

Journalogue: Voicing Student Challenges in Writing through a Classroom Blog

Suneeta Thomas

Department of English, Missouri State University, USA // suneetathomas@missouristate.edu,
sthomasacademic@gmail.com

(Submitted October 10, 2015; Revised February 15, 2016; Accepted 24/04/2016)

ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively analyzes the challenges presented by international undergraduate students in a freshman composition course at a large Midwestern university in the US. 15 students were divided into five groups, of three members each, with varying proficiency levels in writing. They were asked to submit reflections as journal/blog posts, on two assignments (each, a different genre). Each group was then asked to comment on their group members' reflections, while the teacher remained a silent observer, to ensure a stress-free environment. With a total of 30 blog posts, and 60 comments, the data was qualitatively coded to display major themes. It was found that the journal/blog posts described student challenges in writing, but also shared optimism for learner growth. Collaborative reflection and learning was accomplished through students' comments, which irrespective of language proficiency, showed identification with each other, and provided encouragement, and advice on how to deal with these challenges. Additionally, this online mode of expression allowed complete teacher access to understand linguistic challenges of students so as to make necessary alterations in the classroom. The paper concludes by presenting suggestions that can be pedagogically used to address the problems faced by students, and by delineating avenues for further research.

Keywords

Classroom blogging, ESL writing, Identity, Reflective learning, Freshman composition

Introduction

With rising access to technologies in the classroom, discussions on blogging and its learning effects have evolved in second language writing studies in recent years. Blogging, as a pedagogical tool has shown to enhance learner engagement, foster knowledge, and increase socio-cultural interaction in the classroom. Specifically, as previous scholars have observed, blogs are significant due to characteristics such as, encouraging communicative and reflective practices (Absalom & De Saint Léger, 2011; Bhattacharya & Chauhan, 2010; Sidhu, Kaur, & Fook, 2010), motivating students to write, improving writer performance (Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010; Lee, 2010; Lin, Li, Hung, & Huang, 2014), its access in real-time, and creation of personal ownership in a public space (Absalom & De Saint Léger, 2011; Chen, 2015; Lin et al., 2014; Sun, 2009; Sun & Chang, 2012). Also referred to as the Blog Assisted Language Learning (BALL) approach (Lin, Groom, & Lin, 2013), Chen (2015) observes that the literature has shown to have three strands of pedagogical foci, namely the development of: (1) linguistic skills, (2) metacognitive skills, and (3) intercultural competence. For instance, with regard to linguistic skills, Fellner and Apple (2006) discovered an increase in writing fluency in their students, by the end of their study, than when they had begun. Similar studies include Bloch (2007), and Gebhard, Shin and Seger (2011) who examined the development of rhetorical strategies, and syntactic complexity in their subjects, respectively.

In terms of metacognitive skills, scholars have discovered that blogging urges students to think about their thinking (to reflect), and to write about their writing. That is, students are asked to actively monitor and evaluate the production of their writing, outlining specific techniques and strategies used during the process. A good example is Sun and Chang's (2012) study that investigates EFL graduate students' blogging efforts in reflecting on their writing processes and identities. The authors show how collaborative dialogue between students can reconstruct writer knowledge, and identity. Other studies along this line of research include Absalom and De Saint Léger (2011), Mompean (2010), and Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010), among others who investigate the role of reflection, motivation, and autonomy in ESL/EFL students' blogging process. The third strand of research, categorized as the development of intercultural competence has been documented in contexts of study-abroad programs, and in scenarios where students interacted with native speakers of the target language, or learners from different linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. For instance, Ducate and Lomicka (2005) in a German FL learning context, observed high motivation in students wanting to relate to the target culture. This was because they had required their students to research, compare, and write about German culture on their blogs, thus encouraging critical analytical skills, as opposed to being passive learners in the classroom. Similarly, Melo-Pfeifer (2015) in her research on Portuguese foreign language learning, investigated the use of a

pedagogical blog to facilitate plurilingual and intercultural competences in her students. Her study revealed that her students by the end of the project had improved their vocabulary, and cultural knowledge of the target language. Other studies such as Elola and Oskoz (2008), Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo, and Valentine (2009), Yang (2011), and Garcia-Sanchez and Rojas-Lizana (2012), also show learner engagement with the target culture, and the development of target culture awareness. However, as much as the pedagogical benefits of blogging are visible from the above studies, a new emerging fourth strand reveals some drawbacks too. Scholars such as Chen (2015), Lin (2014), Lin et al. (2014), Lin et al. (2013), and Lin et al. (2011), for instance, have come to grips with the inevitability of blogging activities ceasing once the writing course ended. Nevertheless, even with this setback, the benefits of blogging on writing and learning, far out-weigh the cons.

While a majority of L2 blogging studies have been conducted in EFL settings, minimal research has been conducted in North American *ESL freshman composition classrooms* (cf. Bloch, 2007). This gap is significant because international students who attend undergraduate studies in the United States (US) are in many ways similar to student populations in ESL/EFL settings. A majority of these students are fresh out of high schools from their ESL/EFL backgrounds. Yet, unlike previous studies, they experience different challenges in linguistic skills, particularly in writing since it is in a US composition classroom context. This study addresses one aspect of their writing challenges by investigating the blog use of international students in an American composition classroom. Adopting an expressivist approach with elements of socio-cognitivism, this study merges the concepts of journaling, blogging, and dialogue to theoretically inform this study. The title “Journalogue,” as a result, emerged from the merging of these three concepts.

Theoretical framework

Expressivism or the expressivist approach, according to Walter-Echols (2008), began as a criticism towards “impersonal and product-oriented” tasks in L1 composition in the 1970s (p. 121). Instead of impersonal tasks, the expressivist approach sought to express the personality of the author through his/her voice. It sought to be a creative outlet, engaging in self-expression, and self-discovery of the writer. Journaling, as a consequence, emerged as a method to absolve this need. Journaling prioritizes the act of reflection, and has been referred to as, reflective writing, or maintaining reflective journals, learning logs, learning journals, research logs, diary entries, etc. (Moon, 2006). Thorpe (2004) in defining reflection, quotes Boyd and Fales’ (1983) who state that it is “the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in a changed conceptual perspective” (p. 100, as cited in Thorpe (2004), p. 328). When it comes to ESL writers, Sidhu et al. (2010) for example, study how students *monitor* their learning through journal writing. Veerappan, Suan, and Sulaiman (2011) further look at the effect of teacher scaffolding during the journaling process. More importantly, Sidhu et al. (2010) advocate “Writing reflectively about their language learning experience is at the heart of ESL students’ experience and as such evaluation of students’ experience defines what students regard as important and how they come to see themselves developing academically as language learners” (p. 128). While reflection is identified as a dialogue with oneself, a blog expands this visibility of self-dialogue to a broader public space, encouraging public participation, and consumption through its comment feature. The intersection of reflective journaling, blogging (expressivism), and consequent dialogue and interaction (socio-cognitivism), aka creation of journalogues, forms the crux of this study. In this context, the teacher is a passive observer, while students participate in interaction and dialogue through the medium of a blog. In their participation, students are not solving a hands-on problem, or conducting a collaborative project per se. Rather, adopting the rudimentary elements of the socio-cognitivist approach (Murray & Hourigan, 2008), this study observes student reflection of challenges in writing, while peers engage in a consequent cognitive discussion.

Methodology

Larger context of the study

The United States (US) has been seeing a tremendous surge of international students from ESL/EFL backgrounds in university settings (Jordan, 2015). Although, to characterize this international population in its entirety would be incautious and beyond the scope of this paper, it is safe to say that a majority of these students, especially those from EFL countries require support in getting assimilated into the American classroom. An important aspect of such support is language learning, and assimilation. When international students come to pursue undergraduate studies in the US, some sources of support available to them are ESL conversation groups, or enrollment in intensive English language programs. However, they are expected to take a freshman

composition course (FYC) which is a mandatory writing course requirement for degree completion. Depending on the university, they are either placed in the mainstream composition course with domestic, native speaker students, or some universities allow the option for choosing an equal, but an ESL equivalent FYC. The context of the current study, involves the latter: International undergraduate students registered for an international section of FYC in a large Midwestern university.

The study: Curriculum design

The present study, seeks to analyze students' reflective journal/blog posts that describe their challenges in writing specific assignments. One section of an international freshman composition classroom, comprising a total of 15 students, taught by the researcher were chosen as participants for this study. The curriculum of the course requires students to participate in a sequenced writing project. That is, they write a sum of four papers on the same subject over the course of the semester. Completing a series of assignments for a sequenced writing project represents the belief that students improve their writing skillset when each assignment builds on the experience and knowledge gained from completing previous assignments (Leki, 1992). In the sequenced writing project, the students may write on any topic they wish with the approval of the instructor. However, it must be a topic that will allow them to do all four assignments (Personal Narrative, Interview Report, Literature Review, and Argumentative Essay) of the project. Additionally, each assignment undergoes three revisions, and only the final, third draft is graded. This method allows the students to revise their papers twice (or even more should they choose to) before they submit their final. This is how the course is designed.

Participants

The participants were students enrolled in one section of an ESL writing course in a large Midwestern university during the Spring 2014 semester. The class had mostly freshmen, with three sophomores, and one junior student. Since it was the spring semester, the students had had the chance of experiencing the university for at least one semester (in the preceding Fall). Thus, all were familiar with the university environment which predisposed them to a less stressful semester, in general. Additionally, the researcher was fortunate to have a diverse group of students in the class with six Chinese students, four Indian students, three Malaysian students, one Honduran, and one Korean student. Table 1 shows the demographic information of these participants.

Table 1. Participants- Demographic information

Students	Languages spoken	Duration of English studied (average)
6 Chinese	Mandarin, Wu Chinese	7.3
4 Indian	Hindi, Marathi, Sindhi, French	11.5
3 Malaysian	Malay, Mandarin	15
1 Honduran	Spanish, French	15+
1 Korean	Korean	10

Procedure and data analysis

For the purposes of this study, at the end of each assignment cycle once the students submitted the final draft, they were asked to write a (300+ words) reflection on their writing experience of that assignment (See Appendix A). They were provided a separate day, typically the day after their final submission, to carry out the journal assignment in class. In this way, the writing experience was still fresh in their minds, and they were less stressed since the final draft had already been submitted. The journal posts were done online and submitted through the university Blackboard learning system. The posts were designed such that it was visible only to the students registered in the class. Additionally, each student was asked to comment (100+ words) on two fellow-group-member's journal posts of the same assignment (See Appendix B). In order to accurately assign group membership, students were assigned one of the three writing proficiency levels—high (H), medium (M), or low (L) based on their performance on a written diagnostic test, and subsequent drafts of the first assignment. For analysis, it is best understood if the students are visualized on a cline of proficiency as seen in Table 2. Five students were placed under each proficiency level and were assigned code names. For instance, in the high proficiency level, the top five students were assigned H1, through H5 where the digit 1 represented the highest proficient student, while the digit 5 represented the least proficient student. In order to ensure that each student was getting feedback from students of other proficiency levels, they were subsequently placed in groups of three,

each comprising of a high, medium and a low level student. They were grouped as follows: H1, M1, L1 in group 1; H2, M2, L2 in group 2; and so on.

Table 2. Cline of proficiency

High	Medium	Low
H1, H2, H3, H4, H5	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5	L1, L2, L3, L4, L5

For the purposes of this paper, journal posts on two assignments—Personal narrative and Literature Review were assessed. This led to a total of 15 x 2 journal posts (30 journal posts) and 2 comments per post (60 total comments). The data was then qualitatively analyzed through coding and memoing and quantified to display major themes in the reflections and comments.

In developing the research design, three main research questions guided this study:

- (1) What kind of writing challenges do students share in their journal posts?
- (2) How do fellow group members respond to their group members' posts?
- (3) What is the nature of interaction between different proficiency level students through the commenting feature?

Results

Journal codes

Table 3 briefly summarizes all the different journal codes that were found after coding. Here, we will look at a few of the prominent and distinguishable ones. Out of the challenges (C-) that affected all students, linguistic challenges seem to have topped the list, with 26 tokens (occurrences) mentioned in the Personal Narrative (PN) journal posts, followed by 18 tokens mentioned in the Literature Review (LR) journal posts. These tokens represented challenges in relation to grammar, vocabulary, semantics, and mechanics. The next highest occurring code was the process/strategy code with 21 tokens. This code represented the strategies students employed in order to cope with or tackle the different challenges (including linguistic challenges) they faced in the assignment. Accomplishments ranked third, with 11 tokens featuring in the PN journal and only two tokens in the LR journal. In tie with Accomplishments was also the code of Sources that referred to the difficulty in choosing the right sources for the LR journal. Since this code featured only in the literature review assignment and occurred 13 times, it goes on to show the high percentage it had in terms of challenging the students. Some students even mentioned the challenge of either going under or over the word limit, with five tokens featuring in the PN journal and only three tokens in the LR journal. Another important challenge that the students mentioned in their posts were about citations. Many students shared the difficulties of citing properly while a handful were happy that they were able to easily follow the format and do them. Although there were other challenges mentioned in the journal posts, these reflections did not go without any positivity about the writing experience. There were five tokens on the code Writing is fun, and five that were colored with hope and positivity. Both these codes came from the PN journal showing the enthusiasm of the students in their first assignment of the course. The final code that I would like to discuss is the lack of confidence code. Although there were only two tokens of this code, it showcased the true emotions and fears of the student. All these codes are discussed in detail in the analysis section.

Comment codes

The comments that were entered after these posts showed four major themes/codes: Empathy, encouragement, compliments, advice/suggestions. The Empathy code was recorded whenever students showed instances of relating to the sentiment of the journal-author, or shared the same experiences as the journal-author. Encouragement code referred to instances where students provided encouragement to strive better or to continue with the journal-author's present endeavors. Compliments code referred to instances where the student expressed awe and complimented the journal-author for his/her accomplishments or perseverance. Finally, the advice/suggestions code referred to students offering suggestions for help, or advice in response to some of the challenges mentioned in the posts. Although on a superficial level, it may appear that these codes overlap, strict measures were taken to ensure that the codes were represented correctly in the data. Additionally, since there was tremendous repetition of these codes in all of the 60 comments, they were not quantified. Rather the form of interaction between the different proficiency level students was analyzed. This will be discussed in the next section.

Table 3. Journal codes

Codes	Description	Tokens
C-Linguistic	Grammar, mechanics, semantics	26 + 18 (44)
Process/strategy	Coping with challenges	21
Accomplishments	Writing, language, expression, research	11 + 2 (13)
Sources	Searching for good sources	13
C- Word limit	Less/excess	5 + 3 (8)
Citation	Struggles/Ease	7
C-Topic choice	Difficulty choosing topics	6
Writing is fun	Enjoyment	5
Positive/hope	Hope for better writing	5
Lack of confidence	Lack of confidence	3
L1/L2 translation	Translation issues	3
Writing is difficult		2
American teaching	Preference for ideas than grammar	2
C- Research Qs	Formulating Research Qs	2
Personal exp.	Description of exp.	2

Qualitative analysis

Journal codes

Following are some excerpts and examples of the above journal codes:

C-Linguistic

“...I actually do spend a lofty amount of time deciding how to phrase my sentences. I would try to play around with words, crafting bombastic and colorful sentences. ‘How much of these could I use before crossing the line of sounding like nonsensical ramblings?’ I was also tentative to how my sentences would read out. I had rephrased the same line, over and over again, out of frustration, trying to rectify how awkward it would sound.”-H1

The above H1 student, the highest performing student in the class has impressive literary writing skills. In the above journal excerpt, he clarifies that he spends a lot of time trying to out-do himself in his writing in order to do well in this class. Despite his advanced writing skills, he too is faced with linguistic challenges such as making appropriate word choices in his writing.

“When S (instructor) revised my essay I understood all my errors and those were mostly the run-on and repeated sentences and some of things in essay were explained properly. So, I have to work a lot to improve my essay, I found it hard because there were errors in almost all my essay and I was difficult for me to correct my essay. But somehow I did it. But after the revision of my second draft, I found more errors and they were the same, but this time it was run-on sentences and repeated words.”-M3

The above excerpt by a medium level student shows his linguistic challenge of writing run-on sentences. His writing style is starkly different from H1, as is visible through the run-on sentence he uses within this excerpt.

“When I write my essay, I meet many problems. Such as my grammar is not very good, I cannot remember many words and I do not know how to write so much words. This is my first year come to United States, so my English is not very good. I look up the words in the dictionary, ask my roommate about my grammar. I try my best to write the essay better.”-L5

This excerpt highlights the linguistic struggles of the lowest level student in the class. Once again showing a strong difference between the above two excerpts, this excerpt discloses a heightened degree of linguistic challenges than a medium or a high level student. In a similar fashion, students also mentioned challenges in relation to grammar, mechanics and semantics that constituted the Linguistic challenges code.

Accomplishments

“Before doing this assignment, I only know about this topic on the surface, but I am so glad that I chose this topic because I found a lot of new information regarding this crucial issue that is affecting the society. I also gained a whole new level of understanding about the media and its impact on the world!” -H2

This is by the second highest performing student who discusses the many accomplishments he has achieved while writing his personal narrative assignment. Similar instances were seen in the medium and low level students, as well.

“I learned how to analyze the requirements of the essay if it is offered and that can help me write an essay with an appropriate topic related to the requirements. Also, if there is no specific requirement, I know how to select a topic that I am interested in and will can inspire me. Another progress for my writing skills is I learned some new skills about research. This class taught me how to expand my topic to find the problem I need to research.” -M4

The positivity and enthusiasm of the student comes through, through this excerpt on the accomplishments he has had after one month of writing.

“Since the beginning of the new semester, I have spent one month on the writing class. I also learned a lot during this time... Although I spent much time on this assignment, I still feel so happy cuz I gain a lot. I know how to reach the agreement of the teacher, the format of the article and so on.” -L4

Although by a low level student, it was very encouraging to see that he too had felt a sense of accomplishment in his writing. However, we can notice the student mentions the idea of “agreeing with the teacher” as a necessary quality for him, unlike the medium or high level student.

Lack of confidence

The instances of lack of confidence as is visible below came from only the low and medium level students:

“Because of the problems with use of English language, I lost confidence in writing. Writing was very hard as I imagined. Since I am not a good talker, I had troubles with expressing my thoughts in a proper way. This was all bad thing during this assignment.” -M5

“I realize that my writing skill learned in China cannot work in my English articles at all. Plus my vocabulary is not enough and English grammar is totally different from Chinese grammar, it is hard for me to write a good English article. When mistakes were pointed out in my first draft, I felt so upset. So when I talked to our teacher, I said ‘I afraid I can’t.’ But S (instructor) said ‘don’t say you can’t, you can,’ which made me feel encouraging.” -L2

“I felt not good, I tried my best to write it but it was so bad. Although I was so unhappy, I knew it was my problem. I should write my essay better. I came back home to rewrite my essay.” -L5

The last excerpt by student L5 is the most moving as we see the lack of confidence evident through his words. Even student L2 shares similar sentiments. However, since this is the first assignment L2 is talking about, it is possible that she was expecting more positive feedback than what she had gotten. This could explain her lack of confidence. Student M5 further brings in the component of speech, which he holds responsible for being unable to express himself clearly. These three excerpts depict the fears of these students which they were able to express in their journals.

Writing as fun

On a more positive note, there were excerpts that referred to writing as fun.

“In my time forging my personal narrative, I often found that the words flow out of me almost naturally. Overall, I found my personal narrative assignment to be emotionally-charged as it was primarily fueled by my feelings and opinions I desperately wanted heard. Talking about video games, a dim light in me instantaneously

flared up and I wrote with passion practically oozing out of my fingertips. Possessing a noble cause to battle the foul misconceptions of video games, I saw it as an eager opportunity and whole-heartedly seized it. To me, it was an essay that was already written out in my mind, right from the very start... to say I didn't find this assignment enjoyable would be a lie. In the past, I have had many writing adventures due to free-for-all topics and had secretly found joy in these assignments."-H1

"The good thing is that I felt that writing is interesting. I don't have perfect grammar skills or writing skills, but when I wrote about personal narrative assignment, I felt that writing was fun. I just need to practice more on grammar and use of English language."-M5

What is significant to notice here is that writing is fun was found in journal posts by high and medium level students. That is, low level students did not necessarily mention writing as fun. However, some low students always expressed hope that they would do better in their writing.

Comment codes

Following are some excerpts and examples of the comment codes. Notice the types of interaction between participants in the comments:

Empathy

L4 → H5: "I have the same problem of you, so I can clearly understand your feeling. The part of personal experience must be difficult if you don't have enough information about it. And also, grammar problem also make me confused."

M5 → L4: "As an international student, I understand that writing is hard, especially with second language. I understand how hard to organize thoughts and choose the correct words. I'm from Korea. Korean education system is similar to Chicness in some ways. In Korea, it is more important to write in correct grammar too. They don't teach how to organize thoughts and write an essay."

H1 → L1: "What you're feeling is all too relatable to me. It reminds me of a time when I was still in a mandarin-orientated elementary school. Back then, my Mandarin skills were just awful and I remember dreading writing Mandarin essays. It was a challenge I never saw through because once I entered high school, I never took mandarin classes ever again. Fortunately for you, English writing is something that will stay with you in your time studying in America..."

Reading the above excerpts is absolutely heart-warming. This is where we begin to see the development of rapport between students. From the above, we can see a high student relate all too well with a low level student. Similarly, a medium, as well as, a low level student empathizes with their fellow classmates, too.

Encouragement

M1 → H4: "It seems you had everything very well plan since day one. The topic you chose is very interesting, and I can totally familiarize with it...I can foresee a very in-depth and captivating research paper to be written out of the previous explanation you wrote. Good Luck with everything!"

L2 → M1: "We all make a great progress in writing with the help of S and every classmate... From your journal, I can see you have a good time in this class, it's nice. And confidence is a great thing. So keeping your confidence, you must will be better."

H3 → M2: "...it's good that you could find help to your problems and come up with a solution. It's awesome that you could change your writing style to suite the requirement and make your narrative the best it could be. It takes great courage to write different from your style of writing, and I think you've been able to do that well as well as do it confidently. I wish you the best for the next few papers."

As we can see in some of the encouragement codes above, students are seen providing support and also wishing well to their group members.

Compliments

H2→ L5: “First of all I would like to praise on your persistence, for not giving up writing a research paper in 4 hours despite all the challenges you faced. It is true that when you believe in yourself that you can do something, you eventually will find your way to do it. I love how you seek help from your friends and consistently try to improve your English writing and speaking skills.”

L5→ H2: “And I think your presentation was really good in the class. I did the presentation after you and I felt a little tense, because you did it so good. In overall your English are very good. I hope we can be friends and you can tell me how you study English well.”

L2 → H4: “Obviously, your arrangement for your paper is clearer than me. And there are so many materials around us which can help your paper. And it’s awesome that you had so many things to express (more than 1200 words).”

Here we see how fellow classmates are able to recognize the plus points of each other and compliment it. Once again, there is a shared sense of unity and understanding that the students are all in this together and hence support each other.

Advice/Suggestions

M5→ H5: “...if you try to describe little more details, you will get used to it. Also, you have to use a lot of words to describe, so you won’t have a problem with word limit. It is good that you satisfied your final draft. Also it is great that you figured all your problems out. If you work on describing details, you will find yourself writing the essay is easy.”

L2→ H4: “The way I think can solve this problems for you is to only write the greatest points, and write them more accurate. And I also wrote many words were too philosophical to express my paper in right way. It’s hard to avoid, right^^ Hope our writting skills will be better.”

H2→ M4: “As for words usage, I recommend learning new words from synonyms because not only you can enhance your vocabularies, you can also avoid repetition especially when you have to refer to the same subject over and over again.”

The advice/suggestions code was the most interesting out of the comment codes. This is because ideally, one would hypothesize that students with higher proficiency level in a language would give more advice about that language. This is true in the last instance, above. However, it is interesting that both a medium and low level student give advice to high level students; whereas, there is only one instance of a high level student giving feedback to a medium level student.

Discussion

Through the above results a few points were visible when it came to the journal entries. The highest concern under journal entries was the challenge of dealing with linguistic errors, whether it was mechanics, or semantic features. This was followed by process/strategies that were adopted to cope with all challenges faced during the assignments. Accomplishments ranked third, and it is not surprising to note that while there were 11 accomplishment tokens featuring in the PN journal, only two accomplishment tokens featured in the LR journal. The personal narrative assignment, was the first assignment of the course. It was comparatively easier, since it required students to present a personal motivation for their choice of research topic. The LR journal posts, in contrast, depicted a stronger set of challenges for the students in the assignment. While, the high level students showed that they had language concerns, they also had trouble writing within the word limit. Nevertheless, they were the ones who enjoyed writing. Medium level students, on the other hand, mentioned having to deal with L1/L2 translation errors that affected their writing. However, they expressed a sense of accomplishment in terms of freedom of expression and language use. Low level students, showcased the highest instances of linguistic challenges that took up a major part of their journal posts. Nonetheless, it was these low students who adequately showed hope in wanting to do better in the class.

With regard to the comment entries, empathy and encouragement codes were the highest, followed by compliments, and a few instances of advice. What was interesting about the comments was that the medium level students tended to give more advice to low or high level students, instead of high students taking the lead. Could this be due to the possibility that medium level students have perhaps experienced both high and low levels of proficiency in their writing, and thus also experienced a variety of feedback? Some low level students were also found to be giving advice to high level students, which was interesting. Perhaps, this was because they probably receive the highest amount of feedback in their writing and thus have a higher feedback meta-knowledge to share? The above are my assumptions of course, and hence are difficult to conclude on, unless an interview can be conducted to corroborate my assumptions. Nevertheless, high and low level students mostly sympathized, gave encouragement, and compliments in their comments to others. The most important aspect to take away from this analysis of the commenting feature is how all the students managed to create a rapport system among themselves through this communication. Although they barely talked to each other in class, this online platform provided them an avenue to freely communicate with their fellow classmates and realize that they are not alone when it comes to composing in English in the classroom.

Conclusion

Although this study employed a small sample size, it provided the instructor a fresh perspective of where the students are in their writing. First, it allowed the instructor to develop and modify materials for future assignments. Second, it created bonds of trust and understanding between all participants, including the teacher spectator. More importantly, this research can be developed further to extend the findings of the current study. First, in future follow-ups of the study, the list of assignments and their corresponding journal entries can be expanded to include the interview and the argumentative paper assignments. This will provide a larger cohesive exposure to student challenges within the classroom, and would be highly beneficial, pedagogically. Second, the instructor can change the variables of viewership of the blog. The current study confined the viewers to only class participants and the teacher. This ensured a safe space for student expression, as they were not worried about public viewers and their opinion. Changing this variable can have positive effects on student confidence, since it would expose them to a wider audience and heighten their sense of ownership. Third, in this study, the instructor was a passive participant and made no comments on student exchanges and interaction. As long as students made timely journal entries, they would get a full grade on the assignment. This was done on purpose to ensure a low stress environment for student expression. However, opening the possibility of teacher involvement in the future, will provide the scope for formative assessment during the writing experience, as opposed to only summative assessment witnessed in this study. Maintaining the class size and number of assignments is however, important, since this will ensure that students are not over-burdened, and the instructor is able to sufficiently cater to the needs of all his/her students. Some points that however need to be considered are: students need to be aware of what journaling is before such a task is undertaken in the classroom. In other words, students should be trained in journal writing so as to effectively use it for writer-growth. Additionally, teachers must consider motivational factors of students' journaling process and consciously work to increase their motivation to reflect. In this way, journaling can definitely be helpful and effective in not only writing, but personal growth, as well.

References

- Absalom, M., & De Saint Léger, D. (2011). Reflecting on reflection Learner perceptions of diaries and blogs in tertiary language study. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 10(2), 189-211.
- Arslan, R. Ş., & Şahin-Kızıllı, A. (2010). How can the use of blog software facilitate the writing process of English language learners? *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 23(3), 183-197.
- Bhattacharya, A., & Chauhan, K. (2010). Augmenting learner autonomy through blogging. *English Language Teaching (ELT) journal*, 64(4), 376-384.
- Bloch, J. (2007). Abdullah's blogging: A Generation 1.5 student enters the blogosphere. *Language Learning & Technology*, 11(2), 128-141.
- Boyd, E. M. & Fales, A. W. (1983). Reflective learning: Key to learning from experience. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 23, 99-117.
- Chen, R. T.-H. (2015). L2 blogging: Who thrives and who does not? *Language Learning & Technology*, 19(2), 177-196.
- Comas-Quinn, A., Mardomingo, R., & Valentine, C. (2009). Mobile blogs in language learning: Making the most of informal and situated learning opportunities. *ReCALL*, 21(01), 96-112.

- Ducate, L. C., & Lomicka, L. L. (2005). Exploring the blogosphere: Use of web logs in the foreign language classroom. *Foreign language annals*, 38(3), 410-421.
- Elola, I., & Oskoz, A. (2008). Blogging: Fostering intercultural competence development in foreign language and study abroad contexts. *Foreign Language Annals*, 41(3), 454-477.
- Fellner, T., & Apple, M. (2006). Developing writing fluency and lexical complexity with blogs. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 2(1), 15-26.
- Garcia-Sanchez, S., & Rojas-Lizana, S. (2012). Bridging the language and cultural gaps: The Use of blogs. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 21(3), 361-381.
- Gebhard, M., Shin, D.-S., & Seger, W. (2011). Blogging and emergent L2 literacy development in an urban elementary school: A Functional perspective. *CALICO Journal*, 28(2), 278-307.
- Jordan, M. (2015, March). International students stream into US colleges. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/international-students-stream-into-u-s-colleges-1427248801>
- Lee, L. (2010). Fostering reflective writing and interactive exchange through blogging in an advanced language course. *ReCALL*, 22(02), 212-227.
- Leki, I. (1992). Building expertise through sequenced writing assignments. *TESOL Journal*, 1(2), 19-23.
- Lin, M. H. (2014). Effects of classroom blogging on ESL student writers: An Empirical reassessment. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 23(3), 577-590.
- Lin, M. H., Groom, N., & Lin, C.-Y. (2013). Blog-assisted learning in the ESL writing classroom: A Phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 16(3), 130-139.
- Lin, M. H., Li, J.-J., Hung, P. Y., & Huang, H.-W. (2014). Blogging a journal: Changing students' writing skills and perceptions. *ELT Journal*, 68(4), 422-431.
- Lin, M. H., Lin, C. Y., & Hsu, P. Y. (2011). The Unrealistic claims for the effects of classroom blogging on English as a second language, students' writing performance. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 42(6), E148-E151.
- Melo-Pfeifer, S. (2015). Blogs and the development of plurilingual and intercultural competence: report of a co-actional approach in Portuguese foreign language classroom. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 28(3), 220-240.
- Mompean, A. R. (2010). The Development of meaningful interactions on a blog used for the learning of English as a Foreign Language. *ReCALL*, 22(03), 376-395.
- Moon, J. A. (2006). *Learning journals: A Handbook for reflective practice and professional development*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Murray, L., & Hourigan, T. (2008). Blogs for specific purposes: Expressivist or socio-cognitivist approach? *ReCALL*, 20(01), 82-97.
- Sidhu, G. K., Kaur, S., & Fook, C. Y. (2010). Developing students' ability in monitoring learning via reflective journal writing. In *2010 International Conference on Science and Social Research (CSSR)* (pp. 127-132). doi:10.1109/CSSR.2010.5773734
- Sun, Y.-C. (2009). Voice blog: An Exploratory study of language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 13(2), 88-103.
- Sun, Y.-C., & Chang, Y.-J. (2012). Blogging to learn: Becoming EFL academic writers through collaborative dialogues. *Language Learning & Technology*, 16(1), 43-61.
- Thorpe, K. (2004). Reflective learning journals: From concept to practice. *Reflective practice*, 5(3), 327-343.
- Veerappan, V. A., Suan, W. H., & Sulaiman, T. (2011). The Effect of scaffolding technique in journal writing among the second language learners. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 2(4), 934-940.
- Walter-Echols, E. (2008). Journaling as writing practice, reflection, and personal expression. In I. Koch (Ed.), *CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching: Selected Papers* (Vol. 4, pp. 120-131). Retrieved from http://www.camtesol.org/Download/Earlier_Publications/Selected_Papers_Vol.4_2008.pdf
- Yang, Y.-F. (2011). Learner interpretations of shared space in multilateral English blogging. *Language Learning & Technology*, 15(1), 122-146.

Appendix A: Journal prompt

These journal posts should discuss your reflection on how your writing has progressed during the course of the recently finished assignment. Discuss the challenges, inspirations, annoyance and anything and everything you felt with regard to improving that specific assignment. If there was a specific incident that helped or affected your writing, write about it too. You have to have at least 300 words for these journal entries, but feel free to write more if you would like!

Appendix B: Comment prompt

You should know who your two group members are. Respond to both your group members' reflection by relating to it in any way you can. Your response should be at least 100 words, but feel free to write more if you would like!