Blogging: A way to foster EFL writing

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Abstract

This article reports on the results of an action-research project carried out with a group of first year university students from an "English Program" at a public university in Bogotá. The project aimed to gain insights into EFL writing and to analyze the role that feedback played in the process of writing. The experience was implemented through the interaction of two groups of students, one from Colombia and the other from Canada, who interacted regularly by means of using blogs. Students were provided with three different spaces: a personal blog in which they wrote about topics of personal interest, a group blog that allowed students to work and write cooperatively, and a debate blog that required the use of argumentative writing. The findings of this research suggest that EFL writing is greatly developed when students feel part of a community to interact with and to share similar interests and language learning goals that are mediated, in this case, by technology. It was also found that by writing in blogs students not only developed their writing but more importantly, students have the possibility to portray and show their own selves through the written pieces they post. Finally, the feedback was found to be beneficial in EFL writing as it was a crucial ingredient that gave student-writers tools to scaffold the writing process.

Key words: writing in EFL, blogs, feedback, community, process writing, scaffolding.

Resumen

Este artículo reporta los resultados de un proyecto de investigación-acción desarrollado con un grupo de estudiantes de primer año de licenciatura en Inglés en una Universidad Pública de Bogotá. El proyecto tenía como objetivo ganar conocimiento sobre la escritura en EFL y analizar el papel que juega la retroalimentación en este proceso. Esta experiencia se llevó a cabo a través de una interacción entre dos grupos de estudiantes uno de Colombia y el otro de Canadá. Se diseñaron tres espacios para los estudiantes: un blog personal, en el cual podían escribir sobre cosas de interés personal: un blog grupal el cual propició el trabajo y la escritura grupal; y, un blog de debates que requirió del uso de la escritura argumentativa. Los hallazgos de esta investigación proponen que la escritura en EFL puede desarrollarse significativamente cuando los estudiantes se sienten parte de una comunidad con la cual interactúan y comparten intereses y objetivos de aprendizaje de lengua similares mediados, en este caso, por la tecnología. De la misma forma, que a través de la escritura en blogs los estudiantes no sólo desarrollan su escritura en EFL sino que también tienen la oportunidad de proyectar su propia imagen a través de las piezas que componen y que acumulan en sus blogs. Finalmente, se encontró que la retroalimentación es un ingrediente fundamental en la escritura en EFL ya que le brinda a los estudiantes herramientas para avanzar en el proceso.

Palabras clave: escritura en EFL, blogs, retroalimentación, comunidad, proceso de escritura, scaffolding.

Introduction

Learning to write in either a first, second or foreign language is one of the most difficult tasks that a learner can encounter and one that few people can be said to fully master; however, not much attention has been devoted to it. In some English texts we find that there is always a part for writing that is usually related to a particular grammatical topic studied along the unit. Thus, the writing task is much more concerned with the form rather than with the abstract thinking capacity to construct meaning and put it into words. Richards (1990) affirms: "The process of moving from concepts, thoughts and ideas to written text is complex. A written text represents the product of a series of complicated mental operations" (p. 101). Evidently, writing is a difficult skill to develop since it requires not only syntactic and lexical knowledge, but also the capacity to generate and organize ideas and thoughts in a way that can be clearly and coherently communicated to a potential reader.

Writing is a very complex area that causes problems to the majority of students in both the native and the foreign language. It might be due to the fact that it implies using an abstract set of mental processes rather than only using the formal structures of the
language itself. We have been educated under a system for which writing is not a major concern. Thus, we find that this activity is left to people who are supposed to be the experts, the writers. It is much more worrying when we think of language teachers who do not have this ability and as a consequence, they may not feel prepared and committed to help students with this crucial part of language.

Nowadays, most teachers and students acknowledge the importance of having good writing skills. For them, developing the ability to express themselves through written language has become a learning objective of its own right. Nevertheless, when we analyze what we as teachers actually do to help students with the challenging task of writing, we might find that sometimes, we do very little to contribute to the actual development of this crucial aspect of the language. Perhaps, if we ask ourselves, do students write as much as we want? Do they enjoy the kind of writing activities they carried out in the classroom? Or, do our comments and feedback contribute to the development of our students' writing? Unfortunately for some of us, the answers to these questions might be a simple “no”.

Concerned with the issues mentioned above, this research study was developed in order to gain insights about the development of writing in EFL and to explore to what extent feedback from the teacher and from peers shape students' writing. This study was carried out through a blog writing exchange between a group of Colombian and Canadian students. A blog is, according to the general online consensus, a website that can be updated regularly and organized chronologically according to date, and in reverse order from most recent entry backwards (Ward, 2004). A blogger usually writes free-flowing pieces that are interesting to him/her, his/her ideas about life and his/her own interpretations about world; in general, issues that might not be meaningful for everybody but that for any haphazardly are intimately close to him/her. Blood, (2000) says in regards to blogs: “These fragments, pieced together over months, can provide an unexpectedly intimate view of what it is to be a particular individual in a particular place at a particular time.” (p.5). Blogs have allowed people to have voice and self-expression in a world where every time there is less space for people to write or talk just for the sake of sharing things that are meaningful and interesting to them.

This research was carried out as part of work-research alliance between University of Dundee, in Scotland and Distrial University, in Bogotá. There were schools from five different countries enrolled: Colombia, Scotland, Chile, Canada and Spain; and two universities from Colombia. The object of this collaborative project was to give students the opportunity to use technology to communicate and create mutual cultural understanding through the interaction among people with different cultural backgrounds.

Through this meaningful interaction, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) were used to create a different learning environment to foster virtual human relationships in order to create a community for learning. To be able to succeed with such goal, a virtual platform was set up by University of Dundee in Scotland whose name was “International creative storytelling forum”. This platform included blogs, forums and videoconferences for communication and interaction, among students-students, students-teachers and teachers-teachers.

For the purpose of this study students were provided with three different blog spaces: a personal blog, a group blog and a blog for debate. For the personal blog, students were free to write about anything they wanted, depending on their personal likes, style and interests. The personal selection of topics ranged from poems and stories to articles about photography and cultural movements.

In the second one, the group blog, students worked in groups of two or three, they could write about the topics selected by all the participants in the forum or any they collectively chose. Finally, the objective of the debate blog was to promote the use of argumentative writing through the discussions of topics that were democratically chosen by the students. Interaction between Colombian and Canadian students was initially mostly achieved by means of the personal blogs. Students usually visited each other’s personal blog, read what the other had written and gave comments, asked questions and gave some feedback.

Theory underlying the research

Here, I present a discussion of the theoretical and research foundations that support the present research study, they are: some conceptions and approaches to writing, some considerations on feedback; and finally, some considerations on blogs and language learning.

Some Considerations on writing

Undoubtedly, one of the first terrifying impressions when writing is facing the blank piece of paper unfolded in front of us waiting to be filled with our thoughts and ideas. Even the most experienced writers might feel a kind of panic in front of that blank sheet of paper. As soon as one starts putting something on it, one gets confident to see how wonderfully one’s invisible inner thoughts are put in such a visible way that anybody can have access to them; now they are not hidden any more, they are not only mine, but they are others’ as well. It is a sublime moment when words come into our minds and we struggle to connect and put them together to give meaning to the thousand of ideas that are running into our heads.

It indicates that the act of writing is far beyond the fact of only putting well organized words and structures on a white piece of paper; it is rather the act of giving meaning and substance to our thoughts. Mitchell (1996) puts it as follows: "writing is a process of discovering and creating meaning" (p.39). Writing implies more than the selection of the right structures, words and general conventions of the language; it is a mental process of using and arranging formal structures in such a way that they can create actual meaning to what the writer has in his head and wants to express in written language. "Good writing is an extension of clear thinking, and writing competence is how the writer makes meaning in written language” (Mitchell, 1996: 4).

White and Arndt (1996) also argue that: "writing is far from being a simple matter of transcribing language into written symbols: it is a thinking process in its own right, it demands conscious intellectual effort which usually is sustained over a considerable period of time" (p.3). In the same trend of thought, Hedge (2005) asserts that effective writing demands a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of information, ideas or arguments; high degree of accuracy in order to avoid ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and to the potential reader.

Nevertheless, in some cases, we as teachers have students write simply as a way to practice formal structures that unfortunately, do not necessarily promote creation of meaning or the necessity of organized thinking. In most of the cases, it demands only a clear understanding of the structures, therefore students might be concerned only with the form rather than with the content. In regards to this, Richards (1990) states: "In foreign and second language programs, the teaching of second language writing has often been synonymous with teaching grammar or sentence structure" (p.102).

From Chomsky’s (1975) conception: “the rules of sentence formation do not really belong to grammar but to some other subject in which the “order of thoughts” is studied” (p. 7). Language is not just a system of structures, but it is the tool that allows human beings to construct and interpret the world. The facilitation of language use within a socio-cultural environment is the predominant means by which people make sense or meaning (Wells, 2000). In a similar trend of thought Lee (2000, p. 192) highlights: “Language serves as a conceptual organizer, primary medium through which thinking occurs”. Thus, language, either written or spoken, is above all an inherent part of knowledge construction.
Writing as process versus writing as product

In the sixties the audio-lingual method was still the dominant mode of language instruction. The view was that writing primarily served as a subservient to reinforce oral patterns of the language (Raimes, 1995). As a result, writing took the form of sentence drills to reinforce the accurate use of grammatical structures and patterns focused on the manipulation of sentences. Teachers' concern was only the final product in terms of how good students were at using vocabulary, structures and mechanics. A "good" text, then, was meant to be one whose formal structure was perfect. To reach such objective students were given texts as models to be followed and imitated (Kern, 2000).

The product model was mainly based on a behaviorist approach whose purpose was just to fill learners' heads with some information to be then reproduced without even being aware of the fact that they were just following a pattern. Krahen states that students can modify input internally and produce a different output, because they have their mental structures that interact with the information given. Mitchell (1996) states that: "there is no such thing as a natural norm for writing. Each writer has a unique approach and uses different strategies to produce a text." (p.31). Grammar and formal aspects of the language should be considered as essential ingredients for the creation of a text but not the only and most important feature. Towards the seventies, as a response to the continuous dissatisfaction from the teachers with that traditional linear approach the Process Approach to writing emerged.

This approach sprang together with the communicative approach in the late 60s and early 70s. The 1970s saw the development of more than sentence combination and controlled composition, which was the aim of audio-lingualism; teachers and researchers reacted against a form-oriented approach by developing an interest towards what learners actually did as they wrote (Raimes, 1995; Kern, 2000; Mitchell, 1996). Hence, writing was understood as a constant writing-revising-rewriting activity. However, I agree that there is not such a strict linear process, as some authors argue, it is rather a circular one in which the writer can go backwards and forwards in the process (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). It means that the writer is constantly generating ideas, organizing and reorganizing the text in order to have his ideas and thoughts clear. I completely agree with the idea that writers do not necessarily follow one step after the other (first prewriting, then writing and so on) as it is often stated, they recur to every stage as they feel they need it.

Baynham (1999) affirms: "Research into drafting and redrafting processes has shown that the writing process is cyclical or recursive, not linear" (p.148). This cyclical process is very different from writer to writer for the mental organization of each one is very different. In a research carried out by Zamel, one of the first persons interested in this approach, she found that planning and generating ideas did not necessarily precede writing but rather were ongoing processes, thus student's writing ESL compositions were involved in the constant interplay of thinking, and rewriting, (cited by Mitchell, 1996: 39). Similarly, Zamel's research points out that students were more influenced by what happened before the actual writing began, some students reported having internal dialogues to determine how to proceed; others said that they read their compositions to an imaginary listener to assess its clarity. Finally, nearly all the students stated that outlines were rarely if ever used; however, they did plan their writing (Cited by Mitchell, 1996: 39). These findings suggest that teachers must be careful because sometimes, even though we claim to follow a process-approach, we try to force students to follow the same process, forgetting that writers vary in the way they arrive at a final product. In some cases, we want our students to use an outline, which is a good idea, but there are some who do not need that since as the findings show, they just have a very careful mental planning of their ideas; some writers revise over and over again as they write.

Although the process approach is much more interested in the process of creation of meaning, it does not imply that formal aspects of the language are not as important. Baynham (1999) argues revision and reformulation can involve work at all levels of the text, from spelling and punctuation through grammar and lexical choice, to features of discourse organization. Similarly, Mitchell (1996) states that "students can be too pernickety about their writing and shift their focus from the idea to the quality as measured by the degree of accuracy, to thinking of writing as an activity in which linguistic information can help them shape their ideas." (p.48). Certainly the focus of this study was not on the accurate use of linguistic features, but of course, they were tools that clearly helped writers to shape and express their thoughts.

It is often seen that problems with grammar, punctuation, lexical choice and the like can have a very negative impact on content and general understanding of a text. When there is a considerable number of problems with the language use, it is very likely that readers will not be able to fully understand what the writer meant. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) affirm that students need an integrative approach where creation and organization of meaning are central to the act of writing, but one that is carried out through the correct choice of language structures in order to have a comprehensive final text (product). To conclude this section, I want to highlight what Raimes (1995) points out in regards to writing: "...what seems to be emerging is a recognition that the complexity of the writing process and the writing context means that when we teach writing we have to balance the form, the writer, the content, and the reader." (251)

What is the role of feedback in writing?

If we are to follow a process approach to writing, which implies constant revision and reorganization of thoughts and ideas in order to get a final ideal text; it is very important for teachers to be aware of the relevant role that they play in the whole process. Therefore, teachers' responsibility is not only to mark final paper's mistakes with red ink or give a final score, but to become mediators and coaches in order to help students succeed. "Because we comment on students' work in progress, the kind of comments we traditionally made are no longer sufficient and may even be counterproductive" (Reid, 1994). Additionally, White and Arndt (1996) affirm: "In a process approach, reading students' work involves responding to the text as a reader, rather than simply as a marker" (p.124). Instead of constraining learners because they do not produce correct writing, teachers should act as facilitators, organizing writing experiences that enable the learner to develop effective composing strategies (Richards, 1990, p. 111).

A response on student's writing is potentially one of the most influential texts in a writing class (Raimes, 1995). Nevertheless, one of the issues that have always intrigued teachers and people interested in researching on writing is precisely the kind of feedback that teachers should give to their students to actually contribute to the improvement and development of writing. Perhaps we as teachers are concerned about choosing the best approach, but very often leave aside the crucial role of feedback. Different ideas have aroused from teachers and researchers in the field on how to and where to focus when responding on students' texts.

Fathman and Whalley (1994), for instance, believe that teachers can comment on form, make generalized comments about content, e.g. "good description" or "bad details". Coffin (2003) considers that students need to be explicitly told where and how their "grammar" is incorrect; it is especially for students who are in the first stages of the writing development because they are not experts, then they might not know why certain thing is problematic. It means that they need a lot of guidance and support from the teacher. According to White & Arndt's (1996) point of view: "The teacher-reader must be supportive and helpful in the kinds of comments that he makes, according to what he thinks is positive rather than focusing on the negative aspects of what the students have presented." (p.124). The teacher should not take the position of a judge, he must play the role of a collaborator, and act as an authentic reader when reading students' written production. The notion of teachers-as-collaborators is particularly valid in that it encourages a focus on the writing process rather than only on the final product. Teachers who agree with this position must work collaboratively with students during the different phases of the writing process with the aim of contributing on students' writing.
Another important issue concerning feedback is where to focus attention: whether on content or on form. People who claim to follow a process approach agree with the idea of focusing on content. However, the majority of them believe that both the content and form are relevant to the purpose. Fatman and Whalley (1994) report the compared results of correcting grammar, content, both grammar and content and neither, in an L2 composition class. According to the findings, correcting grammar brought about improvement of the grammar of rewritten drafts and at the same time led to a 44 per cent improvement on content expression of the writings. The results of this study suggest that feedback on both grammar and content, whether given alone or simultaneously, affect rewriting positively. White and Arndt (1996) suggest that the first reading should be concerned with meaning and purpose of the text. Similarly, Kern (2000) maintains: “grammar, spelling and other issues of form come into play in the editing phases, but are not emphasized up front, so as to encourage students to express themselves freely” (p. 183).

In addition to the teacher’s feedback, we have peers’ feedback which can be as beneficial as the teacher’s or maybe even more beneficial for the writing. Probably, this is one of the aspects that have not been widely considered as relevant for the writing practices; probably due to the conception that the teacher is the only one who knows and that students are just learning and might not be qualified to give appropriate feedback. According to the findings of a research done by Rollinson (2005) in regards to peers’ feedback, he asserts: “Peer response operates on a more informal level of response. This may encourage or motivate the writer or at least provide a change from the one-way interaction between the teacher and the student, where the student ends up making revisions without necessarily agreeing with or even understanding the teacher’s authoritative comments” (p.27). Based on the findings of his research, the author suggests that by giving the opportunity to revise others’ writings, students become more critical readers and at the same time it helps them to become more self-critical to self-edit and revise their own writings. As it can be seen, feedback should not be only the teacher’s responsibility but should be a collaborative activity where students contribute with each other, but at the same time where students enrich their own writing through the activity of looking at the other’s work with a critical eye.

With the avenue of Internet and other technologies that can support writing, it is possible for students to have peers in a remote part of the world, in a different school in the same city or just peers from other levels, or even from the same class at the same institution. New Technologies have extended writing environments by linking student- writers to other people with whom they can interact through writing. Writing then becomes the vehicle for communication rather than the final purpose. Pennington (2005) asserts: “All types of assignments have the potential of motivating L2 students to write and to revise in response to a real audience, for helping them to gain more input in writing, for encouraging them to experiment in their writing, and for empowering them to seek out resources for developing their ideas” (p. 294).

Thanks to technological changes, now students can write for an audience other that the teacher who is, as in this research case, native speakers of the native language. In this way, students-writers feel motivated to compose good texts in order that the interlocutor can understand them. It is a very enriching experience since often students do not consider the teacher a reader but simply the person who judges and marks their texts, as it was stated above. By means of the interaction, students can also receive feedback from their peers in a very relaxed way, and within a communicative objective. Communication in these virtual environments can change some of the dynamics of peer feedback sessions found in traditional classrooms, Pennington (2005). We will now see how technology can become a useful tool in the development of writing in EFL.

**How can technology contribute to the language classroom?**

A recurring theme in the literature on computer mediated communication is that New Technologies offer opportunities for treating teaching and learning as truly social activities where knowledge is built through interaction and dialogue rather than lectures and recitation (Brown, 2000, Hardwick, 2000, Rice, 2003). Technology goes beyond the delivery of information and lies instead in the power to create collaborative, learner-centered educational spaces (Deitinger & Huston, 2004). Thanks to technology new language teachers have new tools that can provide students with opportunities to interact with virtual communities while at the same time they can construct knowledge and exchange cultural issues with the participants. This interaction fosters communication among the individuals in the community which at the same time can enhance construction knowledge, socio-cultural understanding and language learning. For this specific research project, blogs were used as a tool to provide students a different learning writing environment that allowed them to interact, communicate and learn with people from an English speaking country.

The blog or weblog, as it is also known, is a relatively new web tool that has spread all over the world during the last years. However, it was only after 2003 that language teachers started to use it with teaching/learning purposes. The general online consensus, according to Ward (2004) is that “a weblog is a website that is updated regularly and organized chronologically according to the date, and in reverse order from most recent entry backwards. Weblogs can also provide decentralized access rights which allow(s) multiple authors.” (p. 2). However, these are only technical definitions of what a blog is; there are other considerations that deal with the use of the blogs.

From other perspectives, a weblog is a personal webspace where learners can post any kind of information they want. Ward (2004) states: “the weblog is usually motivated solely by the need of self-expression, and often communicates something about the personality, or adopted person, behind the blog, through the style of writing and choice of topics.” (p. 2). Certainly, the texts each blogger posts resemble a lot the kind of person he/she is. Blogs allow students to show their inner voices in a world where little by little humans tend to be voiceless beings who just follow mainstream trends. Blood (2000) highlights that: “blogs are nothing less than an outbreak of self-expression. Each is evidence of a staggering shift from an age of carefully controlled information provided by sanctioned authorities (and artists), to an unprecedented opportunity for individual expression on a worldwide scale” (P. 7).

For the language teacher the weblog is a timely arrival tool which can fulfill any of the needs identified for the teaching of writing. It provides a genuine audience different from the teacher, who in most of the cases does not act as a reader but simply as a judge. It is authentically communicative, since the students are using the language to actually construct meaning and to communicate something. It is process driven because the writer has the chance to edit and correct anything at any point, since the technical features of the tool allows bloggers to edit or rewrite the whole version of the same, Ward (2004). Additionally, it gives the opportunity for peer review and feedback, it can be given by peers in a different context or even by peers from the same class.

There are some studies that have shown the advantages of using weblogs to enhance students' writing development. Ward (2004) carried out a short term study with forty non-native English speaker students with an intermediate language level. The study was developed in order to see how weblogs could benefit his composition class. The teacher chose four different tasks for students to write; he says that even though blogs are thought of spaces where little attention to form is paid, he wanted his students to advance in their writing. Therefore, he helped them in the process of writing the texts. In this case, the audience for the students was peers from the same class. His findings suggest that students enjoyed the experience a lot and they said that it had helped them to improve their English. Other students expressed that the blog was a form of self expression, something similar to a diary where they could put all the things they wanted to share with others. In general, according to the author, students were highly motivated to write. Some of them continued keeping their blogs after the course finished.
This research was conducted at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, which is a public university, specifically at the

Research setting

Type of study

This research study was based on the action research paradigm which is a methodology that combines action and research. It means that during a study the researcher is repeating the process of performing an action, reflecting on what has happened and using this information to plan the next action. The most important focus of action research is to work on concrete and practical issues of immediate concern to particular social groups or communities (Burns, 2001). O'Brien (2001) highlights that this type of research has its foundations in the writings of John Dewey, the great American educational philosopher of the 1920s and 30s, who believed that professional educators should become involved in community problem-solving. Similarly, Nunan (1998) affirms: "The [action] research is initiated by the practitioner and is derived from a real problem in the classroom which needs to be confronted" (p. 18).

Thus, action research is mainly concerned with the problems that a teacher faces in his/her classroom and how s/he can find solutions for the specific problem.

Nevertheless, the aim is not only to know the causes of such problem; it is rather a fact of improving and changing teachers’ daily practices through systematic research.

Based on this research paradigm, I proposed two questions to be dug out and answered along this empirical study:

- What insights about writing in EFL can we gain from a blog writing experience?
- How does feedback provided in the blog writing experience shape Colombian students’ writing in EFL?

In order to answer the above research questions, there were basically three different action research moments that started in April 2006 and ended in December of the same year.

- Exploratory work, Canadian and Colombian students’ interaction through personal blogs.
- Exploring Writing through the activities in a Virtual Wall
- Writing argumentative texts and debates

Research setting

This research was conducted at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, which is a public university, specifically at the
School of Sciences and Education. The mission of this School is to educate professional citizens by providing them with strategies that empower them to construct new alternatives in order to transform subjects and national collectivities. This School, founded in 1973, is specialized in programs of Education, such as: Physics, Spanish and Literature, Social studies, English, among others. They have the responsibility of forming students who in the future will be teachers, especially in Primary and Secondary school. The program I undertook this study with was "Licenciatura en Educación Básica Primaria con Enfasis en Inglés." This program consists of ten semesters. Students are required to do a pedagogical practicum in public schools from sixth semester until they finish the programme. The areas of Pedagogy and English are at the core of this program.

Participants

I carried out this study with 17 students from second semester of the above program whose ages ranged between 17 and 23 years old. Most of the students were studying because they wanted to become teachers of English in the future; however, there were some who did not, some of them are in the program because they could not study engineering, business administration or something different. For some others, the reason to study this program was only to learn English in order to be able to travel abroad and have a better quality of life. Independently of what their purpose to learn English was, most of them were motivated to learn the language. Although I worked all of the pedagogical activities with the whole group, I selected only eight participants to collect data from and to analyze all their process. All of the participants signed a consent letter in which they accepted to participate in this action-research project, as well as to allow me to collect and analyze their written productions (See annex 1).

Instruments for data collection

With the purpose of collecting data that could answer my research questions I used interviews, students' artifacts (writing drafts) and students' blogs.

a. Interview

In action research, interviews are used in order to understand the perspectives of students or teachers. The interview is a good way of finding out what the situation looks like from other's point of view, Elliot (1993). I applied a semi-structured interview almost at the end of this action-research process (see annex 2).

b. Students' artifacts (writing drafts)

From Hubbard and Miller’s (1999) point of view, students’ artifacts is one of the richest sources of data for teachers-researchers as “it is tangible evidence of what kids [learners] are able to do and of the range of responses kids [learners] make to different learning task” (p. 102). Although I was not working with children, this perception was very important for me since as the authors argue, it was tangible evidence of my students’ actual writing development. I kept the original and copies of the drafts students produced in the process of writing each text.

c. Students’ blogs

The blog was the main data collection instrument I had since it is the record of all that the students wrote as well as of the interaction with their Canadian peers and the kind of feedback they received from them. This is another kind of artifact since it is the last step of the writing process which was the publication of students’ texts in the blogs. This was a very rich source of data to analyze and also to find particular issues that were later deepened in the personal interviews. (See annex 3).

Data analysis and findings

As with all data, analysis and interpretation are required to bring order and understanding to the lots of information that are gathered during the research process. This requires creativity, discipline and a systematic approach. The analysis for the present research study is based on the grounded approach. This approach is an inductive form of qualitative research where data collection and analysis are conducted together. Constant comparison and theoretical sampling are used to support the systematic discovery of theory from data (Graham and Taylor, 2005).

After the long journey of systematic analysis, I came out with three main categories that could answer the two research questions:

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<td>2. How does feedback provided in the blog writing experience shape Colombian students’ writing in EFL?</td>
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The first research question of this study proposes to search for insights about writing in EFL. The dictionary defines insights as follows: “it is a clear understanding of something, or part of something, specially a complicated situation or idea. It is also the ability to understand what people or situations look like.” Other synonyms for this word are: knowledge, understanding, comprehension and vision. The second question intends to find the role that feedback played in the experience of writing with blogs. Therefore, I analyzed feedback from two different viewpoints: feedback from Canadian peers and from the teacher. We will try to gain some understanding and knowledge about writing and the role of feedback from this experience with blogs. This research focuses only on the outcomes of the Colombian students as the data was collected from them. I will start with the analysis of the first category named Community of Writers.

1. Community of Writers

The word community comes from the Latin words “communicate” and “common”, which makes it appropriate for groups of people who share experience and interests and who communicate amongst themselves to share and learn about their interests (Mercer, 2003). Thus, a community is a group of people who are united by common purposes and who engage in joint activity; such joint activity leads to the idea that there is a common practice amongst the members which allows them to engage and build relationships and interactions that enable the members to learn together.

The first aspect that characterized the writing community in the context of the present research was the shared learning practice that both groups had. On the one hand, both groups were foreign language learners (Colombian students were English learners and Canadian students were Spanish learners) enrolled in the virtual forum with the aim of practicing the language by using the
language to communicate and interact with the others through the use of blogs. On the other hand, the participants also had similar interests: regarding music, arts, hobbies, etc., which allowed some of them to build strong relationships that resulted in the consolidation of a community. In addition to sharing the same practice and similar interests, members of the community also agreed to write in the target language in order to practice and learn about it, as well as to learn about the target culture (For the purpose of this research the data samples were taken only from Colombian students' blogs, therefore the pieces are in English). The common practice empowered students to use the target language to build learning relationships mainly based on topics of culture and personal issues.

The following quotes taken from students' personal blogs illustrate the exchange of a pair of students from Colombia and Canada based on their passions and interests.

**D.R:**

**MY PASSION**

In general, Art (painting, drawing, music) allows people to show feelings about something or someone. I like art a lot. I'm going to show something about my passion: "Drawing". Since I was four years old I like drawing, I learned by myself. I don't know, but when I stay in front of the table I begin to imagine other world: in this world there aren't limitations, not rules, not pressure, only peace, freedom and imagination. I feel very well, this is the way that I can express my feelings, also I relax from everything. My favourite are Japanese drawings. They are the best in the world. They have big beautiful eyes, long hair and perfect bodies. Here are some of my drawings that I want to share with you. What about your passion?

**Posted at May 15/2006 04:06PM:**

**DCSED:** I can't draw, but I get a similar feeling when I read, sing or dance. I like to read suspense novels because you never want to put them down. I like to sing and dance because it is relaxing and fun. My favourite pastimes are at the cottage with my cousins. I used to be on a synchrony swimming team, diving team, a swimming team and a curling team. In middle school I used to play volleyball and soccer. I am on many committees in school. I am on Graduation Council, the Winter Formal committee, and many others. I work at the great canadian bagel.

What places you have visited? I have been very lucky to travel to many places in the world. I have been all across Canada except for Newfoundland and the territories. I have also been to New York, New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont. I have been to Florida, the islands of Caymen, Jamaica, Nassau in the Bahamas, Mexico, St.Thomas, the Dominican Republic, and some other places as well.

My favorite sport to watch is hockey. It is a world-wide sport with many diverse leagues such as the OHL and the NHL. My favourite hockey league to watch is at the High School level. My favourite player is my boyfriend Jordan Rice. He is an excellent goalie. I also love to watch my sister Breanna play hockey. Hockey is played on ice, but you also can play it outside.

One team has a minimum of 15 players and 2 referees. My favorite NHL hockey teams is the Calgary Flames. Hockey is also an Olympic sport! Team Canada recieved a gold medal for the girls this year. Hockey is one of the most watched sports in Canada and is a favourite past time for many families. You must use the protective gear of the hockey and use a small stick to move the puck around the ice.

(Student D: Blog 1/11/05/06)

In the previous extracts the Colombian student writes about his passion and then he closes his text with a direct question for the reader (Canadian peer) as a way to engage him/her in the text and provoke an answer in order to build communication and interest. The reply from the Canadian peer makes it evident that the students established a kind of communication around topics of their particular interests; and at the same time, it makes evident that the Colombian student had it clear that he was writing for a real reader or audience, which is precisely the second feature that characterizes the community.

The Colombian student wrote a specific question for the audience/reader in this case the Canadian peer. This kind of communication required Colombian students to write to address a specific audience that would react as an authentic reader. Students found their writing meaningful and useful as they wrote for genuine purposes not just as a teacher's requirement. In the interview one of the participants highlighted the impact of the blog writing experience in the task of writing in English as a foreign language. She also pointed out the significant fact of composing with the purpose of making herself understood with the other participants (audience) in the group:

"E: pues yo creo que nos ayuda bastante [the experience of blog writing] a que podamos interacciones con personas de otros paises con el fin de intercambiar ideas, e igualmente hacemos el feedback que de una u otra manera nos ayuda a... para nuestra formación como docentes de inglés. También creo que... pues... durante estos dos semestres que he tenido la oportunidad de trabajar con los blogs me ha ayudado a mejorar la escritura. Pues más que todo la adquisición de palabras desconocidas, ya que con esto uno puede... en el momento en que se está haciendo un escrito usted tiene que... se ve en la necesidad de buscar las palabras para poder realizar el escrito y así hacerse entender con la otra persona." (Student E: Interview 5; 16/11/06, lines: 3-12)

In the context of the forum, language was used as a means to communicate something to someone (audience) who belonged to the same community and who might be interested in reading the content of the blog entries and who would react based on the meaning that he/she (re)constructed from the text. In this regards Scarcella and Oxford (1992) mention that using writing purposefully to convey authentic messages to real audiences facilitates writing development.

The third feature that characterized the community of writers was the feedback that the members in the group had through the interactions. One way to make it evident that a group of people feel part of a community is the joint tacit/explicit commitment members have to help the others to progress in their learning. In the community that we are looking at, community of writers, there were some cases in which Canadian students gave direct feedback to the Colombians in terms of the use of the language. This excerpt illustrates the interaction of a Colombian and a Canadian student around a topic of culture. I will concentrate principally in the reply that the Colombian student received from her Canadian peer. It is interesting to see the way the reader - interlocutor (Canadian girl) engages with the text and understands the content of it. Then, she first made a comment on the content of the posting which shows that she grasped out some knowledge from the blog entry and finally she makes a very gentle comment on the formal aspects of the language.

**J.R:**

The Gold Museum was founded by the republic Bank in 1939, 65 years ago in order to help the Colombians to preserve the archeological patrimony that belongs to everybody. This is the world's most important collection of this kind (gold). It contains...
How does current music affect young people's behaviour?

M.P: posted at Oct 03/2006 08:02PM:
Music is culture, is art. I love the feelings you can get when you are listening to music, or on the other hand, the kind of music you want to listen depending on your mood.

I agree with Edward, the childhood has to be watched by its parents. Not all the music is good, even though, in this moment there are more bad music than good music, the comercial world just try to sell, no matter what the human being think what he wants be, and his growing as a being of cultural man.

In fact, we have to be consciose, and try to not help that comercial world, looking for another kind of music, which base doesn't be sex or boys, or rhythms without meaning. We should look for music that believe in man and his differents cultures around the world. On that way maybe children of today and tomorrow can be more sensibile. The music must be a good expression of the art... is a communication form, the music espress each life style... And "tell me what do you listen and i will tell you who you are" simple... I think that people that always listen reggaeton... only thinks on sex... but in their brains there isn't something of sencibility and art...like poetry... althoug some songs of reggaeton have a message, and a good rhythm... in the end we are Latinamericans and this rhythm is latin (although it has some influences from another continents ) but I think that young people should listen constructive music.

Posted at Sep 29/2006 07:58PM:
J.P: also I think that the music is a form to read the world, see the violence and listen to the heart then is the music bad

Posted at Sep 29/2006 07:46PM:
E.A: I think that current music is a problem for peple, because almost all current music bring sublimal massages, as for example REGGAETON MUSISIC, more exactly MICAELA AND QUEMONA, IT say so: Micaela enferma, enferma de amor...
But reggaeton is not the only music genre that gives a wrong behavior impression. Excessive sexuality in popular music in divas like Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson, Paris Hilton or Christina Aguilera give a new conception of feminity in girls, but in a wrong way. Today’s music shows a very wrong image to our children’s behavior and we need to educate them to listen to it and understand their inner message; don’t matter if it is good or wrong.

The second factor related to freedom was self-expression. It was one of the major principles that underlined this research project. When students are allowed to choose the topics they write about, they elaborate their ideas, clarify their thoughts, and revise their texts. (p. 121). The following extracts from the interview exemplify students' opinions about the freedom to choose what to write:

"M.P: [the blogs] Es algo como... la mejor forma de aprender a escribir, no porque toque sino porque nos gusta, porque podemos expresarnos, podemos hacer las cosas que nos gustan, podemos por ejemplo hablar sobre nuestros cantantes, sobre las cosas... sobre el arte, sobre el cine, sobre todas aquellas cosas que nos llaman la atención... me diverto muchisimo haciéndolo. Creo que mis compañeros también y cuando tienen el tiempo y lo saben hacer lo hacen muy bien y también les gusta hacerlo. Primero había desarrollado en nosotros muchas cosas que antes no teníamos... Por ejemplo el hecho de tener una mejor escritura. Mi writing ha mejorado muchísimo desde el semestre pasado." (M.P. Interview 3; 10/11/06, lines: 3-12)

"G.E:...por ejemplo yo soy encarnizada con los poemas... a mi me fascinan y yo busco en español, en francés, en inglés... Entonces eso es fácil porque es lo que a mí me inspira. Entonces cuando a mi algo me inspira, yo escribo y me riego en prosa y en todo... yo soy feliz en ese blog. Todo está relacionado conmigo... yo estoy contenta porque digo: por fin voy a darme a conocer! Y lo mejor es que no voy a imponer nada... es decir que como soy gótica me voy a vestir así... no impongo mi imagen sino que... en el blog me dan la libertad para quien quiera conocer mi imagen." (G.E: Interview 6: 16/11/2006, Lines: 34-41)

"P:...lo del foro porque uno opina sobre temáticas que suceden en la actualidad, las polémicas y todo eso. Lo individual es muy chévere porque uno puede escribir sobre lo que le gusta, lo que no le gusta, lo que uno sabe de la vida y de todo. También ideas sobre las situaciones que ocurren." (P: Interview 2, 8/11/06, lines: 66-76)

The second factor related to freedom was self-expression. It was one of the major principles that underlined this research project along the three different research phases. As new spaces were created the range of topics that students chose was much richer, therefore there were more alternatives for them to express what they wanted and to portray themselves from different perspectives. Blogs empowered individuals to use their voice freely in order to express whatever was important to them, to write things that they considered worth exploring. I show and analyze two examples of two different participants in the present research in order to put together some blog entries written at different moments of the pedagogical intervention. I selected these two students because the content and style of their writings were very different, so it allowed me to illustrate how fragments pieced together over time (Blood, 2000) can give us an intimate view of the ideologies, beliefs, vision of the world and personalities of the two students behind the blogs.

Example 1: Participant C

"C: today, I am going to tell you about the thing I most like doing. I love all the things related to the plastic arts. I enjoy drawing, painting and learn techniques to create beautiful things. I take a seminar about glass. It's very interesting because we are learning how to cut glass in different forms create a concept and put it in a craftsmen. Also, we are learning about making sculptures by using ovens and others machines that trough heat transform the original structure of glass. Additionally, we are using acids to engrave on pieces of glass. I think art is one of the ways trough wich people can explore themselves and go out from the routine. As an artist you can

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open that way to people and make them to think about themselves, and obo, and about other people and their problems. However, there are some things I enjoy doing in my free time, like dancing, listening to music, traveling... but, my real passion are art, especially." (Student C: blog 4, 15/05/06)

"C: The morning after pill is creating controversy. It is being selling in drugstores without a medical prescription. Some people think and say: "the pill is not abortive", and their opinion and arguments are respectable. However, I have to say: "I don't agree with the morning pill". I've found some information which says pill is really abortive, because it doesn't let the implantation of the pheto in the womb.

If you are going to have an active sexual life, I think you should settle down with a person, and if you don't want to get pregnant, look for information and use an anticonceptive method, go to the doctor... I just have to say it's better than after. Think about the moral side, nobody's owner of other's life". (Student C, debate blog 1, 05/09/06)

"C: Here there is one of my works when I was in a glass seminar the last semester. It's like a picture to put in a wall. I tried to represent many things in that work for example, in first place you can see a part of a face, especially an eye, that for me means how the humanity can see and show feelings, in this case about the creation. If you see closer you can find the story of creation as the bible says. In the hair is every single day of the creation. The word used as a poetic instrument. The color plays a very important role in the interpretation because every single color is present around us, in the nature, even in us. If you see the picture when you get far, maybe you can see or create in your mind a landscape, just using color, the basic colors, at least the colors I consider are always present, maybe I'm wrong. Furthermore, every color has variations that represent nature diversity, variety even in the human being, how different we can be, and how beautiful we can be together if we remember our roots."

(Student C: Blog 3, 11/10/06)

The student overtly writes about her passion for art as she describes her picture in depth and gives her personal interpretation about what art means to her. She understands art as a way for people to know themselves and to help others think and reflect about themselves and others' problems. In addition to those different explicit passions and visions of art, there are some implicit personal thoughts and ideas about religion and love, just to mention two. She also subtly refers to the concept of world creation and the Bible when she interprets her own picture and when she gives her opinion on the morning after pill debate.

Next I present some blog entries from a second participant written at different moments of the project:

Example 2: Participant G

G: I love drawing because when I was a little girl, I loved watching Sailor Moon (this was my first manga program) so, I started like it (this kind of programs) so my dream is when graduate, I would like to travel to Japan and create my manga story, so I WOULD like to be a real otaku, maybe I will marry with a japanese man.

Otaku it is known outside Japan as a fanatic with taste marked enough by animates or Manga. In its country of origin, the meaning is closest to the definition of friky, a person who goes back to himself and lives alone because he enjoys, like the computers, a singer, automobiles or models on scale. This Japanese term has passed to the West with the meaning of "Manga fan". In Japan the term is generally contemptuous, although recently, some Japanese use it with pride. In the West it can have as much negative connotations as positive

*Posted at Oct 06/2006 06:49PM:
The teacher also became an expert member of the community who facilitated the interaction between the groups and helped Colombian Canadian groups consolidated a community in which they shared similar learning interests. Now, I want to analyze how I, as the first category discussed in this analysis was community of writers. It illustrated how the people from the Colombian and Canadian groups focused, the teacher is viewed as an expert member of the classroom community whose role is primarily facilitative (Mitchell, 1996). It helps in the improvement and development of the students' writing by contributing in the scaffolding of such process. Within this focus, the teacher is viewed as an expert member of the classroom community whose role is primarily facilitative (Mitchell, 1996). It is assumed that scaffolding occurs in the presence of an identifiable and stable expert participant who helps the others to reach a step further from their actual thinking process, what Vygotsky (1996) calls zone of proximal development (ZPD). This concept which derives from cognitive psychology and L1 research, states that in social interaction a knowledgeable participant can create supportive conditions in which the novice can participate and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence" (Greenfield, 1984; Bruner & Rose, 1976 cited in: Donato, R. 1990)

As mentioned above in the theoretical discussion, writing is a process that requires a lot of guidance from others, especially from the teacher. The teacher becomes a coach or mentor in the process, as he/she is a "more knowledgeable" person in the field, he can help in the improvement and development of the students' writing by contributing in the scaffolding of such process. Within this focus, the teacher is viewed as an expert member of the classroom community whose role is primarily facilitative (Mitchell, 1996). It is assumed that scaffolding occurs in the presence of an identifiable and stable expert participant who helps the others to reach a step further from their actual thinking process, what Vygotsky (1996) calls zone of proximal development (ZPD). This concept which derives from cognitive psychology and L1 research, states that in social interaction a knowledgeable participant can create supportive conditions in which the novice can participate and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence" (Greenfield, 1984; Bruner & Rose, 1976 cited in: Donato, R. 1990)

The first category discussed in this analysis was community of writers. It illustrated how the people from the Colombian and Canadian groups consolidated a community in which they shared similar learning interests. Now, I want to analyze how I, as the teacher also became an expert member of the community who facilitated the interaction between the groups and helped Colombian
On the one hand, I helped students identify and solve their problems in writing by offering them clear information about where their problems were as well as helping them solve such difficulties. Thus, my role as a teacher was altered from the function of a judge to taking on a coaching role during the writing process. In this regard Vygotsky (1996) claims that knowledge within a discipline is important, but solving problems that encourage students to go beyond their current skill and knowledge level is critical to effective instruction. I want to illustrate these ideas by showing how through the feedback the students and I could establish a kind of interaction that finally helped students to scaffold in the process of writing. I present a sample of the process that a group of students went through to have the final product of a text about Vallenato music (a Colombian music genre).

First writing draft, taken from group: Two and a Half Men 19/10/06

<table>
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<th>History</th>
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<td>Vallenato was born in the Atlantic coast. Since its beginnings, this kind of music is has been one of the most important tradition in the Colombian culture and a product to export to another countries. In the vallenato rythms, you can find different styles like “paseo”, “pulla”, “son”, etc. actually we can listening “the Nueva Ola” and the most representative singers are: Cebollón, Dangond, K. Morales, and we can see a traditional singers that has unit to this genre like: Villazón, Zuñiet, “Los Diablitos” and others. The traditional, vallenato sound is produced with Acordeon, Caja and Guacharaca. The new sounds introduce key boards, bass, guitars and other instrumentsand effects. About the festivals the vallenato has one special festival celebrated each year in April. In this festival is selected the best interpreter, song, composer, young revelation.</td>
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Traditionally in every party the people listening and dancing vallenato specially in the coast caribbean zone. In the new population, the vallenato is a little reject new rhythms like reggaeton, bachata are invaded the colombian culture and let the vallenato like an old and bored sound. We invited you to listen and know about this rhythm because is part of us. and it is so funny. About places, in each city of Colombia we can find a “Parranda” places, here we can drink beers or better drink Ron, listening good music and dance, in Bogotá, the most famous places are “La Trampa”, “Aguadepanelas”, “Maramaos”. go and enjoy it.

Teacher’s feedback and recommendations

Organization

1. Divide your writing in paragraphs because there is no clear division of the information.
2. Differentiate the introduction from the rest of text.
3. There are some ideas that are not developed in the text, they are just mentioned.
4. Write a paragraph for conclusion.
5. In the last part you talk about places but you should develop this aspect more extensively in a different paragraph.

Content

1. You have included relevant information that might be important about this rhythm but sometimes you do not expand the themes. For example, you should mention some places from the coast to help the reader to have an idea of the places you refer to.
2. You also mention some typical rhythms (son, paseo, puya) but you do not specify anything about them. Remember that you are writing for readers who perhaps do not know much about this music.
3. On the other hand, you refer to the Festival Vallenato and even though you try to explain the information sounds rather unclear to me. Please reorganize it.
4. Finally, you can create one paragraph with the places you recommend in Bogotá.

Second writing draft, taken from group: Two and a Half Men 23/10/06
Vallenato music

Vallenato in colombia was born in the Atlantic coast. Since its beginnings, this kind of music has been one of the most important traditions on the Colombian culture and a product to export to another countries.

In colombia the vallenato music is present in special places for example the Caribbean zone that have to Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Guajira and Cartagena. These cities represent the vallenato culture. But besides of these places the vallenato is listened in all the country.

In the vallenato music you can different rythms like paseo, “pulla” and “son”. In the “pulla” style the accordion and the guacharaca are the principal instruments. In songs of this type sometimes the singers don’t sing, just play the instruments. This is characterized for a fast interpretation and the song’s duration is between five and nine minutes.

“The paseo”, in this rythm the songs are interpreted slowly and in all the songs there are some lyrics. This style is a very traditional because the lyrics talk about life’s stories, places and love stories. Finally, the son style is accompanied with other instruments like “maracas”, “clave” etc. this sound has influence of Cuban rythms the song is slow but in some moments changes and get more “tropical.”

Nowadays, the called “Hueva Ola” (new style) is taken a very important position in the vallenato music. This kind of music is the combination of different styles and instruments, those are the “cumbia”, “pop” and rock music. About the instruments, someone like the electric guitars, keyboart and bass guitars are included in this new purpose. It is necessary explain that in this new kind of vallenato music the new instruments don’t replace the classic instruments as the “accordion”, “caja” and the “guacharaca”.

Something important is the impact of vallenato music in the actual people the vallenato is a little rejected because new Central American rythms as “reggaeton” and “bosta” are invading the Colombian culture and let the vallenato outside.

About the festivals, the vallenato has one special festival celebrated each year in April in a place called Valledupar. In that festival is selected the best interpreter, the best song, the best composer and the young revelation.

But in Bogota there are some good places for the party too, for example: “La Trampa” (the trap), “aguadepanelas” and “Maramares”. In those places, you can drink a lot of different national and international drinks, you can dance all the night some rythms of the tropical music (salsa, merengue) and obviously vallenato too.

Those places are characterized for a good environment, big space to dance and a tradition that has been built in ten years, approximtity.

We invite you to listen and know about this rhythm because is part of us ad is very cool.

Teacher’s Comments:

1. Your writing improved a lot from the first writing to this one.
2. The organization is much better and clear.
3. The division by paragraphs gives a sense of clear organization and development of the ideas.
4. Now you have more relevant information for the reader to understand.
5. Correct the few mistakes and post it in your group in the VIRTUAL WALL of the forum.

J Good luck

Last version of the text posted in the group blog (virtual wall) taken from group:

Two and a Half Men 08/11/06

"Vallenato" in Colombia was born in the Atlantic coast. Since its beginnings, this kind of music has been one of the most important traditions on the Colombian culture and a product to export to other countries.

In Colombia, the vallenato music is present in special places. For example, the Caribbean zone has to Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Guajira and Cartagena. These cities represent the vallenato culture. But besides of these places the vallenato is listened to in all over the country.

This is the colombian coast This is a very popular hat called “sombrero vueltiao”

In the vallenato, you can find different rythms like "paseo", “pulla” and “son”. In the "pulla" style the “Acordeon” and the “Guacharaca” are the principal instruments. In songs of this type sometimes the singers don’t sing, just play the instruments. This is characterized for a fast interpretation and the song’s duration is between five and nine minutes.
The "paseo", in this rhythm the songs are interpreted slowly and in all the song there are some lyrics. This style is very traditional and common because the lyrics talk to us about life's stories, places and love stories. Finally, the "son" style is accompanied with other instruments like "Maracas", "Clave", etc. This sound has influence of Cuban rhythms. The song is slow but in some moments it changes and gets more "Tropical".

Nowadays, the called "Nueva Ola" (a new style) is taking a very important position in the vallenato music. This kind of music is the combination of different styles and instruments, those are the "cumbia" (other kind of musical genre), pop and rock music. About the instruments, some of them like the electric guitars, keyboards and bass guitars are included in this new purpose. It is necessary to explain that in this new kind of vallenato music the new instruments don't replace the classic instruments as the "Acordeón", "Caja" and "Guacharaca".

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This learning environment mediated by technology place me, the teacher, in the role of a guide or facilitator, who intervened only as necessary (Peters, 1996). The students and I established a kind of interaction within the community not focused on discussion of common topics as they did with the Canadian peers or within the group, but I became a member in the sense that I was contributing to the improvement of the texts. My interventions helped students identify and find solutions to their writing weaknesses whenever it was necessary as there was a context for student and expert interaction (me the teacher) who contributed to scaffolding students in their writing, it represented a joint activity to contribute to the students' writing development.

The next excerpts from the interviews exemplify the way students perceived my role in the three different cycles of the research process and the pedagogical intervention:

G: "Cuando la profe me lo pasó (feedback)... o sea primero me aterré porque es que punto por punto, o sea todo, o sea media página de comentarios más que lo que yo había escrito de lo que yo le pasé de todos mis errores... me gusta que usted me dice: 'niña usted está fallando en esto... niña a usted le falta esto, a usted le sobra esto... a mí me gusta que me hagan esa retroalimentación porque así u no realmente aprende. Otros profesores dan una nota y uno como qué... uy y aquí qué pasó si yo me esforzó tanto... pero si le muestran a uno dándole no está como dice si... verdad no me había dado cuenta..." (G.E: Interview 6, 16/11/06, lines: 70-80)

J: "...así como usted lo hace en el feedback de ahora que no nos ayuda a re-escribir todo como el semestre pasado, sino que nos dice qué bueno, buena organización esto ta ta ta, por qué no mejora esto... le da a uno unas sugerencias. Me parece muy bueno porque eso lo ayuda a uno para ver uy! claro... aquí fallé por esto, o aquí no hice o sí hice, sí tiene toda la razón. Entonces como que uno reflexiona sobre lo que uno hizo y puede avanzar en el proceso... Entonces uno ahi ya se va dando cuenta que cada vez va avanzando más en el proceso de escritura" (J: Interview 8, 22/11/06, lines: 91-103)

On the other hand, the interaction that Colombian students had with the Canadians, especially in the first research cycle in which the communication was more constant, generated a kind of feedback that was another way to mentor and stimulate students to write in the foreign language. The feedback that Canadian peers provided in this context was rewarding as Colombian students felt that they were writing something comprehensible to an audience that was not the teacher but to native speakers of English. This fact made the task of writing more challenging and at the same time motivating as students always had to use language devices much beyond their writing developmental level. Being successfully understood by the members of the community gave students a sense of improvement and at the same time self confidence as learners of the English language. The fact of receiving a reply on what they had written was a kind of feedback as it meant that their texts were comprehensible. The next extracts from the interviews reveal students' positions towards these aspects:

"D:...bueno... y... el feedback que ellos nos brindan es muy bueno, bueno porque el hecho de que ellos nos escriban no más... nos estén respondiendo a lo que nosotros les enviamos entonces quiere decir que estoy escribiendo de una forma entendible, que me hice entender. Y sé ellos no nos van a subrayar no esto es así, pero digamos no se... x oración ya la puedo usar de esta forma... y uno bueno... el feedback que ellos le brindan no se ya tan directo sino está como implícito."

(Student D: Interview 7, 14/11/06, lines: 164-171)

"J: Yo creo que los blogs son una manera diferente de aprender inglés, ya que ayuda a... ya con el solo hecho de interactuar con la otra persona y que otra persona se lo va a leer allá y le va a decir uy es bien su trabajo, o está bien siga progresando. Es muy interesante eso." (Student J: Interview 8, 22/11/06, lines: 8-12)
However, students not only received this indirect feedback, some of them also received explicit feedback through the interactions with the Canadian peers. The next snippets taken from a Colombian student's blog clearly explains the mentoring offered by a Canadian peer; the majority of the interactions between the two students generally contained some kind of comment on the text and use of the language in general.

"[Posted at May 23/2006 06:16PM:]"  
[AFSED]:  
Hi! I like your new pictures! The I've never heard of the gocharaca but it looks cool.: D Your english is getting better and better! The only thing I noticed was that the tenses of some of your words were a bit off but I could understand what you were saying so its not too bad. Well, I hope you have a good week!  

Posted at May 02/2006 02:57PM:  
AFSED:  
That looks like it must have been a funny play. Wow, it must be some play that costs $10 000 to get in! Have you ever been to one of them? You should probably say play instead of tale because a play is performed in theatres and a tale is like a story in a book or that someone told you. (Student E: Blog, 02/05/06)

Conclusions

After the analysis of the data gathered along this research path, I can say that I gained some knowledge on writing and feedback. One of the most important insights in regards to writing in EFL is the need for the creation of a community of people who share similar interests and writing objectives, and who are engaged in constant interaction and communication. Interaction with the members is precisely the departure point for writing as the exchanges with the members create the need and desire for students to write and take part on the common practices and interests of the other members. As pointed out by the followers of Vygotsky's principles, learning always if/when happens in community, any individual can reach higher developmental stages if at least he/she is surrounded by a group of people who interact with and at the same time who help him/her to scaffold in his/her learning process. Another fundamental understanding on writing in EFL is the creation of writing environments that encourage and motivate students to write. Blogs are powerful tools that can act as alternative writing environments in which technology is the principal mediator to facilitate the design of the spaces. The innovative environment produced an interest in writing and consequently students engaged in the practice of writing in EFL regularly. Writing in this kind of technology mediated environments allows students to freely express and say what the world is for them, based on their own thoughts and experiences of living in it.

The role of feedback provided by Canadian peers and by the teacher was to help students to create better quality texts along the process. The amount and quality of writing that students produced during the implementation of the pedagogical intervention of this study revealed that the feedback played a scaffolding role as it was one of the factors that helped students to move from writing simple texts, in the first research cycle, to more complex and longer ones in the last cycles. The teacher became part of the writing community acting as a "more knowledgeable person" in the group to help students in the production of texts that were beyond their actual writing development. The interaction with the Canadian members of the community was one of the most powerful resources that motivated students to write good quality texts because their responses to and engagement with the students' texts gave them confidence as writers and at the same time represented a challenge.

References


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Annex 1: Consent Form Format

Estudiantes

Segundo semestre
Licenciatura en Educación Básica con Enfoque en Inglés
Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas

Estimados estudiantes:

Actualmente estoy cursando tercer semestre de la maestría que ofrece la Universidad Distrital, Linguística aplicada a la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. Para optar al título de Magíster estoy desarrollando una investigación en el desarrollo de la escritura en lengua extranjera a través de la interacción escrita en weblogs con estudiantes canadienses.

La investigación tiene como propósito observar y analizar en detalle el proceso de desarrollo de la escritura a través de una experiencia que les proporciona datos reales para escribir y una audiencia diferente al profesor que está interesado en leer sus escritos. Con este proyecto no sólo tengo la oportunidad de desarrollar su escritura, también podrán interactuar con alumnos de un país de habla inglesa y así enriquecer su conocimiento cultural y competencia lingüística. De la misma manera, tendrán la oportunidad de acceder al aprendizaje y uso de medios digitales como herramienta de apoyo en su escritura. Este último aspecto es de absoluta importancia para los docentes quienes cada día estamos a la vanguardia del desarrollo de nuevas estrategias en el mundo en constante cambio. Así, ser alentando, en un sentido más amplio es la capacidad de (re)construir y exacerbar significado del mundo a través de la lectura y la escritura, como también la capacidad de conocer y hacer uso de las tecnologías en dichos procesos.

Los datos para dicha investigación serán recolectados a partir de la fecha y hasta el final del tercer semestre académico. Para poder participar, se harán entrevistas, grabaciones, conferencias y se archivarán cada uno de sus escritos publicados en sus weblogs y de su portal personal. Esta información será recolectada por mí, Luz María Quiñónez, docente investigadora con el objetivo de ser analizadas posteriormente.

Las personas que deseen participar lo harán bajo las siguientes condiciones: se asegura total anónimo de su identidad. También se aceptan nombres ficticios. Si usted quiere escoger su nombre lo puede escribir en el espacio provisto en el formulario. La información recolectada será anónima con absoluta confidencialidad. Usted tendrá la oportunidad de revisar sus declaraciones antes de ser hechas públicas para evitar posibles interpretaciones erradas. Las entrevistas, por ejemplo, se revisarán para su correcta interpretación, especialmente en aquellos casos en que sus comentarios no sean muy claros para las entrevistadoras.

Agradezco su participación en este proyecto. Para hacer formal su aceptación debe firmar la presente carta y devolvérsela o enviarla a la dirección que se propone. Si tiene alguna duda al respecto puede hacerlo directamente a mi

Cordialmente,
Luz María Quiñónez
Doctora Investigadora

Nombre: 
Correo electrónico: 

Annex 2: Semi-structure interview

The purpose of this interview is to talk about the experience that you had had on writing in blogs during these two semesters. I want to explore all your opinions about the things related to this activity. There are basically five questions that you can read in advance, and then we can have an informal talk to know your answers.

1. What is your opinion about the use of blogs as a pedagogical tool in the English class?
2. You have received two kinds of feedback during this process. Last semester I used to help you a lot to rewrite your texts, so what did you do to underline where the problem was and then to suggest you how to change it by reorganizing and rewriting your ideas. This semester things have changed. Now, we have adopted some codes to identify problems related to form. So I underline and assign a code and you are in charge of finding out what the problem is and also you correct it. Additionally, there are some descriptive comments in terms of organization and content. I would like to know your opinion about these two kinds of feedback.
3. Last semester you only had one blog. This semester you have two other spaces, the virtual wall where you write in group, and the dialogue. However, you still have your personal blog that is even more personal. What do you think about those three spaces that you have to write?
4. You have had some interaction with a group of Canadian students. During this interaction you have received some feedback from them. A feedback that is not necessarily similar to your teacher's. Sometimes they are just positive comments, a question, or an appraisal that you like. I would like to know what is your opinion about your English that Canadian students had given you?
5. Finally, based on all the things you have done throughout this time, what linguistic aspects related to the English based on the feedback Canadian students have given you?
If you have any different comments you can add them.
Blogging: A way to foster EFL writing. Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, 10 (1), 7–49. Writing is one of four language skills students must have. Writing skills are often accepted as the last competency that will be obtained in producing language (Hamp, 2006; Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal, 2016). According to (Ngoh, 2002) writing is a good opportunity for students to improve their skills individually. Development of Writing Exposition Text Materials Based-PBL. Conference Paper.