

Blogs as a Didactic Strategy in the Improvement of Short Text Writing

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Nota de Responsabilidad

Las ideas y conclusiones aportadas en este Trabajo de Grado son Responsabilidad de los autores.

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Resumen

Teniendo en cuenta que la tecnología se ha convertido en parte de nuestra vida diaria de tal manera que no hay excusa para no incluirla en la enseñanza. Esto hace que el proceso de enseñanza - aprendizaje sea más efectivo porque la tecnología integra la teoría y la práctica. Es conocido que algunos profesores no incluyen la tecnología en sus clases porque no se sienten cómodos en este campo. De acuerdo a Gahala (2001), el uso de computadores genera problemas en el aula de clases. Algunos profesores carecen de tiempo y de motivación para aprender herramientas tecnológicas, de igual manera se sienten inseguros de cometer errores frente a sus estudiantes y perder el respeto porque en el rol de los profesores tradicionales los docentes no pueden demostrar debilidad o inexperiencia.

Abstract

Taking into account that technology has become a part of our everyday life to such an extent that there is no excuse for not including it in our teaching. It makes teaching and learning more convenient and effective because technology integrates theory and practice. It is also true that some teachers do not use technology in their lessons because they do not feel comfortable in this field. According to Gahala (2001), hardware and software often pose problems for teachers in the classroom, and just-in-time technical support may be unavailable. Teachers may lack the time and the motivation to learn technology skills. They are afraid that if they make mistakes, their students will respect them less as the traditional teacher role does not allow the teacher to show any weaknesses or inexperience.

Introduction

The teaching of English has become one of the most important concerns in the education system because English seems to influence remarkably in Colombian system of education. Currently, many teachers teach English by means of traditional methods (e.g. Audiolingualism and silent way) those are not suitable for a changeable learning environment. According to Richards (2001), the notion of teaching methods has had a long history in language teaching, as is witnessed by the rise and fall of a variety of methods throughout the recent history of language teaching. Some, such as Audiolingualism, became the orthodox teaching methods of the 1970s in many parts of the world. Other guru-led methods such as the Silent Way attracted small but devoted followers in the 1980s and beyond, but attract little attention today. Thereupon, students learn English in a limited and superficial way. Besides with traditional methods their learning is not significant because they do not participate actively in their own learning process. For this reason students do not master the main skills of English particularly listening, speaking, reading and writing. Writing skill is one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners and at the same time it is classified as a basic academic skill. According to Spelkova (n.d), writing is often considered a difficult skill perhaps because of the value of written texts and notions associated with “correctness” and the importance of errors. Learners often do not like to be given writing tasks, as they view the task as being likely to provoke stress. This is one of the reasons why many learners are worried about writing in another language and consider writing to be one of the most difficult skills in the learning of a second language. Writing, is an ability that makes students consolidate any academic learning in a second language. In this way, a student should be able to express his ideas accurately in English and understand new ideas of other people in English.

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Also, students need to solve problems, share insights and build knowledge, which is achieved through writing skills. However in reality, some teachers in Colombia have not very well promoted the development of writing skills because writing instruction is an activity that demands more dedication. Therefore, students still have problems with written compositions in a second language.

This research paper aims at reviewing and analyzing data and information about blogs as a didactic strategy in the improvement of writing short texts. This research tries to show the incidence of blogs as a successful learning environment that fits in the changeable learning process and puts in practice technological skills that students are acquiring because the virtual world is expanding. In that way, teachers will know the advantages of using blogs as a supplementary and didactic material to improve writing skills. As a result, English classes will be more motivating and interesting through the virtual learning world. In the same way, after reviewing some blogs for developing writing, a proposal will be presented to suggest teachers the use of three blogs that can help beginner, intermediate and advance EFL students from high schools in Nariño to ameliorate their writing skills.

Justification

Computers and language teaching have walked hand to hand for a long time and contributed as teaching tools in the language and second language classroom. However, it has been difficult to apply those kinds of updated implements in most of the public high schools in Pasto because of the lack of computer training to teachers, the shortage of resources, and a few numbers of computers for a great number of students.

As a result the importance of this study is to determine the application of the blogs to develop writing production of short texts in English. First, writing a text involves a communicative intention which is materialized by a set of sentences or words. These must be organized taking into account standard of English forms. Therefore, it is important to consider focus on form approach to develop accuracy in writing short texts. This approach was put forth by Long (1991) and Robinson (1998) as a suitable way to solve comprehension and/or production of L2 grammatical form problems by exposing students to English complex forms. Also, by means of focus on form, students notice the forms that they currently lack.

Taking into account that technology has become a part of our everyday life to such an extent that there is no excuse for not including it in our teaching. It makes teaching and learning more convenient and effective because technology integrates theory and practice. It is also true that some teachers do not use technology in their lessons because they do not feel comfortable in this field. According to Gahala (2001), hardware and software often pose problems for teachers in the classroom, and just-in-time technical support may be unavailable. Teachers may lack the time and the motivation to learn technology skills. They are afraid that if they make mistakes, their students will respect them less as the traditional teacher role does not allow the teacher to show any weaknesses or inexperience.

“Computers and technology are still a source of fears and insecurity for many teachers everywhere in the world despite the latest advances applicable to language teaching such as specialized websites, blogs, wikis, language teaching methodology, journals, and some others. Although many countries have done institutional efforts to modernize their equipment, spent large amounts in technology, proved the positive effects of integrating computers in language learning” (Tsou, Wang & Tzeng, 2006)

As a result of not providing favorable conditions which allow students to have a good command of English, teaching and learning English have become a hard task for teachers and students in our environment. Deciding factors such as teaching without meaningful and suitable equipment and using of old pencil-paper materials with a lot of information just based on explicit grammar have contributed to the conception of English as a boring subject. Also, most of the teachers use methodology which is deficient to accomplish students' needs. Then, students do not get satisfactory results in their learning process. Finally, the traditional and old materials do not work with updated topics and do not expose students to real language. In the use of suitable material, it is important to consider Long and Robinson's (1998) point of view. They state writing materials should be authentic as mirrors real-life, such as doing job interviews, writing a letter to a friend, and engaging in classroom debates. Besides, writing skills have been forgotten by some teachers in high school because of its complexity in the processes. Teachers have not promoted techniques and activities for improving students' writing production such as peer correction, teacher assessment of the students' written composition. As a result, teachers are depriving students of sharing their thoughts, consolidating knowledge and enriching vocabulary and English forms. According to Tim Bowen (n.d), it is probably fair to say that in many English language classrooms around the world less time is devoted to the skill of writing than to reading, listening and speaking. In many teaching situations, teachers may see their students for no more than an hour or two a week and writing is seen as time-consuming and not perhaps the best way of making use of such a short amount of time.

All these downside about unfavorable conditions especially in relation to materials must be important considerations when the teachers do research into reading and writing materials to improve teaching English. They should think that the Colombian education is moving to

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modernization, so they should change the traditional way of teaching English on taking advantage of different tools like blogs.

The characteristics of a text are relevant aspects in the process of writing a text in English.

A text has three main characteristics: Content, Structure and Language. The content must have appropriate ideas and information, besides; it has to be implicit and explicit. The structure must have mostly simple sentences, with a few compound sentences and simple punctuation. In the language it is recommended to use familiar words and visual language features (e.g Diagrams) (“National Centre of Literacy and Numeracy for Adults”, 2012). It is mandatory for this process to provide a clear instruction and practice that promote a communicative intention, coherence and cohesion of a text. Thereby, students have the opportunity to get experience in writing texts particularly the short ones. They will have a good command of English and feel prepared to any challenging writing examination involving reading skills in the target language.

Definition of Blogs.

Currently, Blogs have become a significant influence in people’s lives as a means of having information and sharing it with others. Blogs can work as a current source of information of any topic on posting up worthy articles or links that provide more information. According to Blood (2000) blogs are means of communication which present articles in order to diffuse updated knowledge of any topic and generate different views, and thoughtful commentary made by weblog members in the interpretation of the new information.

Blogs’ popularity might be caused by their flexibility and accessibility. The information in a blog is treated with a particular mixture of links, commentaries and personal observation of the blogger. This person is who creates the blog and refines it as a means of communication with

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distinctive voice and personality. Owing to this quality the blog has been an infinitely malleable format (Blood, 2000). Equally, their popularity might be also produced by being free. There are many web sites that playfully give elements and explain step by step how to create a blog for free. Also, the services to maintain the blog active such as updating data or customization process are free, and all of them are planned to facilitate individuals to publish their own weblogs quickly and easily.

Some of these advantages have something in common which is that they involve a communicative process. Therefore, a blog can be easily defined as an appropriate context to teach and learn languages particularly English. For this reason, it is important to think about some statements of the relationship between blogs and the teaching of English.

Blogs in Teaching of English.

For more than a decade, teachers and the organizations that certificate teacher education programs have recognized the significance of promoting teachers to use technology (Duhaney, 2001; Willis & Raines, 2001). Clearly, technology use continues to expand in the classroom, it becomes more and more compatible with the necessity of creating learning environments that keep students interested in learning English and accomplish students demands and necessities in their process. In addition blogs' characteristics tend to accomplish web sites standards which can make the blog easy to use for teachers and students. Anyone with minimum technical knowledge is able to change the blog in accordance with the demands of spectator (Blood, 2000).

Blogs are able to develop a communicative process which can improve reading and writing skills. The functions of the blogs mainly consist in publishing an article or a video in order to be diffused and generate spectators' reactions that are materialized in commentaries. Therefore, the member of a blog is engaged in practicing writing and enriching the experiences

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of sharing their ideas by written discourse. With practice and time, it will be easier for them writing in a proficient and clear way.

Finally, an important consideration is the fact that tens of thousands of teachers have used blogs as a way to engage their students in improving their 21st century skills (*What is a WebQuest?*, 2007). Blogs offer services that contribute significantly in the process of learning. As an illustration, there are some tools of blogs that would be a means for giving feedback. Another useful material that can be included in blogs is related to assessment. It is important to know that testing and assessing are two different concepts, even though they are sometimes misunderstood. "Tests are prepared administrative procedures that occur at identifiable times in a curriculum when learners muster all their faculties to offer peak performance, knowing that their responses are being measured and evaluated. Assessment, on the other hand, is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain. Whenever a student responds a question, offers a comment, or tries out a new word or structure, the teacher subconsciously makes an assessment of the student's performance. A good teacher never ceases to assess students, whether those assessments are incidental or intended." (Brown, 2003).

Another relevant consideration in this research is the use of technological resources such as videos, readings, web sites, chats and some others for the teaching of English inside of a blog. These technological resources are also aimed at the improvement of reading and writing skills by providing the students some tools to elicit their ideas. As a consequence, the writing process will include an input that can facilitate the writing process from the beginning. Besides, the use of technological resources for teaching English in a blog could be well received because of the great success that technology has had in people's lives.

The Use of Technological Resources for Teaching English.

The use of technological resources for teaching English helps the enlargement of education. They produce effective learning environments where both teachers and students have the possibility of sharing information, and knowledge in general. “The positive influence of technology when learning English is valuable and can maximize the overall experience. As technology becomes a major part in today’s world, students can have more freedom and support to fully absorb the information. More students are choosing to learn English online because of the increased efficiency with lower costs. Technology and learning English go hand in hand because technology brings more opportunities to access to new resources.” (International Teacher Organization, n.d.).

Also, by technology and innovated ideas carried out by technological resources, students can learn in a modern classroom.

The internet has spread out almost covering all the fields in life, in this way; the teaching of English has not been the exception. Technological resources such as: blogs, web sites and videos should play an important role in education; therefore, their use should be considered in English teaching because they might permit teachers to make interactive classes. Nowadays, the interest in the use of blogs and technological resources to support the teaching of English has grown substantially. According to Pope (2007) technology has always been implicitly central to an understanding of what “English” is or can be. After all, without manuscripts and pens and without paper and print technologies there would be no texts and nothing to read, and virtually no historical dimension to the subject at all. This process was the basis for the development of new technologies especially in the teaching of English.

Another point to talk about is the improvement of the different English skills through the use of technological resources. Nutt (2006) states that chat rooms, online forums, and discussion groups give the chance of practicing writing in English, with the opportunity to get some feedback on grammar and spelling.

The use of technological resources (e.g. web sites, chats, blogs, videos and some other aspects) is changing the face of education quickly; particularly the teaching of English. In this change, it could be easier for learners to improve their English skills. Besides, Zang (2006) cited by Solanki (2012) states that “through network technology we can offer students not only rich, sources of authentic learning materials, but also an attractive and a friendly interface, vivid pictures and pleasant sounds, which to a large extent overcome the lack of authentic language environment and arouses students’ interest in learning English.” (pag.152).

Ediger and Pavlik (2000) assure that for improving reading and writing skills it is necessary to give genuine communication contexts through e-mail, messages, dialogues, journals or develop class-to-class information sharing through the internet. However, these genuine communication tools should not be used nor chosen arbitrarily in a blog because for the development of writing skills with accuracy it is mandatory to consider a suitable reading process that presents correct and authentic language forms. Therefore, reading skills and comprehension discussion must be integrated in this research process.

Reading.

Reading is probably the most important skill for L2 learners in academic contexts (Grabe, 1991). In most of the academic environments, the development of reading skills has been a relevant component in education. Therefore, the reading skill is an essential issue to improve in classrooms. The improvement in reading can come up naturally because reading provides a large

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exposure of L2. According to Ediger (2001), reading is gradually being recognized as a valuable source of language input. Common class materials such as articles, stories, dialogues, diagrams involve reading activity. In addition, reading activity is an interactive process that includes aspects in and out of the classroom. Ediger (2001) considers that reading works with three elements: the text, the reader and the social context. These factors go through stages such as unconscious word identification, structures and vocabulary comprehension, recognition of text categories, cultural knowledge, and classification of information and evaluation of reading strategies. Then, reading is an ample cognitive process which is influenced significantly by background of L2 learners.

Reading can be seen as a dynamic skill which provides a wide range of positive results in acquiring languages. Krashen (1982) described that reading helps to acquire second language by means of adequate exposure of language in a relaxing learning environment. Also, reading is the most direct source in acquiring language features. As an illustration, advanced readers have a good command of language forms and vocabulary because they have been exposed to a regular and sufficient repetition of new language structures by reading activity (Wodinsky, M., and Nation, P., 1988). Reading is also considered as a productive skill when it activates writing production. According to Bell (1998), the effective reading fosters the reader's thoughts that eventually are showed in writing construction. Therefore, when learners are reading they are preparing to take part in communication events by responding in written form. As a result, learners are encouraged to improve their knowledge of language by reading appealing materials.

Certainly, reading skill promotes writing ability but above all pretends to enhance comprehension because it can guarantee the interpretation and elicitation of new ideas from

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students. For this reason it is mandatory to talk about the characteristics and advantages of reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension. Reading comprehension could be the main purpose of reading skills. It lets the reader move from the process of knowing the text's topic to achieve the interpretation on the text's message. It could be also defined as an effective learning tool which permits learners manipulate information to represent the universe. In addition, Grabe,W. and Stoller,F.L. (2001) argue that reading comprehension is the mixture of information and expectation of readers.

Reading comprehension goes through processes such as text-structure awareness and strategic reading (Grabe,W. and Stoller,F.L.,2001). Strategic reading should be developed independently from speaking, listening and writing in order to guarantee understanding from the first time. Besides, the strategic reading activates learners' schemata where their beliefs and social values are treated by prereading, discussions, pictures, diagrams, drawing, videos and role playing (Grabe,W. and Stoller,F.L.,2001). Therefore, reading comprehension pretends to cover as much materials as possible. Teachers work reading in a flexible way with vocabulary, graphic representations and specifically an extensive reading. Grabe (1991) and Paran (1996) have emphasized the importance of extensive reading in providing learners with practice in automaticity of word recognition and decoding the symbols on the printed page. On the other hand, reading comprehension might offer the opportunity to make comparisons of the wide quantity of categories of a text-structure. Hence, learners with this ability can identify the different forms in which a writer joins thoughts and how these thoughts can be materialized into a visual representation.

Reading comprehension elicits the use of critical thinking skills at every stage particularly the use of deductive reasoning, conclusion making, logical supposition, chronological analysis, tonal awareness, and an understanding of scope (“Reading Comprehension Worksheets”, n.d.) When learners read and comprehend a text, they evaluate the ideas of the author on making critical reading. Reading also permits learners to develop reflective thought and a tolerance for ambiguity (*Orientation Lecture Series LEARNING TO LEARN: Developing critical thinking skills*, n.d.) In other words, reading comprehension takes part in teaching critical thinking skills.

Reading and writing are tightly connected in the learning process for that after discussing reading it is necessary to talk about the relation that can be established between reading and writing skills. According to Graham S. and Hebert M. (2010) writing can be a vehicle for improving reading. In particular, having students write about a text they are reading enhances how well they comprehend it. In addition, teaching writing not only improves students’ writing skill, it also enhances students’ ability to read a text accurately, fluently, and with comprehension. Finally, having students spend more time writing has a positive impact on reading, increasing students understanding in texts written by others. Due to the importance of the development of writing skills through the use of blogs, it is necessary to have a clear image of the characteristics that writing implies for the improvement of communication through this productive skill. For that, this paper will show some characteristics of writing skills.

Writing.

Writing might be a skill which is both limited in value and difficult to acquire. As is the case with many other things people do, getting better at writing requires doing it, a lot. This means real writing, not just listening to lectures about writing, doing grammar drills, or discussing readings. The more people write, the easier it gets and the more they are motivated to

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do it. Writers who write a lot learn more about the process because they have had more experience inside it. Writers learn from each session with their hands on a keyboard or around a pencil as they draft, rethink, revise, and draft again. In other words, improvement is built into the experience of writing. (Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee, November 2004).

When we write, we use graphic symbols that are the combination of letters which relate to the sound we make when we speak. Writing has been a method of representing language in visual or tactile form. Writing systems use sets of symbols to represent the sounds of speech, and they also have symbols for such things as punctuation and numerals.

According to Sayan (2008) writing is essentially a solitary activity and the fact that we are required to write on our own, results in the lack of possibility of interaction or the benefit of feedback. When writing, it is important to organize the ideas in such a way that can be understood by the reader in a correct way. Writing is a visual representation of speech (Rowe and Levine, 2009).

Even though in the 1400s writing was used specifically to write important documents by a small number of scribes, currently, we use writing with different purposes: to describe, to give information, to persuade, to tell something and some other aspects, but it is not necessarily important. Nowadays, anyone can post and share information on the Internet.

According to Graham S. and Hebert M. (2010) it is necessary the specific teaching of techniques for improving the quality of students' writing and also enhance their reading. Writing in a correct way requires time; time to produce several drafts where the writer will be able to make words work together and to correct some details in order to express ideas in a better way

because it is difficult to obtain a perfect paper in the first try. Hence, at this point it becomes necessary the teaching of writing techniques.

Writing techniques. Writing could be one of the most difficult processes a student of a second language has to face. It is not only thinking about something in another language, but also producing coherent ideas and being able to express them in an appropriate way, using correct grammar, thinking about the readers to make words understandable. According to Raimes (1983) it is necessary to encourage composition beyond elementary-level sentence exercises, letting the students express ideas without the pressure of face-to-face communication, exploring a subject, recording experiences, and becoming familiar with the conventions of English discourse. For the teachers, it could be appropriate the use of pictures; readings; using all language skills; teaching practical writing; using controlled writing; teaching organization; and responding to students' writing.

According to Beare (n.d.) the most important factor in writing exercises is that students need to be involved in order to make the learning experience valuable, encouraging student participation in the exercise and at the same time expanding student's writing skills. The teacher should be clear on what skills he/she is trying to develop. Next, the teacher needs to decide on which means (or type of exercise) can facilitate learning of the target area. Once the target skill areas and means of implementation are defined, the teacher can then proceed to focus on what topic can be employed to ensure student participation. Through these objectives, the teacher can expect both enthusiasm and effective learning. The teacher must choose a writing objective, find a writing exercise that helps to focus on the specific objective, provide feedback through correction activities that call on students to correct their own mistakes.

Sometimes, writing becomes an underestimate skill because it is used since the most complex text where different kinds of rules are required until a simple shopping list. However, according to Strong American Schools (2008) many adults in America are not fluent, confident writers and some reports say that nearly 40 percent of professional community has skills under the college level. Nowadays, it seems like writing has become an important skill to get into a competitive world, so it could be a difficult but at the same time a significant task to teach writing to the new generations. For this purpose, this section will talk about teaching writing.

Teaching writing. According to the Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee, (November 2004) writing should not be seen as an activity that happens only within a classroom's walls. Teachers need to support students in the development of writing lives, habits, and preferences for life outside school. Many students tend to write a lot when they are emailing, doing projects, making web sites and blogging. In that way, the teaching of writing should be geared toward making sense in a life outside school. In order to provide quality opportunities for student writing, teachers must minimally understand:

- How to interpret curriculum documents, including things that can be taught while students are actually writing.
- The elements of "writing lives" as people construct them in the world outside school.
- Social structures that support independent work.
- How to evaluate while students are writing.
- How to plan what students need to know in response to an incomplete research.
- How to create a sense of personal safety in the classroom, so that students are willing to write freely.

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- How to create community while students are writing in the same room together.

Students of English taught in writing can achieve reinforcement, language development in the second language. Besides, they can learn writing style and the most important they can achieve writing as a very well developed skill. Without a doubt, writing is necessary to be involved in the current world. According to Williams (2002), in the writing process computer and computer software can be a valuable tool for many students. Students need to know how to write letters, how to put written reports together, how to write using electronic media.

Thereupon, the next issue is writing using electronic media what is called e-writing.

E-Writing. “E-writing is a writing done within the medium of networked computing.” (Dashkin, 2003). E-writing (electronic writing) is a developing field which is changing our perspective on writing, through the integration of traditional writing with the use of computers and technological resources we can find on the internet. According to Matuck (2009) E-writing can have some phases before having the final text. Those phases are: meta-writing as planning; act-writing as actualization of an original meta-text; post-writing as final editing of the e-writing process. This last phase is what we see for example in a post.

Nowadays, we can say that computers have definitively changed writing. Originally, when they were first created they were not made to have any relation to language but only to calculations. They were seen as purely mathematical tools. However, the use of computers has spread out and they are useful in almost all the subjects.

The use of technology has had a significant impact to improve the writing skills. For example computer technology, especially word processing has become vital in writing for the students. According to Wetzell (2012), technology has a tremendous power to help students obtain, organize, manipulate, and display information. Also, McDaniel (2009), states that

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technology has a very important role in the classroom and it can be used to teach important concepts in almost every subject area.

All the recommendation and teachers' expectations are put into practice by writing instruction about how to write a text, in particular a short text. This is suitable to teach the basic knowledge of writing procedures and make them easily to achieve. Next section includes some characteristic of the written short text.

Written discourse. There are a classification and hierarchy when it is necessary to identify a written text. It is divided in words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters in the case of a sentence, short text, articles and novels or research papers respectively. All these groups of words are considered a text when they are joined by one communicative purpose and one global idea. These two conditions make the readers be focused on one idea when they read the text. That is to say that a text could be one or two words, one or two sentences and so on. Diaz (1999) states that a text is not evaluated by its size but its unity and homogeneity aimed at accomplishing a communicative intention which are deciding factors to make it a good text.

Categories of a written text. The text type depends on what it wants to express and its organizations. The text could be narrative when the writer creates a sequence of events on describing the character(s), settings, problems and resolutions. Also, a text could be expository when it is aimed at informing facts related to any topic by means of examples, dates or writer's statements. Furthermore, a technical text talks about procedures to accomplish tasks such as manuals, books that give instruction to the reader in order to do something. Finally, the persuasive text uses writer's arguments to convince the readers such as essays which generate debates between texts. Even though these categories are easy to identify because of their contents

and organizational skeletons, they could be combined slightly by the main idea of the text (Diaz, 1999).

Coherence in the written text. In order to provide the global idea of the text to the reader, it is necessary to develop one textual meaning from the text. This could be materialized by the coherence which is in charge of making a suitable sequence between the supporting sentences. Also, these sentences should be connected by logical relations such as causes and effects, contrast, comparison, emphasis, exemplification and some others. All texts need to have an introductory sentence or paragraph. This must express a general statement from the topic in order to contextualize the main idea and the subtopics to develop into the text. Then, the text develops the part where the writer develops the sections and subtopics previously presented. Finally, it is necessary to include the conclusion part since it is used to confirm the main idea of the text and retake the global meaning of the text. According to Bellert (1970) cited by Diaz (1999), the prior knowledge, inferences and deduction help the reader to find the coherence in the text.

Cohesion in the written text. It is aimed at obtaining coherence in the text. Diaz (1999) defines it as a morphosyntactic system that includes processers of substitution and ellipsis which replace and leave out words in order to connect sentences and to avoid repetition in the text. The lexical substitution has as an objective to avoid word overuse in the text and distracting the readers' attention on the text. The process of leaving out a word must be carried out carefully in such a way it does not change the meaning and affect the interpretation. The cohesion also develops grammatical rules in order to assure correctness of linguistic knowledge and the appropriate use of the language, that is why it is necessary to encourage the knowledge of English forms and use of the language. Therefore, approaches in particular focus on form promotes the linguistic knowledge which must be taken into account in this paper.

Focus on form. This approach makes students focus on noticing, learning and using English simple and complex structures. In order to assure the accuracy of a text, it is necessary to promote a good command of English forms and use of the language. This is possible with the help of focus on form approach which combines correctness of linguistic knowledge and the appropriate use of the language (Long and Robinsin, 1998). In addition, this approach makes teachers help learners attend to and understand problematic L2 grammatical forms.

Focus on form and focus on forms. These two approaches seem to be similar in concerning mainly in grammar instruction as input of L2. Nevertheless, according to Long (1988, 1991) there is an important difference between these terms. While focus on forms pretends to increase learners' attention to language structures in an isolated and traditional way, focus on form works with language features or forms which primary purpose is improving meaning and communicative production. Another important consideration, as Sheen (2002) thinks, is that focus in forms pretends to develop learning based on the cognitive process whereas focus on form is based on comprehensible input theory and interaction. The former could be a conventional approach on using the same kind of materials in classrooms. The latter could be flexible on applying fairly different materials to improve meaning and interactive communication.

Focus on form in teaching of meaning. One of the discussed issues in second language acquisition has been the way how focus on form uses general grammar instruction for achieving meaning and communicative activities, as Grabe and Stoller (2001) describe, focus on form provides implicit grammar and these forms are internalized and then significantly used. Learners with internalized forms of L2 tend to measure the text and all input materials in terms of grammar and explore language forms in context. In addition, Grabe and Stoller (2001) suggest

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focus on form approach concentrates on features of a particular grammar point which are essential to develop accuracy in writing production. That is to say, the objective of focus on form might be achieving fluency and accuracy in second language acquisition. On the other hand, Focus on form evolves from perceiving problems with comprehension or production (Long and Robinsin, 1998). This concern in improving comprehension could define focus on form as an analytic approach. Some researchers suggest pedagogy methods such as Task-based language and Content-based language to teach focus on form and meaning (Willis, 1996). These methods might present grammar as a means to make the meaning evident.

Focus on form in teaching grammar. Focus on forms involves traditional approaches to teaching grammar which is built up in an isolated way out of the context (Doughty and Williams, 1998). There are conventional approaches particularly grammar translation and silent way that treat language features or grammar structures as a primary object. Their materials seem to be based on explicit grammar and their learning environment could be no interactive. According to Carter and Nunan (2001) focus on forms emphasizes normal aspects rather than meaningful activities. This synthetic approach does not tend to develop activities taken from the context. As a result, learners might not engage in their learning which occurs in an unreal and synthetic context. Nevertheless, focus on forms could materialize cognitive processes in the learning of a second language such as noticing and developing awareness of the language patterns. These processes increase the learners' consciousness of language structures and improve their system of linguistic knowledge (Ediger, 2001). It is not a coincidence that there are connections between focus on form and the reading skill. For instance, similar to focus on form, reading takes advantage of cognitive processes (Shanahan, 2006).

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As stated by Goserud (n.d) the cognitive processes are commonly referred to as cognition. The Latin root of cognition is *cognoscere*, which translates into "to conceptualize," "to recognize," and "to know." The cognitive processes may be defined as encompassing all information processing even at the subconscious level or as strictly the ability to think and reason.

As far as this, the literature review is concluded and in the next section the derived proposal for this research is going to be presented.

Proposal

In the learning of a second language, the importance of developing students' main four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) is well known. This research is focused on the last one, writing. For students, writing can become a difficult skill, until the point, they find themselves struggling against it. Perhaps, it is due to the lack of practice in this skill that students feel demotivated, and also the few exercises they are assigned are boring because their quality is not the best. In this part, three blogs that teachers can use according to the level of their students beginners, intermediate or advanced are proposed.

- Beginners: <http://writingshorttextsbeginners.weebly.com/>
- Intermediate: <http://writingshorttextsintermediate.weebly.com/>
- Advanced: <http://writingshorttextsadvanced.weebly.com/>

Besides in this section, the structure of the three blogs is going to be described. First, in the three blogs an introduction is presented where the purpose of each one is explained. Secondly, there are five activities according to the students' level, where it is intended to improve their writing skills. The activities in the blogs were chosen taking into account focus on

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form approach. Besides, some quotes have been included with the purpose of encouraging students.

To start, the blog for *Beginners* has been created taking into account that students in this level do not have the tools to write long paragraph essays. Instead of that, short writing assignments are proposed where learners have the possibility of writing few sentences that serve to practice a topic in a meaningful way. So, they can notice their progress in the second language and also the application of that knowledge. It is important to say that most of the activities have to be posted in the comments section of the blogs; in that way teachers can check and follow the improvement of their pupils. To continue, the activities in the *Beginners* blog are described.

In Activity #1 “Postcards”, students can find the definition of *postcards*, an image and an example of it. In this activity, students have to write some few lines based on five parameters: the greeting, a sentence about the place where they are, one or two sentences about what they are doing or have done, a concluding sentence and a signature.

In Activity #2 “Advertisements”, the definition of *Advertisements* is presented with an example in an image. Students have to write an advertisement where they invite people to drink water. For that, they are suggested with the headline: “The benefits of drinking water”. Besides, learners have to look for an image and write three benefits of drinking water.

In Activity #3 “A Thank You Note”, some images with examples of *Thank you notes* are shown. Learners in this exercise have to imitate one of the examples and write one on their own.

In Activity #4 “Family tree”, students are able to practice the vocabulary about family members and the possessive “‘s”, they are provided with an image of a family tree “The Simpsons Family” and some examples based on it. Besides, as a support for this exercise, a link

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www.geni.com where learners have to register an e-mail address and then start to create their own family trees is included; they can add photos and more details.

In Activity #5 “Countries and Nationalities”, apprentices find out a video where they can remember the countries and nationalities they studied in class. Subsequently, in this exercise they have to answer the questions “Where are you from?” and “What is your nationality? Then, they are provided with two links where they can practice what they learned in some online activities. In the first one, pupils have to drag some letters to write the correct nationality according to the clues given in a sentence. And in the second one, they have to match the countries with the nationalities.

Second, the blog for students in an *Intermediate* level is presented. This blog is provided with different activities with a higher level of complexity considering the previous knowledge students have. In the intermediate blog students will move from writing words and some sentences to write a paragraph. Although there are different types of paragraphs such as narration, exposition, definition, classification, description, process analysis and persuasion. In this level, students will be focused on description and opinion paragraphs. In the first one, apprentices need to write in sequences incorporating adjectives and adverbs what let students practice the previous knowledge. And in the second one, learners are able to state their point of view in a determined topic. To continue, the activities in the blog for learners in an intermediate level are described.

Activity #1 “The best day of my life”, it is the first activity where students are going to write a paragraph on their own. They have to choose the best day of their lives, describe it and

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say why it was their choice. Besides, there is a video with the lyrics of a song named as the activity “The best day of my life”.

In Activity #2 “The last letter” students are going to imagine they are suffering a terminal disease and they have to write the last letter in their lives, it must contain some advice to their love ones or what they would like to do during the last days. For this exercise learners need to include at least 5 modal verbs. Moreover, one example is provided, that is Rosenbergs’ last letter to their sons.

In Activity #3 “Autobiography”, apprentices are going to write their autobiography (90-120 words), it has to contain the most important facts in their lives. For this exercise, students are provided with a link where they can find an example of autobiography. Additionally, it is posted a useful video where learners can follow some steps in order to write an autobiography.

In Activity #4 “Used to”, learners are going to practice the topic *Used to* through the song “Used to” by Daughtry. In the exercise, students are going to find the lyrics of the song with some gaps and they have to fill them with *Used to + Infinitive*. Furthermore, there is a link where some other examples and two extra exercises are found.

And the last activity, Activity #5 “What about your last vacation?” has as its main purpose to reinforce *Past Simple Tense*. Here apprentices are led to watch an animated video and answer seven questions based on it. Subsequently, there is an extra work where students have to post in “a comment” a descriptive paragraph about their last vacation time; for their help they have some questions related to the topic.

Finally, the blog for students in an *Advanced* level is presented. Taking into account that students in this level are able to create, give opinions, compare and interpret situations in a more

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complete way, they are asked to do more complex activities than in the previous blogs. That is why students move from writing just one paragraph to write an essay. For that reason, argumentative and narrative essays particularly are going to be defined. In the first one, students attempt to persuade the reader to their point of view. And in the second one, learners can write about personal experiences in a more conversational style. To continue, the activities for advanced learners are going to be described.

In Activity #1 “Finish the story”, there is a link where students are going to read an incomplete story. Then, learners have to imagine what is next and write the end of the story in 150 words.

In activity #2 “Movie: Easy A” a movie that students are supposed to watch in order to answer four questions is suggested; in the last one learners are intended to write a five-paragraph argumentative essay. Students are going to try to convince the reader of the validity of their opinions taking into account the next statement “Perception is always reality”. The essay must be structured in the next way: First paragraph (Introduction, Thesis statement), second paragraph (Body paragraph, supporting example 1), third paragraph (Body paragraph, supporting example 2), fourth paragraph (Body paragraph, supporting example 3), and fifth paragraph (Conclusions).

In Activity #3 “Colombia beautiful country”, a video named *Colombia the only risk is wanting to stay* it is shown where the beauty of Colombian cities is highlighted. After watching the video, students are going to choose a city to write a five-paragraph argumentative essay where they state why people should visit that place. Besides, they are going to find a useful video about *How to write an essay*.

In Activity #4 “Cartoons and more cartoons”, the Present perfect tense is going to be reviewed. The activity contains some images related to the topic and a video with some scenes from popular TV shows where students can identify the use of Present perfect. Afterward, it is time for learners to create their own cartoons based on the topic they have just studied. For that, an example and a link www.toondoo.com where learners have to create a free account are provided. Then, they have to go to “toons” and choose the option “create a toon”, in this part, students have many tools to make their cartoons unique.

In activity #5 “Cultural differences”, an image with some cultural differences is shown. Then, there is a statement “The way of behaving depends on the place you are” to which students have to say if they agree or disagree. Subsequently, there is a video related to the topic and finally students have to write a five-paragraph narrative essay answering the question “What are the main cultural differences a foreigner can face in Colombia?” Apprentices have to include at least three examples to support their ideas. The structure of the essay is: introduction, three body paragraphs each one with an example and conclusion.

Conclusion

After the research process and the writing part of this paper, it is possible to conclude that the use of blogs as supplementary material could help students to improve their writing skills. In that way, learners could feel motivated with the use of blogs because of the interaction this kind of material offers. Particularly, with the use of the three suggested blogs for beginners, intermediate and advanced learners; apprentices have the possibility of observing the improvement of their writing skills in the second language because the activities proposed in the blogs are divided taking into account the students’ level.

Furthermore, the online feedback that the teacher is able to provide can help to improve significantly the writing skills of the students in terms of grammar and vocabulary. Additionally, with the use of the three blogs, it could be possible to see a substantial improvement in the final version of students' compositions when compared with their corresponding drafts.

Moreover, it is recommended to develop projects which include the use of technological tools to improve writing skills. Technology usage can change the way of teaching, because it offers teachers and students a variety of activities and students' understanding can be assessed through multiple means. Technology helps to make teaching and learning more meaningful and fun. Besides, students and teachers should be trained in the correct use of electronic communication tools such as blogs with the purpose of ameliorating students' writing and developing interactive classes. Also, in students' syllabus, the use and implementation of blogs as supplementary material should be considered in order to improve the process of teaching and learning English.

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Appendix

Writing short texts Beginners.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL writingshorttextsbeginners.weebly.com. The page has a dark background with white and light blue text. At the top, the title "Writing short texts BEGINNERS" is displayed in white. Below the title, there is a navigation menu with "BLOG" highlighted in a light blue box, and "ABOUT" and "CONTACT" in white. A "Contact us" link with an envelope icon is in the top right corner. The main content area features a "WELCOME!" heading in light blue, dated "26/8/2014", and "0 Comments" in white. On the left, there is a cartoon character of a notepad with a face, arms, and legs, pointing upwards. To the right of the character, the text reads: "Welcome to everyone! This blog has been created as a supplementary material with the purpose of helping BEGINNERS to develop their writing skills. This blog is geared towards EFL students from high schools in Nariño. It contains". On the right side of the post, there is a portrait of a woman with long dark hair, identified as "Alejandra Noguera" and "Student at the".

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL writingshorttextsbeginners.weebly.com. The page has a dark background with white and light blue text. The title "Countries and Nationalities" is displayed in white. Below the title, there is an image of various national flags. To the right of the image, the text reads: "Where are you from? What is your nationality? In the next links, you are going to find two interactive activities where you can practice the vocabulary related to Countries and Nationalities in a funny way." Below this text, there are two buttons: "COUNTRIES & NATIONALITIES 1" and "COUNTRIES & NATIONALITIES 2", both in light blue boxes with white text. On the left side of the post, there is a "Hi guys!" heading in light blue, followed by the text: "In the next video you can find some countries and nationalities so you can remember what you studied in class."


writingshorttextsbegginers.weebly.com

ACTIVITY #4
21/8/2014 0 Comments

Family tree

Hi there!
For today I have a question for you: How is your family?

Well, in this activity you will be able to create your own family tree. First, go to the link below, register your e-mail address and



WRITING PART: What are the relationships between the family members?

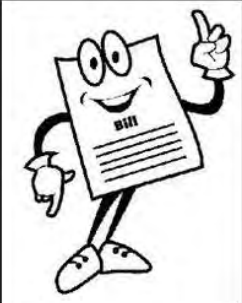
Writing short texts Intermediate.

writingshorttextsintermediate.weebly.com


Writing short texts INTERMEDIATE

[BLOG](#) [ABOUT](#) [CONTACT](#)

WELCOME!
9/9/2014 0 Comments



Welcome to everyone!
This blog has been created as a supplementary material with the purpose of helping students in an INTERMEDIATE level to develop their writing skills. This blog is geared towards EFL students from high schools in Nariño. It contains some



Alejandra Noguera
Student at the

Procesando solicitud...

writingshorttextsintermediate.weebly.com


USED TO

Hi there!
In this activity you are going to practice the topic you studied in class: **USED TO.**

Let's listen to the song and fill in the gaps with **USED TO + INFINITIVE.**

For more information about **USED TO.** Click on:

Daughtry - Used To



0:00 / 3:28

1. Listen to the song and fill in the gaps with **USED TO + INFINITIVE.**

USED TO (Daughtry)

You _____ to me like:	We never thought.
I was the only one around.	We _____
You _____ on me like	At least there's you, and at least
The only other choice was falling	there's me.
down.	Can we get this back?
You _____ with me like.	Can we get this back so we can get to


writingshorttextsintermediate.weebly.com

What about your last vacation?

Hello everybody!
In this activity you are going to reinforce "Past simple" tense.

Watch the video and answer the next questions:

Past simple animated



0:00 / 1:56

1. Did Amy go on a trip?
2. Where did she go?
3. How did she get there?
4. Did the trip take long? Yes/No Why?
5. Where did she stay?

Extra work:
After answering the questions of the video. In a comment write a paragraph about your last vacation time. Where did you go? What did you do? How did you get there? and more. Don't forget to include


Writing short texts Advanced.

writingshorttextsadvanced.weebly.com


Writing short texts ADVANCED

BLOG ABOUT CONTACT

WELCOME!
1/13/2015 0 Comments



Welcome to everyone!
This blog has been created as a supplementary material with the purpose of helping students in an ADVANCED level to develop their writing skills. This blog is geared




Alejandra Noguera
Student at the

Taken from: www.hbrn.ca

writingshorttextsadvanced.weebly.com

Movie: Easy A



Fun, funny and remarkably smart!
Emma Stone is hilarious!
Easy A is easy to love!
Brilliant!
Wickedly funny!
An Easy A+!

A COMEDY ABOUT A GOOD GIRL, A SMALL FAVER, AND A BIG RUMOR

Taken from: www.comerblogaramar.com.br

Hello everybody!
In this second activity you are going to watch a movie "Easy A" and you have to answer the next questions. Enjoy it!

QUESTIONS

1. What is the plot?
2. What are the main characters? Describe them.
3. Did you like the movie? Yes/ No why?
4. Write a 5 paragraphs argumentative essay


To watch the movie online click on the next button:

writingshorttextsadvanced.weebly.com

Cartoons and more cartoons!

After studying Present Perfect in the class, let's check the next activity.

But if you still have doubts about the use of this tense, the next video is for you:



In this activity you are going to create a **CARTOON** where you use Present Perfect tense.

First, you have to create a free account in:

Practice the Present Perfect with scenes from TV shows

