WHAT IS SAID AND WHAT IS DONE:
EFL Student Writers' Perceptions of Peer Feedback Through Blogs and Their Actual Use

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ABSTRACT

The demand of responsibilities among teachers has evolved not only in classroom management but also to the extent of promoting communication and interpersonal skills. Social media is integrated in schools and higher learning institutions for communication and reflection of learning which enhance teachers' performance in leadership quality and effective teaching.

This study was designed in a qualitative approach mainly to explore the extent of interest and enjoyment students experienced during an intensive ICT course. Blog was used as a medium for reflection during the class where students posted their creations of videos, posters and other ICT materials. The three needs investigated were namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness support. The researcher further examined on students' awareness of the usefulness of the ICT skill they learned and how much they can use the blog for teaching and learning. Based on the Basic Psychological Needs Theory framework (BPNT), this study has adopted the direct observation, journal entry, and interviews as a triangulation approach.

Keywords: Qualitative research, Basic psychological needs theory, blog and social network.

INTRODUCTION

Peer feedback, which is also known as peer review, has been advocated as a valuable activity for learners as they work on a text. It refers to the practice of having a peer read and offer insights on a text, with a view to improving the final written product (Crossman & Kite, 2012). Peer feedback is believed to benefit student writers in numerous ways, such as raising awareness of their readers, improving attitudes in regards to writing, reducing their apprehension towards the act of writing, and giving them more insight into the writing process and the role of revision (Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000).

While engaged in exchanging peer feedback, learners have been found to give each other suggestions, actively formulate questions, give and receive explanations, and edit grammar mistakes (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994).

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For second or foreign language students writers, such as English as a foreign language (EFL) student writers, such interactions can give them the opportunity to receive comprehensible input, engage in the negotiation of meaning, which helps them to notice linguistic features and modify their output accordingly, and develop various language skills that can contribute to their writing skills development (Liang, 2010; Liu & Sadler, 2003). However, some research has found that second and foreign language student writers may not feel comfortable with giving feedback directly to a peer. A few participants in Ho and Savignon's (2007) research revealed that, when engaging in peer review face to face, they avoided criticizing or delineating problems in their peers' work in order to maintain harmony. Peer reviewers may also be reluctant to provide feedback for fear of ridicule due to their lack of linguistic proficiency (Nelson & Carson, 1998).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies have been proposed as an alternative medium to conducting peer review in face-to-face settings. Such technologies help maintain the beneficial aspects of peer feedback as outlined previously, but have the added advantages of being less anxiety-provoking than physically addressing a peer and giving greater flexibility in terms of time and place for providing peer feedback (Ho & Savignon, 2007). Furthermore, CMC's blend of spoken and written communication is seen as conducive to participation and collaboration. It also appears to enhance motivation and keep student writers focused and on task (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Liang, 2010).

Blogs are an asynchronous CMC technology that have been suggested as a possible platform for online peer feedback. Blogs have a user-friendly interface that allows users to quickly publish their work online with little to no technical expertise. Most importantly, blogs allow visitors to leave comments in relation to the content of posts (Mishne & Glance, 2006). It is this capacity for dialogue between readers and writers that has had many researchers and instructors advocating and investigating blogs as an online platform for the exchange of peer feedback (Dippold, 2009; Liang, 2010; Wu, 2006).

Culpan (1995, cited in Elwood & Maclean, 2009, p. 67) noted that successful implementation of a technology within an educational context requires favorable attitudes on the part of the intended users. In general, research has revealed overall positive learner perceptions of the use of blogs as a medium for peer feedback. When Dippold (2009) investigated the extent to which blogs can support peer feedback with a group of second-year advanced German learners, at the study's conclusion, the participants revealed blogging was an enjoyable experience and that they appreciated receiving both peer and instructor feedback via their blogs. Similarly, the participants in Gedera's (2012) study were receptive to the peer feedback they received on their blogs, and found it to be conducive to the improvement of their writing skills. This was also noted when Kitchakarn (2013) investigated the use of blogs as a platform for peer feedback with Thai EFL learners. The learners had a positive attitude to using blogs to exchange peer feedback in small groups of 5 to 6 learners as they worked on writing paragraphs in English. A large percentage revealed they found peer feedback beneficial for learning to write, and statistical analysis found that their writing abilities showed significant improvement.

As a major objective of introducing blogs as a peer feedback platform is to support student writers' text-related discussions beyond the classroom, some studies have also looked in detail at the types of comments learners produce.

Wu's (2006) research participants chose to give their peers encouraging and complimentary comments, rather than pinpointing writing issues. It was acknowledged that the low frequency of writing-related comments may have been due to a lack of training in how to generate peer feedback. Liou and Peng (2009) found similar non-revision-oriented comments with their sample prior to implementing peer review training. After training was administered, however, they found an increase of revision-oriented comments, from an initial 42.2% of all comments before training, to 68.7%. This would seem to point to the need for training in how to exchange peer feedback in a blog-based environment.

In summary, there have been studies that have found that student writers have positive perceptions of blogging for peer review and there has also been research that examined how student writers implement this technology for this purpose. Less research, however, has looked at how learners' perceptions of the technology and their actual use, as seen in the comments they generate, correspond. This present research, therefore, aimed to categorize and examine the comments student writers posted when they are using blogs as a medium for peer feedback alongside their thoughts regarding use of blogs for this purpose. The main objective of this study was to explore whether student writers' professed opinions of blogging as a platform for peer feedback are consistent with their utilization of the technology.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at a large, public university in Bangkok, Thailand. The participants were 26 first-year students majoring in engineering. There were 4 females and 22 males, with a mean age of 18.5 years. They were all Thai learners of English as a foreign language, taking an EFL course taught by the first author, hereafter referred to as the researcher-instructor.

The class was a mandatory one (the first of two) for all first-year students at the university, except those majoring in arts. Course content was derived from a commercial textbook, and the main objective of the class was that, at its conclusion, learners would be able to produce both oral and written assignments incorporating information from multiple sources. Final course grades were calculated from examination scores, classwork and homework scores, and project scores. The course lasted a total of 16 weeks, with two weeks allotted to the midterm and final examinations. The researcher-instructor taught the students in a face-to-face setting for a total of three hours per week, in a classroom equipped with computers, at a ratio of one computer to approximately three learners. One computer allowed the researcher-instructor to share information on her personal monitor with the class, as it was connected to a projector.

All the computers in the physical classroom had Internet capability Furthermore, all of the students also had mobile devices that could be used to connected to the university's wireless Internet services. Some of the participants also had tablet and laptop computers with Internet access as well. The learners could also go online at computer workstations around their faculty and the university campus.

To encourage the use of the technology, the decision was made to require the learners to utilize blogging for the course, with particular emphasis on its use as a channel for peer feedback during the process of completing writing assignments.

A week prior to the data collection period, before mandatory blogging was implemented, the researcher-instructor first led a discussion of issues of online privacy, safety, and etiquette to ensure the participants knew how to maintain their anonymity, keep themselves safe, and interact politely while using the blogs. Then, the participants were asked to sign up for individual blogs on the free blog hosting site, Wordpress (http://www.wordpress.com). Their individual blog addresses were collected and the links were stored on a central blog maintained by the researcher-instructor, so that every participant could easily access others' blogs.

The concepts of writing as a process and peer feedback were introduced to the participants in class. Following Rollinson's (2005) suggestions on implementing peer review, the researcher-instructor first led a class discussion on the use and benefits of peer feedback. Then, the researcher-instructor modeled the activity and reiterated the principles of peer review. For this study, neither peer feedback guidelines nor checklists were utilized, but for every writing assignment, the participants were given explicit criteria for scoring, which they could use to guide their peer review, if they so wished.

Graded blogging began after the initial one-week familiarization period, and lasted ten weeks. During this time, the participants utilized their blogs in the completion of seven different writing assignments (an essay on someone they admired, two emails recommending travel destinations, two narrative texts, and two argumentative texts). Every assignment lasted approximately a week, and the participants were to post an average of four times to their blog (at least once for each stage of the writing process), and comment on at least one peer's post, while they worked on a particular assignment. They could post comments, concerns, or queries at every step of the writing process. Blogging use was scored according to a holistic rubric, with the scores contributing to the classwork and homework component of the participants' final course grade.

At the end of the ten-week data collection period, all of the posts the participants made regarding their peers' work were collected. Posts that did not comment on a peer's writing assignment were excluded from analysis. Directed content analysis was then undertaken with the data. This type of content analysis draws on existing concepts in the literature, operationalizes them, and then utilizes them as categories during the initial coding of the data. Following this, new codes are generated for data that cannot be categorized with the initial coding scheme (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this study, the researchers relied on an existing rubric to code the participants' comments. This rubric, developed by Liu and Sadler (2003), served as a framework for analysis. The rubric classifies each peer comment on the basis of three elements: the nature of the comment (whether it is revision-oriented or not), text areas it focuses on (global or local), and its discourse function. The initial discourse functions included in the rubric were evaluation, suggestion, clarification, and alteration. The decision was made to include an additional discourse function category to allow for classification of more socially-oriented comments. This additional category is called "social interaction", and is similar to Liou and Peng's (2009) "chatting", which they defined as comments that do not address aspects of writing.

However, "social interaction" in the present research also included non-revision-oriented comments that had indirect links to writing. That is, comments that did not directly discuss writing, but included a mention of some aspect of the peer's text, were coded as social interaction. For instance, the following comment (presented in its unedited form) was categorized as social interaction:

Looking forward to reading the remaining part ;) [S3]

As can be seen, the student writer is discussing a component of his peer's text, but the comment serves to foster solidarity rather than inspire revision. Thus, this comment was related to an aspect of writing, and so could not be categorized as "chatting" as defined by Liou and Peng (2009), but could also not be categorized as an evaluation, suggestion, clarification, or alteration, as per Liu and Sadler's (2003) framework.

Following Liu and Sadler (2003), the unit of analysis was sentential meaningful units. When a particular posted comment had a complex meaning, the meaningful units contained within the comment were the focus of the analysis. This can be seen in the following example, where the sentential meaningful units have been numbered:

> ➢ **That is interesting structure!**
> ➢ **I don't know that this structure need to be like an essay or not, but others make an introduction by pursuing readers and get them into the story. (**
> ➢ **3) Though, this is good one, but tries to check your grammar and words.**
> ➢ **You're a business man! [S11]**

Though this was a single posted comment, it contains four sentential meaningful units. Contained within this single comment are components that can be categorized as either revision-oriented and non-revision-oriented. These components can be categorized further as having the discourse functions of evaluation, suggestion, and social interaction. "That is interesting structure" is an evaluation comment, "I don't know that this structure need to be like an essay or not, but others make an introduction by pursuing readers and get them into the story. Though, this is good one, but try to check your grammar and words" is a suggestion comment, and "You're a business man" is a comment that is meant to promote social interaction. The comment also covers both global and local areas of the text. The first sentential meaningful unit focuses on the global issue of the text's structure, while the second specifically pinpoints introduction portion of the text.

Analysis of the data from the blog comments was investigated in relation to information taken from a questionnaire on blogging use administered to the participants after ten weeks of using the technology. The questionnaire was authored by the researcher-instructor and validated by experts in teaching and researching English as a foreign language. The questionnaire was administered to the participants in Thai, to ensure their comfort in responding. They responded to the questionnaire when the use of mandatory blogging was halted.

RESULTS

Over the ten-week data collection period, a total of 310 comments were posted to the participants' blogs. Of these, 179 were generated by the participants (as opposed to the instructor or outside visitors to the blogs), with 62, or 34.6% of all student writer-generated comments, that were able to be categorized as peer feedback. That is, these comments were posted to initiate dialogue regarding a peer's written text. These 62 peer feedback comments yielded 148 units of analysis. The units of analysis did not have to be complete sentences, and it was noted that some did not end with conventional punctuation, but contained or were concluded with emoticons, or short symbols used to represent emotions in text-based environments (Derks, Bos, & Grumbkow, 2007). For convenience, these units of analysis will be referred to as "comments".

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Through directed content analysis, it was discovered that these comments were both revision- and non-revision-oriented, and that they encompassed only the five discourse functions in the initial coding scheme. Thus, no new coding categories were required.

It was found that only 50 of the comments, or 33.8%, were revision-oriented comments. The remaining 98 comments, or 66.2% of all comments that could be categorized as peer feedback, were non-revision-oriented. (It should be noted that comparing the revisions undertaken by the student writers to the revision-oriented comments they received, as was done in Liu and Sadler's (2003) study, is beyond the scope of this research).

Further analysis revealed the discourse function of the different types of comments, as well as the text areas the comments delineated. The majority of the comments were evaluation comments, followed by social interaction comments, suggestion comments, alteration comments, and clarification comments. Over half of the comments focused on global issues within the text. Table 1 below summarizes these data.

Table: 1
Summary of nature, discourse function,
and focused area of comments

Revision Nature		Revision-oriented		Non-revision-oriented	
		33.8%* (50)		66.2% (98)	
Discourse Function	**Evaluation**	**Suggestion**	**Clarification**	**Alteration**	**Social interaction**
	42.6% (63)	19.6% (29)	5.4% (8)	6.76% (10)	25% (37)
Text Area of Focus		Global		Local	
		68.2% (101)		30.4% (45)	

*Rounded to 2 sig. fig.

As can be seen, despite receiving peer review training, the majority of comments (66.2%) the participants generated were non-revision-oriented, i.e. did not address aspects of a peer's written text that would lead to modification or change.

Table: 2
Mean usefulness ratings of different purposes for blog use

Statement	Mean usefulness rating
1. sing blogs to post while working on an English writing assignment for the teacher to comment on.	4.75*
2. sing blogs to post while working on an English writing assignment for classmates to comment on.	3.91
3. sing blogs to post while working on an English writing assignment for other Internet users to comment on.	3.54
4. sing blogs to express my opinion on my classmates' English writing assignments.	3.88
5. sing blogs to contact the teacher when I have questions while doing my English writing assignment.	4.38
6. sing blogs to contact my classmates when I have questions while doing my English writing assignment.	3.33
7. sing blogs to contact other Internet users when I have questions	3.13

while doing my English writing assignment.	
8. sing blogs to answer my classmates' questions while they work on their English writing assignments.	3.46
9. sing blogs for learning English in other ways, such as reviewing before a test.	3.63
10. sing blogs to learn other subjects aside from English.	3.21
11. sing blogs for contacting friends and acquaintances.	3.34
12. sing blogs to follow news from friends and acquaintances.	3.5
13. sing blogs to contact other people, such as actors and singers.	2.79
14. sing blogs to follow news from other people, such as actors and singers.	3.13
15. sing blogs to follow news in general, such as political news or entertainment news.	3.29
16. sing blogs to follow news on special events, such as flooding.	3.29
17. sing blogs to record daily events that happen to yourself.	3.67
18. sing blogs to share personal information	3.96
19. sing blogs to share interesting information, such as interesting websites	3.83
20. sing blogs to search for general information.	3.58

*Rounded to 2 sig. fig.

The type of comment that was left most often was evaluative in nature. Following Liou and Peng (2009), complimentary evaluative comments were coded as non-revision-oriented, while critical evaluative comments were categorized as revision-oriented. More in-depth analysis revealed that only 6 of the 63 evaluative comments, or merely 9.52%, were negative evaluations. The remaining 57 evaluation comments, or 90.5%, were compliments regarding the peer's work.

The comments were also categorized regarding to the areas of the text they made reference to. Comments that focused on issues such as punctuation, word choice, or grammar were coded as local comments, while those that drew attention to broader issues such as the organization of the text, the purpose of the text, or the potential readers of the text, were coded as global comments. Of all 148 comments, 101 or 68.2% were global comments, while 45 or 30.4% focused on local copy-editing issues.

Thus, in summary, the majority of the comments were non-revision-oriented, evaluative, and global. These findings were examined in relation to data regarding the participants' perceptions of blogging.

These were collected via a questionnaire regarding blog use that was distributed to the participants after their use of the technology was discontinued. Respondents were asked to provide demographic information, elucidate any difficulties they had with the technology, and decide if they would recommend continued use of blogging. They were also asked to rate how useful they found blogging for 20 different purposes on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 5, which meant "very useful", to 1, meaning, "not at all useful". In total, 24 participants responded to the questionnaire. Table: 2 shows the mean usefulness ratings for each proposed purpose for blogging.

The data show that overall; the participants had a neutral opinion toward the use of blogging, with only two statements receiving a mean usefulness rating higher than 3. These particular items, however, asked about their perceptions of blogs' usefulness as a channel for instructor feedback. As can be seen, the participants perceived that using blogs for this purpose was fairly useful. However, it should be noted that the mean usefulness rating for the statement "Using blogs to post while working on an English writing assignment for classmates to comment on" was 3.91, which seems to indicate a tendency towards finding blogs beneficial for peer feedback.

Another noteworthy observation is that the only purpose for which participants felt blogs were not particularly useful was for contacting people outside their sphere of acquaintance.

For the item on the questionnaire that asked participants if they would recommend the use of blogging for new students, only 21 of the 24 respondents answered, but there was 100% agreement that blogging should be continued from those that replied. When the rationale provided for their endorsements were examined, it was found that receiving peer feedback was in their top three reasons for using blogs.

However, it was discovered that there was more or less equal support for its use as a channel for both peer and instructor feedback. Analysis revealed ten main reasons for why the participants believed blogging should be continued. Each of these reasons was mentioned by at least 2 different participants. The last category of "Other" refers to the two reasons that were mentioned by only one participant. All the data are summarized in Table 3 below, in order from most to least mentioned.

Table: 3
Reasons provided for continued use of blog use and number of mentions

Reason	Number of times mentioned
Ease of sharing work and comments	8
Receiving peer feedback	7
Receiving teacher feedback	7
Improving writing	5
Seeing peers' work	4
Speed of sharing work and comments	3
Giving peer feedback	3
Practicing writing	2
Contacting others outside of class	2
More focused use of Internet	2
Other (e.g. ecofriendliness)	2

The participants revealed that the major reason they would recommend continued use of blogging was due to the ease with which they could share their work publicly, as well as the relative ease of giving and receiving comments. Using blogs to receive peer and teacher feedback seems to hold the same level of importance, as these two reasons were mentioned an equal number of times. Giving peer feedback via blogs was mentioned fewer times than receiving it, which might indicate greater importance or interest in getting peer feedback versus offering it. The participants also felt that blogging helped them to improve their writing, both in terms of process and product. Two respondents mentioned how blogs can be used to practice writing, while others advocated its use as a way to communicate with those outside the classroom and the fact that it allowed them to use the Internet in a more productive manner.

However, participants also revealed frustrations with the blogging technology that may have contributed to their overall perceptions of it. Technical issues were raised by several of the participants as problems they encountered while blogging. The blogging website was often slow, and comments from peers were sometimes not immediately visible. Furthermore, even after ten weeks of use, some respondents reported they still had trouble navigating the site. Another issue of concern was the lack of visitors to the blogs.

Although learners were encouraged to post comments to their classmates' blogs, some of the participants were not visited by anyone but the researcher-instructor. Two of the questionnaire respondents also claimed that blogging is not as popular as other CMC technologies, such as social networking. All of these factors may have influenced their perceptions of blogging.

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to investigate how closely student writers' perceptions of blogging as a medium for peer feedback and their peer review practices aligned. The participants of this study had a neutral opinion of blogging as a channel for peer feedback. These findings differ from Kitchakarn's (2013) study, which also investigated blogging as a peer feedback channel with Thai EFL learners. In that research, participants had overall positive attitudes towards the use of blogs as a platform for peer feedback.

The student writers' neutral perceptions translated to corresponding use of the technology. Less than half (34.6%) of the comments the participants made could be classified as peer feedback. These results appear to lend support to Culpan's (1995, cited in Elwood & Maclean, 2009, p. 67) assertion that perceptions are connected to effective technology use. The student writers seemed open to the use of the technology as a space for sharing their work publicly, and giving and receiving comments on their texts, but these interests were not reflected in the collected data. Even with the initial peer review training they received, the majority of comments they generated were simple complimentary evaluative comments or ones meant to foster social interaction. They also tended to post comments that touched on global aspects of their peer's work, such as idea development. One finding of note was that the participants did not appear to show a preference for either peer or teacher feedback. Past research has found that EFL student writers often prefer feedback from an instructor over that of a peer. In Zhang's (1995) study, for instance, learners were shown to have a marked partiality towards teacher feedback. Peer feedback was viewed as a viable alternative only when teacher feedback was absent. This was not the case in this research.

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However, despite evidence of the tepid reception of blogging, a large percentage of the participants supported its continued use, citing similar reasons to those that have been outlined in the literature. They were open to having not only their peers and teacher read and comment on their work, but having others do so as well. Thus, although their perceptions and use did not seem to favor the use of this technology, they were nonetheless aware of and able to elucidate its potential benefits. It may be argued that such awareness may be built on and fostered in future implementation of the technology. Furthermore, their perceptions of the technology were not favorable, but neither were they negative. As speculated, technical issues, lack of visitors, and blogging's seeming lack of popularity (when compared to other CMC technologies) may have played a part in shaping their perceptions of the technology. If these issues are addressed and/or resolved, blogging could possibly be perceived more favorably.Several limitations regarding this study must be noted. First, this study had a very small sample of only 26 Thai EFL student writers. Thus, any results obtained likely cannot be generalized to other contexts. Secondly, this study was conducted over a period of only ten weeks.

The time period may have been too short for any significant results to occur. As noted, several participants professed confusion towards blogging even after ten weeks of use, which may indicate that more time is needed for student writers to become comfortable with the technology. While it cannot be said for certain what effect their confusion had on their perceptions of the technology, which they chose to remark on it means it is an important issue to take into consideration. Finally, there are a number of variations on the peer feedback activity (Ho & Savignon, 2007).

This study utilized one particular sequence for peer review, but it may be argued that a differing ordering of the components of this activity may have led to differing results.

As such, this research points to further avenues for investigation. During data analysis, it was noted that peer reviewers' comments were not limited to the written product that was posted, but also to the peer's writing process as well. This was a concept introduced during class, and promoted throughout the duration of the course. For this study, comments about the writing process were not coded separately, but was categorized using the same scheme as comments regarding the product.

However, future research may examine comments on product and process separately. Additionally, it should also be noted that the posted comments contained emoticons. One posted comment consisted solely of the symbols ^^, which represents a feeling of bliss. According to Derks et al. (2007), these symbols are used in place of nonverbal cues in CMC. Their research found that emoticon use is more frequent in social contexts when compared to more task-oriented contexts, but they cautioned that there is room for more research into the use of emoticons.

For this study, the emoticons were included within sentential meaningful units during analysis, but future research may code them separately and investigate their use more thoroughly.Overall, it may be concluded that though this study found only neutral perceptions of blogging as a platform for peer feedback, the technology presents potentially fascinating facets for future investigation.

In addition, the apparent connection between learners' perceptions and their implementation of a technology may be exploited.

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Although a correlation or causal relationship may not be claimed, this research would seem to suggest that altering perceptions may lead to concurrent changes in technology use or vice versa. Further research may shed further insight on this observation, and lead to more effective implementation of blogging with student writers.

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