

Exploring communicative practices in the blogging of female EFL university students

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Blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies have offered the possibility of interactive communication to students who use English as a foreign language (EFL). The author proposes that we should explore how university students co-construct a multitude of interactions within and around EFL blogging. Drawing on two interconnected methodologies – sociocultural theory and sociolinguistic studies – this paper analyzes online interactive discourse among small groups of female EFL students in an undergraduate “Online English Learning” course. The analysis suggests that the integration of these interactive, community-based approaches to EFL blogging opens up rich and complex communicative practices in which participants can share second language (L2) knowledge, support each other, and present their virtual selves through creative text construction and semiotic language use. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for L2 learning and future research.

Introduction

This decade has seen blogs becoming popular media for implementing a variety of literacy and communication purposes. Second language (L2) educators and researchers have used blogs to facilitate university students’ reading and writing skills (Pinkman, 2005), vocabulary learning and writing fluency (Fellner & Apple, 2006), and critical reading and writing strategies (Bloch, 2007; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Murray & Hourigan, 2008). This growing body of research has focused more on individuals’ production and interpretation of discourse and text than on their communicative interaction in a broad social and cultural context.

This paper analyzes a small group of female bloggers' collaborative discourse in an English as a foreign language (EFL) class. I first review community-based literacy and communication practices in sociocultural theory (SCT) and sociolinguistic studies. These background concepts then lead to a presentation of multi-level interactions in EFL blogging, which helps not only inform the design of blogging tasks for student learning in and out of the classroom, but also guide discussions on how different communicative outcomes can be achieved via these tasks. The purpose of this study is to explore and assess the most beneficial uses of social media in EFL learning.

Community-Based L2 Literacy and Communication

SCT concepts, such as mediated learning, assisted performance, and situated experience have drawn our attention to the fact that we read, write, and communicate as members of social groups (Hyland, 2008; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Mediated learning denotes learners' communicative engagement with their textual experience and their integrative organization of this experience (Lantolf, 2000). Peer assistance and expert guidance create dialogic discourse that fosters joint production and exploration in different apprenticeship environments (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Finally, the concept of situated experience in "communities of practice" (CoPs) describes how members of a community can build multiple relationships and develop shared practices by participating in activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Reconceptualizing CoPs, Gee (2004, p. 85) proposed "affinity spaces" where participants share common interests, goals, and practices and play out identities in new ways through communication and interaction.

On the other hand, sociolinguists have discussed how social categories, such as class, gender, and race, are enacted linguistically in CoPs. Regarding talk in interpersonal interaction as an essential component of communicative competence, Coates (1996) observed that women friends tend to use linguistic strategies, such as hedges, questions, and repetition, in collaborative utterances to share feelings and experiences. Likewise, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) documented individual speakers' communicative means (e.g., ways of talking and acting) and linguistic resources (e.g., lexicon, grammar, discourse markers, and pragmatic acts). They found that shared assumptions in conversation are a key to public discourse but that small shifts in personal styles also change the social order and linguistic conventions in communicative practices within discourse communities. Based on a macro-level discourse analysis of interaction, Mills (2003) has further pointed out that negotiations should not be constrained by CoPs and that a "productive conflict" can occur between individuals and various linguistic communities (p. 3).

L2 research and pedagogy have recognized the heterogeneity of CoPs. L2 learners can be viewed as bilingual community participants who socially construct their discursive lives through various languages (Firth & Wagner, 1997). To support L2 students' distinct identities, a creative and critical L2 practice should unify diverse communities (e.g., local vernacular communities and dominant academic communities) and accommodate the various interests and values of multilingual writers (Canagarajah, 2002). Examining disciplinary variation in the use of hedges, boosters, citations, and self-mention across academic communities, Hyland (2008) illustrated how genres or discourse conventions can assist L2 participants in realizing their communicative purposes. While he found that groups of academic participants interpret text and construct discourse based on their disciplinary knowledge (i.e., particular views of knowledge associated with specific academic areas of study),

Hyland also noted that “communities are composed of antagonistic groups and discourses, contested theories, peripheral contributors, and occasional members” (p. 548). Hyland’s approach, which emphasizes the discovery of L2 identity and the development of community, informs this study’s analysis of socially-mediated, pragmatic meaning generation.

Communicative and Literacy Practices in EFL Blogging

While **EFL** education could be limited by conventions of academic discourse and classroom interaction, contemporary online environments and communities, such as blogs, provide opportunities for broader communicative genres and literacy practices that connect the classroom and the outside world. Specifically, mediated learning, assisted performance, and situated experience have also been discussed in literature on blogging outside the classroom.

EFL blogging, first of all, brings together electronically mediated CoPs and conventional academic communication and literacy practices (e.g., the study of English and American languages, literature, and composition). Blogs blend texts and other media in a “middle space” between students’ online interaction and their offline contexts of use (Oravec, 2003). Compared to other forms of print and online discourse, blogging more strongly encourages the development of critical discourse and rhetorical strategies in the academic writing context (Bloch, 2007). Moreover, blogging takes place on the Internet where there exists a hybrid environment of styles with varying degrees of message exchange, comment control, and multimedia use (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). The flexible and hybrid nature of meaning making and communication through easy editing and fast links to multiple texts and resources (e.g., blog lists, favorite sites, and interest tags) allows students to organize and circulate their diverse experiences, knowledge, and interests in conversation with other sources, both academic and personal. The first issue, thus, is to investigate how students in an academic discipline adopt particular views of knowledge to interpret and construct texts in blogs.

The second aspect of **EFL** blogging focuses on social support and connections within networked CoPs. Instructor or class blogs can assist students in negotiating access to learning strategies, resources, and practice. Other forms of expertise and interests in the blogosphere also facilitate interactions within blog communities without the presence of an instructor or classmates. Through interactive functions, such as online subscriptions, links to blogs, and reader comments, multiple sources of assistance from the class and the outside world can be connected in blog networks. **EFL** students can interpret situations and use languages to share feelings, establish communication, and show interest with a broader audience. Millions of existing blogs and bloggers can be models and mentors to assist in blogging through examples and personal experiences related to course content and concepts. For example, Ducate and Lomicka (2008) suggested that reading blogs gives students “an authentic window into the target culture” (p. 21). Accordingly, it is interesting to understand how blogging encourages L2 students to interact with a diverse audience through collaborative learning and problem-solving.

The third topic of investigation is self-expression through blogging in virtual CoPs. Blogging takes place within a netspeak community, which allows for the creative use of language in the forms of graphic icons, emoticons, local codes, and so on to show distinct personalities (Crystal, 2006). An abundance of symbolic and semiotic resources, such as images and icons in various fonts, colors, and templates, is used throughout the blogosphere.

In addition to selecting and publishing personal information (e.g., name, birthday, location, email, gender, and hobbies), bloggers can express their subjective identities and aesthetic preferences. More interactive features, such as online pools, multimedia play lists, guest books, and chat boxes, also add verbal and non-verbal socially-mediated linguistic variety so that bloggers can present themselves and contexts to other community members through multiple modes of communication. These symbols of identities that bloggers create and use have social and cultural values, which may contribute to the formation of shared L2 practice. This “late modern communicative aesthetic” (Thorne, 2009, p. 88), or strategic use of various linguistic and stylistic forms of communication, is the third topic for investigation.

Thus, by exploring a multitude of interactions within **EFL** blogging, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do **EFL** university students use their disciplinary knowledge to blog?
2. How do these students interact with others in blog networks?
3. How do they express virtual selves through multimedia blogging tools?

Methodology

Blogging context

The study took place in an “Online English Learning” course, which was designed for juniors and seniors in the department of English at a major university in Taiwan. Thirteen students took this course; all of them were female. At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to create blogs through Blogger (<http://blogspot.com>), one of the largest multilingual blogging networks in the world. Instead of local Chinese-language blog systems, Blogger was selected because it aggregates international English users with whom students could practice discursive strategies in the target language and perhaps build affiliation bonds.

The author played the role of both instructor and participant-observer in the **EFL** blog community. As an instructor, the author wished to establish an apprenticeship environment for blogging. To encourage students’ peripheral participation in L2 literacy practices around the Internet, she created a class blog, which provided a series of blogging tasks and moderated student posts and comments. To study mediated communication, the author performed a virtual ethnographic enquiry (Hine, 2000) by exploring blogging as a cultural context and a cultural artefact. She participated in the blogging community by analyzing students’ blogging behaviors and interpreting their blogging content.

After the course ended, the author posted students’ grades and then invited all class members to participate in the study by sending them informed consent forms. All participants gave their permission to the author to analyze and use their blog content.

Data collection and analysis

Blogs enable researchers to collect online interactions and capture the linguistic and literacy practices in a virtual community (Kvasny & Igwe, 2008). Building on previous blogging scholarship (e.g., Bloch, 2007; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Murray & Hourigan, 2008), this study uses blogs as the primary research tool in investigating a small female group’s L2 interactional processes.

The results from the pre-course questionnaire provide the following pieces of information. First, four students reported an upper-intermediate English proficiency (with **TOEFL CBT** score of 250), but the others did not specify. Second, 10 students had Chinese blogs, but no one blogged in English or used Blogger. Third, all students perceived themselves as skilful at Microsoft Word and multimedia devices, but only three had ever used Web editing tools.

To involve students in blogging practices, the author used the following three tasks, each of which served both pedagogical and research purposes:

1. *Website or weblog reviews.* To familiarize students with blogging discourse and practices, students were asked to search and explore **ESL/EFL** websites or weblogs and to write reviews on their personal blogs. The purpose was to understand how concepts and meanings were enacted in blogging practices and how their reviews related to their specific disciplines.
2. *Interactive comments.* To allow blog author and readers communication, students were asked to leave comments on peer students' postings or refer to each other in blog entries. The purpose was to understand how students shared information in their responses to blogging situations
3. *Activity reflections.* To introduce students to Internet cultures and cultural artefacts, students were asked to participate in assigned, text-based **CMC** activities, including blogging. Afterward, they wrote down reflections on personal blogs. The purpose was to understand their perceptions of these technologies and how students expressed themselves in certain ways through them.

Data analysis adopted Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis approach, which links together textual analysis, analysis of discourse practices, and sociocultural analysis. First, the author investigated all of the students' blog postings, aiming to identify discourses related to blogging practices in general and language use with respect to disciplinary knowledge, social relations, and virtual identities. To show the discursive, creative, and hybrid nature of the complex discourse practices and (inter)textual relations, the author then analyzed how similar concepts were articulated within and across texts by lexical chaining (i.e., linking related words in the written texts together). To address important sociocultural questions which have framed the discourses, the author also selected postings that exhibited heterogeneous positions and analyzed their contradictory points of views.

Findings

The findings are framed according to the three research questions: (1) the exploitation of **L2** disciplinary knowledge, (2) the development of social discourse, and (3) the expression of virtual identities. In the following section, the author provides representative quotations from student blogs. While pseudonyms are used, the students' words are not edited.

Exploitation of L2 disciplinary knowledge

Through both online observation and constant communication with the students in offline contexts, the author found that several sub-disciplines (i.e., language, education, literature, and communication) co-exist in the **EFL** community. Students' specific disciplinary interests and values are reflected in their blog descriptions, posts, and links to other Web sources and content. For example, **CR**'s blog demonstrates her enthusiasm for English education by

links to her role models (i.e., local EFL teachers' Chinese blogs) and The Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT), a test from Cambridge ESOL (i.e., teaching English to speakers of other languages). Blogging, in this sense, accommodates EFL students' diverse speech communities (Canagarajah, 2002).

Textual links and intertextual references within and across the blogs also illustrate students' strategies for co-constructing discourses and literacies based on their disciplinary interests. The student AY revealed her strong interest in mass communication. She posted her website review of CNN.com with an emphasis on certain technological functions and usage, and the other students joined the conversation by leaving comments on her post. Figure 1 shows these students' collaborative discourse in the form of lexical chaining within and across posts:

- AY: One of most famous program is "CNN Pipeline" which is a **video news** service providing both live and on-demand **video** to subscribers' computers via Internet connections.
- VC: Besides the words and pictures on the webpage, *I believe* that viewers actually are expecting **some kind of "moving images"** like **video**, when viewing. It's like TV news and online news get the advantages from each other. TV news will put **words** beside the screen when the anchor is reporting, while the online news will use **multimedia** to give people a sense of "watching TV" since TV is still **the main source of news** for people. It's attractive for learners to see **this kind of video images**. It's more convenient and also provides another way of learning.
- CR: Just like you, *I think* the most attractive part of this website is that we can see the **video clips of any kind of news**. Since the clips do not have **subtitles**, *I think* watching news in this way can also help me upgrade my English listening ability.
- CT: And there are a lot of time that I can not fully understand the news because my listening skill and my vocabulary is not enough. *The site you introduced* can be really useful to me because I got to see **the text form of the news**.

Figure 1. Lexical Chaining and Hedges in Interactive Comments

In the context of communication, VC rephrased AY's "video news" and "video" into "moving images like video," "multimedia," and "video images," which were then included in "video clips of any kind of news." Likewise, her original phrase "words besides the screen" was recast as "subtitles" and then adapted as "the text form of the news" based on their alternative interpretations. The lexical chains not only connect significant elements word-by-word and post-by-post, but they also illustrate these students' attempts to make sense of each other's meaning and to produce cohesive messages based on their L2 disciplinary knowledge. For instance, VC elaborated on AY's posts by comparing TV and website news and by describing how visual and verbal information are processed along the two distinct channels of the TV and the Internet. The students also used hedges, such as "I believe" or "I think," and recycled phrases like "(some/this/any) kind of" to signal to others that they were presenting arguments and searching for the right words and phrases to convey thoughts. Another prevalent discourse feature was to identify common positions (e.g., "just like you" and "the site you introduced can be really useful to me") or to repeat the points of the others before proposing alternative positions. This communicative event of negotiating L2 knowledge through lexical chains, hedged comments, and repeating phrases was

not a single occurrence, but the degree of participant contribution in a given post varied depending on what topics were discussed.

Failure to share meanings was one of the reasons why certain students could not join the interactive discussion. As the student **AN** pointed out, she had diverse assumptions about the use of multimedia in Internet genres and practices. In (1), **AN** commented on **AY**'s post by comparing different points of view:

- (1) I think I put great emphasis on how this website facilitates learners' learning process, and you give us a new insight of services **CNN** provides.

On the other hand, the hybrid blogging context made students who had studied and adopted conventional literary genres (e.g., poetry, fiction, play, etc) feel confused about the focus on the discussion in electronic genres and practices. **YJ**, for instance, viewed the extensive use of technologies in English learning as peripheral to her goals of acquiring English. She had "technophobia" and struggled in a culture of networked and mediated worlds as in (2):

- (2) To tell the truth, this course is far from what I had expected: I thought the focus of this course was "English learning," but indeed, the focus of this course is "online learning." As a technical idiot, I have never got to be "this close" to computer...The most important thing for me in this course is that I broaden my ideas about online English learning seeing that it is very different from what I used to know....

In the following extract, another student **MD** wished to express her experiences based on group discussions of the principles and criteria for the website/weblog review task, but she encountered technical problems when organizing her blog:

- (3) I think bloggers do support the learning goal which wants to learn and teach through Internet. While I was blogging I always thought that what I put on my blogger would be read around the world, and therefore, I would carefully deal with the information I put on my blogger. Not only is the information I put on my blogger important but also the way I organize my blogger. Because our group sets up some principles and criteria for **ESL** websites and bloggers, I really hope that blogger can fit the principles. Unfortunately, problems occurred while I was organizing my blogger. Although I use computers often, this is the first time for me to build a blogger. Problems I encountered are mainly technical problems.

While these students learned various discursive practices and conventions in blogging, they also perceived the vernacular and specialized varieties that influenced their application of newly acquired **L2** content knowledge in blogging.

Development of social relationships

Initially, teacher support of student blogging came in the form of step-by-step instructions and directions posted on blogs. When students became more competent, the guidance was gradually reduced to encourage their participation in blogging. Compared to traditional teacher-centered learning, the student **CR** found that this apprenticeship approach provided more opportunities for self-exploration. She shared her interpretations and experiences with the group in (4):

- (4) One year ago, I had a Chinese blog that was an assignment of the educational

courses. That was my first time to know “blog.” I set the blog under the instruction of the teacher, that is, I followed the teacher’s instruction to finish that blog. Though I accomplished that blog myself, I did not really learn a lot from that because I just did the “steps” that the teacher had already arranged for us. Compared to the blog, “CR” was finished by my own exploration, so I think I really learn something from this experience.

In such processes, peer assistance through sharing ideas, explaining procedures, and working with more advanced students plays an important role. The following comments left in EN’s blog illustrate how these female friends exchanged Blogger techniques and communicated technical problems by constructing social discourse online and face-to-face with more advanced classmates through conversation:

(5) Thank you so much for sharing this skill to us, I will try to add it in my blog (but I am not sure if I can success!) You are really an experienced blog runner. I think you might know lots of blogs or websites that teach/help others to make their blogs better. Could you please share with us?)

(6) Thanks for your compliments, CR. But nah, not really, I don’t really know lots of blogging techniques, widgets or stuffs like that. I just go and find the necessary info when I am in need, and that’s probably more important than having any website favorite. But the question is “HOW”. How to find the info you want? That is the tricky part. For me, the simplest answer is “key word”. Just try to find the correct key word so that you can google. And of course Angelo’s blog is a great starting point!!

(7) EN, you are really good at computer! When AN and I got lost in SchMOOze, you were the one who found the way. Besides, thank you for introducing such a useful blog.

(8) I appreciate that you actively create many articles that you think may well respond to teacher’s requirement and even help other classmates to think about how to solve the computer problem etc, and this is very kind and generous... To tell the truth, I feel helpless now and then when I have to face so many technical problems and computer, and I am really anxious. So thanks again for helping me.

From examples (5) through (8), we see the students perform pragmatic acts (e.g., compliments, complaints, gratitude, requests, advice) through words with positive and negative emotional connotations. They share their own inferior conditions and feelings (e.g., lost, helpless, anxious), and at the same time, praise each other’s superior qualities and personalities (e.g., kind, good, generous, experienced) by using intensifiers (e.g., very, really) and asking questions. By acknowledging and supporting each other, these female students drew on collaborative strategies to request information and express gratitude in the form of a casual conversation between friends.

As illustrated in (6), these female EFL students seldom accepted peer appraisal as expert feedback, even though they gradually became familiar with blogging skills and communities. Instead, they usually ascribed the credit to others by sharing stories about personal learning and participation in both local and global Internet communities. As in (9), CR acquired blogging techniques by using search engines and interacting with global blog audiences to subscribe to Internet news related to her topics of interest:

(9) Oh, I have a story to say about this news scrolling sidebar. This news function was downloaded from widgetmate.com. Well, the story goes like this, one day, when I was checking my e-mail, I found a letter from a person named Alex Smith. He said that he likes my blog, and he thinks maybe I would like to add the news function from widgetmate, so he suggested me to give it a try.

Example (10) further illustrates such a strategy. **CT** used her native language (i.e., Chinese) to learn blogging techniques from local knowledge sharing communities (e.g., Yahoo Knowledge, Taiwan):

(10) To make my blog more attractive to myself and visitors, I went to Yahoo Knowledge to search for things I can put into my blog. To my surprise there were so many things that can put into blog!!!! You can have a pet, a weather report, or even time...etc. Also many people formed blogs to teach people blog techniques.

The students interacted not only with visible friends and acquaintances in their immediate CoPs, but also with unseen bloggers across distance communities. On the one hand, a broader audience in the blogosphere motivated students to capitalize on blogging as in (11) and (12):

(11) And of course, what's better is I can share all these stuff with my friends. My friend Shirley enjoys clicking every linkage in my webpages and has a lot of fun. I am glad about that.

(12) I was really happy to know that there are some other people (except my classmates and my friends) visit and like my blog. Alex Smith's letter not only gave me another kind of motivation to run my blog, but also remind me again that what I post in my blog can really be seen all over the world! So, I have to think twice before I post everything.

On the other hand, students felt perplexed about this pragmatic function of blogging when faced with an anonymous audience as illustrated in (13):

(13) I didn't know what this blog is built for and I have no idea who my readers are, except obviously, my team members who need to read it for assignments' sake. Is this blog for learners? Or is it for **ESL** teachers? Are my readers locals or foreigners?

While social relationships between the students and their audience seemed to shape their blogs, students' interpretations of online communities and audiences also influenced how they used the technology. In (14), the student **SY**, who was a moderator on a campus bulletin board system (**BBS**), preferred to restrict her readership:

(14) I really would prefer **BBS**, cause it looks somehow cleaner...and at least, I know those who are viewing...which is hard to trace if I use a blog!

Accordingly, those who did not feel comfortable with anonymous audiences rejected public access to their blogs and did not link to others.

Expression of virtual identities

Students viewed blogging as a creative process of self-expression. Reflecting on her blogging experiences, MD wrote,

(15) I use my creativity in the process of organizing the blogger. I figured out an English title and a brief description of my blogger, but the description would cover my picture therefore I placed it in the "About Me". I also put a picture of myself to signal my own identity.

Instead of revealing details about their personal lives, students opted for graphics or artwork to construct their lives. The semiotic significance of these visual details was illuminated by peer discourse. In (16) and (17), fellow students' comments on icons or images illustrate how they used fictional characters from popular media (e.g., films, cartoons, video games, and TV series) to personalize their blogs. In particular, they related female personalities to color schemes such as those in (16) and (18):

(16) Your blog looks very sweet!!! One is because of the "bloody" cake picture; the other is because of the cute rabbit. Your blog looks simple and that is very good for others to look through your articles. Also, the organization of the blog is neat and clear. Your introduction makes me feel that you are a very special person with peculiar sentiments and thoughts. I adore the artistic picture you put in your introduction for the picture is so colorful that looks like a girl's fantasy and reminds me of the French movie "Amelie"...

(17) I love the picture with you and the Sponge Bob! I want to be like sponge, too <(^-^)/ (you've got beautiful eyes especially in this photo! L(▽▽) Γ...The design of you blog shows a lot of your personality, you're stylist!

(18) Your blog is soooo purple, I think your whole life will not only connects with English but also **PURPLE!** I think you must agree with me! **HAHAHA....**

In these comments, students also forge playful and conversational practices through emotional icons or graphics (e.g., <(^-^)/), exclamation marks (e.g., !!!), capital letters (e.g., **HAHAHA**), and intensifiers (e.g., soooo). It is interesting to note that stylish expressions, such as <(^-^)/, is Eastern not Western. Although this is an EFL sample, many of the cultural artefacts (e.g., icons, emoticons, graphics, and artworks) are commonly used in Internet communication on college-affiliated BBSs and Taiwan-based blogs (e.g., 無名小站 www.wretch.cc/blog/). EFL blogging, in this sense, nurtures not just target language users, but also bilingual community participants (Firth & Wagner, 1997).

During the study, some students performed their identities for the teacher, but most of the students used blogs to express their personal experiences and observations. In the blogosphere, these female students co-constructed their "new" selves through speech and art. Some students quickly discovered their purposes and identities as in (19), while the others often changed their virtual figures by creating new artworks as in (20):

(19) I think that having a space like a blog to put useful stuff is really cool. I am also planning to have a blog that provides me a space to post something about art so it can become the data collection for me!

(20) Haha I see that you have reskinned your blog. It's great! I'm just curious... is that you on the banner?? Or is that your twin phantom who has more meat on her bones? And here is a surprise link for you!! I saw it on milk and cookies, it's pretty cool!

In addition to commenting on their peers' online and offline identities through joking and praising, students compared their writing styles and experiences to those fellow class members as illustrated in (21). In addition to evaluating diverse styles and actions in their blogs, they also shared their values and reasons why they chose to use or not use multimedia features as in examples (22) and (23):

(21) We write article in different styles and sometimes I can learn a way to write a beautiful essay.

(22) I think you are a very talented learner. You are good at not only English learning, but writing graceful things as well. The color you use also adds some mysterious atmosphere in this blog so that readers may want to read more and further. If you can also add some interesting elements such as more pictures, video clips, interactive space, then you surely can attract more readers' attention.

(23) **CL** uses this blog to try to make a connection between her previous learning and her learning now... **EN** uses more technological features to support her blogging... I like things simple but clear, so I arrange my blog this way without too much other stuff, categories, or technological features because I think let everyone notice what I think is really important.

In their blogs, students expressed a "communicative aesthetic" (Thorne, 2009, p. 88). While blogging offers a rich context for self-expression, users must decide how to represent themselves. **VC**, for example, posted a right foot (see Figure 2) to show her metaphorical thinking about virtual identity. As expressed in her posts, the identities disclosed in her blog tended to be fragmentary and roguish.

Discussion

The student blogs displayed a wide variety of styles and strategies in the social processes of L2 learning and meaning making. Through textual analysis, I have observed the English majors' conversational interactions, communicative practices, and discursive structures based on their various interests and disciplines. As a public form of literacy, blogs help students develop academic writing strategies by discussing and using texts in the work that they produce (Bloch, 2007). While some strategies contribute to academic discourse, other forms of interaction create social opportunities for relationships even when the discourse elicited by instructional activities differs from natural conversations in non-pedagogical communication. By employing linguistic strategies (e.g., questions, hedges, and cohesive vocabulary) and pragmatic tactics (e.g., acknowledgement and compliments), the small female group in this study shared their assumptions and experiences through conversations, which have also been observed between female friends in Western societies for a couple decades (Coates, 1996; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Furthermore, I should discuss blended discourses and practices, in which different genres mix and serve multiple functions. As in Ducate and Lomicka's (2008) study, the



Figure 2. Screenshot of Student Blogging

international Blogger service seemed to immerse students in the culture of L2 blogging in a relaxed environment. A discourse analysis of student blogging has illustrated their pragmatic interactions with audiences outside the classroom (e.g., friends and strangers). Moreover, blogging in a netspeak community allows for rich speech styles (Crystal, 2006). While performing blogging tasks with English cultural tools (e.g., texts, icons, emoticons, graphics, and artworks), the EFL university students also negotiated and modified discursive structures and literacy practices. In doing so, they encoded their own subcultures into hybrid forms of communication. Accordingly, some artefacts produced appeared to be different from those in Western discourse. The interactive nature of the communicative practice may also be related to the degree of their involvement in particular tasks (Hyland, 2008) or their affiliation with particular groups (Gee, 2004).

Based on diverse values, sociocultural analysis has produced conflicting views on what communicative genres are appropriate (e.g., academic literacy versus technical communication, local interactions versus global networks, and personal journals versus public media). For example, some students, who were more skillful in blogging, avoided the role of expert in the new knowledge extensions, while other students, who reported peripheral participation in blogging tasks, rejected vernacular communication with bloggers outside their affinity groups. L2 researchers (e.g., Canagarajah, 2002; Thorne, 2009) have proposed that a critical and hybrid orientation to literacy and communication, which connects local vernaculars with dominant communities, should replace the problematic concept of a homogeneous community. This study further suggests that the implementation of such methods in EFL contexts should develop procedures for evaluating both conventionalized routines and local creativity.

Conclusions

As a pedagogical tool, blogging makes the social and cultural contexts of L2 communication explicit to **EFL** university students. This study has presented the choices and constraints of a group of students during their interaction with multimodal texts, wide audiences, and virtual identities. These English majors used their sub-disciplinary knowledge in the areas of language, education, literature, and communication to interpret texts and exchange messages by multilingual linking, lexical chaining, hedging, and recycling phrases. Socialized in a networked community, this clique of friends managed interpersonal relationships by acknowledging peers, shifting credit, and soliciting audience participation both inside and outside the physical and disciplinary confines of the classroom. In cyberspace, these female university students presented images of themselves through verbal and nonverbal stylistic strategies, most of which were playful and colorful. Such findings underscore the importance of recognizing the various interactive styles and strategies in **EFL** blogging.

The implications for second language learning are as follows. First, to enhance mutual understanding and clarify their writing, students should be encouraged to share their own assumptions and contextual knowledge so that they might capitalize on their collective expertise in various genres of mediated literacy and communication. Second, to develop discourse strategies, peer activities should be incorporated to create strong dyadic and affiliative bonds between class members. Mitigated interactions can also be achieved by negotiating conflicts and exploring subjective positions for different communicative purposes. Third, given the diverse communication styles and evaluation standards in the speech context, students should understand that graphical icons and stylistic choices have symbolic significance, which may reinforce or contradict their desired interaction with actual or virtual others. Of course, certain pedagogical decisions must be made by considering forms of apprenticeship and blog use, for example, whether to use localized blogs for content creation or encourage extensive use of alternative media for exploring vernacular identities.

This study has offered a preliminary examination of communicative situations and written discourses that **EFL** university bloggers can engage. Although it reflects an understanding of female **EFL** bloggers, it also carries some limitations. For example, students' blogging processes cannot be directly inferred from blog content they produce as a result of instructional tasks. Moreover, because of the lack of male participants, no direct evidence supports gender-specific usage in the female students' blog discourse. Nevertheless, this study still sheds light on how female students who major in Liberal Arts or Humanities may develop their communicative practices through blogging tasks in virtual environments.

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