



SHEIKHBAHAE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

DEVELOPING WRITING ABILITY OF
INTERMEDIATE LANGUAGE LEARNERS BY
BLOGGING

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Dedicated to

My parents, my brother, and my sister, and all my professors at Sheikhbahee University without whose support I would not have come this far.

Abstract

Considering the widespread use of blogs during recent years, the present study explored how blogging can affect the writing skill of Iranian language learners. Besides, the learners' perception of blogging was evaluated qualitatively and quantitatively to see whether learners showed enthusiasm to blogging and how it motivated them to write. Two intermediate English classes were selected as the Control and Experimental Groups. Six writing topics were selected and were assigned to both groups. The writing activities in the Control Group were done on paper-based method while the Blogging Group used a selected website to do so. To evaluate the writing activities, four criteria were taken into account: a) length of the writing activities, b) use of verb forms, c) use of articles, and d) use of prepositions. Based on the results of the chi-square tests, in terms of the frequency of missed articles and prepositions the performances of both groups were significantly different. Also the compositions in the Blogging Group were longer than those of the Control Group. However, the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the learners' perception towards blogging revealed that students believed blogging had encouraged them to write more accurately. They also considered that blogging had remarkably improved their writing ability as compared to the time they did not use blogging.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Teachers do their best to find ways to help students improve their learning. No doubt, writing is the most difficult skill for language learners to master (Richards & Renandya, 2002), consequently teachers should try to help learners produce a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing which is probably the most difficult thing in this respect (Nunan, 1999). Writing is also a way of knowing, a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it; therefore it is a task which is partially dependent on the individuals, their creativity and the way they approach each topic.

Holmes (2006) believes that in the history of language teaching, there have been numerous approaches to the writing instruction. Traditionally, writing was viewed mainly as a tool for the practice and reinforcement of certain grammatical or lexical patterns, a rather one-dimensional activity in which accuracy was all important and content and self-expression were trivial (Holmes, 2006). However, with an increase in attention to students' practical needs born out of functional-notional approaches, the significance of writing certain text types as a skill was highlighted (Holmes, 2006).

The ability to write effectively is becoming more and more important and writing instruction is assuming an increasing role in L2 language education (Weigle, 2002). From simple writing activities to scientific reports, all depend considerably on the writing skills of an individual. A research paper, irrespective of the value it has, if is not properly put into words, may not convey the author's main idea or even might not be valued efficiently while being read by the target readers.

For years, the process approach being affected by Flower and Hayes' theories (1981) and Peter Elbow's views (1990), had been a widely accepted pedagogical approach for writing. It is a teaching approach that focuses on the processes involved in writing rather than focusing on the product of writing. The process approach to writing involves a collaborative process instead of a private and solitary act. Writing easily fits with the concepts of social, collaborative, and constructivist activities. This approach was a focus on the recursive process of brainstorming ideas, drafting, organizing, editing, and rewriting (Jones, 2006).

In the past few decades, writing and technology have focused on a variety of computer applications as well as a variety of tools, from word processors, e-mails, listservs, to online chats, bulletin board discussions, and Web page projects (Jones, 2006). By expansion of the Internet and its integration with everyday life of many people and specifically the young generation, many researchers have been motivated to investigate if this prevalent phenomenon can be employed for pedagogical purposes. Many ordinary Internet users are used to posting different subjects in an everyday manner and some even use it as a diary. As one of the simplest uses of the Internet in language classes, some English teachers ask their students to send their homework by email and by doing so they avoid carrying piles of papers. Thus, one might ponder to even make a better use of this widespread and popular means of communication.

During the recent years, by the expansion of the Internet more than ever and accessibility of more affordable computers, a number of new tools have emerged, all of which serve as virtual communities or a cyber environment through which starting new

topics and proliferation of the whole community is possible. Such tools have turned to be useful means of creating an online community. Wikis, Open-source Netbooks, and Weblogs are among the most popular tools in this respect. Typically these technologies may fulfill educational applications for needs raised every day.

Weblogs (blogs), online personal journals that are frequently updated, have existed in the cyberspace community since 1998. However, educational blogging emerged in the early 2000s. The impact of computer on teaching and learning a language can be traced in all language skills. Some research on EFL/ESL methodology focus on teaching one or two of the English language skills by using computers, such as teaching vocabulary or speaking, while some others have focused on the English language proficiency in general. The language skill which is probably to be most affected by the new technology is writing.

Blogs are one of the latest and most quickly expanding forms of communication and publishing in the Internet which can be used in education too. Richardson (2006) extends an analysis of blogging into a practical guide for teachers trying to integrate blogging into their classes. He suggests a number of benefits of blogging, including increased motivation, intuitive and associational thinking sense of community, combination of solitary and social interaction, and confidence. With a few simple steps in a graphical user interface, teachers can easily use the blog to create a collaborative learning environment in which students can peer edit others' postings (Dieu, 2004; Mitchell, 2003). Students should be encouraged to comment their partner's postings, which can also be shared by other classmates.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

In spite of numerous approaches to the teaching of writing such as communicative language teaching (CLT), process-based approach, product-based approach, genre-based approach; etc., that have evolved from different teaching methods, tackling EFL writing is still one of the challenging areas for teachers and students (Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh, 2007). Lately, a number of new tools have emerged in this respect. The recent popularity of blogs over the last couple of years has caused practitioners of language teaching to ponder on the integration of this medium in language learning classrooms. Blogs were created as a tool for people to create online journals without any programming experience or knowledge. Although not originally intended for use in ESL classrooms, blogs have a huge potential as an extremely valuable tool for second language teaching.

In traditional paper and pen writing tasks, students can only receive comments about their own writing and that is possible just by the teacher in a non-interactive procedure. While using blogs, commenting on each others' writing, would be possible; moreover, blogs allow learners to share their personal thoughts and ideas with each other. Students can also discuss their writing errors, which may lead to an interactive and authentic use of language. This medium gets even a higher degree of importance in non-English speaking countries, due to insufficient exposure of learners to the foreign language outside the class.

Some believe that writing skills do not receive enough attention, as compared to the other skills. The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2006) in its report included the following action items to compensate for the so called neglected skill, i.e. writing, in education: “(1) double the amount of time students spend

writing, (2) assign writing across the curriculum, (3) encourage out-of-school writing, and (4) employ technology to help improve writing” (as cited in Drexler, Dawson, & Ferdig, 2006, p.140). As a result, one might think of blogging as a means to meet these requirements. The findings regarding the use of blogs in writing tasks have shown that it can have different outcomes in different situations and for students with a myriad of characteristics. While some researchers like Chang and Chang (2004) and O’Donnell (2006) have reported a positive attitude to it, others like Kelly (2008) and Al-Aayed (2009) have found that it is not of great significance and the students’ performances have not been considerably enhanced.

The present study probed blogging, as one of the most recent technologies in language teaching to find out how it can help intermediate learners in Iran, where English is a foreign language, improve their writing skills, and how it can be applied in the language learning classroom. Besides, effort has been made to find out how students themselves find blogging effective for improving their writing ability.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

Writing is a critical skill for students in school, college, and lifelong needs (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2006). Many teaching approaches have been applied to motivate students to learn the language. One of the latest approaches is integrating technology into the classroom activities. By emerging

such a situation, it can be helpful to investigate the effect of this medium on the writing skill of language learners.

Considering widespread use of weblogs during the recent years, the use of this medium in language teaching is attracting the attention of researchers in the field of language teaching. At this time, using blogs in education, and particularly in foreign language teaching, is still novel and there have not been many formal studies done on this topic.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how blogging can affect the writing skill of Iranian EFL learners. Besides, effort will be made to investigate the learners' feelings towards this activity.

1.4. Research Questions

Two research questions were generated which are as follows:

Research Question (1): In what domains can blogging help language learners improve their writing ability?

Research Question (2): What is the perception of EFL learners about virtual environment of weblogs for developing their writing skills?

1.5. Hypotheses of the Study

For the current study two hypotheses were formulated.

Hypothesis 1) There is a relation between one's using weblogs and the improvement of their writing skill.

Hypothesis 2) Writing in the virtual environment of weblogs can affect the students' perception for developing their writing skills.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

1. Weblog: A frequently updated website by the teacher and language learners, consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order.

2. Blogging: The activity of updating a blog by posting new writing tasks and also leaving comments on them by the learners and the teacher.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Introduction

Chastain (1988) believes that writing is a fundamental communication skill and a distinct asset in the process of language learning. By the recent advances in technology and emergence of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and weblogs as a tool being typically updated daily using software that allow those with little or no technical background to update and maintain it, teachers can think of incorporating weblogs into the classroom to easily make the accessibility of teaching materials possible even outside the classroom. Regarding the nature of weblogs, improvement of writing skills can be the main focus in such activities. Weblogs give students the opportunity for authentic self-expression with writing. Meanwhile, different learners with a variety of social backgrounds may react differently to using computers in general, and expressing their ideas in an interactive environment specifically, where everyone can access their pieces of writing and; moreover, write comments about them.

2.2. Theoretical framework

In this part the theoretical framework being generally applied to teaching of writing which are in line with this study are dealt with. To begin, the history of different disciplines in language learning is delved into in order to depict how writing skills have concerned the followers of such disciplines. In doing so, initially we will see how methods being used in the early 19th century were concerned with writing and whether this skill was valued by them or not. Then the environmentalist, the innatist and the interactionist views of language learning which serve as the background to language teaching theory will be credited. Then current issues in writing will be discussed which