



Weblogs in EFL Writing Course¹

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Abstract

In light of innovations in education, various instructional methods and techniques have been utilized to encourage foreign language learners to practice writing, not only in class, but also outside the classroom. In line with those practices, EFL learners' blog uses for writing lessons were practiced, and learners' attitudes toward such a practice were examined in the present study. Thirty students who enrolled in a writing course in a university level participated in the study. Additionally, participants' Internet use habits that were assessed through the Internet use inquiry forms are also considered prior to the treatment. During the treatment period, which was lasted over a 6-week period, the participants enrolled in a writing course which was supported by the use of blogs in addition to the regular curriculum. Throughout the study, all of the participants wrote 3 essays, each consisting of a first, second and final draft. Two of the essays were of the compare-contrast type, and the third was a definition essay. At the end of the 6 weeks of treatment, the achievements of the participants were reassessed, and the results were compared with the pre-test scores. Additionally, learners' attitudes toward the writing course and use of blogs were examined through an inquiry form. The findings revealed that using blogs for writing lessons was an effective method to improve student achievements in writing. The findings additionally depicted that participants found the writing lessons supported by blogs very beneficial.

Keywords: blog, writing skill, EFL, attitudes

Introduction

The technological tools, which become a central part of daily life over the last few decades, have taken their place in the world of education. In all likelihood, these tools will continue to be used for instructional purposes as long as teaching and learning tools are developed for new

¹ The researchers hereby declare that the data was obtained before 2019. With regard to the issued statements on compliance with ethical international standards, they officially state that they did not use any unlawful method or material during the research. The researchers initiated the research after permissions (i. e. voluntary and individual written consents) and submitted them before publication. This manuscript is based on an MA thesis prepared and defended by the first, and supervised by the second author.

generations. The innovative efforts in education, particularly the recent developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and widespread use of Internet, have compelled scholars to employ the recent technologies in the instructional settings to provide more authentic environments in many disciplines. In a similar vein, language teachers have been occupied with incorporating various technologies into the English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms so as to deliver a more student centered teaching. As for integrating the technology into teaching environments, Motschnig-Pitrik and Holzinger (2002) asserted that “the Internet and information technologies are principally well-suited to be used with the student-centered approach” (p. 164), since such instruments provide students with the ability to freely explore various instructional materials. Moreover, it is believed that technology-enriched learning environments which include reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, Web-quests, anchored instruction and other approaches that involve learning with others in social environments (Schunk, 2000). Similarly, as Dovedan, Seljan, and Vučković (2002) stated, the use of the Internet and internet-based technologies in every aspect of life have compelled language instructors to make use of such favorable tools in the teaching of language skills. Accordingly, the Internet and its tools, such as discussion forums, mail groups, podcasts, e-portfolios, chat or messaging programs, social networking sites and weblogs integrated into foreign language instruction. Hence, the presence of technology, especially Internet-based technologies in foreign language classrooms is welcomed by many scholars and teachers who are active users of such tools.

Developments in the use of ICTs have compelled educators to integrate these means into the teaching and learning environment. One of the instructional movements that the foreign language teachers come across in the last two decades is the web logs or blogs, which can be simply defined as amateur web pages broadcasted for varying purposes. Although most blogs are written in a personal or journalistic style, they have been increasingly used for educational purposes especially in language teaching environments for supporting reading, writing and listening skills. Blogs known as simple web pages constructed through the guidance of templates; that is anyone who has an email address can create a personal blog which might include text-based content, videos, audio files, images and links to other pages. According to Goodwin-Jones (2003) blogs, which are considered as a web space for writing where all the writing and editing applications are in use via a web browser, provide a collaborative environment, and, thus, they have recently gained considerable popularity in education.

The incorporation of Web 2.0 tools (e.g. student blogs) into the writing instruction process is believed to provide appropriate conditions for idea generation, peer collaboration and research skills of the learners. Although Harrington, Kopp and Schimmel (2003) highlighted that every learner is unique and shapes their learning and knowledge through their experiences, when it comes to writing activities learners depend mainly on their teachers’ directions and feedback. Several studies (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Huwari & Aziz, 2011; Latif, 2007; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989) indicated that writing activities in foreign language learning are recognized as tedious and boring since the audience for students’ papers is primarily the teachers, and learners generally do not receive a real response to their writing, aside from teacher feedback. Thus, when there is not real audience, the writing activities becomes as non-communicative exercises where the lack of idea sharing with peers and with teachers grounds a mechanical learning atmosphere (Abu Shawish & Abdelraheem, 2010), which in turn, leads a non-effective social learning and cause discomfort for learners. Furthermore, it is believed that blogs, which can be implemented free of charge, constitute a creative means for the collaboration and the improvement of writing skills of language learners. Thus, the use of blogs in writing courses are projected as an alternative in order to turn a mechanical learning atmosphere into an interest-grabbing activity which motivates learners through connecting the social lives and the real-like learning activities. Consequently, the emergence of blogs in the field of education encouraged learners to

write, since their audience is more authentic which motivates learners to spend more time working to improve the writing skills of foreign language learners (Jonassen, 2000). Similarly, Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008) and Pinkman (2005) underlined, most of the language learners considered blogs as authentic, interesting and communicative resources for writing activities.

The underlying reason for integrating technology into writing courses lies in the necessity for teachers to motivate learners to write by providing them with authentic materials and real audience. Moreover, it is likely that the learners in most foreign language learning environments do not have chances to write as they did in their mother tongue as part of their daily life routines such as sending SMSs and emails, chatting online or using social networking sites in their target language. As has been proposed by various researchers (Loving, Schroeder, Kang, Shimek, & Herbert, 2007; Moundridou & Goulioti, 2010; Northcott, Miliszewska, & Dakich, 2007; Ramos, 2004), blogs can be used as a vehicle for learners to improve their writing skills, providing them not only with an authentic writing context, but also enabling peer collaboration. Likewise, using blogs as an out-of-class activity is believed to provide a positive contribution in writing courses (Chen, Liu, Shih, Wu, & Yuan, 2011; Dippold, 2009). Moreover, blogs could create a real audience since they are open to anyone.

In the context of education, teachers recognized the benefits of using blogs in teaching especially their flexibility and ease of use triggered both teachers and learners (Loving et al., 2007; Moundridou & Goulioti, 2010; Northcott, Miliszewska & Dakich, 2007; Ramos, 2004). In particular, English language teachers have found blogs to be a useful instructional tool in terms of writing. As Richardson (2010) contends, blogs engage writers with ideas, questions and links. Moreover, they not only ask readers to think, but also to respond to blog posts; therefore, blogs encourage interaction and communication. This authentic communicative atmosphere of blogs makes writing more enjoyable for learner since the blogger can interact with his/her posts via the comments of the followers (Du & Wagner, 2007; Kavaliauskiene, Anusiene, & Mazeikiene, 2006; Noytim, 2010; Oravec, 2002; Ward, 2004). As Weller, Pegler and Mason (2005) pointed out, blogs have emerged in the educational field as a means of communication, as a tool for collaboration, as a digital portfolio for learners, and also as a classroom portal where teachers can archive the writings of their students.

While various researchers (Loving et al., 2007; Moundridou & Goulioti, 2010; Northcott, Miliszewska & Dakich, 2007; Ramos, 2004) emphasized that blogs can be readily used in language teaching, Duffy and Bruns (2006, p.32) highlight that “blogs easily incorporate other forms of media, such as images and video” which encourages their use in the foreign language classroom as well. The review of available literature revealed that blogs have been employed creatively in teaching all of the language skill areas. For instance, in terms of writing skills, Bruns and Jacobs (2006), Ferdig and Trammell (2004), and O'Donnell (2006) have all noted the usefulness of weblogs in improving learners' writing skills. Likewise, Arıkan and Khezerlou, (2010) claimed that writing in computer or technology enhanced environments enable students become active participants of the learning process, as they are encouraged to be explorers and creators of language. Several studies (Brandt, 2008; Chen, Liu, Shih, Wu & Yuan, 2011; Dippold, 2009; Lou, Wu, Shih, & Tseng, 2010; Storch, 2005; and Tan, Ladyshewsky, & Gardner, 2010) focused on the role of peer feedback provided through the web-blogs and credited positive effects of peer feedback on the development of writing skills. Additionally, a number of studies (Ellison & Wu, 2008; Fageeh, 2011; Kuzu, 2007; Özkan, 2011) explored the learners' attitudes towards the use of blogs and generally found that students have positive attitudes towards the use of blogs in their education.

As the review of available literature exposed, the studies in the field have examined the effects of using blogs from various perspectives. For example, Vurdien (2011), Chen et al. (2011),

Abdullah (2011), Wang (2009), Blackstone, Spiri, and Naganuma (2007), Abidin, Mohammadi, and Hamid (2011) studied the effects of blog-based peer feedback on learners' writing skills. The results of these studies generally indicated that using peer feedback has a positive effect on learners' writing skills. In a similar vein, Noytim (2010), Moundridou and Goulioti (2010), Miyazoe and Anderson (2010), Tan (2008), Lance (2006) and Wu (2005) investigated learners' attitudes towards using blogs; whose findings indicated that learners have generally positive attitudes towards blog use in their coursework, and most of the participants in those studies believed that using blogs improved their writing skills. Khampusaen (2012), Fageeh (2011), Hashemi and Najafi (2011), Özkan (2011), Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010), Koçoğlu (2009), Zhang (2009), Quintero (2008), and Wang and Fang (2005) investigated the effects of blogs on learner success, and their findings indicate that using blogs mostly improved learner outcomes in writing. In a review study, Can and Özdemir (2006) examined the studies on the use of blogs for process-oriented writing and on the theoretical foundation of using blogs for teaching writing. As a result of their review, they concluded that blogs can offer an innovative approach to writing instruction, which can be effective in higher education in the Turkish context. Moreover, they claimed that use of blogs can bring about solutions to the problems faced in writing courses in the higher education contexts.

Although there are various studies concerning the use of blogs in terms of peer and teacher feedback, as well as students' attitudes towards their use in the education, the review of available literature revealed that these issues have been explored mostly through survey type studies. Additionally, although there are numerous studies dealing with the use of Internet-based technologies in the context of language teaching, most of these studies solely inquire into the participants' opinions on the use of Internet-based technologies in language instruction, and only a few studies have examined the effects of the use of blogs in writing courses. Moreover, there are only a few studies which examined the effects of using blogs in terms of learner success and attitudes associatively.

Thus, in order to contribute to the growing body of research on the issue, a thorough study is needed to explore various dimensions of blog use in writing courses. Therefore, the present study aimed to provide a blog-enhanced writing course for a preparatory English program at a state university and evaluate its effectiveness in terms of its contribution to the learners' writing skills, as well as to their attitudes towards writing. That is, the present study aimed to investigate the effects of using blogs both in terms of learner success and learner attitudes.

Regarding the abovementioned aim, the present study sought answers to the following questions:

- 1) What are the students' opinions related to the use of blogs in their writing course at preparatory school?
- 2) To what extent does the use of blog in preparatory school writing courses enhance the writing skills of the participants?

Method

The present study adopted a quasi-experimental design as its research methodology. According to Abraham and MacDonald (2011, p. 506), the quasi-experimental design is similar to experimental research; however, it differs in some respects be "either there is no control group, no random selection, no random assignment, and/or no active manipulation". Thus, the present study is conducted only with an experimental group which was pre-tested in writing comprehension, administered a treatment through blog enhanced writing activities, and post-tested in

order to examine the effects of the blog use on the participants' attitudes and writing skill development.

Participants

The participants of the present study were selected through convenience sampling technique, which allows researchers include whoever happens to be available and volunteer at the time. Thus, a total of 32 EFL students, who enrolled in a writing course in the school of foreign languages at a state university, were invited to participate to the study. Although all of them accepted to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. Of the 32 participants, two were excluded from the study -not from the course- since they have an advanced level of blog use experience. Additionally, since the study does not take the genders of the participants into consideration as a variable, their gender difference was not taken into account. However, while presenting the findings, their genders were indicated through using the initial letters of their genders. All of the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their permission was obtained via a consent form, which assured that their written products and posts on their blog will be kept confidential and will only be used for academic purposes. The English proficiency of participants was A2 level which was determined by an official placement exam implemented by the school of foreign languages.

Data Gathering Instruments

The first data gathering instrument was the official placement test of the school of foreign languages which was served to determine the proficiency level of the participants as pre- and post-test of the study. Additionally, the students' essays were used as a data gathering instrument for the present study which served to determine the writing comprehension of the participants prior and after the treatment procedures. As for the validity and the reliability of the writing assessment, the assessment procedure was defined clearly, the physical conditions set equally, the topic and genre of the writing tasks restricted, and the scoring rubric which defines the criteria by which the written products are judged prepared carefully (Gronlund, 2003; Hughes, 2003). Additionally, besides the researchers' evaluations, the participants' papers were also evaluated by two independent raters selected among the experienced writing instructors working in the same institution in order to establish the rater reliability.

The second data gathering instrument was the Internet use inquiry form which was developed by the researchers through reviewing the related studies (Bashir, Mahmood, & Shafique, 2008; Malik & Mahmood, 2009; Sam, Othman, & Nordin, 2005). The inquiry form consisted of 14 items on a 5-point Likert type, and inquired the learners' attitudes towards the Internet use (items 1, 2, 8 and 11); the purpose of their Internet use (items 4, 5, 6, and 7); the purpose of their blog use (items 10, 12, 13 and 14).

The other data gathering instrument was the blog use evaluation inquiry form, which consisted of 23 items in three sections; the demographic information about the participants (items 1-4), opinions of participants about blog use for their writing classes (items 5-22) and one open-ended question for the additional thoughts about the blog use in their writing course. The blog use evaluation inquiry form was also developed by the researchers through reviewing similar studies in the field in order to figure out the attitudes of the participants towards blog use for their writing course.

In order to establish the content validity of both inquiry forms, the clarity of the items was assessed by another expert in the field, and based on experts' feedback some of the items were revised and re-formed. Since the two inquiry forms were mainly used to gather information

about the participants as well as their opinions concerning the process they experienced throughout the treatment process in the form of written interviews, establishing their content validity is considered as sufficient for their validity. Since written interviews do not require a total score as in scales or questionnaires (Erkuş, 2011), the further reliability estimations or the factor analysis of the items in the inquiry forms were not computed.

Procedure and Data Analysis

In order to follow the pre-determined writing course curriculum of the school of foreign languages, the learners are instructed practicing different writing activities such as paragraph completion, linking word and conjunction exercises and sentence or paragraph completing exercises on varying topics in the first four weeks. Prior to the treatment sessions, the participants were trained on blog creation, blogs use, posting and commenting on a blog and how to follow their peers' blogs through hands-on activities. The actual study lasted 6 weeks and 12 sessions that are equal to 36 class hours in total. During the treatment period, the participants enrolled in a writing course which was supported by the use of blogs in addition to the regular curriculum. Throughout the study, all of the participants wrote 3 essays, each consisting of a first, second and final draft. Two of the essays were of the compare-contrast type, and the third was a definition essay. At the end of the 6 weeks of treatment, the achievements of the participants were reassessed, and the results were compared with pre-test scores to find out whether the use of blogs enhanced the learners' writing skills.

Additionally, learners' attitudes toward the blog supported writing course were examined through inquiry forms. The frequencies and percentages of the responses to each item were computed, and the findings were presented descriptively. Additionally, the participants' essays, which were administered as pre- and post-test to evaluate writing achievement, were examined and graded by two raters independently. Finally, the scores for each participant in pre- and post-tests were compared with each other in order to estimate the effects of the experiment.

Findings

The findings of this quasi-experimental study are presented in line with the research questions posed in the study. However, the findings based on the demographic data of the participants were presented first so as to illustrate the profile of the participants. The analysis of the demographics of the participants showed that none of the participants have experience in blogging and most of the participants neither follow a blog page nor write comments on any blog prior to the study.

Since the present study initially focused on figuring out the opinions of the participants regarding the use of blogs in their writing course at a preparatory school, the related data were gathered through using inquiry forms and their findings were presented descriptively. Additionally, the participants' comments -if relevant- on the open-ended question were attached to the findings of the quantitative data in order to display their opinions in a broader standpoint.

The analysis of the data revealed that almost all of the participants (93 %) started to log onto the Internet for their academic activities such as surfing for homework or for similar purposes on daily basis after the experiment process. As for the participants' satisfaction with the blog use in their writing course, the findings revealed that all of the participants satisfied with the experiment, and they found integrating blog based activities to their writing course as beneficial for their development in their writing skills.

As for the contribution of blog use in their writing course most of them (80%) stated that *using blogs for writing activities contributed to their writing skills*. The very similar ratio was found correspondingly when the same questions were reversed in the inquiry form. As for the contribution of blog use in their writing skills one of the participants (M3) commented that *[his] writing skill had improved more than [he] imagined since posting on blogs without any restriction helped [him] to write the things on [his] mind*. Similarly, another participant (F8) said that *using the Internet and blogs were useful and that they were great tools*, reporting that she was more comfortable while writing on her blog.

When the participants were asked whether they enjoyed making their writing assignments through using blogs, it was found that only a few of them (7%) stated negative views; however, most of them (93%) stated that they enjoyed writing their assignments on their blogs. For instance, one of the participants (F13) said that *it was motivating, educational and entertaining*. In a similar vein, it is found that most of the participants (80%) stated they believe using blog is a good method in their writing courses. For instance, one of the participants (F6) stated that *using blogs for writing lessons is both entertaining and a different method*. On the other hand, some participants found it uncomfortable since submitting their homework or assignments through blogs also display their deficiencies in their writing.

Since participants get systematic feedback for their writings on the blog by their peers and their instructor, they were asked whether they found getting peer feedback beneficial or not. The analysis of the gathered data revealed that while some of the participants (14%) did not find their peer feedback beneficial, the rest of the participants agreed that peer feedback was helpful for their development in writing. For instance, one participants (F1) stated that *getting peer feedback was constructive and helpful in correcting her mistakes and downsides on her writing*. In a similar ground, the participants were also asked the contribution of giving feedback to peers on their writing development, and the findings exposed that a great quantity of the participants (87%) consented its positive contribution to their writing skills. Likewise, the analysis of the qualitative data correspondingly confirmed their opinion on the beneficial contribution of giving feedback to the blog writings of their peers. For instance, one of the participants (F6) found that *giving feedback to her peer on her blog was not an easy task*. Similarly, another participant (M9) expressed that *in order to give feedback to my peer, first of all, my feedback should be clear and understandable, therefore I have to be more careful. Thus, giving feedback to my friends indirectly had a positive effect on my writing performance*.

In addition to their opinions on the contribution of receiving or giving feedback to their peers participants were also asked whether they had benefited from their teacher's feedback or not. The analysis of the data clarified that although some (8%) of them prefer getting feedback from their instructor face to face, most of them (92%) were satisfied with their instructor's feedback and found their teacher's feedback on blogs notably beneficial. For instance, one of the participants (M1) stated that *when my friends write their comments on my blog I was happy because I really believe that they would like to help me however when my teacher provide me feedback for my blog post, I felt very secure since I was sure that I have produced grammatically accurate sentences*. Another participant (F2) expressed that the availability of the feedback on the blog either by their peers or by their instructor was the most beneficial side of the blog use in their writing courses. She stated that *I found getting and giving feedback via blogs as beneficial because I could reach their feedback whenever I needed*.

Furthermore, the participants were asked whether they would recommend such a writing course to their friends in order to expose their satisfaction with the course and the treatment which requested them to write essays on their blogs and provide feedback to their peers. The analysis of the data showed that while most of them (73%) stated that they would recommend such a

course to others, some of them (27%) stated that they were unsure. The ones on the positive side expressed that *writing activities on blogs improved their in and out of class communication with their peers* (M4); *using blogs made him/her more motivated to learn English, and using blogs made their writing homework more enjoyable* (F12). Quite the reverse, the ones on the negative side stated that *such a course demand us having our personal computers thus I cannot recommend it to my friends who does not have a personal computer* (F15). Similarly, another participant (M11) acknowledged that *although I surf on the net every day, I think we need to do more practice before using blogs because I had never used blogs for writing activities before*.

As for the achievement in the writing skills of the participants, the pre- and post-tests -the student essays- were analyzed and their results presented descriptively. The analysis of the pre-test depicted that there is no significant difference among the grades of the participants and the mean score for the essays were found as 40.8 over 100. This mean score indicated that the writing skills of the participants were under the average level prior to the treatment procedures. After the treatment, the improvement –if any- in the writing skills of the participants was reexamined through an essay, which also served as the post-test of the study. The analysis of the student essays depicted that the mean scores of the participants has risen to 66 over 100, which indicated that there is a significant improvement in the writing skills of the participants after the treatment. The further examination of the student scores in the essay assessment showed that their scores were scattered on a wide continuum between 53 and 79 over 100.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative findings of the present study, it can be claimed that almost all of the participants found the use of blogs in their writing course as beneficial in terms of improving their writing skills in the intensive English language preparatory program. Based on the analysis of the results of the post-test, it is found that practicing the writing courses through the use of blogs had a positive effect on the language learners' writing skills and their achievements in writing.

In their answers to the open ended question, the learners mostly indicated that using blogs is a new and an entertaining activity to improve their writing skills. Moreover, they found getting and giving online feedback through the use of blog posts were beneficial, and they became more motivated and thought critically while writing, since their posts could be read by others and were open to the public. The reason behind their satisfaction with such a course which -in turn- contributed to their achievement in their writing skills might be grounded in having real audience for their writing. As the writing activities were carried out through the student blogs, it was no longer just a piece of paper to be given to the teacher. Thus, using blogs for writing activities enhanced a real written communication, and as a result, they motivated students to write. Additionally, the learners are more motivated because they knew their posts would be read and criticized by others. The present study revealed in general that the use of blogs was found motivational and enjoyable. This finding shows similarities with the findings of previous studies (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Lance, 2006), which found that blogs are motivating tools for learners and create an authentic atmosphere for learning.

In light of the results of the present study, it can be concluded that using blogs for writing instruction has a positive effect on learners' writing skills. As Zhang (2009) stated, blogs are a very versatile communication medium for use in education. Moreover, based on the results of the present study, it can be concluded that, in addition to the positive effects on writing skills, learners enjoyed using blogs for writing instruction, and peer collaboration was also improved. Additionally, it can be concluded that blogs offer interactional opportunities, which also creates

an authentic atmosphere for learners to improve their writing skills. What is more, using technological tools for writing instruction makes the curriculum up-to-date. As Sun and Chang (2012) pointed out using technology has become an integral part of language education, and using blogs and their interactive and collaborative features can help students academically and improve students' process and academic writing knowledge.

As a result, the present study, which investigated the effect of using blogs in terms of achievement and learner attitudes, showed that using technological tools such as blogs provides several advantages. It makes writing courses fun within an authentic atmosphere and creates more interaction and through creating an interactive environment the peer collaboration reasonably improved. Moreover, according to the analysis of the blog use evaluation inquiry form, it can be concluded that using blogs improved learner motivation and engaged them to write in the target language. Moreover, using blogs created an authentic environment for writing courses and improved peer collaboration.

All in all, it should be considered that the present study was limited to involvement of 30 A2-level foreign language learners enrolled in a writing course at a state university. Therefore, similar studies should be conducted in other different contexts with different language proficiency levels. Moreover, this study was limited to a six-week term. In order to get better results and to clarify the interpretation, similar studies should be conducted for longer times in other contexts as well.

Finally, teachers may find blogs to be a well-suited medium in guiding their learners to improve their writing skills. This study indicates that using blogs helps learners to improve both their writing content and their proficiency in English, and teachers may find more authentic environments to make writing courses effective.

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