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## Blending Web 2.0 Technologies with Developing of Writing Skills in ESL Classroom: Some Insights

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### ABSTRACT

Recently, the educational field has adopted a new route for improving and increasing the way we learn languages, particularly English language, through using social networking services such as; Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other technologies in writing skills. In this respect, this paper discusses how ESL classroom can apply the social networking services or Web 2.0. Technologies effectively to promote learners' writing skills. The paper first details research studies about the characteristics of two social networking, Blogs and Wikis, to show the importance of implementing Web 2.0 technologies in writing skills. Then the benefits of applying social networking services as an essential approach for teaching and learning writing skills in L2 are presented. Paper also discusses the counter –argument, as opposite perspectives, that applying social networking websites is not always considered as a proper method to improve writing skills due to many reasons which may lead decreasing learners' level of English or make them far behind because of their difficulties they face when they use these technologies.

**Keywords:** *Web 2.0 Technologies, Writing Skills, Social Networking Services, Learners, ESL*

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### 1. Introduction

As social networking services become a popular tool to meet and communicate with different people around the world, new generations are beginning their exposure to the real world through this digital world. That is the reason social networking sites such as Facebook, Wikis, MySpace, YouTube, Flickers, or Blog are forming part of L2 teaching and learning for acquiring the target language, especially writing skills, rapidly, interestingly and efficiently. Some scholars, though, disagree about teaching and learning L2 through social networking fearing it may cause negative reflections and affect the students and the teachers in their teaching and learning as social networking services are considered informal and unsuccessful tools to receive a proper education. However, social networking services are considered vital mean for developing second language writing skills. Therefore, this paper attempts to discuss the importance of applying Web technologies to develop writing skills in ESL classroom based on research arguments favouring social networking websites like Wikis and Blogs.

The paper also aims to elaborate on the advantages of why social networking services are extremely important in teaching and learning L2 writing skills.

### 2. Literature Review

Social Networking sites, according to Boyd & Ellison (2007: 210-230), can be defined as web-based services which enable people to articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection such as teacher and the students. A lot of researches have been done on the importance of the social networking services, especially Wikis and Blogs, in effectively learning and developing writing skills. A study done by Kavaliauskiene & Vaiciuniene (2006) reported that the experience of writing on blogs provided opportunities to learners to improve their knowledge of English. A study by Nadzrah (2007) also reported that blogs helped students compose writing with specific purposes which encouraged them to improve their writing. Sims (2012) also conducted a study on effectiveness of blogging on writing skill development. She reported that her participants showed eagerness in attending class to discuss their writing. It was also reported that the

blogging experiences enhanced students' writing abilities as well as helped them in 'gaining confidence in their writing skills' (P. 3). Blackmore-Squires (2010: 41) also reported that Blogs had 'a big impact on the students and their writing skills' in second language classroom.

In this respect, Ducate and Lomicka (2005) also report that when teachers start using blogs in teaching ESL writing classroom, the class can take apart and write down their comments on each others' work. Also, social networking tools allow the students to discover different cultures by reading and writing in the blogs and allow them to interact and involve with native speakers who consider a great opportunity for the L2 learners. Meanwhile, the L2 learners become skilled readers by giving their points of view toward particular topics and good writers by selecting their topics which the learners are interested in. Lee (2009) also adds that the students become motivated to write because they take into their account when they write something in the blogs; the public will read their topics, not only their teachers. Lee (2010) declares that making blogs is quicker and simpler than making HTML. The users can upload pictures, videos, and audio clips, and hyperlinks to support their writing and make their blogs more effective and valuable.

A study was conducted by Lee (2010), with seventeen university students who were in advanced level in Spanish course. The main goal of this study was to show the development of students' writing skills when they learn a target language using blogs as out of class assignment. Blogging was the main tool in this study because it is easier to set up and has many characteristics which students can use to carry out their assignment. The participants were asked to keep their blogs for 14 weeks. The participants' missions were to read, make comments on each others' work, and give feedback on the context. The data were collected from blogs, surveys, and interviews about the difficulties faced while blogging and their opinions toward collaborative feedback. The results showed that the participants interacted confidently when they used blogs and they got benefits by creating and reading their blogs. The participants also reported that they spent good times and reported their usefulness and enjoyment when they were allowed to share their ideas with their classmates. It was reported that 80% of the participants liked the idea of writing the blogs more than

writing on papers. Besides, the participants found the blogs more effective and beneficial because they preferred to add some video and audio clips as well as post pictures and hyperlinks to make their points stronger. Similarly, about 78% of the participants found that using blogs improved their writing skills because they used blogs regularly. The outcomes of this study showed that implementing blogs in the classroom brought many advantages to the L2 learners to develop their writing fluency which supports the idea of applying Web technologies in ESL classroom to enhance writing skills.

Not only blogs, but Wikis are also considered to be very effective tools for enhancing ESL writing skill. In this respect, Wheeler, Yeomans and Wheeler (2008) stress on implementing Wikis as a beneficial means in ESL classes because it is a collaborative online tool which teachers and the students can work together consistently. There are some amazing characteristics about Wikis which are simple to create a page and to learn how to use them. Moreover, everybody can reach it quickly and easily. Also, everybody can upload videos and pictures and change texts and hyperlinks. Wikis are suitable for educational purposes and a very effective method to learn how to write academic standards.

Shu and Chuang (2012) also emphasize on mass collaboration offered by Wikis. Mass collaboration is "a form of collaborative action in which a large number of people work independently on a single project" (Shu and Chuang, 2012, p. 89). One of the most interesting features of this social networking tool is anybody can get access to Wikis and change the texts because the writer has a right to edit his or her page. Additionally, when a group of students writes the content during the writing process, other groups can read the page and change and add information at the same without waiting the first group to finish their pages. Another feature of using Wikis is that every time the page is edited, the earlier draft will remain. So, anybody can go back and check the last drafts and compare former and later versions. Wikis offer collaborative writing which has documents with high quality, more writers' participation, and "contributors with greater satisfaction" (Shu and Chuang, 2012, p. 99). Wheeler and Wheelerb (2009) also conducted a study in a university and classified the participants into four groups: 10 first year students, 10 second year



students, nine third year students, and six postgraduate students. The main goal of this study was to show how social networking services such as Wikis could be beneficial to generate ideas about specific topics. Also, another goal was to encourage the students to get the benefit from social networking service to develop their academic writing and to think critically through learning writing and reading skills. The participants were asked to use Wikis as part of their studies for ten weeks with a tutor. After ten weeks, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire through their emails. The questions were about the advantages and disadvantages of implementing such these tools in their studying and what the areas of their writing skills were developed through Wikis. The results showed that the students reported that they preferred using Wikis to create ideas and brainstorming by sharing their ideas and thoughts; they enjoyed a lot because they discussed the contents of their courses with each other. Furthermore, the students agreed that Wikis assisted them a lot to improve their writing skills specifically in academic standards. The students became aware of using citation from other sources and made great efforts to check their references validity before they posted them to the public. To sum up, applying Wikis in ESL encourages the learners to improve the quality of academic writing standards through collaboration which is considered as evidence that how Web technologies is a great aid to developing writing skills.

### 3. The Advantages of Using Social Networking Services in L2 Writing Skills

There are plenty of studies endorsing social networking usage in ESL classroom and how Web technologies can enhance learning and teaching writing skills. Yunus, Salehi and Chenzi (2012) emphasize in their study on brainstorming through social networking because brainstorming is considered as a key step to begin writing. Students can share not only ideas, but also they can share some pictures, videos, and audio clips, and hyperlinks which assist them to create their thoughts. The way to start brainstorming is by creating an account on Facebook, Blog, or Wiki which teachers can supervise. The benefits of using group discussion and brainstorming are like training method through which learners can think critically and also get "work-peer skills" to improve "their expression abilities" (p. 46). To conclude, learners can generate great ideas

and share their thoughts through social networking services.

Another privilege of using social networking services is to help the beginners communicate with their classmates confidently. Some students feel embarrassed because their speaking or listening is not strong enough to have conversations with their peers. Besides, using social networking services outside the classrooms encourages the learners to interact and contact with their classmates and their teachers permanently and give them a lot of confidence to write and express their thoughts by writing in English (Yunus, Salehi, and Chenzi, 2012). In short, social networking sites can help the learners to gain confidence and to feel free by contacting their teachers and their peers.

Motivation and enthusiasm generate creative writing when L2 learners are involved in social networking sites. Gibbons (2010) stresses that writing collaboration is quicker and more effective tool to L2 proficiently. He notices that shy students have an opportunity to reach their voices and express their points of view through Wikis, blogs, or Facebook. Also, the students welcome their peers' constructive criticism which encourages them to change their pages to be more efficient and meaningful by adding pictures, hyperlinks, and video and audio clips. Creative writing is considered as a fantastic combination of sharing the students' experiences and expressing their thoughts through social networking tools. In short, these services offer encouragement and enthusiasm to the learners which lead them to do creative writing.

One advantage of using social networking services is getting feedback from students –teachers or/and students – students. Kim (2009) encourages the students and the teachers to get the benefits of using some features on Facebook and blogs to give some feedback which L2 learners need them to improve their ways of writing. By applying feedback, the students can participate actively by writing down some comments on each others' work. Also, the students will learn how they discuss comments with their peers and how they can apply these comments to correct their work. By this way, the students will learn language collaboratively. Lee (2009) emphasizes that L2 learners can exchange knowledge and increase their awareness of various cultures as well as improve their writing through peer feedback. Furthermore, Lee prefers using

"collaborative scaffolding" in peer feedback because peers can give some notices on each others' work, and then they correct their mistakes based on peer's assessment before their work goes to the teachers to check. (p. 214). As a result of this, L2 learners can create new ideas and find their linguistic problems through interactive peer feedback. Shih (2011) stresses on teachers and learners to use peer assessment process to give feedback on Facebook. Shih conducted a research aimed at investigating how blending learning combines between peer assessment and using Web 2.0 or social networking services, Facebook, to improve their writing standards. The results showed that the students learned a lot of skills such as organization, grammar, content vocabulary and spelling. Also, some students encountered difficulties at the times when they wanted to write; so Facebook can encourage them to write as they will see their classmates' participation and comments on each others' work. To sum up, implementing peer feedback through social networking tools give some opportunities to the learners to their critical thinking and correct their linguistic problems through collaborative feedback.

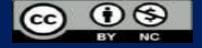
Another characteristic of implementing social networking services is allowing the students to discover the real world by interacting positively with native and non –native speakers. According to Ducate and Lomicka (2008), social networking tools are providing valuable opportunities to the students to break the routine of the traditional classroom. Because sites such as Facebook, Wikis, blogs, and Twitter have a large audience. Students can take this chance and communicate actively with different people around the world. These tools are very helpful especially for the students who are shy to get them involved, share their points of view, and make some comments to other people. Similarly, Williams and Jacobs (2004) agree to use social networking services in the field of education because these tools allow the students to get exposed to the large audience and let them think critically how their perspectives might influence on the readers. As a result, L2 students will learn how to write properly by interacting with native speakers, and they will have "a sense of global interaction" (Yunus, Salehi, and Chenzi, 2012, p. 44). Furthermore, when Lee (2009) conducted a study about intercultural exchange, the results appeared that the social networking services are the best place where the

learners can share their experiences and knowledge and exchange their ideas collaboratively. In short, social networking tools not only develop L2 students' writing skills but also allow them to exchange ideas and cultures.

Besides, there is a strong relationship between peer familiarity, written interactions, and writing performance through social network analysis. Kim (2009) considers peer familiarity and written interactions among the learners have a vital role to enhance writing process and writing quality. Furthermore, Kim confirms in his study that implementing social networking services is extremely valuable tool for creating interactive activities and "collaborative writing process" which influence written interaction and writing quality (p. 95). Kim states in his study that when the learners use social network analysis (weblog) constantly, they become eager to produce more writing in Weblog, to post their opinions, and to give direct feedback through making comments on each others' work in Weblog. Using weblog leads to increase their writing quality and to take their peers' feedbacks and comment and apply them in writing. To sum up, written interactions, writing performance and peer familiarity produce better writing using social network analysis.

#### **4. Some Restrictions for Using Web 2.0 Technologies in ESL Classroom**

Some researchers claim that there are some negative aspects of using social networking services in ESL classroom. A study by Yunus, Salehi and Chenzi (2012) showed that the students were easily distracted when they used the social networking tools. They could not pay enough attention in their assignment; they started to use different websites and play some games. Another problem was that the students started using some abbreviations and informal writings on these social networking websites. By this way, the students gradually forgot the proper academic writing style and started mixing between the formal and informal English writing and vocabulary. Moreover, some social networking websites offer some services like spell check corrections, and the outcome is that L2 students will no long recognize spelling of vocabulary and become lazy to memorize and practice writing. Additionally, L2 students face a lot of misleading information in these social networking services which guide the students to adopt misconceptions toward



some issues. Another issue in respect of applying technology in ESL writing classroom, social networking tools might lead the students to boredom. Besides, not every language and every level are appropriate to apply the technology in the L2 classrooms. The reason behind that is learners of some languages such as logographic languages counter difficulties to use social networking tools during writing using the keyboard, particularly learners with less proficiency in a language. As a result, the learners will spend a long time to train themselves until they get familiar with typing on the computer keyboard and they will not pay attention to their assignment (Wang, 2005). To end up, social networking tools may cause some problems which affect the students passively.

### 5. Conclusion

Social networking tools have a positive influence on the way of learning and teaching a second language. The main purposes of having technology in the system of education are a) helping the learners to do brainstorming pre-writing, b) assisting lower proficient learners to interact with advanced level of learners, c) creating an atmosphere of motivation and enthusiasm among L2 learners, d) giving feedback and making comments on students' work, e) opening many facets to L2 learners to communicate actively with native speakers which is an excellent opportunity to expose the real life, and f) combining between peer familiarity, written interactions, and writing performance through social networking analysis which contribute positively to develop academic standards. Many studies were done to manifest the extent to these social networking services affect learning and teaching of L2 and how the technology enhances the system of education in the classroom and both positive and negative aspects have been outlined. However, to get maximum out of these implementations, there are some recommendations for the teacher to take into their account. Shih (2011) advises the teachers to do training before involving the class into the digital world focusing on how to communicate actively with peers through social networking services. Furthermore, English writing teachers can spend an amount of time for putting more efforts to correct the learners' comments and online assignment. Also, the teachers should encourage less motivated students by pushing them to write and assess their peers. In the end, Web

2.0 or social networking services are considered a great means to interact with other people and know different cultures as well as to acquire a second language and to improve vocabulary, grammar, and spelling.

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