

A PROPOSED ROLE FOR BLOGGING IN THE ESL WRITING CLASSROOM

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by  
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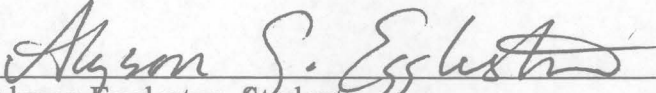
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## A Proposed Role for Blogging in the ESL Writing Classroom

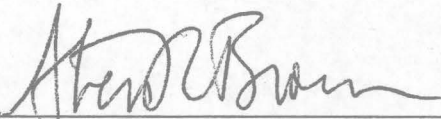
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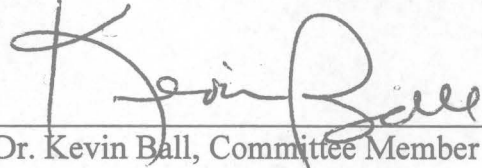
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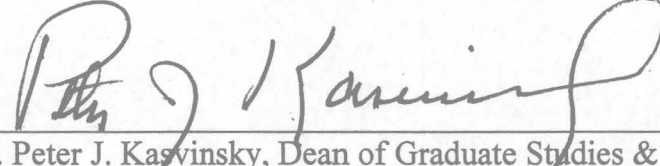
  
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## ABSTRACT

Blogging has the potential to confer agency on to its users, as their mastery of literacies increases. The number of computer users who regularly update their weblogs has grown exponentially in recent years and the growth of this medium is expected to continue.

Blogging represents a new information medium which requires the mastery of new technological literacies, since it not only includes text, but also a visually driven layout, as well as social networks that are actively engaged in building a community of writers and readers. Blogging has also facilitated the expansion of the critical public sphere wherein information is analyzed, debated, and otherwise disseminated without federal or corporate control.

For these reasons, Intermediate to advanced level English as a Second Language students could benefit greatly from exposure to the critical public sphere of blogging, as it would also allow them to communicate from a position of authority in the target language. The features of blogging also lend credence to it as a viable application of existing ESL and composition pedagogical practices and theories. Given this relationship, it is remarkable that little, if any, theoretical synthesis has taken place so as to more effectively construct blog-driven communicative tasks that take theory and pedagogy into consideration. This research seeks to fill this need by providing an understanding of how blogging functions socially and critically as a new medium and tool, and also by defining the conditions under which it would provide the greatest benefits for ESL writing students seeking to gain membership to academe and western culture at large.

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## ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

AAVE	African American Vernacular English
CALL	Computer Assisted Language Learning
CCCC	Conference on College Composition and Communication
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
CSCL	Computer Supported Collaborative Learning
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
GUI	Graphic User Interface
HTML	Hypertext Markup Language
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
L2	Second Language
LAN	Local Area Network
NBLT	Network Based Language Teaching
OPR	Online Peer Review
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
TOEFL	Test Of English as a Foreign Language
WAC	Writing Across the Curriculum
WAN	Wide Area Network
WTC	Willingness To Communicate
WWW	World Wide Web

## 1. Introduction

Blogs have been compared to the forward function in email messages, since they are immediately viewable to *anyone*. In addition, the ability for multiple users to respond to one post is similar to the conversation threads in online bulletin boards and forums.

However, blogging is uniquely the most interactive of the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) mediums in the sense that 1) its physical representation resembles a website more than an email, 2) blogs do not 'impose' themselves on Inboxes, as they are self-contained and exist independently of other CMC mediums, and 3) they are usually constructed with a particular audience in mind, as well as a topical purpose (e.g., politics, business, social interaction, hobbies, etc.)—and in this sense blogs differ considerably with personal homepages, which often contain family pictures and material, and are not updated on a daily or weekly basis. The most succinct definition might be found in the following: "a weblog is a website that is updated regularly and organised chronologically according to date, and in reverse order from most recent entry backwards. Weblogs can also provide decentralised access rights which allows multiple authors" (Ward 2004). These definitions, of course, do not do justice to blogs' uniquely communicative and community-building functions, both of which will prove critical to its proposes inclusion in ESL curriculums.

This research aims to show that blogging, as a highly developed, interactive, and adaptive composition tool, can be a critically effective component in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) -oriented ESL classrooms. This will be accomplished through the synthesis of existing Network Based Language Teaching (NBLT) practices

within English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy, as well as with their counterparts in composition research, specifically those that address the need for building communities of practice in order to engage and develop literacy. Communities of practices are here defined as “networks of people who engage in similar activities and learn from each other in the process” (Warschauer 2004: 120). Blogging, in terms of its functions and activities, will be explicated in order to better show its direct correspondence with CALL and NBLT values, and to situate it within the existing theoretical framework. Such framing is necessary in order to 1) justify its inclusion in ESL curriculum plans, 2) understand its functions in order to employ blogging in the most effective way, and 3) appropriately gauge our expectations of literacy and output for ESL learners.

Chapter 2 discusses research considerations that are important to bear in mind before proceeding. Specifically, 2.1 examines the legitimacy of CALL, despite its flawed application in most instances. 2.2 focuses on the composition component of ESL and explicate reasons for focusing on the part it plays in literacy. 2.3 will define and give background information about blogging, both in terms of the interface itself and social activity. 2.4 describes the aims of research in the context of a larger, preexisting body of CALL research. It also describes and defines two ESL pedagogical perspectives, both of which will be called upon later to situate the task of blogging.

Chapter 3 comprises the literature review and synthesis. It is divided into sections according to topics. This seemed to be the best organization since this research has three major prongs: CALL, Composition, and Blogging. Section 3.1 defines and gives an excerpted history of CALL, and connects blogging to this larger supracategory. In



subsection 3.1.1 features two perspectives of CALL, the sociocultural perspective in 3.1.1.1, and the interactionist perspective in 3.1.1.2, with an explication of the differences between the two. Section 3.2 offers insights from composition pedagogy for the purpose of informing the composition aspect of the blogging task. 3.3 discusses blogging and blogging communities in terms of their generally observed effect on culture. Section 3.4 discusses the efficacy of synchronous and asynchronous mediums in order to further our understanding of how to properly incorporate a Computer Mediated Communication tool, like blogging, given the research that has been completed with regards to the other related mediums. The role and relevancy of the rhetorical functions and community building associated with the act of blogging will be explored, as well. Finally, the blogging task, which is located in the appendix, is described in terms of the preceding literature and analysis. In addition, the future goal of this research is explicated.

## 2. Research Considerations

### 2.1 Is CALL Legitimate or Just Fashionable?

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is by no means a new concept in English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy. Language learning mediated through technology began as a concept that was initially developed in the 1950's and 60's as a practical use of increasingly more affordable audio equipment, and initially took the form of the ubiquitous language lab outpost that should be familiar to most college graduates (Brown 2001). Actual examples of CALL however were not documented until the 1960's, and later in the 1970's the U.S. federal government funded a number of projects to better understand what role computers could play in foreign language instruction in higher education (Chapelle 2005b). Each subsequent cycle of technological improvement encouraged high hopes in ESL instructors that acquisition would be rendered effortless. However, it was soon discovered that communicative competence does not follow necessarily from exposure to tape decks and computer screens alone, but rather that a greater synthesis of theory and application on the part of instructors and researchers would provide a more effectively communicative and interactionist learning environment for ESL students (Egbert and Petrie 2001). Much of the interactionist-driven pedagogical considerations, so prevalent now in CALL, could not be actuated until the development of the Local Area Network (LAN), which allowed students to engage in tasks and communications with other learners at a distance, or self-selected partners. The advent of the LAN and the World Wide Web (WWW) changed the sort of CALL interaction that

was occurring from one of student—computer interaction to an expanded student—student connection (Chapelle 2005b: 20). Chapelle goes on to say the following in regards to the effect of LAN and the WWW on CALL:

(...) activities were no longer limited to interaction with the computer and with other students in the class, but included communication with learners in other parts of the world – either learners from specific classes chosen by instructors or (...) participants who choose to spend time in computer-mediated communication for language learning. (Chapelle 2005b: 23)

In considering, some fifty years later, the increasingly pervasive role technology plays in our home, professional, and educational spheres, the potential (and need) for CALL-driven approaches seems greater and more relevant than ever before. Nearly all college age students have grown up with, or will need to become comfortable using, computers as communicative tools; therefore, e-mail, instant messaging, and most pointedly blogging, as mediums of dialogic practice can serve as natural and necessary extensions of traditional CALL approaches.

Both the more seminal theoretical investigations in computer-assisted or mediated learning will be examined, as well as the newer research, which has sought to better synthesize theory with application in order to avoid the wholesale acceptance of all CALL-related approaches on the basis that they seem new and fashionable, will be reviewed (Egbert 2005, Hu 2005). In fact, research compilations published recently have aimed at better clarifying the difference between effective and theoretically grounded CALL approaches and those wherein such grounding may be lacking. This research

consideration of the legitimacy of CALL has now concluded, and we will move on to a defense of focusing on writing in ESL, despite the primacy of the spoken word.

## 2.2 Why Focus on Composition in ESL?

Writing and speech are two aspects of language; both express the same language, but in two modes. It is important to be clear on the point that virtually no language construction is singular to one mode or the other, but rather the frequency of a particular usage changes—a change largely dependent on tone, formality, and audience (Baron 146).

While the primacy of spoken language is accepted *a priori*, for obvious reasons, writing tends to contain a higher frequency of more formal constructions because the writer has more time to compose a text than he or she would have in dialogue. Indeed, in their explanation of the (superior) benefits of Network Based Language Teaching (NBLT), Warschauer and Kern contend that as a subset of CALL, composition tasks in an NBLT environment maintain their efficacy due in large part to the fact that “(...) because it occurs in a written, archived form, students have the opportunity to plan their discourse” (Kern and Warschauer, 2000: 19)

In addition, there exists an expectation of formality in writing, especially in academic and professional contexts, because proficiency in this area signals social competence, a higher degree of educational attainment, and practiced logical and organizational abilities. To that end, computer mediated communication, and more specifically, composition, includes both the dialogical benefits of speech and the more formal expectations of logical organization and linearity that are features of writing.

Pennington terms this 'overlappage' and blending of speech and writing features as a 'creolization' of communication forms (2005: 83). As Brown and Attardo summarize,

There is a broad consensus that CMC occupies an intermediate position between speech and writing. CMC retains some features of the written register, thus the fact that CMC lacks the suprasegmental (word stress and intonation) and visual cues of face-to-face communication makes it an impoverished form (such as writing) [of communication]. (2005: 188)

Writing, with its attending outside expectations and prerequisite language skills, is culturally prioritized in such a way as to make it simultaneously a test of comprehension, proficiency, rhetorical and organizational skill, and cultural understanding, i.e., the ability of a writer to address or respond to different readers (audiences) appropriately through the patterned use of culturally accepted discursive markers, the mastery of which connotes cultural literacy (Ferris and Hedgcock 2005: 33). For these reasons, focusing on the composition aspect of ESL pedagogy seems potentially fruitful, both in terms of its practical need on the part of learners, for the reasons mentioned above, as well as the ease with which it lends itself to existing CALL-driven pedagogy—specifically in the form of blogging.

The question remains, though: how and when do we as instructors and researchers divide written academic discourse into the two halves of freshman composition pedagogy and ESL composition pedagogy? Newer research suggests that this dividing line may be unnecessary, and possibly counter-productive. Composition researchers have begun to borrow and reallocate terms and metaphors from interactionist ESL approaches and communicative tasks with the hope of facilitating the dialogic and feedback-rich sense of

community for which language classes strive (Zamel and Spack 1998). While it may be too soon to know if ESL inspired approaches will be more effective for beginning composition students, the possibility of mining one field in order to better inform another is at the heart of liberal, interdisciplinary approaches to education (Zamel and Spack 1998: x). Nevertheless, the problem of importing specialized and context-specific approaches (ESL) to the broader context of academic composition in general, remains one of scale. Consequently, the importation of narrowly focused material into a broader field is fraught with issues of incoherence and varying contexts—this much must be conceded. However, the reversal of that importation, i.e., moving the focus from broad (composition) to narrow (ESL), can be shown to inform and further justify a composition methodology like blogging in the CALL-driven ESL classroom, while at the same time the reversal of focus mitigates the common interdisciplinary pitfalls of incoherence and irrelevance in application. For these reasons, this research seeks to borrow the variable definitions of literacies from composition theory, as well as to prioritize the diminishment of social distance between ESL instructors and students, so as to encourage student writers to write from a position of authority in the target language. This concludes our focus on the research considerations of composition in an ESL context. We will now proceed to define and describe blogging very generally, in terms of both its history and its social impact.

### 2.3 What is 'Blogging' and How Might it Serve ESL?

Though blogging has only become wide-spread among the native speaker population within the last couple of years, other forms of public, asynchronous and synchronous electronic communication have been used throughout the last decade as a response to the growing and technologically aware ESL student population. The results of previous case studies, which used the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) genres of e-mail and instant messaging, enjoyed positive results in terms of improving the students' ability to immediately identify erroneous constructions, peer-edit other students' texts, and negotiate meaning through dialogic composition (Bloch 2002, DiGiovanni and Nagaswami 2005, Rose 2004, Strenski *et al.* 2005, Sullivan and Lindgren 2005, Ward 2005, Yuan 2005). The historical precedent of incorporating new CMC mediums into the CALL-driven learner environment is especially crucial for arguing in favor of the pedagogical benefits of blogging.

In addition, just as email has made writers out of us, so too has Weblogging made all of us publishers; so in this way, blogging can be seen as the "great leveler" among CMC mediums – the democratic medium that brings agency to the people (Blood 2002). For these reasons, blogs have been described as the "training ground for writers." Such capabilities can only help serve second language learners as they seek to create a space for themselves within the target language community (Blood 2002). The following section is meant to further meld the three prongs of this research (CALL, composition, and blogging) in order that their functions, relative to each other, can be better understood.

## 2.4 Aims of Research

The CALL classroom was once seen as an ancillary lab activity, meant to merely supplement the existing teacher-fronted course structure in an ostensibly 'modern' way (i.e., computers are involved, therefore the curriculum as been 'modernized'), but much of the discussion to follow proposes that first, CALL-based pedagogy, when properly grounded in existing communicative interactionist ESL pedagogy, can serve to promote language learner autonomy and greater target language use both inside and outside the classroom. The choice of the term 'CALL-based' is a conscious one, in that it refers to the goal of this discussion to promote a more seamlessly integrated ESL classroom; a classroom that uses technology in an interactively valuable way. Currently, one composition medium encapsulates the ideal composition activity in a CALL-driven ESL classroom, that being Weblogging, or as it is now known, blogging.

Secondly, blogging offers synchronous and a-synchronous communication modes, is dialogic and yet demands a higher level of formality, i.e., accuracy, in its discussion than other previous online communication mediums (e.g., instant messaging and email). For these reasons and others, blogging is a socially and rhetorically rich genre of the electronic medium through which language learners engage in community-building activities and social connections, all of which only help promote acquisition of the target language.

The third prong of this approach centers on reversing the current trend in composition pedagogy: the mining of ESL approaches for application in native language users' composition classes. It will be shown that the reversal of this technique can not only inform and support the existence and design of blogging activities in a CALL-driven



ESL classroom, but can also serve to further synthesize existing approaches in a way that validates CALL, more generally, rather simply adding to its burden of being widely accepted.

This concludes the section of research considerations and brief background descriptions of the topic at hand. We will now proceed to the literature review.

### 3. CMC Mediums and their Efficacy in the Classroom

#### 3.1 CALL

As early as twenty-five years ago ESL instructors were discussing the prospect of constructing and applying CALL strategies to their classrooms (Chapelle 2005b). They were also questioning their own motives for integrating this type of instruction into their existing curriculums – was this a bad case of technocentrism, Hawthorne syndrome, or worse, the result of an effective marketing strategy on the part of ESL software makers? Gradually, Chapelle notes, the tone changed from ‘should computers be used’ to ‘how can we more effectively make use of existing technologies to enhance and make the learning process more accessible for our students’ (2001). This is an important change of focus, because not only is it indicative of the general consensus of acceptance (perhaps too much so) of CALL strategies, but also the implicit recognition that technology, distance learning and communications, as well as the research process is now so steeped in computer-mediated tools, that to ignore that facet of our daily activities—or worse to deny others access to such tools and opportunities—would be to wantonly ignore the need and expectation for learners to acquire electronic literacies and to communicate competently in registers associated with electronic modes (e.g., e-mail, chatting, and blogging).

Writing, even in its simplest of forms, is understood to develop our cognitive abilities in such a way as to make possible increasingly more complex thought.

connections through their visual 'capture' in text. Pennington (2004) cites this capture as being critical to the expansion of our cognitive world and our access to other ones.

Today our access to information resources on computers, CD-ROM databases, Internet search tools, multimedia utilities, and people made accessible through e-mail and websites expands our cognitive worlds and resources to a virtually unlimited degree. At the same time, these electronic media are changing our modes of interaction with information and with each other. (2004: 70)

Warschauer speaks to this point more succinctly: "today, social, economic, and technological transformations are again aligned to bring about major changes in literacy practices" (2004: 111). Ong observes more obliquely that more of what is said and written in the future will be determined by the "shape" that electronics give to social organization (1981). This bilateral re-shaping occurs through the use of new tools, as Ong notes: "writing and print and later, electronic devices, must have reshaped man's contact with actuality through the word" (1981: 92).

The use of the computer in the context of composition, and specifically ESL composition has been linked with social and meta-language benefits that continue to serve students outside of the network based language learning setting (Pennington 2005). These benefits include an increased positive attitude toward writing in the context of CALL, since much of the hassle of revision, and recopying has been reduced, if not negated entirely. Students experience a decrease in their general apprehension of fear of composition, in large part because errors are easily adjusted, but also because text manipulation has become nearly effortless (Pennington 2005).

Other benefits of CALL include the production of longer texts and a reduction in overly self-conscious construction; however there is a word of caution here: Pennington notes that “text produced with a computer is less likely to be written in set rhetorical modes and the standard of formal written language than text produced by traditional means,” (i.e., traditional in the sense of pen and paper composition and typewriters) (2005:74).

It has been further suggested that not only does computer assisted composition support surface level revisions (e.g., grammar and punctuation), but it also stimulates meaning-level revisions (e.g., content organization) when it is “aligned with a process approach, which often includes peer feedback,” (e.g., blogging) (Pennington 2005: 75). In support of this, she cites her study which showed that computer assisted composition in the ESL context provided the necessary scaffolding for an overall increase in total revisions, and most importantly, meaning-level ones, when the approach was coupled with peer feedback. Like most tools, it would seem that CALL is only as effective as the approach governing its implementation.

After reviewing what appear to be clear benefits to a form of CALL coupled with peer feedback, Pennington admits that “autonomous word processing is no longer the main arena of computer based developments” (2005: 79). As such, if language learning is clearly a collaborative activity and computer assisted composition is effective to the degree that it incorporates peer editing and review, then composition in CALL should naturally benefit further from the network based approach (e.g., Kern and Warschauer 2000). As Ong notes, “human communication is never one-way. Always it not only calls

for response but is shaped in its very form and content by anticipated response” (Ong 2003 [1982]).

Pennington sees the movement of linking L2 learners over Local Area Networks (LANs), whose boundaries typically are confined to a language learning lab, and Wide Area Networks (WANs), whose boundaries extend anywhere from a college campus computer network to the World Wide Web, as one that encourages student-fronted classrooms with an emphasis on collaboration and active participation. In contrast, she describes the traditional classroom in the following terms:

the pattern of interaction in classrooms the world over tends to be organized around a relatively restricted three-move pattern of: a) a teacher’s *initiation* move (most commonly by asking a question and requesting a response), followed by b) a *response* by one or more students, and then c) teacher *follow-up* to the student response (most commonly by an evaluation such as “good” or “correct.” (2005: 79)

Because there are additional opportunities for collaboration (e.g., peer, or ‘team’ editing), participation, and access to resources, having students communicate over a network – be that a LAN or WAN, promotes a richer communicative dynamic outside of the traditional dialogical approach, as well as it adds increased interest and texture to the ESL writing classroom.

In summarizing recent findings on L2 learner interactions over a WAN, Pennington notes that the degree of acquired competence was correlated with the degree to which the communication was limited or specified; that is to say, the more freedom the students had to communicate with native speakers in terms of topic choice and

convenience, the more motivated the students were to do so. Highly motivated students in an environment where the topic of communication is mutually negotiated between communicators provides the sort of authentic language learning opportunities that closely resembles face-to-face interactions (Murray 2005). In addition, as Pennington notes, “placing L2 learners in a computer network encourages a more equal social structure that results in a more participatory form of communication, with the particular benefit for language learners of more speaking time in the L2” (2005: 81). More communicative opportunities in a less face threatening environment seems to indicate a need to engage with new media on the part of ESL writing instructors, and speaks to a kind of obligation to incorporate network based practices into L2 learning pedagogy (Pennington 2005).

This obligation to incorporate network based practices brings with it attending and outmoded expectations and benchmarks for L2 learners’ writing, in terms of both its organization and content. Since LANs and WANs form a new medium of communication, it should come as no surprise that when used as tools, they yield new voices, new languages, new literacies, and new processes (cf. Ong 2002 [1982]). To this end, Pennington notes that “such [network based] writing environments encourage a high degree of creativity and novelty” (2005: 82). This assertion suggests that a process driven approach to ‘knowledge making’ within a community of practice facilitates language play, which we know to be highly beneficial in ESL and EFL contexts (see Cook 1997). Pennington ostensibly agrees with this conclusion, especially in the context of online space, which is ripe with opportunities for the creation of “alternate selves,” and “experimenting with roles we might not have assumed in face-to-face, “live” communication” (2005: 82). As further evidence that Pennington promotes this sort of

language play, witness the following: “By promoting experimentation and creativity, interactive writing environments may enhance the language-learning process and so be especially beneficial to L2 writers” (2005: 83).

Unfortunately, the acceptance of CALL has been so overwhelming that it has actually come as a detriment to the field, despite its explosive research activity in recent years (Chapelle 2005b; Egbert and Petrie 2005; Huh and Hu 2005). Most egregious of the research offenses committed in this field is the failure to satisfactorily ground the research in, or an outright omission of, an SLA theoretical foundation for learner tasks (Egbert 2005), the addition of which would situate and reveal new information about the process and pace of acquired competencies that learners are experiencing. An insightful exploration of such a process could only better inform and shape future curricula. In addition to the absence of theoretical grounding in many studies (Egbert 2005), there are the problems of focusing too much on the computer or technology used (Warschauer 2004), and rather less on the actual methodology and task, as well as only discussing partial results for the study, i.e., the positive results (Huh and Hu 2005). Thus, the more balanced and analytical framing of the research is lost, which again diminishes what we can draw away from the work for future applications and research. Huh and Hu also attribute this lost perspective to not only the absence of theoretical justification, but also the absence of agreed-upon standards of research. This criticism does not so much reference a preference for either qualitative or quantitative investigations over the other, since both provide insights that the other cannot, but rather a diminished awareness on the part of researchers about how a teaching perspective (e.g., interactionist, sociocultural) will necessarily shape and frame not only the study but its results or

implications. Such construals should in no way be regarded as negative; it is important to be able to define the frame in which one is working, however it is equally important to acknowledge that such a frame is nothing more or less than a particular lens or perspective.

The following subsections describe two research frames commonly used in CALL theory, those being the sociocultural and interactionist approaches. Both of these approaches speak directly to certain features of blogging and are used later to analyze the expected efficacy of a blogging task.

### 3.1.1 *CALL Perspectives*

#### 3.1.1.1 The Sociocultural Perspective

Warschauer, one of the most notable CALL researchers, is a proponent of the sociocultural perspective, as mediated through Vygotsky. Warschauer is especially interested in the way tools necessarily transform the action and output that is obtained from them—a Vygotskian idea—but in Warschauer’s case, he is interested in applying that transformation to CALL. He asserts, “what is thus significant about various tools—such as computers, writing implements, or language itself—is not their abstract properties, but rather how they fundamentally transform human action” (2005: 42).

Warschauer states further on the topic of tool incorporation for a given action: “by being included in the process of behavior, [the incorporation of tools or *mediational means*] alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions” (2005: 42). The implication here



is that this principle, here attributed to Vygotsky, can be applied to CALL in the sense that new technologies can and will change the process of previous activities. He goes on to say “we do not now have a traditional form of writing plus the computer, but rather we have entirely new forms of writing that need to be taught in their own right” (2005: 42). This in itself is a powerful statement that attests to the power genre and medium have over the work mediated through them (e.g., blogging), as well as the implicit need to teach electronic literacies as though they are facets of communicative competence.

The second point Warschauer makes in regards to the sociocultural perspective of CALL concerns social learning. A priority is placed on the type of learning which incorporates the language and linguistic chunks of others, an idea he credits with Vygotskian, but that is also echoed in Bakhtin (1982: 240). This social or collaborative learning is important, according to Warschauer, from the perspective that such an incorporative process can reveal “how they [L2 learners] refine their writing for, and with input from, an authentic audience” (2005: 43). To this end, Curran and Stelluto suggest that this perspective views “language development as occurring through interactions in communities of practice located within specific cultural, historical, and political contexts” (2005: 781). It is through this contact with communities of practice that learners are expected to revise and redefine their identities and roles, and in this way “cross linguistic and cultural boundaries” in their journey towards an expanded membership in the target society (2005: 781).

In the third priority, that of genetic analysis, Warschauer prioritizes the ‘situating’ and ‘contextualizing’ of existing technologies within the L2 learner’s cultural framework, in order to better understand how those technologies function to motivate or guide

learners' interactions with the technology. This last prong of the sociocultural perspective deals most directly with issues of literacies, identities, and culture. Chapelle sees this cultural exchange as a necessary variable that must be accounted for when formulating an Internet pedagogy, since such "cross-cultural communication is inevitable in most internet activities" (2001: 25).

The socially constructed perspective, especially filtered through Vygotskian cultural psychology, accounts for much of what drives Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) (Chapelle 2005b). Chapelle notes that "the social structure of an activity can include the computer software with which a learner interacts in addition to other learners who collaborate in the same room or from remote locations through networked computers" (2001: 32). Unfortunately, the heavy use of acronyms, especially those coined by multiple authors in order to more precisely describe the activity being referenced, tends to muddy the waters of meaning; therefore for our purposes, it is important to recognize that much of the supposed distinction between related terms, e.g., NBLT and CSCL is one largely of perspective. That is to say, the teaching, in the former instance, must necessarily inform the learning, in the latter instance, and vice versa.

#### 3.1.1.2 The Interactionist Perspective

The interactionist perspective hinges largely on the idea that there is a greater potential for language development to be found through increased interaction and interactivity.

This approach is driven largely by the expectation that if meaningful interactions increase

in frequency, the L2 learner will have obtained that many more chances to develop the requisite language skills of meaning construction and the acquisition of verbal and non-verbal competencies to respond appropriately to a given request or response. The subtle adjustments required in learners' conversations to construct meaning and negotiate referential information result in a greater attention to, and improvement in, linguistic form<sup>1</sup> (Ellis 1984; Gass and Varonis 1994; Pica, Young, and Doughty 1987). More specifically, Pica *et al* (1987), as well as Gass and Varonis (1994), provided direct evidence through their studies that students required to engage in interaction to complete a task exhibited better comprehension than did those students who were not permitted to interact. Interestingly enough, in the latter study, increased comprehension followed through the students from the variable group until their next interaction, thus showing evidence of *acquired* competency through interaction. It should be noted, especially in the last case, that Gass and Varonis suspect that too much focus or attention on linguistic form at the outset may actually delay linguistic development. The interactionist proponents claim to have largely overcome this issue, since the activity itself distracts the learner from this formal attention.

Chapelle applies the interactionist perspective to CALL by first maintaining that in large part, no one can really differentiate between *interaction* and *interactivity*, much less can they tell us precisely what the terms denote (2005: 56). Instead, Chapelle focuses on what she believes to be the three interactions taking place in a CALL environment, and predicts their benefits using the interactionist hypothesis. These interactions can be summarized in the following: 1) interactions between people (communication over

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<sup>1</sup> Here, the improvement in linguistic form through interaction references an improvement in 'interlanguage.'

distances or face-to-face which have the posited benefit of meaning negotiation; 2) interaction between the person and the computer which will enhance, or modify output<sup>2</sup>; and 3) the intra-action that takes place in the person's mind which has the benefit of directing the learners' attention to linguistic form (input) (2005: 55). Of note in this taxonomy of interactions is the sense that, as Chapelle puts it, "discussion of CALL pedagogy frequently refers to the principles and examples that assume an interactionist perspective" (2005: 56). This assumption, as Chapelle refers to it, is important, as it alludes to what was referred to earlier in this section as 'defining the box.' As such, according to Chapelle, a good deal of CALL pedagogy simply takes the interactionist perspective as a given frame.

Chapelle is careful to identify seven characteristics that effective CALL software would contain, all of which are grounded in the interactionist approach:

- 1) Make key linguistic features salient.
- 2) Offer modifications of linguistic input.
- 3) Provide opportunities for comprehensible output.
- 4) Provide opportunities for learners to notice their errors.
- 5) Provide opportunities for learners to correct their linguistic output.
- 6) Support modified interaction between the learner and computer.
- 7) Provide opportunities for the learner to act as participant in an L2 task. (2005: 57)

Chapelle's taxonomy of desirable CALL software characteristics is further relevant because, as she acknowledges, the list is based on theory (interactionist) and is defensible

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<sup>2</sup> The tool's (computer) ability to enhance or change output is meant to bring to mind Warschauer.

on the basis that it meets the target priorities of that theory. The application of this list to task construction has a greater yield than one not devoted to a particular perspective or 'box,' since they tie theory with a practical "course of action," as well as the potential they have to serve as research hypotheses within interactionist research (2005: 57).

Chapelle makes important connections between traditional interactionist pedagogy and CALL approaches. For example, she recognizes that while traditional interactionist approaches rely on or assume face-to-face communication for the purpose of meaning negotiation, CALL clearly requires an extended paradigm since most instances of it do or at least can rely solely on distance learning modes (e.g., the various synchronous and asynchronous electronic genres referred to prior section); perhaps one that has not yet been clearly plotted.

Chapelle notes, "the SLA tradition that the research comes from, however, is based primarily on face-to-face interaction, and therefore the varieties of interaction that can occur in the electronic setting may require additional constructs for analysis" (2005: 61). The salvaged kernel at the heart of interactionist CALL pedagogy and research is the emphasis on the linguistic and personal benefits to be gained on the part of learners through social interaction "with a partner or a community of learners" (2005: 60). This emphasis on a community of learners is especially fruitful for the purposes of this investigation since blogging, as an NBLT task, or more broadly, an approach to L2 composition, relies heavily on the assumption that there will be a community of practice.

Critical to the success of a community of practice is the learner's desire or motivation to communicate and make use of all available opportunities to engage in authentic language acts. Chapelle notes that this desire or motivation is considered simply

a “willingness to communicate” (WTC), and as such, it is a socioaffective condition for second language acquisition (SLA) (2005: 50). The term WTC captures the idea of their being an investment on the part of the learner in an activity that prompts authentic engagement with a specific person at a specific time (Chapelle 2005a). In addition, there are several factors which influence the necessary feature of WTC in SLA:

- 1) the desire to communicate with a particular person,
- 2) communicative self-confidence at that particular moment,
- 3) interpersonal motivation, the desire to control or affiliate with others,
- 4) inter-group motivation (related to the speaker’s group affiliation),
- 5) self-confidence,
- 6) intergroup attitudes (e.g., integrativeness)
- 7) social situation (i.e., features of context affecting affiliation,
- 8) communicative competence,
- 9) intergroup climate, and
- 10) personality. (2005: 50)

Chapelle offers the conditions above as an initial filter for task selections in a CALL environment, though she concedes there are other factors which should be considered, as well. First, there is a lack of a needs-based assessment of the learner(s) in question, which would ascertain their learning preferences, cognitive style, and possibly their age. Secondly, the overall affects the task has on the students, teachers, and anyone else involved should be identified beforehand. Lastly, an audit of available resources

should be made, the (e.g., number of computers available). Chapelle cites these factors in conjunction with the cognitive and socio-affective learning conditions to be carefully considered during the evaluation of a CALL task. These considerations were prompted, in large part, to what Chapelle refers to as a lack of “L2 materials evaluation” and their being “no systemic guidance for formulating such principles” (2005: 51).

Chapelle took these criteria further, and when she extended the implications of the prior consideration and factors, she expanded her criteria in six new ways. As she points out, these six new criteria rely on existing research and theory in SLA, and seek to determine, collectively, the appropriateness of a CALL task.

First, the extent to which a task focuses on “or draws beneficial attention to form” determines its degree of *language learning potential* (2005: 55). This criterion can be observed from task features like interactional modification, modification of output, control, and time constraints.

*Learner fit* is a term Chapelle uses to describe the need for a pragmatic assessment of learner needs and abilities, and correlates this with the obligation for instructors to use tasks that “will provide learners with an opportunity to work with a range of target structures appropriate to their level” (2005: 56). Tasks using target structures that are beyond the learners’ abilities do not provide useful or meaningful challenges for the learner, since those challenges will go unmet.

Another useful criterion for determining a CALL task’s appropriateness is *meaning focus*. Meaning focus is a criterion that primarily concerns a learner’s object of attention during the task. That is to say, a learner should be primarily focused with the meaning of the language needed to complete the CALL task.

*Authenticity*, a criterion that is under particular scrutiny in CALL task context due to the replacement of face-to-face interaction with network based interaction, refers to “the degree of correspondence between an L2 learning task and tasks that the learner is likely to encounter outside the classroom. Authenticity is closely related to the concept of using language for specific purposes with the expectation that that repeated ‘practice’ will context-specific abilities on the part of the L2 learner.

The need for *positive impact* refers to the hope that classroom activities will teach something more than language; “they should help learners develop their metacognitive strategies in a way that will allow them to develop their learning in the classroom, as well as to learn beyond the classroom” (2005: 57). This criterion also concerns the development of a pragmatic interest in and engagement with the target culture in a way that will encourage L2 learners’ willingness to look for chances to communicate in the L2.

*Practicality* refers to the degree of ease with which L2 learners and instructors can implement a given CALL task in their classroom. This criterion can at times include the availability of technological resources (e.g., internet access), and the social and institutional practices that instructors should be aware of in order to make informed decisions about which kinds of resources are suitable for their learners; that is to say, which resources the instructor can feasibly use in CALL task, while providing the necessary language and technical guidance to maximize the task’s efficacy.

Thus concludes our discussion of CALL, its perspectives, and its functions in an ESL classroom. The following section provides a deeper discussion of composition



pedagogy and the specific insights this field has that can be used to inform an ESL composition class.

### 3.2 Insights from Composition Pedagogy

The contrast between active engagement, in the sense of student-student and student-instructor, and that of 'knowledge transfer' is a stark one and one of which researchers in composition pedagogy are particularly conscious. On this point, Warschauer comments that there have been historically two schools of thought: those that view education as knowledge transfer and those that view it as a constructivist process. In criticism of both, Warschauer asserts "both, however, downplay the social aspect of education, and it is that aspect that is particularly relevant to [Information and Communication Technology] ICT" (Warschauer 2004: 119).

In the following discussion, composition theorists are trying to 'manage' the social and cultural divisions between the students themselves and between the students and the teacher in such a way as to minimize the rhetorical and communicative distance between them by way of making this issue a priority in their communications with each other. This democratization of the classroom, as well as the necessary effects it induces on classroom negotiations, is entirely analogous to the encouraged increase in personal and social agency that users experience through blogging. That is, they are engaged on equal footing with each other and actively publishing content and ideas for the benefit of their peers' and instructor's responses. Elbow proposes that in order to effectively minimize the imbalanced power relations between instructors and students, we must find

a way to position the students as experts in something with regard to their compositions.

He asserts:

Therefore, unless we can set things up so that our first year students are often telling us about things that they know better than we do, we are sabotaging the essential dynamic of writers. We are transforming the process of writing into the process of being tested. (1995: 81)

Closing these distances, as well as renegotiating what we, as instructors and researchers, mean when we use the terms 'tool,' and 'skill' in reference to language may help to students to more effectively acquire academic discourse as well as critical place for their voice in academe.

Shaughnessy is particularly concerned with the noticeable social distance found in most composition classrooms. She sees it as very much a problem that educators have inflicted on their own environment in an effort to prescribe and measure the precise distance writers must travel in order to be deemed competent or literate, while wholly ignoring that these skills come less by way of studying verb inflections and more through interactions with what she calls the 'the tower,' i.e., the exclusive academy ((1998) [1976]). She determines that in their writing, students are so concerned with answering each point of the rubric that they fail to slowly generate what she calls an "orienting conviction" that would serve as a compass for their writing; that orienting conviction would guide them through a developed paragraph with its requisite assertions, connections, and conclusions. Much like Pratt's "contact zone," a term Pratt uses to describe the "social space where cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in

contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power (...),” the social space where L2 composition students and their instructors meet can often be governed by their respective senses of community and authority (35). This sense of community and authority must further be developed and negotiated within the L2 composition student’s writing if critical reasoning and community building activities are to be prioritized as valued outcomes—outcomes which are difficult to achieve if the instructor remains locked away in his or her ‘tower.’ These ‘tools’ or ‘skills’ of composition do not lend themselves easily to the formulation of discursive recipes like the five sentence paragraph cliché, but require continued and extended play with analysis, others’ writings, and the ways in which the two forms of language – both speaking and writing “both support and undo each other” (Shaughnessy 8).

The level of formal analysis and the ability to effectively organize their ideas—much less the vocabulary needed to express thoughts about thoughts—cannot be acquired through standard oral dialogue. Shaughnessy notes that the differences between the two in some sense accounts for the inability of basic writers to transfer ‘what they know’ into formal discourse, since they may or may not be aware of the requisite tone and logic required to communicate an idea in written language, as opposed to the looser and non-verbal signals available to them (interruption, arm-waving, etc.) that they use to indicate propositions, which in the case of speech, they will most likely not be required to defend. Shaughnessy contrasts the relative safety of speech constructions with the intimidating lens of scrutiny that writing promises to bear upon students’ ideas:

The spoken language, looping back and forth between speakers, offering chances for groping and backing up and even hiding, leaving room for the

language of hands and faces, of pitch and pauses, is by comparison [to speech] generous and inviting. (6)

Mike Rose seems to answer this challenge with what he determines to be the primary objective for composition classrooms, that being to “engage young writers in rich, natural language use” (1985: 11). He goes on further to place the composition movements of writing as a process, liberal studies, and ethnographies as the fulcrums around which current writing pedagogy turns. The foci on cultural context, idea development and decreased attention to form and grammar have each begun to start composition on the road to increased peer review and interaction. Rose takes issue with what he deems to be the archaic perspective of English language teaching, which he asserts educators still retain to a surprising degree today, that perspective being the focus on theory and principle presentation rather than the development of analytical and creative skills on the part of the writer (1985: 16). Rose suggests redefining ‘skill’ in such a way as to eliminate the connotation of rote memorized technique and favors its becoming “a complex interweaving of sophisticated activity and rich knowledge” (1985: 16). This kind of skill can only increase in efficacy through continued interaction and interpretation of others’ ideas; it is a critical thinking tool that promotes continued creative connections rather than the fulfillment of stale rubrics. More on this point, Rose states:

writing seems central to the shaping and directing of certain modes of cognition, is integrally involved in learning, is a means for defining the self and defining reality, is a means of representing and contextualizing

information (which has enormous political as well as archival importance)  
(...). (1985: 17)

Writing as a process is a tool that Rose sees as being one of continual refinement over the course of a lifetime.

Among the other terms Rose takes issue with is that of 'illiteracy,' a loaded, amorphous, and negative term, to be sure. Literacies, as in the recognition of having access to a rich body of connected knowledge in an area is one side of the term; the negative of this term, as Rose notes, has remedial, mentally defective, culturally unaware connotations—connotations that do not take into account the enormous amount of functional literacies that students perform everyday: "reading and writing, as any ethnographic study would show, are woven throughout our students' lives. They write letters; some keep diaries. They read about what interests them (...). Reading, for many of them, is part of religious observation" (1985: 24). The real relationship between reading and writing is one wherein each reinforces and strengthens the other, and their authentic and prominent roles in our daily lives should be acknowledged. The overall agreement that teachers need to recognize students' daily activities as including such mundane language tasks such as work-related reading or writing complaint letter to companies, suggests that these two skills should be presented together since they are performed together.

In an effort to recognize the daily language activities, specifically in the case of writing, that students perform, Kutz maintains that a student has a right to expect that his or her language usage be respected upon entering the university. Kutz cites the 1974

CCCC policy which asserts that all speakers have access to a wide range of styles and can make appropriate changes to adapt to a given situation (38). While Kutz recognizes what is often perceived as the gulf between language use on the part of beginning writers and standard academic discourse, she also sees the job of the composition instructor be one that “adds yet another style to their [the students’] existing repertoire” and not to replace the students’ existing style with another (38).

Framing the acquisition of academic-speak as merely a style shift may seem a little dismissive or reductive, however Kutz accounts for those essays that are composed with rich ideas and insights but lack the proper stylistic ‘scaffolding’ as an output which occupies an intermediary position in the student’s struggle for academic literacy. She makes this intermediary position analogous to one of interlanguage, a term borrowed from Krashen and SLA theory (Krashen 1981) that accounts for the process by which learners achieve ‘natural language use,’ i.e., the “unconscious and intuitive responses to language in meaningful ways” (40).

Other research has indicated that CALL activities, especially with the advent of newer mediums of communication, have generated new forms of cultural literacies, especially for young, college-age learners (Murray 2005). Murray defines, and broadens, the term literacy and captures its new connotations in a CALL environment:

Literacy is also a contested concept, with definitions and use ranging from the ability to read and write, that is, to code and decode, to the ability to function in reading and writing in everyday events to understanding how language and ideology function through written texts and being able to appropriate written language for one’s own creative and personal needs. (2005: 189)

This definition of literacy is one that seems especially valuable for the purposes of this research, in the sense that the term now includes pragmatic skills that require interpretation such as how to communicate online, how to access and assess online information, and how to incorporate online resources into one's own writing agenda. Murray notes that reading and writing in an electronic medium also requires the L2 learner to navigate new technologies and read digital texts in the target language. This skill might be especially important in general, and in specific to blogging, since it is broadly understood that "screen reading is more difficult than print reading" (Murray 190). In the context of CALL, such CMC skills would be prioritized in light of the use of asynchronous CMC modes (e.g., e-mail, discussion lists, blogging). Murray asserts that the newer asynchronous modes have several advantages, especially from an interactionist view, because they provide L2 learners with opportunities to engage native speakers at a distance using these various mediums, and can do so at their own time and speed (2005).

Murray outlines the basic advantages of recognizing and teaching to this new concept of literacy because she sees the new CMC mediums as being portals of practical, authentic, and autonomy-supporting opportunities for L2 learners to engage with native speakers (196). The expectation that there will be an outgrowth of meaningful and meaning-focused interaction is primarily based on the assumption that the construction of this dialogue or communication will rest on a scaffolding of SLA research and theory, rather than focused particularly on the technology. In addition, learners will learn ways to scaffold their newly acquired language, using the forms they mutually create and discover with each other in these networked environments.

For Kutz, applying the concept of interlanguage to basic writers is a meaningful one, since academic discourse and organization represents a new style or dialect to be mastered on the part of the student. She maintains that these language learners will not learn how to construct their own rhetorical scaffolding through the mastery of grammatical rules, but rather will “learn out of communicative need in real contexts where language is pushed by meaning” (41).

Again, the process of reading and writing informing one another produces growth when students are exposed to meaningful texts, this growth manifest itself in the mastery of “conventional forms of not only literary genres, but of standard English” (42).

According to Kutz, the requisite style shift is inevitable, unconscious and intuitive, as the student is exposed to a pattern of usage in meaningful texts that is both logical and organized.

Digital literacy and visual literacy are two new components of the style shift of which L2 learners are, and will be expected to be, competent in their manipulations. According to Murray, the term literacy has long been used to refer several different kinds of language competencies:

Literacy is (...) the ability to write, to the ability to function in reading and writing in everyday events, to understanding how language and ideology function through written texts and being able to appropriate written language for one’s own creative and personal needs (2005: 189).

That being said, the ability to meet the benchmarks for literacy outlined above also now include the regular and comfortable use of new technologies put to these ends.

Warschauer comments on this new concept of literacy by referring to it as “the



interpretive and writing skills necessary to communicate via online media,” and at a more advanced level “the pragmatics of effective argumentation and persuasion in various sorts of internet media (e.g., email, bulletin boards)” (2004: 117).

If we mine the resources of composition research effectively, we find that there is a general consensus that learning through writing must be collaborative and reinforced with peer and outside texts in order to reinforce the academic dialect in composition. In addition, it is not helpful to view the acquisition of this style-shift as coming at the cost of the speaker’s existing level of language mastery, but rather as simply mastery of another genre. By respecting the level of interlanguage present, we also diminish the distance between students and instructors, simply by focusing on or acknowledging the learners’ ‘literacies’—which one should assume are many and that extend beyond the classroom. To focus on their ‘illiteracies’ is to focus on the attending baggage of defective, remedial, and flawed writing, which denies the learner their voice, both culturally and literally, as well as does it deny them any agency or critical authority that they might derive from additional exposure to the writing and response process, e.g., like the exposure that could be gained from a network-based composition project. Indeed, even in an ESL writing context, it has been suggested that as the new mediums of hypermedia and computer networks develop, the effect has been that the “new domains of communication and literacy” that are emerging are moving us away from conventional definitions of literacy, “in terms of a written text, and toward a new orientation to visual and combined media literacy” (Pennington 2005: 84).

If we accept that alternative forms of literacy have developed – literacies that assume exposure to combined media literacy, as well as that collaborative composition

coupled with peer review has enjoyed success when it has been grounded in SLA research and theory, then it follows that a certain amount of scaffolding needs to be developed by instructors to facilitate the level of interaction and engagement needed for L2 learners to maximize their use of networked communications and content. To that end, Beckett and Slater have developed methodological tools, which they have termed a “project framework,” which seeks to “help socialize students in a new way of thinking about language and language learning” (2005: 108). Beckett and Slater assert that the use of projects that organize ideas provide an “effective way to teach language and content simultaneously,” and in addition their use of the project framework stimulates L2 learners’ abilities because the framework establishes a practical connection that students can appreciate between language learning and its application.

As part of their study, Beckett and Slater made the goals and resources of their project-driven classroom explicit to students. Raising learner awareness to the efficacy of learning a language while at the same time learning content in that language was deemed necessary and appropriate since some students expressed confusion that the course layout was something they had not experienced before hand. To remedy this, Beckett and Slater explained to the students at the start of the course the purpose and objectives of the project framework.

Beckett and Slater’s research took place over a standard 14-week course length, in a content-based, undergraduate level class offered to exchange students at a Canadian University. There were 57 students involved in the study, all of whom had an upper intermediate TOEFL score between 420 and 540. An initial survey given at the start of the course revealed that these students had been learning language in a context where

language, content and skills were learned and taught as separate entities. Data was garnered from teacher and student reflections, portfolio projects, and end-of-course interviews. Out of 57 students, 79% reported that the project and diary helped them chart their own acquisition progress. Beckett and Slater assert: "All students felt that they had learned a considerable amount about their chosen topics as well as the language and skills needed to demonstrate their knowledge" (2005: 114). In addition, 79% reported having a clear understanding of the content-based approach to ESL learning. The authors go on to further show through student excerpts that students recognized how they had learned language, subject matter content, and skills simultaneously.

This simultaneous grasp of language and content was directly related with the success of the project framework, according to Beckett and Slater. They assert: "The project framework is a tool that addresses the simultaneous learning of language, content, and skills" (Beckett and Slater 2005: 110). According to them, content and language integration theory (as it is broadly understood) expects that L2 learners are engaged in a unique assimilation of their second language learning and their second academic culture through drawing on prior knowledge. The project framework calls for students to be made aware of new ways of thinking about language and language learning, while housing these activities inside of a new institutional context. The project framework is seen by Beckett and Slater as a mediation tool (in the Vygotskian sense) to facilitate acquisition.

Of particular interest to this research are the composition requirements for the class. Students were asked to keep a diary, and to explicitly describe the language, content, and skills they had been using throughout the week—all of which were to be

written in the L2. Admittedly, content-based ESL learning requires some degree of needs-analysis considerations, and the structure of the course feeds in seamlessly to existing Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) pedagogy that is currently employed in college level composition courses for native speakers; however, to the degree that those two prior restrictions are considered, the project framework seems like an obvious way to integrate proficiency expectations in the areas of language, content, and the development of cognitive skills.

This concludes our discussion of composition and its proposed connections with blogging in an ESL classroom. We will now proceed to discuss recent research that has sought to understand the recent explosion of blogging and what implications that has for constructing community-building repertoires and engaging other writers in communities of practice.

### 3.3 Blogging Communities and their Social Impact

Blogging is fast becoming a booming field for scholarly research, particularly in regards to what the popularity of this form of online communication (or genre) might say about western culture and the primacy it places on personal *experience, its implications for the* public sphere and rational-critical debate, and how the activity might reveal new ways of constructing discursive identities. Of course, there are nuggets of important insights to be found in all of these explorations, and for that reason some of the following *discussion* does not so much seek to encompass the breadth of the socially functional role blogging plays in the West, so much as it does to situate it in regards to its cultural relevancy,

functions, roles, and social implications. Issues of cultural relevancy, functionality, and social agency seem critical to understanding how such a medium can be employed as a useful and effective tool in the ESL writing classroom.

It has been argued that blogging is essentially an American, or at the very least North American, practice (Barton 2005; Rak 2005; Serfaty 2004). In addition to its being a 'westernized' medium of discourse, blogging has become so popular that there are hundred of thousands of blogs being kept on the internet, and that number is growing at an exponential rate (Rak 2005). According to Serfaty, the French to English ratio of blogs is approximately 1: 36.5, and further, the overwhelming majority of those blogs written in English were also written by North Americans (2004: 466). In addition, approximately 60% of households in the United States have internet access (Rak 2004). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that those people creating and using this new genre of communication would be those people for whom this genre has cultural agency and echoes certain cultural values. That being said, it has been argued that "liberal beliefs about the value and rights of the individual remain at the core of most blogging, since most blogs still have the opinion and experiences of one person as their focus" (Rak 2005: 172). In addition, there still remains a certain democratization of this genre; that being, that it is almost as easy to "produce and distribute content (...) as it is to receive it" (Barton 2005: 178). This ease of production and distribution contrasts sharply with the corporate-run history of radio and television, whose broadcasting restrictions effectively eliminate and control all disseminated content. Blogging, as a kind of unofficial writing, "is designed to circumvent the traditional circuit of publishing between the writer, agent, editor, publisher, distributor, and seller" (Rak 2005: 175). So it would seem that there is a

certain ideology in play concerning this phenomenon (Barton 2005; Rak 2005; Serfaty 2004).

While keeping in mind the ideological motivation or explanation of blogging, its popular use is still, in large part, one of personal narrative with “the constant crossing between private experiences which can be revealed because the blogger is interacting with online people” (Rak 2005: 173). Rak notes that this point could be the most singular feature of blogging, since “the belief in individualism and the freedom of expression for individual is particularly important for Americans, who make up the majority of bloggers” (Rak 172). As self-publishers then, blogging is directed towards a given readership, and not to the bloggers themselves (Rak 2005: 175). As such, communication directed outward and for the purposeful consumption and response of others becomes a kind of critical public sphere, rather than an online diary—or at the very least there is a kind of hybridity at work in this genre, as it has conferred immediate social agency to an activity that has historically been deemed private (i.e., writing in a diary). To this end, Serfaty notes that the publication of blogs on the internet “may be seen as upholding a long tradition in self-representational writing even as information technology modifies the forms and functions of such texts” (2004: 457).

Blogging has modified the forms and function in such a way as to make an implicit demand on the reader that he or she must “must perceive or make sense of disparate data provided through diverse media (print, photographs, videos, audio files in an ongoing process of interpretation and construction of meaning” (Serfaty 2004: 461). This self-representational writing is then aided by its corresponding media, which act as props, or reinforcements for the overall coherence of the identity that is constructed

through the blog. Barton suggests that “one of the primary functions of personal blogging is the development of subjectivity, (...) and the blogosphere provides an interiority where bloggers can attain clarity about themselves” (Barton 2005: 184). Barton goes on to say that exposing students to blogging “may be an excellent way of helping them to acquire the subjectivity necessary for engagement in rational-critical debate” (2005: 185). This subjectivity, or self-reflectivity as Serfaty terms it, “enables both writing and the critical distancing from that writing which is crucial to the slow construction of meaning” with which bloggers are engaged (Serfaty 2004: 463). The writer-reader dynamic, in turn, creates a collaborative, “co-production and co-enunciation” of the text, while bloggers still retain a degree of ownership over their work, to the degree that their blogs are read (Serfaty 2004: 465). That is to say, the existence and nature of a blogger’s constructed blog identity is entirely dependent upon the feedback and existence of his or her readership (Rak 2005; Serfaty 2004). That readership forms what several scholars have referred to as a rational-critical public sphere, and as such, forms an effective and supportive means by which to expose learners to critical debate and thereby foster rhetorical awareness. As a proponent of blogging in the composition classroom, Barton asserts that “frequent blogging of the self-reflective kind will help students develop subjectivity and explore their thoughts and feelings in a writing space that is public yet controlled by the student—there is a sense of ownership among bloggers (...)” (2005: 189). Barton also asserts that “a truly enabling composition pedagogy” will develop students’ voices, engage them in a rhetorical way, and lastly merge students’ voices into a polyvocalic, collaborative text that is committed to social action of some kind” (2005: 190). It is precisely this feature of polyvocalic meaning-construction that connects

blogging communities to each other, as well as disseminates information and cultural observation while simultaneously creating that content and culture.

Kumar, Novak, Rhagavan, and Tompkins have completed a large, longitudinal, and socially directed research on the 'blogsphere,' and have noticed that bloggers are becoming increasingly more connected to each other and engaging in community-building activities, as compared to the blogging behavior that they studied in 1999-2000, when blogging was not a household name and had not yet been linked with political resignations (see Ashbee 2003). In a study and statistical demographic analysis of over 25,000 bloggers taken from livejournal.com, Kumar, *et al.*, discovered that communities can be categorized by their 'burstiness', i.e., the degree to which they erupt in sudden activity between their members. Furthermore, a high degree of burstiness can be correlated with certain interests – the majority of which are college related (e.g., fraternity parties, graduate school, mid term exams, etc.). This burstiness in regards to specific college related interests ostensibly suggests that young, tech-savvy, college-connected students are principally responsible for the explosion in blogging and its increasing trend toward community building (Serfaty 2004). The creative social construction of blogging has implications for an ESL classroom, especially in a university situation, because the majority of students could be included in this demographic. However, it would be an overstatement to suggest that this 18-24 year old age group is wholly responsible for the social networks being created; they are simply more responsible than any other demographic.

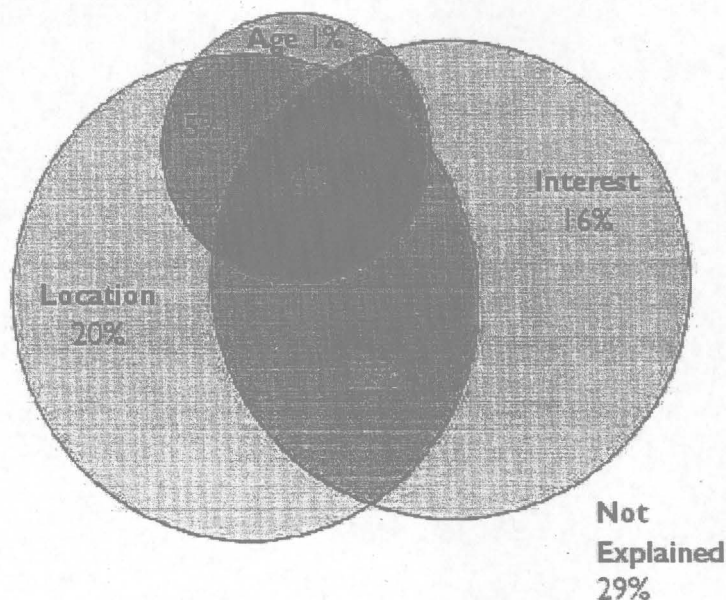
Kumar, *et al.*, represent the 'glue' that bonds together these social networks, in terms of a Venn diagram (see Figure 1) that clearly shows that there are two main



correlations between users who define themselves as members of the same network: location and interest. It should be pointed out that these communities ‘naturally’ organize themselves around this virtual demarcation line, and that bloggers actively seek out other bloggers with whom they can add to their ‘friends list’ – the HTML function which virtually demarcates their social network from others. In defining the structure of the blogosphere, Kumar *et al.*, describes it as a three tiered one:

At the bottom is the individual blogger, who can be defined in terms of age, geography, and interests. These characteristics interact, resulting in clusters of interest groups, often with geographic or demographic correlations. In the middle is a web of friendships between pairs of bloggers. They are frequent and important and are usually explained in terms of shared locations and/or shared interests. Finally, at the top is the evolution of blog communities. (2005: 39).

Figure 1



(Kumar, *et al.* 2005: 38)

It seems, rather, that these three levels of the blogosphere might be more accurately represented in terms of being three-dimensional, because blogging is asynchronous, and due to the RSS subscription feeds<sup>3</sup>, all members of a group are conscious or made to be aware of when another group member updates his or her blog. In this way, it would seem that blogs – once connected to an active network – are representative of that group in as much as they are representative of the blogger's online persona. Therefore, the difference between the individual blogger and the community building members should not be represented as two unconnected levels, tiered by quantity only—as this reveals little. Rather, the rhetorical content of the blog continually shifts between being representative of the blogger and of the blogging (discourse) community. This elaborated understanding of the nature of the 'self' and the 'other(s)' should be, and in some superficial sense is already, a part of critical pedagogical practices, especially in the ESL learning environment, because the possibilities of blogging include the power to produce texts that inform, engage, and connect with other language learners with the added benefit of negotiating one's role within the group at a safe distance. *Pennington asserts that ESL* instructors have an obligation to address the changing values and practices of literacy with regards to these new, networked communities in the following:

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<sup>3</sup> RSS is defined as follows: Really Simple Syndication. RSS is a webfeed that allows a website's frequent readers to track updates on the site using an aggregator. An aggregator is software that retrieves RSS webfeeds in an organized display.

Teachers must acknowledge that the present generation of students is aware of the shift in emphasis from issues of text and language to issues of design, and is developing new values and standards for their communication practices. (2005: 84)

According to Warschauer, these new values and standards of communication are learned by doing—that is, being involved in a community of writers: “one learns to write not by memorizing facts about writing, but by engaging in the social practice of writing in the company of colleagues, peers, critics, and mentors. Learning how to write involves appropriating the language of others (...)” (2004: 122).

This concludes our discussion of blogging, its functions, and affective potential. We now move onto a larger discussion of CMC mediums in general, with regards to the existing research, for the purpose of envisioning an effective placement and incorporation of blogging into an ESL writing class. Because blogging is such a new medium, there is much less research that speaks specifically to its application. For that reason, we turn to other forms of synchronous and asynchronous CMC, in order to decide which features apply to blogging; i.e., what insights can be imported into our research inquiry.

### 3.4 Synthesis

As it was mentioned previously, there is a precedent of success for the marriage of CMC and ESL pedagogy. The following discussion encompasses the asynchronous CMC mediums of email and blogging, as well as the synchronous medium of chatting, with

special attention paid to online peer review (OPR). Despite the fact that chatting is a synchronous medium, it is interesting how an initial medium intersects with the enhanced capabilities of blogging, especially in terms of error recognition and peer review. Since blogging is such a relatively new phenomenon, especially in application to ESL composition classes, it seems particularly important to look out how other CMC mediums have been used within the same context, given that blogging encompasses most (if not all) the features of the others, in addition to its having a more visual presentation.

Rollinson identifies some possible roadblocks to the incorporation of peer feedback in the ESL classroom, while acknowledging that both the literature and instructors have been generally supportive of the concept. It just so happens that many instructors, while agreeing in theory with collaborative writing, think that the task takes up too much valuable class time. In addition, many students instinctively feel “only a better writer—or a native speaker—is qualified to judge or to comment on their written work” (Rollinson 2005: 23). Rollinson identifies several key advantages to using peer feedback in the ESL classroom, all of which are mentioned by the researchers in the coming section:

- 1) “becoming a critical reader of others’ writing may make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing” (24);
- 2) peer editing forces students to write for an audience—an audience who will respond;
- 3) collaborative dialogue is negotiated and managed by two parties who are involved in “highly complex socio-cognitive interactions involving arguing, explaining, clarifying, and justifying;”

4) the social dimension may enhance learners' attitudes towards writing.

(24)

Strenski, Feagin, and Singer analyzed the benefits of assignments that require small groups of students to respond electronically and asynchronously to each other's drafts in a class of ten. These exchanges are printed out and analyzed in terms of the following features: rhetorical/thematic, discursive/environmental, technological, and logistical/time management. Strenski, *et al*, acknowledge that even as compositionists begin to study electronic writing, the "variants proliferate and (...) the terrain shifts under our feet" (2005: 192). Despite the array of other electronic media options, Strenski, *et al*, wanted to return to a basic, often overlooked and undervalued, resource: email for small group peer review. About this pedagogical resource, Strenski, *et al*, claim "email should not be underestimated, (...) it can be systematically exploited for its unique benefits in small group peer review in regular composition classes, as well as professional writing courses" (2005: 192). Strenski, *et al*, cite email's cheapness and convenience, coupled with what they term its "textual hybridity," as reasons for its incorporation in a composition classroom with an expanded understanding of literacies. In addition, Strenski, *et al*, list the most obvious advantages of email writing assignments and peer review to include the following: "promotion of computer literacy, social interaction and community building, student-centered learning, and pre-professional writing practice" (192).

Strenski, *et al*, found in their research that emailed peer reviews frequently elicited superior drafts than did the face-to-face version of the same activity. The

rhetorical distancing in the email medium allowed students to adopt a more 'teacherly' persona, thereby making suggestions and revisions that delved deeper than sentence-level mistakes. In addition, Strenski, *et al*, note that the medium of email itself seems to support a kind of 'rambling' on the part of the writer, more so than does an in-class essay of the same sort. Moreover, this rambling was often "a student's effort to articulate intuited principles of writing, explicitly" (197). Part of the cause for that might be that during in-class assignments, students will typically ask for a requisite page-length before ever proceeding through the task. Another reason that emailed peer reviews were frequently more effective and superior to their face-to-face counterparts was the enthusiasm factor. Students looked forward to receiving email from their peers, and because they knew their peers were waiting for their response, they necessarily felt pressure for their responses to be more reflective, elaborative, and helpful (193).

Strenski, *et al*, had an important and unexpected insight into their peer review email tasks at the end of the semester, when all responses were collated. Students had, "almost unconsciously," developed rhetorical strategies for simultaneously engendering solidarity with other students, while maintaining enough distance to critically read their peers' texts; that is they find rhetorical voices that are at once authorial and non-threatening. Strenski, *et al*, see this development as the students' progression as writers with mastery of "rhetorical position, voice, and ethos" (195).

Of equal importance to this study was the effect this task had on students who were normally silent or otherwise seemingly non-engaged students during in-class work. For Strenski, *et al*, the peer reviewing performed online represented a safe, face-maintaining for students to become truly engaged with their peers and their writing.

Strenski, *et al*, had this to say: “This less structured instructional dynamic makes students more likely to participate with each other online from face-to-face” (198). Furthermore, Strenski, *et al*, saw a spill-over of increased interaction in face-to-face class communications that was rooted in previous, positive, online communication. “The residual effect (...) is that students normally shy to speak in class not only find themselves verbally engaged in the context of the email peer review format” (199). The authors excerpt several responses from ‘shy’ students and conclude: “These students comments reflect a truth too often overlooked in the classroom: Students desperately want to participate in discussion but can be intimidated, even when explicitly invited in” (206).

Essentially, Strenski, *et al*, conclude that email peer review challenges traditional western notions of competitive individualism in the classroom by exposing students to what is “an intrinsically collaborative process” and the “layered rhetorical situation of which peer review is a part” (198). This additional freedom of co-production and critical expression extends itself to the act of peer reviewing as well; Strenski, *et al*, note that the asynchronous feature of email allows students to respond to drafts outside the formal boundaries of academia, thus “permitting them to compose in a space, time, and medium that may be more comfortable for them” (206). This freedom thereby obliges students to cultivate a deeper, collaborative and layered connection with their drafts and responses.

DiGiovanni and Nagaswami investigate what real benefits can be gained from Online Peer Review (OPR), and if it can be used effectively as a replacement or alternative to face-to-face peer review. They cite some of their motivations for this comparison as being the general increase in positive affect and interest students have for

CALL based approaches. To investigate this comparison, they linked both types of peer reviews to regular writing activities, stressing that they (the teachers) would correct any grammar errors, so as to encourage students to focus on idea development and organization.

DiGiovanni and Nagaswami used transcripts of face-to-face peer review, as well as well as printouts of the online peer reviews, in order to compare the two review types in terms of engagement with and depth of topic, the degree to which the suggestions were constructive, and the number and type of negotiations that took place in each instance. They also provided an end-of-course questionnaire, in which the students reported overwhelming support and enthusiasm for the OPRs over the face-to-face ones.

DiGiovanni and Nagaswami report several encouraging insights into the efficacy and success of OPR. They note, "when our students were online, they remained on task and focused" (2001: 268). They later report having to force the students to leave the networked classroom in which the OPR was taking place. They also found that their own jobs were made demonstrably easier, since "teachers can monitor students' interaction much more closely than in face-to-face situations, where only bits of conversations can be heard as they circulate among peer dyads" (2001: 268). They also found that with continued OPR use, students' responses became increasingly more complex and critical as their skills in negotiation increased. One cause for this improvement might be the non-threatening environment (a networked classroom), since the students were at once spontaneous in their responses and yet could rehearse their suggestions and consider each other's drafts at their own pace.



Compositions that take place in comfortable, non-threatening physical and rhetorical spaces (i.e., email) have been looked at by other scholars in terms of their ability to facilitate the adoption of new rhetorical personas. Bloch looks at his 120 unsolicited email communications with his 26 L2 composition students in two advanced graduate-level courses to uncover the ways in which the written word is used for the purposes of making and maintaining relationships, especially in situations where there is a perceived difference in status and power. Bloch notes:

email can also provide students an alternative to face-to-face communication by reducing the pressure on students to produce a constant flow of language in a face-to-face context and by eliminating the problem of heavy accents that can hinder communication. (2002: 118)

After looking at various excerpted rhetorical stances his L2 compositions were able to adopt, Bloch concludes that students seem to unconsciously or intuitively grasp the medium of email as being more than simply written language, but rather a ground on which to negotiate social relationships, thus “to be successful email users requires more than simply fluency,” it requires a sense of when certain expressions or varieties of language forms are appropriate, in short, it requires an instantaneous assessment of one’s relationship status with a given audience (131).

Technological literacies and the attending requisite competency of appropriateness were explored in the form of an ‘email epistolary’ in an ESL classroom by Jeanne Marie Rose. Rose uses the myth of ‘transparent technology,’ that is, the notion that the tool does not affect or determine the characteristics of the product, to reveal that technological literacies are not simply the act of acquiring computer skills, but rather it

“entails consciousness of the complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills involved in operating linguistically within the context of electronic environments” (Rose 2004: 238).

To this end, Rose wanted to help her ESL students to understand and interpret technology critically, and she attempted to review this course objective through the reading and discussion of email epistolary novels. Email epistolary novels, as a literary genre, are “comprised of email messages, rendered in print form” and include conventions like “abbreviations, informal sentence structure, and nonstandard spellings to convey the casual register and speed of much communication” (2004: 238). Rose wanted to design a course where students’ anxieties concerning the surface-level mechanics of their writing could be eased, and a course wherein their writing could be taken seriously. By exposing students to the flexibility and the informal nature of email, Rose hoped to introduce critical investigations of language, literacy and social roles. Also, her purpose in this course focus was to bring about a more nuanced understanding of electronic conversations and roles in which, both teacher and student, enact, while assessing the effects of an individual’s responses on a given discourse. In addition, the novel provided metacommentary on the typical abbreviations and emoticons that have become so ubiquitous in electronic communication. Discussion of this feature fostered awareness of this convention and focused on the outcome of failing to follow accepted conventions. Rose notes more globally that “in this way, the novels highlight the necessity and difficulty of gauging one’s audience online, a principle easily applied to other writing situations” (2004: 240).

Other competencies that Rose explored included social ones, wherein students determined how to construct themselves rhetorically while online, with whom they should correspond, and the degree to which they should disclose aspects of their offline lives. In short, Rose found that critically responding to electronic rhetoric in print-form helps students to understand discourse conventions, builds audience awareness, as well as provides an opportunity for students to consider the attending ethical issues of online representation. Rose notes that, while some might view the casual discourse markers of email to be debilitating to developmental ESL writers, she concludes that the students found this refreshing. For the students, this informal style of communication showed them the ways in which native speakers 'let their guard down,' (e.g., nonstandard spellings, casual sentence constructions, etc.) and in turn encouraged them to produce more rather than to edit their own compositions too soon. Rose notes that too often, the concern on the part of ESL students for topical issues of mechanics can essentially paralyze attempts to cultivate the "broader development of ideas." By decreasing L2 learner anxiety through exposure to casual rhetoric, Rose hopes that students will shift their focus to the expression of ideas and "appeals to audiences" (2004: 240).

As an end-project for the class, Rose asked her ESL writers to compose literacy autobiographies. These biographies reflected what the students had learned about the effects that online communication can have on relationships, social opportunities, and privilege. She found that, for many students, technological literacy and language were closely tied to issues of assimilation and affluence. In the student excerpts, Rose outlines how students, while quick to identify nonstandard African American Vernacular English (AAVE), were not as keen on placing value judgments on nonstandard constructions

commonly used in email (e.g., replacing the copular 'be' with 'b'). Rose suggested that this difference in reaction might suggest an unconscious bid for "white" status. Rose notes that for the students in this ESL class, "developing critical technological literacy encompassed struggles for membership in North American society and the immediate undergraduate community" (2004: 247). In addition, one of Rose's Russian students wrote in his literacy autobiography that he was concerned that the laxness of email might "spawn a deterioration in the English language" (2004: 246). This prescriptive attitude is also, according to Rose, possibly related to his process of assimilation.

Other research has drawn similar conclusions regarding the mediums of CMC and the effects they have both on learner attitudes and the potential CMC has to facilitate a focus on content and idea development, rather than surface-level mechanical difficulties. Fotos remarks that the different CMC mediums can be differentiated in terms of their immediacy. However, asynchronous forms (e.g., email and blogging) "possess stable discourse features, particularly when used for correspondence, chatting, or participation in discussion groups" (2004: 109). This 'stable discourse' with features characteristic of both speech and writing, promotes a scaffolding effect, according to Fotos, in which the embedded text of one writer provides part of the content for each interlocutor's turn at utterances. Fotos suggests that this scaffolding feature is of primary importance for literacy considerations, since it is a process whereby learners "can expand their own knowledge by modeling grammar structures, or borrowing terms from the previous utterance, thereby extending their linguistic development" (2004: 115). Further, these authentic opportunities for communicative writing give the learner "a sense of control over their learning and interaction," as well as it encourages them to invest additional

time on the learning task due their being a real audience and real purpose to their task. The fact that learner's perceive a pragmatic benefit to their electronic communications in the L2 results in their increased motivation, and their realization that their studies are not an end to themselves, but rather a means to having access to "a powerful medium for communication" (2004: 117).

Yuan investigates real-time electronic interaction and its effects on learners' abilities to identify, correct, and reflect on incorrect or inappropriate constructions at her university in Singapore. Of particular importance to this study was the remoteness of the participants during the instant messaging session, and their later cohesion as team members during the peer group session. The results draw similar parallels to Sullivan's and Lindgren's study of real-time composition followed by peer reflection of the composition process. The remoteness of the participants did not impair their ability to compose and peer edit, but rather, this isolation augmented their ability since face maintenance concerns were not as primary as they would be in a traditional language acquisition environment.

Yuan used two male faculty members, who are described as having extensive exposure to English, but who still had difficulty with nouns, articles, verb tenses, and idea organization. Because both subjects were already aware of the relevant grammar rules, Yi felt that it was redundant for her to explain these problematic grammatical elements, so instead she constructed a LAB-based chat room, accessible anywhere in the university, in which the participant were required to chat with each other about 'authentic' topics such as weekend activities and families – and in so doing – negotiate meaning between them. The participants were involved in repair acts and self-repair acts, the former indicates

attempts to repair the other participant's text and latter refers to the participant's attempts to repair his own. The participants, in total, were able to repair on average 8.59% of their initial errors either through self-repair or peer-assisted repair.

Yuan concluded that the necessary element to their improvement was practice, an activity in which both participants had not found an opportunity to engage for several years. On their ability to identify and repair each other's errors, she comments: "This noticing of errors, apart from leading to more target-like language production, also promoted the two learners' language development" (203). To support this premise, she cited Richard Schmidt's *Noticing Hypothesis*, in which he states "noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake" (206). Yuan's methods, which included in-class discussion and synchronous, real-time peer review obviously created an environment that fostered this 'awareness' to which Schmidt refers, as well as an interesting insight into learner language acquisition processes, since the participants' ability identify errors hinged largely on whether the errors obstructed the formation of meaning that was being negotiated, e.g., spelling and verb tenses. Yuan notices that "errors in subject-verb agreement, noun/article, proposition, and transition were less frequently repaired because they were less likely to affect comprehension and communication" (204).

Ideally, Yuan's study would be more valuable if it could be reproduced with a larger participant population, but under the same conditions, i.e., only using participants with a prior knowledge of English syntactic structure, a homogenous L1, and the requirement of 'authentic' conversation topics. In observing the authentic dialogue of the chat print-outs, Yuan describes the interaction forming "a new genre of discourse"

because they “capture the characteristics of both written and oral communications” (205). It is not clear to me that a new medium of communication should immediately acquire the structural connotations of the term ‘genre’, but it does seem possible that supplementary on-line learning environments enhance interaction skills and acquisition in a way that is disinhibiting<sup>4</sup> and inviting.

As mentioned above, Yuan’s study echoes some of the same process-revealing insights as Kirk Sullivan and Eva Lindgren’s piece, “Self-Assessment in Autonomous Computer-Aided Second Language Writing.” In this research, Sullivan and Lindgren show the marked achievement students showed, who were involved in real time revision activities, wherein the students were ‘re-played’ their composition process during peer discussions. Specifically, every addition and deletion the students made, including their substantive revisions of the draft, were recorded on text-memory software (2002: 252). This text memory software records each and every keystroke, including all subsequent deletions and revisions that a student makes. The results of this re-playing were that the students were able to discuss with each other their differing composing styles and identify in real-time the errors that they made, as well and more importantly, the process of composition that had led to those errors. Because this article shows how real-time revision strategies improve learners’ abilities to identify and correct composition processes, it is relevant to blogging, another form of electronic composition, in that blogging interactions can be continually revised and the discursive turn-taking allows for this. This is another example of the historical precedent of success that CMC has enjoyed, and due to the process driven approach, this method intersects with the blogging medium

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term “disinhibiting” here as a descriptor for how students tend to learn when they are both members of a common community of practice and while engaged in interaction that is minimally confrontational (Warschauer 2004).

in much the same way as Yuan's study: the students are actively engaged in public peer-review, error identification, and reflection upon their individual composition processes.

Sullivan and Lundgren's study took place in Sweden with four adult ESL learners (2002). Again, a criticism common to these studies is that the participant population is not sufficiently large enough to more than suggest or tease readers with the possibility of a successful implementation CMC driven pedagogy. In addition, the learners were not homogenous, though all reported that the 'replay' technique was useful and helpful in their future compositions in English. Three of the learners were Swedish and the other was Brazilian – for whom English was her L2 and Swedish, her L3. Due to this complication, this student often had difficulty with describing the Swedish culture in English, even though she has already lived there for three years at the time of this study. This added a statistical kink to the results because this student is recorded as taking many more pauses and making more substantive revisions than the other three, and it is not clear if this can be blamed upon the medium (CMC), or simply transfer problems.

Sullivan and Lundgren comment upon the application of CMC and its efficacy in the following:

If the method [re-playing text] were used on a regular basis, and with a wide range of topics, it is likely that the student would receive a broad insight into their L2, and on that basis, develop it further. Furthermore, as the method promotes reflection in general, the methodology is not restricted to L2 learning environments, but could be extended effectively to other learning situations. (266)



Sullivan and Lundgren uncover a strong argument in favor of the implantation of CMC motivated pedagogy in their observation that because methodology promotes reflection and L2 insight, it can possibly be implemented into other learning environments. This seems to be a critical undercurrent of valued methodology, i.e., the inclusion of peer reviewed, public compositions, process-uncovering reflection, and dialogue/interaction seem to be so highly regarded as to be universal truths or 'platonic ideals' of this method. It is difficult to argue with the assertion that communicative language practices are at the very least fashionable, if not pedagogically sound. Further, if this view is accepted, then CMC, and more specifically, blogging, ought not to be looked at as skeptically as one would prefer on the basis of its novelty and 'techno-centrism,' since it does immediately show real, authentic communicative content and results as our next researcher describes.

Ward examines the role that blogging has played in his language teaching classroom for the past four semesters (2004). Ward is an instructor at the American University in Sharjah, UAE, and notes that blogging has been the much-needed antidote to his students' apathy toward writing. Often, students compose in English only to meet the requirements for obtaining a certain grade, and their compositions are meaningless to them because a true audience of peers is virtually non-existent in traditional composition practices. Ward cites Kitzman's insightful comment about this crucial element to improved student interaction in composition, an audience, in the following: "the [online] audience is not only anticipated but expected, and thus influences and structures the very manner in which the writer articulates, composes, and distributes the self-document" (4).

Ward describes blogging in terms of its ultimate communicative content, as well, because it exists multidimensionally, in terms of both a monologue and a dialogue. Many

blogs simply fulfill the blogger's need for self-expression, or self-expression of a constructed persona, and in this case exist as a public monologue. However, the individual and group comment function, which is active as a toolset for most free blogging sites, creates additional avenues for interaction within and among the students. According to Ward, it is especially useful that these types of interactive features allow blogging to intersect with all previous CMC genres, like email and instant messaging, but in so doing it surpasses them in terms of communicative possibility.

This audience, enhanced by its demand for interaction, also acts as a rigorous peer review. "A collective intelligence can be brought to bear on any question" and the group dynamic that is involved in the writing process encourages only the highest quality composition, as well as the social benefit of potential celebrity among the blogging group (Ward 8). This inter-group tension and awareness of the public nature of the forum combine as key motivating factors for the students in their efforts to write something that is meaningful—for themselves and their audience.

It has been well documented that CMC, with its accompanying anonymity, provides a space where users can disengage their inhibitions, biases, and preconceptions of others due to the absence of anxiety-inducing face-to-face conversation. The lowering of this potential communicative stumbling block can reveal fascinating insights and interaction that, arguably, would never have been present in some cultural contexts, such as the one in which Ward teaches. He observes:

Some of the most vocal "disinhibited" students in this online discussion were the more inhibited students in class. When browsing through my students' weblogs, I noticed that some of the quietest students had the

loudest blogs! For instance, I have a covered Muslim female student who prefers to sit alone, and barely speaks unless prompted, yet her blog was an outpouring of opinion and insight, illustrated with vibrant colours and images! Through anonymity, online environments can liberate the students that are intimidated in the classroom and plug them into a matrix where shyness and insecurity are left offline. (9)

In describing his course design, it is clear that Ward's assigned blog topics utilize authentic communicative pedagogy because they typically involve prompts that ask the student to comment on something they read in the newspaper, saw in a film, or to write book critiques, as well as to send invitations to elaborate on their perspective on a topic of personal consequence to them. The blogging module for the course was started when the class began and this activity continued through the semester to the end. Most of the student blogging, as well as their peer editing, took place on their home PCs. As part of their grade, students were required to respond and edit their peer's postings, and in addition, award 'sweeties' to those postings that were of especially high quality. ('Sweeties' were awarded by means of another free web service that notifies a user when a blog or blog group has been updated, whereupon that user can evaluate (i.e., give 'sweeties' to) the blog(s) on the basis of content.) Ward also required traditional peer editing as part of his course design, as well: the students were required to print out all of their blogs and postings and re-evaluate them during the mid-term. The blogs were assessed at the end of the term by means of a portfolio project, in which the students included all of their blog print-outs, comments, and peer reviews. Ward used the portfolio element at the end of his course in order to encourage students to be aware of and review

their entries, to edit them for grammar and content, and to promote an acceptance of the natural 'process' of composition, which includes structural revisions.

Ward received positive feedback from the students for his approach. Most preferred blogging to more traditional forms of composition instruction, e.g., the five paragraph essay cliché, and most students thought that blogging had improved their English. It is important to note that most of the students had no prior experience with web design, and this attests to the user friendly GUI of most blogging sites (no HTML knowledge is required). Ward had this to say about the future of blogging as a core curriculum feature in his classes:

It is too early to tell whether writing produced online, rather than slipped discreetly under the writing teacher's office door, is truly of a higher standard. However, it is usually a lot more fun for the students to produce and for the teacher to read. I hope that institutions that teach writing will come to recognize the Web log as a valid form of instruction and alternative assessment because it is basically the writing portfolio digitally remastered. (16)

Other researchers have come to similar conclusions, though due to the lack of a synthesized pedagogical foundation, are unsure as to the causation for what are ostensibly clear and positive results regarding the use of blogging as a composition task. In her research on the pedagogical value of blogging, Kaye D. Trammel posits the benefits of blogging to be unknown, but pragmatically apparent: "Although there is not a tremendous amount of academic research on blogging, theoretical and practical writing suggests a number of important reasons for using blogs in teaching and learning (2005:

60). Trammel is interested in the implications of blogging in pedagogy, specifically in reference to blogging's ability to promote interest in learning. In her classes, Trammel lets the students choose topics about which to blog, but first they must perform the "three step process involved in blogging: scour, filter, and post" (61). In addition, Trammel encourages her student to view themselves as part of a "limitless, international student body," and encourages them to connect with other bloggers from cultures differing with theirs (62).

As pedagogically inspiring as all of this may sound, we must remember the jury is still out on blogging. Trammell touches upon this as well in her word of caution:

Researchers should undertake this task [the return value of blogging pedagogy] and investigate the impact of blogging on learning. Such studies should chart self-reported student perception of what blogging does for individual student writing ability. Studies should also assess the impact of blogging on short-term and long-term learning. (65)

That being said, a study of any informative value cannot include only two or four participants, as some of the research previously presented did. The learner population simply must be larger, and as an optimal control, all learners should begin at roughly the same level of L2 competency. As a model, Ward's initial findings show that he is progressing toward a more comprehensive integration with the interactionist perspective in his ability to make the blogs 'work' for the students. The students are given similar, though not identical blogging prompts, which provides for authentic *and* creative composition output. More importantly, it also gives the peer-review activities (posted online) a fresh spark of life, since the students are not reading the same entries on each

other's blogs. This motivates students to be increasingly interested in learning, especially if required to perform the three-step process mentioned above: scour, filter, and post.

Additionally, based on the demographic research, it seems that the students who would most benefit from this CMC medium would be those who are taking the most uncoerced ownership of it – those in the 18-24 year age group. A medium with social networking, self-expression, interaction and polyvocalic capabilities<sup>5</sup> can only be described as one fulfilling the criteria for Mary Louise Pratt's 'contact zone' (1991) – by means of creating polyvocalic, co-authored, collaborative, fragmentary and open ended texts. Educators concerned with the representation of historically underprivileged groups have a great deal to gain by at least introducing ESL students to, as Ward calls it, "push button publishing," in the interest of providing them with the means to acquire something approaching power. For the covered Muslim female in Ward's class, this 'power' might simply be the recognition of herself in the blogs of others, or the rejection of certain ideas. Blogging may be only an outlet to display demarcation, but the lines have at least the possibility of changing to absorb 'others,' if the outlet is used. Rebecca Blood, one of the foremost scholars and historians of the blogging phenomenon, recalls this power and agency that blogging brought to her in the following excerpt from "Weblogs: A History and Perspective":

[...] I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but [...] I could see I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice that I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more

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<sup>5</sup> The term "polyvocalic" is used here in the Bakhtinian sense as a descriptor in for the process by which people learn through the continual shuffling of others' language and interactions into their own. See Bakhtin 1982: 240-262.

highly my own point of view. In composing my linktext every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel my perspective was unique and important. (12-13)

Blood goes on to elaborate on the precise relationship between the quality of online social connections (i.e., the audience), and the quality of writing that a blogger will be obliged to produce. Not surprisingly, this relationship is a direct one.

Other, more limited CMC mediums than blogging, have proven to be effective when used in conjunction with peer review (cf. Beckett and Slater 2005; DiGiovanni and Nagaswami 2001; Murray 2005; Rollinson 2005; Serfaty 2004; Strenski, *et al*, 2005; Yuan 2003). That being said, since peer review is one of several key features of blogs, it is expected that in this regard, blogs will be successful in providing the requisite scaffolding and revisioning that other researchers have cited as being so critical in the development of cognitive and affective skills (Beckett and Slater, 2005; Chapelle 2005a [2001], 2005; Fotos 2004; Kutz 1998 [1986]; Murray 2005; Pennington 2004). In addition, students have the added convenience and security of being in a networked environment, and it has been shown that this sort of environment facilitates longer texts as students attempt to make explicit their intuition about writing (Strenski, *et al*, 2005).

It was also shown that this environment encourages audience awareness, exposure to and improvement in rhetoric, the negotiation of meaning, and the beneficial awareness of errors (cf. Bloch 2002; Chapelle 2004; Cook 1997; Curran and Stelluto 2005; Egbert 2005a, 2005b; Fotos 2004, 2005; Gass 1997; Kern and Warschauer 2000; Kutz 1998; Murray 2005; Rollinson 2005; Rose 2004; Strenski, *et al*, 2005; Sullivan and Lindgren 2002; Yuan 2003). It was further shown that learners were able to creatively play with

language and construct their own identities and acquire multiple literacies through collaborative writing projects (cf. Ferris and Hedgcock 2005; Fotos 2004, 2005; Kutz 1998 [1986]; Pratt 1991 [1976]; Rak 2005). These multiple literacies included the ability to manipulate text, images and other media in order to exert agency over knowledge-making and information dissemination in a medium wherein English dominates (Kern and Warschauer 2000; Murray 2005; Rak 2005; Rose 2004; Rose 1998 [1985]; Warschauer 2004).

To that end, blogging provides a means for engaging in the greater online sphere of public discourse, and for acquiring opportunities for increased exposure to both rhetoric and authentic communication events (Bloch 2002; Barton 2005; Chapelle 2005a [2001]). The polyvocalic aspect of shared, or collaborative online texts, requires the ability for a writer to appropriate other voices for his or her own use (see Bakhtin 1982), and because the 'text' relies heavily on visual presentation, additional layers of interpretive skill are required to both send and interpret blog texts. That is to say, the tool or the medium in this instance, is fundamentally changing the way in which we produce texts (Ong 2003 [1981]; Warschauer 2004, 2005).

Given what we know about blogging and how it fits within the CMC research, the example task in the appendix was designed to incorporate both the sociocultural and interactionist perspectives, as well as to function as an ongoing course project for students throughout the semester. Once students build their blogs, the project essentially runs itself, in the sense that all responses, posts, and social connections are saved in an archived form for future review. In addition, the instructor has the option of checking on a student's course progress at any moment in time.



This research definitively points to the potential blogging projects may have for the ESL writing classroom. The theoretical and pedagogical justifications are certainly available, though not adequately utilized in the task designs with this, or a similar, focus. The task I have constructed in the appendix is designed to be 'pedagogically aware,' rather than simply innovative or fashionable. There is currently a dearth of publications and course materials that focus on blogging as a key course element, and to that end, the completion of this research ought to result in a pedagogically aware curriculum design that is 'blog-driven.' The elements of this curriculum would be clearly and explicitly connected to the research synthesized in this thesis, so as to better inform instructors about the basis for their selection of blogging tasks. Accordingly, the future of this research does not conclude here, but rather begins again as a blog-driven curriculum design handbook.

## Appendix: Construction of a Communicative Blogging Task

### Objectives:

- 1) To increase opportunities for meaningful writing connections between students.
- 2) To focus on content, rhetorical construction of identity, and negotiation of meaning.
- 3) To facilitate composing from a position of authority.
- 4) To encourage the adoption of a 'teacherly' tone in peer reviews.
- 5) To encourage a sense of agency and community membership through writing.

### Method:

- 1) Use any of the various free, open source blog spaces to set up the instructor's page (e.g., [myspace.com](http://myspace.com), [livejournal.com](http://livejournal.com), etc.)
- 2) Show students a series of examples of other types of blogs, i.e., give them a sense of the content diversity.
- 3) Post an introductory essay, in addition to images, regarding the first prompt.
  - a. Be sure to complete all assignments you give to them and post them on your own page. This will minimize the social distance between you and your students so as to validate their unique authority in their narrative writing.
- 4) Require students to link all of their pages to yours, and at their own discretion, each other's, in order to engender the sense of an authentic writing community.

- 5) Make blogging prompts extensions of classroom discussions to facilitate a sense of linearity.
- 6) Do a mock blogging peer review in a networked computer lab, so as to provide the students with the specific kinds of questions they need to ask each other.
  - a. Be sure to remind students that surface-level mechanical issues are not to be the subject of comments. Assure them that you will be the one to address and grammar issues, if needed.
- 7) Pair students off to comment on blogs once posted. These comments should feature both breadth and depth, i.e., students should respond to the content, as well as the organization and rhetorical style of the posting.

**Benefits:**

- 1) Students are engaged in the online public sphere and acquiring and negotiating electronic literacies.
- 2) Students are connected to a community of writers and can develop their cognitive and social skills at a convenient and comfortable time and space. (Sociocultural perspective)
- 3) Peer feedback takes place outside of class, leaving more time for group discussion and other face to face affective negotiations.
- 4) Peer feedback is expected to be of a superior quality than that received in a face to face situation.
- 5) Based on the research, students are motivated to produce higher quality texts because:

- a. It is posted for the peers to read and to comment upon
  - b. Technology within 18-24 year old age group holds a great deal of interest.
  - c. All of their compositions are archived in such a way as to make error recognition more obvious when seen as a pattern of errors.
    - i. Meanwhile, error recognition is not at the heart of the peer review, therefore the threat of error is minimized during key learning events in the composition process, that is to say, students are less likely to edit themselves too soon. (Interactionist perspective)
- 6) Students are acquiring electronic literacies and agency in a medium that is predominated by English.
- a. The various literacies documented in the research section indicate that failure to acquire effective communication skills in electronic literacies may prevent the learner or forestall him or her from being the 'knowledge maker' and instead relegate them to a role of 'knowledge producer.'

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