Blog writing integration for academic language learning purposes: towards an assessment framework

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Abstract

This article presents the results from ongoing research in the area of academic blog writing and language learning which began over four years ago. Initially, the research examined the area of micropublishing, virtual writing and blogs for academic purposes (Murray & Hourigan, 2006), then moved on to identify specific pedagogical roles for blogs in language teaching and learning (Murray & Hourigan, 2008 forthcoming). The third phase of this research now examines the areas of creative expression, reflection and language acquisition in *mandatory* blog writings by students at a Third Level Institution. Previously in this research, students were asked, but not required, to keep a personal blog for up to five months; writing only about their language learning strategies and experiences with the declared aim of improving student language learning strategies through self-reflection and self-expression. Students are, this time, required to write and 'complete' their academic blog as it represents one compulsory element –with due weighting, given its importance– of a language module assessment. This compulsory blog writing task has raised a number of pedagogical questions which will be explored, such as: effective integration, assessing and rewarding student creative expression within the blog medium, self-reflection as a language learner and ultimately the role and value of academic blog writing in language acquisition.

Key words: blogs, academic writing, micropublishing, assessment framework, integration.

Resumen

Integración de la escritura de "blogs" con fines de aprendizaje del lenguaje académico: en busca de un marco evaluativo

En el presente artículo se exponen los resultados de una investigación llevada a cabo en el ámbito del aprendizaje de lenguas y la escritura académica de diarios virtuales o *blogs* que comenzó hace cuatro años y aún sigue en curso. En un principio se examinaron el tema de la microedición, la escritura virtual y los *blogs* con fines académicos (Murray y Hourigan, 2006). Más tarde se concretaron las distintas funciones pedagógicas que de forma específica desempeñan los diarios virtuales en el proceso de enseñanza/aprendizaje de lenguas (Murray y Hourigan, 2008 en prensa). En la tercera fase, que es la que se presenta en este trabajo, se estudian las cuestiones relativas a la expresión creativa, la reflexión y la adquisición de lenguas en la realización de redacciones de diarios virtuales *con carácter obligatorio* por parte de alumnos de educación superior. En una etapa anterior, a los alumnos se les había pedido, pero no exigido, que durante cinco meses elaboraran y mantuvieran un *blog* en el que escribirían única y exclusivamente acerca de sus estrategias y experiencias de aprendizaje del inglés. La finalidad expresa de esta tarea consistía en conseguir que los alumnos mejoraran sus estrategias de aprendizaje mediante la auto-reflexión y auto-expresión. No obstante, esta vez los alumnos estaban obligados a escribir y completar sus diarios virtuales académicos, constituyendo esta tarea un elemento obligatorio que se somete a evaluación y, por su importancia, también se pondera como parte del módulo o asignatura de lenguas. Toda esta experiencia de escritura obligatoria de diarios virtuales ha planteado diversas cuestiones de carácter pedagógico que se estudian a lo largo de este trabajo, como por ejemplo: integración efectiva, evaluación y reconocimiento positivo de la expresión creativa del alumno dentro del ámbito de los *blogs*, reflexión individual como estudiante de lenguas y, finalmente, la función y el valor que puede desempeñar la escritura de diarios virtuales académicos en el desarrollo de una nueva lengua.

Palabras clave: *blogs*, escritura académica, microedición, marco evaluativo, integración.

Introduction

The recent emergence and growing popularity of blogs over the last number of years has presented practitioners of CALL with the opportunity to exploit this non-dedicated tool for specific language learning purposes. Such resources represent the current proliferation of generic tools onto the market which, if exploited appropriately, may provide learners with additional aids which can be integrated into their studies. Further, while products such as MP3 players, mobile phones, blogs, Google services, and social networking sites may be used by consumers in their daily recreational activities, their application to a distinct academic language learning context

presents a significant area for consideration. The main challenge for teachers lies in identifying the L2 potential of these tools in order to create a meaningful context for their appropriation within the language learning classroom. For a language learner examining such a generic tool, the difficulty in creating the necessary order and structure required for classroom exploitation is one of the main challenges associated with this approach. In particular, the question of defining the characteristics of academic blogs becomes increasingly difficult when we take into account the chaotic world of the blogosphere. Indeed, due to the ever-expanding structure of this distinct online space, the presence of blogs is becoming increasing noticeable across a wide range of contexts, from journalistic commentaries to reflective writings of a personal nature which are visible on social networking sites such as bebo.com and myspace.com. In fact, the amorphous structure of the blogosphere (Murray & Hourigan, 2008 forthcoming) is indicative of its continuously evolving format, which, dependent on the actual intended audience, may be exploited for either personal and/or commercial purposes. While this sense of disorder may be viewed as problematic by some, the inherent flexibility afforded by this environment presents the practitioner with rich sources of blog formats, which can be tailored accordingly to their specific pedagogical needs. The most important factor for consideration here involves the establishment of an effective teaching approach which outlines the practitioner's specific aims and objectives. This should also present an appropriate assessment framework in relation to the task which is being set. Thus, the paper shall discuss specifically the question of outlining a viable pedagogical framework which proposes a set of guidelines for the assessment of L2 academic blogs.

Firstly, we shall consider the current literature in this area, taking note of questions such as task creation, purpose and authenticity (Chapelle, 2001) and then the issue of effective information and communication techonology (ICT) integration. Secondly, our specific methodological approach shall be discussed with particular emphasis placed on the distinct context established by the design of the "Language and Technology" module at the institution where this study took place. This relates primarily to the establishment of a 20% essay assignment which involved learners firstly writing their own blog entries over the course of the semester and secondly using these entries as part of their (self-) analysis for the academic essay.

Examples of previous research on writing and assessment

The issue of writing assessment has long been a key concern for researchers in terms of the development of both transferable communicative skills and the improvement of students' L1/L2 written standard (Leki & Carson, 1994; Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Hawkey & Barker, 2004). For instance, Hamp-Lyons (2002: 5) notes that "the written word remains a principal medium of communication" which can create "understanding" between people. Thus, implementing a strategic framework with regard to promoting the quality of writing emerges as a significant factor to consider in this context. Understandably, the question of accurately measuring the learner's written communication capacity has evolved over the last 50 years or so, with increasing emphasis placed on ensuring a fair, accountable and viable examination procedure.

According to Yancey (1999) three main developments in the history of writing assessment can be identified. The first stage 1950-1970, witnessed the implementation of objective tests as the predominant format used to evaluate learners' composition skills. Eventually, these tests were replaced during the second assessment phase (1970-1986) which was characterised by the holistically scored essay. Finally, the current wave of assessment (1986 to present) is by and large associated with portfolio-based work (Little, 2002; Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005). Indeed, this present trend is regarded as helpful for making learners more accountable for their own work (Herter, 1991) and as such, reveals a more detailed account of learner development and progression. Hence, writing assessment can be viewed in terms of measuring reliability and validity, with both concepts now dominating the current approach (Huot, 1996). In fact, this question will be discussed more specifically later in this section when we examine the impact of the process and post-process approaches to academic writing.

As aforementioned, many studies relating to written language assessment are mainly concerned with the area of composition, with particular emphasis placed on the development of essay writing skills within a third level environment. Examples of such studies include: the evaluation of assessment essays (Barritt et al., 1986), comparing both direct and indirect assessment (Breland & Gaynor, 1979; Meredith & Williams, 1984; Heck & Crislip, 2001), implementing standardised rating scales for evaluating work (Brown et al., 2004; Hawkey & Barker, 2004), refining one's skills (McCarthy

et al., 1985) and providing training for learners in specific discourses (Cheng, 2006). The question of writing within a language learning context may typically involve numerous approaches. Examples may include the establishment of pedagogical practices such as explicit grammar instruction or indeed the introduction of specific task types –for instance exploring the differences between descriptive and narrative writing (Reichelt, 2001).

Additionally, evaluation procedures may adopt various structured formats in terms of content, for example, functional composition (Kelley, 2001) or context such as timed assessments (Lee, 2002). While a number of CALL-based studies have explored similar issues using alternative L2 aids such as corpora, Multi-user Domains Object Oriented (MOOs) tools, and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Hempel, 2006; O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006), there has been little previous research which provides a valid framework for blog assessment. However, one paper by Murray & Hourigan (2006) has provided guidelines for implementing blog writing assessment tasks within a generic framework for micropublishing tools. Furthermore, studies undertaken within the more conventional classroom setting provide us with a helpful set of criteria which can be further adapted to the L2 academic blog writing environment. One of the main features common to these studies is the emphasis on the role of the teacher in terms of establishing an appropriate context for successful task creation.

Underlining the four main areas of research into L2 writing, Archibald & Jeffery (2000) discuss themes such as: the process, product, context and teaching of writing as key factors to consider when addressing this issue. They recognise the complex activity of this multifaceted task which requires proficiency in several areas of skill and knowledge. Thus, in this context, the teacher should be familiar with the broad range of written expression skills, the objectives of the specific writing task and the needs and characteristics of those being assessed. Furthermore, Huot (1996) had already discussed several years earlier five main areas for consideration in relation to writing assessment. He believes that the process should be: site based, locally controlled, context sensitive, rhetorically based and accessible to learners.

Additionally, tailoring one's pedagogical design to learner needs is outlined as another crucial feature of successful task creation. For instance, Hawkey & Barker (2004) examine the production of a scale of descriptors which match different levels of writing proficiency. Elsewhere, Connor-Linton (1995) reaffirms this idea by focussing on the important relationship between the

actual rating process and the individual teacher's objectives in the task. In fact, a call was made four years earlier to provide forms of composition evaluation which were consistent with the teacher's pedagogical goals and indeed their personal beliefs about the development of academic writing skills (Hamp-Lyons, 1991).

Additionally, the actual role to be assumed by the teacher during this process is investigated, with particular interest placed on the provision of feedback via teacher comments (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Conrad & Goldstein, 1999). Moreover, the writing task is implemented as an intervention exercise in order to explore its impact on the learning experience (New, 1999; Bangert-Drowns et al., 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Interestingly, part of the process may also involve handing over control to students with regard to the writing assessment. For example, Duke & Sanchez (1994) discuss their particular approach which encourages students to derive their own set of assessment criteria which could be employed either individually or in peer response groups. This again is dependent on the context of the assessment and the teacher's main objectives. Other studies such as Becker (2003) place a great deal of importance on the idea of fostering self-expression in composition and once again outline the significance of bridging the classroom instruction approach with the aim of improving FL competency.

Interestingly, the question of self-expression has been discussed in detail by Cumming (2002). He observes how ethical issues come into play with regard to the distinct type of text being produced. Cumming notes the difficulty in assessing writing for specific purposes when used to express ideas such as personal development, intercultural negotiation, knowledge and emancipation. He outlines the importance in distinguishing between functional writing tasks and those which foster independent expression or thought. In fact, whilst this tension identified in terms of the production of personalised content shall be addressed in more detail in the methodology section of this paper, we must clarify our accepted definition of "personalisation" now. In our research context, we remain aware of the current inchoate definition of educational personalisation (Hartley, 2007) and so within this "management of the study process", we are referring to the "facilities for the personalisation of content, time, place and pace" (Schoenmakers et al., 2000: 10), where students learn about personalisation (Hartnell-Young et al., 2006) and many of its inherent benefits and applications for meeting their own needs (Condie & Munro, 2007).

The lengthy debate between both product and process approaches exists as another contributory factor in the teacher's design of an appropriate assessment approach. As noted in our earlier observation on the history of academic writing assessment, the gradual shift in emphasis from the final written product to the actual approach adopted by the learner acknowledges the inherent complexity of the writing task (Matsuda, 2003). While the initial product approach has not completely been disregarded of late (Ferris & Hodgcock, 1998), some teachers prefer to adopt the process method as it allows learner-writers to become more self-aware when revising and producing text as part of the composition process (Raimes, 1983; Phinney, 1989; Pennington & Brock, 1992). In fact, the activities associated with this approach such as: (re)drafting, generating ideas, structuring, focusing, micro and macro editing and the re-drafting of work indicate a highly flexible method which may produce more effective writing (Carpenter & Slater, 2000).

As noted in an earlier paper on blogs (Murray & Hourigan, 2006), both expressivism and socio-cognitivist approaches present equally viable procedures in the teacher's overall task design. By expressivism, we refer to the promotion of fluency in the learner's written output as a means to encourage the development of a more creative approach to writing. Consequently, this allows the student to address issues such as self-exploration and discovery in the written academic assignment (Berlin, 1988). In contrast, the socio-cognitivist school of thought approaches the task from a problem-solving angle with great weight placed on practising both higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. As such, this type of specifically-purposed assignment may be more suited to collaborative activities and is once again subject to the teacher's prior task objectives (Bloch & Crosby, 2006; Jeanneau & Batardière, 2006; Bloch, 2007).

There also exists the post-process approach to writing (Kent, 1999; Atkinson, 2003), wherein it is possible to view this particular procedure as an extension of the process paradigm, rather than as a rejection of it, and "post-process might be more productively defined as the rejection of the dominance of process at the expense of other aspects of writing and writing instruction" (Matsuda, 2003: 67). Generally, it relates to receiving effective and critical feedback from the teacher, most frequently via written commentaries (Goldstein, 2004). For a more comprehensive discussion of these processes please refer to Murray & Hourigan (2006 & 2008 forthcoming), but Table 1 should suffice for our purposes here.

Process and Post-Process Approach	
Socio-cognitivist	Expressivist
• Collective dissemination of knowledge • Peer discussion • Collaborative processing and application of data • Single publication comprising plurality of authors	• The "author's voice" • Creative • Reflective • Vanity-publishing factor • Collaboration between student and teacher

Table 1. Summary of approaches.

Integration and blog assessment

Thus, to briefly summarise, the establishment of a viable blog integration framework is dependent on a number of different issues. Firstly, in terms of assessing academic writing, the teacher should be aware of the following:

- Issues of validity and accountability in evaluating the written content.

- Their personal objectives and aims in terms of written skill development.

- The specific aspect of writing to be targeted (for example, discourse specific, self-expression, grammatical testing).

- The context of the task (for example single-authored (expressivist) or collaborative approaches (socio-cognitivist)).

Keeping these in mind, it is also imperative to consider a number of issues relevant to the integration of this generic writing tool which is being adapted for specific CALL purposes. These may include:

- Learning environment (classroom-based or self-study).

- Learner profiles (covering their previous exposure and experience to more general ICT use in their studies and in their online social networking, and of course their current language attainment levels).

- Creation of a relevant, meaningful and authentic context, including the justification for using the tool in question.

These issues shall be discussed in more detail in the next section which deals with our methodological approach. More importantly, we shall outline the particular context of the "Language and Technology" module and how we established our pedagogical framework based on the above criteria in order to assess and reward where appropriate the student writings.

Methodology

Background information and learner profiles

The participants involved in this study were second year students who had registered on the "Language and Technology" course at the third level institution where this research took place (i.e., The University of Limerick). This module introduces students to a wide variety of resources over a 12 week period. Students learn to use and evaluate tools such as: generic and dedicated language learning websites, automated summarising software, corpora and concordancing software, blogs and machine translation techniques. Furthermore, this module is the only one of its kind offered to language learners at the university and as the course outline declares, attempts to: "introduce students to the major pedagogical, professional and research applications of technology in modern languages and to enable students to integrate these into their studies".[1]

The class generally comprises learners from a variety of modern foreign languages courses including: Language and Cultural Studies (7 students), Applied Languages (13 students), Applied Languages and Computing (3 students), and Erasmus students (9 non-native English speakers). As part of this variety, the group is made up of students at different stages of their language learning, ranging from post-beginner to advanced levels. Given the large diversity in the language competencies of the students, the blogs were to be written in English. This did not disadvantage the Erasmus students at all, who on the contrary found it quite a normal exercise to be writing in their target language, English. No comments or complaints about the choice of the target language were made by Erasmus students, either in the blogs or in their essays. The cohort of students from the year 2006-07, during this, our third study on student blog writing, numbered 32 and is profiled along with estimates of their language output, in Table 2.

Group profile Yr 2006-07 and language output	
Group size:	n = 32
Total number of students who submitted essays:	s = 32
Distribution across language levels:	Post-beginner = 3 Lower Intermediate = 5 Intermediate = 14 Higher = 3 Advanced = 7 Total sample = 32
Average number of postings per week:	3
Number of weeks:	12
Average number of words per posting:	177
Average total for postings:	6372 words
Final essay:	1000 words

Table 2. Group profile Yr 2006-07 and language output.

The wide range of language proficiency levels makes the issue of training learners to personalise their approach an important concern for the teacher when planning the assessment for this module. The main languages which are studied are: English, Irish, French, Spanish, and German with a lower percentage studying Japanese. As such, the course provides these students with a valuable opportunity to adapt and personalise numerous types of CALLware to their individual needs as learners. Up to this point in their studies, students would have received instruction in the traditional face-to-face classroom format. However, as the university is currently piloting an e-learning management system, it would be hoped that in the future learners would receive more exposure to such alternative tools during their time at university. At present, students who take this course are generally inexperienced in the use of CALLware and would not have a great deal of prior experience with using either dedicated or generic tools in their language studies. However, this may change in time if the use of the university-wide Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) becomes more widespread among staff.

Academic Assessment

Previously, assessment in this course comprised the completion of two 50% projects based on their evaluation and integration of any two tools which must be completed by the end of the semester. However, as part of our action research approach (McNiff & Whitehead, 2003), the assessment method was amended from the previous year. This was due to the fact that the existing structure allowed the students to choose and evaluate two tools from the list of software integrated into the course curriculum. As such, there was no mandatory element of the assessment, which could allow the teacher to track and monitor both the learners' integration and evaluation of any given tool. Given the compulsory nature of the blog entries and essay tasks, it would guarantee this monitoring on an iterative and on a summative basis. Consequently, it was decided to award 40% for the two main essays with an extra 20% for the establishment and assessment of a language learning (LL) reflective blog. The smaller percentage of marks was offered for the academic blog essay in order to decrease the sense of pressure and urgency which students often experienced in the more weighted assignments. This sometimes resulted in students cramming their lab practice sessions and producing generalized content which was not personalised enough or directly relevant to their experiences. Thus, the

marks were awarded on students successfully establishing the blog and subsequently framing these examples of self-expression within a well-structured essay.

In addition, we wanted to guide learners in making the gradual transition from the generic blogosphere to the LL specific blog space. Thus, it was important to achieve balance between the practical aspect of making blog entries and the pedagogical aim of producing reflective LL content. Therefore, the blog exercise had to be completed over the 12 week period with frequent entries (at least 3 entries per week) to be made by the learner. The address had to be emailed to the teacher at the start of term in order for their work to be tracked over the semester. The content of these entries would then form the basis for the student's 1000 word essay whereby they would reflect upon the following:

1. how they integrated the blog; and

2. whether or not they would continue to use it as part of their long term LL strategies.

Due to the fact that this assessment focused on the issues of self-expression and reflection, students were not marked down on the personalised content of the blog or the essay. On the other hand, marks were awarded for:

• 10%: Structure and presentation of the essay. Students were given guidelines on writing the academic essay during class time as well as a style sheet which was made available on the course website.

• 10%: Elaboration and development of points, using examples and quotations from the learners' personalised blog entries.

As highlighted earlier, learners had to produce content that was both personalised and reflective in nature. These reflections had to focus on their experiences as language learners *only* as a means to make learners more aware of their individual LL strategies over the course of the semester. Furthermore, the added value of using the blog meant that students were producing content that was instantly accessible on the web, which could potentially attract comments from other users, whether they were classmates or anonymous bloggers. Please consult table 3 for a summary of our assessment procedure in this module.

Blog assignments: Action Research			
Yr 1: Initial Model	**Participation Potential**	**Issues with assessment**	**Areas to be addressed**
Module Assignment: Essay open to choice of 2 topics (including machine translation, website evaluation, corpora, summarising software, blogs)	Reduced numbers of participants due to wide range of choices available	• Students had to submit essays during weeks 10 and 13 of the semester. There was no formal log of how students were using and practising the software over semester. Essays were evaluative in nature and the amount of time for practise and exposure was dependent on the topic's order in the teaching block • In addition, the teachers were concerned that learners were "cramming" their practice time in the multimedia lab and may have been prone to producing standardised analysis in their essays due to the heavy weighting of the 50% essay. More emphasis on personalisation was needed.	• Establish task (weighted at 20%) which would encourage active reflective content on the LL process as well as the provision of dated entries in order to indicate the frequency of the learner's use of the medium. Example of enforced disruption. • Timescale of the task would last for the full duration of the module and would require learners to personalise their web space and content • It could also potentially provide a reflective space for their experiences with using the other pieces of software on the course • Aim: to "enforce" in a gentle manner a more structured and disciplined approach towards the integration of a specific piece of CALLware
Yr 2: Current Model	**Participation Potential**	**Issues with assessment**	**Areas to be addressed**
Module Weighting: Students now had to complete three essays. Two, weighted at 40%, were chosen from a choice of themes covered during the term (Machine translation, website evaluation, social networking platforms, corpora). Students also had to complete a mandatory blog and essay weighted at 20%.	100% participation as this was a mandatory exercise	• Essay due week 13 of the semester • Students had to make regular blog entries during the term. Their blog addresses had to be firstly emailed to the teacher. This was to promote active reflection on their LL. • Final product would include 1000 word essay in conjunction with regular blog entries by the student at least 3 times per week.	• Personalisation of content (self-expression and self-quotation for the essay) • Reflection on LL strategies • Reflection on language awareness • Quality of self-analysis and realisation • Good organisation and structure; clear development of points

Table 3. Summary of academic blog assessment objectives.

Data analysis

As aforementioned, students from the class were encouraged to establish firstly a personalised context for their LL specific blog, which in turn would provide useful data for their end of semester assignment. In fact, the academic essay would play an important role in allowing the students to reflect upon and assess the process at the end of this three month period. Consequently, students were awarded marks based upon how they developed

this sense of personalisation and the manner in which they framed their discussion within a coherent and well structured essay. Hence, in this section we shall deal primarily with these two important issues, beginning firstly with an examination of how students individualised their content in the blog medium. Secondly, a number of examples relating to structure and cohesion shall be considered, looking at issues such as organisational devices, development (or indeed, lack of development) of key issues and the use of self-quotation as a means of clarifying certain points.

End of term essay: Personalised Reflection

Generally, we can divide the majority of themes into three main areas: context of use, maintenance of relevant LL content, and self-discovery. One of the chief aims of the essay was to encourage students to contextualise their use of the blog writing space over the course of the semester. Thus, while the focus and content of the blog were predetermined by the course programme, students were still free to choose their topics of interest once these related predominantly to their LL practices. As stated earlier, we wanted learners to personalise their content in order to place more emphasis on their roles as learners in the LL process. Interestingly, some students noted how this gently enforced approach made their attempts to standardise output relatively difficult. For instance, one student remarked that after a while they became less aware of the fact that they were "writing" for the sake of getting a good grade with the result that their content became more "honest" in nature. This may simply be because the learner did not feel pressurised to write what "someone would like to hear" in relation to their language learning. Ideally, it was hoped that this sense of freedom would gradually encourage learners to become more creative in their choice of theme development. During the course of the semester, learners would be able to switch to issues which emerged as being of greater importance to them at different points of the experience. Consequently, this would allow the individual the opportunity to place themselves at the centre of the reflective process as examples (1) and (2) from students outline:

Example (1)

> In comparison to the grammar book exercises or activities like learning lists of words by heart, the blog leaves a lot of space for a student's panache, imagination and educational freedom.

Example (2)

> I love the diversity of it. I love the fact that I can write a Spanish essay and then totally change my mode of thinking and write a Japanese essay using a whole different word structure, word order- not to mention alphabet!! [sic]

By introducing this approach into the academic essay format, we could identify a broad range of themes emerging from the learners' examination and analysis. Furthermore, it was hoped that this additional post-process reflection would help learners firstly to monitor their sense of focus and commitment throughout this period and secondly to offer recommendations with regard to their future development of LL strategies in their studies. In fact, many honest examples of the students' appropriation of the tool were subsequently noted, ranging from general satisfaction with the medium to confessions of laziness due to a lack of motivation. One student remarked that they were too "lazy" to do any work related to language learning because they were generally "unmotivated" over the course of the semester. The question of motivation also emerged with regard to maintaining LL specific content in the blog. Some learners found it difficult to write solely about their language learning experiences and at times suffered from writer's block. In one particular case, the learner tried to address this issue by moving from a discussion on mechanical aspects of language acquisition to a more generalised account of their own experience of LL in Ireland. Therefore, the possibility of producing such "improvised" thematic content was an important aspect of the writing task, as a means to encourage learners to open up and explore their own language learning world. In other cases, learners noted how the switch from recreational usage to a more dedicated LL context was yet another challenge to address. For instance:

Example (3)

> This is something about the blog which would not help in language learning because as there are no rules or boundaries it is easy to go off in a tangent, in a sense you just write what you are thinking.

Example (4)

> An effective blog demands knowledge and a lot of personal perseverance. Otherwise, it remains just an entertainment. [sic]

Example (5)

> I think I will keep blogging, not for language technology, but rather I will

start a personal blog. Of course, I will write the blog in English, so this way I also gain something from it language-wise. [Erasmus student]

In these examples from students' academic essays, we see that learners are concerned with the "effectiveness" of the appointed task which requires a certain amount of input from the student in order to work appropriately. In fact, as students begin to frame this experience within a dedicated learning environment, their expectations change and we can identify attempts to establish goals which relate directly to their LL experiences. In some cases, as seen in the last quotation, LL goals could indeed be maintained in the development of future blog content by writing in the foreign language, regardless of the theme. This outlines the potential for students to maintain some of the strategies developed during the course as part of their long term integration of the tool.

In addition to issues related to context of use and the creation of appropriate content, learners frequently made reference to experiencing a sense of self-discovery and personal growth during this reflective period. Indeed, before undertaking this task, many students admitted that they had not previously considered their individual practices as language learners and only became aware of these characteristics during this period. These experiences were relatively positive, with individuals reporting on how the blog gave them confidence in relation to their status as learners, which in turn renewed their sense of commitment to the process. For some learners, the academic writing task allowed them to develop particular methods and approaches which suited their own writing styles. These included using the blog space for specific purposes such as:

- A "memory aid": "The blog reminds me of what I have already acquired".

- Analysing existing methods: "Writing down this progress online has helped me analyse my methods".

- Planning future goals: "This made me realise that when I go to Paris and Seville during the coming year that I am going to have to make the most of my time abroad".

- Taking action to improve weak areas: "Downloading language material to my ipod; Private tuition; Pronunciation practice with my sister …".

In addition to making positive discoveries about their roles as language learners, students in the class also outlined examples of negative affective factors which influenced their attitudes towards their studies. In some cases, these were relatively positive, with individuals reporting that the blog gave them confidence in relation to their status as learners, which in turn renewed their sense of commitment to the process. In fact, the relative sense of satisfaction expressed in their blogs served to validate their established methods and consequently, emerged as a helpful motivational aid. However, in other cases the self-examination component of the task revealed seemingly negative aspects of the language acquisition process, which previously may not have been obvious to learners. In these cases, affective issues such as shyness, lack of confidence, intimidation and fear all emerged as additional factors which influenced how students approached their language learning in general. These problems related not only to working with a new medium but were also applied to their general experiences at the university. Examples of topics included reservations about the nature of blogs, intimidation by the online environment and fear of the self-access centre:

Example (6)

> When I first started writing a blog I found it hard to grasp the concept of sharing my thoughts, especially on language learning, with other people, god forbid they might disagree with what I wrote or my style of writing.

Example (7)

> I started off with a negative attitude to the blog and I don't think I benefited as much from the experience because of this.

Example (8)

> My blog is my bank of irrational fears regarding language learning. It has also revealed to me that I fear the LRA (Language Resource Area).

These examples pinpoint the potential benefits synonymous with the blog medium, if used effectively. While these citations above reflect negative experiences underlined in the blogs, the possibility for learners to gain perspective on their *personae* as language learners is undoubtedly helpful in this context. In effect, learners have the chance to compare their experiences at the time of composition with their present understanding of the language learning process. As such, both the blog and the essay content provide the

opportunity for the learner to track their personal development and to take suitable action if required.

In the next section of the article, we shall look predominantly at examples of structures and cohesion from both the student blog entries and from their resultant end of term academic essays, in order to assess their value to both teacher and student in identifying LL strategies and language awareness.

Structures and organisation

In attempting to map the structures, cohesion and organisation of the blog entries and essays we will examine the student academic writings using the following, although by no means exhaustive list of criteria: evidence of supplementary reading; style transference; self-quotation for clarification; discourse; examples of introductions and conclusions from the same essays; examples of bibliographies. Due to space constraints and to facilitate easier reading, our examples will be presented in the Appendix.

Evidence of supplementary reading

Looking at the content provided by students in the group, it is possible to identify evidence of supplementary reading in a number of blogs. Typically, the learner frames this reading task within a distinct language learning objective, thus adhering to the primary aim of this particular essay. Examples include citing interesting quotations by well-known authors as well as detailing literature which the student is currently reading in their foreign language. This particular practice reflects the manner in which students attempt to contextualise their learning in order to clarify the blog's specific role in their L2 studies.

Style transference

Within this category, we have identified many examples of different writing styles discussing similar content. The blog writing style is nearly always informal, familiar and coherent –the students rarely, if ever, deviated from the set tasks. This informal style was expected but never imposed upon the student by the lecturers. We then see in the academic essay evidence of some informal writing styles encroaching upon the formal submitted essay. Further research will be needed to explore the influence of the medium upon the mixing of such writing styles.

Self-quotation for clarification

Another significant feature which arises in this essay task is the use of self-quotation for clarification purposes. This particular strategy again reinforces the reflective nature of the task and highlights the attempts by the learner to develop a more profound and thoughtful analysis of their SLA activities. For instance, we can see how learners used their blog entries in order to track their individual development as language learning bloggers during the course of the semester. By using this "self-quotation" approach, many learners were able to assume a more objective role at the end of the process, in terms of evaluating their individual strategies. This in turn led to a more critical understanding of the language learning task, as outlined in our example which considers the challenges of acquiring a language outside of the target language community.

Discourse

These examples show how in the foucaultian sense of discourse the students have gained some comprehension of themselves as language learners, in particular their language learning strategies and then acted upon these reflections by "modifying one's actions" (Gee, 1990: 37). This is where we have found the strongest evidence of some lasting and positive impact upon the learner caused by the blog and essay writing exercises.

Organisation of content: introduction, conclusion, bibliography

Finally, the use of organisational devices such as an introduction and a conclusion emerged as an important aspect for consideration in this task. The fact that this was an academic exercise may well have had an effect on the way learners presented and discussed their work in both the essay and the blog. While these features would be a required element for submitting a standard essay at the University of Limerick, it is also interesting to note the inclusion of such devices in a number of blogs. These may have been chosen by learners in order to make the distinction between "recreational" and "academic" blogging, as a means to reinforce their attempts to produce more reflective written production. Indeed, many students printed extracts from their blogs which were submitted as appendices in their essays, once again displaying their attempts to adhere to the specific task allocated to this generic medium. Readers may also recognise or wish to note the growing use of web-based sources, especially Wikipedia, in academic essays.

Conclusion

In our context of research and assessment, the blog represents the academic writing process method in which the student composes in an admittedly enforced medium of self-expression and analysis. The blog writing also represents aspects of a post-process method with opportunities to rationalise and reflect upon the "expressions of the self". The formal academic essay also corresponds to the post-process approach, offering to the teacher an academically-valid assessment framework for providing effective feedback; and to the student an academically-endorsed acknowledgement of the quality of their self-analysis and possible discovery of their most effective LL strategies. From our data we have found that most students understood the potential of blogs as a reflexive tool on LL and the benefits thereof. Yet, some remained who did not. This may require an improved integration technique on our part. The main task for researchers interested in this LL approach will be to improve upon the pedagogical and writing processes involved in turning future "masterpiece[s] of scattered thought and random concepts" (comment from blog, please see Appendix) into better quality academic essays.

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NOTES

[1] For a detailed description of the course, including the blended task methodology (Thorne (2003) and Abermann (2004) are quite useful on blended task creation techniques), see http://www.ul.ie/~appliedlanguages/LI4113_Course_Outline.htm).

Appendix. Criteria and examples from blogs and academic essays.

EVIDENCE OF SUPPLEMENTARY READING	ESSAY:	As Jane Wagner said, (shown above) language is the medium through which we complain about life. In my personal experience, blogs are the medium through which I complain about language.
	BLOG:	Lately I have been reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in the Spanish Language which translates as *Harry Potter y la piedra filosifial*, or something along those lines.
STYLE TRANSFERENCE	ESSAY:	- In my first year, my X teacher wanted us to keep a learner diary, but it didn't work out. In essentials I thought it was an excellent idea. It was my understanding that it was supposed to be doubly beneficial. Firstly, it was for us to discover ourselves what works for us and what doesn't. We were to examine ourselves for our own sake, but we were to turn them in, so that she could review and find out what aspects of her class worked and what didn't. Secondly it was so she could learn what she could do to cater to the learning style and needs of her students. It's the same idea in principle. The learner diary, like my blog is similar in that it not only serves as a learner journal, to note new grammar points and vocabulary words that one has learned recently or found particularly interesting or tricky. It covers both theory and practise of language learning.
		- To sum up, I cannot say that during the duration of my Erasmus exchange in Ireland *Neverendingstory* blog was playing a crucial role in the acquisition of the foreign languages I learn. But undoubtedly it was a significant experience, especially as far as written English is concerned. The blog forced me to spend some time creating the posts in English, checking phrases and reediting my own mistakes. It was also a place to publish for myself already acquired words and recollect them later. I treat *Neverendingstory* as a funny, engaging language learning experience and a fruitful exercise which has developed my knowledge of both English and German.
	BLOG:	- I remember in first year, X asked us to keep a learner diary, but it didn't pan out. I still thought it was an excellent idea. I'm not sure if it was for our benefit or for hers... whether we were to keep this diary to use for our own good, to help us with our own studies, or if it was for her sake, trying to learn how her students learn and what she could do to cater to those needs. Pity it didn't work out. Either way it would have been a worthwhile project...
		- The very last official post. It is a touching moment... I'll try not to cry;) What should I actually write on this special occassion?? Hm... I like my blog:) In a minute I'll send an essay which sums up this piece of work. Well, some new words seem to be the most appropriate..to entice, to savour, to hit the ceiling, welfare remorses. It's not the end anyway. It's a Neverendingstory. :).
SELF-QUOTATION FOR CLARIFICATION	ESSAY:	- Upon starting the blog I felt it was important to outline why I was doing so and this can be clearly seen in the first post of 29th September. Being a language learner I felt it important to highlight the usefulness of languages and their highly important function as a communicative medium. Throughout the

blog, you see my musing on all things language-related. The topics ranged from bilingualism to the usefulness of machine translation (MT).

- I mentioned in my 29th entry, "the Erasmus students are always much better at writing in their blogs, but that's because they have so much more to write about... because they are here, learning English every day in many ways. While I'm sitting here, trying to think about things to write about when it comes to my language learning experience and classes etc, they are learning new things everyday." I may sit in a classroom for 4 hours a day and not learn anything new, Erasmus students are practicing and learning new things all the time, whether they want to or not.

BLOG: Is the essay a big blog? What I mean now is where do I make the differences?

DISCOURSE: IN FOUCAULTIAN TERMS OF "UNDERSTANDING"' AND THEN "MODIFYING ONE'S ACTIONS" (GEE, 1990: 37)	ESSAY:	*Convoluted, joycean and irresistible example*:

- I have always been aware what type of language learner I am, but for some reason, unknown to logical acumen, I never bothered to make note of it, either mentally or physically. Resultingly, over a number of years, like a truly inveterate fool, I have continued to use methods of language acquisition which have had hardly any positive effect on my linguistic ken at all.

Clearer example:

- When I first started writing a blog I found it hard to grasp the concept of sharing my thoughts, especially on language learning, with other people, god forbid they might disagree with what I wrote or my style of writing. But the blogging community is a very open community from what I have seen and eventually I became less inhibited, rapidly jotting down thoughts as they came into my head. I pondered over whether I was an audio or visual learner, made fun of some of the more peculiar elements of my languages and, most importantly, admired the works of others.

BLOG: - When I am in Japan, I think it would be good for me to write in my blog at the end of the day, either in Japanese or English,... just to point out all the new things I've learned that day. Then I can always go back through my blog and use it as my own personal grammar book for review.

- The first shock: Living surrounded by a foreign language 24 hours a day during several days can be a little bit shocking. We've been talking about in the lab today ans it's completely true. The first week I was here I had a strange feeling. It takes some days to completely change your mind and try to think in another language. I realised that while days were going on I could understand people easily. Once you've achieved to think in English it's much easier. I'm sure that when I come back to Catalonia it will happen the same but the opposite way. I'll be so used to speak English and listen to it that it'll be hard to speak Catalan again. I think that's the best way to learn. You can know all the grammar, you can pronunicate words perfectly, but if you don't go somewhere and do some practise with native speakers you'll lose some important things. Even you don't notice it, but you are constantly learning new things and improving

INTRODUCTION	ESSAY:	Blog is a perfect example of a UGC (User Generated Content) similarly to a source of this term which was published on wikipedia.org. "It is a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order" (wikipedia). Its content can vary extensively according to user's preferences. The aim of this essay is to discuss its effectiveness in terms of foreign language learning and acquisition.
	BLOG:	I give you a masterpiece of scattered thought and random concepts. I'd suggest carrying on reading my blog. It's a great read for the most part, and I'm not just saying that because I'm narcissistic...
CONCLUSION	ESSAY:	In conclusion, do I feel that this blog writing has helped my learning? I think it is clear that it most certainly has helped me outline my thoughts and

		processes as to language-learning methods and the use of language technology and ways in which I can become a quicker learner.
	BLOG:	This is my first entry that lay outside the deadline on the course description, and is prompted from my own desire to continue with this academic exercise... A symbol that I have moved on passed a level of habitual 'humdrummery of school assignments' attitude into the threshold of over-achievement. But self congratulation aside...
BIBLIOGRAPHY/ APPENDICES	ESSAY:	1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog 2. http://www.writing.northwestern.edu/self_assessment.html 3. http://www.athabascau.ca/mais/syllabi/mais616.html 4. Class Notes - Lecture One /Two…
	BLOG:	No examples.