Korean EFL Learners' Perceptions of Online Interaction*

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Kim, Minjung. 2017. Korean EFL Learners' Perceptions of Online Interaction, *Linguistic Research* 34(Special Edition), 97-124. With the increased interest in blended learning for higher education in Korea's universities and EFL settings, there is a need to understand how students work within blended learning environments. The purpose of this study was to examine the interactional practices of EFL students in a blended EFL writing course in order to gain the understanding of interaction in terms of its usefulness and challenges. Data were collected from multiple sources such as surveys, observation notes, reflective journals and interviews, all of which were analyzed to extract salient themes. The emerged themes involving the usefulness of each interaction type (learner-instructor, learner-learner, learner-content) were prompt and personalized teacher feedback, group discussion, and lurking. Themes involving challenging were demands on posting, limitation of e-peer feedback and English-only policy. Further discussion of the themes is presented in relations to learning second language writing and suggestions for addressing the challenges are made. **(Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary)**

Keywords   online interaction, blended learning, EFL, second language writing, online feedback

1. Introduction

Widespread use of internet and the rapid growth of technologies have brought a change in the pedagogy of language learning classroom. Particularly, utilizing multimedia to assist language learning has enhanced opportunities for learners to interact with the target language. Online instructors try to implement a wide variety of interactive activities such as video clips, animations, and graphs to serve students' different needs (Lee, 2010).

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) classes, which were previously

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referred to as a traditional computer laboratory, are now directed with blended learning to enhance active learning through interactive strategies (Graham, 2006). Recent studies show that blended learning for language learning yields positive outcomes in academic achievements and the learner's satisfaction (Choi, Ko, & Baek, 2009; Hinkelman & Gruba, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2012; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Yoon & Lee, 2010).

With regard to second language writing education, several researchers found that blended learning enhances a process-oriented writing development by expanding the opportunities for collaboration, communication, and the development of positive attitudes and confidence about writing (Chih-Hua, 2008; Colakoglu & Akdemir, 2010). Wold (2011) argues, "Blended learning clearly has many advantages over using online formats for writing instruction for ELLs" (p.372). Similar findings have been made in Korean EFL settings as well (Yoon, 2011; Yoon & Lee, 2010).

While the importance of CALL has been continually emphasized, there is a lack of qualitative research on actual student experiences in blended learning from the students' perspectives (Lao & Gonzales, 2005; Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008). Perhaps this is due to the fact that the majority of research in online or Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has been focused on the relative effectiveness of learning outcomes between exclusively online and face-to-face environments. Despite increased interest in blended learning in the higher education of Korea's university and EFL settings, there is even less research focusing on students' experiences in a blended learning environment. Blended learning research for Korean language classrooms, albeit it in small amount, mostly suggests an effective model through comparing the effects of courses (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2012; Yoon, 2011). Although they are equally valuable discoveries, a more student-centered approach can fill the gap to see "what is going on in a virtual world" as opposed to a traditional face-to-face instruction classroom. Therefore, it is imperative to hear the students' voices to learn about their experiences of blended learning and to understand their interactional experience, which are the key elements of the online classroom (Beldarrain, 2006; Berge, 1999; Liaw & Huang, 2000; Northrup, 2001), and to language acquisition as well.

Given this, the present study employs a qualitative approach to investigate students' learning experiences in a blended EFL writing classroom. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to describe students' interactional experiences in terms of

challenges and usefulness as the students partake in a semester-long English Writing for Academic Purposes course. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to the existing literature of online interactions in EFL settings and serve as a preliminary guideline for the development of EFL blended classes. Following questions are addressed to serve the purpose of the study: (1) What are the Korean EFL students' perceptions of the usefulness of online interaction for learning English writing skills? (2) What are the Korean EFL students' perceptions of the challenges of online interaction for learning English writing skills?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Blended learning in SLA

The term "blended learning" has been used for nearly two decades to refer to a new move in educational delivery that occurs in a combination of face-to-face and online learning. Although blended learning has become a trendy word in both academia and the business world, some ambiguity exists because it is defined and interpreted in a variety of forms (Graham, 2006). It has been only a decade since the researchers began to use the term blended learning in relation to language learning. Before that, the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) had been examined extensively, including the various formats of blended language learning cases since its beginning in the 1960s. Therefore, many literature reviews on blended learning were dependent on the field of CALL research which has a relatively longer history.

Many researchers of blended learning in second language acquisition also draw upon studies on CALL, although these studies did not use the term blended learning (e.g., Hong & Samimy, 2010; Neumeier, 2005; Wiebe & Kabata, 2010). However, it is still ambiguous to demarcate blended learning from CALL and vice versa. Neumeier (2005) even encapsulated that "in the realms of blended learning, there is still a lot of undiscovered territory to be explored and mapped out" (p. 176), which in another sense indicates that blended learning in the field of SLA is still in its early stage.

2.2 Interactions in online learning environments

Successful online or blended learning involves a connected system of multiple components such as content, design, communication, interaction, learning environment, and management categorized by Moore and Kearsley (1996). Among these six components, interaction is at the heart of online learning experience and is considered to have the potential to create a better learning experience online (Wagner, 1997).

Defining "online interaction" has been a challenge to distance educators since it has been used differently across studies (Battalio, 2007; Muirhead, 2000). Along with a vast number of definitions used under the term, interaction, there are different frameworks for categorizing interactions. This study adopts one of the most widely discussed frameworks, Moore's (1989) taxonomy. He classified online interaction into three types within the online classroom: 1) learner-instructor, 2) learner-learner, and 3) learner-content interaction. First, learner-instructor interaction is "between the learner and the expert who prepared the subject material or some other expert acting as instructor" (Moore, 1989, p. 2). Second, learner-learner interaction occurs when a learner works together with a partner or a group of students (Hirumi, 2006; Moore, 1989). Third, learner-content interaction occurs between the learner and the subject matter as the learners construct knowledge based on their previous information. In order to serve the purpose of the research, the present study examines the students' interactions in an online setting which, in effect, was a dominant arena for learning.

2.3 Computer-mediated communication (CMC) in SLA

Firstly, some studies have shown that CMC in language education can increase learners' motivation. Beauvois (1995) reported that the students' motivation increased as they felt "freedom from having to produce target language and in someone else's timeframe; [it] seemed to release the students to create meaningful, more accurate, and even playful conversations with their classmates and instructor" (p. 182). Beauvois (1995) also found that learner's motivation was higher in the CMC setting than in face-to-face interaction. Other researchers (Chen, 2005; Lee, 2004) found that authentic and meaningful online interactions positively motivate students to participate actively in interactive tasks.

Secondly, the research has shown that students prefer online interactions to

face-to-face ones due to the time convenience; that is, students can easily access the internet any time they want and produce language when they are prepared (Beauvois, 1995, Kern, 1995). In the same vein, online interaction in language classroom is reported to provide learners with more time for reflective learning (Yamada & Akahori, 2007). In a CMC setting, students are allowed to have more time to look back on their experiences and evaluate them using available resources on the internet (Jonassen, 2004). Furthermore, in an asynchronous environment, EFL students can take advantage of time flexibility such as composing sentences more carefully or reading through peer/instructor feedback.

Thirdly, CMC environments are known to foster learner autonomy in language learning (Arnold, 2002; Benson, 2007; Chiu, 2008). The concept of learner autonomy lies in learner independence in which learners take responsibility for their own learning and takes control of their learning process (Benson, 2001; Little, 2000). Chiu (2008) examined the relationship between the teacher's role and learner autonomy in online education and found that using CMC offered more interactions which developed learner autonomy, especially when the teacher played a counseling role. Moreover, learner autonomy was investigated in relation to CMC technology and pedagogy within three different perspectives (an individual cognitive, a social-interactive, and an experimental-participatory approach), and Schwienhorst (2003) suggested tandem language learning can help to realize the principle of learner autonomy by implementing technologies and pedagogies.

While it is true that the new technologies have increased advantageous opportunities to the language learners and teachers, they also come with problems. Disadvantages of CMC in language teaching were summarized by Warschauer (1997: 1) more difficulty in achieving consensus in online discussion than in face-to-face, 2) danger of using hostile language, and 3) overloaded information. Huang and Liu (2000) additionally pointed out that the computer software and technical problems in CMC language teaching can be difficult for students and instructors.

2.4 Online interaction in second language writing classroom

Given the above-mentioned benefits of using computer-aided instruction for general language learning, traditional writing classes also have been employing technology to motivate learners and facilitate learning (Chang et al., 2008; Fidaoui et

al., 2010; Goldberg et al., 2003). Although there have not been many studies done on blended learning in writing courses (Wold, 2011), a few of them have shown that CMC positively influenced L2 learners' writing performance compared to traditional classrooms (e.g., Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2005). Specifically, Zhang, Gao, Ring and Zhang (2007) examined the effects of online discussion on different skills of language and discovered that students showed improvements in essay organization and critical thinking, whereas no significant improvements were found in grammar, vocabulary, or reading skills.

The fact that blended learning can provide online interactional opportunities to EFL students seems to bring positive results in a writing class. Using forums, blogs, and wikis, Miyazoe and Anderson (2010) found out that the students were more actively engaged in communicating with each other which helped them to improve their ability to differentiate English writing styles and they reported to have positive perceptions of the blended writing class.

Several studies regarding blended learning and second language writing in Korea have investigated the perspectives of Korean EFL students and the effectiveness of peer feedback in a blended writing course. Yoon and Lee (2010) found that the students developed their writing skills in terms of mechanics, content, organization and structure, and overall, the students had positive perspectives on both peer feedback and teacher feedback. Yoon (2011)'s research also supports the beneficial effect of online feedback in that the students were able to discern their problems in writing and set new goals for improvements in L2 writing. Especially, in Korean EFL contexts, online interaction through CMC are considered useful because of its flexibility and practicality (Cha, 2007; Yoon & Lee, 2010).

Even though the findings of research speak favorably of blended learning for language instruction, there are concerning voices, too. Kannan and Macknish (2000) found that students' experiences had negative effects when there were inadequate motivation, feedback, self-directedness, and computer technology skills. Ho (2005) spoke of teacher's perspective that "in either hybrid or fully online classes, [teachers] encountered various pedagogical challenges…" (p. 4). Most of all, due to the lack of research on blended writing courses, blended learning has not been efficiently applied in writing courses, which calls for more research to meet the needs of students and instructors.

3. Research design

3.1 Participants and the Research Setting

Ten students in one of the graduate schools in Korea participated in this study. They were enrolled in a blended EWAP (English Writing for Academic Purposes) course which was one of the elective courses required for degree completion. Background information of the participants is listed in Table 1. There were six students in master's degree and four doctoral students with different majors. They ranged in age from 24 to 50. Their English proficiency was approximately intermediate level according to the TEPS[1] grade.

English writing class was designed to meet once a week for three hours in a face-to-face traditional classroom and approximately one hour per day in an online classroom. The online classroom was created through Naver café.[2] Each face-to-face class was devoted mainly to instructor's lecture on weekly lessons and the assignment announcements.

Table 1. Background Information of Participants

Students	Age	Gender	Program	Major	TEPS
A	35	F	MA	History	2
B	32	M	MA	Culture	3+
C	30	F	MA	Musicology	3+
D	32	M	MA	Informatics	3+
E	50	M	Ph.D.	Ethics	2+
F	24	F	MA	Culture	3+
G	36	F	Ph.D.	Art History	2
H	33	F	Ph.D.	Musicology	3+
I	45	F	Ph.D.	Linguistics	2
J	30	F	MA	Musicology	2

Online classroom involved two types of participation: one was obligatory participation which was subject to evaluation and the other was voluntary participation which was done at their own free will. Obligatory activity included

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1   The Test of English Proficiency developed by Seoul National University or TEPS is an English proficiency test created by Seoul National University's Language Education Institute to evaluate South Korean test takers' English language skills. In Wikipedia. Retrieved May 1, 2015, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Test_of_English_Proficiency_(South_Korea)

2   Naver is a popular search engine in South Korea.

checking weekly announcements, reading guidelines for assignments, uploading weekly assignments, posting opinions in a group discussion forum, and writing feedback between peers. Voluntary activities included replying to teacher's diary, writing a short memo, and leaving messages in student's diary board. Table 2 shows a detailed description of the online interactions in this blended classroom.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, data were collected for 15 weeks frm the onset of the semester to the last semester. The data were collected through online classroom observation notes[3], interviews, reflective journals, and survey. In the first week of the course, students had filled out information background survey which provided basic information of the students regarding their major, age, gender, program, English proficiency and online learning experience. Online classroom observations were made by counting[4] and reading each week's postings including the threads of replies to comments. Some notes were taken each week for any outstanding traces in the classroom to help the researcher's memories in subsequent interviews with the students.

Table 2. Description of the Online Interactions

Type of Interactions	Description of the Online Interactions
Interactions with Instructor	Writing on the self-introduction board, email transactions with the instructor, communicating through chat-rooms, replying to teacher's diary, receiving and replying to teacher's feedback on writing products, writing on the Q & A boards, keeping short diary in the diary board.
Interactions with Learners	Having an Asynchronous discussion on the writing topics, providing feedback to each other's essay, writing questions and answers about the process of writing, commenting on each one's journal

Interview was significant data for this particular study because interviews supported qualitative research by delving into a phenomenon of interest at a given

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3   The note was part of the researcher's class log which recorded her experience along with noteworthy interactions but was not subject to firsthand analysis for present study focused primarily on student experience.

4   The numbers of posts and tag lines were counted not for the direct data analysis but to provide a quantitative trend of interaction level for the researcher in order to aid her understanding of the students' experiences.

time through the particular understanding of the participants (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted twice for about an hour; first interview was done after individual background survey in the second week and the second interview was administered in the last week after the final examination. At the first interview, the researcher asked general questions about the participants' previous experiences, perceptions in blended or online learning, and expectations for the course. The questions included: 1) Have you ever taken blended course or online course? 2) If you have taken online courses, tell me about your experiences? 3) What is your motivation of taking this course? 4) What do you think interaction is? 5) What are the expectations of interaction in the course?

The last interview's questions were focused more on evaluative, reflective and suggestive comments about their experiences in online interactions. Some of the interview questions included: 1) What did you find valuable to your learning in blended learning? 2) What did you like and not like about online interaction? 3) What was it like to learn to write in both online and face-to-face classrooms? 4) What seems to be the biggest hindrance to your learning as you communicate in an online setting? Weekly reflective journals were garnered out of the 15-week course which asked five questions: 1) What did I learn this week? 2) What did I find most and least helpful for learning academic writing from this blended learning class? 3) What were the challenges about this week's lesson? 4) Any difficulties in communicating (a) in a face-to-face classroom? (b) in an online classroom? And, 5) Any recommendations for better class?

The two research questions about the usefulness and challenges of online interaction adopted an inductive thematic analysis. The thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Such analysis was well-suited for the present study since this approach is used to report experiences, meaning, and the reality of participants. Through thematic analysis, the researcher was able to draw interpretations and identify salient factors that might have influenced topic expressed Table 3 shows the phases of thematic analysis and the description of the process that this study implemented in analyzing interview transcripts and reflective journals.

Table 3. Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

In the first phase, the researcher transcribed the data gathered from interviews, read all the written data repeatedly, and then started to underline notable features of the data which were collated to each code. The students' reflective journals were also read and analyzed following the same steps. For coding online interactions, the researcher used abbreviations such as LI for Learner-Instructor interaction, LL for Learner-Learner interaction, and LC for Learner-Content interaction, all of which, in the next stage, were clustered according to each potential theme. Then in stages four through six, the researcher reviewed the themes to check if they made sense to draw a thematic map, named the themes, and finally chose the most vivid extracts to represent the theme under each interaction type.

In order to ensure credibility of the data and the analysis, this study adopted the process of triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By using a variety of data sources (observations, interviews, reflective journal, and surveys), accuracy of the data was confirmed. Further, the students provided feedback on the interview data and the

research's findings, which was done through email messages. Finally, the process of data analysis and the interpretation of the data was tested for authenticity thoroughly by the two English instructors/researchers who were also teaching blended courses.

4. Emerged Themes

4.1 Usefulness of Online Interactions

4.1.1 Prompt and Personalized Teacher Feedback

In this academic writing course, teacher feedback was both a tool for and outcomes of active interactions with students. All of the participants valued teacher feedback as the most effective form of instruction for this particular class, and timely feedback was a very important factor. In most cases, students' weekly assignments were read, commented on and evaluated within 24 hours of the posting time. The instructor utilized a mobile application which enabled the online café to be synchronized with a cellular phone, thus immediate notice was provided whenever there was a new posting. Excerpts (1) through (3) describe how the students felt about teacher feedback.

(1) Interaction with the instructor is more important than any other interactions. More specifically, writing feedback was most helpful. After we uploaded assignments, instructor gave us feedback within less than a day so I was able to check it before I forget about my writing. (Student I, journal)

(2) *Teacher feedback helped me a lot to find out my habitual mistakes and grammatical errors in my writing. Although I was sometimes embarrassed to post my assignment because of many errors, I appreciated when the instructor provided me with corrective feedback not just saying 'good job'.* (Student G, interview5)

(3) *I think everybody wanted more teacher feedback and more quickly, too. It was the most productive and effective way to learn writing skills. Face-to-face classroom did not give us enough time to write and*

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5   Interview data is written in italics to differentiate from journal data.

> *receive feedback but because teacher feedback was provided at length in the online classroom, I was able to see my weaknesses and the way to develop them.* (Student C, interview)

Students felt good about receiving personalized comments on their essays because they were able to sense that the instructor was thoroughly reading their work and trying to provide constructive feedback. Since personalized feedback in an online classroom is known to be more consistent than classroom feedback (Tsutsui, 2004), the students in the study also voiced that receiving consistent feedback helped them to see the progress at their own pace (Excerpts 4 and 5).

(4)   *After some weeks passed, it became a routine for me to visit the online classroom to check the teacher's feedback on my writing. At first, I was somewhat self-conscious about posting my writing in public, but it was good for me to keep a track of my mistakes and corrections on a weekly basis. It really helped me to see what I lacked in my writing.* (Student E, interview)

(5)   *My cell phone buzzed whenever there was a new post or a reply to my postings, so I was able to check the reply [feedback] real time. I always looked at them [feedback] to write better for the next draft.* (Student D, interview)

In addition to the regularity of receiving teacher feedback, the students noted that receiving one-to-one feedback enabled them to build a closer relationship with the instructor, this in turn eased them to transition from the traditional classroom to the online classroom and to reflect the teacher's direct comments on their next writing assignment (Excerpts 6–8).

(6)   *I thank you [instructor] for giving us individualized comments on our papers. I know everyone was at a different level so it wouldn't have been easy to give feedback but when you gave us feedback, it was very helpful. For me, it was my motivation to visit the café more often. I appreciated the teacher's immediate and personalized feedback which helped me to reflect on my writing processes.* (Student E, interview)

(7)   *You know, when learning academic writing in a blended format, it is important to practice and apply what we learned in the class, that's why we dedicated much time to the online classroom. Going to the online classroom to check the teacher feedback was quite exciting although I didn't always get the positive feedback. I felt that it was more convenient to ask personal questions than in our face-to-face classroom.* (Student B, interview)

(8)   *It was helpful to receive straightforward feedback on my essay. I preferred to know a direct solution to a problem so that I could be more careful not to make the same mistake again in my next writing. After I became used to receiving teacher feedback, even the negative ones, I was able to ask you [instructor] questions more freely.* (Student F, interview)

Students greatly appreciated teacher feedback for its individualization but the repeated cycle of interactive feedback session also helped the learners to make progress in their writing process from planning, drafting, and revising after each feedback session.

4.1.2 Group Discussion

All of these students agreed that the online discussion was an essential element in developing critical thinking for content development, but the interviews and journals revealed additional insights into where the most satisfaction came from and where disappointment resulted from. Students' comments in general describe the positive role of group discussion for idea development and higher order thinking for academic writing, but different experiences were shared depending on the classroom environment. Some students preferred face-to-face group discussions to online group discussions, whereas others preferred online group discussion to face-to-face group discussions. Excerpts (9) through (11) describe advantages of face-to-face discussion over online discussion.

(9)   *Group discussion is believed to be important in any type of learning especially for an academic writing course. It was important because we could share more ideas and create better content. However, I felt that a face-to-face discussion was better than online because it was real time and energy was felt on the spot.* (Student J, interview)

(10) *My group was good at discussing because every member was active. I personally learned a lot about the topic necessary to write an academic paper, but when we moved to the online discussion, it was different. Everybody just uploaded their own thoughts but no discussion continued.* (Student F, interview)

(11) *A group discussion was good for brainstorming ideas before writing. You need to have good materials to produce a good academic writing. We sometimes discussed in Korean face-to-face, which I think was more effective than online because it helped us to engage in a high quality discussion rather than superficial one.* (Student B, interview)

The other half the group seemed to value online group discussions more as illustrated by the following excerpts from (12) through (14).

(12) I wasn't so active in a group discussion because I was kind of shy, but I think it was helpful to listen to others' ideas. You know, sometimes, you can't write because you don't know what to write about. It helped me to think better and create more ideas⋯ in fact, it was better for me to write in the online discussion forum because I could write with more time. (Student G, journal)

(13) The online discussion was different from the in-class discussion. It required more thorough thinking and clear opinions to write. It helped me to organize my thoughts and to improve my writing skills, too. I liked it because I was kind of shy to talk in public, but online was more comfortable. (Student H, journal)

(14) *I think online discussion was twice more helpful because online communication was done through writing which gave me more chances to practice English writing. Well, sometimes we discussed in Korean in the traditional classroom but in online, we used more English. So I guess it was helpful.* (Student I, interview)

The online discussion was credited with generating better ideas for content building in writing. The reasons varied from more time for reflection, to comfort, to communication through writing. It is also noteworthy that some students acted

differently from a face-to-face discussion to an online discussion because they were 'shy' (as they described themselves). Some introvert students felt more comfortable to have discussions online rather than offline, because they had more time to organize their thoughts, which enabled them to interact with the content and target language more.

4.1.3 Lurking

One of the advantages of using blended learning is that an online classroom is utilized as a storage room which allows the class to keep track of each student's work including assignments, threaded lines of discussion, teacher/peer feedback, and classroom materials that are retrievable anytime anywhere. For instance, the students in this study reported that although they sometimes looked like invisible online participants, they still took time to look at others' works and learned from them. The following excerpts evidently describe what they called "luking"[6], which could be a strategy for learning academic English writing (Excerpts 15 through 17).

(15) *I learned to write better from reading others' homework. I was kind of guilty to wait till the last moment to upload my homework. That was because I wanted to read others' papers first to compare with mine. Was it a bad idea?* (Student D, interview)

(16) *I may not have been the most active participant, but that doesn't mean I didn't care for studying. I always read your [instructor] diary, others' comments, and clicked on the extra web sources to get the information I needed. I believe that it all helped me to develop my writing skills, too.* (Student J, interview)

(17) *Do you know the word, "lurking?" It is like reading but not writing a reply. I did that a lot because I could learn from reading others' essays including the feedback. Whenever I wasn't sure how to start my paper, I opened others' essays and looked through. It helped me to see how I could organize my essay better.* (Student H, interview)

These students were used to lurking as many of them said at the beginning of the course that they had joined online cafes, but did not participate actively. The main

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6   In actual interview, Korean word '눈팅' was used.

reason for joining the online community was to lurk and get the information they needed. Such a habit seemed to play a role in a blended academic writing course where students read materials and used them as they liked. This explained why there existed smaller numbers of tag lines compared to the numbers of hit on postings.

In other words, the students used the strategy of lurking to write their own papers. This may be partly explained by the relationship between reading and writing. Online activities relied heavily on text-based interaction which entailed a big amount of reading as studies prove its positive effect on writing development (Krashen & Lee, 2004). In the present course, students had to share their written works with other classmates to make them subject to peer-feedback activities. One student said, "Although we were self-conscious about exposing our works to others at the beginning of the course, it somehow stimulated us to see each other's writing works as time went on."

Lurking was also a specific phenomenon pertaining to students' characteristics including familiarity of online learning, learning styles, age, and personality. These adult learners explained that they were different from ordinary undergraduate students in two areas: first, their work involved much of independent research, and second, they were relatively reluctant to make strong voice in an online community. Following excerpts (18-19) reflect how these differences were related to lurking strategy:

(18)   *I am an old student who's not so familiar with the online community. I was rather passive to respond to each posting but quite active in browsing and reading. In fact, I learned to organize my writing better through reading XX's essay and the teacher feedback on others.* (Student E, interview)

(19)   Most of us are working at a master's or doctoral thesis which requires a lot of reading. We are more used to reading articles and processing them silently. So even in an online learning, reading linked websites or postings was a more comfortable way of learning writing skills than outwardly interacting online. (Student A, journal)

It could be said that for these adult students, the tendency to lurk was a natural phenomenon. Moreover, they used it as a learning strategy to improve their writing skills autonomously. Students may not have been visible in an online environment but lurking enabled them to interact better in terms of learner-content interaction.

4.2 Challenges of Online Interaction

4.2.1 Demands on Posting

One of the overriding comment on challenges was forced postings to the café boards which was subject to marking. Although students understood that the instructor's intention of demanding postings was to encourage more interaction for the sake of cooperative learning, they questioned the true value of interaction. Students were quite expressive about the negative effects of mandatory posting requirements (Excerpts 20-21):

(20) *I was frustrated to write anything online only to meet the required number of postings. I couldn't write constructive feedback because it took too much time so I avoided any lengthy replies. I was just busy counting how many postings I had.* (Student F, interview)

(21) *I didn't find student postings so helpful because reading hundreds of not-so-meaningful replies on my writing was a waste of time. I was doubtful about this whole idea of putting more postings in English in relation to learning English writing skills.* (Student B, interview)

Students also pointed out that postings each student made were different in length and quality. Some postings were lengthy but not necessarily connected to lessons whereas some postings were short but educative. This was an issue of quantity versus quality. Students went on to suggest that there needs to be more specific rules and criteria as to how many words are appropriate in replying threads in the discussion forums and giving written feedback on each other's writing products. Following excerpts (22-24) talk to this point:

(22) I was confused whenever I had to read a long comment which took much time but not always helpful. Lengthy written feedback at first seemed like more participation but you had to give another look to really find out whether that posting really talked about my essay or not. (Student C, journal)

(23) *I somehow felt like we were tacitly competing to write more in the online forum just because that was part of our participation grade.*

Some students kept on posting up such a long essay like feedback as if s/he wanted to boast off his/her volume of words. There should have been more guidelines about the maximum and minimum size of the postings. (Student D, interview)

(24) *I am not sure if putting up long postings help me to learn English writing skills. What if there are many errors and those errors are not treated by the instructor? I think we need specific rules about postings, too.* (Student J, interview)

Overall, even though having to write postings in the online classroom as a required activity was one way to encourage student interactions and control their participation, students' general consensus on demands on postings have been negative.

4.2.2 Limitation of e-peer feedback

While these students believed that online communication is an excellent medium for language learning, their ideas of meaningful learning depended mostly on the quality of peer feedback. Peer feedback in this study was mostly done in online in the English language. In a discussion on the effectiveness of e-peer feedback, students mentioned that the superficial peer feedback such as 'good job' or 'I like your topic', and the broad peer feedback such as 'how about strengthening your argument?' or 'please check your vocabulary choice' were not meaningful at all. Following excerpts (25-26) reflect students' opinions on e-peer feedback:

(25) I didn't really take general feedback as real feedback. I wanted to find out more specifically how I can correct my poor word choice. The general peer feedback seemed to be there out of formality. When it was just 'good job' comment, I thought it didn't really mean it. (Student C, journal)

(26) W*hat I needed was not a vague response but an accurate guideline to develop my writing skills. For example, when I wasn't sure how to change my essay structure, I was hoping that somebody would suggest me to reframe each paragraph but that didn't happen. All I received was something like 'your structure needs to be changed.'* (Student, A, interview)

For this reason, peer feedback did not always receive equal attention as the teacher's feedback. Students' excerpts (27-29) show that students weighed teacher feedback a lot more than the peer feedback.

(27) *I think peer feedback could be sometimes superficial. People tried to leave some comments on others' essays because it was part of participation grade, but I honestly thought their comments didn't really do much to improve my writing ability to the next level as much as the teacher's individual comments did.* (Student F, interview)

(28) *I think peer feedback was not always meaningful because we did it out of formality. It took too much time to give quality feedback because you had to read a lengthy essay first, then read again to evaluate what's good and bad, and then you had to read your comments again to check whether they made sense or not.* (Student J, interview)

(29) *When I received stupid comments, I got annoyed. I'm busy doing lots of things. Why should I even reply to those messages when they are not helpful? This is why I preferred the teacher feedback all the more.* (Student E, interview)

This might have resulted in why the most common type of peer feedback in online was explicit correction on form rather than the process of writing. The reason for students' leaning toward grammar corrections may also be attributed to their relatively high capacity of grammar skills and the ease with which they can give feedback as part of required course activities. Commenting on the contents or the organization of the essay seemed to be beyond their ability; as one student said, "I don't think we can actually say anything about the content since academic writing usually deals with the technical knowledge." Another student also mentioned, "The content is too difficult to understand for me." For these reasons, peer feedback activities were mostly confined to mechanical error correction on the surface level.

This shows that learners viewed e-peer feedback with skepticism and showed only partial satisfaction with learner-learner interaction. They appreciated e-peer feedback only when it was directly related to grammatical error corrections. No student had seemed to value peer feedback more than teacher feedback because of limitations to producing effective e-feedback for each other.

4.2.3 Limitation of e-peer feedback

Seven out of ten students noted that English textbooks and extra handouts provided by the instructor were difficult to understand because the content was all in English. Although these students' average English proficiency was above intermediate level (see Table 1), dealing with the text-heavy materials seemed to have an adverse effect on student's learning. Excerpts (37) and (38) delineate the students' opinions on using all-English materials for learning academic English writing.

(30) *I am not fluent in English so it's actually very time consuming when I had to deal with all-English textbooks. I mean… think about it, having to read, understand and write in English are so challenging. I think we should have been allowed to use some Korean for the sake of understanding.* (Student H, interview)

(31) *I thought we didn't need to stick to all-English materials because this was not a speaking or listening class. It's similar to how we don't usually use an English-English dictionary. It's too difficult to understand all English textbooks. We'd rather use some Korean when we learn technical skills. Then, it would have been more effective time wise.* (Student C, interview)

These comments illustrated students' opinions that the all-English policy was not really effective for this particular class for two reasons: one was that the purpose of this course was not for speaking and listening in English but for writing an academic English paper with the ultimate goal of publishing it internationally. The other reason was that, since this particular academic writing course dealt with many mechanical skills (e.g., formulaic expressions used in the abstract, certain vocabulary for research papers, and organization of the experimental paper), these skills could be delivered more conveniently in Korean.

In addition to all-English materials, English-only was the classroom policy for communicating in the online. This appeared to cause a major challenge both in instructor-student interactions and learner-content interactions especially at the beginning of the semester. Students who were not experienced in communicating in English in the online classroom, which in this case was text-based communication,

they encountered even more difficulties to learn to use proper English writing styles to write to an instructor and other classmates. Several participants used the word "frustration" to describe their feeling about having to use only English to write in an online classroom (Excerpts 39-40):

(32)   I was quite frustrated to use English for all functions of communication in an online classroom. I agree with the policy that the lecture should be given in English so that we could learn English through English but I wasn't so sure why we had to use English even for online communication. English postings made by students contained many errors and could not understand it fully. (Student B, journal)

(33)   *I thought English-only communication was not the most effective medium to do the discussion when the participants were not fluent English speakers. I felt frustrated when I could not engage in an active discussion on a deeper level because of English barriers.* (Student F, interview)

Although some students stated that in theory more writing in English should help them to improve their writing skills, majority of the students experienced frustration in communicating in English in the online classroom. These students' shared experiences with the inefficiency of English-only policy imply that some level of leeway should be given to students whether to use the English language or Korean language depending on the purpose of communication.

5. Discussion

This qualitative case study explored on the learners' perceptions of usefulness and challenges in online interactions of the English Writing for Academic Purposes course. The emerged themes students noted as helpful were prompt and personalized teacher feedback, group discussion, and lurking. Teacher feedback and group discussion are closely connected to the role of interactive communication of the writing process. The student participants spoke in one voice of the dynamic cycle of receiving and responding to the teacher/peer feedback indicating that it not only helped them to see the exact areas that required revisions in their essays, but how it

also enabled them to refine their writing processes when they were engaged in active feedback. This means that, as the sociocultural theory of learning considers feedback in L2 as a dialogic process, interactive feedback serves as clarification signposts for students (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), and helps them to reflect on their writing processes based on the support received from the feedback sessions (Prior, 2001).

In addition to teacher feedback and group discussion activities, lurking was a new strategy learners identified with usefulness in terms of learner-content interaction. Taking advantage of online classroom where all the resources and individual writing products were saved and retrievable, students often lurked other students' essays and the exchanges of teacher/peer feedback to use them as a benchmark for their own writing. Although the question can be raised whether or not lurking should be seen as a way of participation for learning, students in this study reported that lurking was pedagogically effective. This contradicts the general claim that if there is no visible online interaction, learning is less likely to occur. This is congruent with the result of Dennen's (2008) research who used the term "pedagogical lurking" to suggest that posting participation is not the only factor that contributes to learning. In this perspective, it can be said that even the less visible participants of EFL writers in an asynchronous environment should not be treated as mere "passive recipient (Knowlton, 2005)" because they may be "active lurker" (Orton-Johnson, 2007) who are learning as much as visibly active participants.

Several themes were identified as challenging for online interaction; demands on posting, limitation of e-peer feedback and English-only policy. Online posting was a new form of communication in a web-based environment. Learners had to adapt to a new way of learning that was not through real time contact with the instructor or classmates. Such context imposed heavy responsibilities on them to make as many postings as possible because it was subject to marking for their class participation. Some participants also held the perception that online interaction was challenging because when they were situated in a blended learning environment, they not only needed to take care of their own learning but also had to be mindful of the impact on others caused by the level of their own participation. For example, one student said that he was very conscious of writing one feedback line because he didn't want to cause any misunderstanding. This was similar to the findings of previous research conducted by Purnell, Cuskelly, and Danaher (1996), and Weigand (1999) who recommended an improved range of learner support services to help them communicate better in an online setting.

E-peer feedback in a second language writing classroom was also a new form of

feedback because it transfers oral response into the electronic space. Although several studies highlighted positive impact of e-feedback for L2 writers such as providing better means of monitoring conversations (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001) and eliciting more honest responses (MacLeod, 1999), it was not without a critical drawback in the present study. The limitation of e-peer feedback might have been an unavoidable challenge for second language writers. These students were neither the trained feedback givers nor the competent writers that it was difficult for them to offer praiseworthy feedback. Given that reality, their peer feedback focused mostly on product rather than the process of writing. This shows that there is a strong need for peer feedback training especially in the online environment.

English-only policy was pointed out to be both challenging and ineffective for learning English academic writing skills and interacting with the other students in the online classroom. This EWAP course had adopted a TETE (Teaching English through English) approach to increase English input and to promote meaningful interaction in target language. However, students' shared experiences implied that Korean should be added for the sake of comprehending content matters as well as to make online interaction more productive. This indicates that although TETE is generally recommended for advanced learners in traditional language classrooms, it may not work so efficiently in an online setting due to the misuse of the English language. Moreover, given that these learners were adult learners who already had a concept of academic writing skills in their first language, their L1 knowledge could be positively transferred to be used as the fundamental resource to develop their L2 writing skills.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to describe Korean graduate students' online interactional experiences in a blended EWAP course in terms of challenges and usefulness. Through the qualitative thematic analysis, six themes were extracted from student journals and interviews. Each theme was discussed in relation to the development of students' writing skills and how each interaction was helpful or challenging for learning L2 writing.

The study offers several implications for instruction and research in the EFL blended learning. First, instructors should be ready to play multiple roles not confining their role to giving lectures and managing classrooms. They need to be

timely to provide personalized comments on students' work, and at the same time, they should be flexible enough to supervise learner-learner interactions such as group discussion and peer feedback activities. Instructors should give direct feedback on the students' essays in a prompt manner but also provide e-peer feedback training in order to help students increase reliability and validity in their e-feedback session.

Second, there is a need to work together with students to create an online classroom policy as this study showed student satisfaction was related to classroom language, size and the quality of postings. Demands on posting and English-only policy were detrimental when it was too much. Having to discuss with students in this matter would open a new arena for student involvement in designing blended classroom as well as place autonomy in individual learning. Especially with adult students and academic specific courses, more responsibility is called for from individual students to contribute to learning in a blended environment.

Third, this study also showed learning can occur even in a silent and invisible interaction in the act of lurking. While there is no empirical data how to interpret such phenomenon in the EFL blended or online learning environment, it is very important to take this into consideration when instructors assess student participation in an online learning environment. Some learners are more visible than others and some are less visible than others but the visibility may not always be the indicator for their learning. There needs to be continued research to examine silent learners and the views on invisible interaction in a variety of EFL contexts.

Even with an attempt to closely examine the students' experiences of online learning, the present study has a number of limitations. The present study focused solely on students' learning experiences; however, examining the instructor's teaching experiences can also bring valuable insights as to what trainings instructors need to receive to teach language courses in a blended learning environment effectively. Although the study infers that the students' writing abilities have improved, it did not assess individual students' outcomes. In order to have a deeper understanding of the blended learning effect on second language writing, students' quantitative outcomes can be included.

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