Blogging as a Learning Tool: A Study of Writing Gains in an EFL Setting

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Abstract

Technology in the classroom today offers novel ways for enhancing the learning experience in ways that also engage the learners. This study aims to evaluate the efficacy of Blog writing in engaging and motivating Saudi EFL learners in the writing class to boost their writing output. The participants are 12 EFL learners at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, who undertake a blog writing five-week support exercise. The instruments of data collection are pre and post-tests, writing evaluation, and interviews. Results of the paired sample-t test indicated that there is a significantly large difference between before ($M = 2.04$) and after ($M = 3, 0.5$), $p = .032$ phases of testing due to the five-week blogging intervention, with organization of ideas being the faculty most developed at the end of the experiment, followed by presentation, vocabulary, grammar, content, context, and audience appropriacy. Interviews reveal learners' enhanced engagement and motivation after the intervention. The study concludes with recommendations that will be useful for teachers, curriculum planners, and learners.

Keywords: Blogging, engagement, learning tools, motivation, technology, writing output

Introduction

Technology is today deeply embedded in all aspects of our lives, both at the workplace and at home. The biggest boost to this trend has been social media which helps people to connect and transmit their thoughts to one another without the limitation of time and place via mobile devices. Needless to say, language is the tool that makes this possible. Most contemporary technology, therefore, whether social media sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, blogs, and other comparable platforms, have a significant effect on language learning (Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021). Reviews of a few significant research studies on the improvement of writing abilities and the effects of social media on language development may be found on different portals. With the emergence of the internet and easy availability of Wi-Fi networks users/ writers have a 24/7 chance to vent their feelings and voice their philosophies in different ways, and free modes-blogging is one of the best examples of this. Blogging facilitates the writer to put his/ her thoughts into the writeup and simultaneously it enhances their writing skills. Social networking sites like Facebook, Yahoo or different search engines like Google enable their users to build their own blogs and wikis in the English language, the language with the largest online presence and users.

Weblogs or blogs (for short) are well-known examples of Web 2.0 applications. A weblog is a web application that displays serial entries, developed asynchronously, using simple user interfaces. It permits users to easily maintain the content or add new dated entries. Other benefits are users can insert graphics, multimedia, video, and audio, aside from the text, a key component of blogging (Akdağ & Özkan, 2017; Kim, 2007). The pedagogical implications of blogs for teaching and learning English writing have also been explored by ELT research (Beach, et al., 2008). Kim (2007) investigated the theoretical foundations of the usage of blogs in educational institutions. In an interesting article using socio-technical system theory he considered blogs as an effective replacement for all CMC applications in English learning. Later, Halic et al. (2010) also published his investigation in the same area.

EFL teachers and students are becoming increasingly interested in blogging as a novel way to teach writing in the classroom. Blogs emphasize writing mechanics specifically, motivate students, and increase the writing dynamics in the classroom. Blogging is a great technological tool for students to interact with one another in a social setting. Writing by students who use blogs is more interactive and focuses on using language in context (Stanley, 2013). According to research studies, blogs significantly enhance student reflection, classroom discussion, and social networking. Additionally, blogs help learners in elementary, middle, and high school improve their writing abilities.

What makes a case for blogging is that they take the writing practice beyond the classroom, encouraging literacy. In this extension, multiple language skills are boosted, such as speaking, debating, and narrating, learners also learn to work with partners or collaborate in larger groups, engage in authentic writing exercises. Thus, blogging is an offshoot of technology, but even so, it comes without its implicit handicaps. It introduces learners to an all new method of writing instruction and trains them in autonomy.

Moreover, academic blogging is a great platform for development of critical thinking, reflection, questioning, modelling, and discussion, when teachers adopt it for classroom practices (McGrail & Davis, 2011). Additionally, blogging gives one a place to draft ideas that can later be refined. By working together, authors who participate in academic blogging can grow and nourish their community. Inasmuch as humans are born with a natural need to learn in a social setting involving collaborative activities, literacy involves all socializing practices that begin

at home and are subsequently developed by further communication with others. Blogging is a case in point.

Even with its many benefits, one difficulty that EFL students and teachers encounter in their writing sessions is the learning environment, are the sociocultural issues. The absence of classrooms intended for language study and outfitted with the required audio-visual instruments to support language learning is a recurring issue. The way instructions are given is what, in learners' perspectives, improves language learning. However, learners who have a favourable outlook to their learning environment are more likely to produce superior writing while language acquisition can suffer in overcrowded classrooms.

Further, blogging provides an excellent opportunity in an EFL environment for teachers and students as practical tools. When students are given well-organized instructions, using blogging in writing classrooms may help them enhance their writing abilities. In a research by Vurdien (2013) the findings showed that teachers' usage of blogs helped students develop their writing skills and write better for particular tasks. The usage of blogs encouraged student collaboration and helped educators understand how to use input from students effectively. Blogging as a writing exercise platform was a new concept for the Saudi learners who participated in this study. Based on this fact and in the background of the literature reviewed earlier, the study set out to answer the following questions:

Research questions

1. Does writing practice that involves posts on blogs improve Saudi EFL learners' writing output?

2. What is the nature of change, if any, in the writing output of Saudi EFL learners when they engage in blog writing?

3. How do the Saudi EFL learners perceive blog writing with reference to engagement and motivation in the writing course?

2. Literature Review

With the facility of connectivity via web tools, different learners can now practice their writing skills synchronously, such as in chat, instant messaging, and live discussion boards (Lloyd-Williams, 2007; Pan & Sullivan, 2005; Smith, 2006; Warschauer, 1996), or asynchronously, such as in emailing and blogging (Ocker & Yaverbaum, 2001; Pena-Shaff et al., 2005; Zeiss & Isabelli, 2005). The development of internet technology has massively enhanced the reach and quality of the teaching-learning process, motivating EFL instructors to employ these (CMC) platforms to foster and enhance their students' online collaboration and English learning abilities (Albelihi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Beldarrain, 2006; Bloch, 2002; Kim, 2007; Zaid, 2011).

Fageeh (2011) used a triangulated research strategy to investigate the implications of blogging on writing ability and attitudes. The approach was to employ an experimental research method and a descriptive research design. Samples in this research included the instructor and fourth-year English department students enrolled in the English 217 (Writing IV) course in the second semester of 2010 (n = 25 for the experimental group and 25 for the control group) at King Khalid University in Abha. According to the results, students saw Weblog as an effective tool for improving their writing skills and attitudes toward writing, as well as their understanding of the English language. Further, they saw Weblogs as providing flexibility and optimum opportunity for self-expression in English when writing for both the local and international audience.

Blog-based writing can be a significant factor in raising students' writing abilities (Arslan & Ahin-Kzl, 2010). The study also found that using blogs had a positive impact on students' speaking and writing abilities.

Bal (2021) investigated the potential use and usefulness of blogs in language learning in Taiwan. The findings showed that there was a general acceptance of blogs as a useful medium by students to advance their language skills, such as writing, vocabulary, self-expression, socializing, and thinking skills.

Alsamadani (2017) discussed the effectiveness of using online blogging for students' individual and group writing. Numerous studies support the idea that using blogs in the classroom can increase the learning of second languages and writing abilities. According to research, blogs can be used for a variety of purposes, including writing for an audience and peer review, developing students' analytical skills, and creating a feeling of community through a weblog collaborative learning environment.

Said et al. (2013) described the findings of a study with a group of 33 students at University Kebangsaan Malaysia. The application of blogging activities to teach writing skills was the subject of data collection through an online questionnaire survey. Results indicated that participants' attitudes and beliefs about utilising blogs to improve writing were favourable.

Ina study on blogs, Perumal (2022) concluded that around the world, social media is currently playing an increasingly significant role. It has become a part of everyone life and is a big source in skill enhancement. This study examined how blogs affect the growth of English as a second language (ESL). The results showed that blogs are an especially useful tool for enhancing students' writing skills, particularly in the context of secondary education. In this research, the benefits and drawbacks of blogs are also discussed.

In another study, Yunus et al. (2013) investigated the variables that affect students' readiness to use blogs as a vital tool for honing their writing skills while learning English as a second language. The findings serve as a constant reminder for ESL instructors to redesign blogs that have been specifically designated in the curriculum for them to give maximum optimization. Similarly, Gunduz (2016) concluded that blogging can help students acquire interesting writing skills as well as genuine creative thinking talents, with the ability to communicate freely, blogs have the potential to inspire learners to improve their writing abilities.

Using e-dialogue journal writing that was published in a Facebook private group to teach ESL, Rodliyah (2016) studied how social media, primarily Facebook, may be utilised to teach English as a second language. The conclusions showed that the sample of students benefitted

from this kind of exercise and a prominent improvement was noticed in their writing skills, especially good improvement was noticed in grammar and vocabulary.

Akdağ (2017) conducted an exploratory case study to ascertain whether high school students' writing abilities were impacted by their participation in blogs. The results suggested that it was an innovative idea to use a blog to help students develop their English writing abilities. It was also found that blogging inspired them to write independently and sparked their interest in writing. This study also suggested that creating blogs can be useful for English language students, teachers, curriculum designers, and material developers, as well as offer areas for further study.

Mabuan (2018) performed a study to recognize what students' opinions were on the use of blogs as a virtual writing platform and to learn what they believed about using blogs to improve their English writing skills. Fifty-eight fresh university students' blogs and questionnaires were used to collect the data from them. Despite technological restrictions, it was found in the study that students thought blogging may help them improve their English writing abilities. Among other advantages of using technology, it gave students a certain amount of freedom to express themselves, which improved or developed their writing abilities and enabled them to interact and converse with their classmates online.

To ascertain if Facebook, the most widely used social media site in Indonesia, may be a helpful teaching resource for EFL university students, Fithriani et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative case study. According to the research, including Facebook in a writing class encouraged students to participate more actively in class discussions, made them more comfortable using English as a communication tool, and improved their English language abilities overall, especially in writing. The results of this study suggested that because Facebook has a positive effect on students' study skills and habits, it may be employed as a secondary learning tool in higher education courses.

3. Methods

Research design

This study was carried out in the first year classroom of a state university in Saudi Arabia. This study applied mixed methods design in which students' writing blogs, interviews and pre-post-tests were used to collected data from the EFL learners of sthe second semester of 1444Ah.

Participants

The participants in this study were 12 first year EFL undergraduates at Qassim University. This is a state funded urban university which accepts learners on the basis of an evaluation test. Twelve out of eighteen EFL learners who volunteered for this study comprised the final sample. All of these are males in the age group of 18 - 19. years. As stated earlier, their average grades in three of the university held writing exams were computed to form a baseline for evaluation after the intervention. These are presented in Table 1. All the participants had urban, educated, middle-class backgrounds, owned personal computers, had a reasonable internet connection at home, and were keen to improve their writing skills. The sample was, thus, largely homogenous.

Thereafter, the learners were informed of the research and their voluntary participation in the intervention planned was encouraged. It was made amply clear that their participation would in no way reflect on their grades (as this is a major concern with learners in Saudi Arabia) but would give them the added benefit of trying out their writing skills in a fun way. Ethical considerations as enumerated were spelt out. A deadline was set for interested volunteers to send in their consent and open their blogs. In all, eighteen participants showed interest, six of these had to be dropped as they were also engaged in another research project on the campus and the

Data collection tools

This study used three instruments to collect data: 1. Qualitative data were collected in the form of the blog posts over a period of five weeks. 2. Semi-structured interviews placed the findings in individual context. 3. Quantitative data was collected through a comparative writing performance evaluation. As a comparison benchmark, three written tasks already completed by the participants as part of the EFL Writing Course were randomly chosen from the records. Average grades from these three were compiled to function as the baseline of the participants' writing abilities before the intervention was introduced.

Procedures

Each participant was asked to post at least three posts on their blogs through a week, they were free to post more if they wanted. Across the five-week period of the intervention, 348 blogs of varying lengths were collected (included all the blogs). These were thematically analyzed as per Merriam (2009), identifying positive and negative themes in the blogs and correlating them with those reflected in the interviews. The researcher kept a close track of the blogs on a daily basis and gave immediate, individual, personal feedback on the writing quality and mistakes, if any, using WhatsApp messaging. The participants were also free to seek his help with composing if they needed. In the meantime, the participants were also going through writing instruction in their physical EFL classes where they were sometimes allotted writing tasks like their peers. At the end of the intervention, a writing assignment similar in all respects to those whose mean scores were included as a baseline was given to the sample and the output was evaluated on the five parameters used earlier. These writings were also marked for i. Context; ii. Audience appropriacy, iii. Content; iv. Organization of ideas; v. Grammar; vi. Vocabulary; vi. Presentation, on a gradient from 1-5.

4. Results and Discussion

RQ1: Does writing practice that involves posts on blogs improve Saudi EFL learners' writing output?

Once the writing outputs were duly evaluated, it was important to verify whether or not the difference in scores were statistically significant. Moreover, since the same sample has taken the test twice, a paired sample t-test seemed the appropriate tool Table 1 below summarizes the results in the two tests.

Table 1. Results of the pre-and post-intervention writing outputs

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	df	Asymp. Sig.
Pair 1	Pretest	2.04	12	.689	1	.032
	Posttest	3	12	1.279		

As can be seen from Table 1, writing output after the participants had taken a five-week blog writing exercise improved significantly with group mean going up from 2.04 to 3, which is an significant increase (Sig=.032). This finding is consistent with (Perumal, 2022; Yunus et al., 2013). Perumal's (2022) results showed that blogs are an especially useful tool for enhancing students' writing skills, particularly in the context of secondary education. Furthermore, Yunus et al. (2013) found that bloggings affect students' readiness for honing their writing skills while learning English as a second language. Similarly, Gunduz (2016) indicated that blogging can help students acquire interesting writing skills as well as genuine creative thinking talents, with the ability to communicate freely, blogs have the potential to inspire learners to improve their writing abilities.

RQ2: What is the nature of change, if any, in the writing output of Saudi EFL learners when they engage in blog writing?

Detailed thematic analysis of the blogs showed some interesting trends int eh writing skills. In the initial posts, the topic and content of the writings were simple, betraying the learners' discomfort with complex and critical thinking and presentation of thoughts. For the first week and a half, the posts were mostly interspersed with emojis and single phrases, mostly appreciating the freedom to write on a blog. By the end of the second week, nine of the twelve participants had formulated a single theme to write on, and in this, they may have influenced each other, this was their concerns with their ability to write. Out of the 39 blogs dedicated to this topic, 24 carried negative themes including but not limited to, poor scores, difficulties in writing, vocabulary handicaps, inhibition in writing in English. This theme carried well into the third week as well but became more diluted as the participants began sharing their excitement at posting on the blog, in this week out of a total of 41 posts, only 7 were negative in context while the others showed greater enthusiasm and learning satisfaction of the learners. One theme that dominated the posts in this period was participants' appreciation of the personal feedback which the researcher posted to each of them. This is confirmed by Stanley (2013) who reported that blogging is a great technological tool for students to interact with one another in a social setting. Writing by students who use blogs is more interactive and focuses on using language in context.

Posts in the fourth and fifth weeks had fully developed, crystallized ideas as the participants shared their dreams and ambitions on the blogs. Thoughts and presentation showed considerable complexity and content-wise, the blogs were longer, at least fifteen of them between 150-220 words each. The choice of vocabulary was more appropriate and sentences were longer and complex as against the simple structures in the initial output. Improvement was also visible on all five writing parameters viz., i. Context; ii. Audience appropriacy, iii. Content; iv. Organization of ideas; v. Grammar; vi. Vocabulary; vi. Presentation. Of these organization of ideas showed the most development in each of the participants' outputs towards the fifth week and till the end of the intervention. This was followed by presentation, vocabulary, grammar, content, context, and audience appropriacy, in that order.

RQ3: How do the Saudi EFL learners perceive blog writing with reference to engagement and motivation in the writing course?

Individual interviews with the participants were audio recorded and transcribed to identify their perceptions towards the use of blogs in enhancing their engagement and motivation in the writing course. The most dominant theme identified was the desire to write when it was done via blogging. It may be noted here that the participants were also attending their writing classes in the physical mode which also allotted them certain writing tasks.

Table 2. Students' perceptions on blogging

Theme	Frequency
Writing in class with pen and paper was 'boring'	9
Students enjoyed blogging	3
Online dictionaries and thesaurus in helping them use the appropriate words	5
Auto-check of grammar a useful function which contributed to their motivation	7

However, on being questioned, nine participants reported that writing in class with pen and paper was 'boring' and did not excite them the way blogging did. Three participants reported that they enjoyed blogging as it gave them the freedom to write what they wanted and not necessarily what the syllabus demanded. Five participants admitted the efficacy of online dictionaries and thesaurus in helping them use the appropriate words, while seven found the auto-check of grammar a useful function which contributed to their motivation and satisfaction in writing. Incidentally, all the participants expressed the desire to continue with blogging especially in the English writing course given its many benefits to them, but primarily because it caught their attention, ignited their imagination, and upped their motivation. This is confirmed by Fageeh (2011) who found that students at King Khalid University in Abha saw Weblog as an effective tool for improving their writing skills and attitudes toward writing, as well as their understanding of the English language. This finding is also confirmed by Said et al. (2013) who reported that using blogging activities to teach writing skills was the subject of data collection through an online questionnaire survey. Results indicated that participants' attitudes and beliefs about utilising blogs to improve writing were favourable.

5. Conclusion

The aims of this study were to evaluate the usefulness of blogging as a writing practice platform for EFL learners, and gaining insights into their perceptions of its use with respect to engagement and motivation. We understand that writing in a foreign language is a particularly challenging skill to learn and hence the large corpus of research on how it can be brought to the centre stage of the EFL classroom. EFL teachers and students are becoming increasingly interested in blogging as a novel way to teach writing in the classroom. Blogs emphasize writing mechanics specifically, motivate students, and increase the writing dynamics in the classroom. Blogging is a great technological tool for students to interact with one another in a social setting. Writing by students who use blogs is more interactive and focuses on using language in context (Stanley, 2013). According to research studies, blogs significantly enhance student reflection, classroom discussion, and social networking. Additionally, blogs help learners in elementary, middle, and high school improve their writing abilities. The findings in this study amply demonstrated that blogging can be a welcome tool in the writing class with writing scores taking a jump of as much as 68% in the post-test. Moreover, all the parameters that make for good writing output (i. Context; ii. Audience appropriacy, iii. Content; iv. Organization of ideas; v. Grammar; vi. Vocabulary; vi. Presentation) showed enhancement as a result of the intervention, as much as engagement and motivation for the writing class.

6. Recommendations

Based on the study findings it is recommended that blogging be made a regular writing platform for EFL learners. Once they are well-adjusted to this new approach, they may be encouraged to undertake academic writing too on their blogs and invite comments and views for improvement. It is imperative that anything to do with technology attracts the learners in these changed paradigms and the onus to use this fact to their benefit leis with the teachers.

7. Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that writing outputs may differ with different genders, learners age groups, and learner proficiency in English. These factors should be considered in replicating studies.

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Appendix A

Participants no	Pre intervention average	Post intervention score
1	2.5	3.5
2	2	3
3	1.5	3.5
4	3	4
5	2	4
6	1	3.5
7	1	3
8	3	4
9	2.5	4.5
10	2	3.5
11	2	3.5
12	1	3
Total		