

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter reviews the conceptual framework of this study and related studies that have been done on writing and blogs. Using blogs as a teaching tool to enhance language learning has been becoming popular in the last decade. Recently, teachers have started to see the usefulness of using blogs with their students. Blogging is no longer seen as just an internet tool but as a very useful medium of teaching and communicating with the students. According to Richardson (2005), teachers are beginning to see the educational benefits of blogging and use it as classroom portals, storing handouts and posting assignments.

Blogs are communicative by nature which makes this study lean towards using them in the writing classrooms, where they can be used to supplement the teaching material. Moreover, students along with teachers can benefit from blogging, if the writing tasks are designed in such a way that they are of interest and meaningful to the students. Blogs, can thus, be a good medium to make students motivated to write and then share that writing with their teacher as well as peers.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The idea of integrating technology for communication in education has been accepted by teachers and educators worldwide. The benefits have been recognized both inside and outside the classroom. This section describes the conceptual framework related to blogging (see Figure 1). The current study was conducted based on the concepts of writing in L2, blogs and communicative skills in writing through collaborative blogging.

2.1.1 Writing in L2

Writing is an important skill that is required for communicating with others. Becoming a good writer requires a lot of practice both by native speakers of English as well as non-native speakers. In order to become a proficient writers one needs to possess a number of skills, for instance, good spelling skills, the skill to be able to express complex ideas in a simple way, metacognitive skills, namely, being aware of the audience and understanding different writing genres (Diane & Shanahan, 2008). There are three fundamental dimensions of second language writing which include the text that needs to be produced, the composing process and the context in which the text is written (Cumming, 2001). The production of rich texts involves the second

language writer to possess metacognitive skills as mentioned previously. These are essentially skills that require the writer to think about how to use the knowledge that they already have to work on the writing task. Weigle (2005: 131) claims that metacognition involves “compensatory strategies for overcoming perceived gaps in

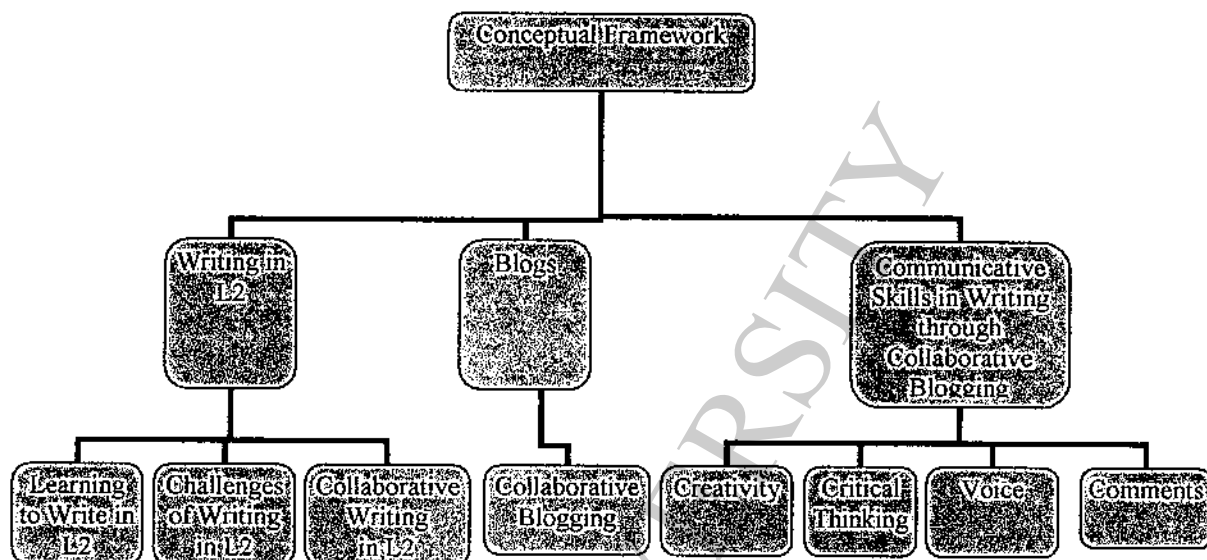


Figure 1. A conceptual framework of the study

one’s knowledge about the task”. An example of this could be students trying to relax and concentrate when they are trying to use a language pattern they have never studied before.

2.1.1.1 Learning to Write in L2

The process of learning to write in L2 is not too different from learning to write in the first language. According to Fitzgerald (2006) L2 learners’ developmental process of writing skills in English does not differ much from native speakers of English. However, one special aspect that target language learners bring to their writing is their bicultural and bilingual experiences (Hyland, 2003). Second or foreign language learners tend to use their first language knowledge and different strategies when writing in the second language. This language transfer tends to occur due to the gap in the learners knowledge between L1 and L2. O’Malley and Chamot (1996: 120) define this transfer as “the use of linguistic or prior skills to assist in comprehension or production”. The bicultural experiences are as a result of the learner studying two different languages, and hence their cultures. Culture is intertwined with language, and the identity of the bilingual learner gradually evolves through their experiences. Another aspect that they bring to their writing is the interference of the first language of the students while they write in the L2. The type of interference could be in terms of phonology, vocabulary or grammar. When writing in the target language the learner tends to lean heavily on the native language (L1) structures. The subject-verb

agreement, syntactical rules and tenses could be examples of the difference in the structures between the learner's first and second language. If there is a marked difference in the structures of the two languages then one can expect a relatively high error in L2 writing.

2.1.1.2 Challenges of Writing in L2

This section describes the challenges in writing in L2. For EFL learners, writing seems to be a difficult task. Firstly, EFL learners tend to rely on their L1 while writing in L2 with regards to vocabulary, generating ideas and planning their writing. For example, the dependence on translation in their writing in English may not prove to be useful because of the differences in syntax between Thai and English. Research conducted by Grabe and Kaplan (1996), Kaplan (1966, 1988) and Matsuda (1997) show that copying the L1 system of writing while writing in L2 may not always produce texts in English that meet readers' expectations. In addition, EFL learners may not have acquired enough English language knowledge to be proficient writers (Cumming, 1989; Pennington & So, 1993). L2 learners in general may have insufficient knowledge of the L2, or they may tend to overgeneralize the rules that they learn about using the language. According to Myles (2002), the learners may also lack familiarity with new linguistic structures and organization and presentation of their ideas. This may lead to expressing things in a wrong way in their writing, which might be perceived by native speakers of English as incomprehensible or not related to the topic.

Moreover, L2 learners' exposure to the second language maybe varied in their everyday lives, whereas their exposure to L1 is greater and fairly constant. Most L2 texts that the learners get access to are mostly in the classrooms and the school and university atmosphere. Thongrin (2000, 2001, 2002, 2006) found that Thai EFL students, who had limited exposure to L2 texts, had a problem in generating their thoughts in a sequence that could be understood by readers and expressing those thoughts while writing. Lastly, the students might not have received guided instructions before they start writing. A study carried out by Gebhard, Harman and Seger (2007) revealed that explicit instruction helped learners develop writing in the second language. In terms of blogging, it is necessary for the teacher to give the L2 learners relevant and supportive instructions about the software that they will be using. In a study by Armstrong and Retterer (2008), the learners were provided a training session in which each of them practiced how to make and start using their own blogs. This gave the learners an opportunity to get familiar with the software and also address any technical issues that they came across while blogging.

In summation, it can be seen that students face the following challenges while writing in the L2:- the tendency of EFL learners to rely on their L1 while writing in the L2, insufficient knowledge of the L2 in order to write proficiently, limited exposure to L2 texts before writing, and not having received guided instructions from teachers before starting to write in the L2.

2.1.1.3 Collaborative Writing in L2

Collaborative writing is defined as the combined production of a text by at least two writers (Storch, 2011). It includes one person working interactively with others and creating or revising a text based on others' ideas (Farkas, 1991). In the real world, learning is more often a social process where the learning takes place between peers, teachers, students, parents and children. This communication with peers and others improves learners' skills on managing clashes, helps acquire leadership roles, gives learners a chance to understand and clarify concepts and develops learning outcomes (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Regarding the nature of writing, Ong (1982) and Olson (1981) claim that writing is not a solitary act. In universities, assigning collaborative writing assignments is quite common as it simulates the real world team writing scenario (Strauss, 2001). The process of writing in a collaborative manner helps the writer by providing feedback. This further provides insight into improving the writing task. In addition, Bruffee (1993) states that the process of collaborative writing encourages reflective thinking and leads to a greater awareness of the audience. Likewise, collaborative writing provides learners with the opportunity to get feedback from various characters such as co-writers, teachers and critical readers. The provision and noticing of this feedback is said to be more feasible with writing as compared to speaking (Harklau, 2002). Spoken language is fleeting, temporary and in the moment, whereas written language can be reflected upon and altered if desired.

The other advantages that collaborative writing brings to learners are that it lets them express the meaning they want to put across, and gives a voice to their thoughts. These thoughts are then changed into writing that can be explored and language further (Swain, 2010). This work on collaborative dialogues by Swain (2010) is influenced by Vygotsky's theory that in the real world learning is a social process. This learning is where peers collaborate and provide scaffolding to each other by sharing their expertise, a process that is referred to as collaborative scaffolding (Storch, 2009). Collaborative writing, thus, gives learners opportunity to raise questions about their peers' as well as their own language use when they try and create a text. The great benefit is for all learners to be able to share various resources when they face problems (Kim, 2008).

2.1.2 Blogs

Rapid advancements in technology have influenced the way computers are being used for communicating in daily life. An example of advancement in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is blogs, which have gained momentum in the last decade. According to Rettberg (2008), the word blog is derived from weblog and was originally coined by Jorn Barger. These weblogs were like online diaries and were used to keep information about various things in one's life. Blogging has been catching on since then and more teachers are trying to integrate it into their classrooms (Beeson, 2005). The advantages that blogs provide are educational benefits such as allowing students to work at their own pace and providing a broad audience to increase students' participation and motivation. Fernette and Brock Eide (EideNeurolearning Blog, 2005) state that blogging can also be a powerful promoter of creative thinking, a powerful medium for increasing access

and exposure to quality information and combine the best of solitary reflection and social interaction.

The collaborative nature of blogging which leads to the development of language skills, learner motivation and learner identity has led to a lot of research interest by educators and teachers in the last few years. Several studies have reported that blogging brings about collaboration, develops a sense of community among students and helps develop students' writing skills (Bloch, 2007; Lee, 2010; Noytim, 2010; Sun, 2009). For English teachers, blogging collaboratively also brings about a range of literacy skills, that might not be developed in the traditional classroom. By receiving feedback from peers, students are exposed to new language that they can use to write in subsequent blog posts. This gives students exposure to new language patterns, thus helping them learn the language.

Through blogging collaboratively, students were motivated by a real audience, their peers and the "Internet" (Ackerman, 2006). The feedback that students receive from the audience also makes students cautious of what they write. The constructive feedback that students receive from peers as well as readers from different countries makes the learning process more diverse. There are new ideas and information that is shared on the blogs and students can notice and become aware of linguistic forms in the text. Nadzrah (2009) suggests that using blogs improves the student communication and interaction with peers and the wider community. In the process of working collaboratively, it is beneficial if there is gradual scaffolding by the teacher in the beginning. Eventually the students can be given opportunities to become autonomous and take control of their learning.

2.1.3 Communicative Skills in Writing through Collaborative Blogging

Communication skills are set of skills that enable a person to convey information so it is received and understood. Good communication skills in writing are reflected in the way a person is able to express his/her thoughts clearly. The present study focused on the following communicative skills in writing, namely, critical thinking, creativity, voice and comments. According to White et al. (2000), any kind of writing brings about communication, and writing on blogs is a powerful tool for communication in the modern, digital age. They have been looked upon as a platform for students to improve fluency by writing new posts and also commenting on their peers' work. The shift from the teacher as audience to other students and peers increases the motivation and interest of the students to write and keeps the students engaged (Thompson, 2000).

2.1.3.1 Creativity

With regards to creativity, this form of online collaboration can be used to create powerful connections among students, collaborations and give students opportunities to display their creativity (Johnson, 2010). Creativity in writing is defined as the ability of the writer to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions rather than simply stating facts and information (Hale, 2008). According to White (1980), creative writing is communication through exposure; it is the freeing oneself into the open. Creativity in writing can be brought about by metaphors, poems and non-fictional writing. Using metaphors in creative writing is a necessary part of

communicating in a specific way with the audience, and can bring more substance to the writing, thus helping to make a powerful connection with the reader (Waldman, 2007). Secondly, poetic expression in writing can lead to a richness of thoughts in a way that is admired by the readers (Grover, 2012). And finally, expressing creativity through nonfiction writing has been looked upon as just another form of communicating to readers by telling stories and utilizing dialogues, but in a way that it keeps the reader entertained but informed (Gutkind, 2007). In relation to the above creativity in writing can also be brought about by having a title that attracts the attention of the reader, using pictures to support the content, and making the content unique and memorable, in such a way that it engages the audience (Lai, 2011). Thus, as a result of using blogs, creativity in writing can be stretched by stimulating conversations and connecting with other people, that leads to rethinking about old ideas, and working on new ones (McGuinness, 2013). As defined by a blogger on the internet, the more time students give to blogging and delivering to the community, the more opportunity they get to become creative writers (Goins, 2011). Students can get creative in their blogs by posting not only text, but also pictures, videos and other hyperlinks that are not possible with the traditional paper-pencil method.

2.1.3.2 Critical Thinking

Following creativity, critical thinking is another important communicative skill in writing. Critical thinking is a form of realistic and perceptive thinking that focuses on deciding what to do and how to do it. It has also been defined as thinking of a particular quality, namely good thinking that meets specified criteria or standards of competence and precision (Bailin, 2002). Bean (1996) says that in order to appreciate the connection between good thinking and good writing, one needs to see knowledge as something other than discrete bits of information to be studied and stored. It involves formulating ideas, reflecting on them, interpreting them and being able to communicate those thoughts effectively with others. Communication can be seen as the process of getting ideas across and receiving ideas and information and it is in this context that critical thinking can be perceived as an important communicative skill. According to Pohl (2000), critical thinking has been categorized into creating, evaluating, analyzing, applying, understanding and remembering, where creating, evaluating, and analyzing are the higher order thinking skills. Critical thinking, as such, has been defined as the process of analyzing and evaluating thinking with the goal of trying to improve on it (Paul & Elder, 2008). This would involve the critical thinker to raise and ask important questions when writing about a topic or commenting on others' work, identify and come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, communicate with others and be open to different viewpoints when finding solutions or coming to a conclusion, and also raise inquisitiveness and think open-mindedly within alternate systems of thought (Paul & Elder, 2008). Critical thinking also involves one to consider both sides of an issue when writing or commenting about a topic, and also display a sense of inquisitiveness to enhance one's personal wealth of information (Lai, 2011). According to Pohl (2000), internalizing one's thoughts and revising judgments based on new information through critical thinking is also seen as one of the affective domains that affects one's way of thinking. Thus, along with creativity, collaboration and communication, critical thinking seems to be one of the most important components of learning in the 21st century.

Blogs can be looked upon as a medium to promote critical thinking skills among students. According to McGuinness (2013), a lot of clarification in one's thinking happens as a result of writing blog posts and commenting on feedback received from others. It is important for students to also be able to think critically when they write, and it is the teacher's responsibility to introduce this process. By doing this, students will be able to write consistently and cohesively, and this leads to the development of their writing. When writing on blogs, students must carefully monitor what they write, as it will be available to the public. This process of writing carefully leads to the development of critical thinking skills.

2.1.3.3 Voice

As a result of writing on blogs, students can try and find their blogging voice by communicating with a wider audience. A good and consistent blogging voice leads to effective communication, more appeal and more fans, and also influences the readership on the blog. It is important to write consistently and comfortably, and also observe others' blogging voices. This process involves not only expressing one's own views but also observing feedback from others since blogs involve a two way communication and comments are exchanged back and forth. The different types of blogging voices usually found on the internet are informative, friendly, humorous, inspirational and dreamy (Cutmore, 2012).

To begin with, the informative blogging voice is seen as one of the most common writing styles in blogs, and bloggers of this kind like to give facts and information clearly to the audience. This type of blogger needs to write interesting points in such a way that it informs the audience about something. A very important rule for informative bloggers, as suggested by Chibuzor (2013), is to do detailed research on others' inspirational blogs, which in turn gives ideas to write one's blog. Secondly, a blogger with a friendly voice makes the audience feel comfortable when reading the blogs and adds a personal touch to the writing, which gives the audience an impression that they are having a real conversation when reading the blogs. According to Stewart (2012), when writing with a friendly blogging voice it is important to remain authentic and just be yourself, since blogging is an online extension of a personal conversation. Having humor in one's blog voice also is necessary when it is called, but depending on the topic that the blog post is about, it is understandable to have a serious tone to it sometimes. The blogger with a humorous voice likes to add humor to their writing and gives the audience a few laughs now and then when they read the blogs. According to an online blogger, Hess (2012), having a tone of humor in one's blog post will be naturally sensed by the reader, and the writer doesn't have to try too hard to bring in that humor. Next, the inspirational type of blogger has the ability to write in a style that encourages and inspires the reader and provides a positive spirit to their minds (Ridinger, 2012). Lastly, the blogger with a sentimental voice is seen as writing in an emotional way about the good and bad experiences in life and keeps the reader engaged (Cutmore, 2012). The writer tries to develop a connection with the reader, as the reader tries to dream about and imagine the situation that is given in the writing. According to Bloch (2007), blogging helps students acquire a sense of voice in a community of writers in English. If there is a

need to rightfully prepare students for communicating in the real world, teachers can no longer be the only source of information in the classroom (Johnson, 2010).

2.1.3.4 Comments

The comments generated from readers are also valuable for blog writers as the number of comments generated might affect their motivation to write. According to Gunelius (2013), comments are the sections in blog posts, typically immediately following the post entry, where readers can provide their reactions to the content of the post. It is a two way communication between the reader and the writer, where both sides voice opinions, leading to further discussion. Blog commenting helps in promoting a healthy, active and interactive community with lots of reader input. Comments are what makes the blog social in nature and helps in developing the blogging community as well as the writer's online presence. The comments are generally of six different types, which are, disputative, non-disputative, critical, subjective, positive and negative.

Disputative comments are those which disagree with the blogger or other commenters, thereby giving scope for an online debate and non-disputative being ones that do not bring about any disagreement or debate (Mishne & Glance, 2006). Secondly, critical comments are usually those statements that make the writer's point clearer and more emphasizing, with the intention of possibly disagreeing without being disagreeable (Musc, 2000). Going on to the third type of blog comments, that is subjective comments, they are usually personal and contain some subjective information, to express feelings or concerns regarding any matter (Yang et al., 2009). Finally, positive comments seem to be important for a blogger and appreciating one's work can lead to the blogger feeling motivated and wanting to write (Grand, 2013). Negative comments are of course, inevitable, and a blogger might face them sometime. They are comments that may carry a tinge of non-constructive criticism and might be potentially rude or offensive (Gunelius, 2013). Also, on receiving very few or almost no comments, blog writers might question their ability to write well and communicate with their readers. Moreover, this might affect the popularity of blogs, when viewed by various readers on the internet. A well written blog that receives a lot of comments might be seen as one worth reading. According to Dmattricno (2011), leaving meaningful and consistently positive comments on others' blogs might also help in attracting readership to one's own site. The feedback through comments that are received on a blog, however, needs to be curbed sometimes, because of inappropriate content or lack of relevance. There are options on blog websites that allows writers to change the privacy settings to allow greater control of the blog comments. Regardless of these potential problems in receiving blog comments, they are defined as a simple and effective way to interact with their readership and one of the defining set of weblog characteristics (Michne & Glance, 2006).

According to Myles (2002) limited knowledge of the L2 such as vocabulary, content and language structure might inhibit students' writing performance. Online collaboration overcomes the above hurdles by making a large pool of resources available to the writer in order to get new ideas for writing and doing it in their own convenient time.

2.2 Review of Related Studies

Studies related to using computers and the internet in writing have been done for several years, such as online courses to improve the students proficiency and attitudes towards learning English (Al-Jarf, 2005) and using online video conferencing and chat sessions with a group of students living in different parts of the world, in which they were asked to write a research paper together (Noel, 2011). However, studies about the effects of blogging on communicative skills in writing of students are rare. The present study intended to discover the effects of collaborative blogging on the communicative skills in writing of university students and their attitudes towards collaborative blogging. The review of related studies can be categorized into the following three groups: blogs, collaborative blogs and communicative skills in writing through online collaboration.

The concept of blogs and their unique features attracted teachers as well as education researchers to use them in their own courses and classrooms. Many studies have been conducted to explore the effectiveness of using blogs in writing and classroom learning. Brooks et al (2004) carried out a study to investigate the relationship between weblog genres such as journal weblogs, notebook weblogs etc. and student motivation. The study was conducted with freshmen and well as senior students. The results revealed that students generally values personal reflection and showed a preference for journal weblogs regardless of the courses that they were taking. One of the participants said that writing on a blog journal made her feel motivated to write, because, although it was like writing in a journal, other people were going to read it too. The researchers concluded that irrespective of the genre of weblogs, technology has a great potential to increase students' self-expression and their motivation to learn.

Recent studies have also investigated how the application of blogging contributed to raising students' language awareness. Kavaliauskiene et al. (2006a, 2006b, 2007) conducted studies on students who were studying ESP (English for Specific Purposes) at a university in Lithuania. Blogs were used with the participants, which was a medium for them to do their assignments and submit their homework. The researchers pointed out that language awareness was brought about in the interaction between the lecturers and the students in the process of posting and receiving comments on blogs. The results from the questionnaires distributed among the participants showed that nearly 70% of the participants found reading blogs and writing comments to be useful. The study concluded that online activities such as using blogs motivated learners to enhance their language skill and awareness. Another significant strand of research related to using blogs is learner autonomy. A study was carried out by Pinkman (2005) in a foreign language class at a university in Japan to determine the effectiveness of using blogs in improving learner autonomy. The findings revealed that the interaction between students as well as between students and lecturers were perceived as beneficial by students, increasing their interest and motivation to use English. The results from the questionnaires and interviews showed that nearly 80% of students had developed learner autonomy.

Regarding blogs in general, Wang and Fang (2005) carried out an exploratory study on college students, the main idea being centered on the advantages brought about by weblog networks. The investigation showed that nearly 65% of the students approved that using weblog networks enhanced their academic development and

increased their opportunities to participate in writing classes. The participants still favored face-to-face interaction; however, they felt that using blogs helped in aiding the learning process. The other advantages of using blogs in teaching, addressed by the researchers, were learner autonomy, cooperative learning and time management.

The benefits of using collaborative blogging to increase students' motivation and interest to write was evident from a study conducted by Glogoff (2003). The researcher conducted an online course and used blogs with his class of 2003. A class blog was created and students were allowed to share their ideas in the blog space. They could discuss things related to one of the course's main themes which were real world use for new technologies. Students who were not that motivated to post comments on the blog did not do so and the other students complained about them. In order to make things more effective in the following year, the researcher added a blog for each student and gave assignments in class. The students were required to read others' blogs and comment on those at least three times a week. This increased students' motivation to work on their blogs and they started taking an interest. It provided a sense of community to them and participation increased. They said that being able to read and comment on what their peers wrote gave them an opportunity to understand the course content a lot better.

Drexler et al.(2007) carried out a study between pre-service teachers and third-grade students to help the students complete a five-paragraph essay as part of an assignment. The study used collaborative blogging in which each student posted their assignments on their respective blogs. The assignment involved each student to write a paragraph contributing towards an essay. The students were given instructions on how to use the blogs before starting the study. The pre-service teachers recommended websites they could visit that would help them with their assignment. As each paragraph of a student's assignment was posted on their own blogs, the teachers also made comments and encouraged them to do better. After the assignment was complete, all the paragraphs were combined and posted on the class website. This study was a success in that it not only improved the writing skills of the students but other skills they learned through the collaboration process were transferred to other subjects and other facets of their life. The students' visual literacy skills also improved since the assignment finally culminated into an online presentation, further improving the presentation skills of the third grade student

Another important area of research that the present study focused on is the communicative skills in writing through online collaboration. Saeed and Yang (2008) conducted an action research to find out how effective blogs were, when combined with a course. The study was carried out in an institution in Australia offering courses in technology. The results revealed that more than 80% of the participants who accessed the blogs posted at least one answer in reply to the queries posted by other classmates. The researchers found that the participants were ready to share their thoughts on the blogs and this improved online collaboration and communication not only among the students but also among the lecturers. Another interesting finding of the study was that nearly 40% of the participants preferred to stay anonymous on the blogs, in order to be able to voice their opinions frankly.

In another study by Sun and Chang (2012), seven graduate students studying for a Master's degree in TESOL and Linguistics created their own blogs and used them to share knowledge with one another. The interactive features of the blogs not only helped the students in generating and sharing knowledge but also gave them a space to seek their writer identity and their voice in writing.

From the studies reviewed above, it was found that most participants found blogs to be interactive and beneficial in the learning process. Some participants did raise issues about privacy, and the conditions of participation. Regardless of the feedback that was received, students still need proper guidance from teachers before starting to carry out blogging activities, in order to participate and contribute to the success of the blogging group as a whole.

The present study focused on the effect of incorporating blogs into the regular writing course. One of the emphases of blogging collaboratively was the noticing of language patterns by the participants through reading and commenting on others' blogs, and trying to incorporate those in their own blogs. Regarding learner autonomy, the present study on blogging also involved the participants to not only write on their own blogs, but also comment on at least two other participants' blogs. This was to investigate if this prerequisite along with her anonymous identity motivated the students to blog with each other. Above all, the effectiveness of collaborative blogging on the participants' communicative skills in writing was the main focus of the present study.

2.3 Summary of the Chapter

The review of the literature and related studies found that the use of collaborative blogging holds great promise as a medium to teach and learn a language. A review of writing in L2 found some essential factors that contribute to success in writing, that also relate to using technology in writing. It further reinforced the ideas of using collaborative blogging to bring about learner autonomy, learner motivation and improving of communicative skills in writing. There seems to be great prospective for integrating blogs into the school curriculum, as it promotes learning through communicating with one another.