



# **The IALLT Journal**

A publication of the International Association for Language Learning Technology

## **AN INVESTIGATION OF LANGUAGE-LEARNING STRATEGIES IN A BLOGGING TASK**

María Isabel Charle Poza  
*Lincoln University*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This study sought to identify the language-learning strategies employed by learners of Spanish while posting entries to a class blog. The project consisted of the development of a blogging activity and its implementation in an Intermediate Spanish course. In accordance with the literature's recommendations about language-learning-strategy assessment, the study employed an actual-task strategy questionnaire which included open-ended questions, along with a checklist to identify the strategies used by participants while completing the blogging task. The analysis of the data revealed that participants employed a variety of strategies while posting their entries to the class blog. The most prevalent was the use of previous knowledge, which was mainly reflected in the choice of topic for blog entries made by participants. Participants also used the task-based strategy of re-wording and rephrasing to simplify the language and turned to available resources such as a Spanish-English dictionary, their textbook, the Internet, and help from friends or classmates. Additionally, participants used the metacognitive strategies of monitoring and evaluation to ensure the quality of their posts, coupled with the task-based strategy of applying general grammatical rules to specific blogging problems. Finally, the data analysis revealed that, contrary to the findings of previous research, students had some awareness of the existence of strategies that they could use to facilitate the blogging task.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies in second language (L2) courses has grown significantly. These technologies have expanded the communicative reach of the classroom by breaking its time and space barriers. As a result, educators are increasingly using CMC applications in the form of discussion forums, chat rooms, e-mail, social media, and blogs as additional opportunities to communicate in the L2 (Chapelle & Jamieson, 2008). Among these applications, blogging platforms have received a significant amount of attention by L2 instructors due to their ease of access and relatively low learning curve. In addition to those practical considerations, researchers have reported pedagogical benefits in the incorporation of blogging in L2 courses. Among them is that student-created blogs provide a real-world context for the development of writing skills (Rivens Mompean, 2010) while encouraging the use of appropriate strategies to make the writing task easier and more effective (Sun, 2009; Vurdien, 2013).

Interestingly, although the literature on the benefits of blogging for L2 learning is substantial, with studies such as Bloch (2007), Chen (2015), Commas-Quinn, Mardomingo & Valentine (2009), Rivens Mompean (2010) and Vurdien (2013) among many others, research on learners' use of writing strategies in blogging platforms is scarce. Moreover, studies on language-learning strategies show that both instructors and students are often unaware or misguided about the strategies that they can use in specific L2 tasks (Oxford, 2011). Therefore, and given the importance of strategic learning in the second language acquisition (SLA) process, particularly in writing, there is a need to increase our awareness of the use of learning strategies in this specific CMC technology. To that end, the present investigation seeks to identify the writing strategies used by L2 learners when completing a blogging task.

## REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

### *Blogging in SLA*

De Andrés Martínez (2012) defines a *blog* as a website that supports the sharing of content by a particular author and promotes interactivity. Blogs are online journals where entries, just like their paper-based counterparts, are arranged in chronological order (De Andrés Martínez, 2012). They transformed

the web from a place where people were passive receivers of information to a platform where they can share their own thoughts and publish their work for a real audience (Warschauer, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that since blogs' first appearance in the 1990s, they have become a prevailing form of online writing. This prevalence has been facilitated by the ease of access, low learning curve, and free availability of blogging platforms such as Blogger, WordPress, and Tumblr among many others. As a result, some bloggers today reach vast international audiences and have massive followings that make them influential celebrities in their own right.

The continuous growth and influence of blogs in web-based social communication has translated into a similar growth in their implementation in educational settings. The field of L2 teaching and learning has joined this movement with practitioners incorporating blogs into their repertoire of instructional tools, along with researchers looking into their impact on L2 writing proficiency (Blotch, 2007; Vurdien, 2013). This growing interest by L2 educators and scholars has also taken place among L2 learners, according to Warschauer (2010), who points to some inherent features of blogs as the causes of their appeal to students. These features include the existence of a real audience for the students' writing which, in turn, promotes a sense of responsibility and authorship (Bloch, 2007; Ducate & Lomika, 2008; Sun & Chang, 2012) as well as the opportunity to share knowledge about a particular topic of interest to the author in an authentic environment (Chen, 2015; Rivens Mompean, 2010; Warschauer, 2010). These two qualities make blogging platforms engaging and interactive social spaces where users communicate and collaborate (Godwin-Jones, 2003). An additional feature that promotes L2 writing is the perception of blogging platforms as non-threatening environments that reduce learners' anxiety and empower shy students to communicate in the L2 (De Andrés Martínez, 2012). Finally, from the educators and researchers' perspective, an attractive feature of blogging is the possibility of archiving posts for later review and analysis (Chen, 2015; Ducate and Lomika, 2008).

In effect, the use of blogs in L2 courses has been shown to have numerous benefits for acquisition, particularly in the improvement of writing skills. Warschauer (2010) mentioned an increase in production and lexical sophistication, while Vurdien (2013) found that participants developed their confidence to produce better-quality writing and this resulted in more accurate vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, blogging platforms have been shown to have benefits that ultimately improve writing. Through blogging, students gain a sense of self-discovery, of personal growth (Murray, Hourigan, & Jeanneau,

2007), and of belonging to a community (Commas-Quinn et al., 2009), and they are encouraged to participate in the generation and sharing of knowledge Sun & Chang (2012).

However, and despite their numerous benefits, some drawbacks have been reported about the use of blogs as a pedagogical tool in SLA. Chen (2015) indicated that some students do not seem to benefit from blogging platforms as much as others and pointed to individual differences as the causes of these contrasting blogging experiences. These differences include their personal beliefs and whether they considered themselves *knowers*, or those who have a lot to say about a given topic. Similarly, while most students find blogging appealing, some viewed its incorporation as additional homework (Vurdien, 2013) and some were still reluctant to participate due to fear or criticism from readers (Alm, 2009). Additionally, the public nature of blogging technologies can constitute an issue for the privacy of students and their academic work (Hourigan & Murray, 2010). These authors also reported the increase in work load for teachers as a drawback, due to the laborious development of meaningful blogging activities coupled with the need for ongoing monitoring of blog postings and the support required in the appropriate integration of the technology.

Although this review of the literature has yielded numerous studies that look into the general benefits and drawbacks of the use of blogs in SLA (Commas-Quinn, et al., 2009; Rivens Mompean, 2010; Vurdien, 2013; Warschauer, 2010), specific research about students' use of learning strategies in blogging activities is scarce. De Andrés Martínez (2012) reported that blogging fostered autonomy and ownership of learning by the acquisition of reflective skills. Similarly, Hourigan & Murray (2010) found that using a blog fostered reflective learning, which made students more aware of their language-learning strategies. Furthermore, Sun (2009) reported that participants used a variety of learning strategies to cope with the difficulties encountered when writing blog entries. These included conceptualizing, brainstorming, articulation, monitoring, and evaluation. Similar results were reported by Sun & Chang (2012). This study found that participants employed a variety of meta-cognitive writing strategies such as the activation of background knowledge and language inquiry to solve blogging-related difficulties.

### ***Language-Learning Strategies***

Oxford, Cho, Leung, & Kim (2004) define learning strategies as “steps taken by students to enhance their own learning.” Some of these actions are conscious while others are unconscious, or automatic, but regardless of whether their use is intentional or not, their purpose is to complete tasks and solve problems during the learning process (Chamot, Anstrom, Bartoshesky, Belanger, Delett, Karwan, Meloni, & Keatley, 2006). Therefore, through the use of learning strategies, students make the L2 learning process easier, faster, and more effective (Oxford et al., 2004).

Learning strategies have been a key subject of educational research since the mid-1970s. In the case of SLA, this line of research has produced several classifications, or models, of language-learning strategies (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002), but there is no consensus about which model best fits real strategy use by learners (Rivera-Mills & Plonsky, 2007). Conversely, there is ample agreement about the benefits of the use of learning strategies in the SLA process. According to Kevorkian (1997) effective language learners have a wide repertoire of strategies, which they use appropriately and flexibly, and they are able to monitor which ones work and which ones do not. Additionally, learning strategies empower students to take control of their L2 learning because they have been linked to variables such as autonomy (Rivera-Mills & Plonsky, 2007), self-regulation (Oxford, 2011), and self-efficacy (Barnhardt, 1997). In turn, according to Barnhardt (1997) these variables have been related to self-esteem, motivation, and learners’ positive beliefs about their language-learning abilities.

With regard to writing strategies, Oxford (2011) reported that effective L2 writers used appropriate strategies such as identifying the purpose of the writing task, activating their background knowledge, and planning the structure of their writing pieces. This is consistent with the Flower & Hayes (1981) cognitive process theory of writing that looks at writing as a process of goal-setting, knowledge activation, planning and monitoring, proving that this model still bears validity thirty years after its conception. Mu & Carrington (2007) also found that successful English as a second language (ESL) learners used a rhetorical, cognitive and social-affective strategies to facilitate the writing task.

### ***Assessing Language-Learning Strategies***

Simple observation has proven to be an ineffective method to identify and measure the strategies used by L2 learners (Oxford, 1996). However, it is

possible to assess strategy use accurately through the use of self-reported measures such as interviews or questionnaires (Barnhardt, 1998; Oxford, 2011). The reason is that these instruments provide direct access to the learners' ideas, beliefs, and memories about strategy use while eliminating observer's bias. Using these measures, the literature has identified two types of self-reported language-learning strategy assessment, general and task-based (Oxford, 2011). General strategy assessment measures learners' overall strategy use, which is transferrable to any task (Barnhardt, 1998), while task-based strategy assessment measures strategy use when learners complete a particular task (Oxford, 2011). While numerous studies have been conducted about general strategy assessment (Khalil, 2005; Nisbet, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005; Olivares-Cuhat, 2002; Woodrow, 2005), task-based assessment has been shown to provide more detailed data about the strategies that learners use in SLA (Oxford et al., 2004; Oxford, 2011). Furthermore, several studies (Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2000; Oxford et al., 2004) have found that the presence of an actual task, like the blogging task studied in the present investigation, significantly affects learners' report of strategy use by providing not only a more detailed, but also a more contextualized depiction of learners' mental processes.

## **METHODS**

### ***Blogging Task Integration***

The present project consisted of the development of a blogging task and its implementation in an Intermediate Spanish course taught by the researcher at a small university in the Northeast of the United States. Following the recommendations of previous research, which emphasizes appropriate implementation of CMC technologies into L2 courses, along with training in the use of the technology (Beauvois, 1999; Comas-Quinn et al., 2009; Hourigan & Murray, 2010; Meunier, 1998; Skinner & Austin, 1999), the instructor included the blogging task in the course syllabus, assigned a weight in the grade, and conducted a training session at the start of the semester.

Also following the recommendations of previous research (Rivens and Mompean, 2010), the class was randomly divided into groups of five with the purpose of increasing a sense of bonding among the students and making the amount of information more manageable. In the course of one semester students were required to post bi-weekly entries about a campus, national, or world event

in their group's blog. The topic was kept general and familiar to the students in agreement with the findings of Yang (2011). In this study, participants valued what the author calls *commonality*, or the possibility of blogging about topics that referred to pre-existing shared personal interests, mutual understanding and similar personal experiences. The wide array of possibilities that the topic provided allowed students to write about something that they enjoyed and about which they already possessed some knowledge. This was also done in accordance with Chen (2015), who found that satisfied L2 learners using a blog consider themselves *knowers*, or in other words, they had a lot to say about a topic.

On the weeks when original contributions were not due, students were required to post comments to two of their group-mates' contributions. This was done following the recommendations of Pelletieri (2000). According to this study, the design and implementation of CMC tasks in L2 courses must require students to access and take notice of the information provided by their peers so that real communication takes place.

### ***Participants***

The participants were students enrolled in an intermediate-level Spanish course at a small university in the Northeast of the United States. The enrolment at the institution is about 2000 mostly undergraduate students and technological availability of the institution is ample, with at least one computer room in each floor of the instructional buildings as well as smart boards in all classrooms. Of the 24 students registered, 18 (75%) completed the questionnaire. Thirteen were females (72%) and 5 were males (28%). Four were classified as freshmen (22%), 7 were sophomores (39%), 3 were juniors (17%), and 4 were seniors (22%). Thirty-three percent of the participants reported to be taking Spanish as a graduation requirement, 33% wanted to make Spanish either their major or a minor, and 11% took the class because they wanted to become fluent in the language. Seventeen percent took the class both as a requirement and because of a desire to become fluent in Spanish.

### ***Questionnaire***

In accordance with the literature's recommendations about the assessment of language-learning strategies, the present study employed a self-reported questionnaire to elicit data from the participants' experience when completing the blogging task. Consequently, this was what Oxford (2011) called an *actual-task*

*strategy questionnaire* as it was not meant to evaluate the participants' general strategy use. Because there is no standardized actual-task strategy measure and general strategy instruments do not describe the strategies used in specific tasks (Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2000; Oxford, 1996), the questionnaire used in this study was developed by the researcher to fit the requirements of the blogging task (see the appendix). Based on the design recommended by Oxford (1996) and Woodrow (2005), the questionnaire contained a series of open-ended questions to elicit detailed qualitative data, along with a checklist in which participants were asked to mark the strategies that they had used on the blogging task. The items on the checklist were based on the model proposed by Chamot (1998), which includes meta-cognitive as well as task-based strategies.

Barnhardt (1998) also identified the benefits of using a combination of open-ended and closed questionnaires in the assessment of language-learning strategies. According to this report, open-ended questions give students the opportunity to report on their own strategies without any pre-conditioning, while checklists are good for task-based strategy assessment in that they may include strategies that the student used but may not have thought about when answering the open-ended questions. In order to avoid the caveat of pre-disposing the participants to report only on the strategies included in the checklist, this section was placed at the end of the questionnaire. Lastly, in addition to strategy-specific items, the questionnaire contained open-ended questions about the students' overall experience with the blogging platform as well as their perceptions of the blogging task, its requirements, and its integration into the course syllabus.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were administered the questionnaire at the end of the semester, shortly after the blogging task was completed. For the analysis, the responses to the open-ended questions were coded in order to identify emerging themes and each theme was assigned a number based on the number of participants who had mentioned it. Additionally, descriptive statistical analysis was performed on the data obtained from the checklist. The results obtained from the qualitative and quantitative data were first analyzed separately and later contrasted to analyze their level of convergence and how they inform or expand one another.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Qualitative Results***

#### ***Perceptions of the Task***

Responses from the open-ended questions that elicited student perceptions about the blogging task and its integration into the course were analyzed to determine if student perceptions had an impact on their use of strategies. The first question inquired about the students' initial feelings when they learned about the blogging task. The class was split in their first reaction towards the activity. While 8 students were enthusiastic, the remaining 10 either perceived it as additional work, or were overwhelmed by the task. Among the comments that indicated a positive initial reaction was the mention of the activity being exciting because of its novelty and because it was different from typical L2 classroom writing activities. One student said: "I thought it would be an interesting experience because I've never done something like it before." Another representative comment of this theme was: "I thought the blogs were interesting. It allowed people to still utilize what they had learned in Spanish, but not with a typical composition topic." These comments are in accordance with Warschauer (2010), who praised blogs on their appeal to students. Another participant mentioned being comfortable with the technology as the source for a positive initial view of the task: "I felt ok because I used Blogger before and I was familiar with the platform." This student confirms a finding that has long been in the literature about technology-enhanced language learning, the significance of the learner's familiarity with the technology and the need for appropriate training (Skinner & Austin, 1999).

Comments that expressed a negative initial reaction were mostly related to the perceived amount of work that the activity would involve, as this participant mentioned: "I thought it was overwhelming in addition to the rest of the course load." This comment is consistent with some of the literature on the use of blogging, which mentions that although most students find the task appealing, some view it as extra homework (Vurdien, 2013). Additionally, the term "overwhelmed" used by this participant appeared frequently in the data, often related to the amount of work that the activity was thought to involve, but also in connection to a fear that the students' proficiency in Spanish would not allow them to complete the activity successfully. One participant said: "I was not very

excited because I was not sure if I would be able to write my thoughts and opinions in paragraphs in Spanish. Overwhelming.” The feeling of the blogging task being beyond the student’s competence was also mentioned by this student: “I was not too happy about it. I felt as though I wouldn’t do well because my Spanish (specifically writing and speaking) was not advanced enough.” The perception of laboriousness and difficulty expressed in these examples is relevant to the purpose of the present investigation since the literature has shown that strategies come into play when a specific task is perceived as difficult (Oxford, 2011). In other words, the initial feeling of being overwhelmed may have motivated the students to use language-learning strategies in order to make the task simpler.

### ***Perceptions of the Design and Integration of the Blogging Task***

In addition to their initial reaction, students were asked about their overall opinion of the blogging task in terms of its design, requirements, and integration into the course syllabus. In this case, the positive opinions outweighed the negative, with 12 students out of the 18 surveyed expressing their satisfaction with the design and integration. This student was pleased with the interactive nature of the task: “The activity was set up well and it is very interactive. It allows to look back at current events and it brings a new aspect to the Spanish class.” The comment also expresses the student’s satisfaction with the open nature of the topic, a design feature that was mentioned by several participants, as in this comment: “Very free in terms of what students choose to write about, which is good. Word count is fine, as you do it every week it gets easier. Overall design is ok.”

Although the student in the second example did not find the length of the blog postings to be overwhelming, this was not the overall feeling of the group. In fact, the majority of the students struggled with the minimum length of 150 words required for blog entries. This comment exemplifies the general feeling of the task being daunting because of the minimum word count: “When I first started the post I thought it was challenging because the word limit was hard to meet at times.” Once more, the impact of the perception of the word count as daunting, mentioned by the majority of participants, may have facilitated the use of writing strategies, since the literature shows that L2 learners are motivated to use specific techniques to make tasks that they perceive as challenging more manageable (Oxford, 2011).

### ***Experience in the Blogging Platform***

In addition to their overall perception of the activity design and integration, participants were asked to describe their experience in the blogging platform, Blogger, in order to determine if it constituted an obstacle when completing the task. Sixteen of the eighteen participants felt that Blogger was easy to navigate and did not constitute a problem for the completion of the activity. The two students who disagreed with the class's general opinion pointed to login problems which were solved shortly after the start of the semester.

### ***Writing Strategies***

The remaining open-ended questions were aimed at eliciting the participants' thought processes immediately before and during the completion of the blogging task in order to determine the writing strategies that they had utilized. Five major themes emerged during the analysis of the students' responses to these questions: (1) carefully selecting the topic, (2) keeping the language simple, (3) using available resources, (4) focusing on reaching the required length, and (5) enjoying the interaction.

Given the open nature of the topic, most of the students surveyed mentioned the importance of selecting a topic that was not only familiar and easy to write about, but also interesting. The following comment exemplifies this theme that emerged from the data: "I tried to think of something I knew I had the vocabulary for. For example, I know the vocabulary for houses and food or the kitchen. Then I'd try to think of anything that has happened recently that connects with words I already know." This participant approached the task from the point of view of the language that he was able to produce and, because the choice of topic was open, he could find a current event that would match his language proficiency. Indeed, this was the most prevalent strategy mentioned by participants in their comments. Most referred to picking topics that they knew about, since they possessed the language tools to write their entries.

The second most prevalent strategy mentioned by participants in the open-ended section of the survey was an effort to keep the language as simple as possible. Within this major theme, the strategy that was mentioned the most was rephrasing or re-wording those sentences that were too complex for the student's level of proficiency. This student mentioned thinking about the importance of focusing on content, yet utilizing simple language: "How can I get my message off and make my writing simple." Similarly, re-wording was a common strategy

utilized by participants, as the writer of this comment: “When I didn’t know how to say something in Spanish, I tried to say it in another way where it would be easier for me to get the same point across.”

The third most prevalent theme emerging from the data was the strategy referring to the use of available resources when participants did not know how to say something. The resources mentioned included a dictionary, the course’s textbook, friends or classmates, Internet searches, and notes. This participant wrote: “I used my Spanish dictionary in comparison to translate. I used my homeworks, or asked one of my friends. Lastly, I completed my entry then sent it to my professor in time for revision.” The option of sending the entry to the professor for review prior to posting it to the blog was made available to all students. However, only this student used the instructor as a resource. In addition, and although the activity instructions did not allow it, a few students mentioned using electronic translation to write their blog entries: “I know we were not supposed to, but I translated the words I did not know how to say online.” The existence of online translation is well known by both L2 instructors and students, and this participant’s comment suggests that it was used to some extent by the group. It is unclear whether this strategy fostered or hindered writing in the blogging platform. While online translation can be used as an effective tool for L2 learning when students receive appropriate training (O’Neill, 2017), there was no training provided in the design of the blogging activity described in the present investigation.

The fourth theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was the students’ focus on reaching the required length of the blog entries, as they had expressed in previous questions. This example summarizes the general feeling of the group with regard to the minimum word count: “I thought about how I would reach the minimum length. (...) Try to summarize the issue before I gave my thoughts about it so that I could meet the 150 character minimum.” The word count overwhelmed the students to the point that they outlined the strategies that they had used in order to reach the minimum length. This is the case of this participant: “I was so more worried about the word count, since it was stressed in the instructions. (...) I usually asked my friends what to write about or asked them for help, so that I would have more to say.” This student’s concern about reaching the minimum length prompted him to ask his friends for help in order to come up with enough content to meet the 150-word minimum. These comments constitute confirmation of the conclusion reached earlier that the participants in the present investigation were using strategies as they completed a task which they considered to be difficult.

The last open-ended question of the survey asked participants to list the aspects of the blogging task that they had enjoyed the most. A fifth theme clearly emerged from the analysis of the responses to this question that does not constitute a writing strategy, but that it is worth mentioning since it refers to the design of the activity and can be of use to L2 educators seeking to incorporate blogging into their courses: The students enjoyed interacting with their classmates. This included reading each other's entries and commenting on them: "I enjoyed replying to other people's comments", but mostly reading the comments that others had made to their own entries: "When people would comment on my blog and I would read their feedback." One student made the following comment about interacting on the blog: "I began with complicated events and then I read my peers' blogs and they kept it simple so I learned from them." As mentioned in this quote, this particular student was using her classmates' postings as models for her own entries. Therefore, the interactive nature of the blogging activity was not only enjoyable, but also provided an additional resource that some students could use as a writing strategy. Early research on the use of blogs had already pointed to their interactive nature as a feature that is appealing to L2 learners (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

### ***Quantitative Results***

In order to determine if the students used strategies that they had not mentioned in the open-ended questions, the items of the checklist that were selected by at least 80% of participants were identified. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Checklist Strategies with Strongest Percentages (Higher than 80%).*

Item	Percentage
Am I making sense?	100
How well did I do?	94
Which grammar rules can I apply to complete the task?	89
I can do this! What strategies can I use to help me?	89
Is there another way to say this?	89
What do I already know about the topic of the entry?	83
Who/where can I ask for help?	83
Did I meet the goal of the activity?	83
What could I do differently next time?	83

As shown in Table 1, students were using meta-cognitive as well as task-based activities included in the models of language-learning strategies outlined in

the literature (Oxford, 2011; Chamot, 1998; Chamot et al., 2006). Specifically, all participants reported to have asked themselves if they were making sense while writing their entries to the blog. This indicates that students were monitoring themselves for both content and comprehensibility. According to Chamot (1998) this is a meta-cognitive strategy in which, in order for language production to be successful, learners must ask themselves if the ideas expressed make sense and beware of comprehension breakdowns. In addition to this formative process of monitoring, the vast majority of students applied summative evaluation after they had completed the blogging task. Most (94%) asked themselves how well they had done and if they had met the goal of the activity (83%). In this meta-cognitive strategy of evaluation learners identify their strengths and weaknesses and improve on future language production (Chamot, 1998). This is further confirmed by the fact that 83% of the participants surveyed asked themselves what they could do differently next time.

In addition to these meta-cognitive strategies, data from the checklist shows that the participants of the present investigation employed a number of task-based strategies. The most prominent was focus on grammatical rules, as shown by the fact that 89% marked this option on the checklist. This is not only indicative of their effort to monitor their language production, but also shows their knowledge of general language rules and their application to this specific task (Chamot, 1998).

Participants also reported to have thought about the strategies that they could use before writing blog posts. This indicates a certain level of awareness about the existence of learning strategies that they could utilize to make the task of blogging in Spanish more manageable. An example of a strategy that was used by 89% of participants is the effort to find other ways of expressing thoughts when they did not know the specific vocabulary or grammar rules. In fact, the use of rephrasing and paraphrasing as a strategy was also a theme in the responses to the open-ended questions.

As shown in Table 1, 83% of participants reported to have used what they already knew to complete the blogging task. This finding is also confirmed by data from the open-ended questions in which participants reported to have selected familiar topics or those for which they already possessed the basic vocabulary. Activation of background knowledge is mentioned in all models of language-learning strategies, and is also crucial for first language (L1) writing, as specified in the Flower and Hayes (1981) cognitive process theory.

Similarly, data from both the open-ended questions and the checklist show that participants employed available resources to help them solve problems while writing their blog entries. While 83% of the students surveyed asked themselves where they could go for help, data from the open-ended questions specified the resources that they turned to. Access to information sources and cooperation with classmates were the most used strategies when difficulties were encountered.

### ***Summary and Convergence of Qualitative and Quantitative Results***

The present investigation sought to identify the writing strategies used by L2 learners when completing a blogging task. The analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data support each other in revealing that, similarly to the findings of other studies (Hourigan & Murray, 2010; Sun & Chang, 2012; Sun, 2009; Vurdien, 2013), participants employed a variety of metacognitive and task-based strategies when posting their entries to the class blog. In fact, contrary to the findings of previous research (Oxford, 2011), the results of this investigation revealed that students had some awareness of the existence of strategies that they could use to facilitate the blogging task.

Qualitative data revealed that this use of language-learning strategies was motivated by the fact that, although they were satisfied with the activity's design and the blogging technology, a significant number of participants perceived the activity as overwhelming. In effect, the literature has shown that strategies are employed when a task is perceived as challenging (Oxford, 2011). This perception of difficulty was primarily attributable to the minimum length required for blog entries. In addition, participants feared that their language proficiency would not be sufficient to complete the task successfully.

Analysis of the qualitative data also found that topic selection was crucial to participants' success, as they chose subjects that they found interesting and about which they possessed some degree of knowledge. The strategy of using previous knowledge was also found in the analysis of the quantitative data obtained from the checklist included at the end of the data-collection instrument. This confirms the findings of previous literature on language-learning strategies since several models include the use of background knowledge to facilitate a writing task. (Oxford, 2011; Chamot, 1998; Chamot et al., 2006). The predominance of this strategy is also consistent with the findings of Chen (2015) who found that satisfied L2 learners using a blog considered themselves as *knowers*, referring to those who had a lot to say about a topic.

Other strategies were identified in the analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data. Among them is the finding that, in order to make the blogging task easier, students used the task-based strategy of re-wording and rephrasing their posts to simplify the language. Additionally, both data sources revealed that participants turned to available resources when they struggled to express a thought in their own words. Among those resources were a Spanish-English dictionary, their textbook, the Internet, and help from friends or classmates. The model proposed by Chamot (1998) includes the strategy of substituting, or paraphrasing, as well as using available resources as useful strategies when a learner does not know a word.

Analysis of the quantitative data confirmed the findings of the qualitative open-ended questions, but revealed that students were using metacognitive and task-based strategies beyond the ones that they had mentioned when answering the questions. Specifically, participants used the metacognitive strategies of monitoring and evaluation. They monitored their L2 output for content and comprehensibility and, after typing their entries, they evaluated if they had met the goal of the task. Furthermore, while engaged in this process of evaluation, they assessed their strengths and weaknesses and determined what they could do differently in the future. The quantitative data also revealed that students used the task-based strategy of applying general grammatical rules to specific problems encountered while posting on the blog. This strategy is closely related to the metacognitive processes of monitoring and evaluation since, while writing their entries, students were making an effort to make sense, be understood, and meet the goal of the assignment. This is an indication that students were reflecting on both content and form while blogging and confirms the findings of previous literature. De Andrés Martínez (2012) reported that blogging fostered autonomy and ownership of learning by the acquisition and self-assessment of reflective skills. Similarly, Hourigan & Murray (2010) found that using a blog fostered reflective learning.

## TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study serve to fill a gap in the literature that looks into the impact of blogging in the development of writing proficiency and as such, they are of value to SLA instructors. Those wanting to incorporate blogs in their courses should take note of the results of this investigation as it sheds light on the strategies that student use when writing in this popular medium. For L2 tasks that are completed at a distance, like the case of the blog studied in this investigation,

strategy use is of particular importance since the student completes these tasks away from the immediate guidance of the instructor (Oxford, 2011). In addition, previous research has revealed that almost everyone can learn an L2 effectively by employing appropriate strategies (Oxford, 2011) and that strategies can be learned through mediation and assistance (Oxford, 2011; Chamot, 1998). Therefore, given the importance of language-learning strategies and keeping in mind the findings of the present investigation, the design of blogging activities should include training on the strategies that can be used to make the writing of the posts more manageable. These can be explicitly taught together with the use of the technology in the training session, or integrated in the syllabus description of the activity. The participants of the present study felt worried and overwhelmed about the minimum length required of their entries and were also concerned that their level of proficiency wouldn't match the requirements of the activity. Strategy training would have reduced or eliminated that anxiety and made the blogging task more enjoyable to students.

The strategies found by this investigation should inform the design of blogging tasks. First, the topic should be kept general and familiar to the students, allowing them to pick something in which they can use their background knowledge to facilitate writing. In addition, the use of outside sources should be allowed and even encouraged. This encouragement of collaboration and the use of textbooks and dictionaries will give students the confidence and skills to complete their blog entries without turning to online translation as a resource. Another way to avoid the use of electronic translation is to teach learners how to keep the language simple by paraphrasing and by using circumlocution when they do possess specific vocabulary to express an idea. This can be done in the classroom on a regular basis as it will help learners with other L2 tasks and improve their communicative competence. If electronic translation is to be used, there should be training about how to use it as a tool for L2 writing and not as a way to avoid having to employ useful strategies to complete a task.

Students must also be taught and encouraged to monitor their language production and to evaluate if they have met the goal of the writing task. This can be accomplished through a simple worksheet or checklist that they can complete while writing their blog entries and immediately before posting. The items on the checklist should compel learners to pay attention to language and content, revise and rewrite, and list suggestions for improvement in the current or future posts.

Finally, the participants of this investigation appreciated the design of the blogging activity and particularly enjoyed the interaction with their classmates.

However, they found the minimum required length of the entries to be overwhelming and mentioned it repeatedly in the qualitative data. Although this feature of the design facilitated the use of strategic thinking in order to reach the required length, L2 instructors must be careful not to design blogging tasks that are too difficult for learners to carry out. L2 tasks must be designed at a level that is challenging to learners, but not so daunting that strategies may not be effective (Oxford, 2011).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the study accomplished its goal of providing insights into the use of writing strategies in a L2 blogging task, the participants were selected based on their enrollment in a L2 course during data collection at one specific institution. Therefore, further research is warranted to confirm the findings and to improve our understanding of the specific strategies that the blogging platform encourages. The findings of this study could be replicated with a larger sample of students from different institutions, at various levels of proficiency. Another possible line of inquiry resulting from the results of this investigation is to analyze the impact of strategy training on L2 writing competence in a blogging environment. Is actual writing improved? Are students using more sophisticated vocabulary and syntax? Is the content better organized and developed? Finally, a further line of research is to look into the impact of strategy training on both affective variables and actual strategy use. Does training reduce anxiety about the blogging task? Do learners feel more comfortable with the activity of blogging once they know what strategies they can use to make it manageable? Do they use the strategies taught or do they come up with others that work better with each individual's learning style?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**María Isabel Charle Poza** (Ed.D. Technology Education, West Virginia University) is an associate professor of Spanish at Lincoln University. Her research interests include language learning and technology and teaching foreign languages to minority student populations. She has published articles in the *IALLT Journal* and *NECTFL Review* and presented at numerous professional conferences including ACTFL, CALICO, SCOLT, and NECTFL. She served as a guest reviewer for *Language Learning and Technology* and is a proposal reviewer for the Lincoln University Humanities Conference.

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## APPENDIX

### *Actual-Task Questionnaire*

1. Describe how you felt when you learned about the activity.
2. Describe your experience with the Blogger platform.
3. Give your opinion about the activity in terms of its design, requirements, and integration in the course syllabus.
4. What did you do before you started writing your entry?
5. What did you do/think while you were writing?
6. What did you do when you didn't know how to say something?
7. What did you do to help make the task easier in general?
8. What aspects of the activity did you enjoy the most?
9. What recommendations for improvement do you have?
10. Did you ask yourself the following questions while completing the blogging task?

	YES	NO
What is the goal of this activity?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What do I already know about the topic of the entry?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Am I making sense?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What should I pay most attention to?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Which grammar rules can I apply to complete the task?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Can I picture the scenario in my head to help me?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How does this task fit into the real world?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Can I work with others to do this?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can do this! What strategies can I use to help me?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Can I guess how to say this?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is there another way to say this?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Who/where can I ask for help?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Where can I find more information about this?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Did I guess right?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Did I meet the goal of the activity?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How well did I do?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What could I do differently next time?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>