

Exploring genres and mediated actions in Taiwanese college students' blog writing

Ching-Fen Chang

National Chiao Tung University
cfchang311@gmail.com

This study examines genres displayed in 25 Taiwanese college students' English blogs and their mediated actions in the English blog writing through the lens of activity theory. The results showed that the interwoven relationships among individuals' agency, the goals they set for the task, the mediated tools, and the contextual elements led to different individual activity systems in completion of the blog task. The findings further revealed that the free-writing blog task allowed EFL students to practice writing in different genres and to suit individual and gender preference on rhetorical selection. The results implied that language teachers should be aware of the influence of personal and contextual factors on EFL students' English blog writing.

Introduction

In the past few years, free, easy-to-create, easy-to-use, and customizable Weblogs (blogs), defined as "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reversed chronological sequence" (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005, p. 142), have become one of the most popular Web 2.0 tools. With little need for technological sophistication, people may easily and rapidly publish ideas, record personal experiences/reflections, or exchange opinions with others in the blogosphere (Blood, 2002). Ubiquitous blogs have presented second language (L2) teachers with the opportunity to explore their potential for language learning. Murray & Hourigan (2008), for example, observe that blogs may be implemented in language learning as a vehicle for group work, as reflective journals, or as multimedia language learning tools.

While most blog-related studies in L2 writing discuss the implementation of blogs mainly for academic purposes, little research has discussed about how the “hybrid nature of blogs” (Herring, et al., 2005, p. 161) may provide EFL students the opportunity to explore ways to express themselves in various genres. Neither has it been discussed how EFL learners approach the English blog writing task. This study aims at exploring the types of genres demonstrated in a group of EFL college students’ individual blog writing. A further aim is to investigate how students’ mediated actions to complete the English blog writing were influenced by their agency and the contextual elements in their activity systems.

Literature review

Blog genres

Compared to other Web 2.0 tools, blogs seemingly possess a “socially transformative, democratizing potential” (Herring, et al., 2005, p. 142), which allow people to create and use blogs with diverse purposes. Herring and her colleagues (2005) characterized the properties of the emergent blog genre by the analysis of 203 blog samples randomly collected from diverse online sources, from which they identified three types of blog genres – *filters*, *personal journals*, and *k-logs*. *Filters* are operationally defined in their study as “primarily containing observations and evaluations of external, typically public events” (p. 147). *Personal journals* are defined as “primarily reporting events in the blogger’s life and the blogger’s inner states and/or reflections” (p. 147). A *k-log* refers to a blog the primary content of which is “information and observation focused around a(n external) topic, project or product.” (p. 147). The difference between a *filter* and a *k-log* lies in the focus of the bloggers’ observations; the former emphasizes public events and the latter centers on the blogger’s own knowledge relating to a specific topic they are involved with.

Situating blogs in a so-called “genre repertoire,” Herring, et al. (2005) found that blogs are positioned in the midway on a continuum between two other popular modes of Internet communication, webpages and newsgroups. The bridging genre of blogs allows authors to experience more social interaction than traditional web pages and gives them more ownership and control over the communication space than given in newsgroups.

Blogs and L2 education

Campbell (2003) suggests three types of blogs which may fit in general ESL pedagogy – the tutor blog, the learner blog, and the class blog. Since each type of blog serves a different purpose, the expected learning outcomes vary depending on the predetermined goals and associated tasks. The notion of blogs as individual diaries for learning tools and blogs as a venue for class activities has been introduced in numerous L2 studies. For example, Mynard (2007) examined 24 Japanese students “learner blogs” serving as a reflective tool about their language learning in United Kingdom. Murray, Hourigan, and Jeanneau (2007) integrated blogs as the learner blog in which individual students reflected on their language learning from the class. Alm (2009) found that the learner blog approach as alternative writing practice to paper-based exercise book promoted students’ sense of autonomy. The students also reported a positive influence of blog writing on the development and awareness of the target language.

138 Another group of studies have employed the class blog, in which blogs serve as a shared

online platform for students to publish their writing (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010; Bloch & Crosby, 2008; Fellner & Apple, 2006) or develop ideas and discuss issues relating to class assignments or themes (Bloch, 2007; de Almeida Soares, 2008; Miceli, Murray, & Kennedy, 2010). Due to different goals set for language learning and associated tasks employed, these studies have explored diverse research issues. Fellner and Apple (2006), for example, examined how a seven-day intensive class blog influenced their Japanese students' writing fluency and lexical complexity. Bloch (2007) examined how the practice in a class blog helped an **ESL** student improve his rhetorical strategies for academic writing. Experimenting with creating a class blog in her English classroom, de Almeida Soares (2008) found that her students perceived blogs as a learning tool although they were not highly motivated or active in their use of the class blog.

Some studies, including some of the abovementioned studies, implemented at least two types of blogs in the classroom. For example, in their Spanish course, Armstrong and Petteer (2008) also integrated a community blog, serving as a discussion board where the entire class shared and commented on a variety of topics, and personal blogs, serving as e-portfolios where individuals posted their formal writing assignments. Arslan and Sahin-Kizil (2010), employing a tutor blog and a learner blog in their classroom, found that the tutor blogs provided the students ample language input whereas individual blogs provided students the chance to raise the awareness of a "real" audience, which resulted in more careful authoring of the content and organization of their writing.

Rationale and purposes of this study

Although previous studies have explored how "learner blogs" may benefit **L2** learning, the type of writing that is normally associated with this blog type may limit students' exploration of different topics and genres, unlike the freedom they usually enjoy in their personal blogs. However, it remains unknown how **EFL** students experience free writing in their English blogs and how they approach personal diary type of blogs when writing in English. To bridge the gap, this study first aims to examine types of genres which appear in **EFL** students' personal English blogs in the context of an English writing course. Second, this study adopts activity theory (Engeström, 1987; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999) as a framework to further understand how individuals approach the English blogging task.

Activity theory, a part of sociocultural theory, intends to examine the interwoven relationships that influence an individual's activity, which is object-oriented, collective, and culturally mediated (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). Drawing upon Vygotsky's (1978) concept of mediated actions, Leontiev (1978) asserts that human activities are collective and motivated by the need to transform an *object* (e.g., a problem or a new task) into desired outcomes. This motive triggers the *subjects* (individuals or groups) to take actions which are carried out through a series of systematic operations. Actions are mediated by *tools* (e.g. blogs, language).

Engeström (1987) expands Leontiev's *subjects-tools-objects* model by including the *community* in which the participants who share the same *object* are involved, *rules* – the norms that the community follows, and *division of labor* – the horizontal interactions and the vertical division of power and status among the members of the community. In activities, "contradiction" is a key to trigger the transformation of human systems. According to Kuutti (1996), contradiction is the term to indicate a mismatch of the elements within a single system or between different systems.

As Thorne (2004) asserts, activity theory helps to “look at orientation toward the activity at hand, and the varying roles that participants and artifacts play, without the blind spots that teacher, student, and technology-centered approaches tend to produce” (p. 52). In this sense, activity theory appears to be an appropriate framework to investigate individual students’ mediated actions in the English blog writing task.

Methodology

Context and student profile

The study was conducted in a semester-long English writing course for non-English-major students in a public university in northern Taiwan. The major writing tasks of this target writing course were paragraph and essay writing for different rhetorical purposes (e.g., description, cause-effect, and comparison-contrast). To provide students additional writing practice and provide them an alternative writing experience to traditional paragraph-essay writing, English blogs were assigned in addition to their regular writing assignments.

Thirty students enrolled in the course. Twenty-five students voluntarily participated in the study. There were 14 male and 11 female students. According to the first questionnaire, which explored their experience in using the Internet, 20 students (80%) had their own blogs in Chinese; only five students (20%) had written English blogs before this course.

Blogs

As mentioned above, 20 students had created their own Chinese language blogs. Since blogs are primarily used as personal diaries in the real world (Herring *et al.*, 2005), to examine what genres may display in the students blog and to integrate the blog project into their existing online practice, I, the teacher researcher, encouraged the students to maintain their English blog on the same platform as their original Chinese blog, but to replace Chinese posts with English ones. Those who did not have a blog before the class were required to apply for a new blog account for the assignment. Since most of the students kept writing blogs in the place of their existing blogs, the blog platforms they used were from international blog providers (e.g. *MySpace*, *Yahoo*) and from domestic ones (e.g., *Wretch*, *Yam!*).

Data collection

Three types of data sources were collected. First, 250 blog entries were collected and analyzed (The 25 students posted 267 total entries during the data collection semester; of these, 17 entries were later found to be plagiarized texts and were thus excluded from the data set). Second, a questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the semester to elicit information of students’ background and their prior experience using blogs. Finally, four students (one male and three females) volunteered to be interviewed to explore their mediated actions in English blog writing.

Data analysis

A coding scheme proposed by Herring, *et al.* (2005) was adapted to examine student blog genres. The coding scheme include four types of genres: *filters* (FI), *personal journals* (PJ),

k-logs (**KL**), and *mixed logs* (**MX**). As Herring, et al. remarked, the coding categories are developed to “provide an overall characterization of the genre as well as to test popular claims about weblogs” (p. 147). To analyze the blog genres, first, I and two research assistants randomly selected four students’ blogs (40 blog entries, approximately 15% of the data set). While coding the data, we found that some students posted a self-introduction in their first blog entry. To distinguish this type of blog from others, an additional category was added, self-introduction (**SI**), in the modified coding scheme. We also observed that even within *personal journals*, the blog content and purposes varied. Thus, we identified five subcategories under *personal journals*, including *personal events* (**PE**), *inner reflection* (**IR**), *movie/book review and reflection* (**MR**), *sports game/players report and reflection* (**GR**), and *copied text with reflection* (**CR**). The final coding scheme thus was developed with six major categories and five subcategories under *personal journals*.

- ✧ A *personal event* (**PE**) refers to entries reporting a specific occurrence that happened to the blogger.
- ✧ An *Inner reflection* (**IR**) refers to entries which narrate the writers’ feelings, emotions, or perceptions surrounding a specific issue.
- ✧ A *Movie/book review and reflection* (**MR**) summarizes the story of a movie or the content of a book. Some may further include an analysis of the movie or book alongside the summary.
- ✧ *Game reports and reflection* (**GR**) refers to a report of a sporting event (e.g. baseball or basketball). Some include an analysis of the game results.
- ✧ *Copied text with reflection* (**CR**) refers to a blog which includes copied text (e.g., lyrics or poems) from other sources and bloggers’ reflection on the copied texts.

After the modified coding scheme was defined, the coders re-analyzed the 250 blog entries individually. Any disagreement was discussed in a weekly meeting to seek consensus. The inter-rater reliability yielded 91% agreement.

In addition, the interview data, along with the four volunteer students’ blogs, were analyzed based on the activity system (Engeström, 1987) which involves six components – subject, objectives, mediation, rules, community, and division of labor. In the analysis process, I first categorized each component from the data, connected the interrelationships between different components, and mapped out individual systems to indicate the the most salient relationships among these factors in these individuals’ activity systems.

Results

The genres in students’ blog writing

Table 1 demonstrates the frequency of blogs in different genres. Among the 250 blog entries contributed by 25 students, 205 entries were *personal journals*, dominating 82% of the blog genres. The remaining types of genres have very low frequencies, accounting for 6% or less of total entries. Under *personal journals*, 136 (54%) were **PE**, followed by **IR** (14%), with **MR**, **GR**, and **CR** all accounting for less than 15%.

Table 2 shows the frequency of different genres and the percentage of each type of genre. On average, the female students posted 9.3 entries with an average of 157 words per entry. Except for two students (F3 and F10), female students adopted two or more types of genres. Four types of genres were represented among F2’s 11 blog entries. On average, 2.3

Table 1: Frequency and distribution of blogs in different genres

Types of genres	Self-intro	Filter	K-log	Mixed	Personal journals				
					PE	IR	MR	GR	CR
Frequency	7	16	15	7	136	35	14	15	5
					205				
Percentage	3%	6%	6%	3%	54%	14%	6%	6%	2%
					82%				

types of genres exhibited in female students' blogs. *Personal journals* were the most commonly used genre, representing 83% of the 106 entries. Under *personal journals*, 49% were **PE**, followed by **IR** (21%).

On average, the 14 male students posted 10.4 entries with an average of 141 words per entry, slightly shorter than the average length of female students' blogs. The average number of genre types the male students displayed in their blogs was 2.1. Five students' blogs used only one type of genre, *personal journals*. Even within *personal journals*, M7, M8 and M10 only reported personal events in their blogs. In contrast, M10 did not post any *personal journals* but eight *k-logs*, in which he systematically made comments on issues from newspaper articles, on topics such as education, health, and entertainment. Over half of the *k-logs* in the data set were posted by this student.

As with female students, *personal journals* were the most common genre exhibited by male students. However, male students tended to write more **PE** (58%) and less **IR** (9%). Furthermore, male students tended to report on sporting events. No such topics were found in female students' blogs. While a few female students copied lyrics, poems, or quotes in their blogs and wrote reflection on it, no such **CR** was found in male students' blog writing.

Four students' mediated actions in their English blog writing

The results of genre analysis uncovered general tendencies and variation in genres displayed in the students' blogs. Four particular cases were further examined to probe into how individual students responded to the blog task.

F1

F1, in her third year studying Computer Science, started to write English blogs when she enrolled in college. Her English blog was on the social networking site *MySpace*, and was aimed at maintaining contact with friends that she met while living in the United Kingdom during elementary school. Her English blog writing then mainly served to keep a channel open for her British friends and to fulfill the current course requirement.

As shown in Table 2, she posted 9 blog entries including two *filters*, three *personal events*, four *inner reflections*, and one *k-log*. In the *filters*, she commented on two public issues relating to the divorce rate and the presidential election in Taiwan. In her *personal journals*, she recorded her new hairstyle, her spring break trip, and the sports day on campus. The rest of her blogs related to her inner reflection about her life and dreams. In the interview, she confessed that she did not write much in her English blog because she felt that what she wrote about her study pressure might not interest her British friends who had started

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of female students' blog genres

	Blog entries	Total Words	Avg. length	SI	FI	KL	MX	Personal journals					Genre Types*
								PE	IR	MR	GR	CR	
F1	10	1183	118		2	1		3	4				3
F2	11	2021	184	1	4		2	3		1			4
F3	10	1326	133					1	7	2			1
F4	14	1655	118	1				10		1		2	2
F5	9	3471	386				1	7	1				2
F6	10	971	97	1				6	1	2			2
F7	11	2094	175				1	7	3	1			2
F8	7	554	69	1	1			1	3			1	3
F9	6	1212	202				1	2	1	1		2	3
F10	8	729	91					7	0	1			1
F11	10	1564	156			2	1	5	2				2
Total	106	16780	158	4	7	3	4	52	22	9	0	5	2.3
Avg.	9.6	1525	158	4%	7%	3%	4%	49%	21%	8%	0%	5%	
								88 (83%)					
M1	7	1070	153					2			2		1
M2	15	1648	103	1		1		6	7				3
M3	13	1528	118		2			7		3	1		2
M4	10	2889	289		1	1		6	1		1		3
M5	9	1428	159	1	1			6			1		3
M6	13	2436	187		2		1	2			8		3
M7	6	436	73					6					1
M8	10	1606	161					10					1
M9	10	1230	123					7	1	2			1
M10	11	2324	211	1		8	2						3
M11	10	1015	102					10					1
M12	10	1506	151		2	1		6	1				3
M13	11	503	46		1	1		8	1				3
M14	10	847	85		1			8	2				2
Total	145	20466	141	3	10	12	3	84	13	5	15	0	2.1
Avg.	10.4	1462	141	2%	7%	8%	2%	58%	9%	3%	10%	0%	
								117 (80%)					

Note: Subcategories under personal journals are not accounted as different types of genres.

working after high school graduation, and whose updates on their lives shifted from writing about different jobs to their trips after work.

Some of their language use, habits, and thoughts have been quite distant from mine. It's been so different that when I turned on my computer, I didn't understand what they were laughing; what was so funny? But I can catch what they are doing, how to earn money, and where to travel or do an internship (Interview, July 22, 2008)

During the data collection time, she shared four entries reflecting her emotions in her **143**

English blogs, which did not reveal detailed personal emotions but provided updates on her life for those who might be concerned about her. She observed that posting something private or emotional was not commonly seen on **BBS**, where people only shared information or discussed schoolwork. No personal emotions were exposed. Thus, posting *inner reflection* entries remained only in her English blogs because of expectations that people, particularly her British friends, might want such updates and respond to these posts.

Interestingly, she noted that the use of the English language was a barrier to prevent social networking in **BBS** as well as in blogs. According to her interview, her college classmates usually avoided using English on **BBS** or other social networking sites, where Chinese was the dominant mediation. These contextual factors further limited her English blogs from exposing her true feeling or thought. In this sense, her English blogs were more like an English assignment, in which she limited the topics to comments on social and political events and knowledge-sharing type of topics.

However, unlike regular English writing assignments she did in class, she was not worried much about making language errors in her blogs. As she said,

Oh, I don't care much about [English problems]. It's not that I have "confidence". I just write. Actually when I read my friends' blogs, I don't think the English proficiency of my British friends who did not study in college is good. They have their "leet" [special Internet orthography shorthand code], too. (Interview, July 22, 2008)

F2

F2 was in her third year in Civil Engineering. She started to write a Chinese blog on *Wretch*, a popular domestic blog provider, mainly as a social networking tool to maintain her relationships with her family and high school friends when she entered university. Nevertheless, blogs were not a commonly used social networking tool among her and her college classmates. To meet the course requirement, F2 applied for a new account on *Pixnet*, another popular domestic blog provider, to distinguish the different purposes of and audiences for her Chinese and English blogs. She noted that her Chinese blogs were a social networking platform to write for her family and close friends whereas her English blogs were an English assignment to write for her teacher, the classmates in the writing class, or even strangers.

While writing her English blog, she continued posting her Chinese blog on different topics. As shown in Table 2, she posted six *personal events*, one *self-introduction*, one *filter*, one *movie reflection*, and two *k-logs*. In these posts, she merely narrated personal events or wrote about public issues, such as comments on the Taiwanese presidential election, the 50th anniversary of the university, and comments on class material. These topics were closely related to her daily life but revealed little personal emotions or feelings, which was quite a departure from the content of her Chinese blogs.

Defining her English blogs as an alternative English practice and an opportunity to publish in a public domain, she was greatly concerned with the language accuracy of her blog writing. To minimize language errors, she first typed her blogs in Microsoft Word® to diagnose grammar errors and asked her school mates to review her writing before submission. The writing process was similar to that for her other English assignments. Due to her lack of experience writing informally, she had difficulty preparing her English blogs in a spontaneous way. She noted that since she used the same formal writing styles in

her blogs as she did in other English assignment, her blogs might fail to appeal to other people's interests in reading them.

I usually type in Word. It's like the format I use to write assignments. I think what I write is not colloquial. I still feel it's like handing in assignment or using the sentences for assignments when I write in my blogs. I read other peoples' blogs which are written in a very natural way... I can't express like that... I think it's because the English I learn is for class or for the **GEPT**². I seldom learn something related to daily life. (Interview, July 9, 2008)

F5

F5, in her third year in Information and Finance Management, first demonstrated her passion for writing her Chinese blogs when she was in her 10th year of school. Her initial intention in blog writing was to record her daily life and her travel experiences for her parents. With the increasingly enthusiastic responses she got to her blogs, she gained a sense of accomplishment and devoted more time and energy to writing blogs when she was in the 11th grade. She continued to write blogs until the data collection semester, posting one to two entries per month. However, since blogs were not a major social networking tool among her classmates in college, she wrote in **BBS** more often at the time. Blogs, at this stage, had become a medium of communication between her and her high school friends. To meet the class requirement, she switched from Chinese to English on the same blog platform she had been using.

As shown in Table 2, she only posted nine entries, but her blog entries were the longest of all study participants, with an average of 386 words per entry. Out of nine blog entries, she wrote seven *personal events*; one *inner reflection*, and one k-log. Interestingly, almost all of her blog entries discussed specific themes, such as travel, guitars, Go, piano, and board games. She explained that she purposely chose a writing topic in her English blogs.

When I write blogs in Chinese, I usually write without any specific topic. I write with the ideas flashing through my brain. That is, I write two to three sentences on one thing and switch to a totally different topic by adding dotted lines separating them. So, there may be over 10 dotted lines in a blog entry... jumping from here to there. But in English, I set a topic, for example "travel". I write all about travel. It is holistic and coherent. (Interview, July 4, 2008)

Compared to her writing on **BBS** where she usually just posted a few sentences directly reflecting her feelings in Chinese, the interface of a blog led her to write longer articles. The further elaborated pieces of writing in theme-based blogs made her feel a sense of accomplishment, whereas writing with dotted lines in between thoughts was a kind of spontaneous writing to express her feelings.

She mainly wrote blogs in Chinese before the writing course, yet she occasionally used English in her blogs to practice English poem or rhymes and record personal feelings. In this sense, English served as a tool to block out the majority of blog visitors. As she said,

Sometimes I wrote in English to block out others because my good friends or classmates' English were not good. When I wrote in English, it was equal to blocking them out 'cause

they don't understand [what I was writing]... Many people I know usually skip over the English when they read blogs (Interview, July 4, 2008)

Unlike her blog writing in Chinese, F5 did not write her English blog spontaneously in the data collection time. She was concerned about language accuracy and the content of her blogs because they were published in a public domain. Even though she had confidence in her English, she encountered difficulty in expressing herself with precise words and concise sentence structures as she could easily do in her Chinese blogs. The language difficulties resulted in her purposely skipping themes which may have involved complicated writing skills. Thus, narration was commonly found in her English blogs. These factors resulted in different writing genres exhibited in her English and Chinese blogs. Consequently, her English blogs may not have truly reflected what she actually thought or felt as was more readily revealed in her Chinese blogs.

M9

M9 was an overseas student from Macau. He was in his third year, majoring in Management Science. He started to write blogs in Chinese after studying at university in Taiwan. In his Chinese blogs, he recorded interesting experiences in Taiwan that he had never experienced in Macau. No specific audience was addressed in his L1 blogs. To do this English assignment, he used the same blog site. Maintaining his original Chinese blog genre, M9 defined English blogs as personal diaries in which he recorded his daily life, trips, and *inner reflections*. As shown in Table 2, he posted 10 blog entries – seven *personal events*, one *inner reflection*, and two *movie descriptions*.

Being perplexed about how to write English blogs during the first few weeks, he wrote the first few blog entries in Chinese and translated them into English. Without knowing what to write, movie description and reflection was a starting point in his English blogs, which were not a common theme usually adopted in his Chinese blogs. Consistent with his Chinese blog writing, M9 did not sense unease about writing personal emotions in the public domain. However, he encountered difficulty in describing his feelings or inner reflection in English. Coping with the language difficulty, he chose to report on personal events involving little description of emotion.

Similar to the abovementioned female participants, he also observed that his English blogs sometimes blocked others out due to the language barrier – the unfamiliarity with reading English among his social network in the blogosphere. Although he wrote personal events in public with ease, his concern with language accuracy in his English blog writing arose because his writing errors might be corrected by others in public. To avoid making language errors, he insisted on having his English blog writing reviewed by his roommates before submission. Nevertheless, the constant practice of blog writing practice appeared to have a positive effect on his English writing because he sensed progress in his blog writing. As he described,

At first, I jotted down notes in Chinese and then translated them into English... Since the one posted on April 6, I began to write [my blogs] directly in English. At the beginning, I was quite often blocked about my writing but later my writing became smoother. I didn't need to ask my roommates that often about word use or grammar. (M9, Interview, July 7, 2008)

Discussion

As Coughlan and Duff (1994) note, “tasks” used in language classrooms are not fixed concepts. How individuals interpret the tasks and the context embedded in the tasks leads to the variety of language learners’ performance and engagement. From the perspective of activity theory, the four students’ mediated actions were not only driven by the goals they set for the blog task, their prior experience of blogging, and the artifacts (i.e. blogs and English), but also by the context where they were situated. Thus, they adopted distinct mediated actions in this blog writing.

Defining the English blog task as an English assignment was the commonly shared object motivating the four students to write English blogs. By fulfilling the class requirement, they intended to ultimately pass the course. While transforming the object into the goals, contradictions occurred due to their prior experience of blogging and the roles that blogs played in their life. F1 and F5 who wrote English blogs before adjusted their blogging habits due to the change in the original purposes of their blogging – a platform maintaining the relationship between F1 and her British friends or a mean for F5’s English practice and sometimes a private space for her inner reflection. F2 and M9 who had never kept English blogs adjusted their blogging behaviors that they used to do in their Chinese blogs. Clearly defining the role of English blog as an English assignment and avoiding confusing her social network in her Chinese blog, F2 created a new blog for this English assignment and wrote her blog entries in the way that she wrote for her English writing assignment. Transforming his Chinese blog into an English one did not worry M9. He continued his Chinese blogging habits to record events in his daily life. However, he encountered the difficulty in expressing himself clearly and smoothly in his English blogs. Thus, he sought assistance to have his English blog entries reviewed before publication.

Thorne (2009) notes that language learning in Internet-mediated tasks is expected to make a shift from “foreign language as a rote process of acquisition toward envisaging language as a resource for meaningful social action and relationship building” (p. 86). However, the study results suggest that the English blog task did not function as an effective social tool for social interaction in this special context. As revealed from the results, **BBS** was much more commonly used in the university than blogs. The English blogs they did for the writing class did not successfully connect them with their schoolmates in the university. Additionally, in the **EFL** context, English was not the mediation for social networking. Even for those who used to communicate with their friends in high school or family (F2 and F5) via Chinese blogs, English might even have become a barrier for communication. While F2, F5, and M9 may have connected with their social network through the channels outside the English blog such as face-to-face communication, **BBS**, or even their Chinese blogs, the English blog task easily became “limited-interactivity” (Nardi, et al, 2004, p. 227). In this sense, this English blog task, thus, appeared to be an English writing task, not a replacement of their Chinese blogs.

Although the English blog task seemed not to function as an effective social tool in this study, it appeared to provide English learners practice opportunities exploring genres that they seldom practiced in traditional paragraph or essay writing assignments. In this writing course, the blog task was positioned as “learner blogs,” which “can be used as journals for writing practice or as free-form templates for personal expression” (Campbell, 2003, p. 2). In this blog writing task, except for the requirement of a minimum post number (10 entries) and the use of English, the students had full freedom to write about any topics in

their individual English blogs. The free-writing blog format, in accord with individual blogs detailed in Herring, et al. (2005), resulted in a high proportion of *personal journal* entries.

Although non-personal-journals (e.g., *filters*, *k-logs*) occurred much less frequently than *personal journals*, over 70% of the students used at least two types of the genres in their blog writing. The writing experience seemed to allow **EFL** students to choose “rhetorical actions” (Kyland, 2003, p. 22) based on the contexts and their identities in an online community. The online community, as Thorne (2009) described, usually carries “interactional, ideational, and relational association, preferred and correspondingly dispreferred uses, and expectations of genre-specific communicative activity” (pp. 85–86). Compared to the class blog activities for academic purposes in Bloch (2007) or individual blogs specified for language learning (e.g., Murray & Hourigan, 2008), the free-writing blog activity seems to offer an alternative to standard traditional essay practice, to help **EFL** learners make authorial choices for the completion of the task, for socialization, and for representation of self (Canagarajah, 2006; Thorne, 2009).

The results of genre analysis help to further outline the variations and tendencies within the personal journal genre and depict individual and gender differences. Previous studies have uncovered that gender differences may exist in blogosphere (Ghiller & Durndell, 2007; Herring, et al, 2005; Herring & Paolillo, 2006; Lu & Hsiao, 2009). Herring, et al. (2005) as well as Herring and Paolillo (2006) particularly found that men tend to write *filters* while women mostly write *personal journals*. Although the results of this study are not in line with the tendency towards genre preferences revealed in previous studies, the frequency differences of *inner reflection*, *movie/book review and reflection*, and *sports game/players report and reflection* (some subcategories of *personal journals*) among individual students as well as between male and female students’ blogs suggest that the free-writing blog task may also help to satisfy individual and gender preferences and may further motivate them to write (Brooks, Nichole, and Priebe, 2004).

Although English blogs may have great potential for English writing practice, it is noted that **EFL** students may also experience difficulty in using English effectively to express complicated ideas or inner reflection, which they can easily achieve in their L1. Furthermore, publishing English blogs in the public domain may put some pressure on those who show great concern about making grammatical errors or causing misunderstanding. The results imply that blogging is not a replacement for writing instruction (Brooks, Nicols, and Priebe, 2004). Writing teachers should be aware of the difficulties and pressure that their students may encounter while they engage in English blogging in a virtual public domain. Providing additional language consultation may help students solve language difficulty and minimize writing problems.

Conclusion

The study explored the genres in 25 **EFL** students’ individual English blogs and the factors influencing four individual students’ blog writing. The study found that free-writing English blogs may provide English learners opportunities to experience writing different genres and suit individual or even gender preferences. The in-depth investigation of four students’ blogs through the lens of activity theory further uncovered how individual students’ mediated actions in this English blog writing were driven by the goals they set for the task, their prior experience in blogging, the mediated artifacts, as well as the situated

Two limitations can be observed in this study. First, only four students volunteered to undergo a follow-up interview. The experiences of the three female and one male students' blog writing may not be sufficiently generalizable to explain the phenomena involved in other students' blog writing. Second, only one interview session was conducted at the end of the semester to glean the four students' overall experience. The results may not fully encompass the students' experience from the beginning of their blog writing.

The limitations indicate a need for future studies to closely trace individual students' blog writing processes, in order to gain a holistic understanding of their experience and the difficulties of writing blogs in English. Furthermore, since this study focused on only one type of blog, the learner blog, future research could explore the variation of blog genres or writing styles in different types of blogs.

Notes

1. These blog providers, mainly attracting blogs in Chinese, offer free account for subscribers.
2. **GEPT**, The General English Proficiency Test, is a widely adopted English proficiency examination in Taiwan to assess individual test takers' listening, reading, writing, and speaking ability.

References

- Alm, A. (2009). Blogging for self-determination with L2 learner Journals. In M. Thomas (Ed.), *Handbook of Research n Web 2.0 and Second Language Learning* (pp. 202–221). Hershey, NY: Information Science Reference.
- Armstrong, K., & Petterer, O. (2008). Blogging as L2 writing: A case study. *AACE Journal*, 16(3), 233–251.
- Arslan, R. S., & Sahin-Kizil, A. (2010). How can the use of blog software facilitate the writing process of English language learners? *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 23(3), 183–197.
- Bloch, J. (2007). Abdullah's blogging: A generation 1.5 student enters the blogosphere. *Language Learning & Technology*, 11(2), 128–141.
- Bloch, J., & Crosby, C. (2008). Blogging and academic writing development. In F. Zhang & B. Barber (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Computer-enhanced Language Acquisition and Learning* (pp. 36–47). Hershey, NY: Information Science Reference.
- Blood, R. (2002). *The weblog handbook: Practical advice on creating and maintaining your blog*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Brook, K., Nichols, C., & Priebe, S. (2004). Remediation, Genre, and motivation: Key concepts for teaching with weblogs. In L. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff & J. Reyman (Eds.), *Into the blogosphere: Rhetorica, community, and Culture of Weblogs*. Retrieved Feb. 19, 2010 from <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere>
- Campbell, A. P. (2003). Weblogs fro use with ESL classes. *The Internet TESL Journal*, IX (2). Retrieved August, 28, 2008, from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Campbell-Weblogs.html>
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2006). Toward a writing pedagogy of shuttling between languages: Learning from multilingual writers. *College English*, 68(6), 589–604.

- Coughla, P., & Duff, P. A. (1994). Same task, different activities: Analysis of a second language acquisition task from an activity theory perspective. In J. P. Lantolf & G. Apple (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research* (pp. 173–194). Norwood, NJ: Albex.
- de Almeida Soares, D. (2008). Understanding class blogs as a tool for language development. *Language Teaching Research*, 12, 517–533.
- Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki, Finland: Orienta-Konsultit.
- Engeström, Y., & Miettinen, R. (Eds.) (1999). *Perspectives on activity theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fellner, T., & Apple, M. (2006). Developing writing fluency and lexical complexity with blogs. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 2(1), 15–26.
- Guiller, J., & Durndell, A. (2007). Students' linguistic behavior in online discussion groups: Does gender matter? *Computer in Human Behavior*, 23, 2240–2255.
- Herring, S. C., & Paolillo, J. C. (2006). Gender and genre variation in weblogs. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(4), 439–459.
- Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Wright, E., & Bonus, S. (2005). Weblogs as a bridging genre. *Information Technology & People*, 18(2), 142–171.
- Hyland, K. (2003). Genre-based pedagogies: A social response to process. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12, 22–29.
- Kuutti, K. (1996). Activity theory as a potential framework for human-computer interaction research. In B. Nardi (Ed.), *Context and consciousness: Activity theory and human-computer interaction* (pp. 17–44). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Leontiev, A. N. (1978). *Activity, consciousness and personality*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lu, H. -P., & Hsiao, K. -L. (2009). Gender differences in reasons for frequent blog posting. *Online Information Review*, 33(1), 135–156.
- Miceli, T., Murray, S. V., & Kennedy, C. (2010). Using an L2 blog to enhance learners' participation and sense of community. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 23(4), 321–341.
- Murray, L., & Hourigan, T. (2008). Blogs for specific purposes: Expressivist or socio-cognitivist approach? *ReCALL*, 20(1), 82–97.
- Murray, L., Hourigan, T., & Jeanneau, C. (2007). Blog writing integration for academic language learning purposes: towards an assessment framework. *Ibérica*, 14, 9–32.
- Mynard, J. (2007). A blog as a tool for reflection for English language learners. *Asian EFL Journal, Teaching Articles 2007*, 31–40.
- Nardi, B. A., Schiano, D. J., & Gumbrecht, M. (2004). Blogging as social activity, or, would you let 900 million people read your diary? *Proceedings of the 2004 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 6(3), 222–229.
- Thorne, S. L. (2004). Cultural historical activity theory and the object of innovation. In K. van Esch & O. St. John (Eds.), *New insights into foreign language learning and teaching* (pp. 51–70). Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang.
- Thorne, S. L. (2009). 'Community', semiotic flows, and mediated contribution to activity. *Language Teaching*, 42(1), 81–94.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press..