

Fostering reflective writing and interactive exchange through blogging in an advanced language course

LINA LEE

*University of New Hampshire, Murkland 210A, Dept of LLC, Durham,
NH 03824, USA
(email: llee@unh.edu)*

Abstract

Blog technology is a potential medium for encouraging reflective writing through self-expression and interactive exchange through social networking. This paper reports on a study using blogs as out-of-class assignments for the development of learners' language competence. The study involved seventeen university students at advanced level who kept personal blogs over a 14-week period. Data collected from blog pages, post surveys and final interviews reported affordances and challenges of using blogs for personal expression and collaborative interaction. The results showed that regularly creating blog entries had a positive impact on learners' writing fluency and increased their motivation to write for a broad audience. Importantly, a four-skill integrated approach to task-based activities afforded opportunities for students to use the target language for blogging. The findings also indicate that peer feedback on the content prompted further discussion, whereas linguistic feedback from the instructor encouraged focus on form for language accuracy. The study concludes that learners' critical thinking and technological skills are essential for the implementation of blog projects in L2 instruction.

Keywords: Blogs, asynchronous CMC, task-based activity, reflective writing, interactive exchange, peer and teacher feedback

1 Introduction

From active knowledge creation to social networking, Web 2.0 technologies including blogs have opened up new horizons for L2 teaching and learning. Blogs or weblogs are websites, typically authored by an individual and organized in a reverse chronological order over a period of time. In contrast to traditional web creation, blogs are easy to make without the need of HTML knowledge. Multimedia features including external links, digital photos, audio and video clips are used to enhance the content and the attractiveness of the appearance. Given that blogs are asynchronous modes of computer-mediated communication (CMC), authors write at their own pace without time pressure, which allows them to reflect critically upon the content (Oravec, 2002; Richardson, 2005). As opposed to the teacher-centered setting, creating blogs promotes learners' autonomy because they are in charge of making

their own decisions as to what, how much and when to publish their work online. The instantaneous nature of content publishing for a broad audience rather than for a sole instructor increases students' motivation to produce quality work (Ward, 2004). Furthermore, archived entries that document students' work over time enable teachers and students to assess writing in progress (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Unlike browsing through static web pages, blogs evolve into a dynamic and interactive network where authors not only create and update content but also share and exchange ideas through responses with comments (Lee, 2009a; Rodzvilla, 2002). In sum, blogs open both personal and social spaces for learners to express thoughts, develop digital identity, and make connection with others within a virtual learning community (Huffaker, 2004).

2 Using blogs as a L2 teaching and learning tool

With the aforementioned benefits, blogs have received attention from language practitioners (e.g., Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Murray & Hourigan, 2008; Pinkman, 2005) and have continued to evolve in L2 instruction. L2 blogs are used in various ways for different pedagogical purposes. For example, personal blogs are collections of online journals that foster self-expression and self-reflection, whereas collective blogs involve an entire class or small groups of students who collaboratively construct L2 knowledge. L2 research has shown that learners benefit from writing and reading blogs. Blogs written by native speakers afford students the opportunity to gain cultural knowledge from a range of different perspectives (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Pinkman, 2005; Schuetz, 2005). Ducate and Lomicka (2005) stress that students become active readers by being given the freedom to choose their own topics to read and further develop a better understanding of the target culture. By being exposed to multiple views, learners also develop their interpretative and critical thinking skills (Ward, 2004).

Regarding writing blogs, L2 research has mainly focused on using blogs as online journals for the development of learners' writing fluency (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Bloch, 2007; Campbell, 2003; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Johnson, 2004). Murray and Hourigan (2008), for example, have discussed the essential aspects of using blogs for creative and reflective writing in the academic setting. According to Williams and Jacobs (2004), creating blogs helps students increase their awareness of the target audience as they think critically about how their views might be reflected upon by the readers. Moreover, students develop their metacognitive skills to regulate their own writing in the process of blogging (Ward, 2004). Learners experience a sense of self-discovery and personal growth during the reflective period (Oravec, 2002; Wagner, 2003). Murray and Hourigan (2006) remark that learners gain confidence in writing and develop their own approaches that suit their personal writing styles. Lee (2009a) adds that students increase their motivation to write because they no longer just write for a sole instructor but rather for a broad audience.

Using a socio-cognitive approach, class blogs have been designed primarily for intercultural exchanges to promote cross-cultural awareness (Carney, 2007; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Lee, 2009b). For example, Ducate and Lomicka (2005) in their study found that both American and French students benefited from sharing their

study abroad experiences of the target culture. The results of Lee's (2009b) intercultural exchange study showed that group blogs created a social workspace where students worked collaboratively to share knowledge and exchange ideas. Through peer feedback, both Spanish and American groups gained cross-cultural awareness and linguistic knowledge. Dippold (2009) and Lee (2009b) conclude that peer feedback through collaborative scaffolding is less intimidating than teacher-led evaluation. Interactive feedback further helps L2 learners develop new ideas and notice linguistic problems that may lead to error corrections. In sum, L2 research has shown that using blogs not only enhances learners' writing fluency and literacy skills (Baggettun & Wasson, 2006; Bloch, 2007; Godwin-Jones, 2006, 2008; Lee, 2009a; Ward, 2004), but also facilitates intercultural learning (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Jones & Nuhfer-Halten, 2006).

Despite the fact that the existing research is valuable to understanding blog technology in L2 teaching and learning, no study has yet investigated closely the effectiveness of blogs within the context of advanced Spanish language instruction at university level. Using a four-skill integrated approach to task-based activities, the study on which this paper is based explores how a blog as computer-mediated tool engages learners of Spanish in reflective and interactive learning. The study involved seventeen college students in a fifth semester advanced language course, who created personal blogs in order to share and exchange ideas with their peers. Drawing on a triangulated data collection from blog entries, post surveys and final interviews, this paper discusses the potential and challenge for using personal blogs by examining students' views of the digital tools, the role of task, and the effect of feedback.

In accordance with the expressivist¹ and socio-cognitivist² approaches to blog writing proposed by Murray and Hourigan (2008), the current project aimed: (1) to build learners' writing fluency through self-expression and reflection, (2) to create an interactive community where students share and exchange ideas with each other through social networking and (3) to enhance critical thinking through peer comments and language awareness through expert scaffolding.

3 Methodology

3.1 Project setting and goals

The blog project was carried out as part of the *Advanced Spanish Composition and Conversation Course*³ at a large public university in the northeastern United States.

¹ According to Murray and Hourigan (2008: 87), "Expressivism promotes and encourages a sense of fluency in the written output and supports the development of the writer's distinctive creative voice."

² In contrast to individual expressivism, socio-cognitivist approach emphasizes collective knowledge, peer discussion and teacher feedback (Murray & Hourigan, 2008).

³ The *Advanced Conversation & Composition* course, a fifth semester language course, is designed to maintain and perfect students' written and spoken Spanish through discussions and short essays based on cultural and literacy readings and films. Students are required to complete this coursework to fulfil the Spanish major or minor requirements.

The class met weekly for three hours in real time in the spring of 2009. In addition to other course assignments, blog entries worth 20% of the course grade were part of homework outlined in the syllabus. It should be noted that the course management system—*Blackboard*—has been regularly integrated into the author's courses to supplement course materials and organize assignments outside of class. However, since Web 2.0 tools including blogs were not available in *Blackboard* at the author's institution, several free software programs were adopted for the blog project (see section 3.3 for more information). The primary goal of the project was to create additional opportunities for students to express personal views on various topics and to interact socially through knowledge sharing outside of the classroom. Lee's (2008) CMC study on focus-on-form through scaffolding illuminated how the expert drew learners' attention to focus on linguistic problems that resulted in error corrections. Thus, for this project, the instructor played a facilitative role in providing students with linguistic feedback including syntactic and lexical items to reinforce language accuracy.

3.2 Participants

The participants were seventeen students who enrolled in an advanced Spanish course taught by the author. The students had successfully completed the intermediate courses or were placed into the course by a computer standardized placement test⁴. The majority of the students were either Spanish majors ($n = 4$) or minors ($n = 9$). Most of the students had reached the intermediate level of language proficiency based on the results of the placement test prior to the study. They had sufficient language skills to express themselves and exchange ideas with others in the target language. The class consisted of freshmen ($n = 8$), sophomores ($n = 6$), juniors ($n = 2$) and senior ($n = 1$). A few students ($n = 4$) had spent one to three weeks in a Spanish-speaking country (Peru = 1; Costa Rica = 1; Spain = 2) during their senior year of high school. Despite the fact that the students were comfortable with Web 1.0 technology including browsing information online, e-mail and text-chat, none of them had used blogs for L2 learning prior to the project. Therefore, a brief training session on how to use *Blogger* for blogs and *iMovie* for voice recordings was provided to the students.

3.3 Web 2.0 Tools

Several freely available software programs were adopted to facilitate this project. *Blogger* (<http://www.blogger.com>), one of the most widely used weblog services, was employed to create personal blogs. *Blogger* was chosen because of its simple to use interface that allows users to easily change page layout (e.g., fonts, color, alignment). Users can also add other multimedia features including images, audio and video files to support the content. *Blogger* is currently available in 41 languages including Spanish, which enables L2 learners to create the entire site in the target language. In addition to *Blogger*, *iMovie* was used to create audio recordings to be embedded in *Blogger*. It should be noted that the Language Resource Center at the researcher's

⁴ The researcher's institution adopted the *WebCAPE Foreign Language Placement Exam* created by Brigham Young University.

institution owns a Mac lab and *iMovie* is one of the software programs already installed in the lab. The greatest advantage of using *iMovie* is its capacity for recording both audio and video clips with images that display during play. Other features, including the addition of adding titles, transitions and special effects, are also available as editing tools. Recordings can be easily saved as MP4 files⁵ to upload to *Blogger*. The uploading process may be slow, as videos tend to be large files.

To facilitate the process and avoid technical difficulties, the instructor asked students to bring their laptops to class at the beginning of the semester and provided them with a hands-on session during which they created an introductory entry to practise the main features of *Blogger* including adding photos, images, external links and videos. To provide additional assistance, students were encouraged to use the online *Blogger Help* site (<http://help.blogger.com/>). Additionally, the instructor prepared a step-by-step handout to guide students to use *iMovie*. With the assistance of a lab technician, students learned how to use *iMovie* and upload recordings to *Blogger*. Students were encouraged to familiarize themselves with *Blogger* and *iMovie* prior to the blog project.

3.4 Task design

According to Samuda and Bygate (2008), task-based activities aim to enhance learners' abilities to use the target language rather than to acquire new language skills. Thus, a four-skill integrative approach was implemented in the design of various tasks. Four types of tasks were created and each type aimed at the use of a particular language skill (Table 1). For instance, listening to selected podcast sites reinforces students' aural and interpretative skills, whereas making oral recordings using *iMovie* enhances their pronunciation and speaking skills.

Readings from the textbook, student-chosen topics, selective podcasting sites and various controversial issues served as a point of departure for blog assignments (Table 2).

3.5 Procedure

As part of the course requirement, each student kept a personal blog throughout the semester. Each week students were responsible for posting one or two entries using various types of task (see Table 1). Students spent approximately three weeks designing their blogs and posting the first two entries. Upon completion of the initial assignments, the instructor collected the blog addresses and posted them in *Blackboard*.

Students were asked to read, comment on and respond to each other's entries. As these students were still developing their interlanguage and did not have sufficient linguistic knowledge to offer corrective feedback on lexical and grammar items, they were only required to provide feedback on the content. In order to obtain spontaneous peer feedback, no restrictions were placed on when, how and how much feedback should be provided. The instructor facilitated the process of blogging by

⁵ *Blogger* currently does not host MP3 audio files. MP4 video files, therefore, were used for this project.

Table 1 Task type and description of task

Task type	Description of task
Assigned Readings	After completing each assigned reading, you should post a 150–200 word entry in your blog to express your reactions to the reading. You are strongly encouraged to ask questions about the reading and use external links, photos, audio and video clips to support the content of each entry.
Free Topics	For this assignment, you choose a topic of personal interest and post a 150–200 word entry in your blog. It is important that your posting elicits your peers' comments for further discussion. You are encouraged to choose topics regarding current events and controversial issues. In addition, you should post a couple of questions for your peers to answer.
Listening to Podcastings	For this task, you choose one of the intermediate or advanced podcasts from <i>Notes in Spanish</i> (http://www.notesinspanish.com) or <i>Cody's Cuentos</i> (http://www.codyscuentos.com/). After listening to the podcast, write an entry to describe the content and explain 2–3 new words or phases that you've learned and found interesting. Use pictures, links or video clips from <i>YouTube</i> to support the content. Don't forget to post the title and the number of the podcasting so that your classmates can listen to it if they wish.
<i>iMovie</i> : Oral Recordings	To help you prepare in-class conversation exchange ("Tertulia"), you are required to produce a 3–4 minutes voice recording using the assigned topic. In your recording, you should talk about your opinion, express your concerns, conclude your talk by asking pertinent questions and invite your classmates to answer your questions. Be sure to add a picture or image as background to your recording.

monitoring students' discussions and provided them with linguistic feedback throughout the semester. The instructor read the students' entries and wrote comments on incorrect usage of lexical items and grammatical structures. For instance, the instructor underlined each error and wrote the code for the correction, such as "vt" for verb tense, "voc" for wrong word and "prep" for incorrect preposition. In addition, brief explanations of major linguistic issues (e.g., the preterit vs. the imperfect) were provided to the students to guide them through the process of error corrections. The entries were then sent to the students via *Digital DropBox* in *Blackboard*. After receiving the instructor's feedback, students made error corrections by editing the entries on their blogs.

At the end of the semester, the instructor created an online survey hosted by *SurveyMonkey.com* to gauge students' views and attitudes toward the blog project. More than 90% of the students ($n = 16$) voluntarily completed the post survey. The instructor also conducted final interviews to gather additional feedback and to secure in-depth understanding of how students' experiences with blogs have affected the way they view online writing. Final interviews were carried out with a group of three or four students to create an interactive dialogue between the students and the

Table 2 *Sample topics for each type of task*

Task type	Sample topics
Assigned Readings ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “Another circle” ■ “Four scientific formulas for happiness” ■ “TV garbage” ■ “I was my own path” ■ “Ten minutes”
Free Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Women’s rights ■ <i>Red Sox</i> in Boston ■ Country music ■ Swine influenza A (H1N1) in Mexico ■ Mayan culture
Listening to Podcastings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Energy saving ■ Facebook ■ Eating out and fast food ■ Adoption ■ Smuggling
<i>iMovie</i> : Oral Recordings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ideal personality ■ Imagination ■ Immigration ■ Euthanasia ■ Globalization

^aAssigned readings were drawn from the textbook *Revista* (Blanco, 2010), which contains poetry, drama, prose and essays, published by Vista Higher Learning.

instructor. Each group interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was recorded digitally for data analysis.

3.6 *Data collection and analysis*

The data gathered from student-made blogs, online surveys and final interviews were used for data analysis. This triangulation of data lends credibility and confirmability to the findings. The online survey consisted of 13 statements. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (1 = *Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (5 = *Strongly Agree*) was used to gauge students’ reactions to the blog project. Students indicated their level of satisfaction by ranking each statement from 1–5. The survey elicited responses in three areas: the effectiveness of blogs for online writing and exchange, the affordance of task type, and the role of feedback. Additionally, a 4-point scale statement from 1 (1 = *Not at all interesting*) to 4 (4 = *Very interesting*) was employed to determine students’ rating of each task type. Open-ended interview questions were used to obtain additional observations and offer suggestions for improvement. Responses on similar topics were grouped together and incorporated into the survey results for discussion. Qualitative data from readily available blog posts and comments provided additional evidence to illustrate and support the findings.

4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Effectiveness of blogging for online writing and idea exchange

The mean score displayed in Table 3 records the students' reactions to the use of blogs for online writing and idea exchange with their peers.

Overall, students reacted very positively toward the blog project (statement 1) and agreed that they benefited from creating and reading blog entries (statement 2). During the final interviews, more than 50% of the students expressed their enjoyment in using personal blogs to share ideas with their peers. The following comment drawn from the final interview exemplifies this sentiment:

“Writing entries gave me a personal space to reflect on different topics. Blogging is a unique way to connect and interact with others. Despite the amount of time and effort invested into creating this project, I know I have benefitted greatly from it. I would definitely use blogs again for my other Spanish classes.”

Overwhelmingly, more than 80% of the students preferred blogs to writing on a piece of paper (statement 3). For example, in comparison to the traditional formal writing, students found blogging more fun and less stressful. Students were also in favor of using multimedia (e.g., external links, photos, *YouTube* video clips) to support the text content. Writing for an audience of their peers was particularly appealing to the students (statement 4). Students repeatedly remarked that they felt more compelled to write when they knew that their peers, rather than a sole instructor, would read and respond to their postings. One student explained: “Knowing my blog posted in Blackboard made me more serious about my writing. I usually checked each entry a couple of times before I published it online because I did not want to make careless mistakes.” Such perceptions of awareness of their own writing were also reported in the study of Lee (2009a). After using one-semester blogs, many students (78%) believed that using blogs on a regular basis had helped them develop L2 competence, especially their writing fluency (statement 5). One student acknowledged:

“Writing has become easier for me. I'm now more confident in expressing myself after having posted more than 20 entries. Not only did I improve my writing skills but also gained different perspectives that I had never thought about before.”

Table 3 *Student perspectives of the blog project*

Statements of the survey	Mean	SD
1. I had a positive experience with the blog project.	4.06	0.25
2. I benefited from writing and reading blog postings.	4.19	0.54
3. I preferred creating blog entries to the traditional paper writing.	4.38	0.62
4. Blogging for a broad audience was more appealing than writing for a sole instructor.	4.06	0.44
5. My Spanish has improved as a result of regularly using personal blogs.	3.63	0.50

Table 4 *Student views of task-based activities*

Statements of the survey	Mean	SD
6. Blog tasks were interesting and meaningful to me.	4.13	0.34
7. I enjoyed using both teacher-assigned and free topic tasks.	4.19	0.40
8. I liked how tasks required me to use four language skills.	4.06	0.25

Furthermore, students made comments about the chronologically archived entries that recorded their writing and allowed them to view the progress of their work. These findings suggest that blogs as a computer-mediated tool foster the development of personal reflective writing.

4.2 *The affordance of task type and choice*

Regarding task-based activities, students were asked to rate three statements to find out the role of task (Table 4).

The results shown in Table 3 indicate that students mostly found tasks stimulating because they promoted the meaningful use of the target language (statement 6) and they were satisfied with both assigned and free topics (statement 7). During the final interview, one student expressed her approval of using various types of tasks:

“I liked how teacher-assigned topics required us to critically think about the readings and free topics allowed us to incorporate personal interests and write about world issues that concerned us the most.”

Significantly, tasks created affordable opportunities for students to use the four language skills (statement 8). The following excerpts drawn from the final interviews further demonstrate how the students viewed the positive effects that tasks had on the development of their language competence:

- In my view, using various types of tasks that required the use of certain language skills was the most beneficial aspect of this blog project. I enjoyed most the native-speaker podcasts because it helped me improve my listening comprehension.
- Tasks were engaging and created a dynamic way of using blogs for real-world communication. At the beginning it was a bit confusing because we had to go to different web sites or use different tools for the assignments. Overall, I really liked how each task was targeted to a different language skill.
- I think blogs got us to a well-balanced exposure to the use of four language skills. For example, using *iMovie* for voice recordings allowed me to practice my pronunciation and speaking skills, which were my weaknesses.

When asking students to rate their preference among the various types of tasks, the results clearly showed that they were in favor of using free topics (Table 5). Topic choice appears to affect the amount of writing that students produced and the degree to which they socially interacted with each other. More than 50% of students not

Table 5 Student ratings of different types of task

	Very interesting	Interesting	Somewhat interesting	Not at all interesting
Readings		63.6%	27.3%	9.1%
Free Topics	45.4%	45.5%	9.1%	
Listening to Podcastings	23.7%	49%	18.2%	9.1%
Oral recordings	9.1%	27.3%	54.5%	9.1%

only produced longer entries (approximately 300 words for each entry) using free topics but also added a variety of embedded multimedia resources including personal pictures, slide shows and video clips to support the content.

It is likely that students at the intermediate level of language proficiency felt comfortable discussing topics that related well to their personal experience including travel, hobbies, university lives and daily activities. One student echoed the same statement: “I felt motivated posting entries using topics of my choice because it enabled me to incorporate my personal interests and be creative. I really wanted to share my views about things that mattered to me the most with my peers.” As a result, students wrote and responded to more comments on free-topic entries than on teacher-assigned topics.

Despite the fact that students liked the idea of using the readings from the text, some students ($n = 6$) admitted that it was challenging for them to write meaningful reflections and substantial comments to respond to their peers. One disappointed student explained: “Most people made similar observations about the readings and some of the comments were repetitive. I did not find this assignment engaging and useful.” In contrast to what Murray and Hourigan (2008) found in their study, the readings did not appear to foster deeper thinking and further discussion. It is possible that the majority of the students were freshmen and sophomores, and they might not know how to write critically. The instructor could use questions to prompt students to reflect on reading materials.

As shown in Table 5, oral recordings received the lowest rating from students. Comments drawn from final interviews revealed that students’ technology skills affected how they felt about recording assignments. Due to the fact that nearly the entire class had never used a voice recording prior to the project, it is likely that students encountered difficulty in using *iMovie*. Students suggested that additional training on *iMovie* should be made available for them to maximize its potential use. In addition, more than one third of the students ($n = 7$) acknowledged that they found making voice recordings time consuming because it took a lot of time to upload a video to *Blogger*. A few students⁶ expressed discontent with making voice recordings in the open space of the language lab. As a result, they became frustrated and were not satisfied with the quality of the recordings. The use of technology should not be a burdensome task for the students (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008).

⁶ The students were PC users and they did not have access to *iMovie* at home.

Table 6 *Student reactions to peer and teacher feedback*

Statement of the survey	Mean	SD
9. Feedback from both my peers and instructor was useful to me.	4.18	0.54
10. I enjoyed making comments on my peers' blogs.	3.88	0.50
11. I liked having my peers make comments on my blog.	4.25	0.58
12. It was important for me to receive linguistic feedback from the instructor.	4.44	0.63
13. I preferred not to have to make error corrections on my blog.	1.75	0.57

One recommendation would be to provide students with private rooms to ensure the quality of recordings. Instructors should seek alternatives, such as using two platform recording software such as *Audacity* to accommodate individual needs.

4.3 *Feedback on content and linguistic form*

Students were asked to rate five statements regarding the role of peer and teacher feedback (Table 6).

The results proved that a combined strategy for the use of peer and teacher feedback was useful and motivational to the students (statement 9). Comments gathered from the interviews revealed that most of the students did not feel comfortable providing linguistic feedback to each other because the lack of confidence in their own L2 knowledge would not enable them to give meaningful advice. These findings corroborate those found in the blog research conducted by Dippold (2009) and Lee (2009b). Although a few students ($n = 3$) complained about the amount of time that they had to spend on readings blogs, students enjoyed writing comments on each other's posts (statement 10) as well as receiving feedback from their peers (statement 11). Comments gathered from the interviews revealed that students were eager to read peer commentaries about their posts and their interest in responding to their peers increased as well. Peer interactive feedback indeed strengthened reflective thinking. The following is an example⁷ of how a student responded to her peer's comment on the overuse of *Facebook* in a reflective manner (translated to English):

“Your point was interesting. I have never thought about the parents. My mom has a facebook but she only uses it to post family pictures. I agree that facebook is a wonderful tool for us to connect with people. However, I think people spend too much time online. Also there is not much privacy. I actually prefer e-mail.”

Furthermore, peer feedback appears to show affective support of social interaction. For example, this student complimented his peer's work in the following example (translated from Spanish):

“I really enjoyed reading your entry about having New York City go dark for Earth Hour. I did not know about this and I think it is a great idea to shut off

⁷ Examples presented in this paper were originally written in Spanish and translated to English by the author.

the lights for an hour to save energy. I wish people would turn off the light when they leave the room. We waste too much energy in this country. Well-done! Matt.”

Peer interaction also makes students feel emotionally connected. In another case, the student expressed her sympathy for another student by commenting on what she wrote about not being able to sleep during the stressful semester (translated to English):

“Sara, I feel for your stress. I have almost the same schedule as yours. I know you will survive! If you need someone to talk to, I’m here for you.”

Pragmatically competent speakers know how to express themselves appropriately in a social context. By putting herself in Sara’s shoes and offering affective support to her, the student demonstrated her pragmatic ability. Overall, peer interactive feedback was not threatening to the students. In fact, it created a comfortable and supportive learning atmosphere for online interaction.

Like other asynchronous CMC, blogs tend to encourage fluency rather than accuracy. Not until students receive linguistic feedback do they use L2 as a primary means of communication and self-expression (Lee, 2008; Murray & Hourigan, 2008). The finding clearly showed that students valued the instructor’s linguistic feedback (statement 12). The high rating of corrective feedback received from the instructor (4.45 out of 5) suggests that focus-on-form procedure carried utmost importance for the majority of students. A number of students admitted that linguistically they were not strong enough to detect lexical and grammatical errors and they further acknowledged that teacher feedback encouraged them to pay more attention to the language itself. As a result, they gained a better understanding of certain grammatical structures and usage of lexical items. Moreover, linguistic feedback helped them reflect on their own weaknesses and strengths, as illustrated by this student’s comments during the final interview:

“I must admit that sometimes I was just focusing on expressing myself and forgot to check my writing carefully before I published them online. Teacher feedback raised specific grammatical issues. After reviewing my entries, I noticed that the major weakness in my writing was the use of the past tense. I tended to overuse the preterit. The process of making error corrections helped me understand better these complex grammar structures. I feel that my writing has improved.”

Although this study did not attempt to measure students’ progress in L2 writing, after reviewing the entries that this student wrote throughout the semester, the quality of her writing indeed demonstrated improvement, especially her understanding of using the two temporal aspects of the preterit and the imperfect as shown in the following unedited blog entries during the third and the eighth week:

“El año pasado mi familia hizo un viaje a europa. Este fue mi primer viaje afuera de los estados unidos y mi primera vez en un avión. Estuve muy emocionada y tuve miedo también. Cuando llegamos en Barcelona, fueron casi las once de la tarde. Nos quedamos en Barcelona tres días y veíamos muchas cosas como Montserrat Al final, era muy contenta con la experiencia.” (third week)

[Last year my family took a trip to europe. This was my first trip outside of the United States and my first time in a plane. I was very emotional and afraid too. When we arrived at Barcelona, it was almost eleven o’clock at night. We stayed

in Barcelona three days and we saw a lot of things like Montserrat ... At the end, I was happy with the experience.]

As the above example shows, the student had difficulty in using the correct structure of the past tense, such as “fueron” (the preterit) versus “eran” (the imperfect) and “estuve” (the preterit) versus “estaba” (the imperfect). By the eighth week, her writing did show improvement in the use of the two distinct aspectual past tenses:

“Me gustaban estos podcasts mucho. Recientemente empecé a mirar la tele española y a veces, es muy difícil comprender. La historia que Mariana y Ben hablaron era muy interesante. Un hombre robó muchos bancos y la policía no pudo cogerlo por 15 años. El hombre llevaba una peluca y tenía armas. La policía descubrió que robó casi 600,000 euros y mató dos guardias civiles.” (eighth week) [I liked these podcasts a lot. Recently I began to watch Spanish TV and sometimes, it is very difficult to understand. The story that Mariana and Ben told was very interesting. The man robbed a lot of banks and the police couldn’t catch him for 14 years. The man wore a wig and had weapons. The police discovered that the man stole almost 600,000 euros and killed two civil guards.]

The above excerpt written by the same student illustrates her understanding of the preterit and the imperfect by using several verbs “pudo” (couldn’t), “llevaba” (wore), “tenía” (had), “robó” (robbed) and “mató” (killed) correctly.

Overall, peer commentary feedback in combination with teacher corrective feedback proved beneficial to the majority of students. The finding constitutes support for the notion of maintaining a balance of fluency (meaning) and accuracy (form) addressed by CMC researchers (Lee, 2008; Levy & Kennedy, 2004; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008).

5 Limitations and directions for future research

Although the findings of this study have shed light on our understanding of the effectiveness of using personal blogs for L2 instruction, much more research is still needed. It would be worthwhile to explore instructors’ responses to utilizing blogs as a teaching tool for L2 learning. Another limitation of this study is that the data collection only included a post-survey. A future study focusing on the comparison of the results of pre- and post-surveys will contribute to a better understanding of personal reflection and interactive exchange through blogging. Another potential area that warrants further study is the use of blogs for telecollaboration involving learners from two institutions with different cultures. It would also be beneficial to include various levels of language proficiency (e.g., beginning and intermediate level) to determine whether they influence how the participants socially and cognitively exchange knowledge in the process of using blogs. Finally, more detailed investigation into the quality of feedback including learning effect on language accuracy will increase our knowledge about using feedback to support online learning.

6 Pedagogical implications and conclusion

More L2 learning is taking place outside of class and it is often facilitated by the use of computer-mediated technology. While a one-semester study of blogs is limited in

scope and depth, the students' perceptions toward blogging have offered valuable insights into our understanding of the use of blogs for reflective writing and social interaction. The findings of this study are noteworthy and offer important pedagogical implications. Firstly, the application of blog technology itself does not guarantee the success of learning outcomes. Tasks that are linguistically and cognitively suitable for the target learners are essential because they affect significantly the quality of writing and the degree of interaction among students (Lee, 2009b; Murray & Hourigan, 2008). Secondly, as students at the intermediate level of language proficiency are still acquiring their language skills, the integration of a four-language-skill approach to task-based activities not only motivates students to voice their opinions but also enhances the development of their language competence. Thirdly, to promote deeper reflection, the instructor needs to guide students through the peer commenting process and offer them strategies for critical thinking to prompt in-depth and thoughtful responses. Finally, it is important for instructors to create appropriate awareness-raising activities through which focus-on-form is guaranteed in the content-based CMC context.

In conclusion, the study has made a further contribution to our understanding of the use of academic blogs to enhance learning performance and enrich social interaction, both for individual knowledge construction and information sharing. The blog project succeeded in making online learning a rewarding experience for advanced language students. Writing blog entries by using less structure-controlled but more open-ended tasks that are relevant to students' personal interests empowers them to be creative with the content. Not only the confident but also the shy students participated in interactive exchanges to express their points of view, query the information given by others and defend their opinions. Lee (2008) posits that both meaning-oriented interaction and focus-on-form reflection are essential for L2 development in network-based teaching and learning. While the primary focus of utilizing personal blogs was meaning creation and exchange, the integration of the teacher's feedback afforded students the opportunity to notice and attend to linguistic problems that resulted in error corrections. Furthermore, regular blogging resulted in creating a greater sense of community and of interactive learning than would have otherwise been possible within the traditional classroom setting. The project serves as a model for L2 professionals who wish to implement blog technology in instructional settings to facilitate L2 development and to promote learners' critical reflection through multiple perspectives within a socially bounded learning environment.

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