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Writing Autonomously: A Blogging Approach

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

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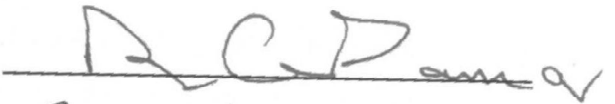
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Approval of thesis


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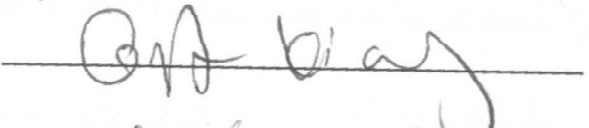
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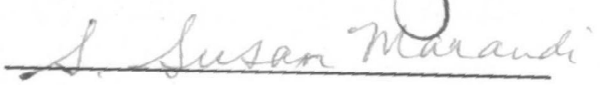
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آیین‌نامه حق مالکیت مادی و معنوی در مورد نتایج پژوهشهای علمی دانشگاه تربیت مدرس

مقدمه: با عنایت به سیاست‌های پژوهشی و فناوری دانشگاه در راستای تحقق عدالت و کرامت انسانها که لازمه شکوفایی علمی و فنی است و رعایت حقوق مادی و معنوی دانشگاه و پژوهشگران، لازم است اعضای هیأت علمی، دانشجویان، دانش‌آموختگان و دیگر همکاران طرح، در مورد نتایج پژوهشهای علمی که تحت عناوین پایان‌نامه، رساله و طرحهای تحقیقاتی با هماهنگی دانشگاه انجام شده است، موارد زیر را رعایت نمایند:

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تبصره: در مقالاتی که پس از دانش‌آموختگی بصورت ترکیبی از اطلاعات جدید و نتایج حاصل از پایان‌نامه/ رساله نیز منتشر می‌شود نیز باید نام دانشگاه درج شود.

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ماده ۴- ثبت اختراع و تدوین دانش فنی و یا ارائه یافته ها در جشنواره‌های ملی، منطقه‌ای و بین‌المللی که حاصل نتایج مستخرج از پایان‌نامه/ رساله و تمامی طرحهای تحقیقاتی دانشگاه باید با هماهنگی استاد راهنما یا مجری طرح از طریق معاونت پژوهشی دانشگاه انجام گیرد.

ماده ۵- این آیین‌نامه در ۵ ماده و یک تبصره در تاریخ ۸۷/۴/۱ در شورای پژوهشی و در تاریخ ۸۷/۴/۲۳ در هیأت رئیسه دانشگاه به تایید رسید و در جلسه مورخ ۸۷/۷/۱۵ شورای دانشگاه به تصویب رسیده و از تاریخ تصویب در شورای دانشگاه لازم‌الاجرا است.

«اینجانب محمدحسین آذمی، دانشجوی رشته آموزش زبان انگلیسی، ورودی سال تحصیلی ۸۸..... مقطع دانشکده علوم انسانی، متعهد می شوم کلیه نکات مندرج در آئین‌نامه حق مالکیت مادی و معنوی در مورد نتایج پژوهش های علمی دانشگاه تربیت مدرس را در انتشار یافته های علمی مستخرج از پایان نامه / رساله تحصیلی خود رعایت نمایم. در صورت تخلف از مفاد آئین‌نامه فوق الاشعار به دانشگاه وکالت و نمایندگی می دهم که از طرف اینجانب نسبت به لغو امتیاز اختراع بنام بنده و یا هر گونه امتیاز دیگر و تغییر آن به نام دانشگاه اقدام نماید. ضمناً نسبت به جبران فوری ضرر و زیان حاصله بر اساس برآورد دانشگاه اقدام خواهم نمود و بدینوسیله حق هر گونه اعتراض را از خود سلب نمودم»

امضا: آذمی

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نظر به اینکه چاپ و انتشار پایان نامه (رساله) های تحصیلی دانشجویان دانشگاه تربیت مدرس، مبین بخشی از فعالیتهای علمی - پژوهشی دانشگاه است بنابراین به منظور آگاهی و رعایت حقوق دانشگاه، دانش آموختگان این دانشگاه نسبت به رعایت موارد ذیل متعهد می شوند:

ماده ۱: در صورت اقدام به چاپ پایان نامه (رساله) ی خود، مراتب را قبلاً به طور کتبی به «دفتر نشر آثار علمی» دانشگاه اطلاع دهد.

ماده ۲: در صفحه سوم کتاب (پس از برگ شناسنامه) عبارت ذیل را چاپ کند:

رشته رساله دکتری نگارنده در/ «کتاب حاضر، حاصل پایان نامه کارشناسی ارشد دانشگاه تربیت مدرس در دانشکده علوم انسانی است که در سال

، مشاوره تربیت مدرس به راهنمایی سرکار خانم/جناب آقای دکتر رضا خفاری
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از آن دفاع شده است.»
آقای دکتر

ماده ۳: به منظور جبران بخشی از هزینه های انتشارات دانشگاه، تعداد یک درصد شمارگان کتاب (در هر نوبت چاپ) را به «دفتر نشر آثار علمی» دانشگاه اهدا کند. دانشگاه میتواند مازاد نیاز خود را به نفع مرکز نشر در معرض فروش قرار دهد.

به عنوان ماده ۴: در صورت عدم رعایت ماده ۳، ۵۰٪ بهای شمارگان چاپ شده را خسارت به دانشگاه تربیت مدرس، تأدیه کند.

ماده ۵: دانشجو تعهد و قبول می کند در صورت خودداری از پرداخت بهای خسارت مذکور را از طریق مراجع قضایی مطالبه و وصول خسارت، دانشگاه میتواند کند؛ به علاوه به دانشگاه حق می دهد به منظور استیفای حقوق خود، از طریق دادگاه، معادل وجه مذکور در ماده ۴ را از محل توقیف کتابهای عرضه شده نگارنده برای فروش، تامین نماید.

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Dedication

To my late father...
His words of inspiration and encouragement
in pursuit of excellence, still linger on.

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ABSTRACT

On the one hand, process approach to teaching writing has proved to be effective in second language writing instruction but implementing it in classrooms is faced with different limitations. On the other hand, recent developments in technology have introduced new tools that are promising for language educators. These issues trigger the idea of integrating weblogs and writing instruction. The current thesis investigated the effect of weblog use in a process-based writing course on the writing performance of the students and on their level of learner autonomy. Also, the study aimed to find the correlation (if any) between students' autonomy level and their writing performance.

The participants were 43 English language learners who were doing their BA in the field of English Language Teaching at Ershad Institute of Higher Education in Tehran, Iran. Nineteen students served as the control group and went through in-class writing instruction. The experimental group had 24 students who used weblogs along with the in-class instruction. Students' writings and questionnaires were used to gather the necessary data for the study. The project lasted for 12 weeks.

The results revealed that using weblogs in line with the process-based instruction helped students in having a better writing performance than those who only received in-class instruction. Weblog use also fostered a sense of autonomy among learners and increased their level in autonomous learning. However, there was no statistically significant relation between the students' level of learner autonomy and their writing performance.

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CHAPTER 1

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter presents the purpose, the objectives and research questions, addresses the rationale and the significance of the study, and it also provides the definitions of key terms used in the research.

1.2. Introduction

Writing, as one of the language skills, has a very important place in language education because of its role both in communication and in language learning. Raimes (1983) considers writing as “a reinforcement tool for grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary that students have learned; as a tool for hypotheses testing as it provides students with opportunities to go beyond what they have just learned to say and as a tool for enhancing thinking skills as it helps students express their ideas in the target language” (p. 6). Wolff (2000, cited in O’Brien, 2004) also emphasizes the importance of writing by regarding writing as “probably the most efficient L2 learning tool we have” (p. 1). Writing becomes especially important in EFL contexts where students do not have much chance of using the L2 outside the class or to communicate in the target language (Kern & Schultz, 1992; Reichelt, 1999).

Therefore, a general agreement on the importance of writing in language education can be observed and because of this fact researchers have tried to find effective ways of teaching writing. A glance at the research done on writing instruction reveals two main issues. One point is the importance given to the process approach to writing instruction. This approach focuses on a cycle of activities that help learners in a series of stages from generating ideas to producing the final text (Tribble, 1996). The other point is the emergence of computers, the Internet and different web tools with different uses in language teaching and learning. Weblogs are one of the

most common Internet tools that are thought to have lots of potentials for writing instruction. Eastman (2005) defines weblogs as “online diaries; logs of thoughts, reflections; a space for individuals to write whatever they choose with an option for readers to comment on what they have read” (p. 358). Therefore, the main aim of this study is to see how the use of blog together with the process approach in a writing course can affect students’ writing performance and their level of learning autonomy.

1.3. Background

For many years, researchers have been interested in the uses of new technologies in language learning situations. Technology has brought with it the promise of exciting new venues for language learners. The Internet, for instance, is now playing a significant role in foreign/second language learning. It enables its users to communicate beyond time and place limitations and in different modes. Computers and the Internet have proved to be useful tools for language learning purposes. Indeed, the Internet offers an effective means of opening new horizons for foreign language (L2) learning and teaching. Many researchers have manifested the usefulness of blogs in different aspects of L2 teaching (e.g. Ward, 2004; Cole, 2004; Du & Wagner, 2005). One of the main facilitating factors that blogs bring with them is that they extend the learning process beyond the walls of the classroom.

One of the most hotly debated topics in language teaching has recently been the significance of new technologies in the language classroom. Recent research has suggested that computers can be useful in enhancing the proficiency of language learners and facilitating the learning process (Kasper, 1998; Warschauer, Schetzer & Meloni, 2000). The Internet, from the time of its emergence, has been continually and rapidly developing and expanding; thus, providing new possibilities for almost all aspects of human life. One of the main uses of the Internet is that of educational purposes which covers a wide range of activities from self-learning packages to simulated colleges. Language learning is not an exception to the wide application of web tools and many scholars have investigated the effectiveness of such tools in second language learning situations (Warschauer & Meskil, 2000). The first benefit of the World Wide Web that comes to mind is the large amount of information that it provides for its users in the shortest possible time. This is due to its growing number of information sources worldwide and its

potential to empower Internet users to communicate across temporal and geographical borders through a variety of modes of their preferences (Costello, 2000). One of the increasingly popular web tools is blogs that are like personal diaries and each person can keep it and post his/her ideas on it without any cost in time or money.

Web tools have been shown to have benefits for language teaching and specifically for writing instruction (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010; Lee, 2010) and such tools have also been found to improve learner autonomy (Bhattacharya & Chauhan, 2010). One of the most powerful Internet applications that can be helpful in teaching writing is blogging. A weblog (or blog) is a web-based space for writing where all the writing and editing of information is managed through a web browser and is immediately and publicly available on the Internet (Godwin, 2003). Eastman (2005) defines blogs as “user-friendly, free virtual spaces for people to write whatever they want, and for readers to elect to record comments regarding these writings” (p. 358). There are many uses for blogging technology in education including student and teacher communication, presenting learning materials, collaboration and professional development for teachers, etc. As blogs become more and more common, educators in recent years have started to notice the potential of blogs for teaching and learning. Using blogs in education, and particularly in language learning, is still a new phenomenon. This study focuses on the effectiveness of using blog for English language writing and improving learner autonomy.

1.4. Statement of the Problem

More research on writing instruction showed that traditional approaches to writing instruction were not able to meet the needs of learners and teachers (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Such studies paved the way for the rise of process approach to writing instruction. Process approach focuses on the writer as an independent individual and guides the learners through a cycle of activities from the production of ideas for writing to the production of the final work (Tribble, 1996). Harris & Graham (1996) maintain that the objective in process approach is “to develop a community of learners who share and help each other, who make personal choices about what they read and write, who take ownership and responsibility for their learning, who take risks in their reading and writing and are able to monitor their learning, and who collaborate in evaluating their efforts and progress” (p. 24). Achieving this objective is not an easy task. The

teacher has the responsibility for developing such a community of learners. To achieve this aim, in turn, teachers need to provide a chance for students to practice extensive writing and by giving them a sense of ownership. A good practice can be publishing what the students write.

According to Tsiu (2000), “when the students are aware of the audiences they are addressing, they will probably take ownership and responsibility for their writing” (p. 148). Teacher needs to provide students with different types of feedback on their various drafts and students should be encouraged to read and review each others’ writings in order to develop revising skills.

However, achieving all these goals in process approach is not possible in all classes and contexts. In some contexts the class size is large and sometimes teachers are faced with curriculum and time constraints. At times, students do not have full access to proper resources. Also, in most cases, students do not have any other audience for their writings other than the teacher. Gettings (1997) believes that this restriction of time, size and resource persists in most EFL schools in the world.

Some studies have been conducted to find out the attitudes of students in EFL context towards the effectiveness of the writing instructions they go through. Most of these studies have revealed the students’ dissatisfaction with their writing courses. Sasaki (2000) asked 131 students (97 from a School of Foreign Languages and 34 graduates) about the major difficulties that they have, and 48.5 % of the students in the School of Foreign Languages and 53 % of the graduate students showed writing skill as their main problem. They noted that they were not able to express themselves in written English and they had difficulty in writing essays in their field of study. The fact that students are not happy with their writing skills presents a need for an effective writing instruction in such contexts. A common solution to this problem that is offered by many researchers is the application of process approach (Matsuda, 2003; Kern & Schultz, 1992; Smith, 2000). All these researchers have proved the effectiveness of process approach to writing instruction. However, as it was mentioned earlier, the success of process approach is restricted in many settings due to different limitations such as large class size, and the teacher being the only audience for students’ writings. As it was mentioned in the previous section, the use of Internet with its weblog application can facilitate process based writing instruction in such a setting.

As a result, the current project is an attempt to investigate the potentials of weblogs to be used on learners’ writing proficiency through process oriented writing course. The assumption is

that using blogs together with a process approach will extend the audience of learners and this might motivate them to write. Also, the students and the teacher can have access to assignments posted on weblogs at any time and this can enhance the feedback process which can increase the success rate. Another benefit for using blog is that teachers can provide students with more materials online so that students can refer to them based on their specific needs and at any time they like. This is assumed to have positive effects on the writing proficiency of the students. When students create their own blogs, they will take control of their learning process and it enables them to organize their learning. Blogs provide students with personal learning spaces and this encourages students to take responsibility for their learning. Therefore, it is assumed that the concept of autonomous learning will be developed in learners.

Over the recent years there has been much interest in computer-mediated communication and the impact these can have on language learning and particularly the skill of writing. Literature suggests that writing using technology, particularly the word processor, can have a positive impact on L2 writing (Sullivan and Pratt 1996). However, there is some negative opinion and suggestion that it does not benefit, and so with any new technology it is important to explore its potentials and limitations. As Chan and Ridgway (2006) suggest:

There is no consistent evidence that these new technologies enhance learning. However, 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 (p. 73).

Also, the issue of learners' autonomy in the Internet environment should not be neglected. How can blogging help students in becoming autonomous language learners? The scarcity of research on the issue of autonomy in online situations has provided another important impetus for the current study. The learners' general profile will be assessed using the Learner Autonomy Profile (LAP). LAP is a battery of inventories designed to assess an individual's behavioral intentions in the context of learning. The LAP is structured around the claim that learner autonomy must be understood in terms of the learner's intentions and assesses four factors that form a syndrome associated with learner autonomy (Confessore & Park, 2004).

The setting for this research will be the Iranian culture and the participants will be intermediate learners of English as a foreign language. Learners of different cultures and locations are familiar with computers and the Internet to different degrees. As a result, their

approach toward these technologies as learning tools would be different. Soares (2008) found that blogs are being used in different ways around the world. He also maintains that “factors such as lack of time or technical problems should be taken into account when assessing the validity of using blogs for educational purposes” (Soares, 2008, p. 522). Therefore, one objective of the current study is to investigate if blogs can be considered as useful and practical learning tools in Iran too.

A related objective of this research would be finding the best approach in using blogs both in and out of language classrooms. The applicability of the blogs in teaching process writing and also the influence of blogs on the level of students’ autonomy will be investigated.

1.5. Purpose of the Study

It was mentioned that many studies have attested to the effectiveness of a process approach on developing the writing proficiency of the students (Kern & Schultz, 1992; Reichelt, 1999). However, following all the stages of the process approach might not be possible in all learning contexts. Many studies aimed at gaining insights into effectiveness of technological devices, analysis of learner’s texts or categorization of Internet resources (Kasper, 1998; Warschauer, Schetzer & Meloni, 2000). Therefore, in the search of a proper way for the successful implementation of the process approach, the present study seeks to identify the effectiveness of blogging in developing writing skills and learner autonomy. In other words, the aim of this study is to find out whether blogging can be used to improve the writing achievement of the students and/or to increase the students’ level of autonomy.

1.6. Significance of the Study

The significance of using blogs is that they enable learners to learn by doing. Individual learner’s learning by themselves and in collaboration with others in the Internet environment would enhance their foreign language acquisition within authentic, contextualized, and purposeful contexts (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000). Research on the use of blogs will provide new ways for viewing foreign language writing development.