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**The effects of using 'weblogs' in writing classes on Iranian
EFL university students' writing proficiency**

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Dedicated to:

Those whom I love!

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Abstract

"The ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second and foreign language education" (Weigle, 2002, p. 1). As using new technology and specifically computers (because of their roots in writing and print) might be powerful tools to teaching writing, educators try to investigate their advantages of using them in writing classes. This study therefore intends to investigate the effects of using 'weblogs' (as electronic environments for active writing) in writing classes on EFL learners' writing proficiency. Fifty-one female university students majoring in English literature participated in this study in two different groups as comparison and experimental. Two IELTS writing tests (as pre- and post-test) and two detailed questionnaires (*Weblog Attitude Questionnaire* and *Technophobia vs. Technophilia Questionnaire*) were used as data elicitation instruments. The results revealed that using weblogs in writing classes has significantly positive effects on learners' writing proficiency. The results also showed that the participants had a significant positive attitude toward using the

medium (weblogs). The implications for and application to CALL were stated and some suggestions were made for further research.

Key Terms: CALL, weblog, technophobia, technophilia, attitude, writing proficiency

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Chapter I

Introduction

1.1. Overview

The potential of computers in facilitating learning/teaching in almost any subject area is now widely accepted. Language learning is merely one of the areas that can benefit from the advantages of using computers. Computers might be used as a medium in different fields of language teaching i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the current study, the focus is on computer applications in teaching writing in an Essay Writing class.

There might be different ways of using computers in teaching writing. Using weblogs could be one of these possible ways and in this study, an effort was made to investigate the effectiveness of using weblogs in teaching writing to help teachers think of more effective ways of teaching. It seems that new technology has not entered the teachers' educational programs in an effective manner. According to Gratton (1998), "While the growth of technology has been rapid,

teachers have been generally slow to adopt this technology, and even slower to make productive use of it."

1.2. Statement of the problem and purpose of the study

It is probably fair to say that in many English language classrooms around the world less time is devoted to the skill of writing than to reading, listening and speaking. There are numerous reasons for this. In many teaching situations, teachers may see their students for no more than an hour or two a week and writing is seen as time-consuming and not perhaps the best way of making use of such a short amount of time. Educators try to investigate the advantages of using new technology to extend the teaching domains beyond the classroom walls and examine the effective ways of using the media. Among different ways of using new technology, blogging (using weblogs) might be a good suggestion to investigate.

Blogging provides active and communicative electronic environments. Since students mostly do not tend to write unless they have to, asking students to keep a blog might get them in the habit of writing regularly. The current study will concentrate on using weblogs as a medium in teaching writing.

1.3. Significance of the study

"The ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second and foreign language education" (Weigle, 2002, p. 1). As writing courses are needed much more than ever before, searching the effective and efficient ways and mediums of teaching writing is an essential need. Computers are currently seen as electronic extensions of prevailing models of literacy because of their roots in writing and print; electronic writing is generally compared to print (Ferris, 2002). But the point that comes to mind is that writing with pen and paper might have a different nature from writing on computers. Sharples (1999) believes that new technology is changing not only the way people write but also the very nature of writing. He also mentions that the use of computers seems to influence the quality of the writing produced by students.

Accordingly, teaching writing with the help of computers may have different effects and different results on learners' writing proficiency improvements.

Another point to be considered is that the attitude of students toward using different mediums might be different. These ambiguities form the basis for some research questions.

1.4. Research questions

RQ1. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency improvements in a CALL-based class (in this case using weblogs) and a traditional (computer-free) one?¹

RQ1.1. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' *'task response'* improvements while writing in a weblog-mediated writing class versus a traditional one?

RQ1.2. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' *'coherence and cohesion'* improvements while writing in a weblog-mediated writing class versus a traditional one?

RQ1.3. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' *'lexical resources'* improvements while

¹In this study writing proficiency is defined as the combination of four different rubrics (taken from the IELTS writing proficiency test instructions) including; 1) task response, 2) coherence and cohesion, 3) lexical resources, and 4) grammar range and accuracy. Accordingly research question one could be divided to four sub-research questions.

writing in a weblog-mediated writing class versus a traditional one?

RQ1.4. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' *'grammar range and accuracy'* improvements while writing in a weblog-mediated writing class versus a traditional one?

RQ2. Do Iranian EFL learners have a positive attitude toward using computers and specifically weblogs in their writing classes?

RQ3. Is there any relationship between Technophobia/Technophilia and Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency improvements in a CALL based class (in this occasion using weblogs)?

1.5. Null hypotheses

H₀1. There is not any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency improvements in a CALL-based class (in this case using weblogs) versus a traditional one.

H₀1.1. There is not any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' *'task response'* improvements while writing in a weblog-mediated writing class versus a traditional one.

H₀1.2. There is not any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' *'coherence and cohesion'* improvements while writing in a weblog-mediated writing class versus a traditional one.

H₀1.3. There is not any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' *'lexical resources'* improvements while writing in a weblog-mediated writing class versus a traditional one.

H₀1.4. There is not any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' *'grammar range and accuracy'* improvements while writing in a weblog-mediated writing class versus a traditional one.

H₀2. The Iranian EFL learners do not have any positive attitude toward using computers and specifically weblogs in their writing classes.

H₀3. There is not any relationship between Technophobia/Technophilia and Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency improvements in a CALL based class (in this occasion using weblogs).

1.6. Definitions of key terms

Writing proficiency: The ability of exploration of ideas and thoughts in the process of putting them on the paper (Zamel, cited in Chastain, 1988) using the most appropriate kind of language (Heaton, 1990).

In this study writing proficiency is assumed to be the scores of the learners on the administered writing proficiency tests.

According to the IELTS writing band score definitions (2006), writing proficiency can be considered as:

Writing proficiency = task response + cohesion and coherence + lexical resources + grammar range and accuracy

Task response: Fully addressing all parts of the task and presenting a fully developed position in answering to the question with relevant, fully extended and well supported ideas (the IELTS writing band score definitions, 2006 provided by British Council).

In this study *task response* refers to the score devoted to the accomplishment of the related objectives of the IELTS rubric on a scale of 0-7 out of 20¹.

Coherence and cohesion: Sequencing information and ideas logically and using paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately (the IELTS writing band score definitions, 2006 provided by British Council).

In this study *coherence and cohesion* refers to the score devoted to the accomplishment of the related objectives of the IELTS rubric on a scale of 0-7 out of 20.

Lexical resources: Using a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features; rare minor errors only as 'slips' (the IELTS writing band score definitions, 2006 provided by British Council).

¹ The scoring procedure was set according to what was more emphasized and more valued in the class while teaching writing. Task response and cohesion & coherence were more valued in comparison to lexical resources and grammar range.