
Meaningful writing in an online EFL classroom: Integrating students' experiences into instructional design

Escritura significativa en un aula de EFL en línea: integrando las experiencias de los estudiantes en diseño instruccional

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Abstract

The evolution of the writing skill is closely linked to ICT, increasing the need to make its teaching a meaningful experience in the digital age. The aim of this study was to analyze students' experiences in a writing task developed on Edublogs to identify elements of task design contributing to a meaningful experience online. The participants were 27 English Teaching students in a first-year composition course at the University of Costa Rica during the first semester of 2021. The study followed a Classroom Action Research design. The students wrote five blog entries. However, only the last entry, a reflection, was analyzed for the study. An open coding method was implemented, through which four categories that impact instructional design of writing tasks were identified: personal connection, engagement, ICT, and applicability. The study concludes with a series of recommendations that can positively impact students' performance in writing courses supported by ICT.

Keywords: Meaningful learning, writing, ICT, EFL.

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Resumen

La evolución de la habilidad de escribir está íntimamente ligada a las TIC, aumentando la necesidad de hacer de su enseñanza una experiencia significativa en la era digital. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar las experiencias de los estudiantes en una tarea de escritura desarrollada en Edublogs para identificar elementos del diseño de tareas que contribuyan a una experiencia significativa en línea. Los participantes fueron 27 estudiantes de Enseñanza de Inglés en un curso de composición de primer año en la Universidad de Costa Rica durante el primer semestre de 2021. El estudio siguió un diseño de Investigación Acción en el Aula. Los estudiantes escribieron cinco entradas de blog. Sin embargo, solo la última entrada, un reflejo, fue analizada para el estudio. Se implementó un método de codificación abierta, a través del cual se identificaron cuatro categorías que impactan en el diseño instruccional de las tareas de escritura: conexión personal, compromiso, TIC y aplicabilidad. El estudio concluye con una serie de recomendaciones que pueden impactar positivamente en el desempeño de los estudiantes en cursos de escritura apoyados en las TIC.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje significativo, escritura, TIC, EFL.

Introduction

Literacy, and more specifically, the writing skill, are strongly connected with technology as knowledge of ICT tools can no longer be separated from the term literacy. According to Educational Testing Service (2002), “ICT literacy is using digital technology, communications tools, and/or networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information in order to function in a knowledge society” (p. 2). The ability to communicate in writing increasingly relies on the use of technology, from producing simple texts on cell phones and participating in social media to producing more complex texts in academic settings with the help of device-installed software or cloud applications. For Lopez (2017), ICT integration improves the traditional forms of communication and opens room for more significant interaction in the face of constantly changing media. It follows that a paper and pencil class no longer suits the demands of the modern world. Instead, technological platforms have become the predominant means of communication and text production.

An interesting characteristic of digital platforms is that they promote interaction among different users. For example, Alkhataba, Abdul-Hamid, and Ibrahim (2018) list technologies such as Edmodo, Google Docs, Zoho Writer, Blogs, Wikis, and Facebook, which can be used in virtual environments to ensure interaction between their users in spite of physical separation. On these platforms, users can create, edit, share, exchange ideas, and engage in meaningful interaction that improves their reflective process and leads to greater awareness of the text. To illustrate what learners can do, Rojas (2011) explains different communication elements that can be added to blogs. The author refers to enriched input with images and videos, links to other sources or blogs, opinions by visitors in the form of comments, and information organized by entries. A positive implication of such features, and of the capabilities allowed by digital platforms in general, is that

they lead to students requiring fewer but more intentional interventions on the part of the instructor since, as they learn to navigate digital tools for learning, they develop agency and independence.

Writing online, in particular, allows for integrating different media and playing with fonts, colors, and even the size of words in texts. Compared to a traditional text, or even a text produced on software like Word, a text written directly online can contain many more layers of meaning. Johnson (2016) refers to the term "Writing 2.0" to describe the process of writing on a platform, more often with the use of online resources and the possibility of enriching a text with different tools and applications. In practice, this means that the final product is only the last element in a chain of steps where writers have the opportunity to engage with a variety of technological resources throughout the composition process, and where composition is more than the production of words. Similarly, Kane (2018) explains that writing a text and the process of doing it can become a multimodal experience, that is, one where the different stages, from brainstorming to editing, can be supported by several technology-based modes of communication beyond the written word and including images, voice, and video, among others. Added to this, Johnson (2016) explains that new tools help to shape the teachers' abilities to articulate their thinking and understanding of written documents. Thus, the impact of ICT transcends the mere means of production of the text and becomes a key component of how authors process information, organize their ideas, and construct new texts.

Concerning instructional design, David, Keaton, Morris, Murphy, and Stapley (2008) believe that a design grounded in ICT positively impacts the students' motivation. In the case of writing, they identified that in digital settings, meaning both in hybrid and fully online classrooms, students spend more time writing than in traditional ones, and that the quality of their work increases as well as a result of the word processing tools. The authors explain that a technology-enhanced classroom can be created with several goals, for instance, facilitating active learning by providing each student with a personal computer, facilitating cooperative learning between students, and facilitating interaction between the instructor and the students through technology. The authors warn that human interaction continues to be irreplaceable regardless of how much technology can do. Nonetheless, careful planning of task activities and guidance with supporting technological tools can greatly enhance teachers' capabilities to carry out effective and engaging instruction.

All in all, student motivation in writing is connected to how meaningful a writing task can be. Frey and Fisher (2010) believe that the energy and motivation that occur when learners are engaged in productive group work makes a task meaningful (p.30). One of the elements they highlight is task complexity. Contrary to what many people would expect, the fact that a task is challenging or new to the students makes it more meaningful in the end. In this sense, the authors claim that "a good gauge of task difficulty has to do with the way the group approaches the task" (p. 31). A scenario where students complete disconnected parts of a task and later bring them together without further peer revision or interaction will probably not represent the same kind of challenge as a more consciously processed task with multiple rounds of revision. In turn, the lower level of complexity would result in less meaningful learning and less motivation.

In the largest study on meaningful writing to date, Eodice, Geller, and Lerner (2017) surveyed 700 students and instructors in three schools about their experience with meaningful writing. They found that meaningful writing occurs when students “tap into the power of personal connection, immerse themselves in what they are thinking, writing, and researching, experience what they are writing as applicable and relevant to the real world, and imagine their future selves” (p. 2). As part of their conclusions, they highlight that meaningfulness is not only the result of the assignments or the students, but also of the recognition of writing as “a social act” that can extend beyond the class, optimizing the opportunity for learners to connect their assignments with their personal and professional goals. Writing assisted with technology aligns with this conclusion because it can reach beyond the classroom and be seen as a social practice within the real world and not just as a sterile product.

Although Eodice, Geller, and Lerner’s (2017) study represents a key contribution to the field of meaningful writing, it was not carried out in a digital environment, and the assignments were not completed online. Given all the possibilities offered by ICT, investigating online writing experiences can shed light on the potential for task design that promotes meaningfulness by enabling the conditions and characteristics previously described by the authors and possibly generating new ones. Based on this, the objective of the present study was to analyze students’ experiences in a writing task to identify the elements of task design that contributed to promoting a meaningful experience online.

Method

Design

The present study is framed within the qualitative research approach, more specifically, with a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to understand the students’ development of the writing competence in an online setting. CAR is characterized by being small-scale, contextualized, and carried out within a teaching-learning scenario (Burns, 2010). CAR is also characterized by following a sequence of four steps in a cyclical manner: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The present study focused on the reflection stage by having the participants engage in analysis and evaluation of the perceived effects of the action to make sense of their experiences in a writing task and identify the elements that contributed to a meaningful experience online.

Participants

The participants were a group of 27 first-year students in a composition course at the University of Costa Rica, Western Branch. Their ages ranged between 18 and 23 years old. 15 students were female and 12 were male. The native language of the students was Spanish, and for most of them, it was the first time they had received an online course, and the first time they had written a blog.

Task

The course was aimed at helping students to develop their writing skills at a paragraph level in English. To this end, the students were asked to create a blog as an e-portfolio to showcase their work in the course. The students had to follow the steps in Table 1 as they completed each entry, guaranteeing the iteration of the writing process, except for the reflection stage. This was written separately from the other paragraphs at the end of the process as an overall assessment of the task.

Table 1. Design of activity

Stages of the task	Key steps in the process
Planning and drafting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a topic. • Write the entry in paragraph form. • Participate in a student-teacher conference to discuss the entry. • Complete a reflection form after the conference.
Publication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edit text. • Post the entry on Edublogs. • Customize entry: fonts, colors, and other media.
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a comment to at least one of the classmates following the chart below. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » What caught your attention? » What is a positive characteristic of the person? » Do you have anything in common? • Reply to the comments using appropriate language and tone.
Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write an entry answering the questions below <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Was the blog useful to keep track of your learning? » Did integrating a variety of media and collaborating online help you improve your writing? » What was meaningful about this experience and how can it help you as a professional?

Source: Project guidelines by the author, 2021.

Procedure

The students' answers in the reflection were coded and compared across the different entries to identify possible task elements leading to meaningful writing. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2015), coding is a major feature of qualitative analysis, allowing the reduction and systematization of dense data from texts like conversations, reports, assignments, or issues concerning the researcher's or the participants' reflections in the learning process (p. 559). Given that the nature of the study was exploratory, an open coding system was followed to systematize the experience of the students after task completion.

Results and discussion

Based on the students' entries in the reflection stage, four main categories of task elements leading to meaningful writing were identified. In addition, a proposal for instructional design was derived from the categories by synthesizing their key features. Figure 1 displays the categories and the corresponding instructional design.

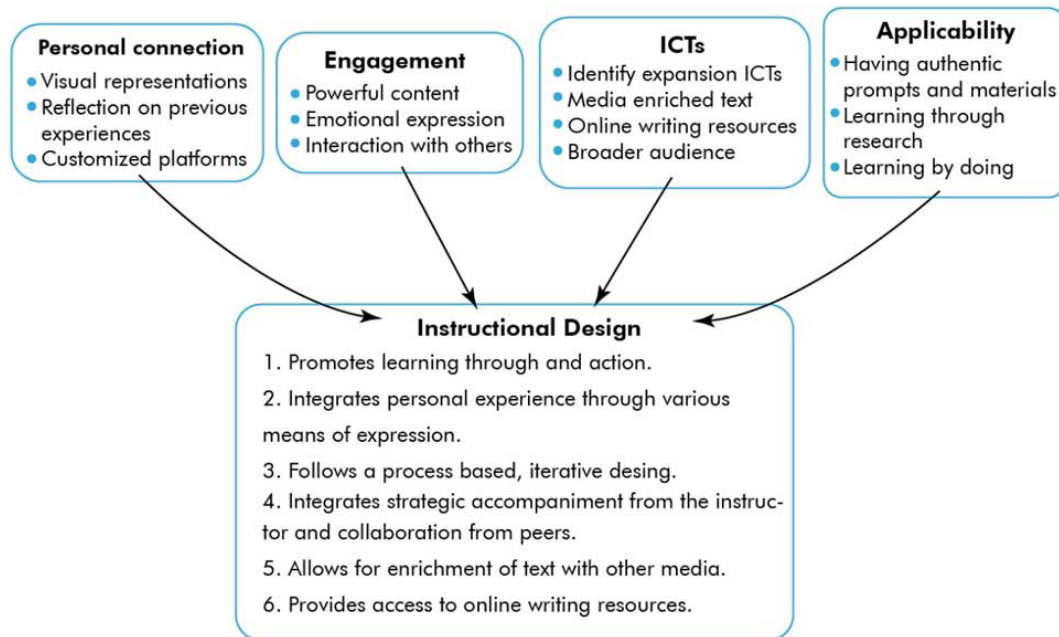


Figure 1. Features of meaningful writing identified in the students' reflections.

Source: Participants' responses to the reflection prompt in the blogs, 2021

Personal connection

Personal connection can be developed in different ways. For most of the students, including photographs of themselves, their families, friends, and places that they visited or worked at seems to have made the assignment more meaningful because they were able to create connections between the content and their experiences beyond the classroom. This contributed to a further development of the content in their written tasks. The selection of colors and designs was also meant to illustrate the students' personality, and when they interacted, a great deal of attention was given to the layout of the blogs to get to know each other and foster a sense of community. This was especially important for people who had not interacted before outside the online class.

Engagement

Engagement encompasses mental, emotional, and interactional elements (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The mental component refers to the students' intellectual efforts to undertake a new task in a new medium and their involvement with the topics or content. In this case, blogging was new to the majority, and the topics were deemed relevant by them, which resulted in a positive impact on their willingness to engage in writing.

Emotional engagement takes place when students express their emotions openly. One student, for example, described an emotional breakdown during her high school years and how she was able to recover and gradually take control of her emotions later at the university. Other, simpler examples consisted of students describing their likes and dislikes in the entries.

Finally, interactional engagement is linked to positive relationships and successful collaboration. In the project, interaction took place by means of comments from peers and accompaniment on the part of the instructor during teacher-student conferences. The students reported that by interacting with others, they gained awareness of better stylistic choices in terms of grammar structures, vocabulary, and/or punctuation. Some students claimed that reading their classmates' blogs was inspirational and beneficial for their own task.

ICT

In the blogs, the students were able to enrich their entries with other media like photos, videos, gifs, and memes, among others, which added meaning and value to the text beyond the words used in the entries. The students were also encouraged to use online applications like Grammarly, Google translator, and online dictionaries to have a broader range of references to fine-tune their work. This practice facilitated the identification of errors and of possible alternative expressions or constructions to express ideas more accurately and efficiently, contributing to both autonomy and agency in writing.

Also, constant interaction through regular visits to the blogs resulted in a broader sense of the audience of the text, thus promoting more attention to detail when writing. The students referred positively to leaving comments on their classmates' blogs; the fact that the texts were published on a public domain led to the students' devoting more effort to their work because of increased awareness that several other people would be reading their entries.

Surprisingly, another interesting dimension of ICT use observed was identity expansion, which could be seen in the use of a variety of names and avatars, or in students representing themselves in ways that they would not do in a face-to-face scenario. As such, this is a phenomenon unique to the virtual experience. Based on the results, the author would encourage other instructors to take advantage of this feature of online interaction to promote creativity and freedom of expression as part of writing tasks in virtual environments.

Applicability

Applicability can be defined as the extent to which a concept or theory can be put into practice. In this study, the students were asked to apply their skills to a text that could be accessed by people outside the classroom. For a few students, the process of writing the entries felt like learning by playing a game as they were gaining expertise both in organizing their ideas in a written text and in blogging, with all the playful elements that it entailed.

To complete the entries, the students were also asked to look for information in different sources and to make decisions as to what could be best for their entries. For them, blogging had a series of ups and downs, particularly as they needed to work independently on many occasions and did not know exactly how the blog would look to readers. Overall, however, they reported that blogging was a satisfactory experience. When revisited by the researcher months after the conclusion of the project, the blogs contained more entries than had been required during the course, a strong testimony to the applicability of the task to real-world situations beyond the classroom, and proof that a connection with reality is meaningful for the students.

Conclusion

A series of elements of instructional design promoting meaningful learning emerged from the categories identified in students' answers.

Promotes learning through research and action

Learning tasks should originate in the idea that the students need to conduct research to complete the assignment, either through bibliographical sources or by interacting with other people. This implies that students need to integrate information from different sources and make decisions to complete an assignment.

Integrates personal experience through various forms of expression

In the instructions of the assignments, there should be room to include personal experiences and different forms of expression. Most commonly, students can refer to an anecdote or include a photograph, but they can also include voice and videos. Personal experience promotes students' agency and reflexivity whereas multiple means of expression help to make the assignment a more authentic experience, especially in a world that is increasingly governed by technology every day.

Follows a process based, iterative design. The development of the writing skill is almost always process oriented, but for this, it is necessary to include various cycles to ensure students' understanding and development of writing competence through repetitive practice.

Integrates strategic accompaniment from the instructor and collaboration from peers. One of the aspects that was more positively assessed in this experience was the accompaniment of the instructor. In key moments, and after students have reached a critical point, accompaniment from the instructor is key as part of the task strategy to raise awareness of perceived progress and students' needs during the task. The text should become an open space for dialogue for both the teacher and the students, one from which reflective practice can emerge.

Allows enrichment of text through other media. Varying the types of fonts and adding other forms of media can help to make the meaning of the text more powerful. Different fonts can help to add emphasis or intention- even playing with colors can affect the meaning of the text. This can also make learning more active, and thus, student centered. Valuing all these elements and finding meaning in the students' texts is indeed conducive to a meaningful writing experience.

Provides access to other online writing resources. In addition to the task, a series of writing applications should be provided to improve the learning experience. Grammarly, for example, can be used to help students edit the text and explore features of audience and style that they may not know by themselves, which if properly guided by the instructor, can contribute to develop more intentional word choices, explore grammar patterns, and overall, achieve a broader repertoire of expression. Other tools, like the editor on Google Docs or Word, can help to track changes and in turn facilitate the revision process. Both the instructor and the learners should acknowledge the existence of these tools and integrate them into the assignment.

These findings are in tune with Rojas' (2017), who explains that "the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) positively influences students' writing skill because it motivates them to write, augmenting their enthusiasm, motivation, and self-confidence; additionally, the use of ICT permits them to increase their awareness of syntactic, morphological, and grammatical patterns when providing their points of view" (p. 23), enhancing both the process and the final product.

For future research, a follow-up analysis should be carried out to identify the relationships between the codes found in this study to better understand the conditions leading to more meaningful writing and the ways that these connections can impact the development of the writing skill in a second language.

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