Developing Writing through Blogs and Peer Feedback

[Desarrollo de la escritura a través de blogs y realimentación entre pares]

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Abstract

Results are presented from a study conducted online with a population of students of an English teacher education program. The study inquired into the role that peer feedback played in the development or maintenance of coherence in non-fictional narrative blog writing. Participant students produced narrative blog entries and peer feedback, which were double-assessed to establish the possible relationship between feedback and coherence. Learner's logs were also kept to obtain second-order data. Findings suggest that peer-feedback and blogging can act as boosting factors to enhance or maintain levels of coherence in text, through the shaping of students' cognition and affection. The potential is revealed of student-centered strategies to enhance learning and foster autonomy through a higher degree of student's control over learning. In addition, it is proposed that new language assessment paradigms be applied in the classroom, acknowledging students as a valid and reliable source of assessment information.

Keywords: peer feedback, coherence, writing, information technology, teacher education

Resumen

En este artículo se presentan los hallazgos de un estudio realizado en línea con una población de estudiantes de licenciatura en inglés. El estudio propone indagar el rol ejercido por la retroalimentación entre pares para desarrollar o mantener la coherencia en la escritura de blogs narrativos y sin ficción. Los participantes recibieron formación en la creación y mantenimiento de un blog, en el intercambio de retroalimentación y en el desarrollo de coherencia textual. También produjeron entradas narrativas de blog e intercambiaron comentarios de retroalimentación, todo lo cual fue evaluado dos veces para establecer la posible relación entre la retroalimentación y la coherencia textual. Se crearon y recolectaron diarios de aprendizaje con el fin de obtener datos de segundo orden de los estudiantes. Todos los datos se recolectaron a través del computador o por internet y fueron analizados desde el enfoque de la teoría fundada. Los hallazgos sugieren que la retroalimentación entre pares y los blogs pueden actuar como factores potenciadores en el mejoramiento o mantenimiento de la coherencia en un texto escrito, a través de la intervención de los dominios cognitivo y afectivo del estudiante. Los resultados revelan el potencial de las estrategias centradas en el estudiante para mejorar el aprendizaje y para promover la autonomía a través de un mayor control del estudiante sobre su aprendizaje. Adicionalmente, se propone la aplicación de nuevos paradigmas de evaluación del lenguaje, que reconozcan al estudiante como una fuente válida y confiable de información evaluativa.

Palabras clave: realimentación entre pares, coherencia, escritura, tecnologías de la información, formación docente

Íkala, revista de lenguaje y cultura
Medellín–Colombia, Vol. 18, Issue 3 (September–December 2013), pp. 45–61, ISSN 0123-3432
www.udea.edu.co/ikala

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Introduction

The present paper aims at exploring and documenting whether there is a possible relationship between peer feedback given on written personal narratives and the development of coherence in students' informal writing. It attempts to do so by resorting to weblogs, or blogs, as an interactive tool that allows for one-to-many communication, as well as feedback from blog followers. The idea originated from an early, undocumented and unpublished class initiative that involved students in the use of blogs through class assignments; then, students wrote informally about several topics as the contents in the syllabus were covered, and their participation, not the quality of their output, was assessed.

By the end of the initiative it was observed that the vast majority of the students had become involved in the activity and had eagerly read and commented their peers' compositions. Some even decided to write about themselves and their lives, or posted other materials (visuals) to share with the class. The final entries in the blogs were rewarding, some even acknowledging the change from reluctance to participate into appreciation for the task. However, no observations were made on the quality of writing or on how comments from peers shaped students' subsequent posts.

Young students' contact with technology seems to be increasing on a daily basis. Being up to date with the latest trends in technology, they seem to complement their real lives with online experiences where they project themselves. From observing social networking and blogging, it is possible to note that most interaction in such environments takes place via informal writing. In the classroom, on the other hand, teachers often report having difficulty helping students develop writing, perhaps due to the important amount of structuring, practice, monitoring and feedback that writing takes and which cannot always be present when syllabus contents push for prompt coverage. Thus, this study was conducted to explore the links between technology and writing development: out-of-class blogging was done as a means to observe the relationship between the exchange of peer feedback

and the development of coherence in informal writing. Blogging was the chosen medium due to its potential for pedagogical interactivity and social support (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008, Robertson, 2011), which can be helpful at transferring the traditional *power* in the classroom from the teacher to students, while fostering learner autonomy.

Literature Review

Blogs.

A blog is a Web 2.0 tool that allows for the multi-way exchange of written, visual and multimedia content. However, their relatively recent appearance and their innumerable possibilities for personalization and variation make it difficult to understand their pedagogical potential and to identify best practices to apply with them (Demopoulos, 2006). Despite this, blogs have proven to be powerful at building a sense of identity and community through, among others, (a) the change of the traditional writer-reader relationship into a more dialogical one and, (b) the facilitation of entry to new online discourse communities (Hyland, 2009).

Studies have been carried out on the incorporation of blogs in education and that report important affordances of the use of blogs in the classroom. In a one-year study with university-level students of French and German, Ducate and Lomicka (2008) observed the steps through which students' moved from being blog readers to blog writers, and examined their reactions to blogging as well as the elements that characterized self-expression in NNSs (Nonnative Speakers) of a foreign language. Two stages were found in their study: in the first, their students had the chance to follow a particular blog writer, or blogger, with whom they felt identified according to their interests and their culture; in the second stage, participants maintained their own blogs and received peer feedback. The authors note that blogs provided students with a larger audience, sense of purpose, and friendlier interaction from peers than they usually would find in the traditional teacher-oriented journal. Moreover, it becomes

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clear from the findings that students should be acquainted with the blogging phenomenon before having to maintain their own blogs, especially when this is to be done in a foreign language. Finally, the authors report that participants evidenced linguistic improvement, deemed blogs as of high academic value, and encouraged participation.

A similar study regarding the use of blogs and peer feedback was conducted by Quintero (2008) in a public university in Bogotá. Carried out with a group of Colombian undergraduate students and a group of Canadian learners, the study aimed at (a) describing the insights obtainable from a blog writing experience, and (b) analyzing the way in which feedback (teachers' and peers') could shape Colombian students' writing in EFL (2008, p. 23). The findings show that blogging led students to engage in a community of writers that generated the need for communication and interaction; additionally, it allowed learners to portray themselves as they had the chance to approach writing in a different, inviting environment to express what the world was for them, based on their experiences.

Robertson (2011) reports on a study about the usefulness of blogs and self-reflection. The author points out that "reflection is indeed an important aspect of self-directed learning, but self-directed learning encompasses other high level skills which can also be developed through blogging" (p. 1629). Findings reveal that participants used their learning journal blogs while planning their learning, monitoring progress and evaluating their own performance, among other autonomy-related activities. Although the study reported in this paper did not deal with reflective blogging, an important consideration can be derived from Robertson's findings as to the development of autonomy through interaction: blogs have the potential to trigger participants' reflections on their own process by means of interaction through peer feedback. Boud (2001) found that three elements are present in an after-event reflection process: return to experience, attending to feelings and re-evaluation of experience. Therefore, as the students in the

study here reported received feedback on their work, they engaged in communication with their readers, reflected on what they had done, how they felt and what they would do differently in future writing experiences.

A blog can be a powerful communication tool. Whatever someone posts on a blog, he or she knows, may and probably will be read by somebody else in cyberspace. When bloggers create and post an entry, they do so with the intention to communicate a message that might be interesting to someone, somewhere, in the hope of interacting around the topic at hand. Therefore, blog writing can be situated within what Hyland (2009, p. 28) considers is writing as social interaction. From this view, writing is more than a classroom task and a skill to develop; it is a means to elaborate meaning dialogically, through "a unique configuration and interaction of what both reader and writer bring to the text" (Nystrand, 1989 as cited in Hyland, 2009, 30–31).

Viewing writing from a social perspective implies being aware that (a) meaning is created dialogically between text and audience through the relationship that readers can establish between the text contents and their own backgrounds, and that (b) coherence is understood as a construction in the reader's mind, impossible to achieve only through effective use of language rules and structures, without any consideration of the audience's reality. Blogs allow for the taking into account of these two considerations: they allow for community-building through interactional comments, and they offer more than plain text to bring in context to text.

Feedback.

Feedback has been defined in different ways, depending on the school of thought from where the definition originated. Seeing feedback as a tool to construct knowledge, this study considered suitable, among others, the approach provided by Richards & Schmidt (2002) who define feedback as "comments or other information that learners receive concerning their success on learning tasks or

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tests, either from the teacher or other persons" (p. 199). This encompasses feedback from different actors in an individual's learning process.

A good model of feedback exchange was provided by Vigil and Oller in 1976 (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 74) with their communication feedback model. With a set of traffic-light metaphors, the authors aim at discerning how affective feedback and cognitive feedback can serve for error correction in language classrooms. In short, affective feedback should determine whether the speaker should continue with his or her attempts to convey a message. Cognitive feedback, in turn, appears to be the point where corrective feedback is located and where error correction takes place (red or yellow lights) (p. 274). It is worth noting that green lights symbolize non-corrective feedback, too many of which may lead to fossilization. For this study, it was believed that this model serves to illustrate that feedback must have a point: it should enable the learner to modify the language that is being produced, if any advancement is expected to be made.

Brookhart (2008) supports such view of feedback:

> Feedback can be very powerful if done well. The power of formative feedback lies in its double-barreled approach, addressing both cognitive and motivational factors at the same time. Good feedback gives students information they need so they can understand where they are in their learning and what to do next—the cognitive factor. Once they feel they understand what to do and why, most students develop a feeling that they have control over their own learning—the motivational factor. Good feedback contains information that a student can use, which means that the student has to be able to hear and understand it (p. 2).

A recent study was conducted that examined the effects of peer-editing in the writing process, as illustrated in Díaz (2010). Reporting a series of positive aspects of fostering peer-to-peer interaction when entering a writing process in the classroom, the author regarded peer-writing within the Vygotskyan concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development, ZPD*. Findings reflected the positive outcomes and the meaning of the experience and behavior that peer-editing can bring into the classroom, as follows:

scaffolding when peer editing (which contained students' empowerment in collaboration with more capable peers, and contact); and thinking when revising (containing clarifying and noticing) (pp. 92–94). In brief, the author concluded that peer-editing worked as (a) a cognitive tool leading students to use learning strategies while revising their partners' papers and (b) a social-interactional tool that helped the novice internalize the expert's strategic processes as the latter provided guidance (p. 96).

Feedback can act as a powerful tool both regarding the cognitive and the motivational conditions in the learner. When handled well, it can prove a useful way to help students gain better control over their own learning; it also could help them make informed decisions on the steps they should follow regarding what is expected of them and what they expect from themselves.

Writing.

Taking the writer as the point of departure, an expressivist view of writing conceives thinking as a preceding step to writing; it also holds that "free expression of ideas can encourage self-discovery and cognitive maturation" (Hyland, 2009, p. 18). As further stated by Hyland (2009), writing is, from this perspective, a developmental process that cannot be learned nor defined narrowly based on notions of grammar accuracy. However, he adds, this view fails to offer clear theoretical principles to evaluate good writing.

Back in the 1980s, Flower and Hayes proposed a theory on the cognitive processes to writing, in which they perceived it as a problem-solving situation. Their model conceived writing as a non-linear, even probably simultaneous set of inter-related elements: Task environment, (i.e. decision to solve a rhetorical problem, and the text that is written so far) the writing process (i.e. planning, translating, and reviewing) and long-term memory (i.e. knowledge of topic, audience and writing plans) (1981, pp. 369–373). This model dominated and is still a part of mainstream pedagogical approaches to writing perhaps due to its simplicity and potential

for teachers to adopt it in the classroom. However, as Hyland (2009) points out, the model fails to describe why learners write the way they do and leaves teachers alone as to how to advise their students to improve their writing practices (p. 23).

Another perspective to writing places greater emphasis on the performance of writing rather than on the cognitive processes that underlie it. Regarded as a situated act, Hyland (2009) defines it as:

> … a social act that can occur within particular situations. It is therefore influenced both by the personal attitudes and prior experiences that the writer brings to writing and the impact of the specific political and institutional contexts in which it takes place (p. 26).

For the current study, these three models or views are complementary. Blogging can support the development of writing through self-expression and self-discovery, although not only that would count towards the achievement of the objectives here outlined. As to cognitive theory it does provide useful insights to approach writing in the classroom; additionally, since this project took place alongside an EFL course, Flower and Hayes' (1981) model earns pertinence. Finally, writing as a situated act can be observed in writing in a blog setting, where a confluence of internal and contextual elements exists. For the case of the present study, these internal and contextual elements could be seen in students' interest to engage in externally-initiated writing, as well as to share their products with a community of readers with whom they want to establish communication.

Informal writing.

Through blogging, this study aimed at seeing the extent to which coherence in informal narratives could, if at all possible, be improved. Then it is important to note what is considered informal writing. Harmer (2001) argues that the choice of structures and words is determined by a number of factors among which we can find genre, purpose, setting and channel, which operate on different levels of formality. Formality, then, he defines as a level of intimacy, or how distant or close the writer feels to his/her setting (p. 247).

Harmer, then, considers informality as the choice of spontaneous language caused by the writer's feeling of closeness to his or her readers. Since this study aimed to work within a community of fellow students, and given that a sense of fellowship was expected, Harmer's distance-based definition serves for the purpose.

Narrative text.

There are various reasons why narrative texts were chosen in this study. Because it is not easy for everybody to handle a genre with which they are not acquainted–such as comparative or argumentative writing–narrative writing offered an accessible option. Basically, a narrative text involves telling a story that can be your own, and whose center, in this case, could be the writer himself or any other person about whom the writer wants to speak. Similar definitions are offered for narrative texts, such as Beristáin's (2006), "one of the types of discourse . . . and the presentation of some facts. . . . It is a type of story [where] a series of events are presented [that] develop in time and derive from each other, . . . offer simultaneously a relationship of consecutiveness and a logical relationship" (personal translation) (p. 352).

Research Design and Implementation

Type of study, setting and participants.

This study fell into the action research paradigm which is defined by Sagor (1993, p. 7), as the process through which a teacher wants to improve his/ her own work situation, motivated by what s/he is doing or should be doing, and by Nunan (1992) as the process initiated by classroom teachers who are "interested in exploring processes of teaching and learning in their own context . . .' (p. 18). Nunan's perspective encompasses several possibilities of classroom inquiry that are not necessarily concerned with *change*. In his words, "a descriptive case study of a particular classroom, group of learners, or even a single learner counts as action research if it is initiated by a question, is supported by data and interpretation, and is carried out by a practitioner investigating aspects of his or her own context and situation" (p. 18).

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This study was conducted in the setting of a five-year-long English teacher education program at a public university in Colombia. The purposes of the program are, among others, to educate teachers with an advanced communicative competence in English' and to educate teachers that are "competent in the use of the English language, competence understood as the grammatical, textual, pragmatic and sociolinguistic mastery of the language" (Escuela de Idiomas – Universidad Industrial de Santander, 2009, p. 23, own translation). The population was a group of five student teachers enrolled in a B2+ course (Advanced English). Their ages ranged between 18 to 20 years and their academic background was almost uniformly one of successful language learning. The course was comprised of ten hours of face to face work on the four language skills, as well as strong work on grammar. Although a task-based course book was followed, it was at the teacher's discretion to use and adapt the materials in accordance with the learners' needs. The student participants were not under the researcher's EFL instruction but under a different teacher's, whose insights were held valuable from the point of view of an insider in the stages of data collection and analysis. Thus, it follows from this that the data collected in this study reflected both *emic* and *etic* perspectives.

Research question.

The line of inquiry in this study had to do with the extent to which coherence could be shaped through a constant process of peer feedback. The chosen medium was blogs because they allow for free publication of texts as well as interaction among the members of the blog community. Blogs also enable a writer to incorporate other types of elements into the text, such as colors, pictures and hypertext, among many other options. We believed that as students advanced in their EFL studies along with this project, they would acquire several tools to enrich a composition—including peer feedback—, which could render the writing process more effective. Based on these premises, our research question was: To what extent does peer feedback on blogs written outside the classroom shape students' writing of informal, personal narrative texts with specific regards to coherence?

Instruments and procedures for data collection.

The data for this study were collected in three ways: from students' artifacts (blog entries) and their assessment by the researcher and the teacher, and from students' learning logs. Artifact assessment was done separately by the researcher and by the course teacher in terms of their level of in-text coherence and of how this changed by means of peer feedback along the study. To do so a three-grade qualitative rubric was used to guarantee uniformity of criteria as shown in Appendix A. Because artifacts were created using blogs, the peer feedback received was also assessed to analyze the extent to which it was determining in the development of written coherence in subsequent texts.

Artifacts, Freeman (1998) says, are "student work," potentially good to provide information on the students' learning, to be collected in the classroom or while teaching takes place (p. 95). Although artifacts in this study did not derive from teaching sessions, this did not deprive them of their potential to provide data on students' learning. Finally, a double assessment approach was decided on because, whereas the researcher was immersed in the implementation of the study and knew the strategies and training that students had undergone, the teacher's view would be useful at determining the quality of students' production in terms of coherence and of the effects peer feedback may have had on it.

With regards to learning logs, students were asked to reflect upon the process they undertook before, while, and after they wrote the blog entries as shown in Appendix B. Freeman (1998, p. 95) classifies learning logs or "learning journals" as an instrument to collect second-order data on the student's thoughts and learning. Learner's logs, then, were used to have students reflect on the coherence-development process that they went through. From the moment students started writing, incorporating their peers' feedback and producing a later text, they were asked to reflect and report on their experiences in writing, by answering researcher-designed questions as a guide. Thus, the usefulness of logs lay on the potential for obtaining data from an *emic,*

second-order perspective, useful at establishing the perceived and actual relationship between peer feedback and coherence. It is worth mentioning that students were offered Spanish and English versions of this instrument, to reduce the bias that problems associated with language proficiency could have on their reflections.

Data were triangulated through *data triangulation* and *methodological triangulation* as defined by Denzin and cited in Freeman (1998, p. 97). For validity, the data collection instruments were chosen and designed to be accessible for the population, keeping in mind the data that they could reveal. They were designed according to the study's objectives and were validated through expert check due to the procedural impossibility to pilot them. Finally, reliability was aimed at through the process of double assessment of the artifacts, compared against the results of the learning logs. The data was analyzed from a grounded approach, in order to derive theory-building interpretations from actual data rather than by theoretical constructs alone (Burns, 1999, p. 25).

Implementation.

This study took place throughout a ten-week period. Four stages were implemented, in which communication was maintained via asynchronous tools such as email or SMS and synchronous tools such as chat, video call or telephone calls.

Stage 1 – Exploration.

This stage got students acquainted with the concept, the form and the use of blogs by millions of people around the world. Students were presented with some blogging services on the web such as Wordpress, Blogger, Xanga, and LiveJournal to give them a clear idea of the phenomenon of blogging. Furthermore, students were able to choose an actual blogger to follow in an attempt to observe the way in which he/she posted entries and dealt with his or her community of readers. The blogging service chosen from was Blogger™, accessible through free sign-up at www.blogger.com or with a Google™ account.

Stage 2 – Conceptual development.

Development of two key conceptual elements for this study was sought at this stage: coherence and feedback. Students were presented with the concept of coherence inductively, using sample narrative texts to guide them towards the development of a clear understanding of the concept. Here, three features that render a text coherent were presented: logical order, unity of ideas and clarity of sentences. Both *coherent* and *incoherent*, yet all authentic texts were used for students to develop awareness of such features.

Feedback, in turn, was presented as a process of interaction that allows for the improvement of performance. Awareness-raising sessions were held to help students understand the constructive nature of feedback through two constituting elements: the affective factor and the cognitive factor. After assessing the sample texts for coherence, students gave mock feedback to the authors and assessed it for appropriateness and possible usefulness. To give feedback throughout the study, students used a two-fold reminder checklist that guided them through the process of effective feedback-giving and the characteristics that render a text coherent. The checklist aimed to reduce subjectivity to an acceptable level and to channel students' efforts into providing useful contributions rather than deviating into malicious criticism.

Stage 3 – Blog creation and maintenance.

This stage had students take initial steps on the blog, such as the selection of topics to write about and the actual posting of the entries. Three sub-steps were made:

Step 1. Signing up for Blogger and creating a nickname (optional).

Step 2. Posting an introductory entry, customizing the blog, choosing six topics to write about.

Step 3. Posting the first and second entries and assessing them by the teacher and researcher; peer feedback exchange started upon completion of the second entry.

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Stage 4 – Feedback in corporation and reflection process.

This stage had students post their mid and final entries of the study, incorporating as much peer feedback as possible. Also, students were asked to reflect upon their process in order to obtain data on the procedures followed to post each entry. These reflective instruments were first-cut analyzed to determine any changes that could be made along the pedagogical intervention.

Data Analysis, Findings and Discussion

Data analysis.

Data were collected and first-cut analyzed almost simultaneously with the purpose of ensuring its usefulness, to get insights on the smooth development of its implementation and to apply changes as the study was being implemented. For data analysis, a piece of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was used, MAXQDA, (2013). MAXQDA allowed, among others, to work out correlations between the researcher's and the teacher's assessments of artifacts. Despite the fact that the coding process was only performed by the researcher, the qualitative data found in the teacher's assessments were coded using the same assessment scale proposed in the artifact assessment rubrics themselves.

In fact, it is worth mentioning that the correlation assessments mentioned ranged from 75% to 100% of researcher-teacher agreement as to the quality of the artifacts, and from 73% to 100% with regards to assessment of feedback and of its possible effects on writing. Correlational disagreements were solved in qualitative terms rather than in percentage points so, whenever the teacher and the researcher differed in their assessment of an artifact or of the feedback contained in it, conclusions were reached taking into account both perspectives, using the qualitative data collected from each rubric. Below are quotes from the rubrics on two students' artifacts that illustrate the way in which students' writing was assessed.

Data was classified following the study anonymity and confidentiality requirements. All participants (P) data was coded using conventions, according to the instrument analyzed (i.e. Blog Entry, Learning Log) and initials were used in order to identify the participants.

> *In her post publication, the author received two feedback comments that asked her to provide more information about the reaction of a character in her story (her boyfriend). Therefore, clarity was the point that she missed, and thus was identified by her readers. In the current story, clarity is virtually flawless, thus leading one to believe that the author took the feedback on board.*

Researcher's assessment on Participant MR's blog entry No. 3

> *In the post the author's peers had provided him with some cognitive-corrective feedback also related to clarity as the author was asked to expand his description of events in the passage. Feedback would appear to have had some effect in regard with unity; opposite to the author's previous entry this text maintains one single idea that links introduction, body and conclusion. Nevertheless, feedback effect on clarity would seem of little impact as one of the key concepts in the plot remains rather confusing to the reader who is not acquainted with the world of waiting.*

Teacher's assessment on Participant DP's blog entry No. 3

Since a three-grade scale (low, mid, high) was used to assess the coherence in students' writings, it is important to highlight that whenever there were teacher-researcher disagreements, they remained within one-grade range (i.e. low to medium, or medium to high). (See Figure 1, for an example of correlation assessments).

Having assessed teacher-researcher agreement, the evolution (or involution) of coherence in writing was observed by comparing the assessment of an artifact with that of its preceding one. In this process the researcher compared the assessments made of artifacts produced in the initial, mid and final stages of the study. (See Figure 2).
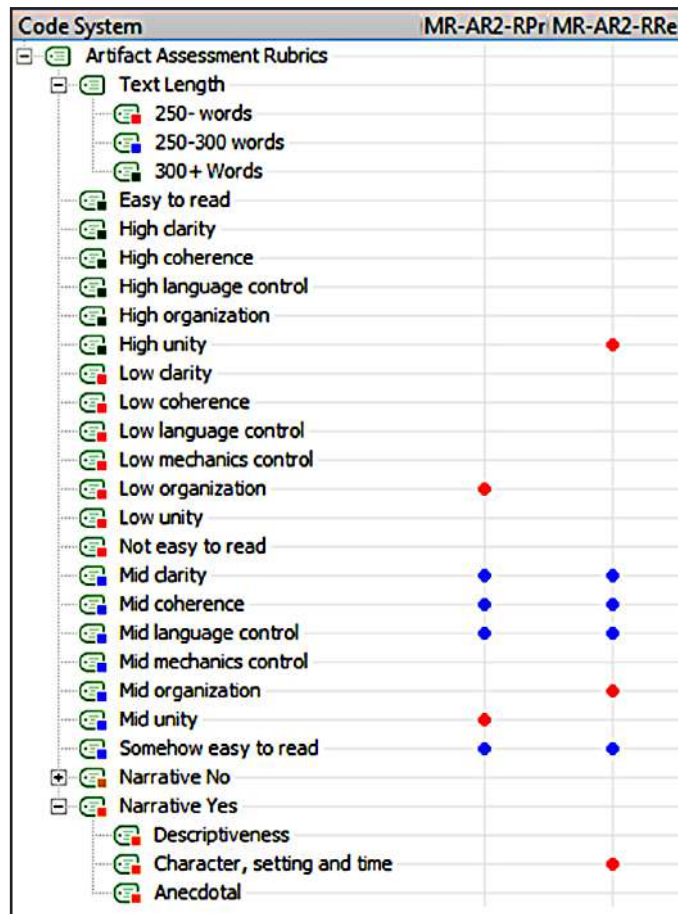
Figure 1. Teacher-Researcher Assessment Correlation 84% in a participant's Artifact 2 – (MR-AR2) – Exported using MAXQDA.
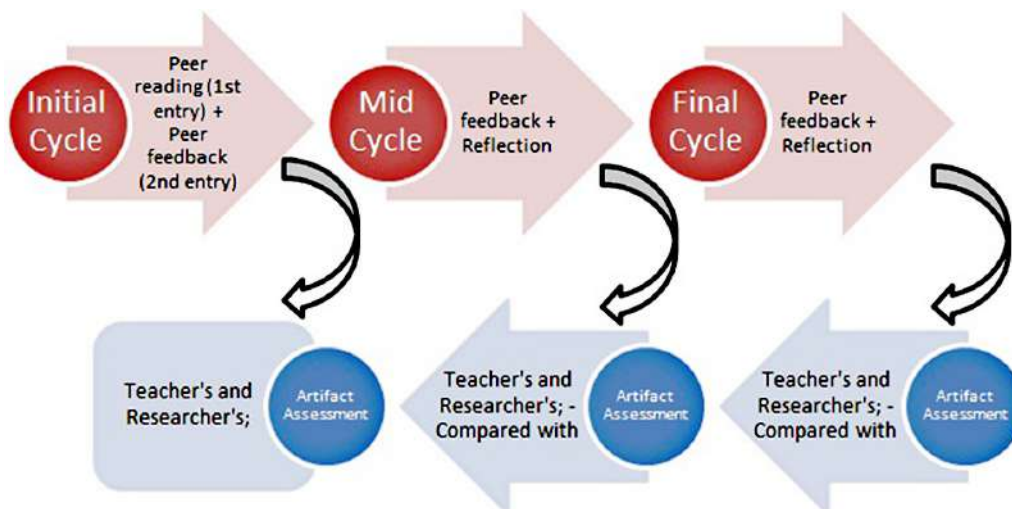
Figure 2. Process of Observation of the Evolution of Artifacts.

Findings.

An important affordance in informal writing attributable to the exchange of peer feedback through blogging was found: the exchange of peer feedback through blogs can act as a boosting factor on the improvement or maintenance of coherence in a text, specifically with regards to text unity and clarity. At the same time, this study found that underlying conditions exist to such affordance, that fall within two potentials of feedback and blogging: to target and shape students' cognition and their affection, both being inter-related in helping a student write better.

Shaping students' cognition.

The participants in this study that managed to keep or maintain their levels of coherence in writing showed to have received feedback that was useful to them, and that signaled points to improve. In other words, feedback proved itself useful by exhibiting a clear, observable content that participants could see and use in later blog-writing tasks. (Zhang, 2009) stated that blogs foster critical thinking by encouraging students to evaluate what they read and write. The author also goes on to say that blogs aid learners so that they can "improve their writing skills and encounter new ideas through interaction with other students" (p. 5). This feature of feedback, however, cannot account for its positive effects by itself. In fact, students that managed to incorporate the feedback that they had received demonstrated awareness and understanding of the aims of such feedback, and also were found to be aware of and understood the concept of coherence, which was key in this study. Below are the findings related to the targeting and shaping students' cognition:

Visibility and clarity of feedback content.

For feedback to be useful it certainly needs to provide enough information to enable the writer to make any advancement, as proposed by Vigil and Oller's model of feedback, "in which cognitive feedback . . . appears to be the point where corrective feedback is located, and where error correction takes place . . ." (Vigil & Oller, 1976 as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 274). It is possible to consider the observable content nature of some of the feedback exchanged in this study as cognitive feedback, as it was meaningful and was filled with information that students could use (Vigil & Oller, 1976 as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 274). Below is a sample comment illustrating the visibility and clarity of its feedback content; it was quoted from a participant's post that told a story about school days:

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9 de diciembre de 2012 15:18
Hahahaha Man you are up the top! You even created a group for skipping clases? That's too much! Would you mind telling us what you, your friend, and the other people who belonged the group did while you were not at classes? Great story!
Responder

Excerpt from Participant EV's blog entry No. 5

The corresponding assessments of that feedback comment, both by researcher and teacher support its evident orientation to enhancing clarity:

All the readers asked the author to be more descriptive about the activities that the author and his friends did whenever they skipped classes. Therefore, clarity was the issue that readers identified, not because the text fell short of it, but because it was so engaging that readers wanted to know a lot more about it.

Researcher's assessment on Participant EV's blog entry No. 6

In his last entry the author received cognitive-corrective feedback with regard to clarity. It was suggested that descriptiveness of the text was expanded.

Teacher's assessment on Participant EV's blog entry No. 6

Feedback, then, can be attributed to be potentially powerful on the condition that it contains information usable by its intended addressee. Otherwise, it will be rendered empty and useless.

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Students' awareness of feedback content.

The effectiveness of a feedback comment on written coherence does not depend only on its internal features. In fact, this study found that peer feedback commentaries made through blogging practices can be extremely beneficial on the improvement and/or maintenance of written coherence provided that its good construction is complemented by its addressee's awareness and sensitivity to feedback comments. These findings relate to Brookhart's (2008) idea of *good* feedback, viewed from its potential to impact its addressee, as one that "contains information that a student can use, which means that the student has to be able to hear and understand it" (p. 2). Below are excerpts from learners' logs exhibiting their awareness:

I think what my friend has asked me through their feedback is to express better the end of every story.

Excerpt from MR's Learning log No. 2

Recuerdo mucho que mis compañeros siempre piden sobre información que no debe faltar en la historia, detalles que no queden flotando, de manera que todas las preguntas posibles por hacer se respondan solas con el texto.

[I recall well that my friends always ask for information that shouldn't be missing in the story — details that do not get loose, so that every possible question is answered in the text.]

Excerpt from MF's Learning log No. 4

It is evident that a student can only derive learning from a tool that can be seen and understood. It does not really matter how much useful content there is in a feedback comment; unless its intended addressee is able to see it and tell what it really means, little advancement is expected to happen.

Students' understanding and awareness of coherence.

As the participants in this study received a certain amount of training in three features of coherence (unity, clarity and organization), they knew that the feedback they exchanged would need to target at least one of them. It was found that some students developed a fairly-accurate level of awareness of the degree of coherence they had in their own blog posts. Participants were able to describe their level of satisfaction with their text coherence and even mention the extent to which feedback had played a role in their writing development:

Al respecto del proceso de escritura, me parece que fue más cohesivo y coherente al final, a medida que íbamos mejorando las entradas con las sugerencias de nuestros compañeros. Traté en todas las publicaciones de seguir los consejos que el profesor nos dio sobre coherencia textual.

[About the writing process, I think it was more cohesive and coherent at the end, as we were improving our entries with our peers' suggestions. I tried, in all my publications, to follow the advice we got from the teacher (researcher) about textual coherence.]

Participant EV's learning log No. 4

My final story was a challenge because I realized I had to do better, I had to bring everything together, what my friends had told me about my previous stories,what to focus on better? what to leave a side? I believe my story was received by my friends-readers well, they could understand it and what they asked me through the process- to make a better end- I could pull it together.

Participant MR's learning log No. 4

Thus, the interactive nature of a web 2.0 tool such as a blog, along with the exchange of peer feedback can be accountable for students' developed understanding of the concept of coherence, as well as for their awareness of the quality of blog posts that their audience expected of them. These findings are in agreement with at least two of Boud's (2001) three proposed elements to be present in an after-event reflection process: *return to experience*, *attending to feelings* and *re-evaluation of experience*. Participants showed evidence of the first and the last element, as they (a) were able to assess the level of coherence in their blog entry contrasted to the feedback that they received and they (b) decided how to proceed in their next writing task.

Shaping students' affection.

The combination peer feedback–blogging was found to have an effect on shaping students' affection in at least three ways: creating potential for motivation, allowing for students' comfort with and reliance on it and fostering community building. Similar to what was found in the study by Clavijo, Hine and Quintero (2008) with a group of Colombian and Canadian students throughout a period of one academic year, where the results showed that with regular interactions the two groups of learners were able to create communities of interest and learning.

Feedback's potential for motivation.

Boosting effects of peer feedback through blogging were observable provided that peer feedback was written in constructive language and that it addressed the writer in polite, affection-targeting terms. The students that showed coherence maintenance or improvement acknowledged having been comfortable with the feedback from their peers, which, far from being merely a praiseful set of words, was based on a careful choice of terms that proved useful to them. An example of a feedback comment with motivational potential is presented below; it was given on a story about an embarrassing situation (the participant described how her grandfather had killed two cats):

November 18, 2012 at 9:24 PM

Nice story . . . ! I really enjoyed it and believe it or nor, it also made me laugh a bit: So while your aunt was preparing things to wash the laundry, she found the cats floating in the sink? frightening, isn't it? and your grandpa murdered the cats with the excuse they were making a lot of noise? weird! Would you mind telling us what your boyfriend thought about this particular situation? Great Job!
Reply

Excerpt from Participant MR's blog entry Artifact 2

In the next artifact assessment, the researcher described the feedback comments received on the blog post, in the following terms:

The feedback that the author received in her past story was introduced using friendly language aiming to show interest in the author's work. The author was addressed in polite, useful terms, which could have helped the author take up a positive attitude reflected in the quality of the current text.

Researcher's assessment on participant MR's blog entry No. 3)

It is evident that when feedback is given in positive terms, targeting not only cognition but also affection, positive effects can be derived from it. Once again, these findings agree with Vigil and Oller (1976, as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 274). Who describe how "affective feedback should determine whether the speaker [in this case writer] should continue with his or her attempts to convey a message".

Students' comfort with and reliance on feedback.

Students that showed improvement or maintenance of coherence levels in their writing acknowledged being comfortable with the feedback they were receiving. This supports the current study's findings on feedback's potential for motivation, as it is expected that for any positive feedback effects to happen, the student needs to feel at ease with the comments made on his/her work. Below is an excerpt from a learner's log, where she recognizes feeling comfortable with her peers' commenting on her writing and also acknowledges the importance of being careful while giving feedback herself:

The experience of posting my stories in order to someone else read then and also give them feedback has being incredible! I just love the fact I can learn through the internet. And there's a lot my friends can help and contribute with my stories. I feel comfortable every time my friends give me feedback but it can't be quite a delight to give theme feedback because you have to be very careful and not criticize their job.

Excerpt from participant MR's learning log No. 2

Similarly, as comfort reflects a student's feeling at ease with the audience's reactions to a writing product, it was found out that trust or reliance is

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needed for peer feedback to be considered useful. Students who recognized having used some, or all of the feedback received did so by acknowledging its reliability. A couple of excerpts from learners' logs can be used to illustrate this finding:

En el post sobre Viaje en el Tiempo, mi entrada parecía más una reflexión o exposición sobre recuerdos que una verdadera "historia", eso notaron mis compañeros y desde entonces en cada entrada trato de que sea más una anécdota sobre el tema que mi opinión sobre él.

[In my post about time travel, my entry looked more like a reflection or presentation about memories than a real "story;" that's what my peers noted and, since then, I try to make my entries more like anecdotes than opinions.]

Excerpt from participant EV's learning log No. 3

It is possible to establish a clear internal relationship between peer feedbacks' potential for motivation; the comfort it generates in students as well as the sense of trust that it brings along, thereby providing useful feedback for the purposes for which it was intended. These findings also agree with Robertson (2011), who emphasizes the importance of social support by quoting a participant who claimed to have found learning logs (through blogs) useful, mainly because communication with peers could be established, therefore helping him advance in his own project. Hence it can be concluded that social support is an important affordance of feedback, provided that its potential user exhibits a sense of social comfort and trust.

Community building.

As students posted entries in their blogs, the affordance for blogging to generate a sense of community was identified. It was found that the act of writing took place in a more dialogical way, different from that which traditionally takes place in the classroom. Engaging in the acts of blogging and giving feedback gave students the possibility to write for an audience whom they felt comfortable with, to portray themselves in their writing and to learn from and about their peers. This sense of community building was expressed by a student as seen in their learning log entries which can be seen below:

At the end of this Project I can say it has helped me a lot, I'm now more willing to tell stories, to express myself better and to take into account what others may say in order to improve my writing skills.

This project was a useful tool, Blogger for my and for people willing to know you, read about you and your stories and to make a advice if there's something missing.

(Excerpt from Participant MR's learning log No. 4)

It was also revealed that students approached writing as a way to communicate with and learn from an audience, rather than to comply with a task. These findings agree with what Quintero (2008) addresses in her study, which illustrates how blogging led students to engage in a community of writers whose needs for communication and interaction were generated while allowing them to portray their selves through their writings. Similarly, as students expressed the importance of receiving help from a community of peers, they acknowledged the social constructivist affordance of blogs and peer feedback. Furthermore, Carney (2007) states that blogs can be seen as a way to begin building a partnership, providing a solid foundation for learners where they can build their identity as well as reflect on the language produced for their partner audience.

Conclusions

After having performed the analysis and the interpretation of data, it is possible to come to the following conclusions, related to answering this study's research question:

To what extent does peer-feedback on blogs written outside the classroom shape students' writing of informal, personal narrative texts with specific regards to coherence?

Table 1

Categories and Subcategories Obtained from the Data Analysis

Category	Subcategories
	Shaping students' cognition through
	• Visibility and clarity of feedback content
	• Students' awareness of feedback content
	• Students' understanding and awareness of coherence
Feedback and blogging as boosting factors on the enhancement or maintenance of written coherence.	**Shaping students' affection through**
	• Feedback's potential for motivation
	• Students' comfort with and reliance on feedback
	• Community building

Furthermore, it can be concluded that, peer feedback through blogging can be a boosting factor on the improvement or maintenance of coherence, on the condition that provided that it is targeted towards shaping students' cognition and affection. Therefore it is safe to say that peer-feedback on blogs written outside of the classroom does shape students´writing of informal, personal narrative texts with specific regards to coherence.

As to students' cognition, the study found that factors such as (a) the visibility and clarity of the feedback content, (b) the students' ability to *see* and understand feedback, and (c) the students' understanding and awareness of the very concept of coherence are considered to contribute to the enhancement or maintenance of coherence levels in a written text. Such factors do so by (a) revealing that feedback needs to contain information that learners can use as building material in their quest for better writing; (b) evidencing that, for peer feedback to be useful, students need to show sensitivity to it; otherwise, it will go unnoticed and its potential, however insightful, will never be exploited; and (c) establishing the need for students to know where they are headed towards in their writing quest, so that the information that lies in peer feedback is used accordingly.

Similarly, three ways were identified in which students' affection was targeted and shaped, which work as conditions to the enhancement or maintenance of coherence in text. They were (a) potential for feedback to bring about motivation through the language in which it is worded; that is, it is expected that feedback that is written in friendly, affectionate terms will be received more openly than will feedback which restricts itself to pointing out cognitive issues and is worded in rather distant and impersonal language. (b) As long as feedback exhibits this motivational potential, it takes a good deal of students' comfort and reliance on feedback to make the change between its potential usefulness and its actual usefulness. It becomes evident, at this stage, that as long as students are at ease with the comments that peers make on their work, and at the same time consider their peers as reliable sources of information, progress can be made in learning. (c) Lastly, it was found that a sense of community building plays an active role in the enhancement or maintenance of written coherence as students approach writing as a dialogical and bidirectional process, as they write having an audience in mind, and as they have a space where to portray their selves and where to learn from and about their peers.

In view of the above, peer feedback through blogging can be considered a potentially useful and empowering tool for the maintenance and enhancement of coherence levels in a text. This, however, will be unlikely if the conditions are not proper both in feedback itself and in the student. It cannot be considered conclusive, either, that real advancement will take place if ideal conditions are met, as there may be other (sometimes interfering) factors that can also play a determining role in the development or maintenance of written coherence. Moreover, the cognitive and affective affordances of peer feedback through blogging by no means guarantee that a student can in fact transfer knowledge and awareness into noticeable changes in performance, since aspects such as one's real levels of competence and sense of self-efficacy cannot simply be left aside.

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Appendix A

Artifact Assessment Rubric

Assessment of artifacts

The following checklists and rubrics will be used to assess the blog entries as students post them on Blogger™.

   Narration.

Answer the question *yes* or *no,* then make a brief comment on it.

         Q: Is the entry a narrative text?   **Yes**   **No**

         Why (not)?

         A:

   Coherence.

Coherence is seen as "the relationships which link the meanings of utterances in a discourse or of the sentences in a text. . . . In written texts coherence refers to the way a text makes sense to the readers through the organization of its content, and the relevance and clarity of its concepts and ideas" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 205).

Based on this premise, assess the blog entry on the following grounds. Please comment on language problems that could facilitate or interfere with your assessment of the text. Use the following three-grade scale: **Satisfactory / In progress / Unsatisfactory**. Comment briefly.

1. The relative ease with which you went through the text and understood it;
2. **Unity:** The connection, in terms of content, between the title of the story, its introduction, its development of events, and its end;
3. **Clarity:** The completeness, or descriptiveness, of sentences and paragraphs, and how they add to the overall plot;
4. **Organization:** The order in which the events of the story appeared, and how it helped or hindered your comprehension.

   Feedback.

Comment on the extent to which you perceive feedback on earlier entries (one or two) has shaped the current post. Consider the following:

1. The amount of motivational feedback (i.e. praise with suggestions) given in a past post, and how it could have shaped or maintained the degree of coherence in the current post.
2. The amount of cognitive-corrective feedback (i.e. signaling points to improve) given in a past post, and how it could have shaped or maintained the degree of coherence in the current post.
3. The possible absence of useful feedback in a past post (i.e. feedback as mere praise or criticism), or of feedback at all, that could have shaped or maintained the degree of coherence in the current post.

Appendix B

Students' Learning Log

Dear student,

The following is a learning log. It will be used to evaluate the way you are learning and what strategies you might be using while posting your entries to Blogger™. The contents that you put here will not be used to penalize you or judge your methods good or bad, so you are invited to reflect on your own learning with confidence.

Please, after you post an entry in your blog, take some time to reflect on the following issues. Feel free to write, use graphs, pictures, diagrams or any other way to express your ideas,

- the steps that you followed to write your entry; how you organized your work;
- your peers' comments; how much of their contributions you applied on your most recent entry;
- what aspects of your friends' entries (or the comments that they received) you observed and applied to your own work;
- the quality of this entry (coherence) compared to your past entries and why;
- the similarities and/or differences between writing this entry and your past ones (easier, more difficult, interesting, etc);
- how comfortable you felt about using the blog, compared to writing on paper;
- how positive or negative you consider the use of Blogger™;
- how comfortable you felt with people reading your most recent blog entry;
- how comfortable you felt with people commenting your work.

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It is necessary that you keep this log constant. It is also preferable to work on, but not necessarily finish, these reflections no longer than a day after you post your entry.

Post your reflections here

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