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BLOGGING AS A SUPPLEMENTARY TOOL TO ENHANCE WRITING  
SKILLS AT THE UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL TO PREPARE FOR  
THE NATIONAL EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH  
Bachelor's Thesis

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## **PREFACE**

Foreign language acquisition is an integral part of a learning process, which importance is confirmed at the governmental level, since English as a foreign language is included into the list of National Examinations performed at the end of the upper secondary school level in Estonia. The examination assesses students' progress in four different language skills: listening, writing, speaking and reading. Writing is generally believed to be one of the most complicated language skills which is influenced by various factors. As writing practice needs extensive practice and, hence, requires much time, out-of-class writing activities might be a good option to support the development of writing skills and to prepare students for the National examination in English, and its writing part in particular. High popularity of Internet-based activities among youngsters nowadays develops students' motivation and interest in this sort of activities and they provide a creative teacher with a wide variety of different tasks and variations of assignments.

The present Bachelor's thesis is aimed to analyse strategies to prepare for the National Examination in English, its writing part to be more exact. Besides that, it discusses how the process of developing writing skills and preparing for the National Examination can be improved with Internet-based activities to give more student-centered writing practice to students of upper-secondary schools. And finally, it explores the effect of using blogs as a supplementary tool to enhance writing skills as one of the stages of preparation for the National Examination in English.

The thesis consists of the following parts: the Introduction, Chapter I, Chapter II and the Conclusion. The Introduction provides the overview of the main aspects of the research, such as writing and difficulties it can imply, writing and technologies and writing as a part of the National Examination. Chapter I "Methods of Teaching Writing Skills " is aimed to scrutinize the background of writing skills teaching methods and also emphasises blogging as a means of teaching and enhancing writing skills. The theoretical part also presents a description of the writing requirements defined in the National Examination in English. Chapter II "The Educational Writing Blog for Exam Preparation" explores the effect of introducing blogging into the learning routine. The Conclusion sums up and reviews the research and gives general comments on the hypothesis.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Second language acquisition is a complex multifaceted cognitive process, which is likely to be influenced by many factors. Reading, writing, speaking and listening are the four fundamental skills of language learning. These skills are inherently linked on the one hand, but also very different on the other hand. To become fluent in a language all of them must be mastered more or less equally. The four main language skills go in pairs. While reading and listening belong to receptive or passive skills, because students do not have to produce a language, speaking and writing are considered to be active or productive skills, since learners not only consume a language, they create phrases, sentences, paragraphs and texts (British Council 2020: para 1). For that reason writing can offer a certain difficulty to language learners.

### **Writing and Difficulties it can Imply**

Writing is one of the main language skills and a form of communication when people express their thoughts, ideas and opinions using graphic symbols. The Concise Dictionary and Thesaurus defines writing as “the act of forming letters on paper etc; a written document; authorship” (2002: 176). According to Byrne (1988: 1) writing is “a sequence of sentences arranged in a particular order and linked together in certain ways”. Hyland (2003: 3) defines writing as “marks on a page or a screen, a coherent arrangement of words, clauses, and sentences, structured according to a system of rules”. In other words, writing is a form of communication, the process of expressing one’s thoughts, graphically shaped ideas. Writing offers certain difficulties for both students doing written tasks as a part of their learning process and professional writers creating their masterpieces, because it is not a spontaneous activity and demands big mental efforts from a writer (Byrne 1988: 4).

As mentioned above, speaking and writing refer to active or productive skills, but unlike speaking, writing is not direct communication and does not imply interaction and involvements of both sides: writer and addressee. The aim of any piece of writing is to deliver a thought of a writer to a reader, because the latter is not physically present. While writing an author nothing but deciphers or interprets his own thoughts into words or phrases. A writer should ensure that his/her writing

will be easily understood without any further explanations and assistance from his side (ibid.).

Despite the fact, that speaking and reading refer to the same type of active or productive skills meaning that a language is produced rather than consumed, writing differs from speaking in many ways and this is the reason why it is considered more difficult.

1. Writing creates its own context and therefore must be clear.
2. Interaction between a writer and a reader is not possible.
3. A reader might be unknown for a writer.
4. A writer cannot get an immediate feedback from a reader.
5. Writing can be reread as many time as necessary for a reader.
6. Syntax should be well-organised and form a text.
7. The only devices of a writer to put a stress are punctuation signs, because intonation, gestures and facial expressions are not available (Byrne 1988: 3).

The process of writing becomes even more sophisticated when decoding of our thoughts occurs in a non-native language. In that case learners have to do a dual job. Besides above-mentioned difficulties, certain cross-linguistic influence of a native language on a foreign language takes place. This influence depends on the structural differences and similarities between the two languages and can be more or less noticeable. Influence of the native language occurs mainly in the form of transfer of grammatical and semantic structures from one language to another. In his survey on the topic of the second language acquisition Shatz (2016: 179) indicated that

in some cases, and particularly when L1 influence has a strong effect, it continues to significantly affect learners even as they reach a high degree of proficiency in the L2.

One more significant factor that influences writing in a foreign language is that even if L1 and L2 are structurally similar, the amount of the language which learners produce is very limited, sometimes so limited, that it is hard to introduce any meaningful form of writing practice into the classwork (Byrne 1988: 6).

All in all, writing is one of the essential skills in the learning process and all the listed difficulties a writer can face indicate the necessity of sufficient in-class and out-of-class practice. However, learners as a rule do not enjoy writing for school

with strict instructions, as almost half of all teens consider the writing they do outside of school more pleasant compared with the writing they do as their homework or classwork assignments. (Lenhart *et al.*, 2008) Taking into consideration learners' dislike towards writing practice and constantly growing popularity of technologies, teachers can try and make this activity more entertaining and enjoyable for them by introducing Internet-based activities into classwork or homework to practice writing skills.

### **Writing and Technologies**

Admitting the fact, that writing is an essential skill to pass English examination successfully, teenagers, however, do not like long and boring written home assignments due to unclear instructions or the fact that they can be very time-consuming (Lenhart *et al.*, 2008). Our digital era reveals a paradox. Despite most teenagers nowadays spend a great share of their life composing texts and messages, they do not consider electronic writing as real writing (Lenhart *et al.*, 2008). Needless to say that non-formal communication full of illiteracy, grammar mistakes and slang is a far cry from academic writing, but necessity to develop writing skills multiplied by teenagers' passion for electronic writing can benefit in many ways.

Technologies have become an inseparable part of teenage life during the last decades. Multiple surveys have shown that a growing share of teenagers use the Internet and technical devices, such as mobiles, tablets or laptops, almost constantly. 45% of teens confirm that they are always online unless they are not asleep (Pew Research Center 2018).

Another challenge is that students tend to use their handwriting less and less often every day. Many teachers involve computer-based tasks, home assignments, tests and even exams. Many countries, e.g. Finland, have already refused from handwriting classes in favour of typing courses. Students for the last decades have moved to digital communication space, which resulted in the situation that typing for learners is much easier and more familiar than writing by hand.

Moreover, not only should teachers include computer-based activities into their work, they must do it, because digital competence is required to be taught at the

upper intermediate level as it is defined in the Estonian National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools. Being an e-state it is essential for Estonia to bring up digitally and technologically aware citizens, that is the reason why the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research puts such a special emphasis on this sphere of study. According to the National Curriculum 2014 every student at the upper intermediate level

uses contemporary technology in a goal-oriented and responsible manner, evaluates the impact of technological applications on everyday life, has well-reasoned opinions on matters related to development and use of technology (Riigiteataja § 5).

Since the importance of developing digital competence in schools is announced at the official level, blogging as a part of the learning process could become a very good solution to achieve a necessary level of digital literacy and develop writing skills in the pleasant for learners manner.

Teenagers understand that their ability to write effectively will have an impact on their future prospects, as fully 98% of the surveyed teenagers agree that writing is at least somewhat important for their future success. (Lenhart *et al.*, 2008) Moreover, writing is one of the basic skills assessed at the National Examination in English and to show good performance at the examination a learner should have sufficient writing skills and constant writing practice.

### **Blogging as Writing Practice**

The notion “weblog”, from which the shortened form “blog” is derived, was first introduced in 1997 (Blood 2000) and originates from the collocation “web log”, where “web” stands for World Wide Web and “log” means “a record of speed, progress, etc, esp one kept on a ship’s voyage or aircraft’s flight” (The Concise Dictionary and Thesaurus 2002: 196). The Oxford English Dictionary Online (2020: para 1) defines the noun blog as, “a frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary”. In other words, a blog is sort of a digital diary that is kept by someone on regular basis to share his/her views on individual subjects, which undoubtedly involves constant writing practice.

During the last decade blogs have attracted attention of both researchers and practising teachers, who try to explore the ways they can be used in and out of class. Researchers explored the issue of blogging in teaching aims from different perspectives, such as its impact on writing skills (Zahoor 2018), to what extent they promote students' interaction (Zarei 2016), in what ways blogging enhances learners' writing skills (Vurdien 2011) or peculiarities of students' perception of blogs in the learning process (Ahluwalia 2011). Some researchers explored blogging in the process of teaching writing skills through the prism of American and British literature (Sagar 2019), other researchers see blogging as a way of developing students' creative writing (Pastarmatzi 2017).

The above-mentioned studies reveal that a lot of researchers have been interested in the topic of blogging, the ways of integrating it into the schooling environment, its benefits for classroom work and perspectives it provides. However, blogging as a tool for preparing for the Estonian National Examination in English, and its writing part in particular, has still been researched insufficiently.

The research question of the thesis is the following: Can the use of blogs as a supplementary tool help improve writing skills at the Upper Intermediate level as a preparation stage for the National Examination in English? The study held among the students of Felola Learning Centre on this topic is meant to clarify the question. It is hypothesised that the use of blogs as a supplementary tool helps improve students' writing skills in the context of preparation for the National examination in English.

## CHAPTER I METHODS OF TEACHING WRITING SKILLS

### 1.1 Requirements to Writing at the National Examination in English

The National Examination in English is an important final stage of the educational process. Results of the examination can have both positive and negative effect on students' further educational path. The higher points in exams a school leaver receives, the bigger choice of professions he/she has. The aim of the English Examination is to assess to what extend the material and competences provided by the National Curriculum for Upper-secondary Schools are acquired.

To understand what skills exactly are required for successful exam writing performance, it is essential to analyse the exam tasks at the National examination in English.

The first one is semi-formal official letter approximately 120 words long; the second part is a formal 200-words argumentative text, such as an essay or report. Both tasks are aimed to assess grammar, language stylistics and spelling competence of students and require such skills as ability to express opinion, give appraisal, comment on events, describe processes, offer solutions, compare and contrast, provide for and against arguments etc. All the above-mentioned skills are basic writing skills and require literacy, grammar command and constant practice. In spite of the fact, that the volume of the tasks is big, the time to complete them is limited to 90 minutes (Foundation Innove 2020).

Assessment criteria of the first written task are divided between three aspects: task completion, used vocabulary and grammar command. For each aspect it is possible to receive maximum three points (nine points in total). The assessment criteria of the second task are divided between four parts: task completion, text formation, used vocabulary and grammar command. For each aspect a student can get maximum four points (16 points in total).

**Table 1.** *Assessment Criteria of Written Tasks in the National Examination (Maximum Points)*

	<b>report</b>	<b>essay</b>	<b>letter</b>
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<b>Task completion</b>	Data discussed appropriately. Reasons for two biggest differences given. The reasons are appropriate and directly linked to the differences.	All aspects of the task appropriately addressed. Ideas presented, expanded and supported.	All aspects of the task mentioned and expanded. Clear organisation (information grouped into paragraphs logically). Correct format.
<b>organisation</b>	Clearly organised, systematic. Paragraphs have a clear focus. Purpose clear. Correct format	Well organised. All required elements present. Clear paragraphs. Natural use of linking devices.	
<b>vocabulary</b>	Accurate and appropriate task-specific vocabulary. Appropriate tone and register. Correct spelling.	Accurate, appropriate, wide vocabulary. Appropriate tone and register. Correct spelling	Appropriate, task-specific vocabulary with a few slips. Appropriate tone and register. Correct spelling.
<b>grammar</b>	A variety of grammatical structures correctly used. Complex sentences and structures frequently used. Tenses appropriately used. Punctuation well managed.	A variety of grammatical structures correctly used. Complex sentences and structures frequently used. Punctuation well managed.	Grammatically correct, with a few slips. Complex sentences and structures correctly used. Punctuation mostly well managed.

Source: Foundation Innove.

The table depicts what criteria must be satisfied to get maximum points for written tasks in the National Examination. To sum up, all the aspects of tasks must be completed, with ideas being presented and data being discussed. Written tasks should be well-organized with clear paragraphing and correct format. Vocabulary of the tasks is supposed to be accurate, appropriate and varied with slight or no spelling slips. While writing a students should demonstrate various grammatical structures, complex sentences and correct punctuation. All these factors indicate that the written part of the exam requires high level of English grammar command,

sufficient vocabulary and awareness of principles of composition. To achieve the necessary level of preparation for the National Examination in English it is essential to provide learners with sufficient practice.

Reasoning from all the above-mentioned information, teaching writing should be focused and organised around four linguistic dimensions: task completion, text organisation, vocabulary development and grammar practice. It is impossible to ignore one of these criteria and expect excellent results at the examination. Thus, all the written tasks and instructions practiced inside and outside the classroom should be designed considering the aspects of a successful written work and reflect the requirements to writing. Students who are practising for the examination are typically more motivated when it comes to writing in class than at home. Besides, for teachers it may be very useful to monitor students' writing, because in this case they have an opportunity to guide the process, advise on structuring students' works, providing necessary vocabulary and give an instant feedback. However, being restricted by the time of a lesson and the number of academic hours available according to the National Curriculum, teachers have to encourage and inspire their students to practice their writing skills beyond the bounds of classwork.

At this point it is essential to pay attention to different methods of teaching writing, because everything teachers do in their professional area, methods they use, teaching styles they adopt and learning tasks they design, should be based on theoretical knowledge about writing methodology. A familiarity with what is known about teaching writing can help teachers make pedagogically correct decisions on how to organise efficient writing practice.

## **1.2 General Overview of Methods Developing Writing Skills**

As it was concluded in the Introduction, the writing skill is one of the most challenging and complicated aspects of language acquisition. If it is possible to learn an oral language without cramming and special training, simply acquiring it in a language environment, a writing skill with command of word order, punctuation and stylistic peculiarities is something that has to be taught and drilled in the classroom. The main aim of Upper-Intermediate level students is to demonstrate satisfying performance at the National Examination, so the question Why to teach writing? does not arise. In this respect, much more important is to

teach writing “in such a way that the learners see the purpose of writing and make measurable progress through the performance of realistic and relevant tasks” (Byrne 1988: 7).

Nowadays teachers can choose a method best suitable for achieving teaching goals among a big variety of methods. As writing has always been perceived as a difficult task even for learners who are quite successful at other language skills, teachers have been searching for practical and attractive for students ways to improve writing skills. Consequently, during the decades, approaches to teaching writing have gone through multiple changes and modern teaching realities provide teachers with much wider opportunities.

“There is no one answer to the question of how to teach writing in ESL classes” (Raimes 1983: 5). Consequently there are as many teaching methods as there are teachers with their teaching styles and learners with their learning styles. Hyland (2003) asserts that all teaching methods work for one mutual idea to illuminate what students need to learn and what teachers need to provide for more productive teaching writing. In his work Hyland (2003) illuminates five different foci of teaching writing.

#### *Focus on Language Structures*

One way to comprehend writing is to relate to it as a coherent sequence of words, collocations, clauses or sentences, structured in accordance with grammatical rules. In this case learning and teaching to write in L2 involves linguistic awareness, grammatical and syntactical patterns that help build essential blocks of text. Focusing on language structures writing is considered as a combination of a writer’s command of grammar and good knowledge of vocabulary, where writing progress is measured by the extent of the ability to imitate the patterns provided by a teacher (Hyland 2003: 3).

#### *Focus on Text Functions*

This approach is aimed to teach students to relate different language structures to meanings and introduces the idea that particular language forms have certain communicative functions and these functions are specially taught to provide students with practical tools or means to achieve the purposes of writing. The aim

of this approach is to teach students to create different kinds of effective paragraphs and texts with the help of developing topic, supporting and concluding sentences (Hyland 2003: 6).

#### *Focus on Creative Expression*

The approach is aimed to develop and enhance students' writing abilities and encourage students to learn to express their personal opinion and creative ideas and to create spontaneous and unique writing. (Hyland 2003: 8) The main goal of a teacher focusing on creative expression is to challenge students to express themselves and learn to manifest their feelings and opinions and make them clear and understandable for others. This method is more student-centered than the two previous ones and involves more learning than teaching. A role of a teacher comes down to a motivating stimulation of students' ideas without restricting them with patterns, models or suggested variants (Hyland 2003: 9).

#### *Focus on the Writing Process*

The process approach treats a learner as a central persona and a main producer of texts and success in achieving writing goals depends exceptionally on learners' ability to plan, direct and organise their writing. The process of writing is very complex and consists of many steps, and the most important idea of this approach is that that this process is not linear and learners can jump backwards or forwards at any stage of their writing task (Hyland 2003: 12).

#### *Focus on Content*

This approach is based on and around what students are required to write about. Typically students are provided with a set of interesting for them topics which are connected to the material of the course. It suggests that students select the topics themselves, which ensures their motivation, material command and interest in the topic of writing. It enables teachers to integrate interesting techniques and combine different approaches in writing (Hyland 2003: 14).

To create clear, fluent and effective communication of ideas a student should have in mind multiple aspects, such as syntax, content, the writing process, audience, purpose, word choice, organisation, mechanics and grammar (Raimes 1983: 6). According to Raimes (1983) there can be a big number of different approaches to

teaching writing skills depending on which of these foci to emphasise and how to combine and mix them.

Putting stress on grammar, syntax and mechanics teachers will practice the controlled-to-free approach, the main idea of which is to guide students through their writing process from elementary level to the advanced one, when they are allowed to try some free compositions. Putting stress on the writing process rather than on the quality of writing made a start to the free-writing approach, the main basis of which is to make students write without thinking of grammar and syntax with the aim of breaking the fear against writing. The paragraph-pattern approach stresses organisation and is based on the principle that the knowledge of particular features of language structures provides success of written communication. The communicative approach stresses the purpose of writing and the audience for it and encourages students to behave like writers in real life (Raimes 1983: 6-10).

More recent studies show that there is a tendency to unite writing features into bigger notions, which in their turn give the basis to approaches. For example, Hasan and Akhand (2010) discern only three major approaches based on the teaching focus.

#### *Product Approach*

The approach suggests that students should mimic a model text presented and analysed earlier. The preliminary analysis of the text includes the following stages: features of the genre study, controlled practice of the features, ideas organisation and text production.

#### *Process Approach*

Teachers practising this approach do not expect their students to produce and submit complete and polished texts without going through stages of drafting, correcting and revision. The writing process looks like a multistage progress consisting of brainstorming, structuring, mind mapping, writing the first draft, peer feedback, editing, final draft and evaluation.

### *Genre Approach*

“Genre-based approach considers writing as a social and cultural practice” (Hasan&Akhand 2010: 81). The aim of this writing involves the context and the culture of the discourse community. The focus of a writer is on the language, discourse features of a particular society and the context in which the text is used (Hasan&Akhand 2010).

However, some researches (Tangpermpoon 2008, Dyer 1996) have come to the conclusion that it is more rational to use integrated approaches to cover all the aspects taught and get multifaceted focus rather than to practice only one. Because teaching the writing approaches separately may result in unbalanced writing performance. Every approach has its strengths and weaknesses and altogether they complement each other. Product-based approach helps students improve their writing skills through comments of their teachers and develop their critical thinking skills. Process-based approach helps students realise the importance of every writing stage and gives an opportunity to self-correct mistakes raising their awareness in the language structure. Genre-based approach helps students master their writing skills and make their texts more artistic. Therefore, teachers should use a combination of approaches that can be called “a process-product hybrid” (Dyer, 1996: 316), which incorporates the strongest features of every approach to provide full and comprehensive development of writing skills.

To sum up, to develop and improve students’ writing skills there are many different teaching techniques and methods at a teacher’s disposal, which constantly undergo modifications under the influence of time, tendencies and trends. Blogging as a sign of a new generation and a new trend in writing can become an innovative teaching technique, which combines various approaches and enables students to enhance writing skills in different directions and from different angles. Availability of digital devices makes this approach accessible both inside and outside the classroom. Variety of tasks that can be designed on the basis of blogging makes it a real methodological discovery for a teacher.

### **1.3 Blogging in the Teaching Process**

Teaching writing at the upper intermediate level is a very significant task. Blogging as writing practice is useful not only from the point of view of

exchanging information and communication, but it also provides learners and teachers with big potential to enhance their writing practice for the purposes of preparation for the National Examination in English (writing). Being understandable and close to teenagers, blogging as a digital activity, might help students overcome their fears against writing and gain self-confidence in expressing their thoughts in paper or computer screen.

Blogs have many benefits compared to handwriting. Raghavendra and Challa (2018: 39-40) mention some of them. They do not require sophisticated software or specific knowledge in programming. Blogs offer security options and a writer can regulate who is able to see and comment on his entries. Blog entries can consist of not only a text, but also include photos, videos, audios and links, which make reading blogs much more exciting. Blogs have an auto-archiving feature, a writer will never lose what was once written. The option of readers' comments helps a writer reflect and contemplate his ideas.

That is how Kuimova and Zvekov (2016: 159) characterise blogging as a teaching method in their study:

Thus, the use of blog technology in a foreign language classroom helps a teacher be abreast of current educational technologies, organize the process of learning, create opportunities to practice the language, increase learning interest, develop writing skills and promote communication skills.

There are numerous reasons why using blogs in teaching writing has sense, i.e. to provide extra reading and writing practice, to increase teacher-learner and learner-learner collaboration, to encourage students to participate in learning process more actively and to make the so called student's digital portfolio of all written works. A very important factor to raise students' interest in blogging activity is novelty. In addition, Raghavendra and Challa (2018: 42) claim that "because students know they are going to have an audience by publishing their writing on the Web, they often produce higher quality work than students who write only for the teacher".

Influence of using blogs on student writing process is invaluable. Writing blogs enables students to improve not only their writing skills, but also foster critical thinking through interaction with other students. When students read each others' blogs and leave reflective commentaries on them, they learn from one another and motivate each other to create even better reviews and entries. Having in mind the

audience of their blogs, students are encouraged to pay more attention to content, word choice, style and grammar, thus improving the quality of writing. Besides, the nature of publishing online stimulates writers to be more creative and make blogs more attractive for readers by using visual aids, such as photos and videos. Blogging promotes meaningful writing, since to provide full information on a topic, students have to explore different sources and gain inside perspective (Raghavendra, Challa 2018: 43-45).

Obviously, blogging is an effective tool to enhance writing skills and has many benefits in the educational sphere. But it has confidently taken its own place among teaching methods, and one of the evidences is a new term “learner-blogger” introduced by Alsamadani (2017) in his research to designate a new type of students learning in blogging-based environment.

Multiple studies in this area have recently proved blogging beneficial influence on writing skills. Montero-Fleta (2009) concludes that self-expression in blogs encourages students to produce language more fluently and motivates them to be more efficient learners. Aslamadani (2017) finds blogging an effective and innovative teaching tool that promotes group interaction and develops team spirit. Madini (2018) claims that the use of blogs in the teaching process is beneficial because it provides a valuable learning technique for a teenager living in a technology-oriented society. He also finds that blogging in learning purposes on a constant basis helps students master new vocabulary and use it in a more authentic way. Besides that, the study confirms that blogging results in peer collaboration and interaction in the classroom and suggests an element of competition, which can be quite motivating.

All in all, it could be assumed that the writing skill is one of the most challenging aspects of the National Examination and it can present certain difficulties for students, yet it is slightly under-practised. There are many versatile methods aimed to develop and enhance writing skills at a teacher’s disposal and blogging as an innovative technique can be very promising in the view of benefits it offers. Based on the findings of other researchers’ studies, it can be assumed that blogging is an impressive technology-based and student-centered method which promotes authentic and meaningful language development, enhances language proficiency and

improves interpersonal interaction. Besides that, multiple features make blogging very flexible and provides a teacher with many options and variations how to organise classwork. For example, a blog can be used to make a class where a teacher invites students to create their own blogs where they post written works and it will be a learning blogging network, where any participant has an access to teacher's or peers' blogs. A teacher can add a forum for every blog entry to share opinions and ideas, just to mention a few. All in all, blogging-based practice have a big potential in teaching in the context of preparation for the National Examination in English.

## **CHAPTER II THE EDUCATIONAL WRITING BLOG FOR EXAM PREPARATION**

Reasoning from the previous studies and their outcomes, the aim of the second chapter is to find out if and to what extent blogging helps improve students' writing skills in the context of the preparation for the National Examination in English. A narrower aim is to ascertain if blogging as a study tool causes more interest in writing than traditional handwriting tasks. The present research is aimed at confirming the next hypothesis: the use of blogs as a supplementary tool helps improve students' writing skills in the context of preparation for the National examination in English.

A problem was identified in the first chapter that a gap between students' interests and the National Examination requirements was emerging with students becoming less interested in written communication. It seemed appropriate therefore to investigate ways to improve students' motivation for writing and quality of writing in order to improve teaching and learning in an attempt to bridge the apparent gap.

Data collection methods involve holding a questionnaire on the topic of writing skills acquirement and comparative analysis of students' blog entries and comments during the course.

### **2.1 Writing Blog: Structure, Content, Participants and Exam Preparatory Course**

#### *Structure and Content*

To provide students with extra writing practice the educational writing blog was created with a specific aim to provide students with exam-based tasks. As the title of the blog a part of the famous quotation of Mahatma Gandhi (Encyclopedia Britannica: para 1), Indian lawyer and politician, was used - "Learn as if you were to live forever", to keep the students focused on the purpose of the blog. In the six-weeks examination preparatory course for upper secondary learners, which lasted from the 18<sup>th</sup> March till 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2020, the students were presented with different writing tasks in the blogging format twice a week. The tasks varied in content, styles, levels of difficulty, but all of them were exam-centered. To receive the tasks the students had to enter the teacher's blog, which was

presented to the students at the first class; the web-address of the blog is [www.bossteacher.edublogs.org](http://www.bossteacher.edublogs.org).

The platform used for both teacher's and students' blogs - [www.edublogs.org](http://www.edublogs.org) - is a website specifically designed for teachers, learners and researchers, and it provides blog-users with various possibilities, such as invite students, approve/unapprove students comments, control privacy options, organise students in groups and monitor students' progress. It is considered as a high-quality, open source blogging facility. Advantages of this platform is that it is not cluttered with advertisements to distract or confuse students, it is very easy to set up within several minutes, it has a big variety of design themes to choose and, what is more, it is absolutely free of charge.

The blog itself is a well designed and easy to navigate tool. The blog is user-friendly with posting onto the blog through a simple text editor then publishing to the web is done through a simple click of a button. The posts enable a user to attach any videos, documents, links, images or multimedia to make posting more creative. An additional very useful feature is the comment facility whereby students can respond or comment on teacher's tasks or each other's published work. Privacy options enable to control who reads and comments on posts and a user gets a notification on his/her e-mail address with the information who posted or commented (see Appendix 1).

According to the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, in order to complete upper secondary education, a student should pass three examinations, one of which is a foreign language. Students have two options to demonstrate their foreign language proficiency: to take the National Examination in English or to pass an internationally recognised examination, and the First Certificate in English (FCE) is one of them, at least on level B1. The results of the examinations are recognised by the state (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research: para 11). The FCE practice book offers tasks similar to the ones included into the National examination, and thus can be used for extensive practice to support students who choose FCE exams or the National examination in English.

Every lesson students had to write only one paragraph based on the task given. They also had to choose the best work of their classmates and comment on why they found it interesting.

As the basis for these tasks, the book *Skills for First Certificate: Writing* (Mann&Taylore-Knowles, 2003) was used. The book provides thorough and comprehensive training in language and exam skills for students preparing for the writing paper in Cambridge First Certificate and includes task-based exercises developing essential writing skills, guidelines for production of effective writing and easy-to-understand examination tips.

**Table 2.** *FCE and National Examination Writing Tasks Comparison*

	<b>FCE</b>	<b>National Examination</b>
<b>level</b>	B2 (Upper Intermediate)	B2 (Upper Intermediate)
<b>1<sup>st</sup> task</b>	Essay (140-190 words)	Semi-formal letter (120 words)
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> task</b>	Article/semi-formal letter/report/review for students' choice (140-190 words)	Essay/report (200 words)
<b>Required skills</b>	Evaluating, expressing opinions, hypothesising, justifying, persuading etc	Expressing opinions, giving appraisal, commenting on events, describing processes, offer solutions, comparing and contrasting etc

Source: Cambridge Assessment; Innove Foundation

As it is seen in the table, both examinations have a similar structure and require similar language skills from students.

The first class was introductory and the students got quite an easy task to introduce themselves. At the second class they had to contemplate about what people can do at home in the circumstances of lockdown in the pandemic infection. The first two

tasks are quite easy and play a roll of warming-up exercises. All the rest lessons were based on materials of the above-mentioned book, but the tasks were specially designed to meet the requirements of the National Examination in English.

The final meeting in the sixth week was aimed to take overall conclusions. The students completed their last blog task and gave their feedback to the course as well as filled in the feedback questionnaire on the topic of the course compiled by the author.

To achieve grammar accuracy, every students' comment was edited by the teacher and later discussed with a student. All the corrections were made visible.

### *Participants*

The experiment was conducted with six Estonian students of English, who attend a private language school and attend extracurricular English lessons with a mutual goal - to prepare for the National Examination in English. The participants of the experiment were of different ages and different forms of the secondary level: three students from form 10, two students from form 12 and one student who studies Storage and Warehousing in Ida-Viru Vocational Education Centre and prepares for passing the National Examination in English. As the students took the course as an elective course, the students were from different learning backgrounds. Before the course their level of English was tested and on the basis of the results the groups were formed. As the course was elective and was held in the after-school time, the number of students participating was small. The average age of the students is 17 and their level of English is supposed to be intermediate (B1).

The objective of the course was to develop students' writing skills to achieve better performance at the National Examination in English avoiding traditional routine writing activities. Up to this point the students had an additional English course with practising different language skills in the traditional face-to-face format: speaking, reading and listening. However, they did not show any enthusiasm when it came to practising writing skills, thus this language aspect stayed under-practised. The majority of them also did not have an opportunity to practise their writing skills via blogging and in the conditions of the quarantine period (spring 2020) and the shift towards online-training it was quite reasonable.

### *Exam Preparatory Course*

The course was meant to be preparatory for the National Examination and the main focus was on the skills required for the examination. The students were aware of the examination requirements before the experiment had started because the course itself took its beginning in September, 2019.

**Table 3.** *Course Outline*

	<b>date</b>	<b>topic</b>	<b>task</b>	<b>instructions</b>
1	18.03.2020	Getting acquainted	Informal letter	Write one paragraph best introducing yourself
2	20.03.2020	Free-time activities	Informal letter	Write one paragraph suggesting what to do staying at home at the quarantine time
3	25.03.2020	Occupations	Semi-formal article	Write one paragraph of your article on how young people might choose a career.
4	27.03.2020	Education	Informal letter	Write one paragraph providing information about the educational course.
5	01.04.2020	Sports	Formal report	Write one paragraph of the report with the title Gymnasium.
6	03.04.2020	People	Semi-formal story	Write one paragraph of a story describing a girl from your class.
7	08.04.2020	Travel	Semi-formal story	Write one paragraph of a magazine story describing an exciting journey.
8	15.04.2020	The Media	Informal letter/ semi-formal article/ formal report	Rewrite three extracts in more appropriate styles
9	17.04.2020	Clothes	Informal letter	Write one paragraph of a letter suggesting what clothes and other items to bring to Estonia
10	22.04.2020	Education	Formal essay	Write two paragraphs of a for-and-against essay about blogging as a teaching tool

Source: compiled by the author

As it is seen in the table, the course covers all the aspects of writing requirements for the National Examination, including various vocabulary topics (clothes, travel,

education, occupations etc), styles (informal, semi-formal and formal) and tasks types (letter, article, story, report, essay). Thus, during six-week course the students were provided with full examination preparatory writing practice.

The students used the blog in class time and outside of class to produce a series of written paragraphs during six weeks using a range of writing styles and topics. These paragraphs included a biographical information about themselves, a paragraph offering advice to visitors to their countries, a for-and-against essay about blogging in teaching, a story about exciting travel, a report about a gym and a paragraph with suggestions about how to spend time at the quarantine time. They also completed the task on transforming styles into more appropriate. The students were encouraged to follow the process approach in their writing on the blog. They were instructed each time to write and publish their paragraphs directly onto the blog as comments directly in the blog.

## **2.2 Writing Blog: Results and Assessment**

To conclude if blogging helped improve students' writing skills, different aspects of written language were analysed. In order to analyse students' reactions and their level of interest in the blogging activity the answers of the feedback online questionnaire compiled by the author were analysed.

### *Development of Task Content*

Students' blog posts went through considerable changing in their content. At the end of the course students were able to develop and express their thoughts, give reasoned feedback, adapt the style according to the instructions. Comparing the first posts with the last ones, paragraphs became longer and more substantial. The most complicated regarding the content were the first two tasks, because they caused the biggest quantity of questions on what to write and how to complete the tasks, despite the instructions were clear and detailed. Besides that, it was obviously difficult for them even to start their writing. Later on, the students were able to complete the tasks better and more thoroughly, they asked fewer questions on the procedure and the content.

Having in mind the dynamics of the content, it is evident that there is the shift from more light-minded posts to more thoughtful ones. The two posts of the same student illustrate this supposition:

I can eat everything and everyone, so I love eating very much. (Task 1)

As I said above, you don't need a lot of clothes, but you can take one jacket with you, because Estonia is an unpredictable country and it can rain. /.../ (Task 9).

Generally speaking students' posts went through development in terms of the content.

### *Practice in Different Writing Styles*

The students demonstrated good command of various styles and they are able to adapt the style according to the instructions given. Generally they made minor stylistic mistakes, for example, using contracted forms in a formal piece of writing, while the choice of vocabulary and grammar structures was mainly appropriate:

I explored many magazines for teenagers that you recommended and I don't like any of them. /.../

As it is seen in their posts, the students are aware of stylistic peculiarities of formal, semi-formal or informal piece of writing and are able to imply their knowledge in their work. Some of the students, though, found the style transformation exercise difficult and expressed her thoughts in her final post: "This task was the hardest for me, but I also really liked it, because it somehow helped me to understand how I need to write formal letters." They also realise the appropriacy of using various styles, as commenting on each others' posts they used informal style as a tool of communication with peers, even though their comments concerned a formal piece of writing. Here is one example of how the students completed the style transformation task:

1. Hi dude, my folks allowed me to go to see your appearance on 'Who wants to be a teenage Millionaire'. I really want to see that. It will be very nice if you tell when you arrive at the studio. (formal into informal)
2. I have read a great many of magazines for teenagers, they are not very good, because they do not give some experience or life lessons to teenagers. Most of them are about pop and fashion. (informal into formal)
3. Nowadays lots of young people uses internet regularly. Some of them wanted to do their own websites. This is unfortunate. In my thoughts they need to realize that

creating of new website is very easy and also it's very enjoyable and constructive.  
(formal into semi-formal)

### *Development of Vocabulary*

The analysis of the vocabulary used by the course participants showed that the word choice did not change much throughout the course. It is possible to suppose that the vocabulary mainly depends on personal language level and the sources where the students acquired it (youth serials, video games, songs, textbooks etc). The type of tasks also influenced the vocabulary, since the choice of words for formal pieces of writing was more sophisticated than for the informal ones. However, one student mentioned in his final post that his subjective impression is that this writing practice helped improve his vocabulary. Besides that, slight development is noticeable in the field of word spelling. In their earlier posts, the students made more spelling mistakes than in their latest ones. It is worth mentioning that all the students from time to time misused some words, that made it difficult to understand the idea. The reason can be in direct translation of some collocations from their mother tongue, therefore they sounded not typically English. However, in general the students' vocabulary did not undergo any significant changes during the course.

### *Improvement of Grammar*

The analysis of the grammatical aspect of the course revealed many problems and gaps in students' knowledge of English grammar. Nevertheless, grammar performance was also the most productive in terms of development and changes the students have come through. The earlier posts demonstrated many problematic zones, the most frequent of them are articles, tense use and prepositions. The first post of one of the students has lots of various mistakes:

I study in Jõhvi gymnasium, I am a 10 year student.

I have best sides like are that I like help people, punctual, responsible, support people.

I like food, so I eat everything that I see.

I am afraid of insects and predators.

A very short and simple piece of text includes the mistakes with using a gerund, wrong sentence structure and absence of articles, while unclear turn of speech makes some of the sentences difficult for perceiving. Comparing this post with the final one of the same student demonstrates significant improvement of grammatical expression:

I liked this teaching method, because everyone can improve writing skills. For example, for me in the beginning it was very difficult and I could not write without the help of a teacher and now I can do this without teacher's help. Also tasks were not difficult and understandable for those who found it difficult. The teacher immediately checked our work and we discussed our mistakes with teacher.

I think that this blogging as a teaching tool do not have any minuses.

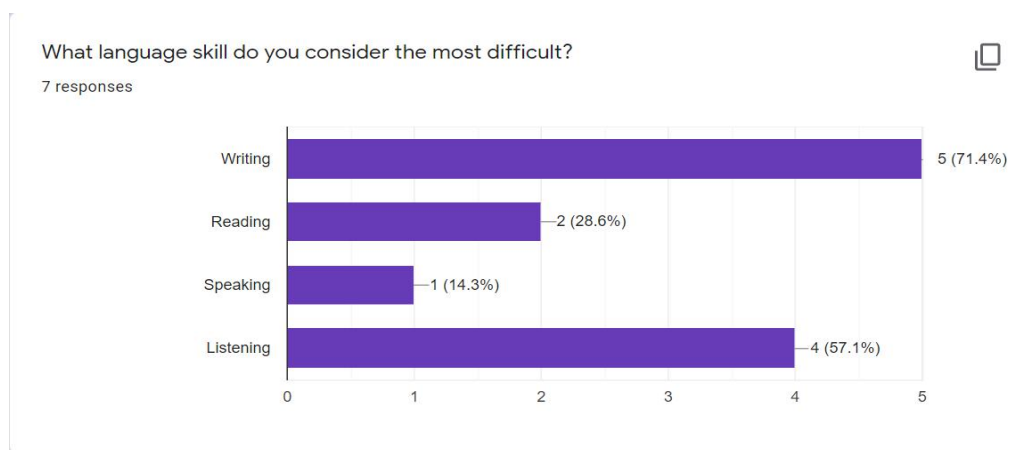
This post is written almost without any grammar mistakes and the quality of the text is much higher than the first one. The same can be said about the rest of the students. The more they wrote, the fewer mistakes the teacher had to correct.

### 2.3 Writing Blog: Students' Feedback

The final stage of the experiment included writing an argumentative essay on the topic "Blogging as a teaching tool to enhance writing skills", where they were asked to write two paragraphs: "for and against" blogging as means of developing writing skills. The students also filled in the online feedback questionnaire, the access to which the students received from the final blog entry (see Appendix 2).

As it was assumed before, writing skills are considered to be the most difficult in the foreign language acquisition process and 71% of the students confirmed it.

**Chart 1.** *What Language Skill Students Consider to Be the Most Difficult.*



As the questionnaire results show, the majority of the students (85%) estimated their blogging experience as positive and only 14% of the students admitted that it was neutral. The students mentioned such positive sides of blogging as its availability, convenience, familiarity and proximity for teenagers, good opportunity to have constant writing practice, possibility to compare answers with the classmates and

immediate feedback from the teacher. Some of the students highlighted that since the tasks were short and included in the majority of cases only one paragraph and did not demand from them writing the whole essay or report, it made blogging experience quite enjoyable. The students also regarded as an advantage the fact that while working individually they had an opportunity to see other students' comments which was supportive for them.

For many of the students it was difficult to find disadvantages and some of them even were not able to do so. However, the main disadvantage of the blogging-based practice can be the fact that not everyone has electronic devices with the Internet connection, thus this circumstance makes this activity slightly selective and may disadvantage students with less financial means.

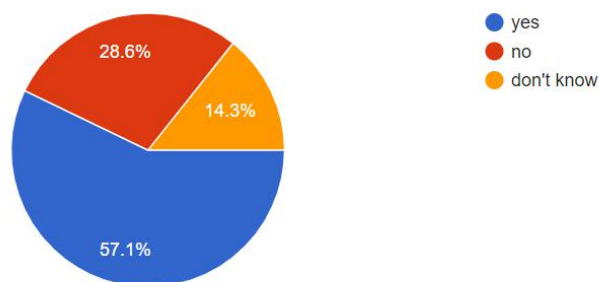
57% of the students think that their writing skills improved due to the blogging course and 29% admit that the course did not influence their skills in any ways. It is worth mentioning that a certain tendency can be traced: the higher initial language skills students had, the smaller development they will undergo. Students with good writing skills did not show noticeable development during the course, and it was just an additional practice for them. And vice versa, the students with average language skills demonstrated big positive changes in their writing skills.

All the students would recommend this course to their classmates and friends and more than a half of them would like to have this practice on the constant basis. The next chart is to illustrate the statement.

**Chart 2.** *The ratio of the Students who Want to Have Blogging-based Practice Constantly.*

Would you like to have blogging-based writing practice on the constant basis?

7 responses



The easiest parts of the blogging course mentioned by the students are to evaluate others, invent stories, have only one paragraph per one lesson and write informal letters. Nevertheless the students also discussed which parts of the blogging course caused problems, and they think that the most difficult parts of the blogging-based practice are to start the writing process, to write long paragraphs and formal letters. Some of the students found the tasks themselves quite challenging (see Appendix 3).

To sum up, blogging can be a very good teacher's support in his/her work at the stage of preparation for the National Examination. The experience of six-week course showed that even short and easy exercises are important, and if students write at least a paragraph every lesson, the efforts will be crowned with success. Digital space is familiar to young learners and students will appreciate the diversity of tasks, methods and variations used on its base. Participating in the blog together with the possibility to see and comment on peers' posts creates atmosphere of collaboration and support. Educational blogging provides a big space for both teachers' and learners' imagination and creativity.

## CONCLUSION

English is included into the list of the state examinations, which students have to pass in order to graduate from Upper secondary schools, therefore teaching English is in the focus of attention of both students and teachers. Writing as a language skill presents significant difficulty and demands to follow precise rules on grammar, appropriate vocabulary and style and coherence in exposition from students. What is more, being a productive skill, it is time-consuming and difficult to acquire, so effective teaching of writing skills is a big challenge for teachers.

As a rule, students do not demonstrate much enthusiasm when it comes to writing long reports, stories and essays, because being people of a new acronymic digital era typing for them has become much more habitual than handwriting. Students' motivation and interest in the subject is of no small importance in the learning process, so it is essential to make teaching writing skills enjoyable and positive.

Teaching writing methods have gone through considerable evolution from precise and limited with strict methodological guidelines to a flexible combination of various methods to support writing skills from different angles (Hyland 2003, Raimes 1983, Hasan&Akhand 2010, Tangpermpoon 2008, Dyer 1996). Teaching methodology is not restricted by certain didactic principles without a possibility to add some new approaches for a detailed and holistic practice and skills development. The new digital era dictates its rules and using technologies in the classroom is becoming rather a necessity than an option.

As the Internet with its activities, such as blogs, forums, social nets etc. can be of more interest to students than classical writing assignments, why not to use its potential for raising learning motivation? As the Internet space has already become a 'comfort zone' for many teenagers, its application to the learning process can make it more comfortable, stress and anxiety free. Since blogs are student-centred and Internet-based everyday writing activities, they increase the volume of students' writing practice and lead to a better performance in writing at the preparatory stage for the National examination in English.

The six-week blogging course created with the purpose to research the issue of blogging and its influence on students' writing skills development has shown that

even a short practice on a regular basis can be effective and supportive in teaching writing. The majority of the students of the Felola Learning Centre, who participated in the experiment, discovered that after the six-week course their writing skills have improved. Blogging as a teaching tool is more habitual environment for students and provides them with some ideas as a collaborative classwork activity with possibility to see other students' works. Students' collaboration plays the role of extra motivation, because peers' evaluation is a supplementary factor in addition to teachers' assessment.

Besides that, blogging is very flexible and can be characterised as a variable tool with multiple functions depending on the goals set in the teaching process. It can be used as a teacher's blogs with instructions or a network of students' blogs and, what is more, it can be sort of a learner's portfolio with all the home tasks kept in one digital place. Blogging enables teachers to practice it in and out of the lesson or even to transfer all the learning activity in the digital space without any loss of the quality. In the context of the preparation for the National Examination in English all these advantages can be of a great value for both teachers and students and provide a lot of options for extensive practice.

However, the students discovered a disadvantage of blogging, namely, not every student has necessary hardware with the Internet connection to join the blogging practice. This aspect has to be researched to make blogging as a teaching tool available for everybody without exception.

Thus, the hypothesis of the present study that the use of blogs as a supplementary tool helps improve students' writing skills in the context of preparation for the National examination in English is proved.

## SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Kirjutamise õpetamine on üks tähtsamaid, samas väga keeruline osa, et valmistada ette keskastme õpilasi riiklikuks inglise keele eksamiks. Kirjutamine kui keeleoskuse üks osaoskus tekitab suuri raskusi ja nõuab õpilastelt grammatika, asjakohase sõnavara ja stiilireeglite järgimist. Lisaks, olles produktiivne keeleoskus, on kirjutamisoskus aeganõudev õpetada ja keeruline omandada. Seetõttu on kirjutamisoskuse tõhus õpetamine õpetajatele suur väljakutse.

Üldjuhul ei näita õpilased pikkade kirjutamisülesannete kirjutamisel suurt entusiasmi, sest nende jaoks on trükkimine muutunud palju tavapärasemaks kui käsiti kirjutamine. Õpilaste motivatsioon ja huvi aine vastu on õppeprotsessis äärmiselt tähtis, seetõttu on oluline muuta kirjutamisoskuse õpetamine nauditavaks ja positiivseks.

Uus, digitaalajastu dikteerib oma reeglid ja tehnoloogiate kasutamine klassiruumis on muutumas pigem vajaduseks kui võimaluseks. Kuna Internet koos oma tegevusvõimalustega, nagu blogid, foorumid, sotsiaalsõrgustikud jne, võib õpilastele rohkem huvi pakkuda kui klassikalised kirjutamisülesanded, siis miks mitte kasutada selle potentsiaali õpimotivatsiooni tõstmiseks? Kuna blogimine on õpilaskeskne ja Interneti-põhine igapäevane kirjutamistegevus, suurendab see õpilaste kirjutamispraktika mahtu ja võimaldab paremat kirjutamisoskust inglise keele riigieksami ettevalmistamise etapis.

Bakalaureusetöö “Blogimine kui täiendav vahend kirjutamisoskuse parandamiseks inglise keele riigieksamiks ettevalmistamise etapis” koosneb neljast osast. Sissejuhatuses antakse ülevaade uurimistöö peamistest aspektidest, nagu kirjutamine ja sellega kaasnevad raskused, kirjutamine ja tehnoloogiad ning kirjutamine osana riiklikust eksamist.

Esimese peatüki “Kirjutamisoskuse õpetamise meetodid” eesmärk on uurida kirjutamisoskuse õpetamise meetodite aluseid ning käsitleda blogimist kui kirjutamisoskuse õpetamise ja täiendamise vahendit. Teoreetilises osas kirjeldatakse ka inglise keele riigieksamil määratletud kirjutamisnõudeid. Teises peatükis “Õppealane kirjutamisblog riigieksami ettevalmistamiseks” uuritakse blogide pidamise mõju õpperutiinis.

Kokkuvõttes esitatakse uuringu tulemused ja kommentaarid uuringu hüpoteesi kohta.

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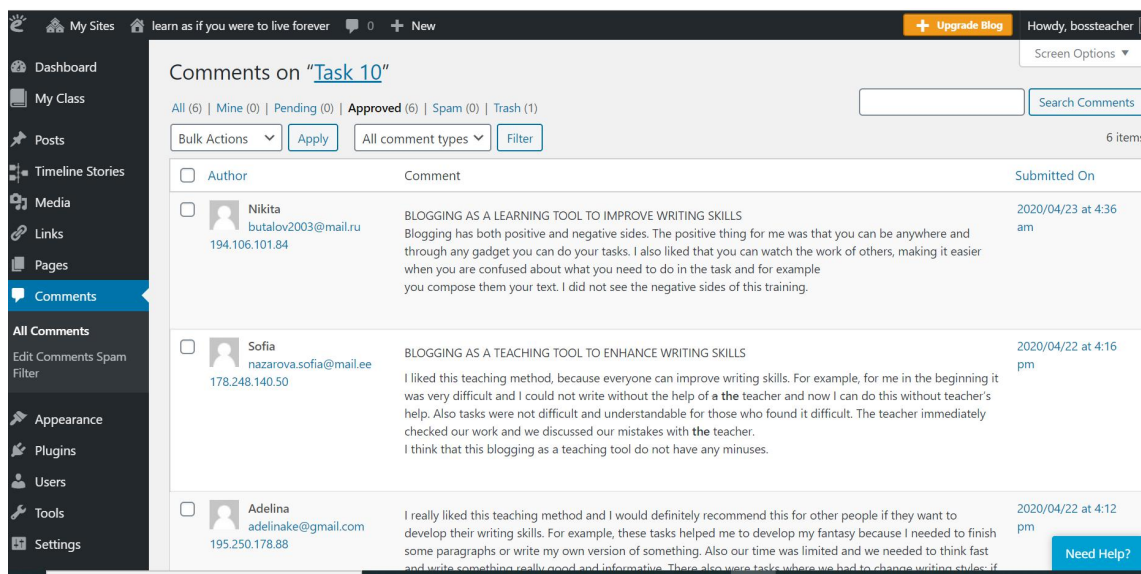
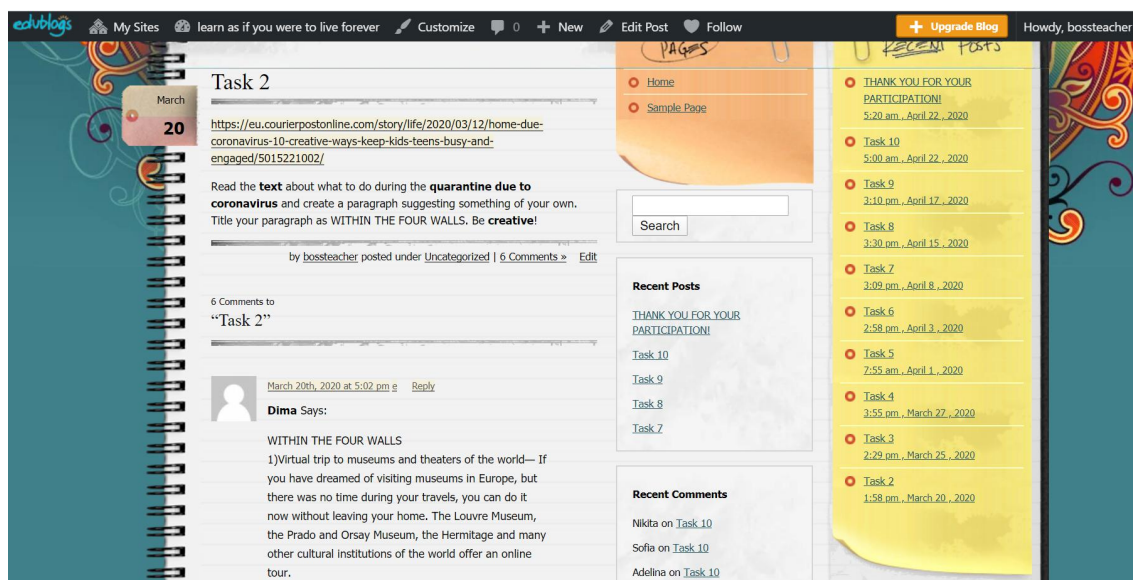
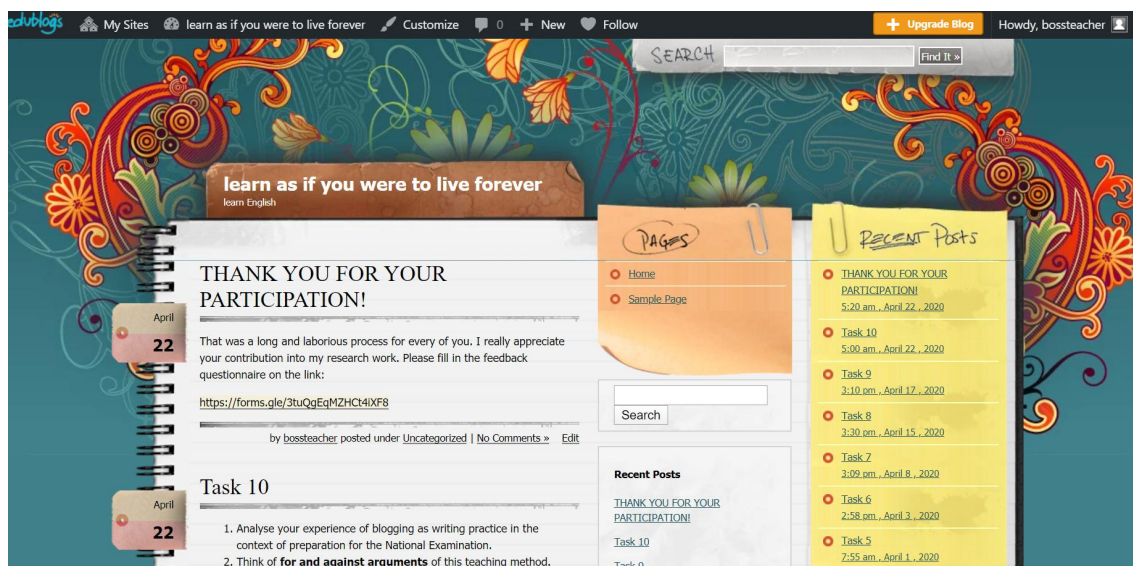
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Screenshots of the Blog



## Appendix 2. Questionnaire

### Blogging as a supplementary teaching tool

What language skill do you consider the most difficult?

- ☐ Writing
- ☐ Reading
- ☐ Speaking
- ☐ Listening

Have you had blogging experience as writing practice before?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

This blogging experience was

- ☐ positive
- ☐ negative
- ☐ neutral

During this course your writing skills

- ☐ improved
- ☐ deteriorated
- ☐ didn't change

Would you recommend this course to your friends?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no
- ☐ don't know

What was the easiest part of the blogging course?

---

What was the most difficult part of the blogging course?

---

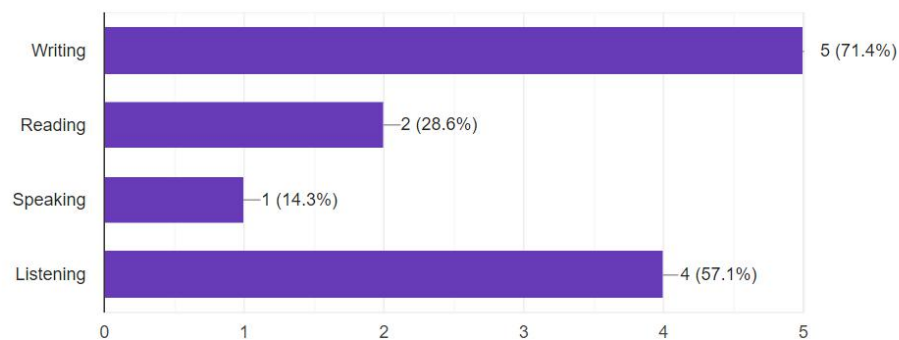
Would you like to have blogging-based writing practice on the constant basis?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no
- ☐ don't know

How easy was to use the blog?

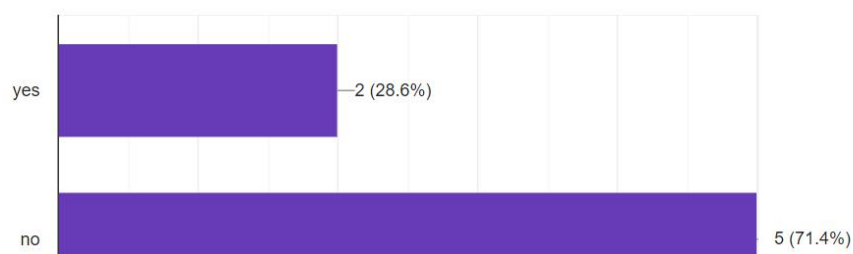
very easy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 very difficult

### Appendix 3. Questionnaire Responses



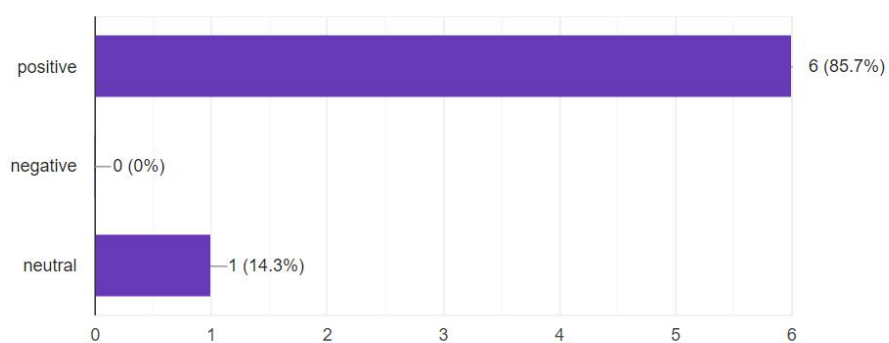
Have you had blogging experience as writing practice before?

7 responses



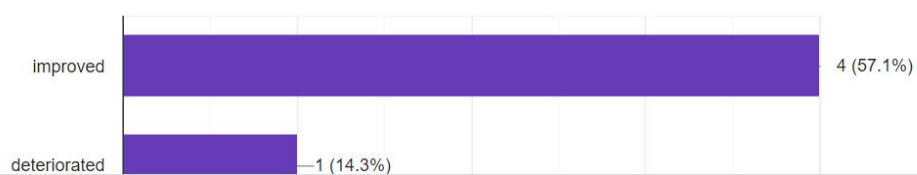
This blogging experience was

7 responses



During this course your writing skills

7 responses



What was the easiest part of the blogging course?

6 responses

To evaluate other

The easiest part was to analyse my classmates tests.

writing informal letters, writing only one paragraph in tasks

invent my own stories

Only one task per one lesson

What was the most difficult part of the blogging course?

6 responses

The tasks themselves

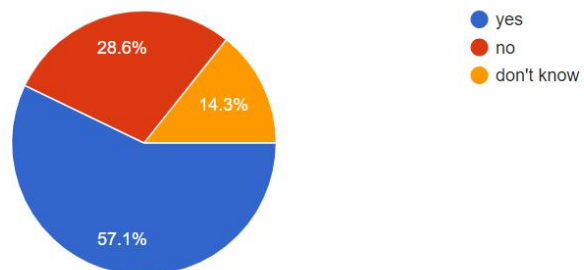
Writing long paragraphs.

writing formal letters

Bloqqing as a sup....html

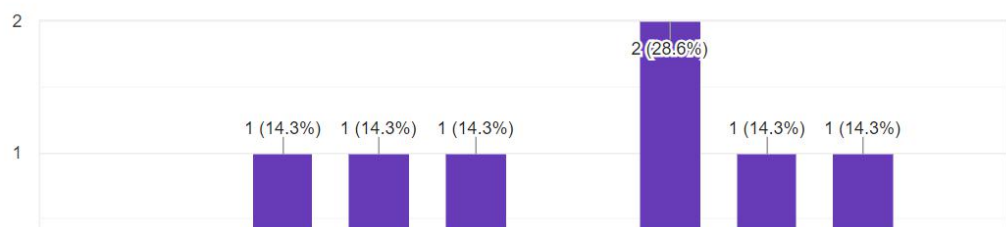
Would you like to have blogging-based writing practice on the constant basis?

7 responses



How easy was to use the blog?

7 responses



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