

The Purposes of Self-Sponsored Digital English Writing of EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the purposes of Thai EFL learners' self-sponsored English writing on digital platforms. The participants were 43 English major students enrolling Academic Writing course in the 1/2020 semester of the University of Phayao. The data were collected using a questionnaire, an interview, and the instances of participants' self-sponsored written texts. The results of the questionnaire showed that the participants performed self-sponsored English writing to have informal interactions with others in their social network most, and to practice their English writing skills least. The findings of the interview and the instances of self-sponsored written texts revealed that there were seven purposes of self-sponsored writing including sharing feelings or opinions on some issues by posting statuses, chatting with friends and family, expressing their opinions on friends' status or photos, encouraging themselves and others, blessing themselves or others on special occasions, teasing friends and creating humor, and practicing English writing. It could be concluded that the participants did self-sponsored writing in English on digital platforms to build and maintain relationships with others, do self-expressing and self-improving.

Keywords: Self-sponsored Writing, EFL Learners, Digital English Writing
Purposes of Self-sponsored, English Writing

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Introduction

In today's world, due to technological advancement, more people communicate with others across societies through writing on digital platforms. According to Yancey (2009), digital technology in the 21st century enables people to write anytime and anywhere based on their own needs. Galvin and Greenhow (2020) found that recently, students write on social media more than in a classroom. They write in chat rooms, e-mails, text messages, or social network sites to communicate with others.

When students write on digital platforms because of their desire, not because of the instruction of their teachers or the requirements of their schools, it means they do self-sponsored writing. This mode of writing refers to informal writing that writers perform based on their own needs in a non-academic context. Self-sponsored writing, hence, is not for educational purposes, and it is also known as writing outside of school (Rosinski, 2017). Self-sponsored writing on social media is informal and personal need-oriented, and a self-sponsored writer tends to use spoken or informal language (Banda, 2017).

The term 'self-sponsored writing' is derived from the groundbreaking study of Emig in 1971. In this study, Emig investigated two kinds of writing activities called school-sponsored and self-sponsored. Emig considered self-sponsored writing as reflexive writing because students wrote diaries or journals to reflect their own feelings or thoughts on things they experienced. The readers, therefore, were the writers themselves. This means that in the past, self-sponsored writing tended to be paper-based and personal-oriented activity. However, due to the emergence of online technology such as social media sites, self-sponsored writing has been transformed into social-oriented. Nowadays, self-sponsored writers write on digital platforms to interact with many readers in their communities or networks (Yi & Crowder, 2016). Although self-sponsored writing changes from personal-oriented to social-oriented, the primary characteristic of the activities is still personal need-oriented.

According to Rosinski (2017), self-sponsored writing can be done through digital platforms such as social networking sites (e.g., Twitter) and texting apps. Also, it can be done in paper-based formats such as writing in a notebook or sticky notes. Based on its primary definition and characteristic, self-sponsored writing also called writing outside a school, self-initiated writing activities, voluntary writing activities, out-of-school literacies, or non-school literacies. However, the present study places emphasis on digital self-sponsored writing on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook Messenger, or Line.

To connect with others from different communities through digital platforms, individuals tend to use English as a medium language increasingly. Bhutada (2021) states that English is the most broadly used language in the internet world. It could be seen that there is a significant connection between the progress of technology and using English on digital platforms. The internet-based communication technology facilitates people to write or text to others more conveniently. In the same way, using the English language in writing on digital platforms helps people to connect to more diverse audiences. For example, Sonkaew (2018) reported that Thai Facebook users who have experienced living in America, England, and Denmark used English to broaden their audience.

There have been studies on the self-sponsored writing of English native speakers (Rosinski, 2017) and immigrant learners who were born and raised in foreign countries such as America and Canada (Yi & Hirvela, 2010). In Thailand, which is an EFL context, Sonkaew (2018) studied why Thai people use English in writing on Facebook. However, some participants had been abroad for many years, and some of them were living overseas during the data collection. That meant they had experienced using English regularly in their daily life. They, hence, were familiar with speaking and writing English.

Conversely, less is known about the study of digital English self-sponsored writing of the Thai EFL students who had limited opportunity to expose to the English language. Thus, this study investigated the purposes of writing in English on digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter of Thai undergraduate students who had English exposure in English classes only.

The significant contribution of the present study is that the findings can add to the knowledge of pragmatics in social media texts. The study could benefit English language teachers who would like to understand the reasons why Thai students with restricted out-of-classroom English exposure use English in their personal writing on digital platforms. Moreover, the research could enable teachers to bring the real world to their classroom by adding the instances of students' self-sponsored writing texts into learning materials and having students analyze the purposes and pragmatics of the texts. Also, recognizing students' purposes for self-sponsored writing could help teachers create activities or tasks for students to experience the roles of writers in different genres.

Objective of Research

The objective of the present study was to investigate the purposes of self-sponsored English writing of Thai EFL learners on digital platforms.

Research Methodology

Research design

The present study was survey research employing both a quantitative and qualitative method. The quantitative data was collected using a questionnaire, and the qualitative data was gathered using an interview and authentic self-sponsored written texts.

Participants

The present study was conducted in three steps. The first step was a screening investigation. The next step was the questionnaire survey, and the final step was a semi-structured interview. The participants of the screening step were 43 English major students who did the Academic Writing course in the 1/2020 semester of the University of Phayao. This group of participants was assigned to sections one and two by the Division of Education Service of the University of Phayao. All participants gave responses to a screening question. According to the answers to the question, there were 23 students who had used English to write on online platforms for their own desires; therefore, they were included in the second step to complete the questionnaire asking about the purposes of self-sponsored English writing. Then, the participants in the second step were asked to participate in the interview based on their convenience, and there were 16 out of 23 students willingly took part in the semi-structured interview.

Research instruments

To gather the data, four instruments were utilized. The first one was a screening question asking the participants whether they have performed self-sponsored digital English writing. Second, the five-Likert scale questionnaire was used to explore the purposes of self-sponsored English writing. The statements in the questionnaire were adapted from the study of Rosinski (2017). Another instrument was a semi-structured interview used to elicit qualitative data of the purposes of self-sponsored writing. Similarly, the interview questions were adjusted from Rosinski's research. The screening question, the questionnaire, and the interview questions were evaluated the validity by three experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC), and the index mean was 0.97. Finally, the authentic texts of the digital self-sponsored English writing written by the interviewees on digital social networking platforms were collected to observe the purposes of their writing.

Data collection

The data collection was administered in the 1/2020 semester after the ethical approval of the University of Phayao Human Ethics Committee. The teacher-researcher provided the participants with the background information of the study such as the title, the objective, the procedures of the research together with the meaning of self-sponsored digital English writing. Next, the screening question asking for the experience of self-sponsored writing on digital platforms using English was used to gather the participants' initial data. The students who have not used English in self-sponsored writing on digital social networks were excluded, and the self-sponsored digital English writers completed the questionnaire investigating the purposes of the writing performances. After that, the interviews were conducted with the questionnaire respondents who voluntarily gave qualitative data of their self-sponsored English writing purposes through the video calls of Facebook Messenger. After the interviews, each interviewee sent the researcher ten instances of the authentic English texts they wrote on digital platforms.

Data analysis

The questionnaire data on the students' purposes of self-sponsored digital English writing were investigated using mean and standard deviation. The criteria for interpreting the mean scores (Srisa-ard, 2010) were as follows:

Table 1 The Criteria for the Mean Score Interpretation

Means	Levels of self-sponsored digital English writing habits
4.21 - 5.00	Very high
3.41 – 4.20	High
2.61 – 3.40	Moderate
1.81 – 2.60	Low
1.00 – 1.80	Very low

The interview data on the participants' purposes of self-sponsored digital writing using English and the instances of the English written texts on digital platforms were analyzed using thematic analysis and coding schemes. During the interviews, the data were recorded. Then the data were transcribed and translated into English. After that, the responses were read thoroughly and categorized according to the emerging themes. Then the researcher studied the examples of the texts and classified them based on their purposes.

Results of Research

The purposes of self-sponsored English writing on digital platforms were studied by using the questionnaire, the interview, and the instances of students' self-sponsored written texts on digital platforms. The findings were presented in two parts: 1) the findings from the questionnaire and 2) the findings from the interviews and the instances of authentic self-sponsored written texts.

1. The findings from the questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire analysis were presented in Table 2

Table 2 The purposes of self-sponsored digital English writing of EFL learners

No.	Statement	\bar{X}	SD.	Interpretation
1.	I write in English to share my feeling by posting my status on digital platforms such as Facebook, Line, Instagram, or Twitter.	2.77	0.99	Moderate
2.	I write in English to comment on others' posts on digital platforms such as Facebook, Line, Instagram, or Twitter.	3.00	1.10	Moderate
3.	I write in English to chat with others on digital platforms such as Facebook Messenger, Instagram, or Line.	3.65	1.06	High
4.	I write in English on digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook Messenger, or Line in order to practice writing skills.	2.69	0.97	Moderate

According to Table 2, the mean scores of students' purposes of self-sponsored digital English writing were at a high and moderate level. The highest mean score was item 3 ($\bar{X} = 3.65$, $SD = 1.06$). This indicated that the participants performed self-sponsored English writing to have an informal conversation with others in their social network most. The second highest mean was item 2 ($\bar{X} = 3.00$, $SD = 1.10$), followed by item 1 ($\bar{X} = 2.77$, $SD = 0.99$). It revealed that the participants wrote in English to comment on their friends' posts and share their feelings or opinions by posting their statuses in a moderate level. The lowest mean score was item 4 ($\bar{X} = 2.69$, $SD = 0.97$). This meant the participants did self-sponsored writing in English on digital platforms to practice their writing skills least.

1. The findings from the interviews

Based on the qualitative data elicited from 16 interviewees, the purposes of self-sponsored English writing on social networking sites were demonstrated in figure 1

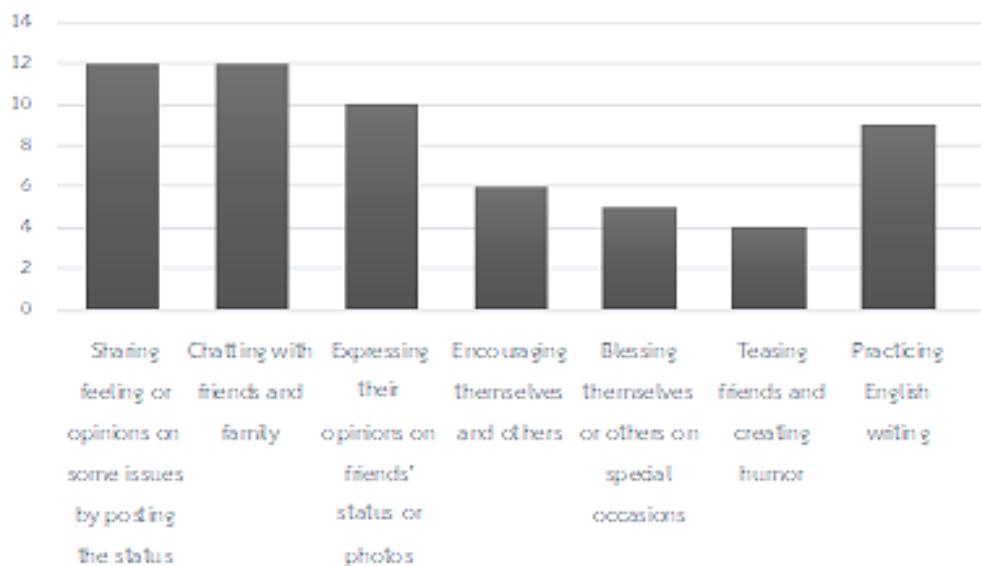


Figure 1 the purposes of self-sponsored digital English writing

Based on Figure 1, the participants of the interviews reported seven purposes of self-sponsored digital English writing. One of the most frequent purposes of self-sponsored writing in English on digital social networking platforms was sharing feelings or opinions (12 out of 16), and another one was chatting with others (12 out of 16). Also, they used English in self-sponsored writing to express their opinions on friends' status or photos (10 out of 16), encourage themselves and others (6 out of 16), bless themselves or others on special occasions (5 out of 16), tease friends and create humor (4 out of 16), and practice English writing skills.

Most interviewees reported that they wrote their statuses on digital social networking sites in English in order to share their feelings or thoughts on situations or issues. For example, the interviewee No. 8 wrote “*Freedom of speech is a human right.*” to show his opinion about the political situation, the interviewee No. 10 wrote “*You could really hate me. I don't mind at all. I'm totally fine.*” to express his feeling about someone's attitude towards himself, and the interviewee No. 15 posted “*Sometimes, I feel like I shouldn't have got into this relationship.*” to tell her feeling about relationship with someone.

Another most common purpose of self-sponsored English writing on social media was to chat with others. Some instances could be seen in following chats:

Interviewee No. 4: *where did you take this photo?*

Interviewee No. 16: *the secret* 😊

Interviewee No. 1: *I wish I could talk right now*

I'm very tired

I'm going to sleep

Anonymous: *Alright, sleep well*

The participants also used English in digital personal writing to express their feelings or opinions on friends' status or photos. For instance, it was written by the interviewee No. 8 “*Such an amazing and beautiful picture!!!*”, No. 10 “*I'm glad to see you all.*”, and No. 14 “*Oh! It's amazing.*”

Some participants wrote in English to encourage themselves or others in doing something or when they felt discouraged. The illustration was found in the posts of the interviewee No.1: “*_stevemiter_ There’re always #lessons to learn from each #experience.*  *it doesn’t really matter how many times you fail as long as you get up from each “fall”. #remindmyself*”, the interviewee No. 3: “*This moment in your life is just a chapter. It’s not your whole story. It comes and it goes.*”, and the interviewee No. 6: “*Not being tall, you have to tiptoe. Not being excellent, you have to work hard.* 

Additionally, students wrote on digital platforms in English because they wanted to bless themselves and their friends on special days or occasions such as birthdays or some good days. For example, the interviewee No. 2 blessed herself on her birthday “*Hallo my birthday. Goodbye 20 welcome 21 I have got many experience from last year. It has both good and bad things idk but thx sm. It’s so incredible.....I wish this year make me grow up better than the past.....n I wish I could meet good guy lol*”, and the interviewee No. 14 wrote to her friend “*Happy birthday to you.*”

Certain interviewees perform self-sponsored digital writing in English to tease their friends or create sense of humor to make them laugh. For instance, the interviewee No. 5 wrote to his friend “*He want to return with you? or He want know your story 5555*” . The interviewee No. 8 posted “*Do you wanna be my husband?*”, and the interviewee No. 11 asked her friend “*Flower or Me?*”

Furthermore, nine interviewees mentioned that they wrote on digital social networks in English to practice writing skills. For example, the interview No. 2 stated “*When I write in English on Facebook, I can practice writing.*”, and the interview No. 10 said “*I think writing on Facebook using English is a chance to practice writing skills. It helps me to get familiar with English writing, so I feel more confident when I write assignments.*”

Conclusion and Discussion

The results of the questionnaire showed the students performed self-sponsored English writing on social media platforms for chatting with others most, followed by writing comments on others' posts, sharing their own feelings, and practicing English writing skills. The findings of students' purposes for self-sponsored writing in English on digital platforms from the interviews were in line with the questionnaire analysis. The top three purposes of writing in English for their own needs found in the interview included sharing feelings by posting statuses, chatting with others, and writing comments on friends' posts. Apart from that, the interviewees wrote in English on social networking applications to encourage or motivate themselves and others, bless themselves and others on special days, tease friends or create humor, and practicing English skills. Based on these purposes, it could be concluded that the students did self-sponsored writing for relationship-building, relationship-maintaining, self-expressing, and self-improving. These findings were similar to the conclusion found in Rosinski's study (2017). It was reported that the reasons for self-sponsored text writing consisted of keeping in contact or greeting someone, entertaining or making someone laugh, and fulfilling needs by asking someone for help to get something done. In addition, Sonkaew (2018) reported that social media Thai users used English to keep a language choice used by their interlocutors. When the conversation on Facebook was started in English, they would respond in English to keep the interaction flow. Also, Greenhow and Galvin (2020), stated that students write on social media to build relationships with their classmates and teacher when they are apart.

In the aspect of practicing English skills, this study was conducted with EFL undergraduate students who have limited exposure to English. They have chances to learn, use, and practice English language skills in English

classes only. Therefore, the students who desire to extend the opportunities to improve their English skills use English in self-sponsored writing on digital platforms for self-training. It was in accordance with Kong-in's (2015) study uncovering that one reason of Thai learners for writing in English on Facebook was the desire to practice writing skills. It was also supported by Kamnoetsin (2014). This previous study found that students practiced English skills by writing posts on Facebook and reading their friends' posts. Students used English to practice language skills and communicate with others.

The findings demonstrated that students performed self-sponsored English writing on digital social media platforms to interact with others, express their feelings and thoughts, and practice language skills. It could be discussed that digital social media sites broaden Thai EFL students' perspectives of using English. They could see that English is used broadly. Consequently, they tend to perceive that they could use English to communicate with others in their online communities based on their desires, and they could practice writing skills concurrently. Boonsuk and Ambele (2021) explain that nowadays, there is no limitation on English usage because it has been taught, learned, and used by people from many intercultural societies. Likewise, Yancey (2009) explained that technological advancement in the 21st century facilitates individuals to perform self-sponsored writing whenever and wherever they want.

New Body of Knowledge

The research findings brought about the knowledge of the main reasons that Thai EFL learners write in English on digital platforms based on their personal needs. It was found that EFL learners have three main reasons 1) building and maintaining relationships with others, 2) expressing themselves, and 3) practicing English skills. The purposes for self-sponsored English writing are presented below.

Table 3 The purposes of self-sponsored writing in English on digital platforms

Main themes	Purposes
Building and maintaining relationships with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chatting with friends and family - Encouraging others - Blessing others on special occasions - Teasing friends and creating humor
Self-Expressing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sharing feelings or opinions by posting status - Expressing their opinions on friends' status or photos - Encouraging themselves - Blessing themselves on special occasions
Self-Improving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practicing using English to communicate with others

Suggestions for Research

1. Suggestion on Policy

The results of the study showed that self-sponsored writing on digital platforms to build and maintain relationships with others. Also, it is one way to practice English communication skills for Thai students. The teacher, hence, may encourage them to use English outside the classroom by assigning them to discuss selected topics using English to help them extend their experiences of using English.

2. Suggestion for further study

A further study should be conducted to examine the impact of self-sponsored English writing on school writing.

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