asked the students to attend to mistakes and revise for clarity and meaningful reflections. At the end of the semester, the students combined their revised entries and submitted their journals. Then the students completed the questionnaire which asked them to rate their opinions on journal writing experience and the benefits of journal writing.

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed and reported in light of the two research questions. First, quantitative data from questionnaires were input into the SPSS statistical analysis software program. The students' opinions about journal writing were reported in terms of average means and standard deviations. Mean scores that fall between 1.0 and 2.4 are defined as "low", 2.5 and 3.4 as "medium", and 3.5 and 5.0 as "high" (Oxford, 1990).

Later, ten samples of journals were randomly selected from thirty-six students. The student writers were identified as Student 1 to 10. After that, 120 journal entries were analyzed following standard qualitative research procedures. I read the entries to find general themes and patterns. From the merging themes and patterns, I could develop a flexible coding scheme and applied it when coding the data. The coding scheme was

adjusted to sort out data categories. Recurring and relevant themes and patterns were identified through a consistent comparison method, which involved coding, categorizing, prioritizing, relating pieces of data according to emerging patterns of coding, and interpretation. Five important categories of qualitative data concerning the benefits of journal writing emerged from the analysis: language skill development, critical thinking, research skill development, cross-cultural understanding, and enhanced metacognitive awareness.

## UNIT 4

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents quantitative and qualitative findings of the study in relation to the research questions:

1. What do the students think about their journal writing experiences in the course?
2. What are the benefits of journal writing for these university English-Major students based on the content analysis of selected journal entries?

Overall, the students appeared to be in favor of journal writing and they regarded the assignment useful for learning. Journal writing was a facilitative learning tool as it engaged the students in active learning, thinking, and writing process. The students reviewed content, summarized main ideas, and reflected on their learning experience meaningfully and critically. Moreover, the present study found evidence to support that in this EFL cultural studies course journal writing could enhance the students' cross-cultural understanding and metacognitive control over their learning process.

#### **Quantitative Data Presentation**

##### **Students' opinions on journal writing**

Table 1 presents means of students' opinions on journal writing. Mean scores that fall between 1.0 and 2.4 are defined as "low", 2.5 and 3.4 as "medium", and 3.5 and 5.0 as "high" (Oxford, 1990). Generally, the participants seemed to hold a positive attitude towards journal writing and thought that it was a useful learning experience; this confirms the results of previous studies (Holmes & Moulton, 1995; Myers, 2001; Steveson & Jenkin, 1994). Their ratings on a five-point Likert scale seem to be positive

on every item, ranging from 3.09 to 4.03. Overall, they thought there were a lot of benefits from journal writing. Students agreed that they needed constant writing practice every week in order to write well (4.04), improve their writing (4.00), and feel at ease with writing in English (3.97). They also agreed that writing in their journals every week was a useful practice (3.80).

**Table 1 Students' opinions on journal writing experience (n = 36)**

| Item                            | Statement                                                                                                                                               | Mean        | S.D.        |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1                               | I need constant writing practice to write well in English.                                                                                              | 4.04        | .90         |
| 4                               | Writing in my journal every week is a way to improve my writing.                                                                                        | 4.00        | .97         |
| 2                               | One of the best ways to feel at ease with writing in English is to write often.                                                                         | 3.97        | .87         |
| 3                               | Writing in my journal every week is a useful practice.                                                                                                  | 3.80        | .99         |
| 8                               | Writing in my journal every week is a good practice for me to develop important learning skills of note taking.                                         | 3.74        | .86         |
| 9                               | I will keep writing in my journal in order to record important information and my opinions, because it is a good practice to help me learn effectively. | 3.65        | .88         |
| 7                               | My journal entries are useful notes to read before taking exams.                                                                                        | 3.53        | .90         |
| 6                               | I think more critically about what I have studied when writing in my journal.                                                                           | 3.49        | .82         |
| 5                               | I understand course content better when I write about what I have studied in my journal.                                                                | 3.40        | .81         |
| 10                              | I want my teacher, classmates, and other people to read my journal entries and share their ideas with me.                                               | 3.09        | .88         |
| <b>Average (Means and S.D.)</b> |                                                                                                                                                         | <b>3.67</b> | <b>0.89</b> |

(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree)

Students thought they would keep writing in their journals (3.65) and they viewed that their journals contained useful notes to read before taking exams (3.53). They quite agreed that journal writing fostered their critical thinking (3.49) and enhanced their understanding of course content (3.40). When asked if they wanted to share their journal entries with their classmates and other people, they seemed to agree (3.67).

### **Students' opinions on their writing improvement**

The students believed that journal writing could help them improve their writing in various aspects. The findings are consistent with the results of previous studies

(Holmes & Moulton, 1995; Myers, 2001; Steveson & Jenkin, 1994). Nevertheless, there is a great variation in their opinions. Data are presented in Table 2. Mean scores that fall between 1.0 and 2.4 are defined as “low”, 2.5 and 3.4 as “medium”, and 3.5 and 5.0 as “high” (Oxford, 1990).

**Table 2 Students’ opinion on their writing improvement at the end of the course (n = 36)**

| <b>Item</b>                     | <b>Statement</b>                                                                          | <b>Mean</b> | <b>S.D.</b> |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 2                               | I have improved my writing skills after having written my journal entries for a semester. | 3.79        | .82         |
| 9                               | I can think and write more clearly than before.                                           | 3.76        | .83         |
| 4                               | I can organize my ideas in writing better than before.                                    | 3.76        | .69         |
| 1                               | I enjoyed writing more than before.                                                       | 3.76        | .99         |
| 7                               | I can use a more variety of English words than before.                                    | 3.72        | .79         |
| 8                               | I can use English words more appropriately than earlier.                                  | 3.69        | .76         |
| 3                               | I can write more fluently than before.                                                    | 3.66        | .81         |
| 5                               | I write more grammatically correct than before.                                           | 3.62        | .86         |
| 10                              | I can think and write more critically than before.                                        | 3.62        | .90         |
| 6                               | I can use a variety of sentence structures better than before.                            | 3.45        | .87         |
| <b>Average (Means and S.D.)</b> |                                                                                           | <b>3.68</b> | <b>.83</b>  |

(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree)

The students quite agreed that journal writing helped to improve their writing skills (3.79). They could think and write more clearly (3.76), organize ideas in writing better (3.76), enjoy writing more than before (3.72), use an extended variety of English words more appropriately (3.69), and write more fluently than before (3.66). However, the students’ ratings were slightly lower in the following aspects: writing more grammatically correct (3.62), thinking and writing more critically (3.62), and using a variety of sentence structures (3.45). These writing skills are meticulous and complicated, so the students need much longer time to study and practice. They still need the instructors to teach and advise them. Journal writing in a short period of one semester may not result in remarkable changes in the students’ confidence in their language improvement. In the subsequent section, an in-depth qualitative data analysis of students’ sample journals was conducted to find evidence confirming the claimed benefits of journal writing.

## **Qualitative Data Presentation**

Qualitative findings of students' sample journals revealed that journal writing was a facilitative learning device as it engaged the students in active learning, thinking, and writing process. Journal writing allowed the students to assimilate course content effectively and reflect on important issues meaningfully. The students took an active role in reviewing content, summarizing main ideas, reflecting on learning experience, and critical thinking. Moreover, the present study also found that in this EFL cultural studies course journal writing could enhance the students' cross-cultural understanding and metacognitive control over their learning process. Qualitative findings which support the benefits of journal writing are presented in five categories: language skill development, critical thinking, research skill development, cross-cultural understanding and enhanced metacognitive awareness.

### **Language skills development**

Journal writing was a new learning experience for the students in this group. At the beginning of the course, the task appeared difficult and demanding for many students. They got frustrated and could not express their ideas in English clearly. The major writing block was due the students' lack of language resources and limited writing skill and experience. In the initial stage, their journal entries contained a lot of incomplete sentences and errors. Due to their limited vocabulary knowledge, the students used the same words repetitively. Incorrect uses of tenses, prepositions, and punctuation marks often appeared. Their summaries sometimes retained a lot of words from the original texts as the students simply copied words from sources and seldom paraphrased sentences by using their own words. Some summaries contained chunks of

information which were not well organized and connected. It appeared that many journal entries did not read smoothly because they lacked connections between ideas.

Nonetheless, to some extent my coaching could assist and ensure the students that they could continue to write. As research suggested (Holmes & Moulton, 1995; Steveson & Jenkin, 1994), I provided feedback for grammar corrections and comments on content, and students were encouraged to attend to feedback and revise their entries regularly. Their skills seemed to improve as the students practiced writing often. Journal writing offered them the opportunities to experiment with the language and start to develop writing skill before they were enrolled in formal writing courses. Even though the evidence of progress was not strong, the present study found various aspects of the students' language improvement apparent in their journal entries. As the students practiced summarizing information and wrote to communicate ideas regularly in their journals, their summarizing and writing skills showed some improvement. The students progressed little by little and gained more independence in writing. The following excerpts show the students' attempts to summarize information in their own words:

*About the meaning of culture, in my opinion, it is the way of life or things humans do or believe that are rooted from the past, depicting opinions, feelings, behaviors, language, beliefs, arts and others that can be changed through time and conditions ... I think people learn cultures to understand and live with others in harmony. (Student 2's entry 1)*

*In the reading part, I studied the story of Jesus. The Son of God who was born from the Virgin Mary who had a fiance named Joseph. Jesus' public life, when he started to teach and heal people, began in his late 20s. He and his 12 followers moved to many places and taught about the Kingdom of God. Then, almost three years later, Jesus was arrested by the influential Jewish authorities who thought he would begin an anti-Roman riot. Jesus was crucified and died in Golgotha on Friday and then his body*

*disappeared from the tomb, so there was a belief that Jesus resurrected and went back to heaven. Jesus in the New Testament, taught about universal love, which is love for everyone including your enemies and love in many forms such as compassion, forgiveness and helpfulness. Be good with everyone and give them what they ask for. He opposes divorce because it is against God's command. (Student 6's entry 5)*

*Critical thinking is a skill of thinking with an intention to inquire or judge something without following allusion but trying to find the answers by posing good questions and finding the answers reasonably. (Student 2's entry 7)*

*According to my understanding, culture means the way of life in society, for example food, dressing, arts, architecture, beliefs, customs, and language. All of these things can be passed to the next generations, developed and changed all the time. Different countries have different cultures, for example Americans show their respect by checking hands, Thais by "Wai" and Japanese by bowing. (Student 5's entry 1)*

*About the meaning of culture, in my opinion, it is the way of life or things humans do or believe that are rooted from the past, depicting opinions, feelings, behaviors, language, beliefs, arts and others that can be changed through time and conditions. This is why certain cultures have vanished. I think people learn cultures to understand and live with others in harmony. (Student's 9's entry 1)*

*Critical thinking is a skill of thinking with an intention to inquire or judge something without following allusion but trying to find the answers by posing good questions and finding the answers reasonably. (Student 3's entry 7)*

Summarizing information from documentary films seemed to be a much more difficult task when compared with summarizing information from written texts. The students often said in their journals that they struggled to understand the main points in the documentaries because their listening skills were very poor and they had to watch the

films again and again in order to grasp the meanings. The following excerpts show the examples of acceptable summaries from documentary films:

*I had watched a DVD about the interesting engineering, architecture, and some emperors of Rome. The extremely make me interested.*

*Let's start with Augustus. I think he got down to his people. He paid his attention to his citizens. He used his skills to improve the people's quality of life by irrigating the water from the source to the city. That was a great idea to make the citizens cleaner and more comfortable.*

*Claudius had creativity with his Aqua Claudius. When he built huge and useful buildings, he built them in the Roman concept, using the arch. But, he married his niece, Agrippina, who was evil, ambitious and hungry for power. She killed her husband and pushed her son, Nero, to be the king.*

*Nero was atrocious because of heredity. That might be a horrible time for the citizens. Nero burnt Christians to death, killed his mother, and built his Golden House in the public land and used the public money. He might not have slept well at night. His guilt would have haunted him.*

*Vespasian was a clever emperor. He built the Coliseum in Nero's land to transform that area to be a public place which the people in Rom could use for enjoyment.*

*The next emperor was Trajan. He must have had a very difficult time. He had to prove himself to the Roman because he was Spanish. He built many interesting buildings such as Trajan's forum, and Trajan's Market Place. His right hand architect, Apollodorus of Damascus, was very amazing. (Student 2's entry 2)*

*After watching the documentary, Engineering an Empire –British: Blood and Steel, I know about this empire better than the others that I've studied because it got into a new era of technological development. In the time of King Henry VIII, there were inventions of weapons for naval battle. The Mary Rose was the warship which was named after the King's sister. She carried the advanced heavy iron cannons on both sides and had the gun ports which could open the guns to be fired. However, she sunk during the second French Wars. The next King was George III. There were 2 important events in his reign. First was The United States Declaration of Independence on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776. Since then, the*

*United States was no longer part of the British Empire. The second was Napoleon war which was sparked by the French Revolution in 1789-1799. The British people invented other machines such as the locomotive called the Rocket. Then, the greatest Western railway was built through the mountains. It was designed by Brunel.*

*When the Palace of Westminster was built in the place of the old building which was burnt, Big Ben, the clock tower was constructed as part of it. The great bell of the clock was made of cast iron and stone was finished in 1859. ... The Victorian Age saw the British Empire expanding as far as the cables of the telegraph could send the messages around the world. In this time, demands for labor to work in the factories in London increased. As a result, the city became populated and polluted. Wastes floated over the Thames River and ensued diseases. Cholera affected most poor areas and killed about 14000 people. (Student 6's entry 3)*

The summary task was apparently difficult and demanding, because it required the prerequisite skills of reading, listening, extracting main ideas and writing to be effective. When the students encountered all these challenges, the difficulty was immense and the task was laborious, exhausting and stressful. Therefore, in order to help students write good summaries the instructor need to prepare systematic instruction and encourage extensive practices. The instruction on writing summaries should include exercises focusing on drawing main points from reading and listening comprehension, paraphrasing, and connecting ideas. The instructor should encourage extensive practices of paraphrasing, such as using synonyms and alternative sentence structures in order to avoid plagiarism.

However, the present study found that when the students wrote often, their anxiety was lessened and their confidence in writing actually increased; this supports the findings of Steveson and Jenkin (1994). I could observe that the students took more responsibilities in their own learning, wrote more meaningful responses and produced

longer entries. As the course was advancing, they exerted greater efforts and worked more diligently in order to accomplish the weekly writing task. The majority of the students worked hard throughout the semester attempting to improve their English writing skill. It made me admire their strong determination and perseverance to make progresses.

At the end of the semester, the students themselves were surprised at how they could improve their writing skills and write longer journal entries with interesting ideas. Their language and writing skills had improved in several areas. It appeared that they could use a more variety of English words and sentence structures and wrote more grammatically correct. Moreover, they could generate interesting ideas and organize their ideas better. They also seemed to write more fluently and enjoy writing more than before. These findings confirm the results of previous studies (Casanave, 1994; Holmes & Moulton, 1995; Myers, 2001; Steveson & Jenkin, 1994). The students who actively analyzed course content and wrote their journal entries seemed to benefit from the assignment more than those who invested less time and effort in their learning.

At the initial stage of journal writing, the instructors should provide regular support and guidance to help students write to communicate their ideas. It is also important for the instructors to ensure their students that they can make improvement. The teachers' feedback can guide students to construct their knowledge and develop language skills; later on, students can gradually progress toward greater independence in learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Critical thinking**

In the socio-cultural context of Thai education that they live in, the students were encouraged to practice critical thinking, the so-called Western academic norm,

throughout the semester. However, the instruction did not intend to replace their Thai intellectual traditions that the students brought to the classroom. It is believed that knowledge is socially constructed and the students' previous background and knowledge cannot be deprived of. Critical thinking, in fact, connected the students to a range of their experiences. It supported the students' active learning and enriched their learning experience as Pally (1997) noted that critical thinking in second language classes allows students to develop their language skills, strengthen content knowledge, and foster thinking skills. The analysis of sample journal entries found that the students used a variety of critical thinking strategies, such as comparing and contrasting, relating to personal experience, expressing personal view points, stating questions at the issues, and suggesting solutions to the problems. They used these critical thinking strategies to connect new information with their existing knowledge and experiences; then, the students could generate interesting ideas in their writings. These critical thinking strategies supported their learning and writing in a significant way.

*Comparing and contrasting.* The students often compared and contrasted different systems of cultural beliefs, attitudes, values, and lifestyles of Western people and Thai people. Their journal entries embrace culturally influenced set of values and beliefs which are socio-culturally distinctive. The Thai cultural and intellectual traditions are clearly reflected in their writings. Several students focused on relevant aspects of Buddhism and Christianity, such as the life of the lord Buddha and Jesus, religious doctrines, ideas about life beyond life in this world, and the ultimate goals of teachings in the two religions. The students' religious belief appeared to mold and shape their worldview and thinking. It influenced the ways they make meanings about life and understand the world they live in.

*Through the history of Jesus, there were a lot of obstacles before he could accomplish his mission. Similarly, the lord Buddha, who was going*

*to be the king, chose to spend his life to search true happiness, instead. After abdicating from the throne, he faced a lot of difficulties before he was enlightened and achieved nirvana. Thanks to his wisdom and effort, which helped him to think beyond the goal of this life in order to gain true happiness. ... Buddhist doctrine emphasizes rationality. Bad action will return bad reaction, so we should have good action for it will be followed by good reaction. There is no belief in God in our religion ... When Christians repent their sin, it will disappear. On the contrary, in Buddhism our sin will still be in our souls and we will inevitably have to repay or be punished. This is the underlying teaching of reincarnation in Buddhist doctrine. Although there are some different teachings between the two religions, the similar teaching is about love and kindness for everyone and doing good things for a better life. (Student 3's entry 6)*

*I think there are many similar beliefs in Christianity and Buddhism. The first one was that Jesus faced many temptations like the lord Buddha did. Second, heaven is a place for good people and hell is for bad people. In my opinion, the teachings of the two religions are sometimes different. But the purposes are the same; that is to make people do good things with good faith. (Student 1's entry 6)*

*In my vision, there are some similarities and differences between Christian belief and Buddhist belief. I am a Buddhist and I'll honestly say that I believe in life after death. But I think there are some differences from Christian belief in this idea. Buddhists believe that people who usually give alms to others, make merit, and practice meditation, their lives after death will be near nirvana, the perfect peace of the state of mind that is free from craving, anger and other afflictive states. It means that you will not reenter this world again through rebirth. And we believe that everything follows the law of action. While Christians believe that their life will be immortal after death and they will wait for "The Judgment Day". Christians are taught to believe in God and not to criticize their God ... But Buddhists are taught not to believe until they can prove things by themselves. It is similar to scientific thinking. (Student 7's entry 5)*

*Christian belief is very different from Buddhist belief in the idea of getting free from sin. Christians believe that they can become free from sin because of the mercy and kindness of God. ... He forgives and does not punish sinners because of their sin. He, on the other hand, blesses them. ... While Buddhists believe that everything is followed by reciprocal deeds. If you do good things after death you might be in heaven. If you do bad things you might be in hell. (Student 8's entry 6)*

*If you believe in heaven and hell, it shows that you also believe in the immortal state of the soul after life. Many religions hold that human beings have an immortal soul which does not die when the body does. After death, the soul will go to heaven or hell. However, Christian view on the matter of body and soul has one different aspect from other religions. It is that on the Last Judgment Day, the body will be resurrected to its soul and judged whether to spend eternity in heaven or hell. Speaking of eternity in heaven or hell, for Buddhists, their stay in the heaven is not eternal. After they have used up all good karma, they will have to undergo rebirth again. Therefore, Buddhism chooses to focus more on escaping the cycle of life and reaching enlightenment rather than seeking a place in heaven. (Student 5's entry 7)*

Another popular topic for comparison and contrast was individualism in the Western societies versus collectivism in the Eastern countries. In the excerpts below, the students identified the differences that they perceive. One student evaluated and validated these cultural values. Consequently, she could choose the path for herself to walk on.

*Individualism contrasts directly with collectivism, which is widespread in Asia. For collectivism, humans are interdependent and the interests of the community always come first. The different ideas are reflected on political, economical, and social systems of the West and the East. Thailand is considered to be a collective society. Western societies,*

*noticeably the American society, promote individualism ... I have heard that people in the West would say that they will live their lives to the fullest, for life is short. This idea clashes with the Buddhist saying: "Live a simple life because we all die." These show the differences between our Thai and Western cultural value. It is true that one day we die, but before that day there are a lot of things to endure. So it is better to know how to accept what is good from other cultures and adapt it into our lives. (Student 8's entry 2)*

*Individualism and collective societies have good and bad points. Individualism provides freedom to do a lot of things freely. But it weakens the relationship between people. For example, American teenagers will leave their home to follow their dreams, so they rarely spend a lot of time with family. On the other hand, collective society emphasizes social relationship. People share and support each other. However, for Asians because others often help us, so when we face obstacles we can't manage the problems by ourselves. ... The present world needs a good balance between these two things, in order to build up interpersonal relationship and people can share with each other. (Student 1's entry 3)*

In the third excerpt, the student compared the life styles of teenage Western women and Thai women. In her idea, they appeared to have some distinctive differences.

*Some women have no dream or goal. We can find these people in Thailand. Thai women are not taught to set clear goals and to create their unique identities when they were young. Most Thai women begin working at the age of 21 after graduation, while Western women begin working before their college life. One of several problems in our society is that Thai children lack the ability to live by themselves, toleration, and self-confidence. (Student 2's entry 8)*

In the following two excerpts, the students compared the political system in the Middle Age in Europe with the ruling system in historical Ayuthaya period of Thailand. This activated their background knowledge and made connection with new information.

In their comparison, students mentioned some general characteristics of the two systems from existing understanding. However, their discussion did not seem well-developed as they did not provide adequate details.

*I think the Middle Age has some similar points when compared with our Ayutthaya period. Buddhism had influences on people's lives. Temples were places where they could get education. Boys had to ordain for education. Monks performed as teachers; they taught novice monks and people morality, arts and science, and they also disciplined human minds to be more moral. Temples were not only the place of education but also the center of human minds. Everybody went to temple on Buddhist holly days to listen to sermons and make merit. Because they believed that when they did good things the consequence of their merit would bring them to heaven. (Student 5's entry 4)*

*Feudalism was a set of reciprocal legal and military obligations among the warrior nobility, revolving around the three key parties of lords, vassals, and fiefs. The lord received military support from the vassal and the vassal would receive the land from the lord too. I think this was similar to Thai ancient world in Ayutthaya Age. In that time, we also had noblemen who owned the land and slaves who worked for them in order to get protection. (Student 4's entry 4)*

In the following excerpt, the student generated some interesting idea in her entry by contrasting the architectural styles of the buildings in the West and the East. She also gave an example of important building in Thailand which was influenced by Western architectural style.

*Because there are different climates and geographies, each country has its own architectural style. For example, Roman architecture has arches and domes, and the materials are often concrete and marble. Chinese architecture emphasizes articulation and bilateral symmetry and uses of large structural timbers to support the roofs of the buildings. Thai buildings are raised as a result of heavy flooding. The roofs are high and the buildings are made of wood or bamboo. In*

*the modern world, mixed architecture can be seen around the world. Vimanmek Palace was influenced by European and Thai modern style. (Student 3's entry 2)*

Comparing and contrasting are the critical thinking strategies that the students used to relate what they had studied in the classroom to the world around them. In this process, the students discovered a new understanding and deepened their insights in cultural topics. The strategy supported meaningful learning and enhanced their cognitive competence.

***Relating to personal experiences and situations.*** In their journal entries, the students analyzed class content in light of their personal experiences, opinions and beliefs, focusing on the cultural aspects that were appealing to them. In this way, they found the issues relevant and connected to their lives, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

*Praying can help us to concentrate and stop our confused thinking. When we are praying, our mind will focus on the prayers. ... According to Buddhist teaching, when we have concentration, we will gain wisdom. ... From my own experience, the praying competition gives me the chances to learn about the doctrines I had never known before, to meditate, and to join religious activities more often than ever. These chances made my life better. (Student 3's entry 5)*

*Thinking tool is a helper to create ideas, and mind mapping is a well-known method. I learned another one when I was in high school. It is called the "Six-Hats Thinking Strategies", the technique of orderly thinking. Each hat has a different color and represents different style of thinking. The white hat is to think justly for evaluation, the black hat implies logical caution which prevents us from making mistakes and the green hat refers to creative thinking for new ideas and development. (Student 5's entry 5)*

Relating to personal experience allowed the students to connect academic learning to their life experiences in an interesting way. They chose relevant topics to

explore further and related them to their personal life and knowledge. It extended their learning as the students linked classroom learning to the broader context in which they live. As research suggests, when instruction focuses on meaning it is crucial to encourage students to make relations between the themes explored in class and their personal experience, value, and beliefs (Dantas, 2002). The students can give additional depth of the subject.

*Expressing personal view points.* Expressing a personal point of view was another popular strategy that the students in this group used to form their critical thinking. When they interacted with content by forming personal viewpoints, the students assimilated new information to their existing knowledge in a meaningful way (Pally, 1997). This intensified their way of viewing the world.

*Religion is unlimited ... You can study and admire any of them. In my opinion, religion is a very important part in human's life. So people should not use religion for their own advantages. Religion is important to our souls and it shouldn't be mixed with money... Hell can be found on earth and this may be in the forms of wars and natural disasters, including unpeacefulness in the mind. (Student 1's entry 6)*

*Christians believe that God created the cosmos including human beings. I disagree with that. I studied in the science-math program in high school, and learnt that there is no proof about this in the scientific view. I realize that Christianity is hard to understand if you don't have faith in it. It is interesting for me to learn about the teaching of Christianity. (Student 3's entry 6)*

*For me, whether there are heaven and hell, life should not be lived for the afterlife. It is here and now that we have and it is so short. So we should spend it wisely, not just spending it all worrying about what we don't know. Also, do good things because it is the right things to do, not because of our fear of hell. Love others because we truly care for them not because we*

*only want God to love us. Then we can say that we are true to ourselves and to God. (Student 8's entry 7)*

*People in the modern world have tried to restore the Parthenon as close as to the condition when it was first built. ...Nevertheless, the will of the Athenians who first built it and of the present generation who tried to rebuild it are not on the same scale. ... When they were trying to preserve this heritage of the ancient world, they probably forgot its original value. From once a sacred temple and the center of the Athenians' lives, it was reduced to a mere historical site and a tourist attraction. (Student 7's entry 1)*

*I think Heaven and Hell have existed in our mind and soul. You feel good when you did good things and feel nervous when you sin. (Student 3's entry 7)*

*I think religion is an important part in human's life, because religions are the foundations of many things, such as education, goodness, and civilization. If we don't have religions to discipline our thoughts, we may be just like animals which never know about the virtue.*

***Jiraporn's entry 4*** (Student 4's entry 4)

It is important for EFL instructors to provide content that captures students' interest as it seems to increase their motivation in learning and encourage them to form personal attitudes about the subject matters. Importantly, students should be given opportunities to express their opinions at their own comfort level.

***Posing questions at the issues.*** The students posed questions at the important issues in their journal entries; nevertheless, most of the questions were still about their personal feelings and some of the questions did not appear to engage them in meaningful reasoning and profound critical thinking. Moreover, the students' attempts to find the answers to the questions they had asked did not seem evident.

*Thailand, Japan and China are examples of collective societies. If Thai society was trained to be an individualistic society, which way would we become? Would Thai people lose their identity of kindness? Would Thai society be a lonely society? (Student 3's entry 3)*

*It's very sad to know that we hear people speak of hell lightly. To many people, it's something to be joked about, or just a curse word. What would happen if people don't believe in hell? (Student 1's entry 6)*

*What do they want from Christmas? Many people hope for more than presents at Christmas. ... We feel sure that behind all the fun and decorations there must somehow be a message, something more important, some key to life, hope and happiness. So can they look beyond the way Christmas is celebrated today, and find any real meaning, any message for their lives today? (Student 1's entry 9)*

*If Athens had prospered throughout time, would the world be more peaceful? Wars had destroyed the ancient Athens, but other societies have inherited its legacy. The truth is that no empire can stand forever. It has to give way for others to prosper. Even though the empire had collapsed, the ancient Greek culture is still alive. (Student 10's entry 4)*

*In many countries around the world, the celebration of Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> is a high point of the year. But why? Can it have any real meaning for us today? Is there a real Christmas message? (Student 3's entry 9)*

*Culture in the west has constantly flow to the East. People from western countries have also received some cultures from the East. It seems that the idea of globalization mentioned by Stoicism some thousands years ago is becoming true in the near future. (Student 2's entry 2)*

*In the Western World, people usually say: "Do the right things." There is nothing wrong with announcing and championing this morality and the rights to live. What criteria are our morals based on? Who can judge what's right and wrong living? This is an important question because our principle law should be*

*based upon morality rather than adjusting morality to suit our own needs.  
(Student 5's entry 3)*

*"The sun never set in the British Empire." Is it true? And why did they say so? ...  
Did the empire rise to such splendid power from trade, or conquest? ...The  
British Empire wanted to gain control and spread its power to other countries,  
but for what? (Student 6's entry 3)*

*Religions do not only influence our lives, spirits, and souls. ... From our birth to  
death, religious ceremonies have involved in our lives -- the ordination, the  
circumcision, the baptism, etc. We believe that we must join these ceremonies  
and wish to be lucky. Can we live happily if we reject these ceremonies? How  
can the ceremonies make our lives lucky? (Student 9's entry 5)*

It is still a challenge for EFL instructors to train students to develop their inquisitive mind. Asking relevant and good questions could be a useful critical thinking strategy which the students need to further practice in class regularly in order to bolster their effective critical thinking. However, the students' ability to ask relevant and critical questions might call on several qualifications, such as background knowledge, deep interest in the issues, and maturity. They need to be systematically trained and nurtured over a period of time.

***Suggesting solutions to the problems.*** The capability to suggest solutions to the problems requires a deep understanding of the problems, knowledge, and experience to propose sound solutions. The excerpts below illustrate that some students worked productively to identify the problems and suggest the solutions to the problems.

*In the past until the present, Thai students study and learn by memorizing information. They try to remember everything, every lesson and sometimes every word in order to answer the questions in the examinations. ... We could do the tests but we lack critical thinking ... I think if we learn without critical thinking, knowledge that we receive may be only information that*

*we recognize and will be forgotten later. But if we learn by trying to understand and looking deeply at details, we will understand, develop good thinking and apply to our life ... At the present time a lot of news reports true and partially true stories. Some people may believe in one-sided or distorted information from the media. This leads us to develop disharmony and conflicts in the society. The problems won't occur if people use critical thinking to consider the news. (Student 10's entry 7)*

*Climate change may be a big problem, but there are many little things we can do to make a difference ... We have to recycle cans, bottles, plastic bags, and newspapers. When we recycle we send less trash to landfills and we help save natural resources, like trees, oil, and natural elements such as aluminum. We can save energy by taking the bus, riding a bike, or walking. Whenever we use electricity, we help put greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. By turning off the lights, the television, and computer when we are through with them, we can help a lot. There are many solutions to save our world from the problem. (Student 2's entry 10)*

*Materialism sees materials more important than our minds. ... When the mind is devalued, people gradually become immoral and do anything sinfully.*

*The following ways are to relieve the problem.*

- *Implanting religious teaching into life.*
- *Showing the consequences of bad behavior and good behavior.*
- *Electing good people to rule over bad people.*

*(Student 2's entry 6)*

*Christianity has been divided into many branches. ... Conflicts sometimes arise between them. ... Conflicts seem to be unavoidable results of any fractures, but they provide new viewpoints and ways of thinking and living. As long as they keep Jesus' teaching of universal love and still have faith in God, the conflicts can be resolved. As Christians believe they are the children of God, then whatever sects they are in they are still brothers who are meant to love and care for each other. (Student 1's entry 6)*

*We can save our world from global warming by using the 3R-principles: Reuse, recycle, and reduce to decrease garbage. Planting trees can help increase oxygen in the atmosphere. In order to decrease carbondioxide, we shouldn't use plastic bags, synthetic containers, and fuels. If possible we should decrease our consumption of electric energy and water supply. Alternative energy is one of many good ways to save our world from global warming. (Student 9's entry 10)*

*We have to be always aware of the problems, and we must have good concerns for nature. We can save the world by some basic ways: turning off or unplugging electric equipment, using both sides of paper, reusing items like envelopes or paper clips, using e-mail instead of paper, walking or riding your bike instead of driving and so on. (Student 8's entry 10)*

Some students attempted to clearly identify the problems and describe the consequences of the situations or the results of the problems in their journal entries. However, they seemed to fail to discuss the issues and elaborate on the solutions clearly. The following excerpts illustrate such problems in their responses.

*In the future, if we still ignore global warming, many things may happen such as strong hurricane, melting of ice at the poles, increasing of the sea water level, increasing of violence and frequency of heat wave, and millions of creature's extinction. ... I think it is regrettable that we do not know that we are standing at the edge of chasm. Humankind development is damaging ourselves. We cannot escape from this. The effects of changing weather patterns will affect our food chain. Nobody can save us, so we have to do everything that can save our world. (Student 6's entry 10)*

*Jesus was merciful to the poor and people who were starving. He was anti divorce because leaving a woman by herself would make her unable to support herself. I agree with this idea. But nowadays the number of divorces is dramatically increasing. This may lead to many social problems such as abandoned orphans. Unwanted children lack love and warmth, and they find it difficult to live in this world. (Student 4's entry 5)*

*One of several ways Western people study is through inquiry. ... On the other hand, Thai people's study and learning styles are different. I rarely find inquiry in classes. We are often taught to follow the teaching, not to form our thoughts. ... Inquiry is a good way to acquire knowledge. If we practice to question about things surrounding us, we will carefully analyze and figure out the answers. It is a good learning habit for everyone, not just educated people. Analyzing is the best way to develop our brain, which can help us avoid Alzheimer's disease. We acquire useful knowledge for our life. Good questions are the questions that require critical thinking and answers. (Student 5's entry 3)*

Nonetheless, suggesting solutions to the problems was neglected by many students in this group as only some students attempted to propose their solutions to the problems they had raised. In class, the instructor need to stress the importance of some common problems that different cultures are facing such as the environmental and social problems and encourage students to brainstorm, research, and propose rational solutions in journals. Along with this useful literacy practice in EFL class, the assignment can support students to become responsible and knowledgeable members of their society.

***Evaluating the importance of the subject matters.*** Evaluating the importance of the issues is regarded to be one of the essential critical thinking strategies that support effective learning. In the excerpts below, the students validate the importance of critical thinking which is prominent in Western academic contexts. They acknowledge that critical thinking is also important to them.

*Critical thinking is a way to improve writing, explaining, thinking and analyzing. ... Critical thinking helps us ask relevant questions, weigh the evidence offered in the arguments, understand complex problems, and make wise decisions. ... Ask better questions and we'll get better answers. It's the key part of critical thinking. ... My favorite critical thinking*

*question is “Do I believe or why do I believe like that?” Asking these questions is an amazingly useful mental exercise to practice. (Student 2’s 7)*

*In the educational system, we study to acquire knowledge, but more importantly we should study to understand and develop the ideas and different points of view. This will lead us to be good thinkers and able to examine everything efficiently. (Student 10’s entry 7)*

*Critical thinking is the important skill for surviving, which we can use to analyze good and bad points about things around us, and determine the best choice. (Student 2’s entry 7)*

Journal writing provided the students with important opportunities to use various critical thinking strategies to investigate course content in ways that were genuinely relevant to their learning. Other meaningful and intriguing responses in the sample journal entries came from the students’ uses of various critical thinking strategies, such as relating course content to other situations, elaborating crucial points with examples and details, identifying the problems, analyzing causes and effects of the problems, casting doubts, and making inferences and assumptions. Critical thinking practices can increase the students’ confidence in the power of their thoughts; when teachers value thinking in the classroom, they value students’ identities (Chamot, 1995).

Although it has been alleged that many Asian countries favor a reproductive mode of learning and emphasize the learning strategies of memorizing and imitating (McKay, 1993), it could be argued that at the present many Thai academic communities are focusing on the intrinsic value of critical thinking related to students’ cognitive development in general education and various disciplinary fields. Critical thinking skills are beneficial for students’ academic studies at the university and professional pursuits in the workplace; therefore, they need to be practiced in EFL classes. Beyond the

classroom, critical thinking skills are applicable to various situations. They help students to understand the socio-political factors that implicate their lives (Pally, 1997).

Critical thinking in Western societies favors an analytical and speculative mode of learning placing an emphasis of evaluating evidence and competently presenting a reasoned argument (McKay, 1993). Personal and cultural beliefs are often voided. Critical thinking practice in EFL class, however, should encompass students' indigenous culture, religion, and traditional wisdom.

### **Cross-cultural understanding**

Journal writing allowed the students to meaningfully reflect on their cultural learning experiences. It gave them the opportunities to critically analyze the Western cultural traditions and values that they had learned. At the same time, the students engaged in learning about themselves, including their own culture and social world. This learning experience helped the students to understand and respect cultural diversity; thus, it increased their cross-cultural awareness. As illustrated in the following excerpts, the students express their admiration for Western values which encourage people to live a good life, keep a high spirit, appreciate spiritual matters over worldly possessions, and work hard to accomplish goals.

*Jesus taught that you should love others like you love yourself, be patient and sympathetic to others, and forgive people who made mistakes. Christians believe that when they give to the poor, God will bless them and return what they give many times. (Students 10's entry 5)*

*Christian believes that human beings were made from clay by God, and at the end we will be back to the clay and cannot bring anything with us. I like this idea because it shows me the truth and reality about life. When you are alive, you may be rich, poor, healthy, happy, or disconsolate. But whatever*

*you have when you're alive will disappear. You cannot take anything with you! You cannot take money, because your body is gone. (Student 10's entry 7)*

*Jesus taught that you should love others like you love yourself, be patient and sympathetic to others, and forgive people who made mistakes. Christians believe that when they give to the poor, God will bless them and return what they give many times. (Student 6's entry 5)*

*I heard about a man named Job in the documentary. Job was a really good man, but he had many troubles in his life. He still had faith in God. The Bible said that God allowed Satan to test his faith. That might intend to teach that Christians have to do good things and have faith in God in everything. What about Satan? Satan used to be an angle, named Lucifer, who fell from heaven because he wanted to be as powerful as God. Satan once dared Jesus to change the stone to bread, but Jesus responded to him saying that humans don't live by bread but live by soul. I like that. I think bread can make human to live day by day but the food for our souls is more important. (Student 3's entry 7)*

*I do believe that people who cherish the American dreams and work hard will be rewarded with successes. (Student 8's entry 8)*

*Then we studied about "The American Dreams," which were particularly about the dreams of American women. Young American women dream to be popular, rich, and unique ... They believe that they can be what they want to be ... I love this attitude ... They want everything — good family, good lover, good education, good job, and so on. They want a perfect life ... I think it is great to have a dream ... Dream gives life an inspiration and hope to live ... dreaming and expecting are not absurd. (Student 1's entry 8)*

*In the contemporary world, women attempt to decrease discrimination against female rights. They began to do activities men do, go out to work, have new life style and form their own identity. This is different from the*

*past. They changed their traditional life style (homemaking, child rearing, be a teacher or nurse) to the modern style, which have material success, more salary and power ... Nowadays, female have high potentials which are as good as male's potentials. Some successful businesses are managed by women, and some civilized countries are ruled by female rulers. (Student 2's entry 8)*

Journal writing also provided the students opportunities to rethink deeply about the Western customs they were familiar with, such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. The students found new meaning and gained an insightful understanding of the customs, as they wrote in the following excerpts:

*Having learnt about the life of Jesus, I suddenly realized the importance of Christmas which is the celebration of the birth of Jesus and it is very important to all Christians. Every year, the celebration takes place around the world. But why some people think of Santa Clause before Jesus? What will Santa give us this year? I admit that I used to think like that, but no more. I'd be better to realize that God sent Jesus for humans on that miracle day instead of thinking about presents or fun parties. (Student 6's entry 5)*

*I think the real reason and the real way to celebrate (Christmas) is sharing; it can be food, money, party, or presents. But the most important thing we should share is happiness. In my opinion, the real celebration is the real happiness that we can share with everyone. (Student 1's entry 9)*

Furthermore, the students expressed their empathy and deep concerns about the problems that people in Western societies are encountering as a result of some declining cultural values.

*The present Thanksgiving Day has changed from the past as people emphasize on food, presents and family reunion more than thanking God; moreover, they forget the kindness of the Native Americans who had helped*

*their ancestors ... At present, Christmas has been associated with materials; people buy gifts for friends and family, and they enjoy going out to see decorations along the streets. Religious traditions of Christmas have been devalued. (Student 3's entry 9)*

*The purposes to celebrate Thanksgiving Day have changed over time. Thanksgiving Day for some people seems to focus on food and new menus. Food has overplayed prayers. (Student 1's entry 9)*

Through reflecting on their cultural learning experiences, the students rethought Western countries' cultural values and their own culture and personal ideas. They became conscious of diverse cultural and social assumptions which helped them to deepen their cross-cultural understanding, widen their worldview, develop cross-cultural awareness, and respect differences.

### **Research skills development**

Journal writing rekindled the students' interests in the topics that they had studied in class and it extended their learning to the world beyond the classroom. Some students did online research and explored the topics they were interested in on the Internet. Then, the students incorporated new and interesting information in their journal entries. This learning experience was likely to help the students to generate the breadth of their knowledge. Journal writing could be used to engage students in academic practice and develop research skills which later could support their lifelong learning. The finding is consistent with what Myer (2001) reported. The following excerpts support the claim:

*I searched what critical thinking is on the Internet. There are many aspects of critical thinking. It is the process of thinking about one's thinking and thoughts. Critical thinking can be understood as the way of becoming*

*aware of and taking control of one's own thinking processes in order to think more effectively. It is consciously directing one's thinking to make it more rationale, clear, accurate, and consistent. Therefore, it is the way to approach problems and make decisions to get as close to possible truth.(Student 2's entry 7)*

*Because there are different climates and geographies, each country has its own architectural style. For example, Roman architecture has arches and domes, and the materials are often concrete and marble. Chinese architecture emphasizes articulation and bilateral symmetry and uses of large structural timbers to support the roofs of the buildings. Thai buildings are raised as a result of heavy flooding. The roofs are high and the buildings are made of wood or bamboo. In the modern world, mixed architecture can be seen around the world. Vimanmek Palace was influenced by European and Thai modern style.  
(Student 5's entry 2)*

*Have you ever seen a greenhouse? Most greenhouses look like a small glass house. Greenhouses are used to grow plants, especially in the winter. Greenhouses work by trapping heat from the sun. The glass panels of the greenhouse let the light come in but keep heat from escaping. This causes the greenhouse to heat up and keep the plants warm enough to live in the winter. Without the greenhouse effect, the Earth would not be warm enough for humans to live. But if the greenhouse effect becomes stronger, it could make the Earth warmer than usual. Even a little extra warming may cause problems to humans, plants, and animals. (Student 3's entry 10)*

*I searched why it was called "Big Ben". There are 2 theories. The first theory proposes that it was named after Sir Benjamin Hall, the first Commissioner of work; and the second theory says that it was named after Ben Caunt, a champion heavy weight boxer of the 1850s. I think the first theory is more likely to be true.  
(Student 5's entry 3)*

*I searched articles about Christianity and found an interesting one from [www.sawadeejesus.com](http://www.sawadeejesus.com). I think it can summarize the major ideas that refer to Christian belief as the following. It says that the basic of Christianity is FAITH. F=Forgiveness means people are absolved by the kindness of God and Jesus. A=Available means forgiveness is available for everyone. I=Impossible means it is impossible that God will let any sinner to heaven, He will judge them. T=Turn means we should be ashamed to sin and turn over a new leaf. H=Heaven means the eternal life.*

*(Student 5's entry 6)*

However, the study also found that online search seemed to be a compensation strategy that the students whose reading and listening skills were weak used to solve their comprehension problems. These students tended to search for alternative texts of the similar topics which were easier to comprehend. The students studied the texts and they could grasp the important meanings of the lessons and incorporate interesting information from new sources in their journal entries.

### **Enhanced metacognitive awareness**

The results of the current study support the findings of previous research that journal writing can foster students' reflections on their learning and it could enhance their metacognitive control over learning processes (Stevenson & Jenkins, 1994). When reflecting on their learning experiences, the students discovered their comprehension problems, and they employed various strategies attempting to monitor their learning process and outcomes. Several students often started their journal entries by assessing their understanding of the lessons, describing comprehension difficulties, stating goals to make improvement, and mentioning using revision strategies to overcome the problems. Through this process, their metacognitive awareness could be enhanced and it could foster effective learning. The excerpts below provide evidence to support the claim:

*I have watched a documentary about the history of Athens. I'll honestly say that I cannot summarize what they say. But I have watched for several times at home, then I understand better. I can even recite the sentences that I didn't understand before. (Student 10's entry 1)*

*This week, I have watched a documentary about the Romans. I feel the same as last week that I couldn't understand the whole story. But I managed to catch up by watching again and again at home. I feel surprised by the mightiness of the Roman Empire. (Student 3's entry 2)*

*This week I learnt about the British Empire. I still had to watch the documentary but I couldn't follow it again. So I have to look up the history on the Internet and asked my friend to tell me the story of the British Empire in order to write this journal entry. (Student 2's entry 3)*

*This documentary (The Romans) makes me have fun but it has lots of difficult words which I don't understand. So, I have to try hard and keep trying. (Student 1's entry 2)*

*This week I learnt about the British Empire. I still had to watch the documentary but I couldn't follow it again. So I have to look up the history on the Internet and asked my friend to tell me the story of the British Empire in order to write this journal entry. (Student 5's entry 3)*

With their increased metacognitive awareness, the students attempted to monitor and improve their learning outcomes. They appeared to take a rigorous participatory role in learning and achieve more successes. Journal writing engaged the students in active learning, thinking and writing process; as a result, the task helped to foster their academic learning, language skills development, critical thinking, and personal growth (Myers, 2001).

Journal writing assignment has proven to be a facilitative learning instrument as it engaged the students in active learning, thinking, and writing process. Journal writing

encouraged the students to understand course content deeply and reflect on important issues meaningfully. The students played an active role in reviewing content, summarizing main ideas, reflecting on learning experience, and critical thinking. In addition, the research study discovered that in this EFL cultural studies context journal writing could foster the students' cross-cultural understanding and enhance their metacognitive control over their own learning process.

## UNIT 5

### FURTHER DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this current study support the findings of previous research that journal writing is an effective learning tool. The assignment fosters university EFL students' writing skills, critical thinking, and research skills. When the students write regularly in their journals and receive feedback from the instructor they tend to improve their language skills and gain confidence to write. Journal writing values the students' thoughts and encourages them to form their own perspectives about the issues that they have studied in class. Students can be encouraged to utilize critical thinking and research strategies to explore the issues in various dimensions to widen their horizons. They can associate learning to their life experiences and the world outside the classroom in meaningful ways.

In addition to these, the present study discovers that for cross-cultural studies in EFL classes journal writing allows the students to reflect on their cultural learning experiences meaningfully and it can enhance their cross-cultural understanding. Students' reflections on their learning in journal entries also help them to increase their metacognitive awareness which triggers them to use strategies to monitor their learning and make improvement. In essence, journal writing is likely to encourage university EFL students to engage in literacy practices as knowledgeable, reflective, and analytical members of their academic community.

Students' journals gave me the opportunities to examine my students' thoughts and their growths in a variety of ways. I could provide individualized instruction and personal support to the students who needed help. As the instructor, I was satisfied to see the students tackled interesting topics and reflected on important issues. However, the benefits of journal writing cannot be examined immediately but after a period of time

when the students could adjust themselves to this learning mode and when the students themselves start to see the advantages of writing in their journals.

### **Instructional Implications**

Journal writing has some explicit value in helping university EFL students to reflect critically on what they have studied. Through reflective writing, the students increase their understanding of course content and develop writing skills. They explore class topics in various dimensions, take on more sophisticated and complex issues, and analytically discuss them in their journals. The students analyze problems and propose solutions as knowledgeable citizens. This meaningful learning experience fosters university EFL students' critical thinking and cognitive skills. The students play an active role in their learning different from passive rote learning in traditional classroom which focuses on remembering and repeating learned information in the exams papers.

It is important to provide interesting and meaningful topics for discussion in EFL class as they are crucial for students' language, critical thinking, and writing skills development (Pally, 1997). Meaningful input can invoke students' critical thinking which can help them to generate salient ideas and write intriguing responses in their journal entries. Selection of cultural content can be based on the interests, needs, and social concerns of the students. Topics for cultural studies can be related to work, family, relationship, communication, inequities in the society, etc.

For pedagogical applications, journal writing should be promoted as a tool for learning which can be incorporated in regular EFL classes. Students should be encouraged to keep their journals and write in English regularly to reflect on their learning experiences. This can mold and shape a good learning habit and support students' lifelong literacy practices in their EFL. The importance of journal assignment

should be stressed by the instructor, and the communicative goal of journal writing should be emphasized. Students' sharing of their journal entries with classmates can heighten the communicative goal of journal writing and urge them to take a strong commitment to write in their journals. However, students should be allowed to express their opinions freely at their own comfort level. As a result, the students will be likely to gain the benefits of journal assignment and regard the task useful for lifelong learning.

While journal writing promises great potentials for enhancing learning, teachers must recognize possible pitfalls and develop preventive strategies for avoiding them. The following important issues need to be put into consideration and practice. Journal writing requires considerable time commitment by teachers to read and respond meaningfully to individual students' journal entries. Thus, the instructors who want to gain benefits from journal assignment must be willing to devote time and effort to offer students thorough and detailed feedback on content and language in their journal entries. Importantly, the instructors' feedback should help students to realize their strengths and weaknesses in journal writing.

Students who have never written journal before may need specific guidelines, and students' journal writing skills should be enhanced by providing a workshop offering formal or informal training. If students do not write regularly in their first language, they may be reluctant to participate in journal writing in English as a Foreign Language. Reluctant students may need further training to feel at ease with journal writing. In the beginning, some students may experience writing block and do not know what to write about. Moreover, most of the students may find journal writing burdensome and they take extensive time to finish the task. Therefore, an appropriate number of journal entries should be assigned and students should be provided adequate time for reflection and writing.

The instructors' modeling of journal writing strategies would be fruitful. When instructors write in their journals together with the class, they can ensure the relevance of journal assignment. Nonetheless, the instructors should also remember that students have diverse interests in journal writing. Even though a lot of students see the benefits of journal writing, it is important to note that some students may not be interested in journal writing at all. Holmes and Moulton (1995) found that some students may want to benefit from formal writing assignments and dislike the informal writing of journals. They state that learners who interact only superficially with their journals will receive few benefits. They suggest that it is important to help students to make a direct connection between journal writing and academic writing. It is recommended that providing positive and constructive feedback may influence how students perceive their journals in a positive way and may lead to a more meaningful reflective writing.

Knowledge of other cultures can enrich our students' lives. In the context of globalization, it is important for us to advance our EFL students' knowledge of other cultures and develop cross-cultural communication skills. Thus, they should receive a greater attention and high priority in EFL curriculum. EFL students need to be equipped with effective cross-cultural communication skills and strategies which help them to deal with cultural differences and conflicts successfully. The instructional goal should also aim at preparing our students to be capable of expressing their indigenous, local, and national cultural identities intelligently in intercultural contexts. In addition, the curricular goal should support intercultural co-operations, activities, exchanges, and dialogues between EFL students and individuals from different cultures. These are indispensable steps to develop mutual respect for diverse cultural identities and recognition of dignity and value of all cultures, including harmonious coexistence of the world population.

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**APPENDICE**

**APPENDIX 1**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Part : To survey students' opinions on journal writing experience**

**Direction: Please read the statements carefully and tick in the boxes.**

(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree)

| Item | Statement                                                                                                                                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1    | I need constant writing practice to write well in English.                                                                                              |   |   |   |   |   |
| 2    | One of the best ways to feel at ease with writing in English is to write often.                                                                         |   |   |   |   |   |
| 3    | Writing in my journal every week is a useful practice.                                                                                                  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 4    | Writing in my journal every week is a way to improve my writing.                                                                                        |   |   |   |   |   |
| 5    | I understand course content better when I write about what I have studied in my journal.                                                                |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6    | I think more critically about what I have studied when writing in my journal.                                                                           |   |   |   |   |   |
| 7    | My journal entries are useful notes to read before taking exams.                                                                                        |   |   |   |   |   |
| 8    | Writing in my journal every week is a good practice for me to develop important learning skills of note taking.                                         |   |   |   |   |   |
| 9    | I will keep writing in my journal in order to record important information and my opinions, because it is a good practice to help me learn effectively. |   |   |   |   |   |
| 10   | I want my teacher, classmates, and other people to read my journal entries and share their ideas with me.                                               |   |   |   |   |   |

**Part 2 To survey students' opinion on their writing improvement at the end of the course**

**Direction: Please read the statements carefully and tick in the boxes.**

(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree)

| Item | Statement                                                                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1    | I enjoyed writing more than before.                                                       |   |   |   |   |   |
| 2    | I have improved my writing skills after having written my journal entries for a semester. |   |   |   |   |   |
| 3    | I can write more fluently than before.                                                    |   |   |   |   |   |
| 4    | I can organize my ideas in writing better than before.                                    |   |   |   |   |   |
| 5    | I write more grammatically correct than before.                                           |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6    | I can use a variety of sentence structures better than before.                            |   |   |   |   |   |
| 7    | I can use a more variety of English words than before.                                    |   |   |   |   |   |
| 8    | I can use English words more appropriately than earlier.                                  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 9    | I can think and write more clearly than before.                                           |   |   |   |   |   |
| 10   | I can think and write more critically than before.                                        |   |   |   |   |   |