

《二语写作》第三辑

(2021年12月)

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卷首语

新时代、新文科背景下的中国二语写作研究面临新的历史机遇与发展契机。二语写作理论如何取得突破？二语写作与其他学科如何进一步交融？二语写作的优秀成果在国际学术话语体系中如何融入？这些问题的解决，需要广大二语写作学者与教师在不断提升教学、科研能力的同时，保持开阔的学术视野，加强国际交流与对话，充分把握全球化、多语言、跨学科、后疫情背景下二语写作教学与研究中的新问题、新特征和新趋势，共同探索二语写作教学与研究的创新发展之路。

《二语写作》第三辑的突出特点是兼具国际视野与本土特色。本辑汇集了13位国内外二语写作领域的知名专家学者、青年新秀和一线教师。研究成果充分体现了开阔的国际视野和各自话题的研究前沿；综述文章也具有“立足本土、放眼世界”的鲜明特色。

“特别约稿”栏目中，Icy Lee探讨了使用第二语言进行博客写作对新手外语教师合作学习和职业发展的促进作用。Neomy Storch借助活动理论分析了二语作者在参与教师反馈和同伴反馈等活动中的能动性，剖析了反馈中影响二语作者能动性的主要因素，并为师生提供了教学与学习建议。

“写作研究”栏目中，Hani Albelihi和Ge Lan通过语料库手段对比分析了阿拉伯语母语作者与英语母语作者在英语学术写作中名词短语复杂性的异同。刘焯、董记华以自建工学和语言学学术语篇语料库为基础，从三个维度对两个语料库中的立场构建特征进行了对比分析。刘应亮、魏依基于中国学生英语硕士论文语料，参照期刊论文中转述词的使用特点，研究了中国学生在学术语篇中转述动词的使用情况。于万锁、郝媛通过自建英语专业高年级在校学生人物记叙语篇语料库，考察了英语专业高年级学生在人物记叙语篇中话语转述词词块运用的复杂性特征。

“研究述评”栏目中，牛瑞英界定了论证和论证能力等概念，阐释了议论文论证发展研究的理论视角，综述了国外目前关于英语议论文论证发展的实证研究。Yue Chen检索搜集了1949年至2019年间发表在国内外核心期刊上的两千余篇论文，从发展趋势、研究主题、研究方法等层面进行了分析探讨。“新秀论坛”栏目中，周杰对2006年至2021年间国

家社会科学基金和教育部人文社会科学研究项目立项的二语写作相关项目进行了多元分析，探讨了国内二语写作科研立项的现状和发展趋势。

作为本刊特色，本辑在附录中列出了2021年以来国内出版和发表的与二语写作相关的书籍与期刊文章，便于读者尽快了解相关领域的研究热点和发展动态。

以上栏目各具特色，既有理论角度的新尝试，也有方法层面的新应用。文章中的研究发现和学术思考对新时代背景下的二语写作教学与研究有较大的启示意义和借鉴价值，值得品鉴。

目前，《二语写作》已经成功出版两辑。《二语写作》的创刊得到了来自全国甚至全球二语写作研究者的关注。本刊不仅收到了来自国内学者的踊跃投稿，还收到了来自美国、比利时、澳大利亚、新西兰、泰国、沙特阿拉伯等国家的作者投稿。本刊自收录于中国知网以来，其论文也收获了不俗的阅读量、下载量和引用量。今后，《二语写作》还将继续为广大教师和研究人員搭建学术交流的渠道和平台，巩固已有的学术影响力，延续并加强在国内写作教学与研究中的引领作用。

Blogging as a Multi-purpose Tool for EFL Teacher Development

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed the emergence of blogs as a tool for promoting second language (L2) teachers' development. However, the majority of studies have addressed the pre-service rather than in-service context. The study reported in this paper aims to examine the use of blogging in an in-service teacher education program in Hong Kong, China. Drawing upon data gathered from blog entries and comments as well as written self-reflections by 20 novice EFL teachers, this study investigates the extent of the teachers' participation in the class blog, the focuses of their blog entries and comments, as well as their perspectives on the benefits and problems of blogging. The paper concludes that blogging can enhance collaborative learning, promote professional exchange and serve as a multi-purpose tool that facilitates novice EFL teachers' professional development.

Keywords: blogging; in-service teacher; teacher education

1. Introduction

With technology advancement in society, social networking has figured prominently on the Internet and its place in second language (L2) teacher education is receiving more and more attention. Blogs based on the Web 2.0 technology allow computer users to express their ideas on the same platform (Soares 2008) and have the potential to serve as a powerful tool for teaching and learning, specifically to cultivate a learning community among the users. To date, research on blogging has focused on how blogs can be utilized as an instructional tool in K-12 or higher education classrooms (Dalgarno et al. 2015; Hall 2018; Justice et al. 2013), with less attention paid to L2 teacher education contexts. In L2 teacher education, while the majority of research studies on blogging are conducted with pre-service teachers, insufficient attention has been given to the use of blogs for fostering teacher learning and cultivating a learning community among practicing teachers attending in-service teacher education programs, particularly in EFL contexts. In Hong Kong of China, in-service English teachers are known to work under enormous pressure, having to cope with heavy workloads from teaching and non-teaching responsibilities that include pastoral care and extra-curricular activities. Asking novice teachers enrolled on an in-service teacher education program to participate in blog discussion, in addition to day-time teaching, evening class attendance, and coursework assignments, is a challenging task. The present study was designed to explore the extent to which novice English teachers engage in blogging in a part-time teacher education course, the focus of their blogging activities, as well as their perspectives regarding blogging in language teacher education.

2. Literature Review

Blogs, formerly called weblogs, are websites that can easily be created and updated without any knowledge of HTML programming. A blog is typically topic-oriented and consists of entries which are presented in reverse chronological order on a single page (Blood 2000). Broadly speaking, there are three types of blogs (Campbell 2003): the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog. The tutor blog is run by the class teacher, serving as a teacher's personal library for students and for parents to understand the school curriculum. It can also be used for disseminating information about extra-curricular activities and homework. The learner blog is operated individually by each student in the classroom and is regarded as an "online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, and thoughts" (Campbell 2003, para. 1). It can also help foster students' fluency in writing and develop their creative voice (Murray & Hourigan 2008). The class blog is run by both the teacher and students collaboratively and can be used as a platform to promote a feeling of community among the members of the class, as well as a collaborative space for discussion, exchange of ideas and self-reflection (Campbell 2003), promoting problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills at the same time (Murray & Hourigan 2008). In the study, the class blog was used.

In language education, blogs can be used as a useful tool for promoting language learning. Not only do they allow teachers and students to post language-related content instantly on the web and interact with each other with just one touch of the comment function button, but they also afford students the opportunities to use the target language for authentic communication (Arena 2008; Godwin-Jones 2003; Richardson 2006; Ward 2004). From a pedagogical perspective, blogs can enhance knowledge conceptualization, promote knowledge generation and develop a reflective learning culture through meaning making and social interaction (Oravec 2002, 2003). They can allow learners to connect to contexts beyond the classroom and foster social knowledge construction (Du & Wagner 2007). When blogging is integrated into the course content and assignment requirements, students can actively engage in conversations with their classmates on an ongoing basis, thereby promoting exchange of ideas and learning (Laurillard 2002), enhancing learner interaction, and building a sense of community (Miceli et al. 2010). Additionally, blogging can enhance learners' writing performance and promote learner autonomy (Bhattacharya & Chauhan 2010).

A growing body of literature has evinced the positive role of blogs in pre-service language teacher education. For example, Tang (2009) and Tang and Lam (2014) introduced an online blog-based teaching portfolio in the pre-service language teacher education program in Hong Kong, China, showing that the online portfolio could attract instant and interactive feedback from peers, encourage the pre-service teachers to actively participate in the blog-based discussion, foster a reflective culture within the learning community, and create opportunities for pre-service teachers to get emotional support and advice from their peers. In a similar vein, Bener and Yildiz (2019) demonstrated that blogs can promote pre-service teachers' reflection during ELT practicum. While

the above studies have addressed blogging in the pre-service context, blogging among in-service teachers of English has received much less attention, except recent research that investigates teacher reflection through blogging (e.g., Hall 2018; Tajeddin & Aghababazadeh 2018). By focusing blogging in the in-service EFL teacher education context, the present study aims to contribute new knowledge to the current research base about blogging and L2 teacher education and address the following research questions:

(1) To what extent did the EFL teachers participate in blogging, and what did they focus on in their blog discussions?

(2) What were the perceived benefits and problems regarding blogging among the in-service EFL teachers?

3. The Study

3.1 Context and participants

In Hong Kong, China, in-service teachers of English without a professional teaching qualification are required to attain the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) with a major in English soon after their entry into the teaching profession. These teachers are mostly novice teachers with no or little teaching experience. The part-time PGDE for teachers of English in Hong Kong is a two-year program that equips teachers with knowledge and skills in English language teaching as well as education in general. The 20 novice teachers of English who participated in the study were in their first or second year of teaching, all serving in secondary schools in Hong Kong. All of them are Cantonese-speaking, with half of them holding a Bachelor's degree in English and the other half with a non-English major.

The PGDE program in which the study was conducted has a 17-week English language teaching (ELT) methodology course in the first year of the part-time program, which is a compulsory course for participants who major in English. The ELT methodology course includes topics like teaching approaches and methodologies, the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading and writing, classroom communication, lesson planning and evaluation, etc. Participants of the part-time PGDE program have to attend evening classes two to three times a week for two semesters each year (four semesters in total for the two-year program), including three hours of ELT methodology course per week over a total of 17 weeks in their first year of study.

As the instructor/teacher educator of the ELT methodology course, I designed a class blog with a view to fostering learning and promoting professional development among my novice English teachers. To improve the participation rate, the class blog was introduced as part of the coursework assessment, taking up 10% of the total score (the other assignments included an essay study assignment, a mini-project and a post-course written reflection on the class blog). Scoring was based on the teachers' level of participation in the class blog, as well as the depth of analysis and reflection as manifested in the blogposts and comments. I created and co-ran the class blog with the novice teachers. A login name and password were created for the class blog and shared among the novice teachers.

At the beginning of the ELT methodology course, the novice teachers were introduced to the class blog and encouraged to actively participate in the online discussion by adding entries on the blogs and/or posting comments on their peers' blogposts. At the end of each ELT methodology class, a few questions were posed in the course handouts to stimulate blog discussion, but the novice teachers were reminded that they were free to write on topics not raised in the questions. They were encouraged to visit the class blog each week after class and discuss with their peers any issues relating to English language teaching through posting entries and/or comments on their peers' posts. At the end of the course, also as part of coursework assessment, they were required to submit a post-course written reflection on their blogging experience, taking up 10% of the total score. Assessment was primarily based on their critical ability to reflect on their blogging experience.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The study relied on three main data sources: the blog entries (i.e., blogposts), blog comments, and the novice teachers' post-course written reflections on the blogging experience. To answer the first research question (about the extent of participation and the focuses of blog discussion), the blog entries and comments posted by each novice teacher were counted. A content analysis approach was employed to ascertain the focuses of the blog discussion. The data analysis was conducted without preconceived categories but instead I let the codes emerge from the data, yielding a total of 12 themes that illuminate the blog focuses. The percentages of the blogposts and comments that are related to each of the 12 themes were calculated. Examples that are relevant to the themes were extracted from the blogposts and the comments to further support the themes. The second research question is examined by means of content analysis of the post-course written reflections triangulated with blogposts and comments, the benefits and problems of the class blog as perceived by the novice teachers.

4. Findings

4.1 Novice teachers' participation in blog discussion

In terms of the novice teachers' participation in the class blog, the findings show that the class blog was generally well-received, especially given the heavy workload of the participants, some of whom having to cope with a new teaching job and a part-time course. There were in total 20 blogposts, 90% (18) of which were written by the novice teachers (two by me as the teacher educator), and 80% (16) of the novice teachers had their individual blogposts (with two teachers having two blogposts each). Among the 90 comments on the blog, 85.5% (77) were posted by the novice teachers (the rest by me as the teacher educator). All of the 20 teachers had given comments on the blog and the average number of comments made by each teacher was 3.9. The maximum number of people involved in a blogpost discussion was 11, whereas the minimum number was two. The details of the teachers' participation on the blog are shown in Table 1.

In light of the fact that the participants were busy teachers undertaking a part-time teacher education program during the study, their participation in the class blog was

considered satisfactory. Although two teachers did not post any individual entries and 16 teachers posted only one blogpost each, there were a great many comments (totaling 77), averaging 3.9 each participant.

Table 1. Novice teachers' participation in the blog

Details	Number
Total number of novice teachers in the course	20
Total number of blogposts	20
Total number of comments	90
Number of blogposts written by teachers	18 (90%)
Number of comments written by teachers	77 (85.5%)
Number of teachers who had their individual blogposts	16 (80%)
Number of teachers who had their individual comments	20 (100%)
Average number of blogposts that each teacher wrote	1
Average number of comments that each teacher wrote	3.9
Maximum number of people (including the teacher educator) involved in a blogpost discussion	11
Minimum number of people (including the teacher educator) involved in a blogpost discussion	2

4.2 Foci of novice teachers' blog discussion

The findings show that the novice teachers covered a wide range of issues in their blog discussion. All together 12 themes were identified from the blog entries and comments. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the 12 themes, as well as the percentages of the blogposts and comments that fell within each of the themes.

A number of entries and comments were about self-introduction and greeting (posted early in the course) — 33.3% of the blogposts and 3.9% of the comments, which was the third most popular theme in the blogposts. Most teachers started introducing themselves by commenting on the first blogpost written by the teacher educator. For example, Teacher C wrote:

Hello everyone! Thanks T (the teacher educator) so much for the blog. It is a wonderful platform for us to sharing (share) and exchanging (exchange ideas), isn't it?

It is noteworthy that Teacher A, who missed the first session of the course, made use of the class blog to introduce herself to the rest of the class:

Hi there! I'm A — the late comer ... I feel terribly sorry that I missed the first lecture since I had to bring my students to the mainland at (in) that weekend. Anyways, I joined all of you on last Friday finally.

Table 2. Themes of blogposts and comments by novice teachers

Themes of the Posts	Percentage (Number) of Blogposts	Percentage (Number) of Comments (%)
1. Socializing/relationship-building	33.3% (6)*	3.9% (3)
2. General views on students' learning of English	5.6% (1)	6.5% (5)
3. Background and prior education experience	33.3% (6)*	2.6% (2)
4. Personal teaching beliefs	22.2% (4)	22.1% (17)**
5. Growth in teachers' expertise	27.8% (5)	2.6% (2)
6. School culture	11.1% (2)	2.6% (2)
7. Sharing of teaching methods and teaching materials	44.4% (8)**	19.5% (15)
8. Posing problems and seeking help	16.7% (3)	3.9% (3)
9. Giving solutions and advice	0	20.8% (16)*
10. Emotional support and empathy	0	72.7% (56)***
11. Learning from others	0	13.0% (10)
12. Self-reflection	55.6% (10)***	16.9% (13)

*** The most popular; ** The second most popular; * The third most popular

The novice teachers also made use of the class blog to share their views on students' learning of English. 5.6% of the blogposts and 6.5% of the comments were about the participants' views on their own students' problems in learning English, what makes effective student learning and what teachers should do to help students learn better. For example, Teacher B expressed her view on what Hong Kong students think about English learning by responding to Teacher A's comments on students' problems in learning English. She commented as follows:

I agree with Teacher A that being unable to speak the language in their daily lives is one of the reasons why some students cannot speak English well ... I noticed that most of the students who do not do well in English found learning English boring as they usually learn English only from the textbooks. They thought there was no other way to learn English, but the fact is they rejected finding some other ways in learning the language.

Such a comment was taken up by Teacher C, who commented as follows:

I do agree that the reason why students cannot express themselves well in English is they do not use the language once they are out of class ... We need to sort of brainwash our students that using English in and out of class is something natural ... and if we English teachers do not stress on grammatical accuracy and interrupt students' speech too much, students will hopefully be

more and more confident in speaking in English.

While Teacher B agreed with Teacher A's comments about the students' lack of exposure to the English language outside class and also offered the reasons behind the students' inability to speak English well, Teacher C proposed solutions to get around the problem.

Apart from talking about their students, the novice teachers shared with others their own background and prior education experience — comprising 33.3% of the blogposts and 2.6% of the comments, which was the third most popular theme in the blogposts. Within this theme, the in-service teachers blogged about the schools they were teaching, the reasons why they became teachers and their previous education experiences. For instance, Teacher C explained why he wanted to become a teacher even though his first degree is not related to education. He reflected as follows:

My major is hotel and tourism management in University A (sounds nothing to do with language). But as I worked in a hotel before, I couldn't help wondering why our local students, who studied English for some 10 years, can't express well when it comes to something very simple, or hardly show a sense of hospitality by using the language in a too formal way? I knew I needed to do something instead of just serving my guests, by making a little more difference.

It was found that blogposts and comments related to this theme tended to find a great deal of support from their peers. For example, Teacher B expressed in a blogpost that she was thinking to quit her teaching job because she failed to get support from her students, and she got 12 comments from 10 peers giving her emotional support and encouragement, including one from Teacher H, who wrote:

I'm very sorry to hear that. But I feel one thing should cheer you up for sure, that is, your students really love you, or else, they wouldn't have written you the thank you card. That must be a sweet memory of yours which would never been taken away by anyone.

Added to their background and prior education experience was a focus on their personal teaching beliefs, which accounted for 22.2% of the blogposts and 22.1% of the comments. Novice teachers shared how they perceived education and teaching and the beliefs underlying their choice of certain pedagogy. This was the second most popular theme in the comments. Teacher D shared her teaching belief in the blogpost as follows:

No matter it's a 'tough' school or 'non-tough' school, we are teachers. We are here to teach, to inspire and to enlighten students. We can choose to teach for money and status or we can choose to teach for love and hope.

Mid-way into the ELT methodology course, a theme that emerged was the growth in teachers' expertise, which took up 27.8% of the blogposts and 2.6% of the comments. This theme documents how the participants' teaching effectiveness/practice was enhanced as a result of the ELT course. Teacher H shared her experience of how she became a better teacher after taking the course. She explained in this way:

In the past, when it comes to speaking lessons, I will let students do the speaking, but having little idea on how I can help them improve. Now, I come to understand that there are different aspects of speaking which can be taught, and I try to work on one area each time.

As the novice teachers established a better relationship with as well as trust for their peers, they also began to talk about their school culture. This theme accounted for 11.1% of the blogposts and 2.6% of the comments. Specifically, the novice teachers discussed how school policies as well as teachers, students and parents' attitudes towards education shaped the school culture. Teacher D shared in a blogpost about the culture in her former school:

The culture of this school is interesting. The principal is an authoritarian. Students are like teachers, working all day long to finish their homework and revisions. It is common for students to stay at school until seven and work on their homework until one at night.

Through taking the ELT methodology course, the novice teachers acquired new ideas about language teaching. They made use of the class blog to share different teaching methods and material — 44.4% of the blogposts (the second most popular theme) and 19.5% of the comments. The participants shared about their current practice, their attempts at implementing new pedagogies learnt from the course and the teaching materials that they found useful. Teacher G shared her vocabulary teaching method in her blogpost as follows:

To let them learn more vocabulary, I have tried out the following methods to encourage them to widen their vocabulary bank...teaching them prefixes and suffixes...providing examples of synonyms and antonyms...making them use the words...keeping on recalling their memories.

The establishment of trust in the learning community also saw the teachers opening up by posing problems and seeking help (16.7% of the blogposts and 3.9% of the comments). A few novice teachers shared about the problems they encountered in teaching and how they sought help from the others. An example to illustrate this theme is a question posed by Teacher I in a blogpost about how to teach the senior secondary English Language curriculum:

How do you teach senior secondary English? I am currently teaching two F.4 classes English and I really do not have much idea of what to teach in class.

Related to the theme about posing problems and seeking help is giving solutions and advice, which accounted for 20.8% of the comments. Aside from attempting to suggest solutions to the problems posed by their peers, the teachers gave advice to those who shared their teaching stories, beliefs and pedagogy. Teacher J, in response to Teacher I's question about how to teach senior secondary English, offered her advice:

Sometimes I try to find a connection between things they learn and their interested topics (i.e., how to use wh-questions to catch a girl's attention); or to show them how they can use or find a particular Grammar item in real life situation (i.e., use a recipe/mobile phone manual to teach Imperatives). In other words, to make them think that 'this could be useful in the future' so that they would do everything to memorize it!

In addition to giving concrete suggestions and advice to help their peers address their problems, the participants showed emotional support and empathy on the class blog. This theme had the highest percentage in the comments — 72.7%. For instance, the blogpost about a novice teacher thinking of quitting her job attracted a number of comments from the teachers, including one of the most inactive bloggers in the class, Teacher K:

Keep your chin up! I think you're a bright teacher with a loving heart! It's good to share any thoughts here — be it good or bad!

A number of the themes in the above (e.g., sharing teaching methods and materials, posing problems and seeking help, giving solutions and advice) resulted in the novice teachers' learning from others, which comprised 13% of the comments. This theme refers to the teachers' newly learnt teaching ideas from their peers on the blog. For instance, Teacher H replied to Teacher G's blogpost by talking about useful teaching ideas learnt from the peers on the blog:

Thanks for G's sharing. These are all good strategies to help students learn vocabulary. M's suggestion also sounds very interesting, and I'll try out with my students later.

Another teacher (Teacher J) appreciated Teacher H's idea of using digital storytelling in class and also sought advice from him.

I think that is a great idea. Definitely very well thought out. I like your scaffolding technique of introducing new concepts to improve on their writing

skills. Like you, I was inspired to have my students complete something similar in Photo Story as well. I think that S.4 students would benefit greatly from this activity ... I am still debating on whether I should go with a fictional story or have them tell a real story of their childhood, or something non-fiction. Also, I am still debating on whether to have it as a class activity or something voluntary, like part of the school's writing club.

Finally, self-reflection, the highest percentage in the blogposts (55.6%) was evident in the blog discussion. The novice teachers blogged about their reflection on personal growth, teaching beliefs as well as pedagogy. Teacher H wrote:

I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on my personal development after I entered the teaching profession ... Teaching has gradually transformed my personality, adding positive elements to my being and my life ... Suggestions from colleagues and the PGDE courses have helped me to make improvements on my teaching. Now, I come to understand that there are different aspects of speaking which can be taught, and I try to work on one area each time ... Self-reflection has been quite useful in helping me to improve. I used to have a journal called "My teaching career 123".

Sometimes peers' blogposts triggered the teachers' self-reflection, as shown in 16.9% of the comments. For example, Teacher K responded to Teacher H's comments about the idea of keeping a self-reflection journal:

Thanks very much for your sharing, which makes me think that it's time for me to keep a journal as well. As teachers, we always give students' feedback about how they have been doing but ironically, sometimes, we tend to forget the need of self-reflection. Thanks for your message which highlights a key point that we should also keep growing up together with the kids instead of simply watching them grow ... self-reflection is particularly important for new teachers like us. When we reflect upon our teaching effectiveness, we can realize our strengths and weaknesses in teaching which allows us to improve our teaching effectiveness. Unfortunately, with the amount of work we have, we seldom have time to do so. Thanks for reminding me that self-reflection is crucial for teacher's development.

4.3 Novice teachers' perspectives on blogging

An analysis of the teachers' written reflections revealed the novice teachers' favorable attitude towards blogging. Specifically, the data demonstrated four main benefits as perceived by the teachers, as well as a small number of problems associated with blogging.

First, all the teachers found that blogging provided opportunities for them to exchange ideas about English language education and to seek advice from the teacher educator and their peers without the restriction of time and space. Some teachers regarded the blog as “a treasure full of ideas” and “a resource bank”. The following extracts from the teachers’ written reflections illustrate the value of blogging:

I posted my predicament on the class blog. Soon I got some constructive suggestions which I had never thought of. (Teacher B)

The class blog gives me inspiration in teaching. (Teacher F)

All their ideas shed light on me when I have come to a bottle-neck of my teaching. (Teacher T)

Second, the class blog was considered a useful platform for the expression of personal thoughts and a source of emotional support, as shown by the majority of the teachers’ reflections. The novice teachers believed that the class blog is a “strong learning community” because “everyone can participate and pitch in to help solve each other’s difficulties in the teaching of English”. It can serve as a network for teachers of different backgrounds to express their views and get resonance and encouragement from the peers:

What we need is a genuine support network like this, with people who are able to identify with our difficulties and challenges, and who are able to offer encouragement, and even more, possible solutions to our problems. (Teacher R)

The class blog is a place where I can find people who would understand my feelings and give me some support ... reading others’ successful stories of personal development or students’ improvement is a way to motivate me to move on. Also, others’ words of encouragement make me feel that my heart and effort are appreciated. (Teacher E)

The class blog serves the purpose of relieving us from the great pressure. (Teacher O)

The third benefit, according to the teachers (half of them), is that blogging provided a useful impetus for self-reflection and helped develop their critical reflection through asking questions about theory and practice and examining issues raised by their peers, and hence helping them develop insights into teaching:

Sharing on the blog helped me to reflect on my role as a teacher. (Teacher M)

Frequent self-reflection can guide us to concentrate on the real value of education and help our students learn and grow. (Teacher P)

Lastly, all teachers, in one way or another, expressed the view that blogging enhanced their professional learning and development, as they could learn new ideas and teaching

methods through reading the entries of their peers. For example, Teacher H shared a self-made digital storytelling (DST) video on the blog and one of their peers (Teacher J) learned to use DST to teach her students. He wrote:

Seeing someone successfully carrying out greatly encourages me to try it with my students. (Teacher J)

Another teacher referred explicitly her own professional development as the main benefit of the blog:

(It is) a place to enhance my professional development as a teacher.
(Teacher B)

Despite the above benefits, two novice teachers, Teachers L and N, had negative feelings about the use of blogging as an assessment task when they first learnt about it at the beginning of the course. The class blog was perceived as a source of pressure for the busy in-service teachers. Teacher N wrote:

I was not used to share my personal feelings to others through posting online blogs ... It was weird and strange for me to write something, which is usually emotional and sentimental ... I was shocked to see the sentence 'if you do not participate at all, you will not get any mark'. I felt the pressure and lots of workload was coming towards me ... At first, I did not like the idea at all thinking how I am supposed to find time to write blog ...

In his post-course written reflection, however, Teacher N acknowledged the value of blogging:

Despite the lack of posts, I did read the blog from time to time ... I was once inspired by M's work and I tried making a similar one but of a different topic ... To my surprise, my kids were attracted to this sort of activity.

Teacher L, another passive blogger, had the following to say:

I seldom blog and I never leave comments to any posts ... It's like a difficult task for me.

Nevertheless, Teacher L showed her understanding of the potential benefits of blogging:

We can all share our views and opinions about teaching and learning

through the class blog ... Once I tried out something, thinking that it was the most suitable method to the learning for my students but it turned out that I was wrong ... I was told by our classmates that my concept needed to be changed ... I am also amused by the new ideas by our classmates.

Even though Teacher L was not an active blogger, she benefited from sharing one teaching episode and from reading the comments.

5. Discussion

This study examined the application of a class blog as part of coursework assessment for in-service teachers in a teacher education course in Hong Kong, China. All the novice teachers showed positive attitude towards blogging at the end of the course. The findings of the study demonstrate that blogging provides a platform for the novice teachers to share their beliefs, exchange ideas, pose questions and get advice and support from their peers, which in turn facilitates their social interactions and professional learning (Hodgson & Wong 2011). Blogging could also promote a sense of community and provide a place for discussion, reflection, and problem-solving (Campbell 2003). In the physical classroom, it is not easy for the teacher educator to involve all teacher learners in asking questions, exchanging ideas, sharing experience etc., especially in the Asian context where students are used to the passive way of learning, and to working in isolation without much cooperative group work (Mok & Ko 2003). However, blogging can provide a virtual platform that fosters active participation of all members in the class. In the study, for instance, every novice teacher had either written a blogpost (or more) and/or given comments to their peers, which was regarded by one of the novice teachers as “a closely-knitted learning community which would otherwise not exist in the real world”.

Although increased workload was raised as a potential problem of blogging, arguably it is the time constraint that renders blogging a valuable tool for novice teachers’ professional development. This is because through blogging the busy novice teachers could get support from peers regardless of time and place — as long as they have access to the Internet. In Hong Kong, China, teaching is a busy and stressful job. Many in-service teachers do not have time to share their problems with others in their workplace, not to mention the fact that they may feel uneasy to do so lest they will be looked upon as incompetent and incapable. Interacting with peers who are not their colleagues on the class blog can take some of the pressure off novice teachers as the platform offers a virtual space for them to share their concerns freely and conveniently as long as they are hooked up to the Internet. In the words of one teacher:

In today’s generation of smartphones, tablet computers and wireless internet, blogging allows for virtual interaction which is not restricted by time and place where we can choose to participate at our convenience, which is perfect for the situation of student teachers who already have a heavy workload