

# *Peer Feedback Through Blogs: Student and teacher perceptions in an advanced German class*

DORIS DIPPOLD

*University of Plymouth, Cookworthy Building, Hampton Street,  
Plymouth PL48AA*

*(email: doris.dippold@plymouth.ac.uk)*

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## **Abstract**

Recent years have seen the emergence of Web2.0, in which users are not only passive recipients of the featured content, but actively engaged in constructing it. Sites such as ‘Facebook’ and ‘Myspace’ are typical examples of this, as are blogs that allow users to present themselves online, to write about their daily lives or even to establish themselves as an authority on a particular subject. Due to the opportunities for self-reflection and interactive learning offered by blogs, they have also become one of the emerging tools in language pedagogy and higher education. At the same time, peer feedback is a technique that is increasingly used by educators instead of, or in addition to, tutor feedback, due to its potential to develop students’ understanding of standards, to initiate peer feedback, and to engage the student in the process of learning and assessment.

This paper is concerned with the question to what extent blogs can facilitate peer feedback and what issues need to be addressed for them to be a valuable tool in this process. After reviewing the recent literature on peer feedback and the specific issues emerging from providing feedback through computer mediated communication (CMC) technologies, the paper presents the results from a pedagogic research project in an advanced German language class in which blogs were used for this purpose. Drawing on students’ blogs as well as the responses given by students in questionnaires and focus groups and responses by experienced tutors in interviews, the paper argues that blogs are potentially valuable tools for peer feedback, but entail the need to address specific issues regarding the choice of CMC tool for feedback tasks, training in the use of interactive online tools and the roles of teachers and students.

**Keywords:** Peer feedback, blogs, interactive online tools, computer mediated communication

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## **1 Introduction**

As a new genre of writing, blogs emerged from the late 1990s onwards. Although they are often considered merely as online diaries in which writers write about their daily lives, the genre is much more varied, with many blogs built around a particular theme and writers presenting themselves as subject experts in that field. Recently, blogs have also made their entry into higher education in general and language teaching in particular, where they have been used as a tool for collaboration and

self-reflection on course content and as a resource bank, but also as a tool for peer feedback on writing.

In this paper, I am going to present the results of a pedagogic research project in which blogs were used to support students' reflection on topical issues, student interaction and peer feedback. The paper starts with a review of the research literature on blogs in education and peer feedback in offline and online environments. It then describes the project with both the pedagogic setup and the data collection procedures. After a presentation of the results, the feasibility of blogs for peer feedback is discussed.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 *Blogs as a tool for teaching and learning*

In many universities across the UK, virtual learning environments (VLEs) such as Blackboard or WebCT are already part and parcel of daily teaching practice, being used to support the face-to-face delivery of classes. These VLEs are becoming increasingly more interactive, offering, for example, discussion forums to which both staff and students can contribute. Some even integrate blogs directly, such as, for example, the 'Sharepoint' environment.

As a freestanding or integrated tool, blogs offer the educational community a number of advantages. They allow writers to reach a much wider audience than just a tutor (Goodwin-Jones, 2003), encourage and facilitate the exchange of resources and thoughts (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), and enable students' work to be evaluated and assessed by peers (Ward, 2004). Moreover, through exposure to a multitude of opinions and through awareness of writing for a wider audience, blogs also foster critical thinking, because learners need to reflect on the possible reactions of others to their postings (Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Oravec, 2003; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005).

The educational community has already come to notice the numerous advantages offered by blogs for pedagogy. In higher education, blogs have been used as a tool for collaboration and self-reflection on course content (Xie & Sharma, 2005; Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Baggetun & Wasson, 2006), peer feedback (Cooper & Boddington, 2005) and as a resource bank (Martindale & Wiley, 2005).

As far as blogs in language teaching are concerned, a number of different uses are reported. Catera and Emigh (2005) asked students of English as a second language at two community colleges to each set up their own blog. Students were assigned partners at their own and the other college and were asked to post personal entries relating to their own lives, answers to comprehension or interpretation questions posted by tutors, commentaries to class reading, or paragraphs of their own writing on which peers could comment.

A further project reported by Ducate and Lomicka (2005) aimed to foster intercultural awareness. It accompanied a spring break trip of American students of French to France and a return visit of the French students to the USA a few weeks later. Students were asked to post entries about both their pre-visit perceptions and their experiences and observations during the visit, with the aim of fostering a conversation between the French and the Americans and to gain a better understanding of the other perspective. Similarly focused on cultural issues was a project

in which students were asked to write contributions to a collaborative class blog about issues of German culture and society based on films which students were viewing in class (Schuetz, 2005).

A different way of using blogs is reported by Foale and Carson (2006). They created or, rather, asked their students at a Japanese university to create what they call a “student driven self access language learning resource”. A small (paid) team of students was responsible for writing about anything they liked in the foreign language and to further update the blog with links to interesting material found on the web.

While in this review I have focused only on prior uses of blogs in education, I will use the next section to discuss in more detail the available research on peer feedback in blogs and other online interactive learning environments.

## *2.2 Peer feedback, collaboration and online interactive learning environments*

The advantages and disadvantages of peer and tutor feedback have been discussed in the pedagogical literature of both the higher education and the language teaching field. Although the terms ‘feedback’ and ‘assessment’ are sometimes used interchangeably, particularly when referring to formative modes of assessment, I will henceforth use the term ‘feedback’ to describe both tutor and learner comments on learners’ contributions that are not associated with formal marking. Rather, the focus of feedback is on helping students to identify the strengths and weaknesses inherent in their performance and to improve it, possibly for subsequent formative assessment.

Rolliston (2005: 25) suggests that some of the main advantages of peer feedback in the L2 writing class are that students write for an audience and that writers are encouraged “to formulate her writing in line with the characteristics and demands of the reader”. Moreover, peer feedback can encourage a collaborative dialogue with two-way interaction, and it operates at a level that is less formal and potentially more accessible than tutor feedback.

This interactive and collaborative aspect of peer feedback is emphasized by many authors. Liu and Carless (2006: 280), for example, describe peer feedback as “a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards”. Nevertheless, and although tutor feedback has been severely criticised for taking the ‘ownership’ of writing from students and making them passive, uncritical recipients of feedback (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984), it is probably fair to say that, to date, tutor feedback is still the prevalent way of providing feedback on learner progress in higher education, including the L2 classroom.

It is due to this communication process that, according to Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006), peer feedback is useful not only for those who receive it, but also for those who provide it, as it allows students to develop criticality and the ability to judge work objectively according to given standards, an ability which can then be transferred to their own work. Cassidy (2006) considers this to be an important factor in developing the employability skills required by employers. Furthermore, he suggests that students work harder in the knowledge that it is peers who are going to assess them, so that deep rather than surface learning is encouraged by peer feedback.

However, there are also several disadvantages to peer feedback. For example, Hyland and Hyland (2006), reviewing a number of surveys of students' preferences regarding types of feedback on foreign language tasks, suggest that foreign language students generally value teacher feedback more highly than peer feedback. Moreover, research has also shown that students perceive their expertise to be insufficient to provide peer feedback, that they see it as the tutors' role to do this (see for example Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001), and they resist having power over their peers or their peers having power over them (Liu & Carless, 2006).

As far as feedback through learning technologies is concerned, Ware and Warschauer (2006: 110) summarize their advantages as follows:

“Technology-enhanced environments provide resources for promoting student peer response online in a range of useful ways. Student papers can be made more widely available, and such collaborative effort can foster a sense of community in the classroom [...]. Electronic discourse provides an audience of peers beyond the instructor, which helps heighten awareness of audience and of communicative purpose [...]”.

In addition, one further advantage of electronic feedback is that it brings with it the potential to speed up the feedback process considerably in comparison to non computer-mediated environments, where more time is invested in the administration of the process with the redistribution of student work and the actual provision of feedback.

Research on peer feedback in synchronous as well as asynchronous learning environments has uncovered the advantages as well as pitfalls of these technologies. Using a two stage process, Liu and Sadler (2003) compared peer review in an English for Academic Purposes class in electronically mediated environments and traditional modes (1. asynchronous peer review: word editing vs. pen and paper editing; 2. synchronous peer review: chat communication vs. face-to-face communication). They found that, in the first experiment, students commented in more detail, for example on grammar, and provided more alteration comments in the technologically enhanced environment, something they put down to the grammar and spell check function on the word processor. These students also provided more comments overall.

In the second experiment, however, face-to-face communication resulted in a larger number of comments and comments of higher quality, although students were affectively more predisposed toward chatting. The authors suggest that the chat communication resulted in students feeling more comfortable about giving feedback, but that the quality of peer feedback was lost in the effort necessary for conversational management. These results confirm an argument by McLuckie and Topping (2004) who suggest that, of the five skills needed by participants to engage in effective peer learning (social/affective, organizational, interactive process management, cognitive interactive, reflective/evaluative), the social/affective elements as well as skills for interactive process management are more difficult to develop in online learning environments.

In a further study, Prins, Sluijsmans, Kirschner and Strijbos (2005) used the VLE Blackboard for a peer feedback exercise in a virtual seminar with students from five different countries. They found that the quality of peer feedback was low and

consisted of mostly negative rather than positive statements, which they attribute to students not using the provided criteria. Moreover, the authors of this study also suggest that the quality of tutors' moderation skills in the online environment is vital in encouraging students to participate in group discussions, in which the tutor is being pushed into a marginal role through the lack of face-to-face contact.

This claim has been confirmed to some degree in a study by Hewings and Coffin (2007) on the role of the tutor in peer feedback tasks in asynchronous virtual learning environments. Conducting a study with three control groups in which tutors took different roles during electronic written exchanges via an asynchronous electronic conference, they found that when the tutor took a back seat after initiating the topic, little follow-up interaction occurred after initial responses and feedback. When the tutor asked probing questions, students continued and elaborated their discussions.

Not only tutors, but also students have a role in eliciting high quality feedback. Based on their experiences with blogs maintained by Information Science and Media Studies students, Baggetun and Wasson (2006: 460) suggest that:

“We see that in order to generate feedback one needs certain skills, in particular, participation skills. As a student, you need to learn how to frame an issue you want to raise, relate it to a current issue, and know how to invite or ask questions so that someone feels tempted to reply. [...] SRL<sup>1</sup> also encompasses participation in learning communities and how to develop skills to engage in productive interactions with your peers”.

One final albeit very small-scale study that requires mentioning at this point is Catera and Emigh's (2005) account of a blog project conducted with ESL students (see 2.1). They found that the amount and quality of the feedback learners received from other students influenced their motivation to post comments. Peer feedback was equally important and motivating as tutor feedback.

As far as peer feedback through blogs is concerned this is, to my knowledge, the only article that explicitly takes up the issue of peer feedback. Hence, this is an area to which I aim to contribute with this study.

### 3 Project description

#### 3.1 Rationale, topic focus and participants

This project was designed to accompany the second term of an advanced German class for second year students at a UK university. All students had entered university with A-levels in German. Some of them were studying for a BA in Modern Languages and some were enrolled for a minor in Modern Languages. The blog project accompanied the overall topic of term 2 of the academic year, which was German work culture, the world of work, applications, cover letters and CVs. Authentic German sources (written as well as aural), were used to stimulate discussion on these issues, to develop oral skills through role-plays such as job interviews and discussion

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<sup>1</sup> SRL = self-regulated learning.

about dress-code in companies, and to teach listening and reading comprehension and writing skills.

One of the rationales for using a blog for this class was to foster peer feedback and student interaction beyond the classroom. The blogs were used because the institution at which the research was conducted did not, at the time of this project, have a virtual learning environment with some kind of interactive CMC tool such as a discussion forum etc. The only tool available to the tutor was, at the time, a platform that allowed tutors to upload documents and for students to download these at the other end.

### 3.2 Blog tasks

Table 1 summarizes the tasks that were set by the tutor to be completed on the blogs, with components 1 and 3 being commented on by peers (component 2 and 4) and the tutor. Students then had the chance to resubmit the two main tasks for summative assessment. The peer feedback tasks were not formally assessed with regard to their form and content, but 5% was deducted from a student's final mark for each comment not submitted.

Students were not given any explicit training with regard to how to provide feedback comments. The only instructions provided were the following:

*For blog tasks 2 and 4, you are asked to write a short comment (at least 50 words each) on a blog-entry by one of your peers. Please try to give positive feedback, i.e. comment on what your peer could do better (for example, how could this person present his/her qualifications better in the job application, or what could this person improve as far as language is concerned). You might also want to give advice on resources to improve this particular point. With regard to the first comment you are asked to write, please also give your opinion on the topic discussed by your peer.*

It was hoped that students would follow up on the feedback received by both peers and the tutor and that a longer dialogue would emerge. Although students were encouraged to do so, this was not explicitly required in the task instructions.

Table 1 *Blog tasks*

Component	submission (12 week term)
1) Post a link to a German text on an aspect of German work culture and write a summary (in German) of this text, providing your own opinion on the issue (~100 words)	week 6
2) Write a comment (in German) on the summary written by one of your peers (~50 words)	week 7
3) Write a cover letter (in German) for a job application based on an authentic job advert (~150 words)	week 9
4) Write a comment (in German) on one of your peers' cover letters (~50 words)	week 10
5) Not compulsory, but recommended: Submit a revised version of component 1) and 3) based on feedback received from tutor and peers	week 12

### 3.3 Research questions and data collection

The main research questions guiding this paper are as follows:

- a. To what extent can blogs facilitate peer feedback on L2 writing tasks?
- b. What are the issues associated with peer feedback in blogs?

A triangulated approach was used for conducting this research, with the aim of capturing views on peer feedback from a multitude of perspectives, as shown in Figure 1.

A central element of the data collection is the product of students' endeavours, the blogs. The focus of the analysis will be on the quality and the characteristics of the feedback comments provided by students, for example what is commented on, and whether suggestions for improvement are made.

As a second element, the class tutor maintained a critical incident log (CIL) to note observations relating to the implementation of the projects as a whole and to the feedback process in particular. This includes notes of student reactions in the classroom and observations based on the blogs themselves throughout the duration of this project, and of general ideas and thoughts with regard to the research questions.

Student perceptions were captured by two methods. Firstly, a questionnaire (QU) allowed the gathering of some, albeit limited, quantitative evidence relating to perceived benefits for learning and student opinions about the different tasks used in the project. In the first part of the questionnaire, administered during the introductory lesson, students were asked about their prior experience with the use of computer-based applications, in particular blogs, for both private and educational purposes, their learning preferences and history, and their perceptions of the project after having been given an initial description. The second part of the questionnaire, which was administered in week 11 of the term, asked students about their contributions to the blog, the perceived benefits for learning, and their general perceptions of the project.

One week after administering the second part of the student questionnaires, two focus group interviews were conducted (FG 1, FG 2), each with a small group of students (3 in the first group, 2 in the second group). While some of the questions in the focus group interviews took up issues asked in the questionnaires, the focus groups made it possible to inquire into some issues in much more depth and detail, to ask follow-up questions and to re-set the agenda flexibly. As a last step in the data collection procedures, interviews were conducted with two of the other language tutors (SI 1, SI 2) at the same institution in order to supplement the student and class tutor perspective.

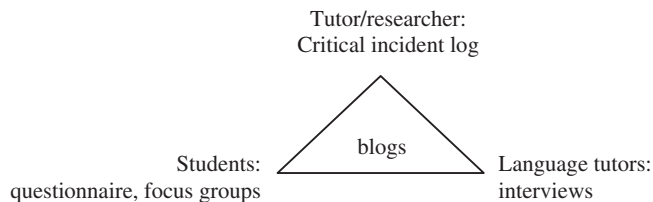


Fig. 1. Triangulated research methods

Due to the small scope of this study and the small group size (9 students), the analysis of the questionnaires, the focus group interviews and the language tutor interviews are conducted in a mainly qualitative fashion, focusing on some key issues and attempting to identify shared trends in students' answer patterns. However, some likert-scale questions also allow for some quantitative evidence through medians and means.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 *Prior experiences with peer feedback and blogging*

In order to establish to what degree students were familiar with the concept of blogs or had experience in using them for either private or educational purposes, the first lesson of the term was designed to introduce students to blogs, advertise them as a tool for teaching and learning, raise students' interest and introduce students to the project. Also in this lesson, the first part of the questionnaire was administered. The class took place in a computer room, with each student being seated in front of an individual computer. It was during this introductory lesson that students set up their individual blogs at <http://eduspaces.net>, using the tutor's guidelines as help. The tutor had already set up her own blog before the beginning of term.

In this initial questionnaire students, not surprisingly, presented themselves overall as computer-literate, suggesting that they were regularly using computer-based applications (MS Office, e-mail, web-browsing) for both private and educational purposes. Four out of eight students had an idea of what blogs are:

*"You write about something on the internet and other people can go and read it and comment on it. It's a bit like a diary on some occasions; others use it to giving out information or to express their ideas/opinions."* (QU)

However, only two students said that they were regularly reading blogs and one was maintaining his/her own blog. Hence, students' experiences with using blogs were limited, in particular in an educational context. Moreover, as the university at which this study was conducted did, at the time of the project, not have a VLE that offered interactive tools, students probably had never used a tool able to facilitate CMC for educational purposes. Nevertheless, all students said they were looking forward to the project as an *"alternative way of doing things"* (QU) and because it would enable them *"to improve my German from other members of the class"* (QU).

As far as students' previous experiences with peer feedback are concerned, four of the students reported having some experience with peer feedback. Although positive experiences with peer feedback were reported, such as the chance to compare one's own work with the work of peers, worries with regard to providing and receiving feedback were frequent. Students said that they worried about receiving negative feedback, but also did not want to be seen as patronising:

*"It was ok – would not be so good if you could not find any positive things to comment about though."* (QU)



Table 2 *Perceptions of the project*

Blog elements	Average	Mode
1. Posting a link to a German text on an aspect of German work culture and writing a summary of the text.	3.25	4
2. Writing a comment on the summary written by a peer	2.5	2
3. Writing a cover letter for a job application based on an authentic job advert.	3.626	5
4. Writing a comment on a peer's cover letter.	2.75	2
5. Writing regular blog entries as assigned in class.	2.0	1/3

#### 4.2 *Students' general perceptions of blogging in an educational context*

Generally, the interactivity offered by blogs was something that was valued by both tutors and students. Moreover, students enjoyed doing their tasks on the blogs due to the ease of access it offered compared to conventional ways of submitting coursework. They also unanimously commented positively on the intrinsic motivation provided by the computer-mediated environment. One student wrote in the questionnaire:

*“It was more interesting doing work purely on the computer instead of handing a paper copy to the teacher. It is also useful that students work together and comment on each other as well as the teacher commenting”* (QU).

While this student values the fact that the CMC environment makes it possible to create a more student-centred environment, this does not transfer to a positive attitude toward peer feedback. Students' general perceptions of the project, including the provision of peer feedback, were measured by asking them to rank the four assessed tasks as well as, in one single complex, the non-assessed tasks<sup>2</sup> according to which one they enjoyed most and which one they least enjoyed doing (1 = liked least, 5 = liked best). The results are summarized in Table 2.

Both the averages taken from students' scores and the modes (the most frequently given score to each question) suggest clearly that the tasks that required original production were better received than the comment tasks, with the mode on both comment tasks representing the second lowest score possible. The cover letter task was ranked most favourably.

In the next section, I am going to describe in more detail students' and tutors' perceptions of the feedback process before drawing conclusions with regard to tutor and peer feedback through blogs.

#### 4.3 *The feedback process*

**4.3.1 *Quality of peer feedback.*** Two things are striking when looking at the peer feedback provided by students. Firstly, as no provisions were made to assign students a

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the summary task and the cover letter task, students also completed a few other tasks on their own or through the comment function on the tutors' blogs (e.g. collecting possible questions asked in a job interview) which were not summatively assessed.

feedback partner, feedback is rather unevenly distributed, i.e. some students received several comments by their peers, while others received only tutor feedback. Secondly, the quality of the feedback differs when the two tasks are compared.

In the first task, text summary, the feedback given by peers was often very short or contained very little content to enable those on the receiving end to build on it in terms of the structure of their summary and the depth of the reflection on the topic. Student commentators usually gave their own opinion on the topic, although these sometimes stated the obvious or merely recounted their own experiences related to the topic at hand. Generally, they appeared to be holding back if they felt that their feedback could be perceived too negatively. This is an example of a comment on the first long task, the text summary:

*Hallo XXX, Ich mag ihre Wahl des Artikel. Jedoch finde ich dass diese Thema sehr ernst ist. Warum sollte ein Mann noch mehr als eine Frau heutzutage verdienen? Sicherlich haben wir auf von vor 50 Jahren bewegt! Vielleicht nächste Zeit könnten Sie ein bisschen mehr auf ihrer Meinung schreiben, würde ich es interessanter finden. Dann könnten wir alle eine Diskussion haben xx Gute Wahl.*

[Hi XXX, I like your choice of article. However I find that this topic is very serious. Why should a man earn more than a woman nowadays? Certainly we have moved on from 50 years ago. Maybe the next time you can write a bit more of your opinion, I would find it more interesting. Then we could all have a discussion xx Good choice.]

In contrast, many of the feedback comments on the second task, the cover letter in German, did contain suggestions for improvement on a linguistic as well as a content level:

*Dies hört sich ziemlich gut an! dein Deutsch ist hier wirklich gut und es sieht auch professionel aus. ich will nur noch kommentieren an einige Sachen geben an denen du dich erinnerst solltest wenn du dich bewirbs und zwar, dass du noch bevor du deine Bewerbung schickst, es noch öfter durchleist damit du die kleinen Rechtschreibungsfehler wegnehmen kannst. denk auch an die Wortfolge z.B. es wäre besser wenn du sagen würdest: Ich bin eine englische Studentin und studiere derzeit im zweiten Jahr Internationales BWL und Deutsch and der Universität XXX.*

*Wie gesagt bin ich positiv überrascht, dass die Sprache hier so gut ist aber machmal habe ich das gefühl, dass du einige Sätze von Beispiele genommen hast. Das ist aber kein Problem aber versuche am nächsten Mal ein bisschen mehr persönlich zu sein. super schreiben noch! machs gut! Tschüssi :)!*

[This sounds quite good! Your German is really good and it also looks professional. I only want to comment to give a few things that you should remember when you are applying and this is that you, before sending your application, should read it a few times so that you can take the small spelling errors away. Also think of the spelling errors, e.g. it would be better if you said 'I am an English student and am currently studying international business and German at the University of XXX. As I said I am positively surprised that the language is that good but sometimes I have the feeling that you have taken some sentences from the example. This is not a problem but you should try to be a bit more personal the next time].

There are several possible reasons for these differences. Firstly, it was the tutor who was first to provide feedback in the first task, commenting on content as well as grammar. This may have led to students feeling pushed into a secondary role, not knowing what to comment on.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, however, it seems that the CV task provided for a higher degree of intrinsic motivation to comment due to the immediate real-life value of the task, and students possibly also felt more qualified to comment on a cover letter than on the more academic genre of the summary task.<sup>4</sup>

What did not emerge at all through the blog entries and comments was a dialogue between students, in which those at the receiving end of the feedback would respond to the feedback received, for example with a discussion of content matters. This was not required from the task instructions, but it was nevertheless a desired outcome of the project.

Not only had the students, however, struggled with providing feedback, but the tutor herself recorded problems in the critical incident log. In week 6 – feedback to the first task had just been provided – the tutor wrote:

*“I meddled around forever trying to provide feedback, first trying to mark errors in the blog, then deciding to give only very general comments and to return printouts where errors are marked in detail. – The blog is probably not an ideal medium for giving feedback on L2 production, at least not in the way I am used to doing it”* (CIL).

The tutor found it difficult to signpost errors in order to enable students to improve on their performance, as was her normal practice. As a consequence, the tutor decided to provide only very general feedback (e.g. hints as to what grammatical items to look out for, questions that could enable the writer to think about an issue in more depth), while the blog entries were printed out and detailed feedback was provided in the traditional way.

*4.3.2 Student perceptions.* In the post-project questionnaires, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement (1 = I don't agree, 5 = I fully agree) to five statements, two of which referred to the value of peer feedback and the ability of blogs to foster student collaboration:

*Statement 1: I have benefited from the tutor's and other students' comments on my blog entries*

As far as learning from the feedback received from tutors and peers is concerned, the degree of agreement with the statement is high (4.125). One student appreciated in

<sup>3</sup> As a consequence of this experience, the order of feedback was turned around for the second tasks, with students providing feedback first.

<sup>4</sup> The question as to what extent students were able to make use of the peer comments on their blogs for the opportunity to submit an improved version of the two main tasks at the end of the term is, unfortunately, difficult to answer from the perspective of the product, as students, rather than resubmitting their tasks, simply edited the earlier versions that they had written. As I do not have a record of the original versions of the tasks, I do not have the chance to compare them.

particular the fact that the feedback enabled him/her to find out for him/herself where improvements could be made:

*“It is always good to receive criticisms to see where I went wrong so I can correct it before it gets assessed. Also students and the tutor gave me tips on how I could change without directly telling me what to write” (QU).*

However, although this statement was received with three scores of five and three scores of four, two students gave only a score of three, commenting that they felt they could not be sure about the quality of peer feedback as compared to tutor feedback.

*Statement 2: The project has fostered group interaction and collaboration*

This statement received quite mixed agreement (average of 3.625 and mode of 3, with answers ranging between 1 and 5), with some students feeling that it did not change much about the group dynamics. However, group interaction may have come about in a different way by, as a student suggests, *“generating a talking point”* (QU). Other comments suggest that students started interacting more outside class as a direct result of the project:

*“It was good to see friends’ comments and ideas about my work and we have exchanged ideas and talked about work outside the university” (QU).*

In the two focus interviews, students brought up very similar issues in relation to peer feedback: status, group dynamics and qualification to provide feedback. Elaborating on reasons for a dislike of peer feedback, one student said:

*“I think for me it’s because you feel you are picking on somebody, you’ve done this wrong. Sometimes I don’t feel sort of qualified to say whether something is wrong or right” (FG 2).*

Moreover, students suggested that the desire to maintain one’s own ‘face’ and not to threaten others’ face may have inhibited students in their efforts of providing feedback (*“You don’t want to come across as patronising”*, FG 1), whereas the tutor was perceived to be qualified to provide feedback, not only due to superior knowledge but also due to his/her power status as compared to students.

However, students in both groups suggested ways in which tutors can make it easier for students to provide peer feedback. One group considered explicit guidelines to be crucial for students to engage more willingly and more successfully in peer feedback:

*“Maybe handout a sheet of paper with different ways of marking or ways of looking at something. If there is a grammar mistake, put up guidelines on how to correct a grammar mistake, or if there is a spelling mistake, what to say about a spelling mistake. Some sort of universal way of speaking about it, so everybody is speaking the same language” (FG 1).*

Students enjoyed being on the receiving end of peer feedback, in particular in combination with tutor feedback, proposing that this would ensure that writers get feedback from different perspectives (tutor/peers). In addition, the split feedback by

tutors (general feedback through the blog, more specific feedback on a printout) was not altogether badly received. Instead, one student said:

*“I found it easier because I want through it and saw the comments that you had written and tried to see why – if I could spot what I’d done wrong and then later when you gave me back the bit where you’d circled it I could check whether I had got it right”* (FG 1).

Hence, the initial provision of general feedback through the blog comment function may actually be a very beneficial way of leading students on a journey of self-reflection that could then have a very favourable impact on student learning and lead them away from mere passive reception of feedback. Nevertheless, the usefulness of blogs for more detailed signposting of language errors must be re-considered, from both a technological and a pedagogical perspective.

*4.3.3 Judgment by experienced language tutors.* In the stakeholder interviews, two other language tutors from the same university<sup>5</sup>, neither of whom had any experience with online interactive learning environments and CMC in an educational context, were asked about their perceptions of the project, based on a written description of the project and further explanations during the interview. One of the tutors described the project as ‘ludique’ (French for ‘playful’): “It was the same syllabus that I do with the CVs, the covering letter, but this is a more fun way [...]. What I don’t have – and this is interesting here – is the interactivity” (SI 2).

Both tutors had some experience with peer feedback, albeit one of them said s/he had only ever used it for feedback on oral performance. The tutor also commented that s/he found peer feedback generally difficult to integrate into language teaching:

*“I do that in class. I do that when I do role-plays. I try and do it in groups of three, so that two people do a role-play and a third one will be observing and give feedback. I don’t do it with the whole class because the students are a bit fragile. If I had final year students, I would do it, because I think they are more mature and they are more confident. But in the second year we have very weak students and for them to be exposed to the whole group... They are very sensitive when it comes to speaking in a foreign language”* (SI 2).

The other tutor had more experience with peer feedback in writing, saying that s/he had used it to look at a piece of writing by students, and then distribute them anonymously within the group. S/he said that s/he found students to be very shy, lacking in confidence and seeing the tutor as the main authority figure for the provision of feedback, and as a consequence had stopped integrating peer feedback into teaching. This tutor suggested that the UK learning context was partly to blame:

*“In the Netherlands where I was working before, it seemed to be working much better, because I think that people on the continent have more experience in*

<sup>5</sup> The tutors were teaching French and Spanish respectively at the same level as the German class in which the project was undertaken.

*learning languages, and they are less afraid about learning by their mistakes, whereas in this country people have a lot less experience in how to learn a language. [...] In the Netherlands, we actually gave them meta-linguistic tools. And I think in this country, in both primary and secondary education, they don't get this kind of training" (SI 1).*

Hence, this tutor, very similar to some of the students quoted earlier from the focus groups, suggests that experience of learning languages as well as metalinguistic knowledge are vital for efficient peer feedback. None of this was explicitly provided to students before embarking on this project, and no specific guidelines as how to give feedback and what to give feedback on were provided to students. This is likely to be the main reason for students' reluctance to provide peer feedback, although at the same time they enjoyed receiving feedback from their peers.

## 5 Discussion

In many ways, this project was an experiment for both the teacher and the students. Despite growing up in a digital age and certainly being positively predisposed toward the use of technologies in general, most of the students had never used blogs for personal, let alone educational purposes. This is quite in contrast to what Herring (2004: 33) proposes to be the norm for today's undergraduate students:

“IM and SMS are no more exotic to this generation, it seems, than note-passing and talking on the telephone were to mine, and blogging is just a modern analog of keeping a personal journal.”

Moreover, I would propose that familiarity with the tools does not necessarily mean that students possess the skills to use these tools in an educational context.

The tutor herself was familiar with a variety of online tools used to support language pedagogy (VLEs, e-portfolios, discussion forums), but had used blogs for the first time in a teaching context. Using blogs for supporting peer feedback activities seemed attractive due to the remarkable similarities in the discourse around peer feedback and blogs, in which similar effects of the engagement in these activities are suggested, such as the development of agency or the availability of an audience.<sup>6</sup> Hence, it was felt that the two would make good partners. But was the marriage eventually successful?

It has been shown that students generally enjoyed working with blogs and receiving feedback from both the tutor and peers because peer feedback in combination with tutor feedback provided them with different perspectives on their performance and afforded them the opportunity to compare their tasks to their fellow students' tasks. Moreover, there is some evidence that the blogs had a positive impact on class cohesion and interaction, although this does not show through the blogs themselves.

However, learners did not enjoy providing feedback themselves due to a perceived lack of expertise, lack of specific guidance on how to give feedback and a fear of

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<sup>6</sup> See Blood (2002) for an excellent introduction to the history and philosophy of blogs.

imposing on those to whom feedback is provided. This led to some of the feedback comments offering little constructive advice for fellow students with regard to their task performance, in particular in the summary task. The class tutor perceived the blog generally not to be an ideal environment for providing feedback, mainly because it was difficult to maintain the normal feedback routine that would include a more general comment and specific feedback on error types.

Some tentative conclusions can be drawn from this with regard to peer feedback and ways in which blogs are able to facilitate it. Many of these patterns can certainly be put down to the nature of the task instructions given, the nature of the two tasks, and the lack of training provided for students on providing feedback. However, the nature of the computer-mediated environment also plays a role. I will end this discussion with five suggestions regarding these issues.

### ***5.1 The choice of interactive technology needs to be carefully considered***

In the example of the institution presented in this research, the blogs enabled students and the tutor to do something that was not possible before in this particular institutional context: they provided a cheap and easily accessible tool for interactive learning in an institution in which tutors and students did not have access to a VLE. Moreover, they brought closer together a group of students who were enrolled in different programmes and have little opportunity to meet and interact outside the classroom.

Nevertheless, the blog technology may not have been the most appropriate medium to facilitate feedback. The asynchronous environment meant that comments could not be immediately followed up, and direct editing of entries was not possible. Using an entirely different technological solution such as wikis might have been altogether more appropriate for the task at hand, as wikis allow direct editing and tracking of what changes have been made. Combining blogs and wikis – asking students to have their documents peer-edited first through the wiki, and then put it on the blog – could have allowed students to also retain a sense of ownership of their writing, which can be lost if the wiki technology is used on its own.

### ***5.2 Skills for the use of (language) learning technologies and interaction skills particular to computer-mediated communication need to be explicitly taught***

Often, CMC technologies are used as an occasional add-on to face-to-face teaching, making it difficult for learners to become familiar with the technologies and to develop the skills necessary to develop and sustain meaningful interaction through the environment. Hence, CMC technologies need to be used continuously and not just as the occasional add-on, with more intensive, on-going training. Moreover, that training also needs to include support tools that can compensate for some of their shortcomings. For example, regular updates on postings by their peers through RSS feeds could make it easier for students to track postings and comments and eventually contribute to more complex dialogue and interaction between students.

Moreover, intensive training is necessary not only on how to use these tools from a technological point of view, but also on the rules and strategies of online

communication, for example, how to invite feedback, how to direct peers to issues where feedback is needed and how to follow up on feedback received. Similarly, neither can tutors be assumed to possess the e-moderating skills required to initiate and maintain the momentum of computer-mediated communication. In her book on e-moderating, Salmon (2003) makes suggestions regarding the moderation of online discussion forums, some of which can certainly be transferred to other CMC environments such as weblogs. This includes encouraging students' contributions and summarizing interesting threads or issues in students' discussions. In the case of this project, the class tutor did not engage in any such activities.

### *5.3 Students need to be trained to give and use feedback in different modes*

One of the major shortcomings of the pedagogical approach employed in this study was the fact that no guidance was offered to students as to how to give feedback, what to give feedback on, how to use this feedback and how to react to it. This is probably the main factor accountable for the lack of feedback dialogue, the short pieces of feedback produced by students and students' concerns about providing peer feedback.

As a consequence, I feel that more substantial training is necessary for students to make them more confident assessors. Ideally, training should be an integral part of the language learning process, and be integrated into offline as well as online modes of delivery. In order for peer feedback not to be seen as an add-on to other classroom tasks, learners need to be given the opportunity to practise peer feedback on a regular basis. Training in peer feedback should also include the provision of meta-linguistic tools for providing feedback and, ideally, also involve students in drawing up the assessment guidelines.<sup>7</sup>

### *5.4 Educational tools need to serve real-life purposes*

In many ways, the way in which blogs were used in this study does not at all agree with the original characteristics of blogs: as Blood (2002) in her 'Blog handbook' so vividly describes, blogs emerged originally as a genre for self-presentation and self-expression. However, when used in educational environments, blogs

“typically present themselves as earnest attempts to meld new technology use, student interest and school work in ways that risk “killing” the medium by reducing its potential scope and vitality to menial school tasks in which students seemingly lack any genuine purpose.” (Lankshaer & Knobel, 2003: 16)

To counter this, and to strengthen the role of blogs as tools for peer feedback, I suggest that they should be used for purposes that are meaningful for the author. This is also in line with Shneiderman's (1998) philosophy for the use of technological tools in educational contexts, which consists of three components: relate (work in collaborative teams), create (develop ambitious problems), donate (produce results

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<sup>7</sup> Clarifying what good performance is, potentially in conjunction with students, is one of the seven principles of good feedback practice proposed by Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006).



that are meaningful to someone outside the classroom). In the context of this class, blogs could, for example, be used by students to design an online-self-presentation page through which students can present themselves to potential employers. This approach might raise the intrinsic motivation to provide feedback to others and make students more receptive to feedback by others.

### ***5.5 Teachers and students need to relinquish traditional roles***

This suggestion is in many ways related to suggestion 5.4. For this project, it was merely the blog technology that was exploited for educational purposes, with the blog philosophy of self-expression pushed aside. Of course, this was due to the fact that, as explained, no other tool for interaction was available to students and tutor, but as a result it failed to truly immerse students in what is essentially an entirely different genre of writing.

Consequently, I believe that it might have been much more beneficial for the project to de-emphasize structures, and to stress the function-meaning aspect of language within the medium of blogs. Warschauer (1997), reviewing a number of studies on CMC from a sociocultural perspective, showed that CMC has the potential to move learning from a focus on forms to a focus on meaning, and from transmission approaches to teaching to frameworks where the teacher is just one of the collaborators in constructing such meaning.

However, during this project the teacher retained, as evidenced through student reluctance to provide and accept peer feedback, a very dominant role. If tutors relinquished some control over the product of students' efforts and students adopted more responsibility for their learning, this might be a big step toward effective peer feedback and interaction with the help of tools such as blogs.

## **6 Conclusion**

As social networking tools advance, and students in most higher education institutions nowadays have access to virtual learning environments, student collaboration and peer feedback is likely to become ever more important for higher education and language learning pedagogy alike.

This paper has evaluated the usefulness of blogs for peer feedback on second language writing. The results are, of course, only generalizable to some extent, but the research has nevertheless allowed some insight into the specific issues blogs throw up with regard to peer feedback. It has shown that students and tutors enjoy and profit from the use of blogs due to their interactivity, the simplification of administrative processes and the positive affective disposition of students. However, blogs need to be evaluated carefully against other learning technologies in order to make an informed choice with regard to the most appropriate tool for a specific purpose. In addition, more intensive training for both tutors and students is necessary to enable both sides to exploit the medium to its fullest potential. Moreover, both students and tutors need to be ready to abandon traditional roles and writing models in order to be able to fully engage with the medium.

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