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# Hot Blogging: Exploring English Writing Experiences of Undergraduate Students in China

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Hot Blogging: Exploring English Writing Experiences of Undergraduate Students in China

by

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A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

Little investigation has been conducted in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) regarding writing experiences through blogs. This study explores students' perceptions and experiences of using blogs in EFL writing in China. It draws upon Vygotsky's constructivist theory and sociocultural theory in language learning. Thirty-one undergraduate students with English majors from a Chinese university participated in the study. Data for the study were collected from students' blog and microblog entries, two questionnaires administered at the beginning and the end of the blog project, individual interviews, and informal conversations. Results indicate students reported that even though they were aware that English writing is an important component in the English exams and it is one of their weakest skills, they did not spend enough time on it. They found that the exam-oriented nature of the writing tasks on the blog designed by the researcher were not stimulating. They preferred to write about their personal feelings and post comments about current events on their microblogs rather than academic writing on their blogs. They created a new concept of "Anywhere, anytime English learning." This means they preferred to share their personal comments on microblogs on their smart phones. Pedagogical implications of using blogs and microblogs to practice writing outside the classroom are discussed.

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Finally, gratitude goes to all the participating students of the present study, without which this research would be impossible.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate my Master thesis to my family and many friends. A special feeling of gratitude to my loving parents, Guiqing Li and Xia Wei who have been supporting me unconditionally during the entire program.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my friends who supported me throughout the process. I will always appreciate all they have done. I dedicate this work and give special thanks to my best friend Virak Mao for being there for me as my best cheerleader.

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## **Epigraph**

*“You cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him find it within  
himself.”*

— Galileo Galilei

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1 Background to the study**

#### **1.1.1 Blogging in an E-learning Environment**

Recently information technology has advanced extensively (Warschauer, Black & Chou, 2010) and its potential for use in English language instruction is limitless. Today there are technological solutions to complement the learning of all four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. In recent years there has been a rapid growth in awareness of social media, such as blogging, Twitter, Facebook and Wikis. These new types of communication tools have changed the way people access and share information (West, 2012). In education they are used as e-learning tools to allow people to share opinions, thoughts, experiences and views with other users. Blogging is considered one of the most utilized online activities among social media (Kang, Bonk & Kim, 2011). The word “blog” gets its abbreviation from the words “web log”. Campbell (2003) defines a blog as an online journal where users can post their personal ideas and thoughts as long as they have an Internet connection. Blogs, as online personal journals that are frequently updated, have existed since 1998 (Wu, 2005). According to *Webopedia*, blog is defined as follows: “Short for web log, a blog is a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.” People without any programming experience can easily update and publish journals on their personal website (Blood, 2000). Users can not only post written documents, but also pictures, audio and video documents. Since a blog is an open area and platform, anybody can read the posts and respond to the content.

Blogging is believed to have a huge potential to enhance learners' communication, interaction, collaboration, personal reflection and the development of critical thinking and writing skills (Joshi & Chugh 2008; Li, 2009). The interactive characteristic of posts enables multidirectional communication among educators and students (Diaz, 2009; Kanniah & Krish, 2010; Kim, 2008; West, 2012). For example, Hsu and Wang (2010), in their research conducted in a university in the United States, reported that blogging has a positive impact on college students' reading comprehension and learning motivation. Similarly, in a study of the use of blogging as a teaching and learning tool in the online health education classroom, blogging was found to "increase students' interaction, engagement and feelings of connectedness with peers in the online classroom" (Oomen-early & Burke, 2007, p.190). Furthermore, in Lee's (2010) study, advanced-level university students were involved in a blogging project which used blogs as out-of-class assignments, guided by assigned task-based activities. This project aimed to develop learners' language competence and enhance their abilities to use the target language. The result of this study indicated that blogging had a positive impact on learners' target language writing skills and language accuracy under the instructions. However, blogging is not widely used in China's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education and the domestic researches in this area are not as many as in developed countries. In the traditional EFL classroom, both teachers and students tend to use the grammar-translation method and blogging is rarely used in university writing classes. Therefore, it is necessary to explore students' perception of the use of blogging in their English learning.

### ***1.1.2 The Use of Microblogging in Education***

As another feature of Web 2.0, microblogging has become more and more popular in the online environment since 2006. It is a platform where people communicate by writing short

messages, which allows its users to follow other people and be followed by others (Ebner et al, 2010). The use of microblogging in higher education is still in its infancy (Betrus, 2012).

Microblogging facilities are considered to be used in three ways: seeking information, sharing information and online friendship-wide relationships (Java et al., 2007). With the advantage of giving immediate feedback through a mobile device, microblogging is believed to have great potential in education. Dai and Yao (2010) argued that microblogging can enhance the interaction between teachers and students to promote collaborative learning by creating a collaborative learning environment with the advantage of instantaneous feedback. Grosseck and Holotescu (2008) concluded that the potential educational uses of Twitter, which is considered one of the most popular microblogging systems in western culture, include building in-class or outside-class learning community, exploring collaborative writing, collecting information, facilitating virtual classroom discussion, and so on. One of the few empirical studies exploring the effects of Twitter as an instant feedback tool during class was conducted by Prestrige (2014) with 180 pre-service teachers. He investigated the types of interaction between lecturers and students when using Twitter during the course and explored the students' attitudes toward Twitter as a learning tool. Prestrige (2014) found that Twitter extended student-student and student-teacher interaction when used as an instant feedback tool during class, but was perceived by the students as a distraction to listening and taking notes. Additionally, Twitter was also examined by other researchers as a tool to support informal learning beyond the classroom (Ebner et al., 2010; Kassens-Noor, 2012) and proved to have great potential for informal learning outside of the classroom, with fewer constraints and improved student engagement in the learning process.

In China the most popular microblogging system is known as Weibo. Although Weibo has a large number of users, it is not widely used in education and therefore still under-experienced. However, whether in the developed countries or in China, microblogging is mostly used as a communication tool for learning instead of a space for students' writing practice.

### **1.1.3 *China's EFL Education***

In the 1950s, only 50 universities in China had English Language as a major. According to the State Statistics Bureau, by the year 2014, 24 million students are learning English in the universities. However, with the increase in English education, China's higher education has also been through profound reforms during the past 60 years, from recovering and exploring to the improving of the entire system. In the history of China's English education, exam-oriented instruction has been the main method. Considering the present situation in higher education and society, the current status will probably not change in a short time. Led by the exam-oriented approach, English education in China seems to have misunderstandings regarding language learning focuses. Long-term neglect of the development of comprehensive ability in English created a flood of students who are only proficient in writing examinations. In approximately the last 10 years, people started thinking about moving from the exam-oriented method, since many Chinese EFL students fail at speaking, listening or even writing proper English. Fortunately, although the formation of this long-term educational imbalance cannot be changed any time soon, China's English educators and public opinion have already paid attention to this issue. Specifically, in the English classroom clear and significant adjustments in teaching methods have been made. The most obvious change is the transference from a teacher-centered to a student-centered mode. Gradually, students start to take over the leading role in the English classroom and participate more and more in class activities. However, the student-centered teaching and

learning approach is influenced by exams and most class activities are designed to focus on the exams.

Since 2013, great changes have taken place in the Chinese College Entrance Examination. The new reform will start next year, first in Beijing. According to the new policy, the English exam will not be conducted concurrently with the other subjects such as math and Chinese and the full mark will be reduced from 150 to 100. Students are allowed to take the English exam twice in one year and use the highest score into the total score of the final College Entrance Examination. In the new exam, reading and writing comprises 70% of the total score and listening unprecedentedly accounts for as high as 30%. According to the reform program, the country is making an effort to make English education change from an exam-oriented approach to the direction of communication in real life, such as listening, writing and reading. In 2013, Sang Jinlong, the vice president of Beijing Research Institute of Education Science, indicated in an interview that reducing the proportion of English in the College Entrance Examination does not mean reducing the degree of difficulty or importance of English, but reducing the impact that the exam-oriented mode on China's English education for so many years. Furthermore, the government hopes to improve the quality of China's English education to produce an essential leap through this new policy. Now, according to this change, local education institutes will probably make corresponding adjustments to fit the new requirements of the exam. Therefore, how to make changes from the grammar-translation method and how to update the teaching and learning material now become the new topics which need to be discussed.

Researchers in China and other countries have spent many years studying China's English education by developing new methods and putting them into practice. Basically, there are four main components of English education in China: listening, speaking, reading and

writing. Recent research (Zeng, 2010) suggests that writing is the most difficult aspect of learning English for students. English writing seems to be a hard job for the students and it may directly influence their confidence in writing tasks or even affect their holistic English learning experience. Another factor that relates to students' attitudes to writing English is that most of them do not like the topics given by their teachers (Zeng, 2010). That may be why they show little interest in these topics and do not know what to write. Furthermore, the way that teachers provide feedback also influences their performance in writing English. Overall, the major problems of China's English writing education lie with both students and teachers. Chinese students seem to rely too much on teachers during their learning, without enough practice of self-learning or peer activities. Actually, this is very common in teacher-centered English classrooms.

In Chinese universities, English writing education has been experiencing a transition from the product-oriented approach to the process-oriented approach (Zeng, 2010). According to Badger and White (2000), learning to write generally has four stages: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing and free writing. The product approach focuses on the compositions as final products of writing tasks, which is considered to be controlled writing. In this approach, writing skills will be evaluated according to the timed production of grammatically and lexically accurate texts (Porto, 2001). Students are given a topic and start their writing with instruction from their teacher. They are required to write individually and teachers will give comments later. On the other hand, the process approach focuses more on the writing process and places emphasis on free writing. The process of composing usually involves planning, prewriting, teacher oral and written feedback, peer review, revision, multiple drafts, and editing. In this approach, writing is considered to be a self-discovery process with self-expression and idea-forming activities (Nunan, 1991). In other words, writing is a process of discovering and

expressing one's personal experiences. The process-oriented approach offers more space for students to build their own understanding of writing and is good for their self-development, but it also needs necessary instruction from teachers to make it effective. However, changing from the product-oriented approach to a process-oriented approach still has a long way to go for Chinese EFL education and it needs assistance from educational reform and technology. Meanwhile, students' and teachers' acceptance of this change should be taken into consideration at the same time. However, a different voice, that of Luo (2002), continues to assert that the product approach should be more effective than the process approach in China's EFL classroom because of the exam-oriented learning background. In fact, in the actual teaching of English writing, both the product approach and the process approach are applied in the classroom and influenced by the traditional teaching model. The product approach still takes a relatively dominant place in curriculum designs.

There are two criterion-referenced English language tests in China's universities—CET (College English Test) and TEM (Test for English Major). The purpose of CET and TEM is to measure the English proficiency of undergraduate students and to examine whether students meet the required levels of English language abilities as specified in the National College English Teaching Syllabus (Jin & Fan, 2011). In the English exams, writing performance is evaluated based on the criteria of content (relevance and completeness) and language (grammar, vocabulary, and appropriateness) which comprises 15%-20% of the total scores in the exams (Jin & Fan, 2011). Obviously, writing, which is supposed to be one of the main subjects in English learning, is one of the most important aspects of the English tests. CET and TEM are always considered to be college students' biggest source of pressure when they learn English, because some schools take the pass rate of these tests as the only standard to measure students' English

proficiency level and a university's English educational level (Huang, 2010) and the score of these tests will probably influence students' future careers. Huang (2010) indicated that under the pressure of examinations, neither teachers nor students have enough time and energy to develop students' comprehensive English language skills.

## **1.2 Purpose of Inquiry**

Little investigation has been conducted into the field of EFL regarding writing experiences through blogs. This study investigates how blogging affects undergraduate students' English writing in China. It examines advantages and disadvantages of using blogs as an English learning tool. The study aims to explore whether blogging can be used as a new tool for EFL students' independent study and peer-collaboration. While the small sample size in this study will not allow for generalizability of the results, the findings from this research could provide an initial assessment of students' experience in using blogging or microblogging as an English learning tool. This study could also serve as a springboard for a follow-up study where blogging or microblogging is implemented in the EFL writing class.

## **1.3 The Research Questions**

The following research questions guide the present study.

1. How do students' perceptions of using blogs influence their experiences in their English writing?
2. How does blogging affect students' writing and collaboration?

## **1.4 Significance**

This research will provide opportunities for participating undergraduate students to practice their English writing outside of the classroom. This study could have a potential to enhance students' communication, interaction, and collaboration using the interactive quality of

posts in blogging. Furthermore, this is a quality contribution to the examination of English writing experiences of undergraduate students using blogs in China, a viewpoint that is often missing in the literature. Students' voices and their perceptions of their use of blogging in developed countries are well studied (Bakar, 2009; Dippold, 2009; Ebner et al, 2010; Jones, 2007, etc.). It is important to explore students' perceptions in developing countries that differ from the developed world in terms of social, economic, cultural, and educational structures. Result of this study will provide insights into the use of educational blogs, educational technology, and China's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in higher education. In addition, the research has the potential to inform stakeholders in the EFL environment, not only in China but also in developed countries, about effective practices and challenges associated with the use of blogs in EFL education. The research could help curriculum design and improvement of the use of educational blogs to support students' writing.

## **1.5 Theoretical Perspective**

### **1.5.1 *Constructivism***

This study draws upon Vygotsky's social constructivist theory. Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, states that human cognitive development, including speech, language, thinking and other high-level functioning takes place in a social context. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the active role that students play in acquiring knowledge and that the social construction of knowledge has been an important principle in social-cultural theory because of the constructivist movement in recent cognitive psychology. Although there are theoretical differences between the Western-oriented "progressive movement" and "reform pedagogy" on the one hand, and East European "social-cultural theory" on the other, they share such key concepts as "reconstruction". These theories of such constructivist icons as Vygotsky, Bruner,

Geertz, Piaget and Dewey have achieved a prominent place in thinking about the design of educational programmers (Terwel, 1999).

Vygotsky (1978) also argues that psychological processes developed as a result of internationalization of culturally organized interactions. Furthermore, the interaction with a mature member links the social to individual functioning (Mehan, 1981). According to Sivan (1986, p.6), the role of interpersonal relations should be emphasized in any discussion of motivation within a social constructivist perspective. There are three areas where interpersonal relations play an important role: (a) integrating instruction and motivation, (b) achieving motivational competence, (c) meeting students' cognitive and affective needs at their level.

Vygotsky (1978) believes that isolated learning cannot lead to cognitive development. He firmly maintain that interaction is a prerequisite to learning and cognitive development, and so do some other social constructivists, such as Bruffee (1986) and later Wertsch (1991). All emphasized the primacy of social interaction as the driving force and prerequisite to individuals' cognitive development through internalization of ideas encountered in the socio-cultural realm (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997).

Collaborative constructivism, which emphasizes sharing and interaction (Slavin, 1990), adds another dimension to the constructivism learning theory. Learning emerges through shared understanding and the construction of shared understanding through interaction with others (Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995). As suggested by Alavi (1994) and others, collaborative activities enhance learning by allowing individuals to exercise, verify, solidify and improve their mental models through the interaction with others to share their thoughts, ideas, and information.

### **1.5.2 Blogs' Support for Collaborative Learning**

Based on the collaborative constructivist model, learning is considered to be more effective through interaction and cooperation with others rather than through individual work (Du & Wegner, 2005). Several studies have shown that collaborative learning results in better learning outcomes compared with individual-oriented learning (Alavi et al, 1995; Piccoli et al, 2001; Wu et al, 2004). Blogs, which have collaboration-supporting features such as web publishing, instant feedback and a public online environment, can be a convenient and effective platform for informal and comparative conversation and interaction among students and instructors (Du & Wagner, 2005). According to Wagner and Bolloju (2004), blogs, as a relatively new knowledge-sharing technology, create a useful medium for knowledge sharing and interaction at web speed. Du and Wagner (2005) put forward several ways that blogs offer students opportunities to actively participate in collaborative learning, such as sharing information and communicating with other students and updating their own ideas.

In Vygotsky's (1962) view, language develops from social interactions for the purpose communication and he also views interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies (vygotsky, 1978). Considering these theories, for English language learning and practice, blogs are tools that can “enhance learning by serving as a convenient ‘conversational’ medium for students to interact and share their learning experience (Du & Wagner, 2005, p.3)”.

### **1.5.3 Writing as a Social Practice**

This study also draws on socio-cultural theory of language learning and views writing as a social practice. According to Halliday (1999), language is a resource that people use to create meaning. The meanings are socially and culturally constructed. This view is useful for the present study in understanding undergraduate students' experiences and perceptions of using

blogs in EFL writing. According to Cumming (1998), “writing” refers not only to text in written script but also to the acts of thinking, composing, and encoding language into such text; these acts also necessarily entail discourse interactions within a socio-cultural context. Therefore, learning to write academically is not only a matter of mastering writing skills; it is also a process of becoming socialized into the academic discourse community (Spack, 1997). This belief about writing derives from the social constructionist approach, best represented by Vygotsky’s theories, especially his emphasis on the dialogic and intertextual nature of literacy (see Johns, 1990, for details). Dialogism, based on the work of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, views language as “a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers” (Volosinove, 1929, p. 98). From this perspective, any utterance is based on “echoes and reverberations of other utterance to which it is related by the communality” of communication (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 91). The meaning of an utterance is dependent upon socio-ideological consciousness among thousands of dialogical threads (Bakhtin, 1981). Many blogs allow a high degree of dialogic interchange between author and audience previously unattainable in print. To better understand students’ performance in blogging, I examine students’ blog entries for examples of intertextuality. Fairclough (1992, as cited in Lewis & Ketter, 2004) defined intertextuality as “the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth” (p. 84). I am interested in determining the ways in which students mirror, in their blogs, other social languages into their pieces.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

E-learning is an online environment in which the student interacts with electronic media to learn a skill or topic (Alberta Education, 2006, p.10). Differing from the traditional classroom, e-learning has a much larger load of information and makes distance learning more convenient. Moreover, e-learning also creates various communicating platforms by using social networking for its users to share information. It is a revolution in education, including English language learning. On this e-learning platform the student's role changes from a "lonely learner" outside of the classroom to an active one that communicates with other learners (Bakar, 2009). Bakar (2009) indicated that there are three different levels of interactions: conceptualization (interacting with concepts), constructions (interacting with tasks), and dialogue (interacting with people). With these interactions, an e-social learning environment is created. Blogging is one effective way of putting an e-learning environment into practice by using social networking, since the popularity of collaborative technology is a new approach for the users to express and share their thoughts with the public. In recent years, blogging has been gaining attention in the teaching and learning environment, whereby many educators consider that blogs can be used as a significant writing tool (Brown, 2004).

### **2.2 E-learning in Higher Education**

#### **2.2.1 *Definition of E-learning***

E-learning first started in the early 1960s by Stanford University psychology professors Patrick Suppes and Richard C. Atkinson in their experiments with using computers to teach math and reading to young children in elementary schools. Alberta Education (2006) defined e-

learning as a learning situation in which the student learns a skill or topic through electronic media. In this definition, electronic media are limited to the videodisc, video tapes or audiotapes. However, e-learning is much more than that; it is “covering a wide set of applications and processes, such as web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms and digital collaboration” (Mason & Rennie, 2006, p. 14). Actually, most of time e-learning is considered to emphasize communication technology, which encompasses training, education, just-in time information, and communication (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Furthermore, e-learning “can cover a spectrum of activities from supporting learning, to blended learning..., to learning that is delivered entirely online. E-learning is no longer simply associated with distance or remote learning, but forms part of a conscious choice of the best and most appropriate ways of promoting effective learning” (Pachler & Daly, 2011, p. 15).

### ***2.2.2 E-learning and Social Networking***

Social networking was defined as “the practice of expanding knowledge by making connections with individuals of similar interests”(Gunawardena, et al, 2009, p.4), which was supported by social media applications for social interaction and information sharing (Hung & Yuen, 2010). Actually, social networking has been supporting e-learning as a communication tool for distance learning or expanding learning space by providing online learning space, such as blogs and forums. Rennie and Morrison (2013) conclude that the benefits of social networks to their users are: turning passive learning into active engagement; easily providing fresh information and learning content; enhancing collaborative work through Internet tools; motivating young people to learn by providing shared community and inter-group communication. The positive feedback from students who used social networks in their learning was considered to be highly related to the function of their information sharing and interaction

(Hung & Yuen, 2010). Facebook, one of the most popular social networks, was believed to not only improve communication among the student users but also the interaction between students and instructors, because this is a platform where higher education professionals can “meet their students” (Wang, 2013, p.191). Simultaneously, the development of social networking enhanced its use among today’s college students and there was an increasing number of instructors starting to implement social networking in higher education (Brady et al, 2010). However, compared to other e-learning tools, social networks seemed to transfer entertainment to an educational purpose. Although social networks had the advantage of attracting students to engage in learning activities, Rennie and Morrison (2013) questioned whether or not social networking had real learning value as an informal learning tool. Similarly, there were also students who felt confused about the information online and they did not know what counted as real knowledge in the social network learning environment (Hung & Yuen, 2010).

### ***2.2.3 E-learning Development in Higher Education***

In China, universities first began developing e-learning systems in the second half of the 1990s with the rapid developments in electronic communication. According to Gilson (2006), the development of e-learning programs in China was promoted by several events: 1) In February 1996, the President of Tsinghua University, Wang Dazhong, first put forward a plan for the expansion of e-learning. In the same year, Tsinghua University implemented a blueprint for e-learning called “Modernization of Long-Distance Education Project Proposal”. 2) In 1998, development was put forward at the most important event – the National People’s Congress – as a significant topic for China’s modern education. Meanwhile, people started to realize that the old traditional learning mode could not meet the needs of student learning any more. Moreover, the old method of distance education could not satisfy “the demands of social development, the

need to establish a lifelong learning system and the requirements of a learning society” (Gilson, 2006, p. 2.). By the autumn of 2000, Web Institutes were well established with full autonomy for recruiting students and offering degrees such as B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. (Gilson, 2006).

Meanwhile, according to 2005 data from China Network Information Center (CNNIC), less than 10% of the total population are currently Internet users, which means there is still much room for an increase in Chinese Internet use and also for e-learning education. However, with the development of e-learning programs, some other problems emerged, such as a lack of standards for management and insufficient connectivity.

Now e-learning in China’s higher education has already developed to a high degree, but compared with developed countries, it still has a long way to go. One aspect that deserves to be noticed is that e-learning in China is mostly led by the government and supported by the same social network among some pilot universities, which is highly limited. So this present research tries to put e-learning theories and methods in the common classroom and make it accessible to all the users with the help of social networking, such as blogs. Since e-learning has the ability to provide an “Anytime, Anywhere, Any Curriculum” learning environment for individuals, educators in China should not limit themselves to only using e-learning as a distance education tool. It can be applied both in and out of the classroom as a common teaching and learning tool.

## **2.3 Approaches to E-learning Services**

### **2.3.1 Computer-based Learning (CBL)**

E-learning services have evolved since computers were first used in education. Computer-based learning refers to the use of computers as a key component in the educational area. It also refers to learning by using communication tools and different media through a computer. Besides, “computer-based learning instructional designs vary in configuration (e.g.

discussion board or tutorial), instructional method (e.g. case-based learning, personalized feedback, or simulation), and presentation (e.g. screen layout, hyperlinks, or multimedia)” (Cook, 2005, p.541).

### ***2.3.2 Computer-supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL)***

Computer-supported collaborative learning is one of the most promising innovations to improve teaching and learning with the help of modern information communication technology. It consists of “highly interactive communication tools, including electronic mail, electronic bulletin boards, asynchronous multimedia notebooks, remote screen-sharing, and desktop video teleconferencing” (Sundararajan, 2009), and has become common in modern classrooms. Blogs, wikis, and Google Docs are commonly used CSCL media within the teaching community. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) increases the opportunity for interactive and individualized learning, making it possible for students to progress at their own pace, focus on their personal specific needs, and connect better with authentic materials (Gilakjani, Ismail & Ahmadi, 2011).

One of the most common approaches to CSCL is collaborative writing. Though the final product can be anything from a research paper, a Wikipedia entry, or a short story, the process of planning and writing together encourages students to express their ideas and develop a group understanding of the subject matter.

Working in collaborative-writing environments may be restrictive and difficult for some, while liberating and easy for others. Blogs, as tools, combine free writing with communication tools and can be used to share work, form ideas, and write synchronously and it also helps collaborative writing to be more complex than those produced by individuals.

## **2.4 China's Current EFL Education in Higher Education**

For a long time, English education has been conducted as both foreign language and second language learning in China because of its wide use and global impact (Lin, 2013). Plenty of researchers have already discussed the importance of English in China's higher education and its influence on the society, but at the same time some problems also emerged with the rapid development of China's English education (Lin, 2013; Shu, 2004; Shu, 2006; Xue, 2010, etc.). Lin (2013, p.292) pointed out that the main current problems include: outdated teaching and learning methods; blindly following the foreign educational trend without considering one's own situation; lack of educational theories and the ability to summarize experience; English teachers' quality still needs to be improved. Similarly, Xue (2010) also indicated that the main questions regarding China's current EFL education should focus on the aspects of teaching content, teaching method and teaching quality. Furthermore, she emphasized that the current English teaching strategies and learning content are disconnected from real life and cannot stimulate students' interest in English learning (p. 259).

At the same time, Xinjing Newspaper (新京报) published a report on March 3, 2014 about students' attitudes toward English learning in the universities in China. In this report, English was considered to be the most disappointing subject at the university. Most interviewees indicated that they don't like college English because it is boring and not practical and they also think their English level did not improve in university.

Although university English education aims at improving the students' comprehension, but from a practical point of view, achieving this goal is still a long way to go and the current teaching mode and exam-oriented learning mode also create obstacles to develop students' practical ability.

In You's (2004) study, she made a specific description about an EFL writing class in China. This research is outdated, but the description still reflects some of the problems in the EFL writing classroom. In her observation of the writing class, the teacher was introducing to her students the "model essay" from the exams and encouraging them to use the same fixed format in their writing. "Apparently, she already had the 'correct' writing in her mind before she asked her students to write" (You, 2004, p.101). The teacher also said to the students:

*"Students with lower proficiency should try to memorize some model writings, so you can write with much more ease. There are 34 model writings in this booklet. It would be better for you if you could memorize all of them."*

You (2004) reported that the teacher admitted that if there was no pressure from the exam, her teaching content would be different. Most teachers observed during her study admitted that they knew about the process approach but they could not actually use it in their teaching because they had to follow the exam and teach "exam writing."

Actually, "exam writing", which most people call "writing templates", are still popular in EFL writing at present (Sun, 2014; Zhang, 2012). Zhang (2012) pointed out the advantages of templates, such as improving student writing in a short time, but also indicated that real English writing could not be learned as "fast food" and it needed plenty practice to build the language foundation. Nowadays, writing with templates is widely accepted by the Chinese EFL learner and provides them with obvious progress in the exams. However, I think the disadvantages of template writing will eventually show up in their future academic English writing if the students depend on it too much.

The teaching content of the EFL writing class is essentially based on the actual needs of the current semester. For example, during the TEM exam semesters, writing class mainly

focuses on exam-writing practice and then turns to teaching thesis writing to help the students prepare their final paper. Appendix A is an English writing teacher's course plan for the semester on thesis writing.

## **2.5 Blogs, Microblogs and EFL Writing**

### **2.5.1 Features of Blogs**

The first generation of blogs had the features of automatic date-stamping for each post, an archive of past posts by date or theme, a way for readers to comment on each post and a link area (Dieu, 2004, p. 27). Now blogs have expanded function with the development of social media and the number of users is still increasing (Rettberg, 2013). In language teaching and learning, blogs can be used as a tool for students to be creative in their writing. According to Campbell (2003), blogs are used in three different ways for different purposes: tutor blogs, learner blogs and class blogs. A tutor blog is used by the instructor to update learning material and assign tasks. A learner blog is used by students to write and communicate. A class blog is more like an online classroom where both teachers and students can share information and perform learning and teaching activities. According to this typology, using blogging in the English learning classroom is considered to be a student-oriented learning mode. There is much more room for the students to control their own English writing practice through this way of learning.

In China, one of the most popular social media is Renren (人人网), known as Xiaonei Net (校内网) at the first time. It was first introduced in 2005 and now has 210 million users by the end of March, 2014. Just like Facebook but more functional than Facebook, Renren aims to stay up-to-date in the fast-growing mobile space and cater to college students (Li, 2011; Niu et al. 2013). In the Renren online community, users can set up their own blogs and share with friends.

Since first founded, Renren has added more functions. One of the functions used in this research is building a private blogging group in which information will only be shared among members. This function greatly protects users' privacy.

### **2.5.2 Blogging in EFL Writing**

In recent years, many studies have been done on the use of blogs in educational contexts (Kim, 2008; Lin et al., 2006). With the use of blogs, student bloggers are able to create an interactive social learning environment where they can learn from the ideas of others and share knowledge resources (Du & Wagner, 2007). Prior research has identified the potential of blogs to enhance students' learning (Churchill, 2009; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Shim & Guo, 2009; Xie et al, 2008). Meanwhile, many researchers who studied the use of blogs in the higher education EFL classroom have drawn interesting conclusions, such as the fact that students treat writing more seriously when writing a blog (Wu, 2006); blogging enhances writing performance (Campbell, 2003; Kennedy, 2003); using blogs improves the content of the students' writing (Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010).

In higher education, blogs have been used as a tool for collaboration and self-reflection on course content (Xie & Sharma, 2005), peer feedback (Cooper & Boddington, 2005) and as a resource bank (Martindale & Wiley, 2005). The importance of peer review on interacting and collaborating is emphasized by many researchers. Liu and Carless (2006, p. 280) described peer review as "a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards." Peer feedback is useful for both of the receiver and provider, as it allows students to develop criticality and the ability to judge work according to given standards, an ability which can then be transferred to their own work (Dippold, 2009). Rolliston (2005) suggests that in the L2 writing class, one of the main advantages of peer review is that students

write for an audience and that writers are encouraged “to formulate her writing in line with the characteristics and demands of the reader” (p.25). Liou (2010), a professor at Tsinghua University, discussed in a case study English blog writing by 25 third-year English-major college students. In his research, he explained how the use of blogs can facilitate students’ writing and give feedback to each other. The findings show that over 90% of the participants reported that peer review activity during the collaborative composing process was helpful in the blogging environment and 84% of them thought the collaborative essay was more effective than individual work. Most participants believe that the blogging environment is able to support collaborative learning for EFL writing. Vurdien (2011) highlighted the effectiveness of the use of blogs in providing opportunities for students’ interaction beyond the classroom. In his research, most participants had a positive attitude towards using blogging as a communication tool for peer feedback and he also discussed the possibility of blogs being utilized as a learning tool outside of the classroom. Vurdien (2011) stressed the significant meaning of blogs in collaborative learning by offering opportunities for students to interact and express their views on their peers’ blogs.

From the perspective of the students, writing a blog means they are showing their work to the public. They have to be more careful during the writing and check it seriously after writing. In an article describing how blogs are integrated with educational activity as resources both for the students and teachers, Oravec (2002) claimed that blog development can “empower students to become more analytical and critical” (p. 618). Bakar and Ismail’s (2009) study indicated that traditional foreign language writing classes always bring huge pressure on the students with time limits and sometimes their low language proficiency makes it difficult for students to finish their writing. Bakar and Ismail (2009) also examined students’ attitude and perspective about using blogs as an online writing platform. In their research, when comparing writing on blogs with

writing on paper, most students indicated that they preferred writing on a blog to writing on paper. One of the reasons is that they thought that they were more creative during blogging, because in the online environment they could not only write text but also include pictures, video clips and sounds. Some students also pointed out that they felt more confident in their blog writing compared to writing on paper. Baker and Ismail also mentioned that from their observation of the participant students' writing, they noticed that their work is longer than what they write on paper and even their sentence structures became more complex. However, in their research, there were some students who thought that they could express themselves comfortably on a blog but they did not find that blogs helped them improve their writing.

### ***2.5.3 Features of Microblogs***

In 2006 a new form of blogging was created, known as microblogging (Weibo, 微博). Microblogging is a Web2.0 technology and a new form of blogging which allows the users to publish brief online text updates (Dai & Yao, 2010). McFedries (2007, p.84) provided the following definition: “A microblog can be seen as a weblog that is restricted to 140 characters per post but is enhanced with social networking facilities”. Microblogging facilities can be used in three ways: information sharing, information seeking, and friendship-wide relationships (Java et al, 2007). Ebner and Schiefner (2008) also stated that the use of microblogging for fast exchange between people with similar interests is highly valuable.

In the developed countries, the most popular microblogging platform is Twitter, which was introduced in 2006 and in China, people are using Weibo (微博) instead of Twitter. Since first founded in 2009, three years after Twitter, Weibo already has almost 540 million users in China by the end of 2013 and it is also very popular among university students.

The main features of microblogs are sharing information anytime and anywhere, updating rapidly, and using search functions (Zhang, 2010). Now with the easy access to smart phones, microblogging is even more flexible. Considering its popularity and functionality, some researchers suggested using microblogging in the education area as a teaching and learning tool (Dai & Yao, 2010; Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008; Wang et al, 2010).

#### **2.5.4 Microblogging in EFL Writing**

Microblogging, mostly used by people with Twitter or Weibo systems, has been applied in the educational field. Most researches focused on its function of being a communication tool in or out of the classroom (Borau et al, 2009; Domizi, 2013; Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008; Hsu & Ching, 2012; Lowe & Laffey, 2011; Palmer, 2013; Yolcu, 2013; Zhang, 2010;). However, as a social network where people write and post short writings, microblogging has not been explored as a space for EFL writing yet. Moreover, former research also reported that students were holding a positive attitude about using microblogging during their learning and it seemed that microblogging stimulated students' learning enthusiasm to a certain extent (Prestridge, 2014; Zhang, 2010). Therefore, I believe that microblogging may have the potential to affect EFL students' English writing experience as well.

#### **2.6 Language Mixing, Code-switching, Word Choice in EFL Writing**

How languages are used online has always been an interesting topic to bilingual researchers, since the new media presents possibilities for change (Hinrichs, 2006; Laroussi, 2011; Marley, 2011; Sebba et al, 2011). There are some studies reporting that some EFL Internet users sometimes mixed English with another language in their writing because of the restrictions of their spoken context (Lee, 2007; Warschauer et al, 2007). Lee and Barton (2012) conducted a study on how EFL Internet users wrote in English on a social network platform called Flickr. In

their research, the fact of English co-existing with other languages in the writings was common. Meanwhile, they found out that the methods those participants used for code alternating changed all the time and were also different among the individuals. Meanwhile, the choice of language was also considered to be related to the purpose of social interaction in an international online environment. Pavlenko (2007) indicated that there was a preference of language when bilingual or multilingual speakers expressed certain things. She concluded that related studies from 1949 to 1998 and the findings of former researchers showed that the bilingual and multilingual speakers preferred to use L1 for triggered feelings and switched to L2 for taboo topics, such as swearwords and an intimate relationship. Lee and Barton (2012) also mentioned that their participants' language choice was partly influenced by their potential audience on Flickr. So for EFL speakers, the language used in their writings may be affected by their readers and their own emotion preference as well, and this is where code-switching appears in the EFL writing.

## **2.7 Concerns**

Despite its many advantages, blogging presents limitations. Wrede (2003) argues that most web bloggers are not professional writers and weblog readers are not professional readers either. He worries that there may be some problems with writing skills that may be developed from activities such as blogging. He was concerned with the popularity of the informal use of abbreviations that appear on the Internet and have become increasingly popular, such as BTW (by the way), TMR (tomorrow) and R (are). This may cause the students to use informal words in their formal writings.

Regarding the aspect of peer feedback, there are also negative reflections. The result from Hyland and Hyland's (2006) research, which reviewed a number of surveys of students' preferences regarding types of feedback on foreign language tasks, showed that EFL students

generally value teacher feedback more highly than peer review. Moreover, research also showed that students considered that it is the instructor's responsibility to give feedback (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001), and they resist having power over their peers or their peers having power over them (Liu & Carless, 2006). Another aspect that needs to be considered is that the blogging platform is an open environment and students post their ideas or works to the public, which means the feedback they get from others is not under control of the instructors. This seems to be a risky matter for the students, because they may receive some criticism which is hurtful or even offensive. Students have to pay attention to their feedback to the others to avoid causing offence (Wu, 2006). Furthermore, the effect of collaborative learning among students can also be influenced by the students' confidence in sharing ideas, which is one of the reasons why they are not willing to invite their peers to read their blogs (Wu, 2005).

As we all know, the Internet is not a stable environment. Students are posting their works to the public. Therefore, the privacy issue should be one of the biggest concerns to protect students. Teachers should take security issues into account in case weblogs are hacked, accidentally deleted, or suddenly out of service. For this reason, a hard drive backup plan is essential. Furthermore, when students are writing personal subjects, they should be apprised of the lack of anonymity on blogger sites and of the need to use discretion in writing blogs and EFL writing (Stiler & Phileo, 2003). Moreover, for the students who are not competent in technology, there may be technical problems which will probably influence their learning outcomes.

To most teachers in China, using technology in the classroom is still a new concept for them. To be specific, the traditional teaching model has an irreplaceable status in the Chinese classroom and both teachers and students and even parents are used to it. They believe the traditional model is the best for them and technologies are just wasting their time. Furthermore,

if any school plans to use social networking in their class program, teachers' training will be another aspect of concern, because of the responsibilities of an online instructor, which include managing the whole learning and communication system in a public environment. Another aspect is that China is still a developing country and not every individual can easily have access to the Internet. Even in school, it is not possible for every student to have enough time on the Internet. For higher education, this situation is better, but how much time students can spend on the Internet is still an issue. There are also other research concerns that although positive expectations for the use of this new technology in language education were expressed early (Campbell, 2004; Pinkman, 2005), it will likely take several more years before blogging becomes a stable component of quality teaching practices (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010).

Although research in language teaching and learning has indicated that blogging has the potential of enhancing students' EFL writing skills and collaborative learning, it is still a new EFL learning tool that is not widely applied in developing countries like China. Most of the research studies reviewed above were conducted in English-dominant contexts. Little investigation has been conducted to examine students' writing experiences in the blogging environment in EFL contexts. Furthermore, as a later product of Web 2.0 technology, microblogging has already been used in the education field, but there is little research on the effective use of microblogs for EFL students' writing. Also, considering the wide use of microblogs among the young generation, it is necessary to explore its potential as an EFL learning tool.

## **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

This research builds upon what is known about using social network for EFL writing in higher education by studying the use of blogs by Chinese students.

### **3.1 Type of Study**

A mixed-methods design is utilized in this research to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The strength of mixed methods is that it combines the advantages of each form of data; that is, quantitative data provides for more generalizability, whereas qualitative data offers in-depth information about the context and setting (Creswell, 2011). Quantitative research aims at numeric data collection and statistical analysis of data, while qualitative research emphasizes elaborate description of specific social or instructional settings (Slavin, 2007). One important feature of mixed method is triangulation, which means supporting conclusions with evidence from different sources (Slavin, 2007).

The use of blogs to support EFL students writing is still a new educational field in China, so the qualitative research method is needed to explore this area and gain a better understanding of it. Moreover, in this research, surveys are used to understand participants' background information and their prior experience writing in EFL.

### **3.2 Participants**

The selection of participants for this study is based on purposeful sampling which maximizes my ability to identify students in a university in China to participate in blogging for the writing process approach. The university that I chose is a provincial key university in the Northwest of China with a long history of comprehensive teaching and research, particularly important scientific research and a training base for talents in Education, Arts, Humanities,

Social Science and Natural Science. The English major program in this university started in 1972 and by now the English Language Faculty has more than 1600 undergraduate students, almost 200 graduate students. The main courses in the English major in this university include: English reading, Basic English, advanced English, English speaking (usually taught by a native English speaker), English listening, English writing, English vocabulary, English and American literature and culture, etc. It aims to enable students to master basic knowledge of English language, theory and skills through these courses. In this university, English major students have a 90-minute English writing class once a week. The textbook they are using on the writing class is also widely used in the other universities in China (see Figure 1).

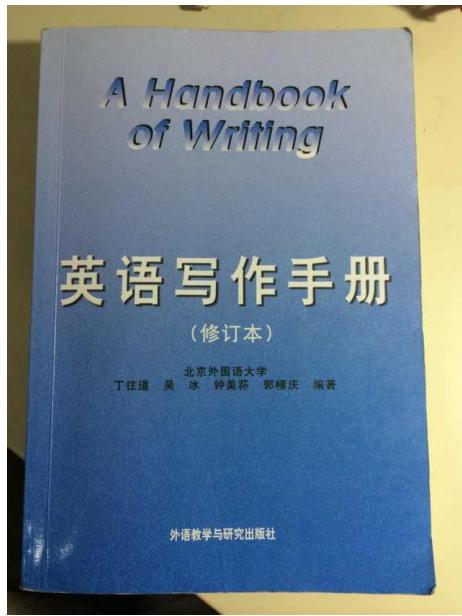


Figure 1: English writing textbook

The writing course design is essentially based on the textbook and the content is mainly about different skills in essay writing. In the first year, participants' English writing class was focused on the basic writing skills and in the second and third year the teaching content was still based on the textbook but combined with exam essay writing practice, which was preparing for

the upcoming TEM exams. Moreover, the participants said there would be another textbook which directed them in their dissertation writing and this would be the main content of their last year's writing class. Thirty-one English major students participated in this research. They were all adult students between 21 and 24 years old and in their third year of study. They had already taken the TEM4<sup>1</sup> examination in their second year and now they were preparing for the TEM8<sup>2</sup> which will be conducted on their fourth year. Also, participants who failed in the TEM4 were preparing for their second chance.

The research purpose and procedure were introduced to the target population when inviting them to participate in this project. In order to raise the participation rate, participants were allowed access to the researcher's blog, which offers the latest information on TEM examinations.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

The data collection took place from the end of February, 2014 to April, 2014. With the permission of participants, their microblog updating is still being observed by the researcher until this thesis is finished.

At the beginning of research, the researcher gave a brief presentation about the study, which included the rationale of this research, procedures for conducting the research and participants' rights during the research process, etc. Then the researcher gave out the consent form to invite the students to participate in the research (Appendix B).

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<sup>1</sup> The Test for English Majors (TEM), is mandatory for English majors. For these students, passing the TEM-4 is a graduation requirement. The test should be taken by the end of the second academic or sophomore year.

<sup>2</sup> TEM-8 ("Band 8") is the highest level for English major students; it should be taken during the end of the last academic or senior year. If an English-major student fails the TEM-4 during his or her sophomore year, they may attempt to pass the TEM-8 during their senior year. Those failing the TEM-8 are only allowed one re-test (during the following year after they have graduated from college). A second failure results in disqualification.

This research employs the convergent mixed-methods design; therefore, both the qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the same phase.

### **3.3.1 Pre-survey**

A survey (Appendix C) was used at the beginning of the research among 31 participants. This survey aimed to collect information about participants' current EFL writing situation and their use of social networking, especially blogging. Specifically, the researcher used the survey to understand the background of the participants, their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences with ESL writing, technology, blogging and the interaction between each other. This survey was taken anonymously.

### **3.3.2 Blogging Project**

Considering the privacy of participants, I registered a Renren account and set up a private group for them to join. Only invited members were able to post and comment on the blogs and this group was dismissed after the data collection. Participants were using real names in this private group but their personal information is not included in this paper and pseudonyms were used for coding data.

In the blogging project, the researcher assigned a topic every week. The writing topics were selected from the previous TEM4 and TEM8 tests or the simulation tests. For example,

*At present, there is heated discussion on whether we should be encouraged in having a golden week holiday for May Day. You are invited to write a composition of approximately 250-300 words on this issue.*

Participants were invited to post at least one blog in this group every week, followed by instruction from the researcher regarding the given topics or random topics, as they preferred. The writing content and form were not limited in this project. At the same time, participants were encouraged to respond and provide comments on their peers' blogs.

### **3.3.3 Post-survey**

A post-survey (Appendix D) was used at the end of the research. This survey focused on participants' attitudes toward the effectiveness of blogging in their English writing. Only eight participants who completed the whole writing program took this survey. In this survey they were asked about how blogging influenced their English writing and their advice regarding this blogging learning program.

### **3.3.4 Interview**

There were interviews (individual interviews and focus group interviews) during this research. The semi-structured interview study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) was part of a concurrent mixed-method study (Creswell, 2009) of EFL students' perceptions and experiences in this study. There were two group interviews. One had four participants and the second one had two. These two interviews were about 20-30 minutes long. Additionally, seven participants were invited to the individual interview, which lasted about 15 minutes. The participants who were invited to join the focus group interview were those who were more active in the study and considered to be able to contribute more information to the subject area (Creswell, 1998; Miles, 1994). The interviews were audio recorded. In addition, the researcher had some informal conversations with the participants during the research process about their experience with using blogs in English writing. These informal conversations were recorded in the field notes. The interview questions (Appendix E) focused on participants' previous English language learning experience, especially their English writing experience, their experience and perceptions about using blogs in their English writing practice and their perceptions about peer review. Considering the different proficiency level of the participants, in order to make sure of the accuracy of data,

the interviews were conducted either in Chinese or English. Some participants chose to speak Chinese and all of the Chinese interviews was translated into English by the researcher.

### ***3.3.5 Observations***

With the permission from participants, I was allowed to follow their personal microblog pages. Participants' personal information is not shown in the data and I was only observing the use of English in their microblogs. Considering the popularity of microblogs among the participants and their high frequency of updating, their performance in the microblogging was also collected and analyzed as data, since it reflected participants' free writing style.

### ***3.3.6 Writing Samples***

During the research, 12 participants' blog writings were collected as samples. I used a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling. Purposeful sampling involved consciously seeking out writing samples which were representative and characteristic and could contribute to the research (Creswell, 1998; Miles, 1994). These samples are intended to show the features and habits of participants' online writing. The content of their writings was also considered in this research. Meanwhile, when participants used English in their microblog writings, these were also collected as data and used in this paper.

### ***3.3.7 Researcher's Journal***

The researcher has been keeping a journal to record the research experience, ideas and thoughts and every single change during the research. The reflective questions included: What is the student's response? What went well and what did not go well? What did the students learn? What could be done differently? Since there were many unexpected changes during the data collection process, the researcher attempted in this journal to record these changes for later analysis. Also, this helped the researcher to understand how the participants were doing and

make corresponding changes during the research. Furthermore, the informal conversations between researcher and participants were recorded in this journal. Informal conversations were considered to be another important source of information for this research, since they covered questions which are not included in the surveys and interviews.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Three quantitative and qualitative methods, questionnaires, interviews, and written assignments, were analyzed to provide a triangulated interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

The collected qualitative and quantitative data was categorized into themes, which will emerge through the data analysis. The qualitative data (observations and interviews) and the quantitative data (survey) was analyzed separately and converged or compared to interpret whether the results from different datasets support or contradict each other. The data analysis process of this study involved organizing the interview notes, transcribing questionnaires and grouping data under major themes and several subthemes. Considering the language proficiency of participants, some content of the interviews or survey was in Chinese, so the author translated them into English. This provided a better way for students to feel comfortable in the interview and express their thinking better.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

An ethics review was approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board, University of Calgary, before conducting the research. Students were only accepted as participants if they signed the consent form. Participants were all volunteers, with no pressure from the researcher, which means that students' course grades were not affected and no bonus points were earned. Participants were allowed to take part in only part of the study (e.g. only the

interview) and to withdraw from the study at any time, but data collected before withdrawal was kept. Research data was also collected anonymously and kept confidential.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The findings of this research are presented in this chapter. Since Mandarin is the first language of all these participants and they all major in English, my conversations and interviews with the participants are conducted in both Mandarin and English. The findings include data from the pre-survey, interviews, focus group, the post-survey, observations, writing samples and informal conversations. Furthermore, they have experienced the traditional mode of Chinese EFL education, so using social networking in their English learning could result in several possibilities: non-acceptable, challengeable, popular, or helpful.

### **4.2 Research question 1: How do students' perceptions of using blogs influence their experiences in their English writing?**

#### ***4.2.1 Participants' English Learning Experience***

In the pre-survey, the data showed that the participants in this research received different levels of English education ranging from 9 to 12 years. When they first started learning English, they did not know why they were learning this foreign language or what this language was for. Even now, English language is still just a school subject to them. The only difference is that now their English proficiency level has directly impacted their future careers. Accordingly, they chose English language as a major because English is becoming more and more popular in China and it is easier to find a job with high English proficiency. From the latest market analysis report of September, 2014 on a Chinese employment counselling website, persons with an English major still have the highest rate of employment among 55 liberal arts majors.

文学各大专业就业排名 TOP10			
排名	专业	门类	就业指数
1	英语	外国语言文学类	248857
2	广告学	新闻传播学	160165
3	汉语言文学	中国语言文学类	111050
4	美术学	艺术学类	93337
5	应用语言学	中国语言文学类	47344
6	新闻学	新闻传播学	41297
7	传播学	新闻传播学	32192
8	翻译	外国语言文学类	23015
9	日语	外国语言文学类	20223
10	动画	艺术学类	20028

\* 排名根据近一个月相关专业招聘职位量统计所得

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Figure 2: Liberal arts majors' employment market report  
([www.jobui.com/trends/yjs/yingyu/rank/](http://www.jobui.com/trends/yjs/yingyu/rank/) September, 2014)

For this reason, for some participants learning English is not based on their interests but on a more pragmatic purpose – their future career. Albert Einstein stated, “Interest is the best teacher.” However, for some participants who have been learning English without any interest, the learning process was difficult, especially when there were ineffective teaching and learning methods. Their previous experiences may have led to some participants’ current negative attitude toward English learning.

The participants reported that they relied on their teachers for English learning and studied English to pass the English exams. They admitted that they were lacking self-learning ability. When they were in high school, almost all their English learning activities were assigned by their teachers. However, once they entered the university, everything was different. Less homework and more free time made them feel that there was nothing to follow.

In the pre-survey, 14 of the 31 participants chose writing as their weakest aspect in English learning. Writing seemed to be the most difficult aspect for these participants, but no one

thought that they had a problem with their English reading. According to the participants, reading used to be the most important content in their English classroom because they learned vocabulary and grammar from reading. Meanwhile, reading occupies the biggest portion in English exams. Therefore, participants spent more time on English reading. The participants had an English writing class every week since the first year. Each writing class was 90 minutes. Usually the writing instructors followed the content and activities of the textbook. Appendix F is the table of contents in the participants' textbook for English writing class.

In the English writing class, the teacher used PPT as the main teaching tool to introduce and explain writing skills. Sometimes the teacher left 10 to 20 minutes for students to practice English writing during the class, but mostly there was no time left to practice writing. Apparently, time for writing practice in English writing class was not sufficient. At the same time, most participants admitted that they would rather spend time on other subjects than English writing. In this study, all 31 participants thought that they did not spend enough time on practicing English writing during or after class. There were 12 of the 31 participants reported that they rarely practiced English writing outside the classroom. The participants provided the following reasons: First, if there was no homework, there was no motivation to do English writing because English writing was boring. Second, there was no one who could provide effective feedback except the teacher. Some of the participants also said they did not have effective interaction with their teacher and their communication was limited only to the classroom. This fact made them believe that practicing English writing was a waste of time because they could not receive useful feedback to improve their writing. Third, they did not have English writing habits. Among all the participants, no one kept an English diary or used English when writing letters, emails or messages. They believed that living in a Chinese language

environment made it difficult to apply English writing in daily life. Furthermore, they thought it took a much longer time to see the progress in writing practice and they did not feel a sense of accomplishment. That was also why they would hesitate before they started a long-term practicing program. In the interviews, some participants admitted that their laziness might be the reason for disliking English writing; however, their lack of interest and the boring process of English writing were still the main reasons.

Another factor that affects participants' English learning experience is the TEM4 and TEM8 exams. In these two tests, writing comprises about 15% to 20% of the total score and for those students who had a problem with their writing, this could be a huge pressure. The participants thought these two tests are the most important thing in the four years of their university study because the scores directly affect their graduation and future career opportunities. As mentioned above, passing the TEM4 is a graduation requirement. Some participants even said that without a TEM8 certificate, there was no chance for them to become a high school English teacher. They spend a lot of time on preparing for the TEM exams but they still mainly focused on grammar and vocabulary. They viewed practicing writing as time consuming and ignored it even though it occupies 15% to 20% of the total score.

To sum up, according to the pre-survey of the participants' English learning experiences, I concluded the following points:

- 1) There was a lack of an English language environment outside of the classroom. Most participants (71%) perceived that it was the end of learning after school because there was no English language environment. Especially for EFL learners in a non-English speaking country like China, building an English speaking and using environment for EFL learners was difficult.

- 2) Participants seemed not to have the ability of self-learning and depended too much on their teachers. Some of them (42%) had no idea of how to conduct independent learning. Moreover, they did not know how to make the best use of time after school for self-learning and extend their English learning time.
- 3) Some participants (48%) reported that they had limited time to interact with their teacher. They also stated that they could not receive timely feedback. They said that when they gave peer feedback, they mainly focused on the grammar, structure and vocabularies instead of the content. Moreover, compared with peer feedback, they preferred comments from their teacher.
- 4) Some of the participants (35%) admitted that the reason they felt it was difficult to learn English was that they did not know language learning strategies. They believed that they needed to be taught how to learn a language in order to learn the language itself.
- 5) Most participants (88%) admitted that they were not interested in English writing and they preferred to spend time on other aspects like reading and speaking.

#### ***4.2.2 Participants' Attitude towards Social Networking***

Most participants normally spent about one hour every day on the Internet. Most used their smart phone to connect to the Internet instead of using a computer. They said there was no Wi-Fi on campus and they have to pay cable charges when using the computer. Also, the limited number of computers in the library was not enough for all the students to use. Also, the electricity was shut off in the dormitory at 10:30 every night. Under these circumstances, the participants had to use their phone to surf online with an affordable data plan. Their online activities mainly involved reading news, playing video games, chatting with friends and social networking. In the participants' phones there are different kinds of social apps, as shown in

Figure 3, a screen capture of a participant's phone that has the most popular social networks on it:



Figure 3: screen capture of a participant's mobile phone

#### 4.2.2.1 Weibo (微博)

Thirty of the 31 participants had their own personal Weibo page. The only one who did not have a Weibo page had closed the page for some personal reasons. They followed each other's pages and believed that the more followers the better. I was also invited to follow their Weibo and got permission to observe their postings. Microblog was very popular among the participants. They thought it is easy to access, flexible and even part of fashion.

From the observation, participants were mainly using three types of microblogs:

### a. Personal microblog

Participants expressed their personal feelings on their own page. Most of their postings were in Chinese. However, observation of their microblogs showed that sometimes they wrote in English about certain content. For example, a female participant posted English microblogs about her breaking up with her boyfriend and sad feelings. She said writing in English about love or relationships was less embarrassing and would not make people think she was too vulnerable.

Maybe there is something you're afraid to say, or someone you're afraid to love, or somewhere you're afraid to go. It's gonna hurt. It's gonna hurt because it matters. John Green

2014-3-22 01:51 来自iPhone客户端

↓ | 转发 | 收藏 | 评论

Figure 4: microblog sample 1

In addition, sometimes participants expressed their anger and swear in English in their microblog with the “F” word. For example, even when they posted Chinese microblogs, they used the “F” word to swear instead of saying it in Chinese. It seems that swearing in English is not as serious as in their first language. Some participants said that sometimes they posted some taboo words or negative emotions impulsively and then deleted them right away. This showed that the public Internet environment has impact on the participants’ online behavior and they were just using it as a revenge tool.

Many participants also used single English words or sentences mixed with Chinese language in their microblog. For example, in one posting, a participant wrote (figure 5):

今晚去理发店一定要hold住，千万不能心一痒又剪成短发了。。。只剪刘海只剪刘海。。。

4月12日 15:19 来自iPad客户端

↓ | 转发 | 收藏 | 评论

Figure 5: Microblog sample 2

“Hold 住” (“hold on”) is a popular expression mixing English and Chinese. The participant said she did not think too much when writing microblogs as long as people could understand and she called it “free style.” However, when writing an academic essay, they would pay more attention to it and would not use network catchphrases or mix use of the two languages.

b. Following celebrity's microblogs

Just as Hollywood celebrities connect with their fans via Twitter, Chinese celebrities depend on Weibo. The participants in this study were also following celebrities on the social website as fans. Some global-minded celebrities have taken the opportunity to connect with their Chinese fan-base through microblogs. One of the participants was following the microblog of famous basketball player Kobe Bryant (Figure 6).

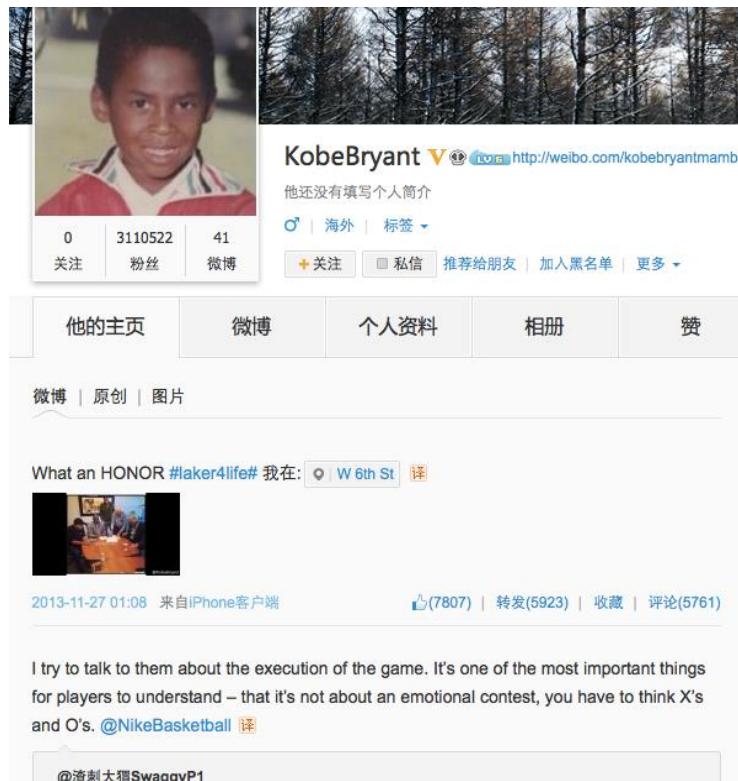


Figure 6: Celebrity microblog sample

c. Following public microblogs

Public microblogs are available to all the users, sharing and posting certain content with people. The difference between public microblogs and personal microblogs is that most public microblogs have a theme and all postings are about this theme. There are no personal feelings and expressions in a public microblog. The participants follow public microblogs according to their own interests to receive information about movies, music, fashion, etc. When asked if they had ever used a microblog for English learning, the participants mentioned that there were many public pages that they were following which were related to English. For example, there was a public microblog called “English in the American TV shows.” This public microblog posts English learning tips, new vocabulary and videos on their website to share with its followers. The following figure (Figure 7) is one of the posts on this public microblog page. The content is about classic lines in popular TV series. The participants reported that they were trying to learn English from these interesting microblogs during their spare time, but they were also not sure if this would really help their English leaning. For English writing, they believed that the more they read, the better their English writing would be and they stated that when they were reading the classic movie lines they would try to remember them and used them in their writing one day, which they believed would improve the quality of their writing. Moreover, they thought the reading material on the microblog was more attractive than the textbook and microblog public pages always had abundant information.



Figure 7: Public microblog sample

From informal conversations with the participants, it was not difficult to see how much they were into this social media and why they spent so much time on it. Most participants reported that they checked or updated their microblogs at least once a day. There is plenty of information that they are interested in and the most important thing is – they can access on their phone, which means the users can get the information anywhere and anytime.

Considering the influence of microblogging, I encouraged the participants to write something in English when they were writing blogs. It should be mentioned that 31 participants in this research completed the pre-survey and joined the discussion, but only 12 of them were active in writing blogs in English regularly every week. The rest of the participants believed that it took too much time and they did not have much to write about in their blog. However, they thought it was acceptable to write a couple of sentences in their microblog because it is easy and they were able to do this at anytime and anywhere. They even made a name for it, “English anytime, anywhere.” Some of the participants were not confident about their English writing but they said that even if they had nothing to write about they could still retrieve some sentences

which they like from movies and readings and they believed this would help with their English writing, since they were at least trying to bring English language into their daily life.

These participants expressed their personal feelings in their personal microblogs and shared with other users who followed them. In some of the microblogs, they also posted pictures and videos with words to match their feelings. They believed that writing academic essays regularly is a better practice than writing single sentences because the structure of an article is also very important, but they admitted that writing in microblogs is easier to do.

#### 4.2.2.2 Renren (人人网)

Renren is also one of the most popular social networks among the participants (see Figure 8). For many students, the first thing they want to do is register on the Renren website and start their social life on this platform. Renren is essentially China's Facebook. Formerly called Xiaonei, which means "schoolyard", it began as a platform for re-connecting friends from school. Like Facebook, but more functional, Renren aims to stay up-to-date in the fast-growing mobile space and cater to college students. Renren has an estimated 150 million registered users and 31 million active users per month. For the participants, Renren is an online society for them to communicate with friends who are "on campus", because the friends they add are mostly college friends. Unlike Weibo, registering on Renren requires a real name and education background, so users think that Renren is more trustworthy than Weibo. Some participants even said that the first thing they did when they received the university's admission notice was to register on Renren to find friends in that university.



Figure 8: Screen capture of Renren

Some participants posted their blogs on the Renren with a range of contents. Some of them wrote about personal feelings, some wrote stories and some noted what happened every day as an online diary. Their updating frequency was also different and irregular.

When asked about how they thought about blogging, one of the participants said:

*“我有一些同学不太熟的，但是他们每天干什么我都知知道因为他们经常更新状态。我超爱看他们写的东西，因为他们为了让大家关注他们就经常写一些有意思的事然后让大家给他点“赞”。。。你知道，大家都好奇别人的事啊。。。我？嗯，我也写日志，但是不写我自己的事。写日志挺普通的，大家都写。但是用英语写？我没见过谁用英语写。我觉得可能他们就是不想写给别人看吧，他们也不好意思给别人看啊如果英语不好，再说了，那些不学英语的人该觉得我们在显摆了。”*

*“I have some classmates which are not very close to me, but I still know what they are doing every day because they are active on the social network and I love reading what they write in their blog since they want to get more attention, so they always make their blog interesting to get more “赞 (Like)” ...and you know, everyone is curious about others’ life....Me? Hm, I write on Renren blog too, but not about too personal stuff. Blogging is popular. Everyone is doing it now but writing in English? I don’t know anyone who’s writing their blog in English, but I guess they just don’t want to share with the others friends because you know, they are shy, especially when their English is not very good. Furthermore, we have*

*other friends who are not majoring English and we don't want them to think that we are showing off."*

#### **4.3 Research question 2: How does blogging effect students' writing and collaboration?**

Considering the privacy of participants in this research, I registered a Renren account and started a privacy group for them to join. In this group, all members could post their blogs and share with the other members and only invited members could see the postings in this group. At the same time, all users were able to leave comments under the blog as feedback to the writer. This private group was dismissed after data collection.

During the data collection process, participants were willing to do the surveys and interview and were active in discussing their feelings about their English learning. However, when invited to start an English blog, some participants showed their unwillingness to participate and they gave the following reasons:

1. Low language proficiency leads to conflicting emotions.

Some participants indicated that they did not want to write English blogs because they were "not good at it" and "feel embarrassed" to show their writing to their classmates. Apparently, lower language proficiency affects their confidence on English learning. Indeed, participants with higher language proficiency were more active in this research and they were not only interested in English writing but also the other aspects, such as listening and speaking. Compared to participants who were not willing to write in English, active participants were more willing to talk about their English learning and showed a great motivation to improve their writing.

## 2. Had nothing to write about in English.

There were some participants who thought they had nothing to write about, but at the same time they were keeping a Chinese blog or microblog. However, when writing in English, they thought they had problems with their expressions:

“我不知道写什么，要是我能用汉语写我为什么还要用英语呢？我英语又没有那么好。有时候想说什么都说不明白。”

*“I really don’t know what to write about. If I can write my blog in Chinese, why will I write in English? My English is not as good as my Chinese anyway and sometimes it is too hard to express some certain things in the second language.”*

## 3. Prefer the pen-and-paper writing style

Another reason was that the participants preferred writing on paper to the computer. To some participants, pen-and-paper is easier and more comfortable and they don’t need a computer or Internet access. Furthermore, in most English exams the writing test is also processed on paper, so there is the consideration from the participants that if they practice English writing for the exams, they prefer to write on paper. Besides, although they are not unfamiliar with technology, it still takes time for these participants to involve the Internet in their study as a learning tool rather than just for amusement. In the university where this research was conducted, Internet access is limited. Most of time, participants have to pay to connect to the Internet and apparently there are not enough public computers in the library. Thus, the limitation of Internet access might be another reason for participants’ negative attitude toward writing online.

However, it is interesting that participants who were unwilling to write English blogs had a positive attitude toward posting microblogs in English. One of the participants said:

“我愿意写微博，简单又方便，我宁愿写十篇微博也不愿意写一篇博客”

(*I like microblogging better. It is easier and more convenient. I would rather post ten microblogs in one day than write a long blog.*).

Given the performance of the participants, it seems that microblogging is more popular than traditional blogging now. In this research, most of the participants have at least one microblog app on their phone and with a data plan on their phone. It is very convenient for them to use microblog at any time anywhere. Because of this, it is not hard to understand the participants preferred microblogging to blogging.

In the blogging project, I designed two types of blogs: given topics and personal feelings (free writing). At the beginning of the research, I asked the participants' opinions about what kind of topic they prefer to write in the blog; most of them like writing about personal feelings better. To be honest, I thought most participants would prefer to write with given topics related to their exams. However, they think writing out of the classroom should not be stressful and they wanted to express their feelings in their own way beyond the boundaries of exams. When they wrote in their own blog, they wanted to be relaxed and shared what happened in their life with their peers.

The following is a writing sample of the personal feeling blog:

### *Something about my study*

*i always hate listening any materials about English. If I listening it at night, i think i will fall asleep. Maybe, because i cannot understand what it say. The more i cannot comprehension, the more i cannot endure it. Finally, i will not listen at all. This is a bad circle.*

*Under the pressure of TEM4, i have to listen it every day. It is painful for me. The examination is coming, i must change my attitude about it. I tell myself i like listening, and i am sharing in it. Some days later, I find I truly love it. When i regard it as my interest then it is not a burden any longer.*

*After this thing, I will ture brave when facing things I dislike.*

*As a student, studying is the order of the day. You must make a point of learning knowledge by your teacher. But, now, in the university, the students who is good for study or bad for study are distinct. I want to say, study is not bargaining; you are also not a purchaser. Study is like a delicate pot or bowl. You must engrave it carefully. I have learned an article "The Eastern Middle Bazaar". In this article, I think a good student is like the camel that carries the great bales of merchandise for their owner. You must study hard, you can lie disdainfully chewing your hay.*

*(I learned some new words from a new reading so I used them in this blog.)*

In this blog, the participant wrote about some of her understandings of study and used the words she learned from an article, entitled "*The Eastern Middle Bazaar.*" This is an article written by L.A. Hill and D.J. May in their *Advanced English* textbook. In this article, the authors described an exotic Middle Eastern market. This participant used some words and phrases from this article, such as "delicate," "bargaining," "engrave" and "lie disdainfully chewing your hay." Also in her writing, the nonstandard use of words was very obvious and there was no clear structure. This was the real "free writing" for the participant and she wrote about her feelings casually. She also indicated that without being restricted by the exam, English writing is actually not so hard.

In the blogs on given topics, most participants used writing templates. All the given topics are related to the TEM exams, so obviously the structure and requirements, even contents, are similar. Thus, in order to save time and simplify the writing task, most participants chose to use templates. For example, in the writing sample on a given topic about the advantages and disadvantages of *The Digital Age*, some participants used similar words in the first paragraph. In the following figures (see Figure 9 and Figure 10), the three participants used "Nowadays" as the beginning of their first paragraph and the following content was also similar. Again in Figure 10 (the last paragraphs of another three participants), it was obvious that they used similar structure as well. From what they said, in the exam writing, the format and content were mostly fixed and

no one wanted to take the risk of writing differently in an exam. Thus the fixed format writing led to the trend of using templates in the exam, which was considered by the participants as “safe and effective.” They did not want to be creative in the writing exams because the examiners “might not like it”.

The figure consists of three vertically stacked screenshots of a digital writing platform, likely WeChat or a similar messaging app, showing examples of template writing. Each screenshot includes a timestamp (2014-03-24), a sharing icon, and a small profile picture.

**Screenshot 1:** The title is "The Digital Age". The text reads: "Nowadays, the digital products are widely used by a great number of individuals, that is to say ,it is commonly and widely accepted by the people from all walks of life that digital products have become extremely popular in our daily life."

**Screenshot 2:** The title is "The Digital Age". The text reads: "Nowadays, the digital products are applied more and more generally. As: computer, digital TV, digital camera, MP3, MP4 and so on. With the development of society, the product is making good progress."

**Screenshot 3:** The title is "Digital Product". The text reads: "Nowadays, the digital product get more and more extensive and popular in our daily life. F or example,when we want to buy somethings,we must go to shop and supermarket in the past, but now we can get it from computer by click the mouse,that is quick and convenie nt."

Figure 9: Template writing example 1

All in all, our society has gone into a digital age. I believe more and more digital products will be created in future, and our life, study and work will make a great difference.

Above all, I think we are watching a much more powerful and positive future unfold. We have confidence that everyone would improve themselves in digital age and the society would be more prosperous.

All in all, with the development of science and information technology, we believe that more and more digital products will be created in the future, and more and more new digital products will be used in society.

Figure 10: Template writing example 2

The TEM4 exam requires only 200 words, but if using templates students only need to fill in the blanks and show the examiner a clear structure of their essays. The following is a template given by a participant:

*"There is no doubt that the specific issue of \_\_\_\_\_ has become a pressing one to \_\_\_\_\_. From my point of view, \_\_\_\_\_.*

*First of all, \_\_\_\_\_. For example, \_\_\_\_\_. Secondly, \_\_\_\_\_, such as \_\_\_\_\_. Thirdly, \_\_\_\_\_. Moreover, \_\_\_\_\_.*

*To sum up/ Overall/ All in all, \_\_\_\_\_. It is hard to draw an absolute conclusion to this issue, but I still commit to the notion that \_\_\_\_\_. "*

Most participants believed that templates were useful and they were encouraged by their teacher to use them in the exam. They also admitted that using templates was not real writing, but it was the most efficient way in the exam.

In the survey, when asked if they had been using the Internet for learning English, the participants mentioned that they watched a lot of English movies and TV shows on the Internet to practice English listening but were always distracted by the stories in the end. Therefore, watching movies actually did not help much and it was more like entertainment. However, they

still use the Internet as a resource for preparing exams. To be specific, there are some famous websites and blogs related to certain exams like TEM4 and in these websites visitors can always find the latest information. There was a participant who was preparing for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test and he said he was following a famous IELTS training teacher's blog. This blog was updated about twice a week and the teacher gave instructions for the IELTS examinees. He believed that was very helpful, especially when he was preparing for the IELTS by himself.

At the end of the survey, I invited the participants to describe blogging according to their own understanding and I used the keywords to create the following word cloud base on their response (see Figure11):



Figure 11: Word cloud of the key words of blogging

This word cloud clearly shows the participants' perception of blogging and microblogging. They used blogging or microblogging as communication tools in their social life

and had a positive attitude towards it. Also, before the blog project, I asked them how blogging would help with their English writing. Here are some comments from the participants:

*“Read others’ writing can extend my own reading.”*

*“I think I get more information from some professional blogs.”*

*“I can interact with the other users and receive advices.”*

*“...build up good habit of writing.”*

*“...share great ideas.”*

However, the blogging project did not show satisfactory peer collaboration among the participants. It seemed that they were reluctant to provide feedback to another writer. The participants preferred to read their peers’ writing rather than comment on it.

Specifically, most participants reported that they did not receive effective feedback from their classmates and they did not leave enough comments on the other participants’ writing either. Some participants admitted that they were not accustomed to this peer collaboration and they would rather focus more on their own writing. Other participants believed that the situation would be different if there was teacher supervision and if this blogging project was a part of their writing courses most of them might be more active.

#### 4. Lack of effective and active collaboration

During the data collection, there was no effective peer collaboration found in the blogging program. The participants admitted that they prefer the feedback from the teacher than their peers. They seemed to trust the authority more than their classmate who they believed were at the same language proficiency level as themselves. Most of the comments which the participants left each other were like “Good job!”, “Good idea!” etc. They reported that it was hard to get useful feedback from their peers on their grammar mistakes or word choice.

Meanwhile, they were afraid of leaving comments to the others because they were not confident about their English writing and they did not want to mislead their peers. Overall, there was no effective peer collaboration during this blogging program and the participants still seemed to rely on their teachers' feedback towards English writing.

## **Chapter Five: Analysis and Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This study initially focused on students' blogging and microblogging experience in their English writing practice. During the data collecting process, unexpected findings occurred. At the beginning of this research, blogging was the main subject, but the participants brought forward the recent popularity of microblogging. Therefore, the educational use and influence of microblogging is also studied and analyzed in this research. In this study, participants were invited and encouraged to write in English in their blogs or microblogs. Their perceptions of this project will also be analyzed in this chapter. Ultimately, three major themes emerged, representing the main findings of this research: a) Features of China's EFL education and its influence on the students, b) Popularity of blogging and microblogging among Chinese college students and their application in the educational area, and c) Students' performance in the blogging project.

### **5.2 Features of China's EFL Education and Its Influence on the Students**

#### **5.2.1 *The Situation of Exam-oriented Education***

In China, College English education has been focusing on basic English language knowledge with the guiding ideology of "solid foundation will benefit for life" (Dong, 2006). From 1985 to the present, the *English Teaching Outline* and *English Curriculum Requirements* promulgated by the Chinese Ministry of Education every year have been emphasizing the importance of the foundation of English education. This immutable position has been considered to be the main cause of the exam-oriented education mode, students' negative learning attitude, and the time-consuming inefficiency of the whole English education system (Cai, 2010).

Applying knowledge is one of the engines of learning knowledge for human beings.

However, the English education situation in most areas of China focuses on the basics of English but not the practical application of this language and “the deeply rooted examination culture leads to an exam-based syllabus, which clashes with the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach” (Pan & Block, 2011, p.401). At the same time, the textbooks in the English classroom are also designed to adapt to a variety of English exams (Cai, 2010). Naturally, for the EFL learners various exams become the main focus and goal of learning English. Obviously, this situation leads to the consequence that EFL students are confused, lack motivation, and feel bored with learning English, and this year-after-year, same content and same purpose of English learning will eventually obliterate their initial enthusiasm for learning the language.

### ***5.2.2 The Importance of TEM (Test for English Major)***

In recent years, college students in China are facing pressure from the TEM and CET tests, since some universities require that students not be conferred a Bachelor’s degree unless they are awarded the TEM4 certificate. This requirement can be considered the main reason for the overly exam-oriented English teaching and learning situation in China’s colleges (Jin & Fan, 2011).

In the present study, among the 31 participants who major in English, TEM exams are considered to be their biggest sources of stress. All their English learning activities are conducted to prepare for the TEM exam. To some extent, over-emphasis on the exam and the pressure of a job search related to the score will obliterate their passion of learning English and are against the test developer’s original intent (Jin & Fan, 2011). In the present study, this phenomenon is particularly evident. The participants clearly know about the importance of English writing but are not working hard on it. In the pre-survey, all 31 participants admitted that they did not spend

enough time on English writing because they “have nothing to write about” or are “not good at it so don’t like writing.” However, most of them do not have the same problem with writing in Chinese. Influenced by the traditional English writing class, participants are used to writing on given topics to practice for the exams and are not accustomed to free English writing.

### **5.2.3 EFL Writing Class**

Influenced by the exam-oriented teaching and learning mode and with the importance of TEM scores to the students, the EFL writing class design has the possibility of deviating from the original purpose. Accordingly, this fact may lead to the following issues put forward by Cai and Fang (2006):

1. Students show low interest in English writing.

From the perspective of students, English writing is different from the other language skills such as listening or speaking. Writing practice is time-consuming and requires patience because it will not show progress in a short time, not to mention that the different ways of thinking and writing habits between English and Chinese also increase the difficulty of EFL writing. At the same time, over-emphasis on the exam makes students lose the pleasure of writing and they have to write with similar given topics in fixed format for meeting the requirements of the exam.

2. Teaching content is monotonous

For English teachers, their teaching content has to follow the exam requirements. Considering the current benefits for students, teachers have to focus on the keys points of the exams to make sure students can achieve higher scores. For example, one of the items in the writing test is application essay writing and all the topics are always chosen from certain content such as writing a notification. As a result, teachers will create teaching goals which narrow down

the teaching content to what will show up on the exam instead of developing students' comprehensive writing capability. In other words, teaching is also greatly affected by exam-oriented education.

### 3. Lack of enough writing practice.

In high school English classes, the class time is limited and teachers are under pressure to teach students language knowledge, including vocabulary, grammar, listening and reading in 40-45 minute classes, so there is not enough time left for writing practice. Students are expected to practice English by themselves outside of the classroom, but with a lack of interest and without teachers' supervision, most students do not spend enough time on English writing.

Similarly in the current study, participants have been facing the same problem. Their English writing teacher did not leave enough time for them to practice in class and they often did not write in English after class. Also, in the literature from Chinese scholars' research, there was little discussion of time management in a writing class. It seems there is tacit recognition that a writing class focuses on teaching skills and practicing should be conducted after class. However, the actual effect of students' independent practice has gone unnoticed.

### 4. Advantages, Disadvantages and Future Impact

Generally speaking, exam-oriented education is not entirely without merit. Under the pressure of exams, students are urged to master the basic knowledge of the English language, laying a good foundation for further learning. For English writing, with the usual practices and basic knowledge, students will not have serious problems with exam-oriented compositions. Actually, some students can write fluently with writing templates which they prepare for the exam.

However, the current situation in China's EFL writing class results in an overall low level of English writing among the students. Although the teaching goals for writing skills which students should master are enough to fit the requirement of the exam, when students write independently most of them are at a loss as to what to do. At the same time, following the teacher's instruction all the time makes students lose their independent learning ability because they are learning in a fixed format that does not require them to think independently. More simply, the present English writing education is only concerned with students' immediate interests and ignores long-term interests, which can be disadvantageous for students' future development.

### **5.3 Students' Attitude and Performance in the Blogging Project**

#### **5.3.1 Microblogging over Blogging: “Anywhere, Anytime English Learning”**

According to a CINIC (China Internet Network Information Center) report on the application status of Internet users in 2013, the number of blog users has reached as high as 400 million and microblog users but number about 330 million and this number is increasing. In the group of blog users, the age of 21-25 years old population accounts for the largest proportion, and most of them are college students. Thus, it can be seen that college students represent the main group of netizens and blog authors and readers. In recent years, the growth of microblogging has surpassed blogging. Today, microblogging has become one of the most important ways to obtain information from the Internet. Moreover, microblog apps for smart phones are well developed by different companies, which means microblogging can be truly convenient for use whenever and wherever possible. Because of this, micro-blogging greatly satisfies people's Internet communication needs and attracts a large number of heavy users.

### **5.3.2 Why Microblogging?**

In this study, participants preferred microblogging over traditional blogging. Besides the advantages of carrying abundant timely information, the flexibility and convenience are also factors that affected the participants' attitude toward microblogging. Actually, the participants reported that microblogging offers more opportunities to make English writing a daily “anytime and anywhere” activity with the features of easy mobile phone access and “micro-posting” with fewer words.

In observing the participants' microblogs, the findings showed that most of their posts were in Chinese. Considering the fact that microblogging is a Chinese language environment, participants also had concerns when posting in English. They indicated that writing in English and posting it online to an environment where most people use Chinese might be considered showing off and result in alienation. Actually, this does not only happen in the L1 environment. Liang (2006) described in her research, which was conducted in an English-speaking country among Chinese immigrants, that some participants felt peer pressure when speaking English to their Chinese-speaking classmates. They believed that speaking too much English might lead them to be excluded from the Chinese peer group. In order to remain together with people who have the same background as them, they had to follow their lead and speak their mother language. In other words, greatly influenced by the Confucianist Doctrine of the Mean, Chinese students may feel uncomfortable being different among their peers. Accordingly, it is understandable that the participants in this study thought that English microblogging would bring pressure to their social life. However, they did not hesitate to mix when using English and Chinese code-switching, as shown in the findings. Apparently, these mixed phrases are popular and widely used online as a new form of cyber words. I think this is probably influenced by the

popularity of English education in China. Moreover, with the influence of the globalization of English, exposure to English language is increasing in people's daily lives, which leads to the phenomenon of trans-languaging use of languages. The phrase “hold 住,” which means “hold on”, “under control”, as shown in findings from a Taiwan talk show, was widely known by people in 2011 and then became one of the most popular cyber words in China (Pan & Yu, 2012). The participants used this phrase mixed with Chinese naturally in their posts. Similarly, words like “high”, “finally” and taboo words were also common to see in their postings mixed with Chinese. Since the participants clearly knew that they could not use cyber words in serious academic writing, the microblogging seemed to be more casual and relaxing. So the free and easy switching between Chinese and English in their microblogs was accordingly more common. Losey (2009, p.219) concluded from former research and indicated that written code-switching could be “an effective pedagogical tool” and “happen more frequently in informal letters and notes.” Moreover, “free switching”, “emphasis”, “stylistic switches” and “lexical need” were also considered as purposes for people's code-switching in their writing. In the present study, participants' code-switching was more like “free switching” which followed the “fashion” use of cyber words. Accordingly, code-switching is considered to be effective pedagogy in the L2 classroom, which benefits students' development of creativity and criticality with the bilingual resources they have (Wei, 2011). Personally, I agree that the potential of code-switching brings benefits to the individuals' language development in a bilingual or multilingual environment. However, the current concern is whether code-switching will be accepted in academic writings. Apparently, students are not allowed to code-switch in the essay writing because of the exam requirements. Thus, a free writing environment like blogging or microblogging seems to be more necessary for the EFL students' language creativity development.

### **5.3.3 Why not Blogging?**

Findings of the study showed that participants' English proficiency level affected performance and attitude towards English blogging. Participants with a lower language proficiency level were more negative and showed their reluctance to write in English blogs because they felt "embarrassed." However, participants who were confident with their English were more active during the research. Kitano (2001) indicated that students' own ability in the target language may cause their anxiety because of the fear of negative evaluation. In the research by Liu (2006), she divided the participants into three groups by different language proficiency levels and she found that the group with the lowest L2 proficiency level seemed to be the most anxious and the group with the highest L2 proficiency level was the least nervous in the class. Liu (2006) concluded that the more proficient in English the students were, the less anxious they would feel in the L2 class. She also indicated in her research that participants with a higher English proficiency level were more confident in the class and responded more positively to the teacher.

In the present study, participants were writing in a blog group and an open microblog environment and their writings could be seen by all the other participants. This factor may influence the willingness of students with a lower proficiency level and add pressure to them when writing online. It is not hard to understand why they didn't want to join the writing project. To be specific, the public environment of blogging has both advantages and disadvantages. With the feature of sharing information online without limit, bloggers' privacy may not be guaranteed. Furthermore, for those who are not confident about their writing, an open environment can be a problem.

Other participants didn't want to write English blogs because of lack of access to the Internet. This is one of the limitations of blogging. As the product of Web 2.0, blogging is always supported by the Internet. However, for some developing countries like China, not all the universities can afford the cost of technology. This current situation may also limit the development of blogging as an educational tool in China's higher education.

There were also participants who said they did not know what to write about in an English blog but they didn't have the same problem when they wrote in Chinese. This may be related to their English writing practices. No participants in this research kept an English diary or practiced English writing regularly. Their English writing activities always focused on the exam requirements. Therefore, once no topics were given to them, they felt lost.

#### **5.3.4 Prefer to Write with Given Topics**

Some participants chose to write on given topics because the topics are related to the English exams. For these students, their final goal in learning a foreign language is to get high scores on the test. Through practice, it is easier for them to get high scores on the exams, but they misunderstand the purpose of learning a language, which is communication. However, they need to prepare for the exams because their scores on the English exam determine these participants' future career choices.

Research shows that providing real topics is more meaningful for students' writing and writing with a purpose will help students achieve more significant success in essay writing (Kashani et al 2013; Paltridge, 2004). This explains why some participants in this research had a negative attitude to blog writing, because they felt they did not have a purpose to write and they had nothing to say.

In addition, participants are very familiar with given-topic writing because of the fixed format and they feel more comfortable with writing in templates. In the TEM exams, most writing topics are discussions about some current social issues. For example, in the 2014 TEM8 writing test, the topic is:

*“Nowadays, some companies have work-from-home or remote working policies, which mean that their employees do not have to commute to work every day. Some people think that this can save a lot of time travelling to and from work, thus raising employees’ productivity. However, others argue that in the workplace, people can communicate face to face, which vastly increases the efficiency of coordination and cooperation. What’s your opinion?”*

During the exam, 45 minutes are provided for students to write about 400 words on the given topic. The templates are all structured about three to four paragraphs in length. The first paragraph is a brief introduction, the second and third paragraphs are discussions from two sides of the topic, and the last paragraph is the conclusion. Writing templates have become more and more popular among students. Some students even think it is easy to write with given topics because of templates. Some school teachers even encourage students to use templates and it is more convenient for the examiner to mark their writings because templates show the structure of an article clearly with the use of conjunctions. However, although templates may be practical for exam writing, how much students can benefit from them in real-world English writing is still doubtful. When I examine participants’ writings, it is very obvious that they were using similar templates when writing on given topics. I can almost imagine how boring it is for the examiners to mark these writings. However, it is a safe way to write in the exam and risk-taking is not encouraged in the exam.

### **5.3.5 Prefer to Write about Personal Feelings**

On the other hand, some students are more willing to write freely their personal expressions in the blog. Some of them consider this as a relaxation from boring academic

writing. They are trying to abandon the exam templates and write about their own interests. They think they have more things to write about than the exam topics and they do not need to worry about the score, so they are more risk-taking in using some unusual vocabulary and grammar. One of the interesting findings is that some participants indicated that sometimes it is easier and more comfortable for them to write in English than in Chinese because they are not accustomed to expressing some feelings in their first language, such as love, sex and swearing. Pavlenko (2007) indicated that early research demonstrated people felt less anxious about using L2 taboo words than in their native language. She also mentioned a former case study about an Iranian young man who switched to L2 when talking about sex because the L1 translation equivalent refers to something else with negative implications in his L1. It seems that bilingual speakers are transferring from different languages to find their comfortable way to express certain meanings. In this study, participants were using taboo words in their free writings, such as swearing with the “F” words, as in “*Forget everything, fuck it all, goodnight*” or mixing English and Chinese creatively in an abnormal way, as in “给力 able” (gelivable<sup>3</sup>). They thought that is why these writings were called “free.” This was more often seen in microblogging because it is less formal. I think the reasoning behind encouraging the participants to write blogs or microblogs in English is to build a free environment for them and encourage them to use English as much as they can in their daily life rather than forcing them to write proper English. Since blogging has already been widely accepted by the participants, now English blogging is just a practice to make writing in English a normal daily activity, not just for exams. I think correcting bloggers grammar and vocabulary should not be the most important aspect of English blogging. Help them to totally

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<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup> *Gelivable, adj.* A Chinglish(Chinese-English) word, be able to excite, make someone feel cheerful. ge- in Chinese means give, li- means power, strength or energy. ----Urban Dictionary

accept it first and then there will be more possibilities for blogging to become an English learning tool.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary of the Findings**

This study explores Chinese university students' perceptions and experiences using blogs and microblogs in EFL writing. The findings of the study indicate that students reported that even though they were aware that English writing was an important component in the English exams was one of their weakest skills, they still did not invest sufficient time in it. The main reason was that the exam-oriented nature of writing became the main factor in their writing class and students lost their interest in writing English. It seems that writing English was serious, torturing and time-consuming for the participants and they did not enjoy it. In this study, most participants had a positive attitude toward both blogging and microblogging. They felt writing online in English was a different writing experience from writing on paper. Meanwhile, they believed that when posting English online, there was less pressure and they felt freer.

In the blogging project, participants were invited to post blogs every week. Some of them chose to post free writing about personal feelings and some focused on the essays related to the exams. In most of the participants' free writing, they did not pay attention to grammar and format and they focused on their personal expression, which they might not write about in the academic essays. There were many grammar mistakes in their writing. However, participants who chose to write with exam requirements in mind made fewer and sometimes their essays had similar form and content in order to meet exam requirements.

In the microblogging experience, participants seemed to be more enthusiastic about writing microblogs than writing blogs. The popularity of microblogging is mainly because of the easy access on mobile devices and the abundant timely information. The participants believed

that the microblog environment was more welcoming than blogging. They thought microblogging was the new trend in social media. Compared with blogging, microblogging is easier, with short text and content that does not need to be very serious. The participants reported that microblogging could offer more opportunities for English writing practice and they used it as a daily activity, which they named as "English learning anytime, anywhere." They expressed themselves freely when microblogging, with fewer words than traditional blogging and mixed popular Chinese-English cyber words. For the participants, microblogging was a more relaxing platform on which to write and use English. It seems that for the participants, English writing practice does not need to be serious essay writing all the time and the more important factor is how to bring English writing into their daily lives and make it a natural activity.

Findings of the study show that the participants misunderstood the purpose of writing English. The participants believed that practicing writing English was for the exams and getting a higher score. This belief might influence their learning attitude and learning experience. This study was not focused on whether the participants made progress during the writing program but on examining whether blogging or microblogging could offer an English writing environment for the participants outside of the classroom. Furthermore, the findings regarding their performance during this research will also be considered as evidence for the further study of the efficiency of blogging and microblogging as English writing practice tools.

## **6.2 Implications and Recommendations**

Certain implications can be drawn from the findings to extend to the school setting and policy making.

First of all, school authorities could bring the concept of "self-learning online" into EFL education and extend English learning outside of the classroom. Using blogging as an English

learning tool in the EFL class has the potential to reduce the pressure in the traditional classroom due to limited time and create a more welcoming learning environment for students. Meanwhile, there is a lack of interaction in the traditional English classroom and blogging might provide more opportunities for such interaction. Especially for EFL students in a non-English speaking country, building an English language environment is particularly important. Furthermore, EFL students can be encouraged to integrate the abundant information on the Internet into their English learning under instruction by teachers. In other words, school authorities could consider bringing the Internet into the EFL learning process and encourage students to practice English writing outside the classroom, extending their time using English. To sum up, blogging and microblogging should be used as English learning tools to make English writing a daily activity and create a learning environment for the students to engage in anytime, anywhere.

In this study, the recommendations to the school leadership and teachers are focused on teacher training and technology development. As mentioned earlier, the online environment is unstable. Technical specialists are needed to support students to address network problems and students' technical questions. For the school authorities, professional development for teachers is needed. First, teachers need to be familiar with the blogging platform and create appropriate curriculum design. Teachers need to consider: the duration of the online writing course; how many writings students need to post every week; assigned writing topics vs free writing; how to provide peer feedback. Also, in online blogging courses teachers should keep track of the students' postings and provide instructions and timely feedback. Second, if teachers decide to make blogging an open space for students to write freely without given topics, then they need to

pay more attention to how to deal with issues on the network. For example, “cyber-bullying<sup>4</sup>” did not happen in this study, but it was mentioned in other research. This has become a serious issue that has a negative impact on students’ emotions and behavior (Lee et al, 2013; Nordahl et al, 2013). Especially when building an online learning space such as blogging, where students are able to comment on their peers’ work, it is significant to ensure the safety of the online environment. The researchers suggested instructors take action immediately when any student is cyber-bullied and at the same time encourage the school administration to develop related policies in order to avoid further problems. In the end, the success of implementing blogging and microblogging in higher education's EFL teaching and learning is also dependent on the development of the university's network capability, especially in a developing country. The recommendation is that universities that intend to use blogs in their English writing classes start a pilot project in a small scale. If the results are successful, they will be able to extend the scale and apply for government support to build a more comprehensive and more mature on-campus network.

In this research, most participants had mixed feelings toward the blogging program. To be specific, on the one hand, they wanted to improve their essay writing for a higher score on the exams. This means they had to practice writing English with topics from the exams. On the other hand, they were not interested in those topics and the format of the writing. They preferred to write English freely according to their own interests but also wondered whether this could help them with the exams. The research indicated that students considered blogging a pleasant writing space but they would like to see if there would be more choices in the writing topics and

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<sup>4</sup> **Cyberbullying** is the use of information technology to repeatedly harm or harass other people in a deliberate manner. According to U.S. Legal Definitions, Cyber-bullying could be limited to posting rumors or gossips about a person in the internet bringing about hatred in other’s minds; or it may go to the extent of personally identifying victims and publishing materials severely defaming and humiliating them. ---Wikipedia

more opportunities to be creative (Ducated & Lomicka, 2008). Blogging is not only a learning tool but also should be an environment where students can express themselves and interact with each other (Sun, 2009). Therefore, I suggest that when EFL writing instructors want to use blogging in their classes, the format of writing content does not need to be based on one source. For the instructors who teach English writing in China's EFL education, to meet the needs of both students' interests and the exam requirements, they may:

- Offer a variety of writing topics and invite the students to choose based on their own interests.
- Invite students to bring in their own choices of topics from the exam topics.
- Explore the hot topics in current events and invite the students to discuss them in their blogs.
- Divide students into groups. Every week, each group chooses a topic or theme to write about. Group members can take turns suggesting a topic.
- Maintain blogging as a serious writing space and at the same time encourage students to use microblogging for free writing and sharing interests.

When blogs are incorporated into the curriculum, it benefits students' L2 writing and the students also have a positive attitude toward publishing their writing online in the form of blogs (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Berstain, 2004; Golonka et al, 2014; Tekinarslan, 2008; Vurdien, 2013; Wu, 2005). However, at issue is how to incorporate blogging into the curriculum effectively. Vurdien (2013) designed a blog project for the EFL writing class which I think can be used as a reference by other instructors (see Figure 12). The advantage of Vurdien's (2013) design is that it uses a blended learning process of face-to-face discussions in the classroom and having blogs/microblogs written outside of class. This researcher did not rely on blogging for all

the learning activities but still considered face-to-face discussion as an indispensable learning process that could compensate somewhat for the disadvantages of online learning and enhance the students' collaborative skills.

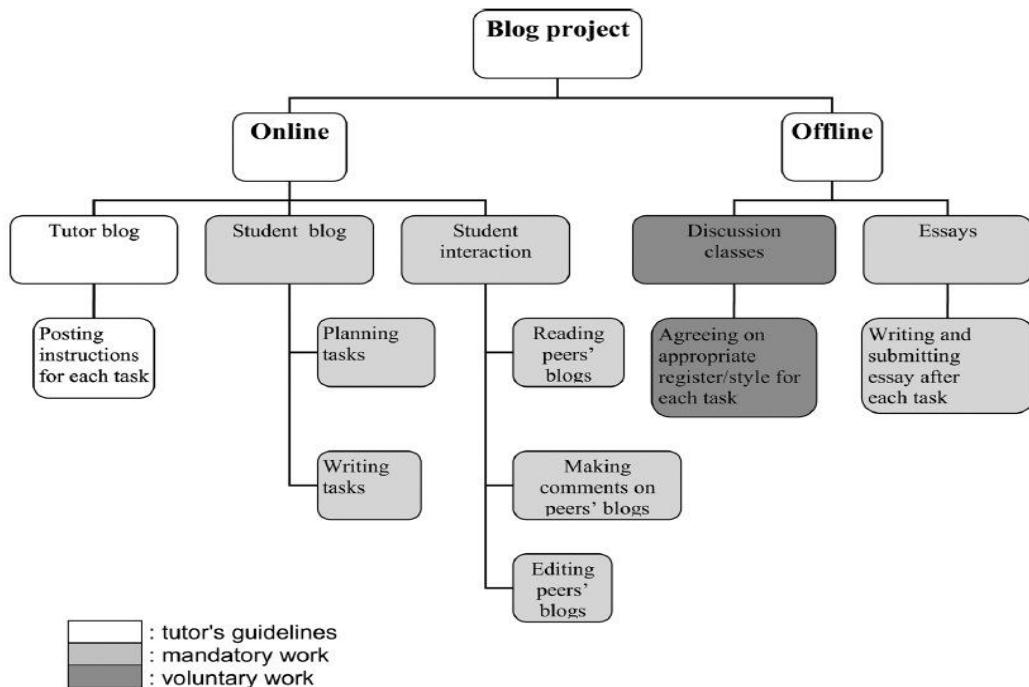


Figure 12: Blogging project process (Vurdien, 2013, p.131)

### 6.3 Implications for Future Research

This research has provided a snapshot of China's university students' blogging and microblogging in EFL writing. Microblogging, a popular social network activity, is not widely used in the educational area, and particularly not in EFL writing. For future research, the potential of social networking such as blogging and microblogging for students' learning can be further explored to help educators, students and school administrators to engage in the development of peer collaboration. Future research can examine how EFL instructors teach peer review and how students provide peer feedback in blogging and microblogging. Moreover, future research can explore the expansion of learning space, such as a blended learning

environment including both face-to-face discussions in the classroom and practicing English writing in blogging or microblogging outside the classroom (Vurdien, 2013). Meanwhile, future study can also focus on the role-changing of instructors in an E-learning environment and how to build the teacher-student relationship on a social network. For microblogging in the educational area, future study can explore how to make the best use of its advantages, such as easy access, shorter content and abundant information, in the EFL writing area.

#### **6.4 Limitations of the Study**

This study was conducted in one university with a small sample of 31 participants. This means that the results of the study cannot be generalized. Moreover, it is difficult to evaluate students' writing progress in such a short time. This research focused more on the participants' attitudes and experiences in an English blogging program. However, this study did not examine how blogging improved participants' writing skills. In addition, considering the different situations in college English education across China, the present research of one university in the north of China may not represent all EFL learners in China.

Moreover, at the beginning of this study, I tried to use Vygotsky's social constructivist theory to support this study since I was looking forward to the interaction among the participants during the blogging program. However, there was no effective social interaction occurred through the study. The original thinking about using Vygotsky's theory to build blogging environment as an online learning community where the participants could have effective communication did not work out in this research. As the researcher of this study, I tried to be an outsider of the study but it also brought the problem of lacking management during the blogging program. If there was an instructor working with the participants and organizing the interaction among the participants, then the findings would be more abundant on peer collaboration.

## **6.5 Reflection**

I started designing my M.A. thesis topic after taking courses in the educational technology area. That was my first opportunity to study E-learning systemically and it made me think about how E-learning could benefit China's EFL students. I used to be an EFL student in China and I have been through the whole learning process. Now I want to help students in the same situation with the knowledge I have acquired. Grisson (2011) defined E-learning as learning facilitated online through Internet technologies and put forward that the goal of E-learning in this century should focus on how to provide a framework for a better understanding of the application of E-learning in higher education. Unlike the developed countries, E-learning in China's higher education is still in a preliminary, developing phase and the learning mode is also relatively monotonous. For EFL students in higher education, most of their language learning activities are limited to the classroom, especially for writing English, and they need time to practice outside the classroom. Considering this issue, I started thinking about whether there was any chance to expand the students' learning space beyond the classroom. Then the idea of exploring the students' writing experiences with blogging came to my mind. During the pre-survey for this research, the participants recommended that I include "microblogging" in my study, so I added the microblogging content into my data collection and it turned out to be a more popular writing space than traditional blogs, which was an interesting finding with significant meaning for my further study.

The whole thesis writing process enriched my original knowledge of blogging in the education area. From the literature review, I realized that there were many more possibilities of using blogging as an EFL learning tool than I originally thought and that my research is just one specific study on one aspect. I was happy to see my participants feel positive about blogging in

English and I hope this is effective in their future learning and their practice in English writing.

At the same time, I believe this research is just a start for me and opens the door to further study on how to help China's EFL students.

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## APPENDIX A: COURSE PLAN SAMPLE

Retrieved from [wenku.baidu.com](http://wenku.baidu.com). 百度文库 英语高级写作课程教案

学期: 2012-2013 学年第二学期 学时: 32

授课对象: 外国语学院 10 级英语专业学生

教材: 《写作教程 第四册》, 2007, 上海外语教育出版社

任课教师: 宇文静 陈琳

### **Lecture 1: Introduction to Thesis Writing (Unit 1)**

#### **一、课程成果 Outcome**

1. Understand the aim of the course
2. Grasp generally some information about graduation thesis
3. Understand what constitutes a good topic for research

#### **二、学时安排 Time: 2 hours**

#### **三、重点难点 Key points**

1. Principles and Requirements of Graduation Thesis
2. Components of Graduation Thesis
3. Steps of Graduation Thesis Writing

#### **四、教学内容 Teaching content: Introduction to Graduation Thesis**

- 1 What is a thesis?
- 2 Significance of thesis writing
- 3 Scales of thesis writing
- 4 Evaluation of a thesis
- 5 Principles of thesis writing
- 6 Requirements of thesis writing
- 7 Steps of Graduation Thesis Writing

#### **五、作业 Homework:** Read Unit 2 after class.

### **Lecture 2: Choosing a Topic for a Thesis (Unit 2)**

#### **一、课程成果 Outcome**

1. Know what steps to follow when choosing a topic
2. Learn how to improve topics that have problems

#### **二、学时安排 Time: 2 hours**

#### **三、重点难点 Key points:** Know how to work out an effective research topic.

#### **四、教学内容 Teaching content**

##### **1. Principles for choosing a thesis topic**

##### **2. What topics should be avoided?**

##### **3. Process of choosing a topic**

##### **4. Exercise 1:** literary criticism /comparative study **Exercise 2:** revise the following topics

#### **五、作业 Homework :** Search for as many thesis titles as possible to get the idea of title designing and design your own title.

### **Lecture 3: Collecting & Organizing Material (Unit 3)**

#### **一、课程成果 Outcome**

1. Learn how to find and evaluate the sources
2. Learn how to document the sources

**二、学时安排 Time:** 2 hours

**三、重点难点 Key points:** Choose proper material; write a thesis statement.

#### **四、教学内容 Teaching content**

- 1 Major sources of related literature
- 2 Guidelines for choosing proper materials
- 3 Documenting material
- 4 Reading in depth

**Exercise:** Analyze the different parts of the following thesis statement.

#### **五、作业 Homework**

Read the textbook Unit 3 and create your working bibliography, using APA style.

### **Lecture 4: Outlining a Thesis (Unit 6)**

#### **一、课程成果 Outcome**

1. Know the format of an outline
- 2 Be familiar with the types of outline
- 3 Grasp how to construct an outline.

**二、学时安排 Time:** 2 hours

**三、重点难点 Key points**

- 1 The format of an outline
- 2 How to construct an outline

#### **四、教学内容 Teaching content**

- 1 What is an outline?
- 2 The Benefits of an Outline
- 3 Process of constructing a thesis
- 4 Types of the outline
- 5 Formats of the outline
- 6 Conventions and contents of outlines
- 7 Principles for Structuring an outline

**Exercise:** Outlining the following thesis

#### **五、作业 Homework**

Based on your topic and thesis statement, with the accumulation of related material, please construct your own outline.

### **Lecture 5: Introduction Writing (Unit 7)**

#### **一、课程成果 Outcome**

Master the elements of the Introduction chapter of a thesis.

**二、学时安排 Time:** 2 hours

**三、重点难点 Key point**

Understand and know how to compose the Introduction chapter.

#### **四、教学内容 Teaching content**

#### **Components of the Introduction Chapter:**

1. Introduction
2. Background of the study
3. The professional significance of the study
4. Overview (structure) of the thesis

**Exercise:** Find the problems in the Introduction chapter of the thesis at hand.

#### 五、作业 Homework

Finish the introduction chapter for your thesis.

### Lecture 6: Literature Review (Unit 7)

#### 一、课程成果 Outcome

1. Know what are included in a literature review
- 2 Know how to compose a literature review

二、学时安排 Time : 2 hours

#### 三、重点难点 Key point

Master how to organize a literature review and how to summarize and paraphrase.

#### 四、教学内容 Teaching content

1. What is a Literature Review?
2. Procedure for Writing a Literature Review

#### Exercises:

- 1: Find a focus for the following titles
- 2: Write a Summary

#### 五、作业 Homework

Write a literature review briefly.

### Lecture 7: Quotation (Unit 8)

#### 一、课程成果 Outcome

Master the way of quotation.

二、学时安排 Time: 2 hours

三、重点难点 Key point: Different quotation formats for different material.

#### 四、教学内容

1. Differences between quotation and citation
2. Types of quotation: direct and indirect
3. Quotation of different material: Poetry, drama, etc.

**Exercise:** Revise each of the following sentences, deleting quotation marks used inappropriately, moving those placed incorrectly, and using more formal languages.

五、作业 Homework: Remember the format of quotation.

### Lecture 8: Citation (Unit 8)

#### 一、课程成果 Outcome

Master the way of citation.

二、学时安排 Time: 2 hours

三、重点难点 Key point: Different citation formats for different material.

#### 四、教学内容 Teaching content

Purposes of documentation

Types of citation: In-text Citation and References

Formats of In-text Citation:

MLA, APA, Chicago Manual style

## 五、作业 Homework

Remember the APA format of citation

### Lecture 9: Methodology (Unit 4)

#### 一、课程成果 Outcome

1. Know how to conduct a research in a linguistic thesis
2. Know how to write the methodology part in a linguistic thesis
3. Know how to write a good findings and discussion

#### 二、学时安排 Time 2 hours

三、重点难点 Key point Master how to conduct a research in a linguistic thesis.

#### 四、教学内容 Teaching content

1. Definition of Methodology
2. Methodology in a thesis on linguistics

Exercise: Analyze samples: What research tools are used? How?

#### 五、作业 Homework Learn SPSS after class: SPSS 教程

### Lecture 10: Methodology (Unit 4)

#### 一、课程成果 Outcome

1. Know how to design a good questionnaire;
2. Master the methods to interpret a work of literature.

#### 二、学时安排 Time 2 hours

#### 三、重点难点 Key point

Master questionnaire design and how to interpret a work of literature.

#### 四、教学内容 Teaching content

Questionnaire design

1. Criteria for a good questionnaire
2. Steps for questionnaire design
3. Exercise: Process the following data

Methodology in a Literary Thesis

#### 五、作业 Homework

Design a questionnaire to collect opinions of the second- year Non-English majors on their L2 learning strategies.

### Lecture 11: Conclusion, Abstract & Acknowledgements (Unit 7)

#### 一、课程成果 (Outcome)

1. Know how to write the Conclusion of a thesis
2. Know how to write the Abstract of a thesis
3. Know how to draft Acknowledgement.

#### 二、学时安排 Time 2 hours

#### 三、重点难点 Key point

Master Conclusion writing and Abstract writing.

#### 四、教学内容 Teaching content

1. Conclusion Writing
2. Abstract Writing
3. Acknowledgements

**Exercise:** Read the following abstracts and then discuss the merits and defects of the abstracts.

## 五、作业 Homework

Choose key words for your thesis.

### Lecture 12: Format-Listing Sources (Unit 8)

#### 一、课程成果 Outcome

Know how to document sources at the end of the thesis.

#### 二、学时安排 Time 2 hours

#### 三、重点难点 Key point

Master the use of punctuations and italicization.

#### 四、教学内容 Teaching content

Basic rules for bibliographic citation

Exercise: Create the Reference entry with the given information

## 五、作业 Homework

Design your own references.

### Lecture 13: Format and Mechanics (Unit 8)

#### 一、课程成果 Outcome

Know some rules of format and mechanics.

#### 二、学时安排 Time 2 hours

#### 三、重点难点 Key point

Master Contents format and Page number format.

#### 四、教学内容 Teaching content

#### Format and Mechanics

**Exercise:** Find out the problems of the following Contents

## 五、作业

根据以下论文内容，加页码并自动生成目录

### Lecture 14: Language Style (Additional Material)

#### 一、课程成果 Outcome

Know the characteristics of thesis language.

#### 二、学时安排 Time 2 hours

#### 三、重点难点 Key point Master diction and voice.

#### 四、教学内容 Teaching content

1. Diction, Tone, Voice, Economy and the Use of Tenses

2. Unbiased language

3. Constructing paragraphs

**Exercise:** Find out the problems of these sentences.

## 五、作业 Homework

Revise your introduction and literature review parts.

## **Lecture 15: Summary (Unit 9)**

### **一、课程成果 Outcome**

Get a systematic idea of thesis writing.

### **二、学时安排 Time 2 hours**

### **三、重点难点 Key point**

Master the requirements of structure, language and format.

### **四、教学内容 Teaching content**

Basic structure and format

### **五、作业 Homework**

Review what we have learned.

## **Lecture 16: Oral Defense (Additional Material)**

### **一、课程成果 Outcome**

Know how to give a good oral defense.

### **二、学时安排 Time 2 hours**

### **三、重点难点 Key point PPT design.**

### **四、教学内容 Teaching content**

Introduction to Oral Defense

Prepare for the oral defense

Tips during oral defense

**Exercise:** Analyze some samples.

### **五、作业 Homework**

Review what has been learned in this class.

## **APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM**



**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Wei Li Werklund School of Education, 403-918-6880,

li9@ucalgary.ca

**Supervisor:**

Yan Guo

**Title of Project:**

Hot Blogging: Exploring English Writing Experiences of Undergraduate Students in China

**Sponsor:**

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study investigates how blogging affects undergraduate students' English writing in China. It examines advantages and disadvantages of using blogs as an English learning tool. The study aims to explore whether blogging can be used as a new tool for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' independent study and peer-collaboration.

Furthermore, another purpose of this study is to inform a master degree. The success of this research will help the researcher finish her master program and get a master degree.

## **What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

(You can chose to participate in any or all of the various components of the research (blogs, interview, etc.), and that they can withdraw from participation at any time. Please mark “X” in front of the content that you are willing to participate in.)



### Survey #1

You will be invited to complete a survey at the beginning of the research. The survey will take about 10 minutes. This survey aims to collect the information about your current EFL writing practice and your use of blogs and other social network. This survey will be collected. During the research, you will be invited to create your own blog. The researcher will assign a topic each week and you will be invited to update your blog at least twice a week and respond or provide comments to your peers’ blogs at least twice a week. This process will take about 2 months. Your writing samples in your blogs and your comments to your peers will be collected.



### Survey #2

At the end of the study, you will be invited to complete another survey. This survey will take about 15 minutes. The questions focus on your perceptions about how blogging affects your English writing. This survey will be collected.



### Interview

You will be invited to participate in an individual interview during the research. The interview will take about 30 minutes. You will be invited to describe your previous English learning experience, especially your English writing experience, your experience of using blogs in your English writing practice, and your perceptions about peer review. It can be done either in English or Chinese. This interview will be tape-recorded. In addition, you are invited to have informal conversations with the researcher during the research process about your experience of using blogs in English writing.



### Start a blog

During the research, you will be invited to create your own blog. The researcher will assign a topic each week and you will be invited to update your blog at least twice a week and respond or provide comments to your peers' blogs at least twice a week. This process will take about 2 months. Your writing samples in your blogs and your comments to your peers will be collected. You may refuse to let your writing samples or comments to be collected by the researcher. The researcher choose [www.renren.com](http://www.renren.com) as the blog environment and all users can set their privacy settings personally, so no one else out of this research has the access to your writings.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate altogether, may refuse to participate in parts of the study, may decline to answer any and all questions and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

In this research, you will be invited to provide the following information:

Academic level

Language proficiency

Language learning experience

Your name, address, phone number, email and the other personal identifying information will not be collected in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. You may choose a pseudonym for yourself. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study.

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There will be no foreseeable risks, harms, or inconveniences to you. Blog is a public social network, which means your writings will be in an open internet environment, but your writings will not include your personal information and will also be anonymous.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. No one except the researcher and her supervisor will be allowed to read any of the responses to the questionnaires or hear the interview tapes. There are no names on the questionnaire. Only group information will be summarized for any

presentation or publication of results. The interview recordings will be stored in a computer disk. This disk, the questionnaires, interview transcripts, and collected writing samples will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher and her supervisor. The anonymous data will be stored for three years on a computer disk, at which time, it will be permanently erased.

*When the participants are recruited, they will be informed both orally and in writing that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point during the study without penalty. If they decide to withdraw from the study, they will be reminded of their anonymity and confidentiality and data collected to the point of withdrawal will not be retained and used (audio data will be erased, survey paper will be destroyed by kneading machine and their blogs will be closed by themselves since only themselves have the access to their blog).*

## **Signatures**

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX C: PRE-SURVEY QUESTIONS**

1. How many years have you learned English?
2. Listening, speaking, reading and writing, which do you think is your weakest?
3. How do you practice your English writing usually?
4. Do you think you spend enough time on your English writing?
5. How much time do you spend online every day?
6. Are you using any social network? What is it?
7. Have you heard about blogs or did you have your own blog?
8. Do you think it is easy to establish your own blog? Why or why not?
9. Have you ever used Internet for learning?
10. Do you think writing regularly on your blog will be helpful to your English writing?
11. Is it acceptable to you to share your writing with your classmates and receive their feedback online?
12. When you are using blogs to practice your writing, do you prefer to given topics for specific aspects like TEM8 or just personal feeling expression?
13. How many blogs do you think are enough for you to post online every week?
14. What else do you think blogging can help you with your writing?
15. Please use three words to describe blogging according to your current understanding.  
(Both Chinese and English are OK)

## APPENDIX D: POST-SURVEY FORM

	1- Poor	2- Fair	3- Good	4- Very Good	5- Excellent
How would you rate the Weblog (blog) writing project?					
How do you feel about your writing improvement?					
How do you feel about your self-learning ability at the end of the semester?					
How do you feel about your writing ability at the end of the semester?					
How do you feel about your ability to comment on classmates' papers at the end of the semester?					
How was your experience of letting your classmate to review your writing?					

- How did you feel when you received any negative and/or critical comments from your peers?
- If you could recommend three things about using blogs, what would you suggest?
- What do you think would have helped you more with writing?
- What is the most memorable thing you read on other students' blogs?
- How do you think blogging has affected your reading, writing, and confidence in writing?
- Will you keep writing on the blog after this project?

*This survey is based on Jones (2006) Appendix E, p.270-271.*

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*1. Language learning experiences.*

- How long have you learned about English?
- What is your purpose/goal for studying English?

*2. Writing experiences.*

- How do you feel about writing in your language and in English?
- What are the differences and similarities?

*3. Previous experiences in using social networks in ESL learning.*

- Have you ever used social networks in your English learning experience?
- Do you think social network or Internet helped with your English learning?
- Have you ever used Weblogs (blogs) before this research? If so, could you describe your experience of using blogs?
  - i) How long have you kept this blog?
  - ii) What is your purpose of writing blogs?
  - iii) Is it a personal blog or public one?
  - iv) Have you ever written in English on your blog?
  - v) Have you ever used your blog as an educational tool? If not, how do you think about this idea?

*4. Peer working*

- How do you feel like reading the other students' writing works?
- How do you feel like the other students reading your writing works?
- Have you ever offered advice to another student on his/her paper? What kind of advice?
- Do you like receiving advices from your classmates on your writing? Why or why not?
- Which do you value more, peer feedback or instructor feedback?

*This interview is based on Jones (2006) Appendix D, Interview 1, p.266*

## **APPENDIX F: TABLE OF CONTENT OF THE ENGLISH WRITING TEXT**

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### **BOOK**

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## APPENDIX G: RECRUITMENT NOTICE

### Recruitment notice

Dear students,

I am an MA student from Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. I am currently conducting my thesis project on China's undergraduate students' English writing by using blogs. The study explores the effect of blogging on Chinese undergraduate EFL learners' English writing.

#### What you will be invited to do?

You will be invited to complete a survey at the beginning of the research. The survey will take about 10 minutes. This survey aims to collect the information about your current EFL writing practice and your use of blogs and other social network. This survey will be collected. During the research, you will be invited to create your own blog. The researcher will assign a topic each week and you will be invited to update your blog at least twice a week and respond or provide comments to your peers' blogs at least twice a week. This process will take about 2 months. Your writing samples in your blogs and your comments to your peers will be collected.

At the end of the study, you will be invited to complete another survey. This survey will take about 15 minutes. The questions focus on your perceptions about how blogging affects your English writing. This survey will be collected.

You will be invited to participate in an individual interview during the research. The interview will take about 30 minutes. You will be invited to describe your previous English learning experience, especially your English writing experience, your experience of using blogs in your English writing practice, and your perceptions about peer review. It can be done either in English or Chinese. This interview will be tape-recorded. In addition, you are invited to have informal conversations with the researcher during the research process about your experience of using blogs in English writing.

You are totally free to choose to participate in any or all of the various components of the research (blogs, interview, etc.), and you are also free to withdraw from participation at any time. At the same time, data collected from you to the point of withdrawal will not be retained and used.

#### Benefits of participating in this study

This research will provide opportunities for participating undergraduate students to practice their English writing outside of the classroom. This study could have a potential to enhance students' communication, interaction, and collaboration with the interactive quality of posts in blogging.

If you have any questions, please contact me: