

WEBLOGS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION. REAL AND PROMISED BENEFITS

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Abstract

Weblogs are seen as the perfect exercise in literacy (Goodwin-Jones, 2007; Carney, 2009; Raith, 2009; Van Compernelle and Abraham, 2009). This paper reports a project in which a blog was used in an English language classroom in the final year of secondary education in Flanders, Belgium. The project's aim was to answer four research questions:

1. Can weblogs motivate FL learners to write more?
2. Can Weblogs motivate FL learners to write better?
3. Can learners learn from one another in blogosphere, in terms of language?
4. Can learners learn from one another in blogosphere, in terms of content?

Embedding the investigation in the literature on how technology has influenced learning theory, on how learning theory has affected instructional practice and on how effective instructional practice can improve students' writing ability in a foreign language, the paper discusses the value of using blogs on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data, gained via questionnaires, qualitative text analysis and software packages (WordSmith Tools, Lextutor and LIWC), yielding quantitative data on text accuracy, fluency and complexity and on mutual linguistic influence between blog texts. Analysing some of the promised benefits of blogs critically, the paper formulates a favourable yet careful conclusion regarding the added benefit of the use of blogs in foreign language writing education.

Keywords: weblogs, English writing skills, evaluation

1 INTRODUCTION

Apart from assisting learners in developing listening, speaking and reading skills in a foreign language (FL), foreign language education (FLE) is also expected to develop learners' writing skills as well as their ability to autonomously maintain and improve their mastery of the foreign language.

In the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, 2001), these different competences are divided in *knowledge* (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, cultural knowledge) and *skills*, with skills incorporating knowledge and knowledge being functional to language use. Language users are seen as social agents who develop communicative competences in a foreign language while trying to achieve their learning and everyday (public, personal, professional, educational) communicative goals. Since skill development takes time, learners should be given ample opportunity to practice, preferably in authentic or near-authentic situations.

While reading, listening and speaking activities are quite easily incorporated in FLE classrooms at the secondary school level, i.e. the level in focus in this article, writing activities are not. Because of often limited teaching time and also because of the less demanding curricular attainment goals often set for that skill in comparison with other FL skills, writing tends to be confined to the jotting down of a few words, the filling out of words in sentences, the writing of an email and other short texts and, only sometimes, the writing of longer narrative or argumentative texts. This situation, which unfortunately also typifies much of mother tongue education throughout Europe, led Graham and Perin (2007) to write: "There is considerable concern that the majority of adolescents do not develop the competence in writing they need to be successful in school, the workplace, or their personal lives." (p. 445).

As over the last decade social media have rapidly become a self-evident part of adolescents' lives, foreign language educators, typically those who would be called "early adopters", have recognized the enormous motivational potential of social media for enticing foreign language students into writing.

Never before have youngsters written on such a regular basis, for example when adding information to their *Facebook* page, chatting with others, twittering or blogging.

This article reports an investigation into the effect of a 6-week weblog project on Flemish 17-year-olds' English writing skills, ability to co-construct meaning through writing and their motivation for writing. The project has shown that weblogs can indeed feature an important role in writing education, for some students and in certain respects. Though the motivational potential of blogs became obvious, their potential for language development and the development of every student's writing ability in a foreign language is more debatable.

In what follows, it will first be shown how the educational literature argues in favour of the use of blogs in foreign language education. The credibility of these arguments will then be tested on the basis of the results of the reported investigation.

2 WEBLOGS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A LOGICAL CHOICE

2.1 Linking learning theories to technological developments

When linking developments in learning theory to technological developments in education, a striking parallel appears. In the 1960s, available computer software supported behaviourist learning theories. These theories were soon dropped in favour of cognitive theories, a change that was backed-up by the introduction of personal computers, which facilitated the individual's cognitive learning process enormously. Social cognitive theories (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978; Bandura, 1986), stressing the role of modelling, observation and interaction for learning, were spurred on by the introduction of networked computers in the 1990s. Learning was now conceived of as a social process in which people interact, learn from one another, thus gain new insights and construct new knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978, 1997). The development of the World Wide Web into the social Web 2.0, stemming from a belief in the importance of being interconnected and actively sharing information in communities of learners, was supportive of sociocultural and self-regulation theories, "focusing on the importance and specific roles of society and culture in promoting learning and cognitive development" (Omrod, 2012: 350) and promoting that learners take control of their learning process as self-regulated learners. Such learners can set their own learning goals, motivate themselves to accomplish a learning task, plan their approach to a learning task and use their time effectively to accomplish their goals. They seek help when appropriate, reflect on their work and consider how they can improve their approach to task completion on a next occasion (Zimmerman & Moylon, 2009).

For today's young learners who feel at ease in self-directed and social co-constructive interactive communities of learners, weblogs are perfect. They allow users to combine an individualistic aspect with a collaborative and interactive one (Mondahl, Rasmussen & Razmerita, 2009). Through features, such as the comment function or the possibility to integrate hyperlinks, blogs can create an online community for students to participate in and create knowledge together. The interactive structure of blogs provides opportunities for scaffolding and feedback, so that meaning and new content are created through collaboration (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Raith, 2009). Weblogs bring together people with shared interests, who want to create relationships that can reinforce this knowledge.

2.2 Learning theories and instructional practice

Social cognitive theory, sociocultural theory and more contemporary social perspectives on learning have had numerous implications for instructional practice, also in foreign language education. Drill-type form-oriented 'repeat after me' exercises widely used in the 1960s came to be supplemented with cognitively demanding analytic activities that helped learners develop their ability to manipulate foreign language forms (grammar items, vocabulary items) to formulate correct sentences themselves and not merely imitate sentences formulated by others for them to reproduce and remember. With the acceptance of social cognitive and sociocultural theory in FLE, educators were recommended to use authentic materials and authentic communicative tasks, through which learners could acquire the language knowledge and skills necessary for executing similar tasks in the world outside of the classroom. This led to a turn in foreign language education towards absolute priority being given to assist FL learners in developing their ability to express authentic meaning in speaking and writing. Practicing communicative dialogues, participating in a class debate, writing a class newsletter, writing a letter to the editor of a magazine, send a letter to a foreign friend or present yourself on a videotape that will be sent off to a partner class abroad became preferred instructional strategies. Self-regulation theory and social constructivist theory resulted in the wider use of tasks and problem-based learning

approaches in FLE, since this type of open learning activities were thought to be supportive in the development of autonomous learning skills. Today, FLE tends to be characterized by a mix of the afore-mentioned types of activities, with educational authorities and FL teachers recognizing that tasks that are both authentic and supportive of meaningful long-term self-regulatory learning are to be preferred over less authentic, less learner-centred and clearly form-oriented language exercises.

As Guariento and Morley say, weblogs are the perfect medium to "bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and real world events" (2011: 347). Blogging is writing your thoughts into your blog, and the blogosphere is the "intellectual cyberspace" that bloggers (i.e., those who blog) occupy and create (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). On blogs, individuals provide information on their daily lives, their thoughts and opinions on topics that interest them, the sources they used to formulate an opinion, the comments and encouragements they received from blog visitors, how they integrated that feedback in their thinking, etc. In this sense, blogs are supportive of meaningful individual and self-regulatory learning, and thus fit well into socioculturally inspired instructional practice.

2.3 Writer's block in FLE: what blogs have to offer

In many foreign language classrooms, motivation for writing tends to lie far behind that for listening and speaking or reading. Writing tasks are often met with feelings of anxiety, uneasiness and apprehension. Such feelings typically include troubling thoughts and beliefs about one's ability to deal with a particular situation. While some FL learners are afraid to produce language that is not up to the standards that written language, in their minds, should reach (Cheng, 2002), others have no idea of what their final text should look like. The permanent nature of the written word further contributes to students' feelings of not being able to live up to the challenge. Moreover, their expectations of writing involving drafting, redrafting and revising again do not contribute to a positive disposition towards writing activities. They are not writing for a real audience, so why would they want to improve their texts?

Blogs then seem to be able to take away that anxiety to a certain extent. For the exchange of personal information, ideas and opinions with friends, bloggers use a language that shows characteristics of written and spoken language. Blog texts tend to be short, with an average of 16 13-word sentences per post, divided in on average 3,5 paragraphs and using few quotes only (Herring et al., 2004: 9). "A blog is both a [written] document and a conversation" (Lenhart, 2005: 59). Moreover, interaction with other users in and outside of the classroom has proven to be a motivating factor for students in their writing process (Raith, 2009). Blood (2000) too has indicated that, by interacting with an audience on a daily basis, bloggers will become more confident in their writing. Feedback from readers may lead to more self-assurance, which in turn can encourage innovative writing and longer posts, as the user will be increasingly stimulated to express personal opinions and, learning from other bloggers, will have more language at their disposal to do so. Consequently, students will be encouraged and motivated because they are working with 'real' language, as it is used in non-classroom contexts, and are writing for a genuine audience (Carney, 2009).

The personal and individual, yet shared character of weblogs is considered to be a motivational feature as well, and weblogs are thought to be able to meet the human need for affiliation, peer approval and personal achievement (Sansone & Smith, 2002). As Hourigan and Murray argue, "blogs can successfully promote self expression in a place where the L2 learner/blogger is developing deeply personalized content" (Hourigan & Murray, 2010, p. 210), which in turn "encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of students" (Godwin-Jones, 2006, p. 13). Weblogs offer students the possibility of creating an online, individual identity, which triggers a sense of agency and autonomy. The opportunity of controlling their own learning process, and taking personally motivated decisions, is argued to increase students' motivation (Carney, 2009) and students will become more self-regulatory learners.

2.4 Conclusion

From the above, one can conclude that weblogs hold promises of increased and higher quality writing than writing on paper. They respect the learners' needs for belonging, peer approval and need for achievement as well as their out of classroom approach to learning, which consists in interactive, social co-constructive learning. These hopeful thoughts regarding weblogs for meaningful writing education led us to formulate the following research questions:

1. Can weblogs motivate FL learners to write more?
2. Can Weblogs motivate FL learners to write better?

3. Can learners learn from one another in blogosphere, in terms of language?
4. Can learners learn from one another in blogosphere, in terms of content?

3 A CASE STUDY

3.1 Sample

During a six-week weblog project, 27 17-year-old learners of English (16 girls and 11 boys) were asked to post a reaction in response to every one of the 6 prompts they would be offered. From a questionnaire distributed among participants before the start of the project, it appeared that all students used the internet frequently, mostly for school assignments, but also for *facebooking*, mailing, gaming, or music or information retrieval. Students indicated English to be the language they most frequently used (receptively) on the internet. Some also frequently use Turkish, as it is their native language, or French, to communicate with friends or family elsewhere. All students were familiar with the concept of a weblog, but none had actually set up one by themselves. When asked about their motivation for the project, students indicated that they were motivated for the following reasons: to help each other, communicate with their classmates, learn in an amusing way, and because they thought it could improve their English. Yet, some students were less motivated because they didn't think of English as an important subject. They said that the biggest disadvantage of the project for them was that it was compulsory, and that they would have to write their posts in 'their limited spare time'. (Kelchtermans & Sercu, 2012)

3.2 Data collection

All 27 participants of the project were asked to start up an account and a blog on *Buddypress*. *Buddypress* is a plugin that can be installed on *Wordpress*. *Wordpress* is an open source software package for web publishing. The plugin can transform the *Wordpress* platform into a social network platform where users have all blogging possibilities provided by many other blogging services. *Buddypress*, however, also offers the possibility to set up individual blogs within the main community. All student activities, such as member registration, posts, updates, profile changes, etc. are listed in the activity stream on the main blog, so that any member can remain updated on anything going on in the main shared blog, as well as in the individual blogs that were part of the class community.

Students were asked to write at least once a week. Each week a different topic was suggested in order to set the writing going. Sometimes these topics were illustrated by means of videos, or students were directed to inspiring websites. Some topics were chosen to encourage students to provide a personal response, while others rather had the purpose of provoking discussions and the exchange of arguments. All topics were chosen with a view to assist participants in moving from level B1 for speaking and writing, to level B2 in speaking and writing as defined in the CEFR. According to the CEFR, a learner who has reached the B2 level can present clear detailed descriptions on a wider range of subjects related to his/her field of interest in speaking. S/he can also explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. As far as writing is concerned, the B2 level user of English can write clear, detailed texts on a wide range of subjects related to his/her interests. S/he can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. S/he can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.

The following prompts were posted for students:

1. Last year, an Australian boy visited your school. If you had that chance, would you like to visit Down Under? Why or why not? Does the country attract you at all? Why (not)? Is there anything that you find particularly attractive or unattractive? Why?
2. You have already exchanged opinions on Australia, and some of you have indicated that Australia is just too far away to visit and that you cannot imagine ever travelling to that country. Are there any other things you would like to do in the future, but which you think are too difficult? You can think of things, such as take a trip around the world, go bungee jumping, become the world's number one tennis player, ... Why would you want to do that? How would you achieve your goal(s)?
3. Last week, the EVA started a remarkable campaign: 'Dagen zonder vlees'. <http://www.dagenzondervlees.be/nl-BE/>. It encourages people to eat less meat and fish over a period of 40 days and wants to raise people's awareness of the role of meat production in global warming. What do you think about the campaign? Attractive?

- Worthwhile? A drop in the ocean (a useless effort)? ... Would you like to participate? Why (not)?
4. You are in your final year of secondary education and will soon graduate from high school. I am quite curious about your future plans: what will you do right after graduation? Will you travel, work, hang out with friends? What will you do after the summer holidays? Will you study or work or maybe travel around the world? Why? If you would like to continue your education, what study programme attracts you most? Why?
 5. 'Kony 2012' is a video made by 'Invisible Children' about rebel leader Kony in Uganda. <http://invisiblechildren.com/videos/kony-2012/>. The video is being spread to make Kony known to the whole world, so that he can be arrested. His army is abducting young children to use them as child soldiers. The video also wants people to make donations so that Ugandan schools can be rebuilt. Most of you have probably seen the video appear on Facebook or television. The campaign has its supporters, but has also been criticised. Some people argue that simply sharing a video will not make for the urgent changes that are needed in the region. Others say this is just another American way of wanting to present themselves as the saviours of the world. Still others believe the video is not telling the truth about what is going on in Uganda or that the Invisible Children company is making a large profit out of this campaign. What do you think about the campaign? Do you think that sharing a video could indeed make a difference and lead to the arrest of a rebel leader? Do you think the whole world could join hands to take action against the use of children as soldiers? Do you or your parents donate to this kind of organisations (e.g. '11.11.11; daminaanactie; Amnesty International) raising money for people in need? Why (not)? Please also have a look at <http://invisiblechildren.com/playlist/about-invisible-children/>.
 6. Next week, the sixth grade of your school will be participating in the 'Social commitment days'. So, you too will be working voluntarily for an organisation for a couple of days. What kind of organisation did you choose, and why? What do you expect of the whole experience? Do you think you will learn something from it? Can this initiative indeed lead to make more people aware of their responsibility to help those in need in our society? In what respect is the organization you will be working for a social organisation?

Before the start of the project, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire inquiring into their overall internet use, the languages they use most frequently while using the internet, their experience with blogs and their motivation regarding the project. After finishing the project, students were asked to fill out a second questionnaire that asked about their experiences with the blog project in a systematic way: Did they encounter any technical problems? Which topic(s) did they like best? Did their motivation change in the course of the project? Had they come to get to know their fellow students better? Did they think their writing skills in English have improved? Did they think they had learnt specific new vocabulary? Did they worry about others being able to read their posts? Did they find writing on a blog more interesting than writing a paper? Why?

3.3 Data preparation and analysis

All posts on both the main class blog and the individual blogs were tagged for student number, gender, type of post (e.g., start-up post, blog post, comment in reaction to student x's 1st (2n, 3rd, ...) post; update on own previous quote; reply on comment of student x, ...), prompt/assignment, 'main blog/individual blog, number of words (post length), number of dependent and independent clauses (post text complexity), content (E.g., new content; reaction + new content; reaction = confirmation of content; reaction = against previously posted content; expression of joy; ...) or 'personalized'. Student answers to open-ended questionnaire questions were labelled in terms of their orientation and content (e.g., yes, no, do not know; like/dislike; reason for liking/disliking; interested/not interested; reason for being interested; not-interested).

Labelling data was done manually and with the help of computer software.

Manual tagging was used, for example, to identify the type of post (start-up post / comment; confirmation of content, expression of disagreement; reference to sources provided in prompt; ...). Because of the relatively small dataset, to draw up a productivity profile, measured as the total number of 'likes, 'comments', 'start-up quotes', of every student, tags were counted manually. The productivity profile was used as a measure of motivation to participate in the project. The total number of clauses, dependent and independent, was considered an important indicator of sentence and text complexity. Complexity can be interpreted as the capacity of the writer to use more advanced language and his/her willingness to engage and experiment with different syntactic structures, such as subordination

and embedding Complexity was measured as the proportion of clauses to the number of T-units and the proportion of dependent clauses to the total number of clauses, which measured the degree of embedding in the text.¹ Accuracy was determined in terms of the number of error free clauses produced relative to the total number of clauses produced.

The first software package used was *WordSmith Tools*, first developed by Mike Scott (University of Liverpool). This programme was used to count the number of words per text, but also to produce a word frequency list for every student's weekly posts. The first measure provides an indication of students' fluency in English writing. The word frequency lists show what proportion of the student's words were high versus low frequency words, with the proportion of low frequency words being an indirect indication of the breadth of students' vocabulary and their ability to use it in writing. The more infrequent words, the larger the vocabulary knowledge of a student can be said to be. When comparing word frequency lists over topics, it can also be determined with respect to which topic a student or the full group of students appear(s) to master the largest number of different words. A comparison of word frequency in posts over time (e.g., week 1 versus week 5) yielded data on changes over time in lexical richness. In this way, it could be investigated to what extent weaker students seemed to have picked up phrases or words, for example for expressing an opinion or stating disagreement, from the posts of stronger students.

The second software package used was *Lextutor*, first developed by Tom Cobb (University of Quebec at Montreal), and in particular its `text_lex_compare` feature. This feature allows one to subtract one text from another to see what is new and what is reused in a new text and to determine the degree of word repetition between texts. Comparing student texts in this way gave us an idea of mutual influence of posts on one another, and thus of possible use of language thanks to that language having been used in a post written previously by a fellow blogger.

Finally, the text analysis tool *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Program (LIWC)*, first developed by Pennebaker, Booth and Francis (University of Texas at Austin) and designed "to provide an efficient and effective method for studying the various emotional, cognitive, structural and process components present in individuals' verbal and written speech samples." (<http://www.liwc.net>) was made use of. The programme analyzes written text on a word by word basis and calculates the percentage of words in the text that match each of up to 82 language dimensions. An overview of these dimensions can be found at <http://www.liwc.net/descriptiontable3.php>, together with a comparison of the on average use of each category in different types of writing (emotional writing, controlled writing, science articles, blogs, novels and talking). From this comparison, it arises that 'controlled writing' and 'blogs' tend to differ, for example in their use of personal pronouns (self-referencing), words to express negative or positive emotions (emotional language), or punctuation, such as exclamation marks or questions (emotional, spoken language).

3.4 Data analysis in relation to research questions

Table 1 below provides an overview of what data were used to answer each research question. With respect to each question, developments in the course of the project were also considered.

Table 1: Overview of data analysis in relation to the research questions.

Research question	Data				
Can weblogs motivate FL learners to write more?	Student reports on this topic in questionnaires	Productivity profile: number of posts, comments, likes, dislikes	Fluency: WordSmith Tools: word count; type/token count;	Interactivity: Lextutor: more interactivity = more deeply involved	

¹ Hunt (1965) describes a T-unit as "one main clause plus whatever subordinate clauses happen to be attached to or embedded within it" (p. 735). Following Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) a distinction was made between dependent and independent clauses.

Can weblogs motivate FL learners to write better?	Student reports on this topic in questionnaires	Accuracy: manual tagging of error free clauses	Fluency: Wordsmith Tools: Frequency lists	Complexity: manual tagging: number of T-units, dependent, independent clauses;	Interactivity: Lextutor: comparison of texts; picking up of words
Do learners gain new language through participating in the blog	Student reports on this topic in questionnaires				Interactivity: Lextutor: comparison of texts; picking up of words;
Do learners gain new insights through participating in the blog project? Do they co-construct meaning?	Student reports on this topic in questionnaires	Qualitative analysis and assessment of texts	Productivity profile: number of comments, likes, dislikes; Types of posts: confirmatory, disagreement	Degree of self-expression and intellectual activity: LIWC-report	Interactivity: picking up of vocabulary as an indication of co-construction of meaning;

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Can weblogs motivate FL learners to write more?

The amount of blog activity, expressed in terms of the number of posts/comments produced over the six-week project showed that Topic 3² was most motivating for 4/5ths of the students, that Topics 1 and 4 generated the same amount of posts and that Topic 2 seems to have been the topic that could motivate students least. Yet, when considering the average amount of words produced by individual bloggers, Topic 4 seems to be the topic that has attracted the most elaborate posts, with 128,5 words on average per post. Topic 2 ranked secondly with 110,25 words on average per post and Topic 3 last with 72,09 words per post. From this comparison of topics as far as the number of posts (13) and the average number of words used (128,5) is concerned, it can be derived that the topic to which students could relate most directly and personally seems to have been Topic 4. In their Topic 4 posts, the use of exclamation marks and emoticons at repeated times was striking and expressions, such as "It's going to be FUN!!!" or "That would be great!!!", "the best summer ever!", "amazing summer", "I am really looking forward to it", "a lot of fun", "very annoying" or "all my life" were hard to ignore and testify to the bloggers' emotional involvement in these posts. On the basis of the results provided by the different but complementary analyses performed on the blog texts, it can be said that students were indeed motivated to write and wrote more with respect to topics to which they felt emotionally attracted to. An example text (no corrections made) is provided below.

"This holiday, I'm going to fulfill a dream I've had all my life. I'm going to make a eurotrip with my friends. We're going to backback through Hungary, Croatia, Austria, ... The long distances we will do by train (with interrail) and the rest we'll walk or we'll figure something else out. We have almost nothing planned out, but I think that's the exciting part of the journey: adventure! It's also very important to me because it's the trip with all of my friends together before we all go our own ways (studying in different places). The day I'll come home from this I won't have much time to rest because I immediately have to pack my back for a camp with the Chiro for two weeks. When I get home from that I'll go and do a bit of holiday work (under light pressure of my parents ;-) to gain some money for my other plans. Furthermore I will probably spent my time going to festivals and parties with my friends or packing my bags because the 24th of august I'm leaving for Mexico (with AFS) where I will stay for a year and go to university! I can't wait to go, but on the other hand I find it hard to leave my friends behind and to think that

² Topic 1: Australia; Topic 2: impossible goals; Topic 3: a vegetarian for 40 days; Topic 4: plans after graduation; Topic 5: Kony video; Topic 6: social commitment days.

I can't spend the first year in Leuven with them, but then I just think: this is a fantastic opportunity to discover a bit of the world and Leuven will still be there when I'm back :)"

In the post-project questionnaire, students were asked to comment on their experiences with the project in general. Most students reacted positively. For them, the largest benefit of the class blog was its interactivity. The opportunity to start discussions on topics that usually were not discussed in class, made the blog assignment more appealing to them than a traditional paper task. To be asked to write down their thoughts and opinions, knowing that their posts would be read by their classmates, and being allowed to read their fellow bloggers' posts, and in this way, getting to know them better, further contributed to the attractiveness of the project. Moreover, students indicated that they had become much more involved with writing in English than ever before and assigned this growth in motivation to the blog project. As a matter of fact, their motivation to participate grew over the project weeks, as their classmates were in general contributing actively and made them reconsider what they had written. Students also felt that the blog project was more of an opportunity to write than a test of their writing ability, something which definitely added up to their motivation.

On the negative side, some students, especially those who had not contributed as actively as some other students, complained about the compulsory nature of the project, especially because they had to write during their "limited" spare time. Especially because of the technical difficulties they had experienced at the start of the project, they felt they had had to invest more time in the project than they had actually intended to. Another point students addressed was the fact that not everyone was participating to an equal degree and that this had somehow kept them from writing (more), even if they were still reading along and considering what others wrote. The moment the better students seemed to have taken over, the hesitation of some weaker students to participate actively grew. One of the students who did not write much commented that she did not like the public nature of the project, a comment that can probably be traced back to her uncertainty about the quality of her writing.

In conclusion, it can be said that participants were indeed motivated to write more and found the blog-format a stimulus for their writing, especially because of its interactive nature and the fact that a genuine audience was available. Yet, it cannot be denied that weaker students prefer to lurk rather than to contribute actively. For some of them, the project just brought along extra work and, in their minds, the possibility of public condemnation. A third point to be remembered is the fact that some topics apparently motivated students more than others. The topics to which they felt emotionally related generated more writing than some other topics. Topics that had been formulated more elaborately, for example through suggesting potential aspects students could write about, or topics where inspiring material (e.g., the Kony video or the vegetarian campaign website) had been provided, also led students to write more often or longer posts.

4.2 Can weblogs motivate FL learners to write better?

For reasons of space, only complexity data and student answers to the relevant questionnaire questions will be discussed here to provide a general idea of whether the blog project reported here was indeed successful in enhancing participants' writing ability in English.

As far as the subordination ratio of students' texts is concerned, no firm conclusions can be drawn regarding development in student writing quality. When studying students' subordination ratios, no clear pattern concerning the increase in text complexity over topics became visible. The idea that students who are more productive, both in terms of the number of texts they post and the number of (low frequency) words they produce, also are the ones who write the more complex sentences, could not be substantiated in our data. Some student patterns even seem to point in the opposite direction: students who contributed two posts only, appear to have written more complex sentences (according to the complexity index used) towards the beginning of the project than students who contributed each week and ended up with an ratio below that of less productive students.

We can only conclude that, because of the limited duration of the project and the relatively small linguistic dataset we could analyze, no firm conclusions can be formulated here. Even so, from student answers to the questions concerning the possible, if any, contribution of the blog project to the quality of their writing in English, some students indicated that they felt their writing had improved, mainly through writing every week. They felt the project had stimulated them to further improve their writing and had actually made them aware of where there was room for improvement.

4.3 Do learners gain new language through participating in the blog project?

To answer our third research question, we again turn to our questionnaire data, but this time also to our qualitative analyses of blog texts and our quantitative Lextutor data concerning the comparability of student texts and the extent to which students appear to make positive use of language provided in previous posts.

The first insight regarding the possibility of students' rehearsing or learning language used by others concerns the fact that students did not frequently build or comment on texts posted by others. To explore the level of repetition or influence in students' blog posts further, with the help of Lextutor, each text was compared to the one that was preceding it. The Lextutor data showed that, in general, the recycling index in the blog posts is very low. The overall average of repetition comes down to only 54,72%, while the program indicates that a situation of a related topic with different authors would bring about a recycling index of 70,89%. Hence, there seems to be relatively little repetition of words in students' posts.

However, when taking a second look at the blog posts, one can conclude that this kind of recycling index does not suffice to describe the actual degree of influence between students' entries. For instance, the tool does not take into account the number of sentences that have been repeated literally. When examining the various texts more closely then, one can conclude that there are many instances of sentence repetition. Students mainly tend to repeat the first sentences of each other's posts. When asked for their opinion about a certain project, the majority of the posts started with "*I think it's a good idea*" or "*it is a good initiative*", as can be seen from Fig. 2. Another case in point in the example is the repetition of the phrase "*I am not capable to hold it for 40 days*". Other phrases or fixed expressions that were quite regularly used in subsequent student posts include: "*Personally, I think that*", "*In my opinion*" or "*I feel that*". Whether students really copy these phrases is difficult to say. They may already have known them and now use the most prototypical one(s) in their writings.

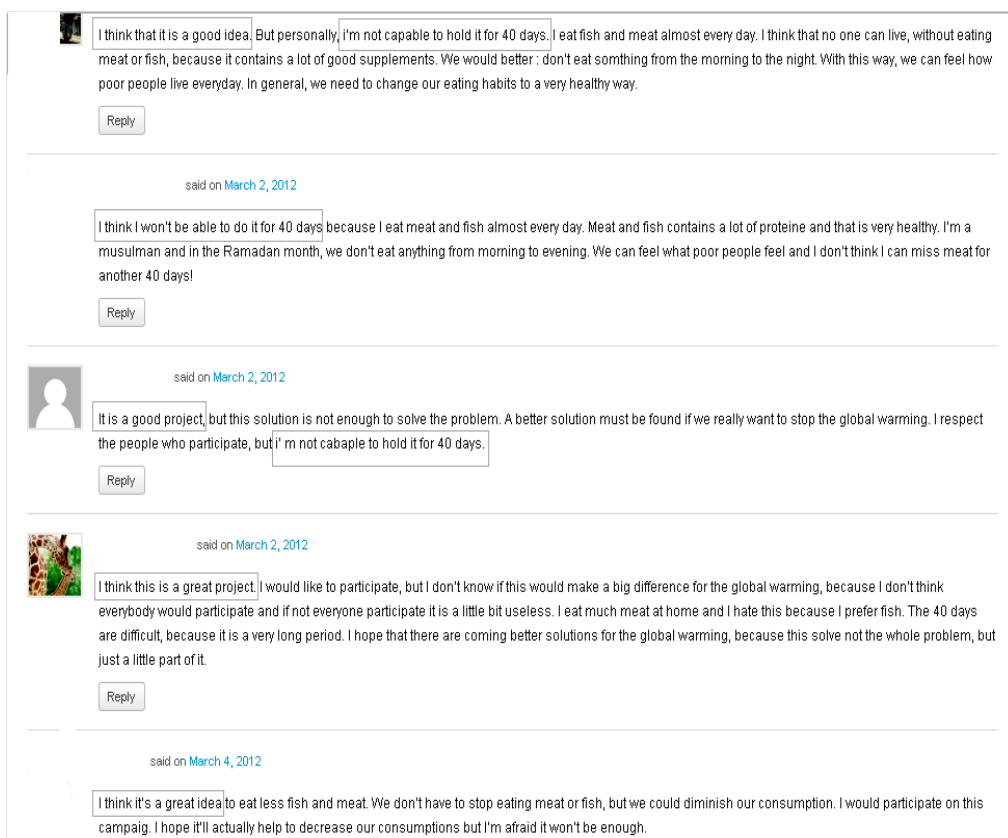


Fig. 2: Linguistic influence between blog posts

Next to sentences that are 'repeated' literally, there were some other occurrences of intentional copying of parts of a post. In one post, a student copied a sentence word by word, but used some of the words incorrectly. Whereas the model student wrote: "*I also like the fauna of Australia because it consists of a huge variety of animals*", the copying student reformulated the sentence as "*The landscape is beautiful and it consists of a huge variety of animals*". The fact that the copying student

tries to reformulate the sentence, but uses it inadequately is an indication that that student does not understand all words correctly, probably thinking that “fauna” equals “landscape”. Another example can be found in the sentence “After i’m going work, i’ll make a citytrip to spain or italy with my friends, so it’s a *surprise* for us”. It seems that the choice to use the word ‘surprise’ does not really fit here, as he and his friends already know about the city trip they’ll make. The student’s choice however can be explained by looking at the preceding post, where a student wrote about a surprise vacation for her boyfriend: “I’m planning a citytrip to Barcelona with my boyfriend but he doesn’t know, so it’s a little surprise”. Again, this points toward the fact that students may copy words and sentences from other students, without really knowing what they mean or in which context they can be used.

Despite the possibility that students will use new language incorrectly when copying from fellow students’ texts, a blog project can help students rehearse language or learn new language. The questionnaire data showed that students believe that the other entries had had a positive effect on their own writing. Reading others’ posts helped them to formulate their own sentences, and provided them with inspiration: *‘it made it easier to express my own thought on the subjects’*. Some students also indicated that they had learned new words after reading other students’ entries, such as synonyms or adverbs. One student even wrote that the blog project had made him more aware of the fact he could improve his English substantially, especially when comparing the quality of his own writings to the quality of other students’ writings.

4.4 Do learners co-construct meaning when participating in a blog project?

Our final question can be answered affirmatively. That students make good use of meaning offered by fellow students, has already become obvious from the linguistic analysis of mutual influence presented above. As questionnaire data show, students feel that through consecutive posts in relation to a set topic, they came to think differently of each topic. They say the posts allowed them to read about aspects of the topic they had at first not considered. They had seen classmates relate ideas they had not related themselves before. They had learned about other viewpoints, which sometimes were culturally defined. Some students also pointed out that they had come to get to know some of their classmates better, through discussing topics that were not normally discussed in class, and that in terms of the exchange of contents and opinions, the project had been really challenging and worthwhile.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper set out to discuss the value of blogs for the enhancement of writing skills in a foreign language, suggesting that some promises put forward in the literature might not actually be met in reality. Our investigation has demonstrated exactly this. Despite the fact that a positive balance in favour of the use of blogs for the enhancement of FL writing education can be struck, no more than careful conclusions can be formulated as to the extent to which blogs may be the ideal instrument to improve students’ writing skills.

As our investigation has demonstrated, blogs work for some students but not for others. Also, they work well with respect to some topics, but not as well with respect to others. The idea that social media such as blogs make co-construction of meaning and collaborative learning easy may be true. Yet, this potential did not materialize up to the desired level in the secondary school class we studied. Some learners have indeed demonstrated their ability to express themselves adequately and learn from others, motivate themselves to accomplish the task, planned their approach to the task and made efficient use of their time. Others, however, awaited posts written by others, complained about the workload and were afraid to be read by others, copying phrases while not necessarily understanding all lexical items correctly. Through our investigation, we believe to have shed new light on the following statements formulated earlier in this paper: “For today’s young learners who feel at ease in self-directed and social co-constructive interactive communities of learners, weblogs are perfect. They allow users to combine an individualistic aspect with a collaborative and interactive one (Mondahl, Rasmussen & Razmerita, 2009). Through features, such as the comment function or the possibility to integrate hyperlinks, blogs can create an online community for students to participate in and create knowledge together. The interactive structure of blogs provides opportunities for scaffolding and feedback, so that meaning and new content are created through collaboration (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Raith, 2009). Weblogs bring together people with shared interests, who want to create relationships that can reinforce this knowledge”. As our investigation demonstrates, such bold claims

about the technological possibilities of a tool in relation to educational aims have to be met with a good measure of criticism and common sense.

To bridge the gap between education and real-life better, current-day (foreign language) education, inspired by sociocultural learning theories, wants to present learners with authentic writing tasks that can prepare them for writing in real life. For Guariento and Morley (2011), for example, weblogs are the perfect medium to "bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and real world events" (p. 347). On the basis of our investigation, we cannot but conclude that students can write blog texts and that their blog texts could feature on a real blog with a real audience hosted on the www. Yet, we feel that blogs do not adequately reflect the type of argumentative or descriptive writings at the B2 level of the CEFR that will be expected of students later on, in their professional lives. Even if part of the participants applied a formal style in their blog writings, others tended to use much more informal language. This may be considered appropriate for a blog text, but not for many of the text genres used in public and professional daily life. In addition, blog texts tend to be rather unsurveyable and ill-structured, lacking in coherence and internal cohesion, features that might be considered flaws in real life.

To end on a positive note, on the basis of the findings arising from the investigation reported here, we believe that blogs have a strong and unprecedented appeal for students and can considerably crank up their motivation for writing in a foreign language. From writing and reading posts written by others, students gain much more than a couple of new words or phrases or a higher degree of accuracy or complexity in their language use. They learn the skill of debating, considering a problem from many different angles, sympathizing with others' points of view or providing feedback on others' writings in a polite and diplomatic way. The largest gain in our opinion lies in the boost blogs can give to students' sense of ownership and responsibility towards their own learning, their fellow learners and society. If blogs can help education spur on this potential in learners, there is any reason to welcome them as a pedagogically worthwhile tool, also and especially in foreign language education.

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