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How can blogging in foreign language education improve pupils' writing skills?

A research synthesis

*Hur kan bloggande i undervisningen i främmande språk förbättra
elevers skriftliga färdigheter?*

En forsknings översikt

Anna Karlsson

Abstract

The purpose of this research synthesis is to investigate how using blogs and Facebook in foreign language teaching can improve pupils' writing skills in the target language. According to the theoretic framework around which the results of this research synthesis are organized, linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural and strategic competence are part of writing skills. The results show that out of the 8 studies included in the research synthesis five showed an improvement in linguistic competence, three out of those five showed an improvement in pragmatic competence as well, and another three studies also showed an improvement in pragmatic competence. None of the studies showed an improvement in intercultural or strategic competence.

Key words: asynchronous computer mediated communication, blogs, Facebook, foreign language writing, foreign language teaching, foreign language learning, writing skills

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Introduction

The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) has a responsibility to promote Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Swedish schools.

The responsibility of the municipalities/independent schools is to provide access to computers and Internet in schools as well as to ensure that practitioners i.e. teachers are skilled in using ICT as a pedagogical tool. At the school level the responsibility is to choose methods and means to achieve the overall goals stated in the Education Act, the curriculum and other guiding documents.(SNAE 2012 p. 3)

At the school where I work this has resulted in that every pupil has their own iPad. The demand on us as teachers is now to make use of these iPads in our teaching.

For some time I felt an enormous pressure to reinvent my ways of teaching. I was frustrated at the talk of apps which were supposed to be useful in my English class because I only came across apps that replaced gap-filling exercises in exercise books which I did not use anyway. Finally I realized with the help from other colleagues that I could finally fulfill my dream of letting my pupils keep reading journals and that this would be easier since they could now do it online in forms of Facebook posts or blog posts. In my English teaching I now use blog and Facebook where my English pupils write reading journals. When keeping reading journals my pupils are given the opportunity ”/.../ to develop their ability to: understand and interpret the content /.../in different types of texts, express themselves and communicate in/.../ writing, use language strategies to understand and make themselves understood, adapt language for different purposes, recipients and contexts/.../” (SNAE 2011 p. 32) by reading real fiction in English and writing real sentences and using English grammar in a context. By making my pupils make posts on a blog or on Facebook I can give them quick feedback on their grammar or spelling which then all my pupils in the same group can read and learn from. The reason I want to investigate how blogs can improve my pupils writing skills is because I get many e-mails from parents wondering why I don't give their kids any traditional grammar exercises where I go through a rule and then give them an exercise where they fill in gaps. I feel that I want to be able to answer these

concerned parents by supporting my ideas of English teaching and the use of blogs to improve my pupils writing skills on research. Therefore I have decided to do a research synthesis on the topic.

Aim and Research Question

The aim of this research synthesis is to find out how using blogs and Facebook in foreign language teaching can improve pupils' writing skills in the target language.

My research question is as follows:

How does using blogs and Facebook in foreign language teaching improve pupils' writing skills in the target language?

Theoretical framework

According to Chapelle (2009) it is hard to evaluate CALL activities and tasks focusing on only one theoretical approach to Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Since the aim of this research synthesis is to find out how using blogs and Facebook in foreign language teaching can improve pupils writing skills in the target language it is necessary to explain what is meant by improving writing skills. Cumming (2006) states that ”/.../ learning to write in a second or foreign language fundamentally involves students improving 1) features of the texts they write, 2) their processes of composing, and 3) their interactions appropriate to literate social contexts.” (p. 474)

Considering previous research (e.g. Canale and Swain, 1980) Usó and Martinez-Flor (2006) propose a theoretical framework of communicative competence. According to their theoretical framework communicative competence consists of linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, intercultural competence and strategic competence which all four lead to discourse competence. Discourse competence thus being the core of communicative competence, knowing how to communicate. The function of writing skills, speaking skills, listening skills and reading skills is to build the discourse competence. Writing skills would then mean the ”/.../knowledge of how to produce linguistically and pragmatically accurate sentences given particular sociocultural norms together with the ability to use strategies to allow effective communication” (Usó, Martinez-Flor & Palmer-Silveira 2006 p. 391).

From the perspective of writing skills, linguistic competence is the fundamental knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and mechanics. A writer needs to know the meaning of words and how to use them in different contexts as well as grammar rules, rules for punctuation and how to spell, to be able to form texts that are readable. (Usó-Juan et. al. 2006) ”Students improve their written texts by increasing their /.../ uses of specific vocabulary, complexity of syntax, and accuracy in grammatical forms.” (Cumming 2006 p. 474)

Pragmatic competence when it comes to writing involves knowing how to adapt a text to its purpose and recipient. This includes knowing if an utterance is appropriate according to the meaning intended and the receiver of the text and using the appropriate level of formality and politeness. (Usó-Juan et. al. 2006) ”Students improve their

composing processes by doing more sophisticated and effective planning, revising, and editing of their texts - attending conscientiously to their appropriate choices of words, discourse coherence, and rhetorical functions in relation to their ideas, purposes for writing, the audience(s) they address, and for learning the language.” (Cumming 2006 p. 474)

”Intercultural competence deals with the knowledge of how to produce written texts within a particular sociocultural context.” (Usó-Juan et. al. 2006 p. 393) Each culture has its own rules of what is acceptable or not acceptable behavior within its language community and a writer needs to understand and follow these rules. (Usó-Juan et. al. 2006)

Strategic competence is also important to writers. According to Canale and Swain (1980) strategic competence consist of the communication strategies we use to solve problems and breakdowns in the communication with others. A writer needs communication strategies ”/.../such as paraphrasing, restructuring or literal translation /.../” (Usó et. al. 2006 p. 393). Examples of paraphrasing are the use of similar words to the word one is looking for, making up new words or describing what one means instead of using the correct word (Maleki 2010).

This theoretical framework will be used to organize the results of the research synthesis.

Literature review

The aim of this research synthesis is to find out how using blogs and Facebook in foreign language teaching can improve pupils' writing skills in the target language. In the section about the theoretical framework for this paper I have stated what in this paper is meant by improving writing skills and what is meant by writing skills. In this section containing the literature review I find it important to show the relevance this research synthesis has in relation to the national curriculum and the English syllabus. It is also important to find out what is significant about writing in an additional language, investigate different approaches to teaching writing and also to investigate the use of blogs, Facebook and social media when teaching writing.

The papers included in my research synthesis were all investigations made in writing classes. The writing classes focused on students planning, drafting and revising essays. This recurring process is typical for the process approach which I explain further below but I have chosen to elaborate on the genre approach and task based writing instruction which belong to the post-process approach. I have chosen to do so because the main focus of the process approach is on writing as an individual, inner process but the purpose of writing within the English syllabus is to communicate with others. The post-process approach focuses more on the fact that writing takes place in social and cultural contexts. When students are asked to publish their work on a blog or as a facebook post, the writing is no longer only an individual inner process, communication takes place and as soon as there is an audience there is a social and cultural context to consider.

1. The National Curriculum and the English Syllabus

The objective of English as a subject in the Swedish school according to the syllabus regulated by the Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) is to teach general communication skills.

Through teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop all-round communicative skills. These skills involve understanding spoken and written English, being able to formulate one's thinking and interact with others in the spoken and written language, and the ability to adapt use of language to different situations, purposes and recipients. Communication skills also cover confidence in using the language and the ability to use different strategies to support communication and solve problems when language skills by themselves are not sufficient (SNAE 2011 p. 32).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an approach in language teaching which shares the same objective as the present syllabus for English (SNAE, 2011), to teach general communication skills. According to Richards (2006), in current CLT the pupils should be engaged in interaction and meaningful communication which arises when pupils work with content that is "...relevant, purposeful, interesting, and engaging... Effective classroom learning tasks and exercises provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, expand their language resources, notice how language is used, and take part in meaningful interpersonal exchange" (p. 22). Richards (2006) states that in order to learn, the pupils need activities which teach them grammar but also activities which give them the opportunity to reflect upon the language and analyze it. "Language learning is a gradual process that involves creative use of language, and trial and error /.../ the ultimate goal of learning is to be able to use the new language both accurately and fluently" (p.22). Furthermore Richards (2006) states that the language learning process is individual and will be successful if the pupils use "/... / effective learning and communication strategies" (p.23). Even though the language learning process is individual the pupils learn through working together and sharing experiences. In CLT the teacher's role is to give the pupils the kind of tasks and exercises which lead to language learning and the opportunity to reflect on their

language learning. (Richards 2006)

As stated earlier in this paper, according to the theoretical framework of communicative competence proposed by Usó and Martínez-Flor (2006), writing skills is the ”/.../knowledge of how to produce linguistically and pragmatically accurate sentences given particular sociocultural norms together with the ability to use strategies to allow effective communication” (Usó, Martínez-Flor & Palmer-Silveira 2006 p. 391). These ideas are also expressed in the knowledge requirements at the end of year 9 from the grade E up to grade A in the English syllabus for the compulsory school in Sweden (SNAE, 2011).

2. Writing in an additional language (L2)

There are ways in which L2 writing is different from L1 writing. Writing in any language involves planning, formulation and revision and is a problem-solving task but L2 writing involves more problem-solving than L1 writing. L2 writing is a multilingual event because the writer uses previous language knowledge to write in an L2.

(Manchón, Roca de Larios & Murphy 2009)

Although people acquire an L2 in very similar ways there is a great difference between learning an L2 in a second language (SL) setting and learning an L2 in a foreign language (FL) setting. In a FL setting many times the only exposure a learner might have is in the instructional situations, for example in the language classroom while in a SL setting the target language is used for communication in various aspects of society. (Cumming 2009) Writing in a FL is very diverse. It is diverse in every aspect from who is writing to the purpose of the writing and the context of writing. Compared to writing in one’s first language, when writing in a FL the focus is much more on language itself. (Manchón 2009) In their research Schoonen, Snellings, Stevenson & van Gelderen (2009) found that when writing in a FL, writers make more linguistic changes than in their L1 but spend less time on conceptual processes thus, in the FL texts the rhetoric is not as well developed as in the L1. Writers in FL make language changes and typographic changes and use strategies to solve language problems more often. They do not reread their whole texts as much as L1 writers

because instead they spend time on rereading shorter sections of their own texts while they try to improve the language in them, making linguistic changes.

2.1 Factors which effect L2 writing

According to Sasaki (2009) who refers to six different studies conducted during 15 years, the factors which effect L2 writing are: L1 writing ability, L2 proficiency, metaknowledge of L2 writing, L2 writing strategy use, previous L2 writing experiences and L2 writing confidence. Sasaki's longitudinal studies confirm what according to her has earlier been found in cross-sectional studies; "L2 writing practice and metaknowledge can influence L2 writing ability development" (Sasaki 2009 p. 53). The large-scale study of junior high school students conducted by Schoonen et. al. (2009) showed that "general metacognitive knowledge of writing and text characteristics" (p. 94) is important in L1 as well as in FL and that it effects writing, which can explain why many writers who are good L1 writers also are good FL writers. The study also showed that grammatical knowledge and processing speed seem to effect writing proficiency more than lexical knowledge. Fluency in the FL effects the writing performance.

2.2 Approaches to teaching L2 writing

Approaches to teaching writing have changed over time alongside with theories and ideas of language acquisition. According to Usó-Juan et. al. in Usó-Juan & Martinez-Flor (2006) until the end of the 1960s writing was considered merely as the written form of speech and the focus was on pupils producing correct sentences which could help the pupils form correct speech. The written texts were seen as products consisting of grammatical patterns and vocabulary which the pupils needed to reinforce to be able to produce correct speech.

In the end of the 1960s the focus shifted from product to focus on the writing processes, highly influenced by the cognitive model of writing presented by Flower and Hayes (1981) which divided writing into three reoccurring processes; planning, translating and reviewing. In the process approach to writing learners are involved in three reoccurring processes based on the cognitive model of writing mentioned above; planning, drafting and revising. (Boas 2011)

In the end of the 1970s the focus shifted towards the cultural and social context in which the writing process took place and the communicative purpose of the writing. (Usó-Juan et. al. 2006) What is called the post-process approach to writing that arose in the middle of the 90s is not a shift from process-writing but can be seen as an extension of process writing focusing more on the fact that writing takes place in social and cultural contexts (Atkinson 2003). According to Raimes (1991) there are many approaches that could be referred to as part of the post process approach, the genre approach and task based writing instruction are two examples.

2.2.1 The genre approach to writing

Hyland (2003) calls the genre approach "a social response to process" (p. 17) an approach which comes from the ideas in CLT. Hyland (2007) claims that there are different orientations within the genre approach, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) are the two most know orientations. ESP focuses on what the students will need the language for but is not only limited to writing courses, it can also refer to classes where the students learn English for tourism or for specific vocational purposes such as Business English (Choroleeva 2012).

According to Hyland (2007) writing in the genre approach is based on five principles. First of all, writing is seen as an interactive activity and always has a communicative purpose, takes place within a context and with an intended audience. Boas (2011) holds that the goal of the genre approach is for the learners to work with different genres of text, together with others. The learners are made aware of the rhetorical features of different genres and then they learn how to use them.

The second principle in the genre approach according to Hyland (2007) is that the purpose of learning and the content are based on what type of writing the learners will need to know in different communicative situations.

The third principle is that it is explicit to the learners what they are supposed to learn to be able to acquire writing skills and what will be expected of them as learners.

The fourth principle is scaffolding, according to Hyland (2003) scaffolding and collaboration between teacher and learner are central. Teacher and peers are important because they scaffold learners' learning and creativity, thus, learning is a social activity. (Hyland 2007) The principle of scaffolding in the genre approach are influenced by

Vygotsky's theories of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Lantolf (2000) Vygotsky defined (ZPD) as the difference between what a person can achieve when acting alone and what the same person can achieve when acting with the support of someone else and/or cultural tools.

The fifth principle is that "learning to write involves learning to use language" (Hyland 2007 p.154). Hyland (2007) states that SFL, also known in the United States as the Sydney School, is an orientation within the genre approach which is based on Halliday's functional linguistics and Vygotsky's sociocultural theories of learning. Halliday's theory of functional grammar looks at grammar as functional which means that instead of focusing on form the focus is on how language ".../creates and expresses meaning" (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004 p. 19). ".../grammar is seen as a resource for making meaning /.../" Halliday & Matthiessen 2004 p.31). In functional grammar for example a clause can be declarative, interrogative or imperative. The function of the clause will then determine the grammar used to get across the intention of the clause. According to Lantolf (2000) sociocultural theory is based on Vygotsky's theories about language and thought. The fundamental thought in sociocultural theory is that humans create an indirect relationship to the world through using symbolic tools, above all language. Thus language can be seen as a mediational tool.

2.2.2. Task based writing instruction

According to Dyer (1996) task-based writing instruction blends the idea of writing as a product with the idea of writing as a process because it focuses on writing as a task that needs to be solved. Furthermore Dyer (1996) finds support for task based writing instruction in Hillocks findings about the environmental mode being the most effective one for teaching L1 composition. To sum up how Hillocks (1984, 1986 referred to in Dyer 1996) describes the environmental mode one could say that, learners are given tasks which encourage interaction among them as the tasks involve problem-solving activities. The tasks have goals which are evident to the pupils and the problem-solving activities are structured. Multiple drafts and peer review are part of the classroom activities and the teaching method is student centered because the pupils are busy performing tasks individually or interacting with each other as they solve problems. Pupils know what is evaluated by the teacher as evaluation criteria is explicitly

explained to them.

According to the cognition hypothesis (Robinson 2011) pupils tasks in L2 should become increasingly cognitively complex, not the linguistic units which are used to solve the tasks. The more cognitively complex a task is the more complex and accurate L2 is needed to complete the task. One way of making a task more complex is to add a conceptual aspect to it, time, space, mind and motion are examples of concepts. For example if a pupil is asked to write about what they did last summer, they have to start focusing on how the past tense is expressed in the target language compared to L1. The conceptual aspects are also called "resource-directing dimensions" (Robinson 2011 p. 18). If a task is cognitively complex with resource-directing dimensions, the learner output will be more complex and accurate but not as fluent. The more complex a task is the more the learners need to interact and negotiate meaning to be able to solve the task. During such tasks pupils also pay more attention to forms which causes them problems, this will lead to an uptake of these forms. Although the cognition hypothesis claims that the increased demands of complex tasks will push pupils to perform more accurate and complex L2 it also recognizes that pupils who are "high in output anxiety" (Robinson 2011 p. 23) are not pushed to perform more accurate and complex L2. (Robinson 2011)

2.2.3 The effect of feedback as part of writing instruction

In both the genre approach and in the task based approach to writing, feedback has a central role. It is not strange since both approaches are post process approaches to writing. According to Hyland & Hyland (2006) feedback is important in the process-based approaches to writing.

Teacher written feedback according to Hyland & Hyland (2006) can improve learners' writing skills in the short term and over time if the feedback is given together with classroom discussions, and if the teachers let the learners correct their own errors, that is, the teacher marks the errors indirectly by using codes or simply just underlining errors and then lets the learners correct the errors. However, van Beunigen (2010), found research in her research synthesis which showed that indirect corrective feedback had a long lasting effect on non-grammatical errors such as spelling and mechanics while direct corrective feedback turned out to be more affective on grammatical errors.

Van Beuningen (2010) further more found research which showed positive long-lasting effects of focused corrective feedback on learner's writing. Focused corrective feedback focuses on certain errors and ignores other errors which might occur. The opposite of focused corrective feedback is unfocused feedback where the teacher brings the learner's attention to all types of errors. According to van Beuningen (2010) there are only a very few studies which have shown a positive effect of unfocused corrective feedback on learner's writing.

Even if peer feedback does not improve learners' writing skills, there are positive effects of peer feedback, for example it increases learners' autonomy and their ability to revise their own writing. Computer mediated feedback depends very much on how the computer is used in the language teaching. (Hyland & Hyland 2006)

2.2.4 Computer-mediated feedback

Computer-mediated feedback is not the same as computer-generated feedback which is performed by using an automated evaluation software, as mentioned by Ware & Kessler (2013), but written feedback given by either a teacher or peers and delivered either in synchronous interaction in a chatroom or in asynchronous interaction. According to Ware & Kessler (2013) students tend to focus on meaning rather than on form in feedback through synchronous interaction as well as in feedback through asynchronous interaction. However, in asynchronous interaction students tend to focus a little bit more on form in their feedback if they have been given explicit instruction to do so. Ware & Kessler (2013) state that research which has compared face-to-face oral feedback with on-line written feedback shows that the written feedback tends to focus more on linguistic changes than on global changes. As of yet there are not any conclusive findings which show that computer-mediated peer-feedback, synchronous or asynchronous, improve learner's writing skills.

2.3 Using blogs, Facebook and social media teaching writing

In the same way as approaches to teaching writing have changed over time alongside with theories and ideas of language acquisition, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) according to Davies, Otto & Rüschoff (2013), over the years, has changed from practicing grammar and vocabulary through drills and practice exercises to a range

of interactive programs focused on various communicative skills. Today CALL has a natural place within language learning and teaching and has made it easier to work according to current language teaching methodology, such as collaborative learning and process writing.

2.3.1 Social media

Social media are platforms and applications used to communicate with people on the internet. Blogs, microblogging e.g.. twitter, social networking sites such as Facebook and myspace, professional networks e.g.. LinkedIn, video sharing through e.g.. YouTube and content-driven communities such as Wikipedia are all forms of social media according to Walaski (2013).

2.3.2 Blogging

From the beginning weblogs, also called blogs, were written entries posted online regularly and in a chronological order similar to diary entries but today there are almost as many purposes of and designs on blogs as there are blogs. The main reason for this is that a blog is a very diverse web-tool and this also makes it very suitable for learning purposes. Its only limit is the teachers' creativity and ability when designing appropriate tasks (Murray & Hourigan 2008).

According to Jones (2006) a blog is an asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) web-tool most commonly used to post written texts and an increasing amount of educators teaching writing are finding it to be a useful tool in teaching writing. Blogs are a type of collaborative writing environment according to Hegelheimer & Lee (2013) and as such they have a positive effect on writing as they encourage process writing, collaboration and increase learners focus on content, organization and grammar.

A blog can be used as a class blog or as a group blog or each learner can have their own blog, it can focus on one topic or it can touch on many topics (Bloch 2007, Oravec 2002). According to Murray & Hourigan (2008) blogs are suitable for general learning purposes because they are easy to set up, the software is for free and easy to access, the

learners can publish their content immediately and they develop and improve their general ICT skills. When learners make comments on other blogs they also develop their analytical and critical thinking. By interacting with others through making posts and comments they develop their sense of empowerment and personal identity as well as their literacy skills (Jones 2006, Oravec 2002). Blogs also give opportunities for collaborative learning and learners can have access to them whenever and where ever they want, blogs also promote creativity (Huffaker 2004).

According to Murray and Hourigan (2008) blogs are suitable for language learning purposes in particular because the blog hosting sites are available in many languages and this gives learners access to many texts written in the target language and it is also easy to interact on the blogs. In her case study on blogging and ESL writing, Jones (2006) found that blogging improved the students' writing, gave the students opportunities to meaningful learning and a purpose for their writing and the fact that they were publishing their writing increased their motivation and interaction.

2.3.3 The blogging function of Facebook

Facebook is the most used global social network site. At the school where I work it is very popular among teachers as a way to communicate information to pupils but according to McCarthy (2010) it is not commonly used at the university level of education. On Facebook, users can make a personal page where they can put up pictures and videos and make posts and comment on other peoples pictures, videos and posts. It is easy to form groups. It is not only an asynchronous web-tool but also can be used to chat with other Facebook users. In this research synthesis there is a study included which focuses on the blogging function of Facebook.

3. Summary literature review

This literature review shows that my objective as a teacher according to the English syllabus is to teach general communication skills (SNAE 2011), writing is one of those skills. There is a difference between learning an L2 in a FL setting than in a SL setting. In Sweden pupils can encounter English on TV, in films, through music and in

computer games, at the same time English is not an official language in Sweden. Even if the Swedish pupils have a lot of exposure to English outside the English classroom setting it is still taught in a FL setting. SL is a language you need to be able to live in a society and even if English is important in Sweden it is not required in all levels of society and the exposure to English varies among the pupils.

When describing CLT, Richards (2006), states that the language learning process is individual but at the same time he states that pupils learn through working together and sharing experiences. Writing in itself is a cognitive process (Boas 2011) but at the same time the purpose of writing is to communicate and it takes place in a social and cultural context (Atkinson 2003). According to Manchón, Roca de Larios & Murphy (2009) writing in L2 is a more cognitive activity than writing in L1.

Hyland (2007) holds that SFL is an orientation within the genre approach which is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theories of learning along side Halliday's ideas of functional linguistics. According to Dyer (1996) the task-based approach views writing as a problem-solving activity. As the pupils are given tasks which involve problem-solving activities interaction is encouraged (Hillocks 1984, 1986 referred to in Dyer 1996).

Based on the above learning to write in an L2 is an inner cognitive process which could be supported by teaching methods based on sociocultural theories of learning. The genre approach and the task-based approach are very similar. I find the task-based approach more useful in the beginning stages of teaching writing to L2 learners and more suitable for younger learners and the genre approach more appropriate for advanced learners who are adolescent or older.

In both the genre approach and the task-based approach feedback is important. Hyland & Hyland (2006) state that even if peer feedback does not improve learners writing skills, it increases learners' autonomy and their ability to revise their own writing. In her research synthesis on written corrective feedback van Beuningen (2010) found that indirect corrective feedback had a long lasting effect on non-grammatical errors such as spelling and mechanics while direct corrective feedback turned out to be more affective on grammatical errors. Further more she found research which showed positive long-lasting effects of focused corrective feedback on learner's writing but only very few studies which showed a positive effect of unfocused corrective feedback on learner's writing. In their report on computer-mediated feedback Ware & Kessler (2013) conclude that there are not any conclusive findings which show that computer-

mediated peer-feedback, synchronous or asynchronous, improve learner's writing skills. However, their whole report only focuses on three different research areas, namely computer-generated feedback through automated software, electronically delivered peer feedback with a focus on form and electronically delivered peer feedback with a focus on idea development. It could still be assumed that the same type of written corrective teacher feedback which has been proved effective by the research synthesis conducted by van Beunigen (2010) would be just as effective if it would be performed as asynchronous computer-mediated feedback.

To teach writing an increasing amount of educators teaching writing are finding blogs to be a useful tool in teaching writing (Jones 2006). Blogs give opportunities for collaborative learning and learners can have access to them whenever and where ever they want, blogs also promote creativity (Huffaker 2004). According to Murray and Hourigan (2008) blogs are suitable for language learning purposes in particular because the blog hosting sites are available in many languages and this gives learners access to many texts written in the target language and it is also easy to interact on the blogs. Jones (2006) found that blogging improved the students' writing, gave the students opportunities to meaningful learning and a purpose for their writing and the fact that they were publishing their writing increased their motivation and interaction. The research on blogs which I have presented in the literature review is positive towards the use of blogs in teaching writing and in language teaching. It is hard to find research supporting another point of view.

Method

1. Research synthesis

To investigate how using blogs in foreign language teaching can improve pupils writing skills in the target language I have chosen to do a research synthesis because according to Norris, J M and Ortega, L (2006) the main purpose of a research synthesis is to find patterns but also inconsistencies in both findings and methods within accumulated research. By conducting a research synthesis on several studies within a field it is also possible to discover how well a theoretical standpoint holds when you try it against more empirical data than you would be able to in one primary study.

2. Finding relevant studies

To find relevant literature for my synthesis I searched for peer reviewed research articles in the online databases Linguistics & Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA) and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). The search was made in december 2013. My first search was an advanced anywhere search in LLBA for the term blog* and second language learning or foreign language learning and it gave 65 results. The search was followed by a similar search for the term blog* and ESL or EFL which gave 11 results which were already included in the first 65 results. I then did a search for the term Facebook* and second language learning or foreign language learning which gave 10 new results and was followed by a search for the term Facebook* and ESL or EFL which did not generate any new results, finally I did two last searches for the term

”social media” and second language learning or foreign language learning and ”social media” and ESL or EFL these two final searches gave me two new results but the last search actually did not generate any new results. I then continued my search in ERIC for the same terms as in LLBA. The first search in ERIC generated 59 articles, the second 2 articles, the third 6 articles, the fourth none, the fifth 2 and finally the sixth search none. After these initial searches I had found 77 peer reviewed research articles in LLBA and 69 peer reviewed research articles in ERIC.

3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Through these initial electronic searches I found a total of 146 peer reviewed research articles. To qualify for analysis, every article was reviewed using the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

3.1 Inclusion criteria:

1. The study focused on the use of blogs, Facebook or other social media in foreign language learning and teaching.
2. The study focused on the effects of blogs, Facebook or other social media on pupils writing skills in a foreign language.

3.2 Exclusion criteria:

1. The study did not focus on language learning or teaching at all.
2. The study did not focus on the effects of blogs, Facebook or other social media on pupils writing skills in a foreign language. Thus this exclusion included studies which focused on
 - a. the development of other aspects of the participants discourse competence than their writing skills
 - b. the participants attitudes and believes regarding blogs, Facebook and other social media
 - c. teachers or teacher students
 - d. theoretical approaches

- e. blogs, Facebook and other social media as a third space
- f. creating framework for the use of blogs, Facebook and other social media in teaching
- g. the effects of blogs, Facebook or other social media on pupils writing skills in a second language
- h. the effects of blogs, Facebook or other social media in combination with traditional worksheets and explicit grammar instruction on pupils writing skills in a foreign language.

After the research articles were reviewed according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria above, 8 articles remained. 7 of them focused on the effects of blogging on students writing and 1 on the effects of the blogging function of Facebook on the effects of writing.

4. Ethical considerations

When conducting a research synthesis the inclusion and exclusion criteria is crucial as well as the search for articles to be synthesized. By including only peer-reviewed studies also called published studies in a research synthesis there is a risk that the results of the findings in the research synthesis will show more positive and statistically significant results than if unpublished studies, also called fugitive literature, would be included. Journals tend not to review studies with inconclusive results and studies with statistically insignificant differences in the results which leads to that these studies never get published.

At the same time it is argued that studies which are published are higher in quality because they are peer-reviewed. Another reason for using only published studies is that it is difficult to know if one has included all studies existing if one decides to include also non published studies and it is also difficult to include studies of all languages, simply because one can not understand them. (Norris & Ortega 2006)

Results and discussion

The results of this research synthesis will be organized around the competences which are included in the writing skills. None of the studies included showed any improvement in intercultural or strategic competence and three of the studies included showed an improvement in both linguistic and pragmatic competence as can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Improvement of competence

Study	Linguistic Competence	Pragmatic Competence
Miyazoe & Anderson (2010)	x	
Hajiannejad (2012)	x	
Sun (2010)	x	x
Kitchakarn (2012)		x
Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010)		x
Shih (2011)	x	x
Liou & Peng (2009)		x
Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012)	x	x

1. Linguistic competence

The linguistic competence is the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and mechanics. A total of five studies showed an improvement in linguistic competence. Text analyses used to measure improvement in those five studies focused on different aspects of linguistic competence as can be seen in the table 2.

Table 2: Focus of studies

Study	Vocabulary	Complexity	Grammatical accuracy	Length of Composition	Mechanics
Miyazoe & Anderson (2010)	x	x			
Sun (2010)	x	x	x		x
Shih (2011)	x	x	x		x
Ciftci and Kocoglu	x	x	x		x

(2012)					
Hajiannejad (2012)			x	x	

Miyazoe and Anderson's (2010) study of 61 Japanese students, divided into three sections, in an upper-intermediate level English class at a University in Tokyo, who used wikis, forums and blogs for out-of-class assignments focused on vocabulary and complexity of the online writing. To see how the students' writing improved Anderson and Miyazoe used a web tool called the textalyser to analyze the students' online writing on the forums and blogs and compared the ratings on the posts from fall 2008 to the ratings on the posts from spring 2009, however it was only the online writing of one section consisting of 23 students that was analyzed. Textalyser tested to see how many different words were used compared to the total number of words, counted the syllables per word and words per sentence and then got a score according to the Gunning Fog Readability Index to compare the complexity of the posts. The results showed that the vocabulary became richer particularly in the blogposts and that both forum and blog posts featured a slightly higher level of vocabulary and more complex sentences. The wikis are not interesting for this paper because they were used for translation exercises from English to Japanese.

A study which focused on the accuracy in grammatical forms and the length of composition (the amount of words) include Hajiannejad's (2012) action research study of blogging and the improvement of writing skills which involved 20 students divided into one control group which did not use blogs for their written assignments and one experimental group which used blogs for their written assignments. The 20 participants studied English in two intermediate classes at Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Tehran, Iran. They were selected based on how they scored on an English proficiency test so that both groups started out on the same level of English. Both groups received corrective feedback from the teacher. The study compared the first written compositions with the last compositions in both groups and also compared the last composition of the blog group with that of the control group. The compositions had earlier been corrected against the following criteria; use of verb forms, use of articles and use of prepositions, furthermore the amount of words was counted. The results of the study show that in the

blog group the frequency of wrong verb forms, missed prepositions and articles had significantly changed and that the length of the last compositions in the Blogging Group was also remarkably higher from that of the first compositions. When comparing the results between the blog group and the control group they show that the performances were significantly different only in terms of the frequency of missed articles and prepositions and that the length of the writing compositions in the Blogging Group was significantly higher than that of the Control Group.

Sun (2010) also used blogging as an out-of-class assignment and tried to make the assignment as casual as possible but it was still 20% of the final course grade. The participants of the study were 23 undergraduate students taking an academic-writing course at a university in Taiwan. The teacher gave corrective feedback on language on the posts. The three first posts were compared to the three last posts. Two experienced English-language teachers scored the posts according to the following criteria: grammatical accuracy, lexical accuracy, frequency in missed punctuations or spelling mistakes, fluency, progression and linking of ideas and the overall writing performance. The syntactic complexity was also analyzed. For the analysis of syntactic complexity total number of clauses per blog text, total number of words per blog text, total number of subordinate clauses, total number of embedded subordinate clauses were counted and the total number of T-units per blog text was divided into the total number of words in each blog text to measure the T-unit length. According to Sun (2010) "a 'T-unit' is the shortest unit that a sentence can be reduced to" (p. 332). The longer the T-unit is the more complex it is. The results showed that although the language in the first three blog entries was more complex than the language in the last three entries the students had improved their mechanics and organization of their texts.

One study which focused on the effect of peer-feedback given through blogs compared to face to face feedback was the study conducted at a university in Istanbul, Turkey by Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012). The study contained a control group using face-to-face peer-feedback and an experimental group using blogs for peer-feedback, each group consisted of 15 freshmen students studying English as a Foreign Language. First drafts and second drafts from four essays each were collected from the participants in each group and scored according to an analytic scoring rubric developed by Tribble (1996) which focused on vocabulary, complexity, verb forms, use of articles, use of prepositions, mechanics, organization and content. The study showed an improvement in the linguistic competences as well as in pragmatic competence in both groups but the

group which gave peer-feedback through blogs showed the greatest improvement.

Shih (2011) focused on the effects of blending Facebook and peer assessment with college English classroom instruction. The 23 freshmen who participated in the study were majoring in English at a technological university in Taiwan. During the study the participants were given one-third of a semester of classroom instruction and two-thirds of a semester combining Facebook, peer assessment and classroom instruction. The participants were divided into three groups according to how they scored on the pre-test which was given. They were divided into a high score, medium score and low score group. At the end of the semester the participants were given a post-test and the results of the pre-test and the post-test were than compared. In both tests the students had to write an essay. The essay was than scored according to content, organisation, structure, vocabulary and spelling and genre. The study showed significant improvement in vocabulary and mechanics but also in pragmatic competence in all of the three groups.

2. Pragmatic competence

Pragmatic competence involves knowing how to adapt a text to its purpose and recipient, when writers improve their pragmatic competence the planning, revising and editing of their texts becomes more effective and sophisticated according to Cumming (2006). A study focusing on the improvement in pragmatic competence, is Kitchakarn's (2012) action research study of the affect of using blogs on students' summary writing ability which involved 33 first year students in a fundamental English course at Bangkok University. The students who were divided into six groups were supposed to post summaries from texts they read in the textbook throughout the course. Each group created their own blog, one member started out by posting his or her summary on the blog then the other members read the post and revised it. The teacher also gave feedback on the posts. Considering data gathered from two summary writing tests, given as a pretest and a posttest, the study shows that the students improved their summary writing ability.

Comparing pretest results with posttest results of an experimental group and a control group consisting of a total of 50 intermediate English students at a Turkish university, Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010) also found that the group which used blogs as a compliment to the in-class writing instruction that both groups received, improved the

organization and the content of their texts. The tests were evaluated by three experienced English as a Foreign Language teachers according to the following criteria: content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics, that is spelling, punctuation and capitalization. There was not any significant difference in vocabulary, language use and mechanics. As commented by the researcher themselves the difference in the results between the control group and the experimental group could be explained by the extra input of English and writing which was given to the experimental group through the blogging.

A similar study using the blogging function on Facebook instead of blogs was the study by Shih (2011), however, the study did not involve a control group. The study also showed improvement in content and organization, as well as did Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012), but also significant improvement in structure and genre and, as mentioned in the section about results which showed improvement in linguistic competence, significant improvement in vocabulary and mechanics. Sun (2010) also showed improvement in organization which has to do with coherence and planning which according to the theoretical framework for this research synthesis are part of the pragmatic competence.

The study of Liou and Peng (2009) conducted at a university in an Asian country showed an improvement in the quality of revision after the 13 EFL freshmen English majors had participated in an EFL writing class which involved writing four formal writing assignments in blogs. Between the first and the fourth assignment the students received training in peer review. The quality of the students revision of their texts in the first and fourth assignment was compared.

3. Analysis

All of the studies above are case studies and some of them are action research studies. According to Efron and Ravid (2013) a case study focuses on one group but can also focus on two or more groups if the researcher wants to make comparisons between groups. An action research study in education often refers to research conducted by an educator within his or her own classroom or school (Efron and Ravid 2013). Neither Anderson and Miyazoe (2010) nor Liou and Peng (2009) explicitly state that one of the

researchers also was an instructor thus making it hard to draw the conclusion that all of the studies apart from being case studies also are action research studies. If neither Anderson and Miyazoe (2010) nor Liou and Peng (2009) are action research studies then there is a lack of information of how the selection of the groups being studied was conducted.

When conducting an action research study one should consider the role one has as a researcher and teacher at the same time which could threaten the objectivity of the study. According to Efron and Ravid (2013) it is actually very hard to avoid subjectivity when conducting an action research study because of the relationship one could have to the students participating in the study or the values or beliefs one has about what is being studied or the earlier experience one has with the topic being studied.

To secure the validity of an action research study as well as a case study the use of more than one way to collect data for the study also called triangulation is very useful according to Efron and Ravid (2013). In all of the studies included in the research synthesis triangulation was used except in Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010) who only used a text analysis. Surveys investigating different aspects of students perceptions of the teaching methods being used, interviews also investigating students perceptions of the teaching methods being used and a text analysis were used in Anderson and Miyazoe (2010), Shih (2011) and Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012), in the latter a student's background survey was also used. Surveys and a text analysis were used in Hajiannejad (2012), Sun (2010) and Liou and Peng (2009). Surveys, posts of learning experiences and a text analysis were used in Kitchakarn (2012).

However, the aim of this research synthesis was not to investigate students perceptions of the teaching methods being used, thus the research synthesis focuses on the text analyses which were performed in different ways. Consequently the reliability of this research synthesis relies on the reliability of the different methods of assessing the improvement in the students writing skills which were used in the studies included (Efron and Ravid 2013). In Kitchakarn (2012) the reliability of the summary writing pre- and post- test is questionable because the researcher does not present the criteria used for correction of the tests. In Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010) the researchers mention the main criteria used to analyze the writing of the students and also states that the criteria is taken from the English as a Second Language Composition Profile created by Jacobs et. al. (1983) but fails to explain what is meant by language use according to that scale. In Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012) the researchers refer to a scoring criteria

developed by Chistoffer Tribble (1996) which they used to assess the effect of peer e-feedback on student's writing performance in general but do not present the criteria in their study. In the other studies the results match the method of analysis.

According to Efron and Ravid (2013) when a study aims to investigate the effectiveness of some sort of an intervention, in this case the use of blogging and other social media in foreign language teaching and its effects on writing skills, it is important to consider other factors which affect the results for the validity of the study. In Sun (2010) the researcher explains the fact that the language in the first three blog entries was more complex than the language in the last three entries as being caused by the fact that the blog was more casual than the very formal environment that the students were used to.

Arslan and Şahin-Kızı1 (2010) use the same criteria in their text analyses as do Sun (2010), Shih (2011) and Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012) but the results in Arslan and Şahin-Kızı1 (2010) do not show any improvement in linguistic competence. In all four studies a blended teaching approach is used, where classroom instruction is mixed with on-line instruction and activities and the different web tools are used for the same thing, publish writing assignments and receive and give feedback on written assignments from others. However, the reliability of this research synthesis in aspect of explaining the different results found in Arslan and Şahin-Kızı1 (2010) compared to Sun (2010), Shih (2011) and Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012) is threatened because of the fact that it is not clearly reported in Arslan and Şahin-Kızı1 (2010) nor in Ciftci and Kocoglu (2012) how many comments the student's were required to make thus it is hard to compare the amount of writing made in the studies.

The reason why the students in Sun (2010) did not improve their vocabulary significantly could be that they were allowed to choose their own topics and thus never had to go out of their comfort zone and challenge themselves when they made the post. They could make posts about topics where they mastered the vocabulary needed for the topic and thus learning was not scaffolded.

A limitation of this research synthesis is the fact that only published papers have been included which could mean that only papers with statistically significant or positive results have been published. Another limitation is that the research analyses focused on the text analyses conducted in the studies and thus it is hard to find improvement in intercultural strategies and in strategic competences.

Conclusions

The aim of this research synthesis was to find out how using blogs and Facebook in foreign language teaching can improve pupils' writing skills in the target language. The results in this research synthesis were organized around the competences which are included in the writing skills.

According to the eight studies included in this research synthesis the learners have improved their linguistic competence and pragmatic competence when it comes to their writing skills. None of the studies have shown improvement in strategic competence or intercultural competence because none of the studies investigated the improvement of these competences.

Five out of eight studies showed improvement in linguistic competence. This could be explained by the findings made by Schoonen, Snellings, Stevenson and van Gelderen (2009) which showed that when writing in a FL, writers make more linguistic changes than in their L1. FL writers spend more time on rereading shorter sections of their own texts while they try to improve the language in them, making linguistic changes. Another fact that could explain and support the findings of this research synthesis is that previous research on asynchronous computer mediated written peer feedback conducted by Ware and Kessler (2013) has shown that students tend to give more linguistic feedback than feedback on global changes. Peer feedback was given in six out of the eight studies included. In Sun (2010), Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010), Shih (2011) and Kitchakarn (2012) feedback from the teacher was given along side with the

peer feedback. Consistent with former research, e.g Hyland and Hyland (2006), which shows that teacher feedback can have a positive affect on the writing performance Sun (2010), Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010) and Shih (2011) showed an improvement in both linguistic and pragmatic competence. Kitchakarn (2012) also showed an improvement but the study only focused on how students would improve their summary writing ability.

All of the studies except one showed improvement in content, organization or grammar which supports findings in previous research conducted by Hegelheimer and Lee (2013) which showed that blogging increase learners focus on content, organization and grammar.

As stated in the literature review of this research synthesis blogs can be used in many different ways and it is up to the teachers to be creative and be able to create suitable tasks. I would say that the same is applicable for Facebook since it is just as userfriendly as blogs and can be used both asynchronously as well as synchronously. It is not the technology that is central but how it is used. In all of the studies blogging was used as a way for students to publish their writings, in most of them it was also to provide peer feedback, in most cases also accompanied by teacher feedback. Most of the studies included had a process oriented approach to writing and the way peer feedback was used in the studies is supported by ideas from the genre approach but also from the task based approach. There were only eight studies included in this research synthesis and it is not possible to make any generalizations on such few studies but there are still indications that blogging can support process oriented approaches to teaching writing and that blogging in combination with these approaches to teaching writing can improve students writing skills in the aspects of linguistic and pragmatic competence. For me as a teacher in an EFL classroom where all the pupils have I pads these indications are positive and encouraging, they inspire me to find out more about process oriented approaches to teaching writing and how to give effective feedback to my pupils. At the same time this research synthesis has raised questions for the future.

Not any of the studies were longitudinal and thus in the future it would be a good idea to make more longitudinal studies on the effects of using blogs and Facebook teaching FL writing on student's writing skills, further more there weren't any studies made on younger FL learners nor on the effects of for example using tweets or other asynchronous writing tools in teaching FL writing. There is also a need of conducting quantitative and longitudinal studies which focus on investigating different approaches to

teaching writing in combination with asynchronous writing tools as it really is not the technology that is the most important but how writing in combination with the technology is taught. This research synthesis showed improvement only in linguistic and pragmatic competence probably due to the fact that these competences are more measurable than strategic and intercultural competences. To investigate intercultural competence the focus of the textanalyses needs to be on different matters than what it was in the studies included here and other methods need to be used to be able to find out how using blogs and facebook in teaching writing can improve strategic as well as intercultural competence.

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