Blogging or Paper-and-Pencil Writing? Evidences from an Iranian Academic L2 Setting

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Abstract

Second language (L2) classrooms in academic contexts usually consist of learners with diverse L2 proficiency levels. One solution for managing such heterogeneous classes and addressing individual needs of students is to improve learners' autonomy by using technological innovations such as blogging. The focus of this study is on investigating the effects of blogging on improving the quality of Iranian university students' writings. For this aim, twenty-six Iranian university students participated in the study. Students in the experimental group (n=13) were required to blog daily while the students in the control group (n=13) were asked to write in a daily schedule using paper and pencil. After a 3-month period of instruction, the five last writings of the students from both groups were rated by two experienced raters. Also, students' attitudes toward the traditional method and blogging were surveyed using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The research results showed evidences in favor of the students who used blogging in their writing program. Also, although students in the experimental group found blogging more demanding than the traditional method, they showed an overall positive attitude toward the use of blogging as a way of improving their writing skills. The findings of the study have implications for the incorporation of computer-assisted learning in L2 academic contexts.

Keywords: Blogging; computer-assisted learning; paper and pencil writing; second language

Introduction

The Internet, as the core of modern technology for communication, has shaped the face of the communication. The world has, as a result of the Internet, become more connected and integrated. The Internet has facilitated business accomplishments, negotiations, and understandings. The impact of the Internet has not been limited to the world of commerce; rather, it has had a considerable impact on the language learning and teaching (Hanson-Smith & Rilling, 2006). As Chan and Ridgway (2006, p. 1) put, "the technologies are new, and it is important to explore new and effective ways of using them to enhance the process of teaching and learning." In other words, new technologies afford new opportunities for language learners as well as teachers.

The introduction of new Internet-based technologies has encouraged instructors to start thinking of the potential uses, benefits and challenges for teaching and learning in their classrooms. Weblogs, commonly known as blogs, are one of such technologies. They are personal websites with the principal aim of communicating ideas, opinions, and experiences. Offering a collaborative environment whereby students can read and comment on each other's posts, blogs has recently received special attention from language teachers. Warschauer and Grimes (2007, p. 1) stated that "millions of people now interact through blogs, collaborate through wikis, play multiplayer games, publish podcasts and video, build relationships through social network sites, and evaluate all the above forms of communication through feedback and ranking mechanisms."

As a writing activity, blogs make students write for an audience which is said to improve writing capacity (Zhang, 2009). According to Zhang, "blogs have formidable potentials as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing classes" (2009, p. 66). Blogs can serve a dual function in classrooms, namely to share various educational experiences by teachers and to learn creative and expressive language by students (MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010).

Review of the Related Literature

Language teachers nowadays are frequently urged to make best use internet-based technology in their classrooms. Blogs, as a tool available for teachers, support computer-based writing offering much more than simply generating simple text typical of traditional writing activities. Blogs have been used in classrooms for a number of years now and the advantage of blogs in the development of second language (L2) literacy has been reported in various contexts (e.g. Fellner & Apple, 2006; Safieddine, 2014; Wu & Wu, 2011). For instance, Fellner and Apple (2006) utilized student blogs in an integrated CALL program for low proficiency, low motivation Japanese university language learners in a seven-day intensive English course. By the end of the CALL program there was nearly a 350% increase in the number of words used in students' blog entries, as well as a substantial increase in the number of 2000 word level and even lower frequency level words.

In another study, Bloch (2007) sought to show ESL/EFL teachers how blogging can help their students develop writing skills. To do so, he investigated several blog entries by Abdullah, a Somalian immigrant student taking an academic writing class. Analyzing Abdullah's class blogs, Bloch discovered that blogging had bridged the student's vernacular knowledge of spoken L2 and the formal written discourse he was learning. In other words, blogging had contributed to his academic writing improvement. Ducate and Lomicka (2008), reporting on a year-long project in which students participated as both readers and writers of blogs, examined the steps students progress through while reading and writing blogs, students' reactions to blogging, and how self-expression is characterized through blogs. They found that their project fostered both ownership and creativity, allowed students to experiment with language, facilitated expression in a relaxed environment, and provided students with a window into the target culture that their textbooks did not provide.

Nakatsukasa (2009) analyzed intermediate ESL learners' linguistic development and their perceptions of group blogs as language learning material. Nakatsukasa found that L2 learners increased the use of academic words in the later blogging activities, and focused on grammar while blogging. Similarly, Rahmany, Sadeghi, and Faramarzi (2013), studying twenty-five students' writing blogs over a period of five weeks, mentioned that blogs increases vocabulary enhancement and structural accuracy when writing. The results of their study showed that students had positive attitudes toward the use of blogs. Also, the results revealed that the number of grammatical errors has decreased dramatically during the peer feedback.

Wu and Wu (2011) aimed at discovering learners' perceptions on the use of blogs for EFL learning. The participants were 49 first-year university students from Southern Taiwan and were divided into ten groups in the study. They found that most of the students positively perceived the use of blogs for EFL learning. Only few students responded to the use of blogs negatively. The results also revealed that blogs have the potential for developing reading and writing skills.

In a study by Chang and Sun (2012), seven EFL students participated to see how blogs help students process academic writing knowledge and make sense of their writer identity. The results of the study revealed that using blogs not only encourages students to actively and reflectively engage

in knowledge sharing, knowledge generation, and the development of numerous strategies to cope with difficulties encountered in the learning process, but students also had the sense of authorship.

Quite recently, Kashani, Binti Mahmud, and Rezvani Kalajahi (2013) compared students' writing performance scores by using pen-and-paper essay writing and blogging among Iranian graduate students of University Putra Malaysia (UPM). The result of their study, however, showed that the tools by themselves could not effect on the quality of writing essays and improvement in the students' writing performance. Notwithstanding, Iranian graduate students of UPM found blog more interesting and motivating tool for writing.

Safieddine (2014) sought to review current research on the use of web 2.0 interactive tools in second language (L2) writing classrooms. It was revealed that web 2.0 interactive tools are starting to find their way into almost all pedagogical practices in L2 classrooms, especially writing. The review also discussed the advantages of blogs as interactive tools in helping L2 learners in collaboratively developing their various writing assignments.

As the review of the literature revealed, the research on the use of blogs as teaching tools in classrooms has resulted in L2 literacy skills in general and writing proficiency in particular. In fact, Williams and Jacobs (2004) talked of blogs as potentially transformative or teaching and learning. To sum up, Stanley (2005) identified numerous reasons for using blogs in second language classrooms. They include providing a real audience for students' writing, providing extra reading practice for students, increasing the sense of community in a class, encouraging the process approach to writing, and encouraging students to create an online portfolio of their work.

Regarding students' attitudes toward the use of blogs in classrooms, the previous studies suggest a positive perception on the part of students. Brooks, Nichols, and Priebe (2004), for example, analyzed university students' attitudes towards the use of blogs for maintaining their writing assignments. Overall, the students exhibited positive attitudes toward keeping writing assignments and school-related work on their personal blogs and also maintained that their personal blogs increased their level of motivation. On the same vein, Pinkman (2005) investigated learners' perceptions of blogging in an EFL classroom where the students kept their blogs individually in English. The analysis showed that the learners increased their interest and motivation to use English by keeping a blog.

To study the relative effects of blogging and traditional paper-and-pencil writing on the quality of Iranian university students' performance on writing essays, and also to study their attitudes on the use of blogging in EFL classes, the following research questions were posed:

1) Is there any significant difference between blogging and paper-and-pencil writing in terms of their relative impact on Iranian university students' writing quality?

2) What is Iranian university students' attitude toward the use of blogging in their classes?

Methodology

The methodology of the present study comprising the participants of the study as well as instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis is outlined below.

Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, a pre-test post-test quasi-experimental design was adopted. A total of 26 Iranian university students participated in the study. They were freshman students of English language and literature at a non-state university in Urmia, Iran. The researchers opted for one class comprised of 26 students. Later, the class was randomly divided into one experimental and one control group, each comprised of 13 students. The groups were randomly assigned to one of the treatments, i.e. blogging or paper-and-pencil writing. The participants were 16 female and 10 male students within the age range of 18 to 22. Moreover, prior to study, an IELTS

writing task (academic module) was administered to the learners to assure the homogeneity of the participants. The results of the writing task showed that the participants in both groups were homogenous in terms of their writing proficiency.

Instruments

The first instrument utilized in the present study was the writing section of *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS* (1996-2011). The writing part of the IELTS test varies depending on whether the test taker is going to study or work abroad. In the first part of the general training module, the test taker has to write a letter; however, in the academic module, he/she has to describe some kind of graph or diagram. As for the second part, the test taker needs to write an essay responding to a point of view, argument or problem in the academic training module. However, the essay may be in a slightly more personal style in general module compared to the academic module. For the purpose of the present study, the second part of *General Training Section* was opted for. That is, for their writing assignment, the learners were asked to write an essay responding to a point of view, argument or problem.

Also, to obtain learners' attitudes toward the use of blogging and paper-and-pencil writing, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were administered. Both instruments, i.e. the questionnaire and the interview, were developed and piloted by the researchers. The questionnaire was based on a textual response format on a five-point likert scale. The value of each item ranged from one to five. The reliability index estimated through Cronbach's alpha was 0.82 for the questionnaire. As for the interview, the researchers interviewed all learners in both groups to further probe into their perceptions regarding the use of blogging and paper-and-pencil writing in their classes.

Procedure & Data Analysis

The data for the study was collected in a time period from October, 2014 to January, 2015. To collect the data from the university, the permission of the head of English department was obtained. To ascertain the homogeneity of the participants, an IELTS writing task (academic module) was administered to the learners. The results of the writing task showed that the participants were homogenous in terms of their writing proficiency.

After taking the pre-test, the participants in both groups received two differing treatments, i.e. *blogging* and *paper-and-pencil writing*. In other words, the participants in the experimental group (n=13) were required to blog daily. However, the students in the control group (n=13) were asked to write in a daily schedule using paper and pencil. The treatments were given for 10 sessions during the regular 12-session semester of the university, which lasted for about three months. To compare the relative effectiveness of the blogging vs. paper-and-pencil writing on learners' writing quality, the five last writings of the students from both groups were rated by two experienced raters based on IELTS *writing band descriptors* published by University of Cambridge.

Furthermore, students' attitudes toward the traditional method and blogging were surveyed using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to analyze learners' responses to the questionnaire. Calculating the mean for each item, the researchers ran *Independent-samples t-test* to compare learners' attitudes toward the use of blogging and paper-and-pencil writing in their classes. The findings of the analysis are presented in the following section.

Results & Discussion

The present study sought to explore the effects of blogging on Iranian university students' writing quality. A total of 26 learners in two groups, namely one experimental and one control, participated in the study. Also, their attitudes toward the use of blogging were sought using a

questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The findings, in line with the research questions, are presented below.

Effects of blogging vs. paper-and-pencil writing students' writing quality

The effectiveness of blogging and paper-and-pencil writing was assessed by rating the last five writings of both groups of learners based on IELTS *writing band descriptors.* The descriptive results are given below.

Table 1. Descriptive results of blogging vs. paper-and-pencil writing

	Group Statistics				
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing quality	Blogging	13	6.0385	.66023	.18311
	Paper-and-pencil	13	5.1154	.54596	.15142

As can be seen in Table 1, the mean for the experimental group, i.e. blogging, is higher than that of control group. It seems that learners who blogged daily experienced far more improvement in their writing quality. To see whether such an improvement was significant, an independent-samples *t*-test was run. The results of the *t*-test are presented below (Table 2).

Table 2. The results of independent-samples t-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	*t*	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Writing quality	Equal variances assumed	.632	.435	3.885	24	.001	.92308	.23761	.43267	1.41348
	Equal variances not assumed			3.885	23.183	.001	.92308	.23761	.43175	1.41440

As demonstrated in Table 2, the result of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances showed a non-significant value of .435. That is, the assumption of equal variances has not been violated, and the first line of Table should be used in reporting the results. The Sig. (2-tailed) value of .001 denotes that the difference between the groups was significant, $t(24) = 3.885$, $p = .001$ (two-tailed). That is to say, learners in the blogging group outperformed those of paper-and-pencil group. It suggests that the use of blogging have a significant effect on learners' writing quality.

Students' attitude toward the use of blogging

To find our students' attitudes toward the use of blogging, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were administered. The results of the questionnaire are presented further.

Table 3. Descriptive results of attitudes toward blogging

	Group Statistics				
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Attitudes	Blogging	13	3.802	.4503	.12523

As can be seen in Table 3, the mean for blogging is higher than three. That is to say, the learners more or less agreed to the items in the questionnaire which underscored the advantages of using blogging in classrooms.

Also, the results of the semi-structured interview, which enquired into learners' attitudes and perceptions on the advantages and possible uses of blogging in the classroom, revealed that the majority of Iranian university students regarded blogging as a useful activity contributing to their motivational enhancement, better learning outcomes, and educational success.

All in all, it was found that the students in blogging group outperformed those of traditional writing. This finding is in line with that of Bloch (2007), and Ducate and Lomicka (2008). For instance, Bloch (2007) concluded that blogging contribute to learners' academic writing improvement. Similarly, Ducate and Lomicka (2008) concluded that blogging allows students to experiment with language, facilitates expression in a relaxed environment, and provides students with a window into the target culture that their textbooks do not provide. As for learners' attitudes toward the use of blogging in classes, it was found that Iranian university students had a positive attitude toward blogging. This finding is in line with Brooks, Nichols, and Priebe (2004), Pinkman (2005), and Wu and Wu's (2011) studies. For instance, Wu and Wu (2011) found that most of the students positively perceived the use of blogs for EFL learning.

In fact, blogs offer the chance to "incorporate audiovisual features, organize text nonlinearly through links to other texts, and easily revise (MacArthur & Karchmer-Klein, 2010, p. 46). That is, through the use of such interactive tools, L2 learners are urged to take the role of audience into account. This is especially important since L2 writers' attention gets directed toward meaning when they are aware of their audience.

Conclusion

In today's world, there are lots of methods in language teaching in general and teaching writing in particular. The present study opted for a comparison of the effectiveness of two methods for incorporating writing in the classroom, namely blogging and paper-and-pencil writing. The results of the study showed that the use of daily blogs improved the quality of writing essays as compared to traditional mode of writing. Also, learners found the use of internet-based technology in their classes motivational in that they offered new opportunities for more practice and better educational outcomes. The findings of the present study have various implications for EFL university instructors, EFL curriculum designers, and language teachers. They can use blogging in their syllabi since it provides the EFL students better knowledge and understanding about writing in L2.

Despite the fact that blogging offers some positive aspects as a tool for writing, there do seem to be challenges in its use. For example, there are issues regarding computer literacy and anxiety on the part of learners. That is to say, students who are not confident with technology may find themselves frustrated with the blogging process and this could be heightened if coupled with technical problems that cause them to lose their work before posting it. As a result, a well-organized

instructional design with an understanding of the benefits and challenges of blogging in mind can make it an invaluable tool for English language classes.

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