



## **Autonomy in Learning English as a Foreign Language: A Case Study in Writer's Voice**

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### **Introduction**

Based on Vygotsky (1978) and Mercer (1995) EFL learners should be particularly involved in interacting with others, indicating that they are engaged in learning. When students are interacting with others, they are in a dialog with an environment where diverse utterances shape each other (Hewings, 2012; Jwa, 2012; Morgan & Cain, 2000). Bakhtin (1981) addressed how languages are formed by various interactions and how EFL learners construct their knowledge by communicating with one another. In addition, Bakhtin (1986) asserted that when EFL learners practice constructing a piece of writing, that interaction helps them become immersed in the dissemination of ideas, in mediation with resources, and in cooperation with others. During such a process, learners interact with others and later generate new voices or ideas (Prior, 2006). For instance, Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (ACMC) is a tool provided for EFL learners to transform the meaning of words from one context to another. Therefore, the writing blog has become a medium in which EFL learners construct ideas and then develop their own writing voices by interacting with others to help develop and facilitate their utterances. In classroom and on-line (blog) writing activities, EFL learners can recreate and apply utterances within the context of dialog to identify themselves and voice their inner thoughts (Amhag & Jakobsson, 2009; Woods, 2003). Furthermore, continued engagement provides partly new and partly old information to motivate EFL learners and activate their knowledge for developing utterances and a writer's voice (Kramsch, 2006). Consequently, EFL learners can learn to shape their utterances and use them in desired contexts, thus developing a confident sense of authorship.

There has been little research on how to provide a dialogic context for EFL learners to express their voices and interact with others in ways that connect with their learning experience. These learners do not understand how to transfer and redeploy new utterances in a foreign-language setting. If the dialogic context works for EFL learners, then through multiple experiences of constructing meaning, they can co-construct words into a proper context, supported by active and responsive aid from others. The purpose of this study is using these activities to help learners not to perceive writing simply as grammar or linguistic practice, but, instead, to help them construct their voices and develop utterances.

## Literature Review

### Foreign-Language Writers' Voices with Inner Speech

Learning a foreign language develops not only through subject content, but also through interactions with the learning context (Morgan & Cain, 2000). Literacy research has demonstrated that students learn in a socio-cultural context, not only by projecting their inner world, but also by exchanging ideas with their community (e.g., others, peers). These processes generate new, writerly voices and help learners to become independent writers in the real world (O'Brien, 2004). Therefore, various theories have led toward a dialogic and interactive writing model for EFL learners.

According to Ellis (2012), inner speech is crucial to EFL learners' development because it mediates their language learning through repetition, manipulation, and vicarious response. Consequently, EFL learners repeating others' words and imitating others' style of language are ways to develop utterances to connect with a particular speech context in a position of equality (Ellis, 2012). For instance, Bakhtin (1984) perceived inner speech not only as linguistic input, but also as the learner's active transfer of knowledge development in the proximal context of interaction with others because all types of inner speech can equally influence others. According to O'Brien (2004), EFL learners valued and appreciated their partners' comments because they spurred their awareness when reading and revising their paper. When EFL learners received comments, they then had fewer error corrections and enhanced their writing products' quality in later assignments. Moreover, when an EFL learner reads others' essays and makes comments, they are collaborating and reconstructing textual meaning because every written utterance expresses certain values and originates from a unique perspective in this social and collective activity (Escandón, 2012; Sun & Chang, 2012).

EFL learners use the utterances they have learned as a type of inner speech in their mind to do repetition and imitation. Later, the learners bring their thoughts as a unitary voice to assist in creating and developing their writing voices when collaborating with one another. Then, how do EFL learners decide which words to use? In fact, when reusing and choosing words, foreign-language writers' decisions are based on input from experienced learners, who have position with high authority above them (Skinner & Holland, 1996). This means that foreign-language writers need to examine words between inner speech and linguistics, moving back and forth to compose their writing (O'Brien, 2004). After learners read and struggle with their inner speech, they reuse and define words in their new context to respond to a challenging writing assignment and reinforce their self-esteem in order to have an equal position with experienced learners (Bakhtin, 1984; Braxley, 2005; Flecha, 2009; Pajares & Valian, 2006; Shanahan, 2006).

### EFL Learners' Voices with Teacher's Authoritative Discourse

Bakhtin (1981) claims that authoritative discourse is presented as the authorized truth and suggests there is a significant relationship between power and discourse. The individual who speaks determines dialogic discourse, which ends with a final meaning, and thereby presents truth or meaning. Furthermore, a foreign-language learner chooses more words from "authority" to evaluate the possibility of using language in a real context. Therefore, when foreign-language learners work with an authority, they may follow the authority's particular form of discourse and be less likely to question the authority (Panofsky & Vadeboncoeur, 2012; Ryoo & Wing, 2012; Tian, 2013). Already in positions of authority, teachers are seen as complete experts in the foreign-language classroom, especially in Asian countries. Accordingly, the teacher's role is crucial in influencing how foreign-language learners learn to write.

Due to the teacher's position of power, a learner may merely follow rules and correct mistakes indicated by the teacher. Such an attitude and actions can limit learners' motivation to write with their own voices (Barcelos, 2006). However, most foreign-language teachers remain unaware that embracing students in a social-interaction environment can help students develop their cognitive abilities and claim

their own voices (Norton, 1997). According to Brookfield (2001), when teachers use less authority and empower learners instead, they increase students' opportunities to participate in discussion and create their own imaginative ideas in dialogic writing experiences.

In the EFL setting, memorizing vocabulary is the most used strategy of EFL learners as much instruction focuses on learning vocabulary. But most learners have difficulty using their accumulated vocabulary in their writing because they choose only words they think are appropriate for a particular context (Yotsukura, 2004). Therefore, Amhag and Jakobsson (2009) claim that to broaden foreign-language learners' writing experiences, they need to comprehend the word's meanings from the dictionary and the teacher's comments. In addition, foreign-language learners need to act in the roles of reader and writer simultaneously. They do this within a collaborative process, share writing activities with others to establish a word's meaning, and, later express meaning in their own voices. In this way, foreign-language learners can better ensure that their utterances are appropriate in the intended context (Alanen, 2003). Moreover, the combination of varied social interactions and diverse practices of language skills provides more opportunity for evaluation in a language social system, so that learners can fit language into their writing context (Medvedev & Bakhtin, 1978). Through these dialogical activities, learners become actively involved with the context and interaction with others because they can see themselves beginning to express or create new meaning to which others respond (Bakhtin, 1984; Pavlenok & Lantolf, 2000). In other words, actual writing is the final product determining whether the writer can develop coherence to construct meaning by introspection and self-reflection from reading texts. EFL learners can thus transform and internalize new words into their writing practice along with other individuals of equal standing (Cazden, 1994).

### **Benefits of Using a Blog to Enhance EFL learners' Voices**

Foreign language learners often believe that academic writing is distant and foreign because they view such writing as objective and factual, not involving ideas they might feel comfortable with (Johns, 2006). In a traditional foreign-language writing class, the instructor focuses mostly on vocabulary and grammar teaching from a textbook and practicing writing techniques, preparing students to produce conventional statements. Hashimoto (2002) contended that anxiety in EFL learning is an influential variable preventing learners from using language as frequently as possible. For instance, he found that if students had high anxiety about their language ability, then the final grades and vocabulary tasks correlated to poor performance. Moreover, Macintyre and Charos (1996) and Yashima (2002) researched that when students had low anxiety about using language, then they were willing to communicate to problem solve in a way that meant that they had high levels of communicative competence. Therefore, diminishing EFL anxiety in a sociocultural scheme leads us to say again that frequency of language use can strongly lower learners' anxiety of language learning and increase learners' willingness to communicate toward higher levels of communicative competence. Alternatively, students can be encouraged to engage in their life experience through technology such as a writing blog. With a blog, foreign-language learners can use various voices to practice and express their opinions, reducing the fear of expressing their own ideas (Elola & Oskoz, 2010). Moreover, the APMC writing blog can extend writing opportunities outside the classroom to help learners connect their writing with life experiences. Consequently, learners' thinking skills can foster more logical expressions of their ideas in a deep-thinking atmosphere. They can recall ideas from the classroom and thus be helped to shape these ideas more vividly and comprehensibly.

Schultz (2006) claimed that writing mediates between the writer and readers. Interactions enable the writer to engage with others, adopt or resist new utterances, and then transform thoughts within a particular writing situation. Therefore, a written text reflects not only the author's voice, but also his/her values and intentions. Moreover, online social interactions encourage writers to consider and monitor their effectiveness in the written text (Rowe, 2009). Within a socially constructed framework of dialogical foreign-language learning, Bakhtin's (1984) APMC tool provides opportunities for foreign-language

learners to adjust their cognitive styles and preferences to write well-formed essays (Coryell & Clark, 2009).

On the ACOM platform, students can use their newly learned words to socialize. Reciprocal exchange thus occurs between others outside of class time because ACOM helps students interact with others, and interactive activities provide unique learning opportunities in a student-centered environment (Hannafin & Land, 1997). Therefore, EFL learners can understand the meanings of words or phrases and mentally classify resources they are exposed to. Consequently, EFL learners can use the target language as their written context.

## Findings

This study explored learning utterances from dialogical writing activities to help Sandra benefit herself by expressing writing voices. There were fifteen students who participated in the entire course. There was one student who fell into that category who was selected for further interviews to see if there were any significant differences among other students because she had not taken the composition before with this instructor. Sandra was selected based upon her willingness to finish the course on time and participate in the related questionnaires, surveys and interviews. She also voiced opinions more clearly, providing more detailed reaction to this course. Data sources for this study included: (a) an oral reading and writing perception questionnaire, (b) oral reading and opinion sharing about using *Activeboard* in experience surveys, (c) in-class and writing blog observation, and (d) open-ended interviews. To explain the course and the subject, the case study reports background and events in this course through the four previously-mentioned data sources.

### Writing Blog vs. Learner's Voice

This section introduces Sandra's background in oral reading and writing perception as linked to her writing attitude. According to the oral reading survey, Sandra, disliked reading aloud because she needed to enunciate each word correctly. Even though she read aloud when reading text as assignments, she did not usually understand the text's meaning because she had difficulty understanding the vocabulary. During class time, she found it very trying to read a textbook article, but she persisted until she understood the main point because the teacher had assigned the article. When interviewed, Sandra reported that she checked new words' pronunciation before the voxpop textbook article recording; she believed this activity could improve her oral ability. For that reason, she checked unfamiliar words in the dictionary and noted the Kenyon and Knott (K.K.) phonetics beside the vocabulary. Once she discovered some mispronounced words, she read slowly and re-recorded. However, she did not use these new words from the textbook reading because they were difficult to fit into her writings. In her interview, Sandra felt "the voxpop oral textbook article reading was more like oral training class, and I don't think that it is related to the writing, and it's weird to listen to my voice from an oral reading recording." Assignments required her to use new words in her writing, and she tried, but used them with incorrect meanings. In the textbook article oral reading, she knew how to decode words, but comprehending the text's meaning was not easy or certain, so she failed to use the new words in her essay. In the writing blog platform, she usually participated minimally in the threads, and her responses were often short and incorrect. For example, here is a question received from Sharon:

Hi, Sandra! I'm Sharon, your story is quite sweet, especially third paragraph! It's wonderful that you can find a person who loves you and you also love him, too! Now, I want to ask you a few questions. Because of Leo's successful process, everyone can keep young. Can I choose the age that I want to stop? For example, I want to have the kid's appearance forever, may I?

She replied here,

Thank you, Sharon!!! I think Leo's process is pretty successful. Maybe it will have more advanced process in the future. If they invent this new function, I will try it first.

From this example, we see that Sandra replied without clear direction. This response reflects her interview statement that, "I don't think I get helped by reading others and posting questions from the writing blog." Sandra did not give correct answers to questions, and she seemed to finish required posts simply by asking and answering questions. She did not engage in reading and replying to other's posts in the blog as an alternative way to practice composition and express her opinions. In addition, Sandra also liked to restate language that others used in the thread, without adding her own meaning. Here is a reply to another's student's essay on a summer vacation:

It sounds like you really like snoopy. And you pretty much enjoy the show in Taipei. It was nice that you could went to many places. Also, you were with your mother in this trip. Before this trip, you must plane those places seriously. It was a wonderful schedule. Hope you can have fantastic trip next time.

In other words, Sandra did not evolve the question at all. In a later class, she seemed to catch the idea of asking questions, rather than just repeating others' sentences. However, she asked different people the same question and only used words she learned from others' threads. Even though Sandra had opportunities to read the article and others' posts, these activities did not help her use utterances, nor did they foster development of her writing voice.

She defined knowledge as derived from the teacher's authority, but to understand and comprehend knowledge, she thought she should depend on herself. Before taking this course, Sandra said that she did not know how to write and did not know the conventions of writing. In the interview, she said, "Before taking this course, I just wrote as I want as I can." After she attended this class, however, she had to think of transition signals and make her paper consistent. Therefore, she defined writing as "brainstorming"; but to her making her papers readable means that she must follow the rules and conventions of writing. She expressed her "following the rules" perspective vividly:

I think the teacher always can point out the main errors and give me the right direction because the peers made the corrections not always correct, but I wouldn't say anything to my peers. However, when I revised my paper, I would mainly follow the teacher's instruction.

In this writing class, students could obtain ideas from their peers in order to do better on the next paper. However, Sandra did not think her peers' advice was beneficial: "I don't think it's helpful because we are all equal and have the same ability, so the writing errors that peers corrected would be the same."

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

With blog-assisted language learning, we expect that students will understand teachers' comments on a draft. Furthermore, we give students more resources and expect them to use these resources to effectively shape their writing. Then they can design what they write to respond to others more personally and with more variety. However, this study shows that it is not sufficient to provide learners with an online tool such as a blog and expect them to develop a writers' voice. We can see that using the blog did not automatically increase or improve Sandra's writing quality and learner participation. For example, when commenting, she only confined herself to thank you messages or misunderstood the questions. In this study, however, Sandra learned not from her peers, but from the teacher authority to give the "right"

responses. She followed the teacher's rules and comments, i.e., authority discourse, which she then properly adjusted so it would be appropriate in the teacher's eyes. However, she lost opportunities to expand her process of utterance and create her own voice. In other words, this study found that despite planning dialogical writing, that is, communicating with others to obtain ideas, creativity, and confidence, Sandra maintained her concept of language learning: Follow only the teacher. According to Hodson (1999), in a social learning classroom, proximate learning involves interaction among teacher, students, and assigned learning activities. The role of the teacher online is assisting, not as a model but rather as a guide, while students collaborate to make connections between new ideas and prior knowledge, use language as a tool for learning, and develop language and thinking competencies. In that way, learners can identify themselves, make decisions, and solve writing problems together.

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