

**An Investigation into the Use of a Blog as a
Tool to Improve Writing in the Second
Language Classroom.**

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Manchester for the degree of MA in Educational
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Abstract.

Several research studies concur that the use of a blog can positively enhance learning in the second language classroom and moreover that blogs can improve writing skills. Research has confirmed positive uses of the blog which include writing for an audience and peer review, the development of a student's analytical skills and the development of a sense of community in a class through a collaborative learning environment.

This dissertation presents the results of a small scale action research project which was undertaken in order to investigate the impact the use of a blog could have as a tool for improving writing in the second language classroom. It was carried out at a further education college in the north west of England with Level two ESOL learners.

The data which was obtained from questionnaires and interviews completed with the students throughout the academic year 2009 2010, and also from comments made on the blog that was used in the classroom, reveal that the students responded positively to the use of the blog. It was found that the blog helped them to improve their writing through the collaborative learning environment that was established and through the process approach to writing that was adopted. There was general agreement that writing for an audience and peer review contributed to the development of the collaborative learning environment and this was conducive to developing writing skills. This has clear and significant implications for teaching and learning strategies in the second language classroom and opens up interesting opportunities for second language teachers to explore when planning the development of their students writing skills.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The teaching and learning context.

This piece of action research has been carried out at Tameside College. The college is a medium to large sized further education college with ESOL provision for approximately three hundred adult, ESOL students from Pre-entry to Level two. Class size is kept small at a maximum of twelve learners per class, and class contact time is six hours per week. All students are working towards ESOL exams following the City and Guilds exam board. The students aim to complete exams in speaking and listening, reading and writing in a thirty two week time frame which then allows them to progress onto the next level of ESOL or into college wide courses.

The college is striving to achieve business college status at present and therefore the integration of technology is a key factor at play within the college. The integration of multimedia resources is made easy due to the excellent computer provision available in the department. All ESOL classrooms are equipped with interactive whiteboards and either networked desktop computers or laptops.

A blended learning approach (Sharma and Barrett 2007) is actively encouraged at the college. This methodology allows appropriate computer use to be planned for alongside traditional teaching methods in each lesson supporting the use of multimedia resources. The ESOL department does not rely on course books but uses the government materials for ESOL produced by the DFES. These are used to determine the curriculum content, tutors are then able to dip into the different resources books and tutor produced materials available to plan their lessons. The ESOL Core Curriculum, which sets down the standards students are expected to need in order to function and progress in work and in society, is also used as an essential planning tool.

Following initial profiling at the start of the course it shows that the students come to Tameside from a diverse range of cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. Students in the department include international students, asylum seekers, refugees, migrant workers, and foreign partners and spouses of British nationals in addition to those from settled Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian communities within the Tameside borough. The majority of the learners have experience of formal education in their country and are literate in their first language. There are learners that are highly educated professionals and have the ability to speak several languages. However, in contrast there are learners that have very low levels of literacy in their native language and have no previous education or employment. Some of the learners have prior experience of learning English in the UK, whereas others are very new to arrive in the UK.

Student motivation in the department is high and reasons for study and individual learning goals range from; career progression, further study related goals, or more personal reasons for learning English for example to facilitate daily tasks of living in the UK such as; going to the doctors, attending hospital appointment, communicating with local councils, communicating with their children's schools or simply establishing and building relationships with their neighbours. The ESOL student population at the college is very interesting due to its extremely diverse nature. However, these varied groups have different language needs arising from their diverse language, educational and professional/employment backgrounds and at times this represents challenges in teaching and learning for the tutors.

Importance of the research

Interest for this study has been gathered over the last few years after noticing the reticence ESOL students have for writing in their L2. In my ESOL classrooms I have noted that students often consider writing to be the most difficult skill and subsequently the most difficult and challenging exam. Reasons for this may stem from the fact that they are not always presented with an authentic task to complete in a writing exam, and also students often feel that they do not need to

write outside the classroom but communicating verbally is more important for them in their lives here in the UK. Unfortunately there is a gap here as writing is one of the skills that students need to be proficient in, in order to achieve the ESOL qualification they are aiming for. Improving attitude to writing and quality of writing in a student's L2 would potentially improve success and achievement rates for learners on ESOL courses. Furthermore, from a teaching perspective, the teacher is on most occasions the only audience for a student's written work and therefore any writing tasks always involve an extensive amount of correction from the teacher until the students finally produce an error-free *'final'* copy. Consequently, I was keen to develop better teaching and learning approaches to improve L2 writing.

Over the recent years there has been much interest in computer-mediated communication and the impact these can have on language learning and particularly the skill of writing. Literature suggests that writing using technology, particularly the word processor, can have a positive impact on L2 writing (Neu and Scarcella 1991: 170; Sullivan and Pratt 1996: 491-501). However, there is some negative opinion and suggestion that it does not benefit, and so with any new technology it is important to explore its potentials and limitations as Chan and Ridgway (2006) suggest;

"There is no consistent evidence that these new technologies enhance learning. However, the technologies are new, and it is important to explore new and effective ways of using them to enhance the process of teaching and learning." (2006: 1)

Blogs and blogging

'An online chronological collection of personal commentary and links.'

Educause Learning Initiative, August 2005

Weblogs, commonly referred to as blogs, are asynchronous communication-mediated-communication tools that were introduced, in the form they are known today, according to Blood (2000), in 1999 despite Winer's claims that they have been in existence since the beginning of the world wide web itself.

According to Campbell (2003) a weblog can be thought of as;

“An online journal that an individual can continuously update with his/her own words, ideas and thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so.”

Using a blog requires no knowledge of HTML consequently, due to this ease of use despite not being originally created for use in the language classroom, in educational settings worldwide students are increasingly using blogs and a lot of support for blogs has been generated. Zhang (2009) affirms that;

“Blogs have formidable potentials as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing classes” (2009: 66)

Blogs offer a collaborative environment whereby students can read each other's posts and in some blogs they have a facility to comment on each other's work. Therefore, students are essentially writing for an audience which is said to improve writing capacity (Zhang 2009).

The introduction of new technologies such as Weblogs has encouraged ESOL/EFL teachers to start thinking of the potential uses, benefits and challenges for teaching and learning in the second language classroom. General discussion around blogging suggests blogging can be good for reasons of self expression, communication, sharing of ideas and reflection. All these reasons seemed particularly valid and exciting reasons to incorporate blogging into the ESOL classroom to improve L2 writing skills. Furthermore blogging appears to underpin current constructivist learning theory as well as supporting writing theory such as the process approach proposed by Flowers and Hayes (1981).

Research question

The research question that this piece of research aims to answer is:

How do Level two ESOL students at Tameside College respond to the use of a blog as a tool to improve their writing?

In order to answer this question action research was carried out over one academic year to collect information from the learners to find out:

- Which part of the blog is useful for writing?
- What aspects of the blog are motivational?
- Does the blog promote a collaborative environment which is conducive to developing writing skills?

An action research method was appropriate for this study as it allows the practitioner to focus on a very real problem within their own classroom. In this study the systematic approach of defining the problem, making a plan, implementing the plan, reflecting on the results and further planning allowed the teacher/researcher to make changes and improvements to classes, and the use of the blog during the research to help understand the impact that a blog can have on L2 writing and thus determine whether this technology has indeed potential to enhance the second language writing process and subsequently to what extent.

Chapter Two

Literature review.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine relevant literature in relation to the topic of blogging and writing in the second language classroom. Different writing approaches will be considered followed by a discussion on the effectiveness of technology on writing development, including historical perspectives and a detailed discussion around blogs including their potential applications and challenges in a second language classroom. Furthermore, a discussion on the nature of social constructivism will be considered in order to understand how learning is constructed when blogging.

Regarding L2 writing theory, it seems there is no theory per se and research into L2 writing is often dependent on L1 research with practitioners often adopting L1 writing practices and approaches. Researchers such as Zamel (1984) have confirmed this by saying,

“Research into second language composing processes seems to corroborate much of what we have learnt from research in first language writing.” (1984: 198)

The research conducted by Zamel led her to conclude that;

“L2 composing processes indicate that the L1 process-orientated writing instruction might also be effective for teaching L2 writing.” (1984: 198)

Therefore historically, L2 writing was taught using L1 writing practices under the assumption according to Silva that, *‘L1 and L2 writing are practically identical or at least very similar’* (1993: 657). Research carried out by Silva (1993) would suggest that on a superficial level these similarities can be warranted but he has identified salient and significant differences in L1 and L2 writing through research concluding that, *‘Adult L2 writing is distinct from and simpler and less effective than L1 writing.’* (1993: 668). From his research he suggests that there are similarities in an L1 and L2 approach to writing generally in terms of the process learners go through and it is important here to mention the two prevalent approaches to writing. These approaches are namely the *product-orientated* approach and the *process-orientated* approach.

The distinction between these two approaches is centered mainly on the fact that the process approach is concerned with how a learner gets to the end product. In contrast, the product approach is concerned with the final product and the assessment of this as a piece of work. The two approaches were developed simultaneously in response to each other and it is worth noting that it is not necessarily true to say that the process approach is disinterested in the *product* or the final piece of work. There is interest in the final product but in this approach more attention is put on how to get there and development of skills along the way.

Earliest theorists on the process approach to writing were based on protocol analysis. A *protocol* is described by Hayes and Flowers in Greg and Steinberg as;

'A description of the activities ordered in time, which a subject engages in whilst performing a task'. (1980: 4)

Flowers and Hayes proposed a process approach theory to the writing process in the early eighties that was based on protocol analysis and consisted of a three stage process which included: *planning, translating and reviewing*. In their theory it was demonstrated that writing is influenced by the task and the writer's long term memory. This theory has been a widely accepted model of the writing process. However, it has generated criticism due to the fact that it is based on research with L1 writers and therefore input from long term memory from the L2 writer is not highlighted within the process.

Writing and technology

Research suggests that teachers today are frequently urged to make use of language learning technology and these days there is a wide range of Web 2 tools available for practitioners following the '*social software revolution*' (Hourigan and Murray 2010: 209). Traditionally, a tool that supported computer based writing was the word processor, this was a tool for most teachers that they had some experience of, and a tool which today offers much more than simply generating simple text due to fast growing nature of technology. The use of the

word processor in the development of writing has been researched a great deal and interestingly Piper (1987) carried out research in which she described twelve reasons why the word processor, *'can make a positive contribution to the development of students writing'* (1987: 122)

Discussion around the use of the word processor in the second language classroom centers on issues such as learner attitude and motivation and the impact this can have on writing. Phinney (1987) stated that;

"Improvement in the affective factors of attitudes towards English and towards writing, motivation to write, time spent writing, and perceptions about ones writing behavior appear to be the major benefits of computer assisted writing." (1989: 87)

This suggest the positive impact that computer assisted writing has on learners. A further issue that has been investigated when considering the use of technology in the classroom is the anxiety students feel towards technology. Students who are not familiar with technology would undoubtedly find using a word processor, and more so any other recent Web 2 application, an anxious experience and this could affect their effectiveness in using the language. However, research carried out with L2 learners by Neu and Scarcella (1991) led them to conclude that after extensive research with L2 learners:

"It is likely that problems students have in learning word processing and other educational software packages will continue to diminish as familiarity with computers grow." (1991: 181)

Hyland (1993) talked of familiarization courses which could include teaching keyboard skills to students before classes began to combat this notion of lack of familiarity that could potentially cause anxiety. This need for prior instruction was also highlighted in Pennington's (1996) four stage model of computer writing skill. Pennington suggested that the computer could have four effects on the learner and in turn the writing they produce, and this was the *natural order* that computer writing skills developed. The stages included: *writing easier, writing more, writing differently* and finally *writing better* (1996: 128–134). The first stage that a learner had to master was a familiarization stage which echoes the work of Hyland and the need for a period of learning how to use the computer to write. This initial stage was intended to reduce anxiety and help to

create a positive attitude to writing in learners from which they can progress onto the following stages '*naturally*'. As learners progress through the next stages, students constantly edit, revise and correct their writing in order to produce a much more sophisticated and effective end product.

Prensky (2001) coined the term *digital natives*, to refer to students that are '*native speakers*' of the digital language due to their interaction and experience with modern technology. He noticed that the changing nature of students due to the advancement of technology has made practitioners aware that the profile of a classroom is changing with students becoming more and more familiar with technology and enthusiastic to see it developed into classrooms as more authentic methods of communication. In this respect familiarization courses such as those proposed by Hyland and Pennington could seem outdated. However, this has been disputed recently by Hourigan and Murray (2010) whose research suggests that although students can use technology and are familiar with social media they found that they are not '*digital learning natives*' and therefore still need explicit instruction. This would suggest that Hyland's concept of a familiarization course where students receive adequate tuition in ICT for learning purposes could still be applied to the second language classroom today.

The challenges that surrounded the use of early computer based tools to support writing such as attitude, motivation and anxiety can undoubtedly be transferred to the more advanced Web 2 tools such as blogs. The use of a blog encourages learning through collaboration and autonomy. They are gradually being used more and more as a pedagogical tool in the second language classroom because they are considered to take on, '*a more communicative role than the less interactive CALL applications*' (Pinkman 2005: 14). However, McKillop (2006) argues that, '*a supported and pedagogical approach to blogging environments is needed for them to be educationally effective*' (2006:1). Therefore, in order to fully understand how learning is constructed through blogging it seems necessary to understand social constructivism and the theories that include the

role social context has to play on developing learning and the writing skill in particular.

Vygotsky proposed a social constructivist approach to learning. According to Roth (1994) Vygotsky's key idea was that the ability we have as adults to think and reason by ourselves and for ourselves is itself the outcome of a fundamentally social process. In relation to the blog and the process approach to writing it is apparent that these adopt a Vygotskian approach. Vygotsky (1962) in Capel (1995) stated that;

“What a learner can do today in co-operation, tomorrow he will be able to do on his own.” (1995: 239)

This idea would suggest that learners commenting on each other's work on the blog and the ability they have to see each other's posts would be beneficial for learning and the development of a learners writing.

Vygotsky talks about the notion of the *'zone of proximal development'* in his theory and it is this that coincides with this idea of a gap between what individuals can do alone and what can be achieved with the help of others. This idea emphasises the idea of social interaction being central to learning. However, it seems that he leaves open to interpretation the task of identifying the nature of the interchange that takes place within this zone. Analysis of this has therefore led to the idea of *'scaffolding'* developing as a way in which knowledgeable others can support learning. According to Wood and Wood (1996) the concept of scaffolding describes the teaching process as having different key functions ranging from;

“Recruitment of the learner's interest in the task, establishing and maintaining an orientation towards the task-relevant goal, highlighting critical features of the task that the learner might overlook and helping to control frustration.” (1996: 5)

This notion of scaffolding, it seems, demonstrates why a learner is able to go beyond their actual level of performance without causing too much discomfort and distress. In terms of using the blog students can *scaffold* each other in terms of operational use of the blog, with the more confident learners aiding the less

able learners. Students can also *scaffold* through the ability to see each other's work which can serve as a model example for the learners and in addition they are able to comment on each other's texts again providing reinforcement and support.

Contingency control has also been a proposal to explain the interchanges that take place in the '*zone of proximal development*'. According to Bruner in Roth (1994) contingency refers to the idea that more help is given by the tutor when the learner gets into difficulty and less help is offered as they gain proficiency. Again, this can be applied to the use of the blog and also to the use of the comment/feedback facility on the blog.

The social constructivist approach encourages students to use language in different situations such as; *expression, explanation, negotiation* and *compromise with peers* (Bakar and Ismail 2009: 46). Undoubtedly, all of these situations can be transferred to the skill of writing and if we consider these different situations it is apparent how collaboration is implied. Furthermore, if we consider the writing process and the stages students go through again collaboration is very apparent for example, initially a teacher may employ many activities to encourage the learner to create text for example maybe through discussion or brainstorming. In addition the writing process also involves arranging information into a structure, drafting, evaluation by peers or tutors and reflection on errors before editing leading to the final draft.

We can also identify how the social constructivist approach can be applied to the use of a blog whereby a learning environment is created in which students have to work collaboratively in a social context. Chan and Ridgway (2006: 2) consider blogs as a way of allowing students to share ideas with others easily, as a useful platform where students might engage in appropriate learning activities. They have described a blog as an environment whereby students have to, '*engage actively in the co-construction of knowledge with peers and with their tutor.*' which reflects very clearly the constructivist ideas.

Blogs have been described as, '*I, I, me-me-me environments*' by Thorne and Payne (2005: 382) to emphasise the individual ownership of blog spaces as being very personal. However, Campbell (2003) identified three types of weblogs for use in the ESL classroom. He distinguishes between the *tutor weblog*, the *learner weblog* and the *class weblog*. Each of these blogs can be used in different ways and has a different purpose. According to Campbell the tutor blog is a blog that is essentially run by the tutor and aims to encourage students to participate in online communication. In contrast, the learner blogs are run by the learners themselves and are used as a platform for students to express themselves through free writing. Finally he defines the class blog as a blog run by the entire class and is therefore the collaborative effort of the class (Campbell 2003).

Blogs have been used in classrooms for a number of years now and the evidence suggests that blogs can positively enhance learning and more particular, in relation to the skills of writing many researchers have claimed that blogs can improve writing skills (Downes 2004 and Hall and Davidson 2007). Research has confirmed many positive uses of the blog which include the development of a student's analytical and critical skills through a more student centered environment. Oravec (2002) claimed that the blog can empower students to become more analytical and critical, in turn improving a student's self confidence. The understanding here is that writing a blog encourages students to think about their own opinions and also consider how their views may be interpreted by others before they publish their post.

Blogs have also been identified as a tool that gives a purpose to writing in that students write for an audience and not just for their tutor. Kennedy (2003) in Barlett-Bragg stated that;

"Web publication gives students a real audience to write to and, when optimised, a collaborative environment where they can give and receive feedback, mirroring the way professional writers use a workshop to hone their craft." (2003: 3)

It is thought that students will be more thoughtful if they know they are writing for an audience, moreover this represents a more authentic writing experience for the students. Following publication of their posts students receive feedback from

their peers about their work and have the opportunity to learn from other students' posts which facilitates meaningful learning for students through increased interest and ownership of their learning. In support of this Bernstein (2004) in Zhang (2009: 67) advocated that, '*writing for an audience improves writing and writing that matters improve writing.*'

Goodwin Jones (2006) in Bakar (2009) echoed the positive aspects of blogging and the apparent advantages of using blogs as a writing tool. He suggested that a blog offers opportunity for collaborative learning through the two way communication that is fostered between a blogger and a reader, and it is in this student-centred learning environment that students can develop the skills of persuasion and argument. Blogs also offer students a high level of autonomy and an environment where they can learn from each other and it is this sharing of knowledge and acquisition that is the basis of a constructivist approach to language learning.

Despite the positive aspects of using a blog as a tool for writing, there do seem to be challenges in its use. Firstly, there are issues regarding computer phobia and anxiety as discussed earlier in relation to the word processor. Students that are not confident with technology may find themselves frustrated with the blogging process and this could be heightened if coupled with technical problems that cause them to lose their work before posting it. Furthermore, Campbell (2004) identified a major difficulty that EFL teachers using blogs in a class could face and that would be lack of participation from readers outside the classroom.

Questions have also been raised as to whether blogging in the classroom enhances education by Ward (2004). He identified challenges regarding lack of security and problems associated with computer netiquette, for example capital letters indicating someone is shouting. More importantly the fact that the use of the blog does not address the issue of handwriting seems a particularly valid drawback to using the blog especially when writing exams on the whole revert back to handwritten texts for assessment. Motivation can also be seen as an area of concern and it has been suggested that if learners are not encouraged blogs

can quickly be abandoned. In a similar vein, blogs are considered as highly volatile because the author can delete or remove their post when they like making continuity difficult. The Educase Learning Initiative (August 2005) have also discussed the concept of when is it appropriate to stop hosting the student blog as this may have implications for students who still want to access their work even after leaving the course, or complications for those people that make links to the blogs in question.

In conclusion there are numerous reasons for using blogs in second language classrooms. Stanley (2005) identified reasons that include; providing a real audience for students' writing, providing extra reading practise for students, increasing the sense of community in a class, encouraging the process approach to writing, encouraging students to participate or creating an online portfolio of their work. However, the key to using the blogs seems to depend on how the course using the blog is designed. This review has suggested that a well-organised instructional design with the understanding of the benefits and challenges in mind can make a blog a very instructional tool for English teachers.

Chapter three

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to allow for a detailed rationale regarding the research approach and methodology used in the study, and to present the data analysis that was done in order to investigate whether the blog can be seen as an effective tool to improve writing in the second language classroom.

Action research

This piece of research can be placed in an explanatory-interpretative paradigm identified by Nunan (2007: 4) as, '*one which utilises a non-experimental method, yields qualitative data and provides an interpretative analysis of that data.*' The research is a piece of an action research which aims to, '*arrive at recommendations for good practise.*' (Bell 2005: 8). Action research has been described by Wallace (1998: 17) as an '*empowering procedure*' and is becoming increasingly popular in further education these days with practitioners identifying a need for change or improvement more readily. This is consequently leading to more effective practices and improvements to teaching and learning in further education.

This research focuses on an aspect of teaching and learning in the ESOL department at a further education college in the North West. A problem was identified in the current ESOL classes that a gap between students' needs and interests, and exam board requirements was emerging with students becoming less interested in written communication which in turn was leading to lower retention rates and thus success rates in the classes. It seemed appropriate therefore to investigate ways to improve students' motivation for writing and quality of writing in order to improve teaching and learning in an attempt to bridge the apparent gap.

Action research can be seen as a tool to help teachers develop an aspect of their professional practise through reflection on the systematic collection and analysis of the data, it is not concerned with making generalisation and universal truths

but more so with improving individual practise and for this reason it was considered the most appropriate approach to take. Furthermore, the '*loop process*' (Wallace 2007:17) which allows the process to be repeated until a satisfactory conclusion can be made was also seen as a reason to adopt this approach in order to make an improvement on the approach to writing in the ESOL Level two class.

The setting

The ESOL department within the college encourages a blended learning approach, allowing appropriate computer use alongside traditional teaching methods in classes. The department also promotes a student-centred collaborative learning environment with students at the heart of their learning by involving them in target setting for their own learning and offering flexibility in examination timetabling to suit individual learning needs thereby allowing learners to progress at their own speed and ability.

The ESOL courses available at the college range over five levels which include Entry one, Entry two, Entry three, Level one and Level two. These levels correspond to; beginner, elementary, lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced levels. The courses are designed to develop listening, reading, speaking and writing skills and encourage progression through the ESOL levels and eventual integration into other courses at the college. Students complete a thirty-two week course in order to achieve the full qualification offered by City and Guilds at the level they are studying on. The classes are two hours in length and take place three times a week.

Students are placed onto an appropriate level course following an initial assessment of their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills at an enrolment session carried out by a qualified ESOL tutor.

At all levels the City and Guilds qualifications are very practical examinations which focus on applying language skills in everyday UK situations to encourage a student to succeed in everyday life and study in the UK. The City and Guilds qualification at level two incorporates the National Literacy test alongside a

portfolio of spoken and written assignments. The students must produce three pieces of texts written for different audiences and purposes that meet the ESOL National standards set down in the ESOL Core Curriculum at this level. The three texts at this level include; a review, a formal report and a formal letter.

The level two syllabus addresses the skill of writing through the sub-skills of text focus, sentence focus and word focus to reflect the complexity of the writing process. According to the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum *text level* addresses, *'the overall meaning of the text and the ability to write in different styles and formats.'* *Sentence level* deals with *'grammar, sentence structure and punctuation'* while *word focus* looks at the *'the individual words themselves, their structure, spelling and meaning.'* (2001: 6) Throughout the course therefore, students learn appropriate planning strategies and format for different purposes as well as correct grammar, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary/range in order to meet the standards. There is also an emphasis on proof-reading and editing of their work in order to produce final texts.

Introducing the blog

A WordPress blog was the blogging facility that was chosen for this study. It is considered as a high-quality, open source blogging facility. Advantages of the WordPress blogging facility is that it is not cluttered with advertisements to distract or confuse students and it is very easy to set up using an e-mail account and a simple password and username combination to log on. In order to facilitate access to the blog, WordPress was linked to the college Moodle system – LearningBox.

The Wordpress dashboard, or administration panel, is the first page the students see when they access the blog. This is a well designed and easy to navigate tool. The blog is very user friendly with posting onto the blog through a simple WYSIWYG text editor then publishing to the web is done through a simple click of a button. The posts that are created can create separate pages of content that can be linked to a main page which makes it easier to locate a piece of work. Some of the features of posting allow text, hyperlinks, images or multimedia to

be uploaded onto the students' pages. An additional very useful feature is the comment facility whereby students can respond or comment on each other's published work, indeed anyone reading the post can leave a comment or *trackback* to their own blog. There is no spell check or grammar check feature as yet on the Wordpress blog.

Campbell (2003) talks about different types of blogs for use in the ESOL classroom namely, '*The tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog.*' For this research a class blog, defined by Campbell (2003) as, '*the result of the collaborative effort of an entire class.*' was chosen and set up. Individual students were encouraged to set up pages on the class blog for themselves and to parent these pages to their own name so students could identify who wrote each post. The students used the blog for writing activities carried out in class and at home. They were encouraged to post their work onto the blog and then make meaningful and constructive comments on their peers work focusing on text, sentence and word level. The tutor also wrote comments for each of the students. The writing process involved students reflecting on the feedback made from their peers and tutors then editing their work, revising and re-publishing it.

Initial data collection and analysis

The data collection took place from September 2009 to July 2010. A Level two ESOL class from this academic year was selected and asked if they agreed to participate in the research investigating the use of a blog as a tool for improving L2 writing. Consent forms (Appendix one) were completed with the eight adult students enrolled on the course in September 2009. Diener and Crandall's (1978) definition of *informed consent* was applied which addresses four elements; *competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension*. According to Cohen and Manion;

"If these four elements are present researchers can be assured that subjects' rights will have been given appropriate consideration."
(2000: 51)

The ratio, men to women, in the class was 1:1 and the students came from Poland, Pakistan, Iran, India, Venezuela, Syria and Mongolia. An initial closed

questionnaire (Appendix two) was carried out with all eight students to determine their thoughts on their IT skills, their ability to write in their L2 and their educational background. This questionnaire was completed with the whole class at this stage then information regarding technology and writing ability from the questionnaire was transferred into a table (Appendix three) in order to determine which students in the class would be the most suitable for the research. Representative sampling was chosen as a method to try to ensure a representative demographic sample from the class in terms of gender, age, background, educational experience, writing ability and confidence with technology.

Following the initial questionnaire a supplementary writing task was completed by the whole class. This was done on the computer and encouraged the students to provide background information about themselves, in addition to eliciting their thoughts on using technology for learning English. Again, this was completed by the whole class to be able to gauge the student's writing ability and IT skills despite their own self-evaluation on the initial questionnaire. The level two diagnostic test that the students complete at the start of the level two class and the corresponding mark scheme was also consulted at this stage to determine writing ability at this level compared with National standards at Level two, ensuring reliability in the assessing of a student's written work.

Participants' profiles

Three students from the class of eight were selected and asked to assist in a more in-depth study of the impact the blog could have on their writing. The student's right to privacy has been respected and therefore all names have been deleted;

Student A is a Spanish-speaking male from Venezuela, South America. He is twenty-seven years old and has been living in the UK for a year and a half with his English girlfriend. Before living in England he lived in Majorca for five years. In Mallorca he worked in bars and nightclubs and spoke informal English with the customers and this improved his spoken English a great deal. He started learning English at a young age in school but did not enjoy the experience.

However, when he arrived in England he decided to start studying again and he has studied ESOL Entry three and Level one at the college and is now in the Level two class. He has assessed his own writing ability as average with this being his weakest skill. He identified problems with punctuation and structure and therefore his aim is to become more confident with his writing in the Level two class. He considers himself to be very good with the use of technology because he has been using it since he was very young and subsequently attended the first year of a university course in Computer Sciences in Venezuela. Unfortunately he had to leave his country and therefore couldn't complete this course. He has a positive attitude towards using technology for learning English but highlights that he has only used technology for language learning in England. He has experience of using the word processor in class and the college Moodle site but has not had an experience of using a blog. In addition he considers the use of technology as a *supplement* and emphasises the importance of the tutor in a class. On completion of the level two course he is contemplating an IELTS English course to further develop his English.

Student B is a fifty four years old. Her mother tongue is Punjabi and she comes from a very academic literary family in Pakistan. Her father is a very influential poet and scholar in Pakistan. She loves to write in her language and has published articles for the Press in Pakistan. She has assessed her writing skills in English as being very good/high and feels confident to write in English. However, she has a very low confidence in the use of technology and rates her ability as below average even though she can appreciate how useful technology can be. She has never heard of blogging and anticipates the difficulty she will have with it. She is a trained teacher from Pakistan and completed her education up to post graduate level. She studied English in her own country and when she arrived in England two years ago she enrolled at the college straight away to continue her English studies. She completed ESOL Level one last year at the college and after completion of the Level two she would like to do a teacher training course.

Student C is a young male aged twenty-five from Syria. His mother tongue is Arabic and he has lived in many countries including Libya, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. He lives in the UK now with his immediate family and works part-time. Before coming to the UK in September 2008 he lived and worked in Libya. He finished university in Libya where he studied Mathematics. He then worked as a Maths teacher in secondary schools in Libya, which he enjoyed immensely.

He started learning English formally from a young age, 12 years old. He generally enjoyed studying English but it did depend on the teacher he had each year. These days, he considers writing in English to be easier than speaking because of the multitude of accents in the UK and therefore prefers to write a letter to someone than to call them on the phone. He assessed his level of English as being good but can still see room for improvement. He completed the ESOL level one course at the college last year and acknowledged that this improved his writing skills. Now he is enrolled on the Level two course but he intends to go to university in the near future and eventually teach Maths here in the UK. Regarding technology he considers himself to have a good ability and can use a computer comfortably. He has experience of using the Internet, e-mail and whiteboards from the ESOL Level one class and thinks the integration of technology into English learning is a good idea because in the past he has mainly used text books and more traditional methods. He has heard of the concept of blogging through the Press but has never used one.

Interviews

A series of three semi-structured interviews were carried out with the three students that were selected from the ESOL Level two class. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis in English at a time convenient to the student. The interviews took a semi-structured form, in that each time there was a prepared interview with a range of topics, issues and prompts to encourage the interviewee to fully develop their response allowing for, '*a certain degree of control with a certain amount of freedom to develop the interview*'. (Wallace 2007: 147). All of the interviews were recorded after seeking permission from the three participants and two of the three interviews were transcribed. The first

interview was not transcribed due to the purpose of the interview. The interviews were designed to get an in-depth look at the students' attitudes and thoughts about using the blog in their classes to improve their writing as the academic year progressed.

The first interview (Appendix four) was conducted in September 2009, at the start of term, when the participants agreed to take part in the study. This interview had as McDonough and McDonough (2006: 181) describe, '*an ancillary role*', as a way of triangulating the data gathered from the initial questionnaires and supplementary writing task regarding background, writing levels and ability to use technology. At this first interview the students were made aware of the ethical consideration such as confidentiality and privacy and how these would be ensured. However, due to the choice of using interviews to collect data, anonymity could not be guaranteed and therefore the students were informed that they did not have to say anything that they did not want to share about their previous experiences and that their identities would be changed. This is fundamental from an ethical perspective given the sensitive status/backgrounds some of the students studying on ESOL classes have.

The second interview (Appendix five) was conducted with the students two months into the course, in late October. By this time the blog had been used in the classroom and the students had started to go through the writing process of posting to the blog, commenting on each other's work, reflecting, editing, revising and re-publishing. Information was sought after regarding their experiences to date. The cyclical nature of action research whereby reflection informs action at each stage of the research ensured data collection and analysis were an ongoing process. At this stage if anything was discussed in the interviews that would improve the use of the blog appropriate changes could be made.

The third and final interview (Appendix six) was carried out much later into the term when students had had a lot of experience using the blog. Responses to their previous interviews were summarised and agreed with them then open-questions

were asked to gain more insight into the overall experience they had had around the themes of technology and blogging in the ESOL classroom, written ability and improvements made over the year and finally the process approach to writing and collaborative writing.

The work that was produced on the blog would also be valuable data particularly the comments the students and the teacher had left for each other. These comments could be used to negate or confirm comments made in the interviews which would again serve to assure reliability.

Data analysis

Data that was collected included the initial questionnaire data, writing samples of students work, recorded interviews and the comments made by the students as feedback on each other's posts. This data is all of a qualitative nature and has been analysed according to qualitative data analysis methods. Waliman and Buckler (2008: 225) suggest that there are, '*essential activities in all qualitative data analysis*' and more specifically Miles and Huberman (1994:10-12) suggest three concurrent flows of action which are: *data reduction, data display and verification*. Following this pattern the interviews were transcribed and numbered line-by-line then they were coded. According to Walliman and Buckler (2008: 226) codes are, '*labels or tags used to allocate units of meaning to the collected data.*' This process of coding allowed for the organisation of the interview data under headings namely; use of technology and the blog, writing ability and the process approach to writing, and collaborative writing/peer review. These headings were then further analysed for patterns or themes which allowed for the coded data to be broken down into further groups to develop a more integrated understanding of the situation which would therefore help to answer the research question.

With regards to the first heading: use of technology and the blog, this was further divided into themes relating to; ease of use, motivation, access and future uses. The heading corresponding to writing ability and the process approach to writing was broken down into progress made and the editing process. Finally,

collaborative writing/peer review was further subdivided into themes that looked at; the comment facility and writing for an audience. Each of the three participants responses were colour coded so to be able to make cross participant analysis of the categories. Colour coding the individual interviews also allowed for analysis over the course of the year as any changes could be seen easily this way. The categories of data were triangulated with the other data sources such as the initial questionnaire, writing samples and the student comments on posts to ensure credibility.

The comments that the three students received and also the comments they left for other students were classified in terms of *text focus*, *word focus*, *sentence focus*, as identified in the ESOL core curriculum, and *other*. The *other* section included comments such as motivational remarks or emotional support students gave to each other. These comments were tabulated according to each category. The comments were also compared to the final written text to see if the comments had been followed and corrections made.

This chapter has highlighted the setting for the research and the methodological approach that was taken. Furthermore, it has identified the action research within an explanatory-interpretative paradigm and has discussed decisions that were taken based on sampling, ethics and data collection methods. It has examined the data analysis that has taken place and discussed any triangulation that has been considered in order to ensure an effective and credible piece of research.

Chapter Four

Findings

This study aimed to investigate the use of a blog as a tool to improve second language writing. The investigation centred on the following research question:

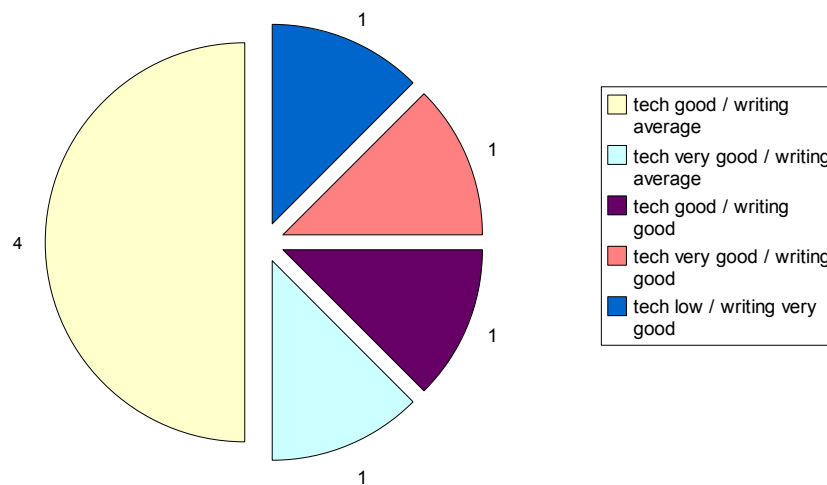
How do Level two ESOL students at Tameside College respond to the use of a blog as a tool to improve their writing?

In order to answer this question a series of sub-questions were formulated, these included:

- What aspects of the blog are motivational?
- Which part of the blog is useful for writing?
- Does the blog promote a collaborative environment which is conducive to developing writing skills?

The students used the blog during the academic year 2009/2010 at a further education college in the North West of England. Three students were selected from the Level two ESOL cohort. The initial closed questionnaire, which aimed to determine the students own assessment of their ability in technology and level of written English, was completed with the whole cohort. The results of this initial questionnaire were used to select a representative sample from the class. The result of the questionnaire showed that out of the whole Level two class, only one of the students considered themselves as an expert with technology, one student had very low ability with technology and the rest of the class described their ability as good. The student's written ability was also considered and again it highlighted different abilities in the class. One student had very good written skills, five students had average writing skills and two students had good written skills. From this information three students were selected that represented the different levels of written ability and technology ability. The following graph charts the whole class in terms of writing and technology ability.

Range of technology and writing ability in the L2 class.



The three students that were selected for the in-depth study were interviewed at three stages throughout the academic year. An initial interview was carried out in September and this was used to profile the students selected for the study. Following this, two further interviews were carried out to chart the students' blogging experiences; one in late October, having just started using the blog, and one at the end of the term in July. The research was a piece of action research and therefore the October interview provided direction for the research as it progressed. The interviews were designed to obtain insight into the students' current experience with using technology for writing, how they felt about peer review and the process approach to writing, and finally their thoughts on the collaborative elements of the blog such as writing for an audience and commenting on each other's posts. These areas were investigated through interview and analysis of the comments left on the blog in order to establish factors that may or may not have encouraged and motivated the students to write.

The students used the blog in class time and outside of class to produce a series of written texts throughout the year using a range of writing styles and topics. These texts included a biographical text about themselves, a text offering advice to visitors to their countries, an opinion essay about mobile phones, a discursive

essay about music downloading, film reviews, a report about the college canteen and a paragraph about their future plans. The students were encouraged to follow a process approach to their writing on the blog. They were instructed each time to compose their text directly onto the blog and then publish it. Subsequently, they were encouraged to read other students' texts in the class and make comments. These comments were supposed to support their peers to develop their writing and encourage them to think about their errors before editing their texts. The students then edited their texts using the tools on the blog and then republished their work. At this point the students could comment again on each other's work if they desired.

The ESOL Core Curriculum addresses the skill of writing through the sub-skills of *text*, *sentence* and *word* focus. Comments that address sentence level include those that focus on grammar, sentence structure and punctuation while text level addresses the overall meaning of the text and the ability to write in different styles and formats. Finally, word focus includes comments that look at the individual words themselves, their structure, spelling and meaning. Students were encouraged to think about this when giving feedback to each other so that they could improve their writing at the different levels. Unfortunately, many comments made at the beginning of the year did not take this approach and were of a more personal nature offering moral support and praise to each other on the final product. It appeared that essentially it was only the tutor offering comments that would help the students improve their writing therefore after critical reflection following the interviews in October discussion took place with the class regarding the need to focus the comments they left for each other. The comments needed to be more focused on offering correction of their peers' writing and support in improving their writing and not simply congratulating students on their final piece of work as this did not support the process approach to writing which was being encouraged through the blog. The comments came from the tutor and the students in the class alone as the blog was only accessible to these people.

Case studies

Student A

This student had experience of technology and was a confident/very good user. Writing was his weakest skill and he assessed his written ability as average at the beginning of term. He was a very enthusiastic and motivated learner and approached the year with a great determination to succeed. He could be described as the collaborative learner in this research. Firstly, because he was keen to help and scaffold other learners with the more operational aspects of the blog in class due to his good IT skills. Secondly, despite his initially hesitation to comment on other students' work he was soon posting comments confidently, offering sound advice and support to his peers. Furthermore, he counted on others to help him with his writing and accepted and considered feedback on his work very seriously. He benefited from the numerous comments he received and gained confidence in his writing. Writing for an audience was for him someone to interact with and learn from and in the same way they could learn from him. He enjoyed using the blog both in class and outside of class and admitted that he was more likely to do homework if it was on the blog as he spent a lot of his time using his computer at home. He saw the computer as an easier option and a more authentic approach to writing. He had a very positive experience of using the blog and the process approach to writing and summed up his experience in the third interview in July 2010 as follows;

“I enjoyed it and have learned. It's a kind of friendly way to learn because you can always check with others students, maybe ideas or things you got wrong. You can really realise what you are doing wrong.”

Student B

This student was truly dedicated to the cause. Her written skills in English were very good but her technology skills were very low at the start of the year. She persistently went through the trials and tribulations of technology; she lost her work on several occasions, she had a very slow typing speed therefore couldn't finish her texts in time, she wrote her posts in inappropriate places on the blog for example in a comment box on the welcome page or on someone else's page and she was dependant on one student particularly to help her log on and get started each time. All this was very frustrating for her and she felt her writing

was better when she wrote on paper. However, she did not give up and through help from others around her and repeated practise, at home as well as in class, she mastered the use of the blog. Eventually the blog became easier and she was able to understand the process of peer review, commenting and editing and publishing a post. However, she did not use any of the features of the blog such as adding pictures or links. The other students were interested in reading her work as she was very strong writer and she left productive feedback for the other students helping them to improve their writing. Unfortunately she did not receive a lot of comments from the other students perhaps due to the high standard of her writing. Any comments that she did receive she replied to by thanking them individually each time. She could see the benefit of the peer review and really appreciated any support the other students offered her. She was very positive about using the blog to support the process approach to writing.

Student C

The technology enthusiast. This student was very motivated by the idea of using technology to improve writing. He considered his technology ability as good and was very interested in using technology outside the classroom. The blog was new software for him to use even though he had previously heard of blogs. He appeared to be a very confident student and rated his written ability in English as good at the start. Despite this he was very unsure of writing for an audience at first, as he feared his peers would '*see his mistakes*' if he made any, which for him was not an ideal thing as he wanted to be '*perfect*'. Also, in class he was very reserved and did not offer to help the other students that were having difficulties using the blog, but was very innovative in his own use of the blog and tried to use all of the features available such as; emoticons and inserting pictures and links into his posts. Furthermore, despite being eager to receive feedback on his work, he did not easily accept this from his peers as he lacked trust in this feedback. He considered the other students to be at the same level or lower and ultimately preferred tutor feedback. He was guided essentially from this tutor feedback and did not always correct mistakes the other students left. He did not offer a lot of support to his peers through comments and in turn did not receive a lot of feedback from his peers either. This could suggest that the peer

review and process approach had limited impact on his writing over the year. As a sign of his enthusiasm for blogging he has now started to write on other blogs in his areas of interest outside college communicating his ideas and regularly leaves feedback for others.

The following section will focus the findings in reference to the research questions and sub-questions that were formulated.

Motivational aspects of the blog

Functionality and intuitiveness.

The students were introduced to the concept of the blog from the first week of class in the induction period. Following this, they attempted their first blog post at the end of week one. They were instructed on how to add a page to the blog and then asked to write a biographical text about themselves including information about their technology and writing ability in English. This first post gave an insight into their ability with technology as some students used more technical aspects of the blog straight away; inserting emoticons and pictures into their work, while others wrote only a limited amount or lost their work due to their lack of confidence with the technology.

Despite the apparent difference in ability, with regard to ease of use all three students agreed that by the end of the year the blog was easy to use, adding that those with prior experience of technology would find it intuitive from the outset. Furthermore they stated that it was still relatively easy to use through practise and regular use, even without good computer skills at the start. Student B who found it difficult from the outset due to lack of confidence and inexperience with technology, through practise at home as well as in class, was blogging comfortably by the end of the year leaving comments, editing and publishing her posts without too much assistance from the tutor or the more technology 'savvy' peers that had helped in the early days. She was very determined and dedicated to improving her IT skills and a comment taken from the blog she made to one of the more technologically 'savvy' students at the beginning of the year clearly demonstrates this;

September 15, 2009 at 10:30 am

Hi X

nice to know you. I think in the class I'll try to learn more Tecnical knowledge from you. Good luck for coming year.

A clear indication of the blog's usability was the way in which students used the blog outside of the classroom. Initially, the students only used the blog in class but quickly as their confidence grew they started to blog at home. Student B who had a low level of confidence using technology said that by looking at the blog every evening at the start of term, and by practising she made a rapid improvement in her IT skills resulting in an increased level of confidence with technology and the blog specifically. Furthermore, by using the blog at home it increased motivation for some students to complete written homework tasks as they saw it as being '*easier than by hand*' and '*more natural*.' Moreover, it seemed a more preferable approach to doing homework with student A saying, '*It is not as strict as if you just have paper at home.*'

Writing for an audience.

The added motivational force that the blog introduced was the idea of writing for an audience instead of traditionally for their tutor only. Publishing work for other students in the class to read was considered an advantage of using the blog over other tools. The importance of this audience for student A seemed paramount as he saw the purpose of the blog;

"To encourage for you to write more because more people can read it."

Despite the apparent benefits they could see of writing for an audience, in the early interviews students expressed concern at publishing their work for others to read, they said that they were '*hesitant at first*' and were '*worried to start*' and did not want their peers to '*find their mistakes*'. On the other hand Student A highlighted his friendly and not too sensitive, yet focussed, demeanour by saying that he was;

"... not too bothered, I use it for learn and I don't care if people are going to read because in one way it's going to help me."

All of the students agreed that due to the fact that they were writing for other people they felt that they had to push themselves to do their best and that it was, *'a bit like extra pressure but in a good way.'* They added that despite this extra push they did feel that it was worth it as they were exposed to other people's writing styles, opinions, new vocabulary or expressions and that this could help them to improve their writing. Interestingly, some people's blog pages were more popular to look at than others due to the quality and content published. Students identified the stronger students in the class, people that they considered to be better than themselves and felt they could learn from them and looked at these people's posts when they logged on each time. Student C very positively described being able to see each other's work and learn from each other as;

"An exchange with experience between each other."

Peer review and the process approach to writing

Commenting

Even though the students were keen to learn from each other's work and did enjoy the exposure to other people's posts, one area of concern was the peer reviewing and commenting on their peers' posts. The initial interview revealed that students found commenting difficult as they weren't confident informing their peers about their mistakes because this was something they did not have experience of. Student A revealed that even though he looked at the posts and could identify errors he had a tendency not to write a comment but to simply tell the student in the next class as face to face correction seemed *'friendlier'*. The students' written ability in English also seemed to be one of the main reasons that some students felt unable to leave comments early on in the year. In the October interview Student A explained that, *'If I am more sure of my writing I think I will be more sure to make comments for everyone.'* Interestingly by the end of year the same student said;

"I think I can comment now, at the beginning it was difficult because writing was not my strongest skill, but now, yeah, I can comment."

At the beginning of the year in October Student C said, *'I'm afraid if I write something my comment will be a mistake, so I have to be sure first before I write*

anything.' This student only left five comments throughout the year and it seemed that not only did students lack confidence in their own ability in English but Student C was also worried that other students would question his ability and this, it appears, discouraged him from leaving comments. This student explained in the interview at the end of the year that he had not left a lot comments because;

"People will trust you (the tutor) more than me, that's for me as well."

Upon further investigation of this point it was noticed that the comments he did leave were based on interest in the topic and did not focus on word, text or sentence level errors that had been discussed in the classes. Students were encouraged to comment on these areas in order to help other students improve on their overall style and format of their text and their grammar, punctuation and spelling, as these are the criteria that would be assessed in the writing exams at the end of the year. Here are some examples of comments left by Student C;

January 15, 2010 at 11:04 am

Hi mate

nice movie .

I would like to watch it with english subtitle and I depend on you to do it



March 19, 2010 at 10:50 am

Hi X

I hope you will have a happy news for you mum. 😊

And it is a brilliant idea to study to gain more qualifications.

I hope you will be future manchester united manager. 😊

I hope the future weather will be fine because we live on the earth. :S



These comments show that Student C did not leave feedback that other students could use to improve their writing skills each time but made more personal comments of encouragement and approval of what he had read. It is worth noting though that this student still showed his high level of technology ability by inserting emoticons to each of the comments he left.

Student B who had very low technology ability but very good writing skills left fifteen comments in comparison and Student A also left a significant number of comments, twenty five. The comments from both of these students tended to focus on the structure, grammar and spelling therefore assisting the other students to develop their writing skills in English. The following comments are examples of Student A's comments. They demonstrate how he tried to encourage other students to think about their writing to help them improve and did not just highlight their mistakes;

November 10, 2009 at 7:37 pm

Hi

It was nice to read your work. You organised your writing very well I think.

In your 3rd paragraph (Secondly) is not very good start I think. My advice to you is it is better to start little bit differently. For example (The way I see it CD sales ... or From my point of view CD sales) like that.

In your writing there is many new words which we are learning lately. You used it a lot I really like it.

February 1, 2010 at 11:24 am

In my opinion you told us a bit too much in the plot failing to achieve the purpose of the film review. You have to work a bit more in the structure of your film review adding positive and negative points as well as a recommendation of the film. However, good phrases and nice vocabulary.

March 19, 2010 at 10:44 am

Hi

I think you wrote a few interesting ideas mate but in my opinion you could change some expression like "gadgets" is gadgets by the way but you could talk about merchandise instead. Also you could tidy up a bit your sentences like in the last part of the second paragraph when you talk about you lost some original CDs I couldn't understand properly what were you trying to say.

Any way nice piece of writing, I hope you finish it soon.

Likewise Student B made comments for students that focussed on areas of their work they could improve on. Observation of the following comments shows that she mainly focussed on spelling and improvements that could be made at sentence level to help her peers improve their writing.

November 12, 2009 at 10:08 am

Hi,
Well done, you did nice work but need to check it again. There are a few errors.
1st.line of third paragraph.
Aighty - spelling
We can bought.

January 15, 2010 at 10:21 am

Hi

What a nice piece of work. I really appreciate it. However, there are some errors.
1st.paragraph; is latest craze
2nd.paragraph; not lot of jobs.
4th.you can say; finally, illegal downloading is destroying the music industry.

March 19, 2010 at 10:39 am

Hi,
Your work is well but there are few mistakes. Please check them.
In my point of you.
Charges far to much.
Favorite.- spelling

Receiving comments

In contrast to the initial apprehension students showed at leaving comments it was very apparent that the students interviewed all enjoyed receiving comments on their posts, whether from peers or solely from the tutor. They considered the comment facility to be '*useful*', '*a nice experience*' and '*a great source of encouragement*'. Student A received the largest number of comments at thirty three and just less than three quarters of these addressed areas of his writing that could help him to improve. Student B did not receive a large number of comments and the comments she received were mainly praising her on her

standard of English. However, she did receive a few comments focusing on sentence and text and despite the struggle technology had been in the early months she replied to these comments thanking them each time. Student C did not receive a lot of comments, only ten and this may reflect the fact the he did not leave many comments for the other students. However, the comments he received did address text, sentence and word errors in the post allowing him to improve his writing.

Undoubtedly, the students could see the worth in receiving comments as it helped them to see their mistakes more easily. However, there were occasions when each of the three students interviewed received a comment that they did not agree with and the reaction to this was very different from each of them. Student A stated that on this occasion he laughed as he knew it was right, Student B explained that she left a comment to explain why her work was not wrong while Student C's reaction was more emotional and he expressed his mistrust with anyone except an expert in English when it came to leaving comments.

Nevertheless, the students were keen to reflect upon the comments and their mistakes before editing their texts and republishing them to make sure the comments left were correct but also to understand their mistakes. Student A said;

“The comments helped me to correct my mistakes and so it's one way I can improve. I corrected and thought about why it was right.”

Student B echoed this by saying;

“Sometimes they highlighted my mistakes and left me comments. This was very useful for me to increase my knowledge.”

The students were given time in class to reflect upon their mistakes and this process of editing the texts was seen as a fundamental part of the blogging experience. Students highlighted that through this they really did improve their writing skills and they tried to avoid making the same mistakes in future posts. Student A noted that through the editing process his common errors were

highlighted and this allowed him to identify his area for development in his writing;

“I now know the mistakes I make every time, I can change the spelling of words I always got wrong, sometimes I put extra articles in and it made me realise through the comments.”

The use of the computer in the process approach to writing seemed invaluable as both Student B and C expressed that they would not necessarily have done the corrections if they had to do them on paper but using the computer was ‘*easier*’ and ‘*quicker*’.

A collaborative environment

Key advantages of the collaborative environment that the blog provides have already been discussed. It is clear from this discussion that the blog does provide students with a collaborative environment where both peers and the tutor can help to develop an individual’s writing skill. Each of the students interviewed expressed that throughout the year their writing had improved and that the approach had been ‘*interesting*’ and resulted in them feeling ‘*more confident in writing*’. The blog allowed them to interact with an audience and learn from it and in turn help others to learn.

Summary

In summary, the evidence suggests that the use of the computer alone could be considered a motivational force for the students in their writing tasks. However, this coupled with the process approach to writing and the collaborative element of the blog has definitely had a big impact on the students and their writing skills. Comments from students at the end of the academic year included, ‘*a great idea*’ ‘*a brilliant thing*’ ‘*a good way to learn*’ and ‘*a necessity in the language classroom*’ even though initially there were some hesitation and confidence issues.

Chapter five

Discussion

The aim and purpose of this research was to investigate how Level two ESOL students at Tameside College responded to the use of a blog as a tool to improve second language writing. This study took place over the whole academic year and analysis of the qualitative data shows that the students that took part in this research were in favour of using the blog to improve their writing skills. This piece of research was a small-scale action research study and therefore did not aim to make generalised conclusions about the use of the blog in a L2 writing class. However, during the course of this research it is clear that some salient points have been identified regarding the use of blogs to improve writing in the L2 classroom.

Integration

Integration of the blog into a L2 setting is one which should be considered very careful. Hourigan and Murray (2010) stated that;

“Integrating this type of task into the language classroom is not a very straightforward issue and thus requires a great deal of ground work beforehand.”
(2010: 21)

The introduction of technology into the classroom can for some people cause anxiety and fear and therefore successful integration from the very beginning is vital. In this study it was identified at the start that two of the students were confident with technology and therefore using the computer was for them very motivational. It encouraged them to complete homework tasks and correct their posts as they felt the blog was a more authentic method of writing and more accessible means of studying for them. However, one student was concerned that the new technology would be too complex due to her low level of ability in technology. It was extremely important to *scaffold* her in the initial lessons in order that she could contribute to the blog through posts and comments without being weighed down by the integration of the technology. This scaffolding was achieved through the support of other students that were more technologically advanced as well as increased support from the tutor to ensure that she did not

fall behind and become anxious about using the blog. This student did master the use of the blog and was very positive about using it but the guidance, scaffolding and support she received from her peers and the tutor was essential in making the blog a successful learning experience.

The students used the blog for the whole academic year 2009-2010 and therefore had a good amount of time to access and exploit the blog as a tool to help them improve their writing. This time frame contributed to the successful integration of the blog into the L2 ESOL class. Furthermore, the blog was monitored carefully by the tutor ensuring that all posts were appropriate in that they did not offend or hurt others in the class. The policing of the blog by the tutor was done to ensure any comments left did not include any nasty remarks or demonstrate prejudice against other students and thus prove damaging for the learning environment. This monitoring of the blog undoubtedly was an extra burden on the administrative duties of the teaching load. However, it was deemed essential for the successful integration of the blog and also essential in order to maintain and safeguard the collaborative learning environment that was established where students felt comfortable when commenting and receiving comments that were made to help them improve their English writing skills.

Collaboration

Most writing has an audience, nonetheless when a tutor sets a writing task the audience is usually limited to one or at most two tutors. The blog allows for the introduction of an audience in a classroom making any written task more authentic. In this study the audience the students were writing for was quite small and consisted of their peers in the class and their tutor only. The blog wasn't open to a wider audience due to fear that the exposure and communication could be as Pinkman (2005: 21) described it, '*detrimental to the learners self confidence.*' The three students that took part in this study said that this audience was a motivational aspect of the blog. As a result of writing for a wider audience they wanted to produce their best work as other students in the class would read their posts. It seemed that the students thought about the content of their posts more and tried to write clearly so as to be understood by

their audience. In addition they were motivated to spend longer selecting appropriate language so as to not be misunderstood and also spent longer checking their work for errors before publishing it. On the whole the students responded well to writing for an audience despite the fact that this did instil a small amount of fear in one student in particular because he did not initially like the idea of public opinion and criticism of his work.

Writing for an audience undoubtedly made the writing process more authentic and despite the added pressure they experienced, it did help the students concerned to improve their writing. Firstly, as discussed they were more concerned with accuracy of their work before publishing but moreover, they were exposed to other students' ideas, opinions and thoughts thus offering different viewpoints and perspectives that could improve their writing. According to Goodwin Jones (2003) in Horvath (2009);

“It is not only a teacher or a even a limited number of people who may have an effect on the development of the target skills, but the participation of a full group of students, each of whom has a stake in each other's cooperation.”

This collaborative learning environment that was established really demonstrated this idea that the students were contributing to each other's learning and the more involved and engaged through writing posts and commenting the more effective this collaborative learning environment became.

The research revealed that Student A and Student B particularly left some very good feedback for their peers, and in addition they benefited from feedback the other students left them. Peer review was a very important part of the process approach to writing and students became more engaged in developing their writing as their knowledge was challenged showing that the collaborative nature of the blog did promote a learning environment conducive to developing writing skills and quality of writing.

Trust and confidence

An issue that was very apparent when using the blog in class was one of confidence and trust. Pinkman said that commenting makes blogging,

'communicative, interesting and interactive.' (2005: 20). However, it is important to realise that commenting is not such an easy concept for some ESOL students. The students in this research were hesitant to comment at the start and for one student in particular this hesitation did not subside as the term progressed.

Research has shown the peer feedback in second language learners can be very effective using computer-mediated communication and can result in better writing (Braine 1997, Sullivan & Pratt 1996). However, in this study peer feedback was an unfamiliar concept and therefore initially the students were not comfortable in giving this. The reasons for this include the fact that the students initially lacked confidence; they did not feel proficient enough in English to make comments on each other's work at the start of the term and therefore only a relatively small number of comments were left. The students did gain confidence in leaving comments and this was perhaps encouraged through *modelling*. The tutor left comments for students on the blog in a format that was being encouraged in order to help students think about their writing and improve areas of it. All students were able to see the comments and therefore this tutor input supported students by demonstrating examples of how to comment.

The students' critical thinking skills were developed due to the fact that students had to make a distinction between comments that could be useful to them to improve their writing skills, and furthermore distinguish between the comments that were inaccurate. Interestingly, reaction from the three students when they received incorrect feedback from their peers was very different. Two of the three reactions, despite being very different could be seen as counter-productive or even damaging. These two students did not address the incorrect feedback but simply rejected it in a way they deemed fit. Student A found it humorous as he knew it was wrong but more emotionally Student C said that it made him lack trust in his peers and forced him to question their ability. Subsequently he considered the feedback from the tutor to be the only feedback he could rely on to improve his English. Both of these reactions could be seen as potentially damaging to the collaborative learning environment of the blog, whereas Student

B's reaction was more productive. She replied to her peers explaining why the feedback was incorrect and thus in turn helped her peers to improve their English on another level. This reaction was very productive for the class and contributed to the collaborative learning that was taking place.

Limitations and areas for improvement

This study was a small scale research project and for this reason there are limitations in that the findings cannot be used to make generalisations for all ESOL learners and L2 writing experience. However, in order to benefit other practitioners interested in this area of study it is important to note that this study could be developed through further investigation into the issues of confidence and trust as these were key issues that arose.

Effective integration of the blog has been discussed earlier in the chapter. However, there are confidence issues surrounding the use of technology in the classroom for learners who may not have had any experience of using technology for language learning, and also for learners that are not familiar with the technology being introduced. Students in this situation may benefit from familiarisation processes such as the discovery of existing blogs at the integration stage. This would allow them to look at ways in which other students have used blogs in class in turn helping them to see the potential of using blogs and easing integration of the blog software into the classroom. Furthermore, students with low ability in technology should be given structured guidance on basic computer operations either through visual displays in the classrooms, through pairing up of students according to ability to ensure they scaffold each other or through awareness of the tutor of an increased need to support students who are unfamiliar with technology. This concept of familiarisation course has been documented by researchers such as Hyland (1993), Pennington (1996) and more recently Hourigan and Murray (2010) who added that even those students that have good use of technology could benefit from '*specific direction*'.

Students in this research experienced difficulty in commenting and accepting the comments due to their lack of confidence and lack of trust. Therefore it is

essential that strategies are adopted to try to increase confidence and trust levels. Peer feedback, made possible through the commenting facility on the blog, was an unfamiliar activity amongst students and this caused anxiety amongst them. The students lacked confidence when writing comments initially and therefore they need to be instructed on how to give good feedback and how to support their peers. Students need to be '*scaffolded*' in order to fully understand how to write a good post as well as how to comment on other people's work and accept the comments made on their work.

One approach to improve confidence and to encourage students to comment could be through the introduction of blog partners in class early on in the integration of the blog. Making the commenting process more collaborative by initially pairing students up to give feedback would help to develop the students' confidence in giving critical feedback, which was the kind of feedback being encouraged on the blog in order to help develop writing skills. Eventually, depending on the students, they would be able to comment confidently on their own on each other's blog through the positive reinforcement they had experienced through the other students.

Again this issue of trust and confidence could perhaps be resolved by opening the blog to a wider audience. This wider audience could include more native speakers and therefore the interactions on the blog would be seen as more authentic and those students that lacked trust in their peers, as they did not consider them 'experts', could benefit from the more knowledgeable audience. This does need to be carried out with extreme caution as non-class bloggers could potentially damage the learning environment and the trust the students establish due to negative or inappropriate comments that may be left in response to students' posts.

Conclusion

Using the blog has encouraged the development of improved teaching and learning strategies to approach the skill of L2 writing and it is apparent that the benefits far outweighed the drawbacks and challenges in the ESOL L2 classroom

that was used in this study. The blog created an innovative, more engaging and more authentic experience for the students. The students responded positively and enjoyed using the blog. Despite the issues surrounding confidence and trust it proved to be a user-friendly communication tool that was useful in the development of students' critical thinking skills through analysis of comments made from other students. The collaborative learning environment established allowed students to learn through modelling and through exposure to other students' opinions, ideas and perspectives. Furthermore, writing for an audience and the process approach to writing incorporating peer review, self-editing and revising undoubtedly impacted on the students writing quality.

Appendices

Appendix one

Consent form given to all the students in the Level two class at the start of the research (September 09)

Appendix two

Initial closed questionnaire that was given to all the students in the Level two class at the start of the term (September 09)

Appendix three

Table showing technology and writing ability of all the students in the level two ESOL class and the students (A, B and C) that were selected for more in-depth analysis.

Appendix four

Interviewer's questions and prompts for the first interview (September 09)

Appendix five

Interviewer's questions and prompts for the second interview (October 09)

Appendix six

Interviewer's questions and prompts for the third interview (July 2010)

Appendix one



10.09.2009

Dear Participant

As I have told you I am completing my Masters degree at Manchester University. I am conducting research into the use of a blog in ESOL classes

I am going to collect data from this Level two class and therefore I would like your permission to use any data when I write up the dissertation.

Could you, therefore, sign the statement below and return this letter to me. All data collected will be handled in an ethical manner.

Yours sincerely

Susan Blackmore-Squires

I _____ agree that all of the data (interviews, texts, documents, audio, blog evidence) that is collected as a part of the research that relates to me can be used in this research.

Signed:

Date:

Appendix two

Survey.

Q1 Name

Q2 Nationality. (Fill in)

Q3 Age range.

(Please tick)

19 – 25	
26 – 35	
36 – 45	
46 – 55	
over 55	

Q4 Please indicate up to which level you have studied.

(Please tick)

Primary	
Secondary	
College	
University	

Q5 Please indicate how you would assess your use of technology.

(Please tick)

<i>Low</i>	
<i>Average</i>	
<i>Good</i>	
<i>Very Good</i>	

Q6 Please indicate your confidence in writing in English.

(Please tick)

<i>Low</i>	
<i>Average</i>	
<i>Good</i>	
<i>Very good</i>	

Thank you!

Appendix three

Class technology and writing ability compared

Table showing technology and writing ability of the students in the level two ESOL class and the students (A, B and C) that were selected for more in-depth analysis.

	Writing below average	Writing average	Writing good	Writing very good
Technology low				1 – Student B
Technology average				
Technology good		4	1 – Student C	
Technology very good		1 – Student A	1	

Appendix Four

Interview one –September 2009

Questions

Could you tell me a little about yourself?

Age, nationality, background, interests, UK, work experience

Tell me about your language learning experiences –

When did you start learning English? Where?

Did you enjoy it?

Informal and formal experiences of learning English?

What is your reason for studying here at Tameside College? What is your aim?

What do you intend to do when you finish this course?

Writing skill –

How do you feel about writing in your language and in English?

Tell me about your experience in using technology -

What applications are you used to using/have you used in class/and or at home?

Internet? E-mail? Word processors? Blogs?

Tell me your thoughts and feelings about using technology in your language classes

Do you think technology can be useful when learning a language?

Did you enjoy using technology for learning language/writing? (if used before)

Appendix five

Interview two – October 2009

Questions

Technology

How have you used the blog in class so far?
Do you like using it for writing? Why/why not?
Do you find it difficult? Why?
What can we do to make blogging easier for you?
Have you accessed the blog outside of class? How often?

Collaboration

When you publish your work how do you feel?
Has the audience changed your attitude to your work?
Do you check other peoples work? Who? Why?

Have you commented on other peoples work? Why not?
What kind of comments have you left? Text, sentence, word, other focus?
How did you feel about commenting on other peoples work?

Has anyone left comments on your work?
What kind of comments? What areas of your work did they focus on?
How did you feel? Were these comments useful?

Did you edit your text according to the comments made?
Do you think this process will help you to improve your writing? How?

Concluding remarks.

What are your thoughts on using a blog as a learning tool for writing?
Do you have any suggestions on how to use it in a different way?

Appendix six

Interview three – July 2010

Questions

Sum up last interview

Technology

Has using the blog got easier as the time progressed? How why?

Have you used any of the technical aspects of blogging – adding pictures, links to websites or emoticons to your writing?

How would you describe your confidence using the blog and technology in general? Has your confidence grown? How would you rate your ability to use technology now? Low, average, good, or very good

What do you think about using the blogs as a teaching tool for writing, would you recommend a blog or do you prefer other tools? For example Microsoft Word – can you see differences? What are these? Do you think using a blog can improve writing skills?

Writing

Has your writing improved over the year? How would you rate your writing ability now below average, average, good, very good?

The writing process has focused on a series of steps

Writing on the blog – leaving a comments for your class mates or me leaving comments – reflection on these comments – editing your mistakes then republishing your blog

Would you say this process has helped you to improve your writing, how?

Would you recommend teachers use this stage approach to writing?

Collaborative writing

Over the year we have had to write and revise and rewrite our posts and others have been able to comment, commenting on other peoples work seemed to be a difficult task at the beginning, did this get easier? Why? How do you feel about commenting on your classmate's posts now?

Do you think the comments have improved your writing in anyway?

Would you suggest it to be a good idea or not to use peers to review each other's work – would it be something that you think other tutors should do in other classes?

Concluding remarks

Can you suggest other ways we could use the blog in ESOL classes?

How would you sum up your blogging experience?

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