BLOGGING TO LEARN: BECOMING EFL ACADEMIC WRITERS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE DIALOGUES

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This study examines how blogs and their interactive and collaborative features help academically-advanced graduate students process academic writing knowledge and make sense of their writer identity. Seven graduate students undertaking Master's level study in TESOL and Linguistics participated. The research questions are: (a) What kinds of writing-related topics do students blog about? (b) How do students' collaborative dialogues on blogs help them process and reconstruct knowledge about academic writing? (c) How do students' collaborative dialogues on blogs facilitate their negotiation of academic identities and construction of authorship? Open-coding and content analysis were conducted to inductively identify salient themes and patterns regarding students' learning and perception of their writer identities. The results suggest that the blog activity not only encourages students to actively and reflectively engage in knowledge sharing, knowledge generation, and the development of numerous strategies to cope with difficulties encountered in the learning process. Blogs also endow students with a sense of authorship as the writers of blog entries and, at the same time, provide a space for them to sort out what being an author entails, their purposes of writing, and their authority in writing.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Blogs, Dialogic Interaction, Identity, Reflective Learning, Writing Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Blogs have become one of the best-received applications in the Web 2.0 era and have fundamentally changed the way we use the Internet, from mostly information consumers to information creators and contributors (Du & Wagner, 2007). Blogs differ from listservs, discussion boards, or Wikis in that blogs are controlled and owned by the bloggers and are primarily centered on and identified with their author or authors themselves, rather than organized around specific topics. Characterized by their strong personal editorship, hyperlinking potential, archival features and public access to content (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004), blogs invite users to share, create, and interact in a virtual space—through writing and commenting on each other's posts—to generate knowledge (Richardson, 2006; Warlick, 2005). Such ongoing textual and intellectual collaboration nurtures the interconnectivity of ideas, arguments, and theories between bloggers, and encourages reflection and meaning negotiation (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Instone, 2005; Oravec, 2002, 2003; Warlick, 2005).

In pedagogical settings, the effective use of blogs enables knowledge sharing through connecting learners to contexts beyond the classroom. In turn, this facilitates the development of individual and critical voices and prompts individual accountability in learning (Du & Wagner, 2007).

Several studies have highlighted the advantages of integrating blogs in foreign language classrooms to develop writing skills (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Bloch, 2007; Campbell, 2003; Lee, 2010; Noytim, 2010; Sun, 2009), facilitate the development of a L2 writing community (Sollars, 2007), develop a sense of voice (Bloch, 2007; Rezaee & Oladi, 2008), and foster critical and synthesizing skills (Lee, 2010; Mynard, 2007; Noytim, 2010). Additionally, the archiving feature available at many blog hosts can also facilitate the recording of learners' learning experiences (Noytim, 2010), and serves as voice blog portfolios to archive learning progress and provide alternative speaking assessment (Huang & Hung, 2009).

In Sun's (2009) study examining speaking practice on blogs, EFL students went through a series of stages, including conceptualizing, brainstorming, articulation, monitoring, and evaluating in the blog project. They perceived blogging as more than a means of learning; it was also a means of self-presentation, information exchange, and social networking. In addition, the sense of ownership in the blogging process encouraged students to write freely and promoted self-expression, self-reflection, and construction of knowledge collaboratively (Lee, 2010; Noytim, 2010). Noytim's (2010) study also showed that *meaning* served as the prominent focus rather than *form* in the blogging environment and students seemed to focus more on the fluency rather than the accuracy of their blog project. Furthermore, Lee's (2010) study further indicated that peer feedback on the blogs can prompt additional interaction and discussion of ideas.

For graduate students in EFL contexts, English writing may be the most critical skill they have to communicate with others as recognized members within the international academic community. Researchers such as Casanave (2002) and Hyland (2002) have reported that non-native English-speaking students not only need to know the rules and conventions of *writing games*, but must also have a recognizable *writer identity*—endorsed by their linguistic and rhetorical competence—to participate in various academic writing practices. Additionally, studies have also shown that through their participation in blog writing, language learners can acquire a sense of voice in a community of writers in English (Bloch, 2007; Rezaee & Oladi, 2008; Sollars, 2007).

According to Hyland (2002), "academic writing, like all forms of communication, is an act of identity: it not only conveys disciplinary 'content' but also carries a presentation of the writer" (p. 1,092). A writer's authorial identity, or authorship, therefore, entails the manifestation of the writer's stance, confidence, and commitment to ideas (Hyland, 2002), or "the writer's 'voice' in the sense of the writer's position, opinion and beliefs" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 26). Ideally, when learning to communicate knowledge in academic languages and genres, students also learn to take on an authorial identity, and its associated responsibilities. However, in his comparison of the use of first personal pronouns—a linguistic feature that represents visible affirmation of one's role in their written discourse—between expert writers and L2 Hong Kong undergraduate novice writers, Hyland (2002) found a clear avoidance of first personal pronouns among L2 writers when making arguments or claims. Although reasons behind such downplay of authorial identity among L2 writers may be cultural (unacceptable in traditions of Asian cultures), they could also be attributed to the unequal power relationship between novices and experts (thesis writers vs. examiners); for the students felt that the authorial marker in first person pronouns was "too powerful," "okay for scholars, but not our project," or they felt "embarrassed to do it" (Hyland, 2002).

Though past literature has shed light on the ways blogs can be used to encourage language learning and learners' participation in writing practices, little, if any, empirical research has been done to examine how interactions in blogs help EFL graduate students develop academic writing knowledge and writer identities. That is, if blogs are powerful tools in language learning, how do EFL students' blog interactions demonstrate and facilitate how they process the knowledge they receive and make sense of who they are as emerging academic writers? In the current study, the students were required to keep blog entries on a regular basis and reflect upon self-selected issues of their development as academic writers throughout one semester. Unlike previous studies that mainly view blogs as a medium for language skill development, the current study expands the conceptual scope of blogs and views blogs as a social medium for knowledge and identity construction and aims to explore what kinds of writing-related topics the students blog about, and how the collaborative dialogues on blogs facilitate their process, their learning about academic writing, and even their academic identities and construction of authorship.

STUDY FRAMEWORK: CONSTRUCTIVISM, COLLABORATION, AND COLLABORATIVE DIALOGUE

The theory of constructivism first appeared in the 1980s and has since become one of the major conceptual frameworks to shape contemporary education reforms and practices (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Wilson, 1996). Knowledge, in the constructivist perspective, is temporary, developmental, and socially and culturally mediated (Brooks & Brooks, 1993); learning, then, is an active development of knowledge through learners' experiences, personal goals, curiosities, and beliefs (Cole, 1992; Yakimovicz & Murphy, 1995). The two main strands of the constructivist approach are cognitive constructivism and social constructivism (Cobb, 1994). While cognitive constructivism focuses on how individuals understand things and construct knowledge discovered through interactions with the environment, social constructivism views learning as emerging from social interaction, dialogues, and collaboration (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Murray and Hourigan (2008) further used expressivist and socio-cognitivist theories to describe two approaches that target and serve distinct aspects of learning in the blogosphere. Expressivism encourages fluency, personal writings, and development of writers' voices whereas socio-cognitivism promotes a more process-oriented, problem-solving approach and emphasizes the importance of higher-order thinking skills. The former approach can be quite effective in the establishment of individual blogs whereas the latter approach can be effective in collaborative group blogs. Vygotsky (1978) also stressed the central role of social interaction in learning and proposed that scaffolding, or the assistance one receives from a more capable person, can enhance one's learning.

Bonk and Cunningham (1998) pointed out that communication technologies can realize active and collaborative construction of knowledge and learning. Though they exist only virtually, blogs may be regarded as constructivist learning environments, for they provide their users with opportunities to reflect on their experiences, posing contradictions, addressing misconceptions, and negotiating ideas with their readers. To examine how such a constructivist learning environment can foster EFL students' academic writing knowledge and writer identities, this study also draws on Swain's (2000) conceptualization of collaborative dialogue—"a dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building" (p. 102). According to Swain, collaboration refers to the collective behavior of the learner-generated resources that "may serve them individually" (p. 104). Since, dialogues are exchanges of utterances—the "saying" and responses to "what is said" (Swain, 2000, p. 104). Swain pointed out that the language used mediates a process of joint constructive interaction that facilitates learning among interlocutors. That is, in a "dialogue," through the verbalization of problems, one makes an object available for scrutiny and calls for peers' attention, reflection, and feedback (Swain, 2000).

In language learning contexts, this knowledge-constructing collaborative dialogue "occurs when learners work together to solve linguistic problems and/or co-construct language or knowledge about language" (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002, p. 172). It scaffolds learners so that they are able to perform at a higher level than their individual competence (Swain, 2000). Such collaborative interaction has been found to aid L2 learners in writing, especially when they were asked to co-construct texts and peer-edit (Swain et al., 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Storch, 1999; Tang & Tithecott, 1999). Through the lens of collaborative dialogue, blogs can be regarded as learning sites that nurture such collaborative interaction and scaffold learning. Since the conversations on blogs allow not one-way reflection but two-way conversation among blog users, they record the collaborative interaction and scaffolding among multiple writers in co-constructing each blog entry. Thus, by taking blogging's collaborative nature into consideration, we hope to trace learners' paths of knowledge processing, construction, and identity negotiation by analyzing the texts, or the dialogues, presented on their blogs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines the way collaborative dialogues in the blogosphere help academically-advanced EFL students develop and process academic writing knowledge and negotiate their writer identities. The study

is guided by the following research questions:

1.   What kinds of writing-related topics do students blog about?

2.   How do students' collaborative dialogues on blogs help them process and reconstruct knowledge about academic writing?

3.   How do students' collaborative dialogues on blogs facilitate their negotiation of academic identities and construction of authorship?

METHOD

The study employs a case study research method to explore EFL writers' development as academic writers through collaborative dialogues in the blogosphere. Due to the small sample size, descriptive statistics serve to provide a layer of data triangulation to the qualitative evidence.

Participants

The participants of the study were seven graduate students in Taiwan, including six female Masters students studying Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and one male student studying in a graduate program in Linguistics. The participants, aged 23 to 25, all cited Mandarin Chinese as their mother tongue. The students' English proficiency level was high-intermediate to advanced, These graduate students were required to complete a MA thesis to meet the criteria of their programs. For the TESOL students, the theses had to be written in English whereas the Linguistics student could use either English or Chinese to complete his thesis. At the time of the study, these students were taking a one-semester course in academic writing that aimed to orient them in the basics of writing about academic research in English. The class met once a week for two hours.

Procedures

There were two main kinds of assignments for the course. One required students to find five journal articles in TESOL-related disciplines, and analyze the moves (Introduction, Method, Result, and Conclusion) and language samples used in each move. The assignment served to provide students with opportunities to connect what they learn from the textbook to authentic academic writing works. The other assignment type was the blog project. Students had freedom of choice in terms of topics they would like to blog about as long as the topics were related to issues of academic writing in general terms. The students could choose a blog service of their preference during the first week of the semester. Throughout the semester, they were required to post 13 entries on their own blogs as well as 13 comments on their classmates' blogs. Even though the blogging task was a semester-long task, students were expected to post a blog entry and comment on other blog entries once a week. They were encouraged to reflect upon their process of developing academic writing skills. Since the quality of reflection is valued more than the length of the entries, there was no set word count.

In order to create a free and non-judgmental blogging environment, the project was only evaluated in terms of the number of posts, rather than the content of the blog posts. Students could write in either English or Chinese. Freedom of language choice allowed students to use the language they felt the most comfortable with and the most able to express their meaning fluently. Table 1 illustrates the language used by the participants in their blogs. Most students switched between Chinese and English when they wrote on the blogs and Chinese accounts for 67% of the language used in both posts and replies.

The course instructor served as a facilitator to guide students as they embarked on the blog project. The instructor's tasks mainly included setting up a group blog, discussing with students the difficulties they encountered in the blogging process, and providing suggestions to solve the problems.

Table 1. *Language Used by the Participants in their Blogs*

Student	Number of posts			Number of replies		
	Chinese	English	Total	Chinese	English	Total
S1	11	2	13	9	7	16
S2	8	0	8	12	2	14
S3	7	6	13	6	7	13
S4	9	4	13	11	1	12
S5	7	6	13	8	2	10
S6	9	4	13	6	3	9
S7	7	6	13	3	5	8
Total	58	28	86	55	27	82
%	67	33	100	67	33	100

Data Analysis

The text (i.e., 168 posts) written by the seven students in their blogs is the main source of data. As there were two researchers, the data was first read and coded separately. Moreover, since a large part of the data analysis effort was qualitative; the data set was read multiple times before—and continued during and after—open-coding and content analysis. Then, the data was explored inductively: with the research goals and questions serving as analytical principles, the researchers identified salient themes, patterns, and relationships regarding students' learning and perception of their identities as writers. There were times when the collected data was examined from beginning to end to allow the researchers a more holistic picture of what was happening in the students' blogs; at other times, the researchers focused on specific parts of the data (e.g., those from a particular participant's blog, those discussing the similar topics) in order to cross-reference, compare, or explore particular themes. To ensure consistency in the coding and code-sorting process, codes and memos from the two researchers were compared and discussed for similarities and necessary adjustments were made in the naming of codes and code-categories.

To answer the research questions, the analysis focuses on (a) the kinds of topics the students blogged about, (b) signs of knowledge accumulation/development displayed in the texts, and (c) indications of issues and difficulties the students faced in seeing themselves as EFL academic writers in their disciplines.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What Kinds Of Writing-Related Topics Do Students Blog About?

The participating EFL graduate students in this study utilized their blogs to talk about a wide range of issues related to their academic writing experiences. Tables 2 and 3 offer some basic information about the blog interaction among the seven students. Table 2 shows the different topics the students wrote about and responded to on the blogs. The categorization was based on the researchers' inductive analysis of the blog texts. The descriptive statistical data shows that the students most commonly used their blogs to judge and (often negatively) evaluate their writing competence (25%), share learning experiences (18%),

echo concerns and problems mentioned by others (13%), and offer each other help or share writing resources (12%). The average word count for blog posts, responses posted and received by each student is illustrated in Table 3. On average, students wrote 356 words per post and 90 words per reply. A total of 83 responses were received for the course blogs. The most responses a student received was 16 and the least was eight.

Table 2. *Topics the Seven Students Blogged About*

Topics of blogging	Number	Percentage (%)
Self-judgment (negative), self-blaming e.g. "My grammar is terrible"; "I just would not start writing and I could not do anything about it."	49	25.0
Sharing learning experiences (what I did, how/what I have learned) e.g. "If an online dictionary could not provide adequate information, I would use Google."	36	18.3
Echoing concerns/problems e.g. "Verb tenses are also my weaknesses."	26	13.2
Offering help/sharing writing resources e.g. "When you encounter problems like this, the best way is to look for a model."	25	12.7
Asking for help (do you have the same problem?) e.g. "I am trying to sort out the logic and make it understandable to the teacher; can anyone help me?"; "I have always had this question…"	19	9.6
Hopeful encouragement e.g. "I will try this strategy this weekend, wish me luck!"	18	9.1
Class/course content reflection e.g. "After reading chapter 6, I found that…"	9	4.6
Appreciation of help e.g. "Your database strategy really inspired me. I am going to start my own database."	8	4.0
Showing disagreement e.g. "Rex does not have to think so negatively about research limitations."	3	1.5
Anxiety, confusion, and challenges e.g. "Do we really have to give up a research idea if we cannot find much literature on the topic?"	2	1.0
Praising peers e.g. "I really appreciate all the questions you raised in class! I have learned a lot from them!"	1	0.5

Table 3. *Number Words per Post, Responses Posted and Received*

Student	Number of posts	Average word count per post	Number of responses posted	Average word count per response	Number of responses received	Average word count for responses received
S1	13	425	20	69	16	67
S2	8	546	0	0	14	93
S3	13	279	16	67	13	96
S4	13	323	9	76	12	135
S5	13	313	13	116	10	78
S6	13	298	6	57	9	92
S7	13	378	18	134	8	68

The data shown in Tables 2 and 3 illustrate that blogs provide students with a forum to share and interact with each other on issues related to their academic writing endeavors. They share information not only on issues directly related to academic writing (e.g., sharing writing resources, class/course content reflection), but also monitor their progress (e.g., sharing learning experiences), post problems encountered (e.g., echo concerns and problems, ask for help, admit anxiety, confusion, and challenges), and offer support to each other (e.g., hopeful encouragement, praise peers, offer help/writing resources). Among the various types of topics, self-judgment, sharing experiences, and echoing concerns account for 57% of the students' posts. Based on the types of topics the seven students blogged about, blogs could be regarded as a valuable space for students to continue exploring the meaning of being academic writers outside content-dominated in-classroom instruction.

Research Question 2: How Do Students' Collaborative Dialogues On Blogs Help Them Process And Reconstruct Knowledge About Academic Writing?

The content analysis of the seven participants' blog entries and responses indicates that through their engagement in writing and interacting on blogs, the students experienced and demonstrated one or more aspects of knowledge development in academic writing: (a) understanding knowledge, (b) reflecting on study skill development, and (c) learning through social support.

Understanding Knowledge

Many of the participating students blogged about their interpretation and accumulation of newly-acquired knowledge in academic writing. Table 4 summarizes brief examples of students' understanding of academic knowledge in their blogs.

Table 4. *Examples of Students' Understanding of Knowledge*

Understanding knowledge	Examples
Restating newly-acquired knowledge	"I have a clearer idea about the structure of a thesis." (S5) "I learn some knowledge about some useful skeleton sentences available for use." (S5) - realize different verb tense represent different meaning and tenses can even help researchers "position themselves in their paper." (S5) "I was stuck by what verb tenses to use when I write my literature review. I found that researchers have no consensus on the verb tense usage in their literature reviews; some use the past tense, some use simple present, some even are not consistent within a text." (S5)
Activating and expanding on prior knowledge	"I remember when I took advanced writing in college, our teacher kept reminding us not to write very complex sentences." (S3) "academic writing is very different from the 'pleasure' writing that I learned in the past." (S5)
Sharing resources and strategies	"I have no APA guide at hand, so I searched online and found much information about APA format." (S3) "I think the use of transition words can also help! You may also find some useful information in Swain's book (Unit 5)." (S5)

For example, S3 tried to summarize the key points she had learned about writing data commentary in one of her blog entries (Example 1):

> This week we talked about data commentary. Data commentary includes three parts:
>
> 1. Location elements and summary statements;
> 2. Highlighting statements;
> 3. Discussions of implications, problems, exceptions, recommendations, etc.
>
> I think the most difficult part is the second element. In data commentary, we cannot simply repeat all the details in words and cover all the information. We have to get something from the data. We have to act as a detective to spot the differences in the data. (S3)

The student further described how her new writing situation in graduate school activated her learning about the use of the simple sentence in the past:

> Regarding the issue of "simple sentence" . . . . I took the course of *Advanced Writing* when I was an undergraduate. The teacher kept stressing that we should avoid writing complicated English sentences. We were taught to keep the sentence structure as simple as possible and to avoid constructing lengthy sentences. He/she showed us some commonly-made mistakes by students . . . . Now, I often remind myself of these mistakes and try not to make similar ones when I write. (S3)

Furthermore, the use of blogs allowed them to demonstrate their development of metacognitive knowledge by sharing how they planned and thought about the learning process and how they monitored and evaluated their production or comprehension. For instance, numerous blog entries were about exchanging useful Web site information they had come across (i.e., online APA guides), recommending books they had recently read, and sharing writing tips they had discovered. S5 used one blog post to explain the tips she had learned about writing literature reviews (Example 2):

> After I read the references that I found, I start brainstorming the viewpoints that should be included in the literature review. . . . I would jot down the ideas and research findings that I need or other relevant viewpoints from the literature. . . .[since] it is not an easy task to summarize such a large amount of information . . . . When I read articles, I pay special attention to how other authors systematically tell us all the information . . . . I would then incorporate what I learn from them into my next writing task. (S5)

In short, the use of blogs provided a forum that enabled multiple constructions of knowledge development in academic writing for these EFL graduate students. Through restating newly-learned knowledge, building on their prior knowledge and experiences, and sharing resources and learning strategies, these students could reflect upon the material they had learned and enhance their cognitive and metacognitive performance as academic writers.

Reflecting on Study Skill Development

The participants also used their blogs as places to share and reflect upon numerous strategies to cope with difficulties encountered in their reading process, including metacognitive strategies, problem-solving strategies, language inquiry strategies, and different ways of applying knowledge learned in classes to academic writing situations. Table 5 summarizes examples of students' reflection on their study skill development.

While East Asian students have traditionally been considered to be more passive in classrooms (Cheng, 2000; Tsui, 1996), these students looked forward to becoming more critical in their writing practices. In Taiwan, the importance of critical thinking skills is not impressed upon students until they enter university or, in most cases, graduate programs. Since developing critical thinking skills was a relative new challenge for these graduate students, they often shared their reflections on their changing perceptions about applying critical thinking skills to writing (Example 3):

> When we start being a graduate student, everyone surrounding us talks about critical thinking. I thought the way to present critical thinking was to find faults in other's research. . . . However, after reading unit six, I have more understanding about writing critiques. I should position myself as a reader without any [presuppositions] such as fault-finding intention. I should include both complimentary elements and critical elements in critiques. (S3)

Table 5. *Examples of Students' Reflection on Study Skill Development*

Metacognitive strategies	Examples
Problem-solving strategy	● "I suddenly found that a brief summary after each subtitles in the literature review part played such an important role in connecting different kinds of information." (S5) ● "The best way is to find one published paper of different research topic from yours and use it as a template for your own writing." (S4) ● "I try to put away the articles and use my own words to express the meaning, to not let the paper that I read influence me. In this way, my flow of thought will not be interrupted." (S3)
Language inquiry strategy	● "I search Google Scholar and found the following answers: 24 items for 'the learning process is triggered' 23 items for 'the learning is triggered' 219,000 items for 'is triggered' Based on the above statistics, the most likely interpretation of the findings is that 'is triggered' is not commonly used in TESOL field." (S6) ● "For me, it takes language intuition to correctly use preposition. Usually, I use a preposition when 'it sounds right.' Then, I will use Google to find evidence to prove or disapprove of one's language intuition on collocation usage." (S5) ● "Now, I always jot down good sentences or expressions while reading journal articles and put them into different moves. Gradually, it becomes a personalized electronic academic language database." (S5)
Knowledge application	● "It is important to find a few well-written journal articles as model papers, then analyze and imitate how the authors contemplate and present their arguments and ideas." (S5) ● "paying attention to how journal writers structure their literature review and applying it to one's own writing." (S5)

The following excerpt is from the comments left in response to S7's blog entry "My understanding of academic writing." The students not only agreed upon the importance of critical thinking to academic writing through their exchanges on the blogs, but also questioned how they could become critical thinkers/writers (Example 4):

> S5: "Inspiring reading, critical thinking, and logical reasoning" really are very important skills that we need to be equipped with [as academic writers]. However, how to equip us with those skills remains a question. I've been told that it is so vital that graduate students need to know how to read and think critically, but I know clearly that I myself am very weak in this skill. I'd like to know if anyone can share with me some ways to improve my critical thinking skill.

> S3: In my opinion, critical thinking can't be taught. If it is taught, it is [no longer] CRITICAL thinking.

> S1: I think being a "reflective" learner, reader, or teacher might be an easier way to start! After all, the concept of "critical thinking" itself is too abstract.

> S4: Critical thinking can't be taught, like S3 said. But just like the concept of reflective reader, which S1 brought up, if we can think carefully and reflectively after we read something, our critical thinking skills can really improve.

For these students, critical thinking was regarded as essential to becoming competent academic writers that brought innovative contributions to their academic fields. Blogs then offered a space wherein they could voice their concerns and anxiety about acquiring such skill and support each other via the exchange of ideas through discussion. Through these collaborative discussions, the students came to redefine "critical thinking" with a concept that seemed more approachable to them—"think carefully and reflectively." They agreed that reflective thinking, or thinking carefully as suggested by S4, was an easier skill to grasp for relatively novice authors like themselves.

Moreover, after a talk given about how to make effective use of dictionaries, one student reflected on the timing of looking up definitions *(Example 5)*:

> During writing, I don't like to put off those unresolved problems so I always resort to dictionary immediately . . .before I can move on to the next sentence . . . . The frequent interruption due to dictionary checking will cut off my flow of thoughts. . . . To solve the problem, I should read more and enlarge my vocabulary repertoire so that I don't have to look words and expressions up in the dictionary during writing process (S3).

In addition to the issue of interruption by the urge to use a dictionary, S3 also shared her insights about the limitations of online dictionaries. According to her, online dictionaries were usually not detailed enough in regards to the usage or collocation of a word. S3 said she would sometimes "go to Google" for a more comprehensive understanding of how a word/phrase was commonly used in authentic contexts. However, she cautioned that since the usually massive amount of search results presented by Google could include some non-standard English usage, "I will try out different search strings [of language patterns] and see which one is the most commonly used one" (S3).

In response to S3's post, S4 echoed her frustrations by commenting that "I also get frequently stuck during my writing process because I always have the feeling that my choice of word is incorrect. I also use Google to find out how other people use a particular language pattern." However, S4 also pointed out that "I usually try not to look things up in the dictionary when I am reading, unless there are too many unknown words. I think if you meet the unknown words several times, you will learn them eventually. The best way to learn a word is to learn it with their 'friends' [collocation]." S3 responded to S4's comment by acknowledging that "I feel that I have a kind of 'obsessive compulsive behavior' [when it comes to] looking words up whenever I encounter unknown vocabulary. . . . I am not sure if it is beneficial or harmful to my learning." Such dialogic interactions indicate that blogs facilitate the sharing of student inquiry and their struggles with strategies used in academic writing that could foster both their awareness and self-evaluation of their learning process. Through sharing and interacting with each other on the blogs, their prior knowledge, experience, and capacity for reflection were activated.

Learning through Social Support

Blogs provide a medium for students to share their feelings and show mutual support. Table 6 presents examples of students' learning from social support.

Table 6. *Examples of Students' Learning from Social Support*

Strategies	Examples
Sharing feelings	• "I have writing phobia." (S1) • "The way I motivate myself to concentrate on writing is to think about what benefits I can get after I finish it." (S5)
Showing mutual support	• "Since some of us have mentioned that we have to write in order to improve our writing, why don't we write in English in this blog?" (S5) • "About writing critiques, I have the same feeling as S5's." (S3) • "Anyone who shares the same thought? Or any different view point? (S5) • "I also encounter the same problem." (S3) • "I also encounter similar difficulty." (S7) • "I wonder if others also make similar mistakes, or if it is only me." (S3)

The participants of this study consistently used phrases like "I also encounter the same problem" and shared their tips about how to cope with writing difficulties, such as procrastination. The following excerpt is from a student's response to a post of her classmate, lamenting the fact she was forced to choose between her writing assignments and her personal life (Example 6):

> How I make myself concentrate on writing is to think solely on what benefits I can receive after completing the writing!! For example, if I want to take a good break next week, then, I will push myself to hang in there and write as much as I can. Maybe you can also think about it… complete the writing as soon as possible so that you can go back to your hometown and meet with him (your boyfriend) . . . Try it yourself (S5).

Research Question 3: How Do Students' Collaborative Dialogues On Blogs Facilitate Their Negotiation Of Academic Identities And Construction Of Authorship?

According to Skeggs (2008), "identity is always underpinned by recognition; 'I am' is a recognition of a dialogic relationship in which the way one is being recognized occurs with how one recognizes oneself" (p. 12). The seven students' interaction and reflection on their blogs shows that blogging helped them make sense of who they were within their academic community and facilitated their understanding and negotiation of authorship.

Identities and Positions

Being graduate students in Master's programs, the phrasing and word choices used in the blogs showed that the EFL students were keenly aware of their relatively-novice status compared to native-English-speaking academic writers or other established scholars in the discipline. In fact, the most salient identities the students took up when they blogged were "beginning academic writers" and "inexperienced/junior researchers" who were "still in the process of learning to read, think, and then write like a researcher or a good academic writer" (S7). However, these "inexperienced," "novice," and "learner" identities were not fixed. At times, they indicated the students' self-belittlement; at others, they were taken on to ascertain their learning responsibilities and/or to project a hopeful learning trajectory.

Based on the analysis of blog topics (as shown in Table 2), the students tended to devalue their EFL and learner identities by referring to the challenges they encountered. They raised questions like "What's wrong with me?" or offered harsh self-criticism: "my poor grammar is giving me a hard time when I am working on [writing] tasks!" (S3); "I am still shy about what I wrote because my understanding [of the topic] is just superficial" (S4); "the lack of logical coherence in my writing is a result of my habit of

jumping about from one topic to another in conversation" (S1). Moreover, the students' interactions on the blogs also demonstrated their negative perceptions of themselves as unqualified members of the academic community. In a blog exchange S7 initiated about utilizing a Web concordancer to facilitate writing, she said (Example 7) she would "turn to concordancers for help next time when encountering writing problems." Although S6 agreed that Web tools such as concordancers were helpful resources, she commented:

> Sometimes we know these tools are useful, but we don't use it because of our natural laziness. I had already known how useful the concordancer was in the last semester, but I just used it for few times . . . so sad.

S6's comment was echoed by S1, "I agree with S6. I am just too lazy to use all those [reference] tools. The usefulness of any tools is not the point; it's the ability to be diligent."

Their blog entries also revealed their anxiety about their lack of disciplinary knowledge—the inability to see the big picture within an ongoing scholarly conversation due to their relative novice status. S3, for instance (Example 8), suggested that the disorientation she suffered when writing proposals or introductions for course term papers was because she was not well-read. S1 responded with a sense of shared guilt and agreed that "We really need to read more, more, more, and more, and even more." While aligning herself with her cohorts as an under-informed learner, another one of the classmates, S5, raised an objection: "Everyone is saying that we need to read more. But the real question is how much reading is enough?" S3, the initiator of this entry, proposed an answer: "Read till you can express yourself smoothly in writing."

Other than seeing themselves as inexperienced novices, the analysis of blog entries shows their alignment with non-native English-speaking (NNES) scholars who had had to overcome similar language struggles and established recognized memberships in the larger TESOL community. What follows is an excerpt from an entry posted by S6, pondering the difficulties her professors might have encountered in writing (Example 9):

> Today I read Dr. Sasaki's article "A scholar on the periphery: Standing firm, walking slowly," in which she said she had to struggle so much to be able to write in English. This sentence hit me hard because I had never thought that a competent professor in TESOL might also encounter the same difficulties. My curiosity was roused. What kind of difficulties do my professors face when writing? How do they solve their problems and improve their writing abilities?

S1 echoed:

> I am also struggling with writing and searching for my academic voice. I guess the professors have been through the same challenges. They were once students; and we will one day be the teachers. I am really interested in knowing how they learned to write—or if they are still struggling?

As they questioned their own competence in writing and sought an academic voice on the blogs, the exchange about established NNES scholars not only helped them realize that if they could just work hard enough, they would eventually make it in the English-speaking community—even as NNES speakers— and would one day "see the pride of being non-native speaker" (S4).

The Making of An Author

Though this study is not focused on the use of certain linguistic features as a manifestation of authorial identity mentioned in Hyland's (2002) study, the use of blogs seemed to complicate the idea of academic

authorship among these academically advanced/EFL students. In fact, the act of blogging gave the students a sense of authorship as the writers of the blog entries and, at the same time, provided a space for them to begin to identify what accounts for being an author, their purposes of writing, and finally, their sometimes ambivalent authority in writing. They unanimously showed a keen awareness of their responsibility as academic writers—and especially of the need for them to produce clear, logical, and coherent texts for readers to follow. S1 wrote: "You have to be kind and always think about your readers." S7 added: "I need to do more inspiring reading, critical thinking, and logical reasoning to train myself as a good researcher as well as writer with clear thought and innovative contribution in the academic field." Moreover, in their blogs, some of the students commented that writers should be able to voice their own opinions rather than "clinging on to words written by other people" (S3); after all, "It's true that no one owns the [English] language, but the writer owns his or her sentences" (S1). Furthermore, many also believed that writers should be able to voice their own thoughts through their own styles and tones. "Everyone has their own style and tone [in writing] . . . . We can't lose our own selves and voices for the sake of confinement," said S1.

Nevertheless, the students' authority over their own texts could be called into question when their writing was reviewed by peers or instructors. However, they did not always passively submit to other people's comments. In an entry entitled "How [to decide whether] to use this word or that word," S6 described a peer-editing activity in which she negotiated the use of the word "trigger" with her peer-editor, S3 (Example 10):

> S6: I used "trigger," a word I had learned from a journal article, in the context of "the learning process is triggered [by]…" in my final paper. I thought it fit nicely, but S3 suggested that I should take out the word "process" because a point can be triggered but not a process. . . . I then went online and searched the word "trigger" on Google Scholar and found 24 items for "the learning process is triggered" and 23 items for "the learning is triggered" and 219,000 items for "is triggered". . . . I then read more carefully and found that "the process is triggered" has been used in publications in engineering disciplines and there was even a phrase "the learning process is triggered by a problem" by [John] Dewey! So I decided to keep my own sentence."

In this instance, S6 was able to defend the authority of her word choice in the text by drawing on a systematic analysis of authentic language usage from an online 'corpus'.

In another blog entry S2 pointed out that inexperienced academic writers like him often set a research topic for the thesis only to find there was not enough related literature on that topic (Example 11). Though others voiced similar concerns in their comments on his entry, S4 questioned the validity of regarding the lack of existing literature as problematic to conducting research:

> I have always wondered, can't we still work on the topic even if we can't really find much past literature on it? Didn't much groundbreaking research also get started with limited information from the past? Those researchers did not surrender to "lack of literature," did they?

S4 tried to negotiate her positioning not only as a graduate student who shared S2's concern, but as a researcher, who, though new to the field, may be able to see a critical gap among existing literature and initiate groundbreaking research.

Regardless of whether the students were right in their beliefs about writing, the blog space gave them a chance to openly address concerns and created a buffer space that allowed the students to negotiate and practice taking on the authorial identity that might seem far-fetched for the students in Hyland's (2002) study. In the end, these students' collaborative dialogues on the blogs helped scaffold individuals to establish themselves as authors and researchers with an eye for good research topics and an active say in

the end product rather than passive and problem-stricken learners of academic writing.

DISCUSSION

The mixed-method analysis of seven EFL graduate students' collaborative dialogues on blogs demonstrates that blogs allow students to scaffold each other in navigating their writing tasks and processing academic writing knowledge, as well as negotiating and understanding their identities as academic writers. As the constructivist perspective proposes that effective learning involves the active process of linking learners' existing knowledge with new ideas for them to make sense of a new situation (Naylor & Keogh, 1999), the range of different writing-related topics the students in this study discussed, shared, and explored on their blogs also helped them come to a newer understanding of their experiences, performances, and roles in writing.

Social constructivist theory believes that the development of knowledge requires active engagement and social interaction on the part of the learners (Jenkins, 2000). The social process serves as a means of internalizing ideas encountered in the socio-cultural realm (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997). Blogs, in this study, provided a realm for students to process and re-construct knowledge through social interaction with each other online: To share ones' eureka moments of academic writing (e.g., changing understanding of critical thinking), raise questions regarding writing (e.g., making effective use of dictionaries), and/or summarize what one had learned about a specific genre (e.g., data commentary) (As shown in examples 1–5). When one verbalizes an issue or a problem via his/her blog, one not only reflects and responds to the issue/problem through the process of constructing the text (or a written utterance in a dialogue), but also invites others to engage in the problem-solving and/or knowledge-constructing dialogue by making the issue/problem available for others to ponder and respond to in an open blog forum.

The social and emotional support revealed in the blog project indicates the potential of blogs in promoting the kind of mutually beneficial social interaction that is conducive to knowledge development. In this study, while the students supported and encouraged each other collectively to understand academic writing through their blogs, they were also critically re-examining their collective anxieties, positioning, and duties as relatively novice writers through the collaborative dialogues. The results show that they spent much time sharing their frustrations, confusions, and feelings of inexperience as they tried to write academically in a foreign language (Example 7). Nevertheless, through their discussion, they were able to come to a newer understanding of their learning experiences rather than feeling lost and belittling themselves as ignorant and under-qualified. They might be able to find a possible solution to their bad writing habits (Example 6) or find a cause to motivate themselves to work harder (Example 8). More importantly, as shown in Example 9, their collective re-construction of the possible learning challenges established NNES scholars might have faced—and might still be facing—in developing an academic voice might have served as an imagined social support that helped these EFL learners in academic writing and research put their own struggles in perspective, soothed their anxiety about their own learning struggles, and encouraged them to carry on.

Additionally, blog entries did not offer a one-sided portrayal of the students as despaired and hopeless learners; rather, they showed their multifaceted experiences in learning to write. As language learners, they were resourceful in actively seeking answers and deftly making use of their acquired knowledge and various learning strategies. Furthermore, although they were relatively novice writers faced with uncertainties in newly-acquired knowledge, they were able to negotiate their identities as writers and claim the responsibility to defend their voice (Examples 10 and 11). As Casanave (1995) found, not all students felt that the top-down instruction was compatible with them and their beliefs about writing and learning. Here the students utilized the blog space individually or jointly to express tension, discomfort, frustration, and skepticism towards the knowledge, instruction, or comments encountered or received from their peers or authorities in the scholarly field (e.g., professors, other scholars in the field, textbooks or reference books). Hence, despite their nonnative-English-speaking and learner status, the issues of their

concern were no longer whether they could—or could not—be authors when constructing academic texts in English, but the responsibilities they need to shoulder as authors of their texts.

CONCLUSION

As Web technology becomes an increasingly integral part of language education today, this study shows how blogs and their interactive and collaborative features can help academically-advanced graduate students process and reconstruct academic writing knowledge and negotiate their identity as EFL writers. The findings of the study also allowed for the rethinking of the roles that blogs can play in writing instruction, and how human−computer interaction, now an inevitable reality, can be judiciously incorporated into our pedagogic decisions.

Despite the various advantages the addition of blogs (or any interactive Web program) can potentially bring to course instruction, it is important to note that technology itself does not *guarantee* better education (Yu, Sun, & Chang, 2010) and that an interactive Web discussion forum does not *automatically* make students learn. In the study, there were times when students simply echoed the problems someone else had encountered rather than offering a constructive solution; there were other times when students could not come up with a satisfactory answer even after several rounds of discussion; and there were still other times when cries for help were simply left unanswered on the open blogs. Therefore, if blogs are to be used as a platform to encourage and extend students' learning, instructors need to monitor students' interaction and provide timely intervention. That is, in addition to the attention paid to the process and products of learning, instructors should take part in students' discussion and respond to queries online or in class to help keep the interactive dialogues on target and meaningful. After all, it is one thing to extend student-centered learning after class by allowing them to be owners and authors of blogs; it is another, however, to potentially leave these inexperienced academic writers fumbling in the dark, or misled into believing they would eventually find their way online.

The present study confirms the conduciveness of collaborative interaction on blogs in facilitating learners' meaning-making process. However, the results presented are not meant to serve as evidence of students' success or failure in becoming academic writers in English. Unlike one's acquisition of particular grammatical or pragmatic feature—a progress that can be ascertained by employing pre-tests, post-tests, or other forms of comparison mechanisms (i.e. drafts and revisions) (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Tang & Tithecott, 1999)—identity development and perception change are intricate and multifaceted processes that are not likely to happen within a single language-related episode (LRE) (Swain et al., 2002) or the exchange of a few blog comments. Building on what the study has found, longitudinal studies should be carried out in the future to further enrich our understanding of the long-term effect of blogging; that is, whether students' dialogues on blogs eventually change the way they write and understand writing academically.

Moreover, it is important to note that the current study only examines a group of seven graduate students in TESOL and linguistics taking a graduate course in academic writing. Considering that these students might be more sensitive to issues surrounding academic writing and English learning than students in other disciplines, results of this study should not be casually generalized to represent the attitudes and perspectives of all learners of academic English. Instead, future investigation on how online interaction shapes learners' understanding and development of knowledge should consider recruiting students from a wider range of disciplines, for "a thorough examination of peer−peer dialogue is instructive for teachers, researchers, and the learners themselves as a means of understanding how learning is happening, and what is going right or wrong with the process" (Swain et al., 2002, p. 181).

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