

Blogging to Enhance Writing Skills: A Survey of Students' Perception and Attitude

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Abstract

Several studies concur that the use of a blog can positively enhance learning in the second language classroom and that blogs can improve writing skills. Research has confirmed positive uses of the blog which include writing for an audience and peer review, the development of a student's analytical skills and the development of a sense of community through a collaborative learning environment via weblog. This paper presents the results of a research project which was undertaken to investigate a group of 33 students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Data were collected via online questionnaire survey related to their perception and perspective on the implementation of blogging activities to teaching writing skills. Results suggested that the participants have positive perceptions and attitude in using blog to improve writing skills and they perceived that blogging was an effective tool to teach writing in English that helped them improve their writing and kept them motivated.

Keywords: blog, writing, English language learning, English as a second language, learning method, writing tool

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a second or foreign language has been a constant challenge due to the interference of the first language. Efforts to motivate learners must first look into the teaching methods among others, as implementing the conventional way of teaching English was found to be unmotivating. Especially when they are restricted to classroom learning (Allum, 2002) which would expose them to a limited scope of knowledge (Nadzrah & Kemboja, 2009), the situation does not reflect a positive trend in teaching and learning English.

In order to create an efficient learning ambience, language teachers need to focus on the core principles of learning community which include integration of curriculum, active learning, student engagement, and student responsibility (Darabi, 2006). Other scholars (Seitzinger, 2006) have suggested that language learning should be constructive as described by these features: 1) active and manipulative by engaging students in interactions and explorations with learning materials and providing opportunities for them to observe the results of their manipulations; 2) constructive and reflective by enabling students to integrate new ideas with prior knowledge to make meaning and enable learning through reflection; 3) intentional by providing opportunities for students to articulate their learning goals and monitor their progress in achieving them; 4) authentic (or simulated) by facilitating better understanding and transfer of learning to new situations; and 5) cooperative, collaborative, and conversational by providing students with opportunities to interact with each other to clarify, share ideas, to seek assistance, to negotiate problems and discuss solutions.

Rapid development in information and communication technology has precipitated various changes pertaining to the methods of teaching and learning. For instance, the use of computers in the classroom has increased tremendously and it is quickly becoming one of the learning tools in language classes (Nadzrah, 2007). More recently, blog, which is a form of internet publishing, has become established communication tools and has been used by millions of users for variety purposes. The existence of blog has opened up a space for writers to share articles or materials in the weblog that are open for view to the audience with an internet access. This has given language learners the opportunity to express and share their ideas to the unlimited internet community in the World Wide Web. Such features of blog make it very popular and common in this era of technology advancement.

With its ease of use, conversational, informal format and collaborative nature, it is not surprising that blogging may be another means of engaging students in writing. Blogging is closely related to writing as researchers realized its potential as a tool in improving the process of writing. Campbell (2003) and Hiler (2002) suggested that blogs can be used by teachers and students as a forum for students to express opinions, co-produce ideas and share interesting information in order to communicate in an environment of English as a second language (ESL).

In language learning, blogging has been experimentally used as a tool to develop writing skills (Pinkman, 2005). Experience of writing on blogs may provide opportunities to help students to improve their knowledge in writing. Nadzrah and Kemboja (2009) found that blogs let students compose writing with specific purposes that can encourage them to enhance their writing in language. Most blog writers use their blog as a platform for self-expression and empowerment, and this helps them to become more thoughtful and critical in their writing (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008).

Blogging is also a form of writing exercise. The cycle of blogging activities such as making blog posts, viewing other bloggers' posts, commenting and reflecting on them are beneficial in polishing the writing skills. In situations where they cannot relate to certain words, they have the choice to refer to online dictionaries and using the Internet, they are able to keep the grammar in their writing intact. This creates an environment for an active learning (Darabi, 2006) among students that can present positive impacts on the writing skills as well as increase learner autonomy respectively.

Thus, this study was conducted to investigate how blogging might impact the aspects of writing and motivation as a whole involving a group of students in the Faculty of Education, *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*. In order to facilitate the investigation regarding the students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of blogs as a writing tool, the following research questions were formulated: 1) What are the participants' perceptions on the use of blog to teach English writing skills?; and 2) What are the participants' attitudes towards blogging as a writing tool in an English classroom?

2. Literature Review

Past studies have recorded mixed results of blogging on the English writing skills among ESL learners with most studies leading to a positive disposition as they claimed blogging has been found to improve writing skills (Downes, 2004; Hall & Davidson, 2007; Nadzrah, 2007; Pinkman, 2005). Students were found to believe that using blog in the class as a writing tool was a good idea as they claimed that they were able to write better and effectively when using blogs and that blogging has allowed them to be creative despite having limited proficiency in the language (Nadzrah & Kemboja, 2009).

Blackmore-Squires (2010) found that a blog can empower students to become analytical and critical writer, which in turn improve a student's self-confidence, while claiming that an online writing such as writing on blogs has many advantages to offer such as 1) encouraging feedback and representing both writing and reading activity; 2) stimulating debate and critical analysis and encouraging articulation of ideas and opinions; 3) offering opportunities for collaborative learning; 4) providing an environment in which students can develop skills of persuasion and argumentation; 5) creating a more student-centred learning environment; and 6) offering informal language reading.

McDowell (2004) supported the idea that educational blogging can enhance learning opportunities as he reported positive feedback from students on the use of blogs as learning tools as they increased interactivity and promoted reflective activities among students. In a study carried out by Blackmore-Squires (2010) regarding the use of blog as a tool to improve writing in the second language classroom, it was found out that the use of blog has encouraged learning through collaboration, which was in terms of communication between peers and tutors, as well as through learner autonomy (Blackstone et al., 2007). By using blog as a tool of communication, the learner actively constructs knowledge by translating ideas into words built upon the reactions and responses of others (Alvi, 1994). Furthermore, Campbell (2003) stated that a class blog run by the entire class is a collaborative effort of the class to create a platform for students to express themselves through writing.

As far as the affective is concerned, Blackstone et al. (2007) found that blogging activities boost nearly all the student participants' motivation, an element which has long been recognized as vital for language learning (Dornyei, 2003) and writing. Since blogs are authentic, interesting and communicative, they can serve a variety of purposes in a foreign language learning classroom (Pinkman, 2005). This is the reason why blogs have the potential to supplement and enhance traditional teaching methods (McDowell, 2004).

However, scholars have also reported negative findings such as Blackstone et al. (2007) as they highlighted that students who lack confidence may experience fear at having others read their thoughts. As blogs are mostly not

private, it is open for display to public and this makes student feel embarrassed for fear that others might see their mistakes. On the same note, Blackmore-Squires (2010) explained that students who suffer from computer phobia may find themselves frustrated with the blogging activities and this will eventually thwart their writing improvement. Thus, it was interesting to investigate how the participants in the study perceived the influence of blogging on their English writing skills.

3. Research Methodology

This study was conducted in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in May 2012 to investigate students' perception regarding the implementation of writing blogs for teaching writing. 33 third-years from the Bachelor of Teaching English as a Second Language, Faculty of Education were selected to be the participants with 7 male and the remaining 26 female students. The respondents were selected for having completed a course, *Technology in Education*, in their first year of study in which they were required to create their own blog account as well as to write a reflection based on their experience. The participants, thus, were familiar with blogging activities. At the present moment, they have had at least one registered blog and for some, a personal blog. For this reason, an introduction to blogging was not prerequisite to conducting the research.

3.1 Instrument and Data Analysis

The participants were requested to answer an online questionnaire posted on www.surveymonkey.com. The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from Fageeh (2011) on the use of blogs in developing writing skills and enhancing attitudes towards learning English among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

The 15 items in the questionnaire were constructed based on the research questions of this study. The items were grouped in such a way so as to address the three areas of students' background in terms of blog usage, perception on using blog in their writing and attitude towards learning writing skills using blog.

The instrument was separated into three sections: Section A, Section B and Section C. Section A was made up of 4 items to understand the participants' prior experience in blogging. There were 5 items in Section B which enquired about the participants' perception pertaining to writing on blogs. The final section contained 5 items which were designated to survey their attitudes in using blog to learn writing skills.

The study applied the 4-level Likert scale for the items in Section A and B – Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree. The 4-level scale was used to eliminate the neutral point in order to elicit a definite decision and by doing this, it provided a better measure of the intensity of participants' attitudes or opinion. The data collected were interpreted into percentage and mean to describe the students' perception and attitude on using blog as writing tools to enhance their writing skills.

4. Findings and Discussion

The first part of the findings presented the background of the participants in terms of the usage of blog as a whole. The second section reported their perception on using blog in learning writing skills and finally the last section highlighted their attitude towards learning writing using blog.

4.1 Students' Background in Terms of Blogging Experience

As indicated in Table 1, the majority of the participants which was 57.6 percent reported of writing more than 12 posts in a month with an average of 3 weekly posts. Representing the second highest group was the range of 5 to 8 posts and 9 to 12 posts in a month with 21.2 percent each. None of the participants wrote less than 4 blog posts which made them active writers as far as blogging is concerned.

In general, 51.5% (17) participants state that they wrote roughly 100-200 words in each of their blog post. This is followed by 33.3% (11) participants that wrote less than 100 words in each blog post. Whereas the rest of the participants, 9.1% (3) and 6.1% (2) stated that they wrote around 200-300 words and more than 300 words in a blog post respectively.

Table 1. Monthly frequency of writing a post on the blog and their length

Monthly frequency of writing a post	Percentage (%)	Number of words written	Percentage (%)
1 - 4 post(s)	0.0	Less than 100	33.3
5 – 8 post	21.2	100 - 200	51.5
9 -12 posts	21.2	200 - 300	9.1
More than 12 posts	57.6	More than 300	6.1

Based on the second item as shown in Table 2, the majority 48.5 percent of the participants indicated that they spent less than an hour in reading blog every day. Meanwhile, 39.4 percent claimed that they spent between 1 to 2 hours reading blog and 12.1 percent spent between 2 to 3 hours daily in reading blog. The data were useful to understand that all the participants were indeed familiar with blogs as spending time on reading blogs written by other bloggers was part of their internet activities.

Table 2. Time spent on reading blog daily

Time spent in reading blog daily	Percentage (%)	Response count
Less than 1 hour	48.5	16
1 - 2 hours	39.4	13
2 - 3 hours	12.1	4
More than 4 hours	0.0	0

As bloggers, it was within the participants' control as to whom the audience of their blogs were and as evident in Table 3, most of them (45.5 percent) targeted other bloggers as readers of their blog. 33.3 percent of the participants targeted students as their readers and the remaining 12.1 percent aimed for educator readers and 9.1 percent aimed for unique visitors to read their blogs.

Table 3. Target reader of the blog

Target reader	Percentage (%)	Response count
Blogger	45.5	15
Educator	12.1	4
Student	33.3	11
Unique Visitor	9.1	3

The results from the analysis of the first section positively suggested that the participants were quite familiar with blogging activities and have been doing so ever actively with varying length of words for each post. It is interesting to note that the number of words written by the majority of them was between 100 to 200 words and that was a good number. With the mentioned length and an average of 3 weekly posts, it is believed that the blog has managed to serve as a tool to be acquainted with writing skills in English. The participants were also found to be driven and motivated to write in order to meet the expectations of their target readers. This would greatly influence the rhetorical organization, content, and style of writing in their blogs. However, in terms of the time spent on reading others' blogs, it was clear that participants spent little amount of time to read online presumably due to the fact that they had been busy writing their own posts.

4.2 Participants' Perception on Using Blog in Their Writing

Table 4 reported the participants' reaction towards five statements related to their blogging experience in terms of 1) writing style and register, 2) writing structure, 3) word choice and spelling, 4) grammar, and 5) editing.

Editing was acknowledged to be most important and it was the only component where all the participants were in agreement. 66.7 percent strongly agreed with it and the remaining 33.3 percent agreed that writing on the blog had motivated them to edit their writing by carefully revising their arguments and the presentation of ideas. Editing was considered crucial by the participants as writing is permanent and they need to keep their language intact especially when they were students of language background.

The second highest component with 97 percent agreement (42.4 strongly agreed and 54.6 percent agreed) was grammar. The participants believed that writing on the blog made them to be more careful with the grammar. Only 1 participant (3 percent) disagreed with the statement. The third highest context was related to word choice and spelling. Despite having the same number of agreement (97 percent) with the second highest component, only 12.1 percent strongly agreed while 84.9 percent agreed with the statement that writing on the blogs had made them check the choice of words and spelling more carefully. 1 participant disagreed with the statement. The fourth highest component was the structure of writing with 90.9 percent of agreement. 9.1 percent strongly

agreed and 81.8 percent agreed with the statement that writing on the blog had made them more careful with sentence and paragraph structure. 3 participants who made up 9.1 percent disagreed as they believed that writing on the blog had not made them to be more careful with the structure of writing. The component with the lowest percentage of agreement was related to the writing style and register. 12.1 percent of the participants (n=4) strongly agreed and 72.7 percent (n=24) only agreed that writing on blog made them use the academic writing style and register. The remaining 15.2 percent disagreed to the statement.

Table 4. Perception on using blog in writing

Statement	Percentages (Frequency)			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Writing on the blogs made me use academic writing style and register.	0.0%	15.2% (5)	72.7% (24)	12.1% (4)
2. Writing on the blogs made me more careful about sentence and paragraph structure.	0.0%	9.1% (3)	81.8% (27)	9.1% (3)
3. Writing on the blogs made me check word choice and word spelling more carefully.	0.0%	3.0% (1)	84.9% (28)	12.1% (4)
4. Writing on the blogs made me check my grammar more carefully.	0.0%	3.0% (1)	54.6% (18)	42.4% (14)
5. Writing on the blogs made me carefully revise the way I present my arguments or put forward my descriptions in essay writing.	0.0%	0.0%	33.3% (11)	66.7% (22)

4.3 Attitude towards Learning Writing Using Blog

Based on the findings as indicated in Table 5, it was obvious that most participants had positive attitudes in using blog in writing. 54.5 percent (n=18) of the participants strongly agreed to the statement claiming that they enjoyed writing on blogs to develop their writing skills. The data proved that teaching writing using blog could attract students' interest in learning writing due to the nature of the blog which was interactive as participants can include media such as pictures, music, video and application on their blog.

A total of 93.9 percent (n=31) of the participants agreed to the statement where they thought that their writing for argumentation and description could be improved by blogging on the Internet. The participants' positive view and responses in this matter indicated that blog was a powerful tool to practice writing which motivated them to enhance their writing skills. This finding suggested that blogging should be incorporated in the teaching of writing in the English language classrooms.

Table 5. Participants' perception on the influence of blog in writing towards their affective domain

Statement	Percentages (Frequency)			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. I enjoy writing on blogs for developing my writing skills.	0.0%	6.1% (2)	39.4% (13)	54.5% (18)
7. I think that my writing for argumentation and description can be improved by blogging on the Internet.	0.0%	6.1% (2)	42.4% (14)	51.5% (17)

Table 6 reported the participants' attitude to the notion that blogging enhanced writing in English. With regard to

item number 8, more than 60 percent of the participants strongly agreed that blogging was an effective way of teaching writing in English. This suggested that blog might be a more reliable way as compared to the conventional way of teaching writing. Teaching writing using blog provides a form of interaction between the teacher and the students for both formal and informal learning setting. Meanwhile, 39.4 percent (n=13) agreed and 57.6 percent (n=19) strongly agreed that blogging could improve the quality of academic writing. The nature of the blog with a public audience encourages the participants to pay more attention on the content and the use of language in their writing.

81.8 percent (n=27) of the participants believed that blogs could motivate them to engage in a more active and interactive writing. As the participants attempted to make an impact on the reader through discussions of topics that were important to them, their posting would make them feel emotionally connected and excited for feedback.

Table 6. Participants' attitude towards using blog to teach writing

Statement	Percentages (Frequency)			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. Blogging is an effective way of teaching writing English.	0.0%	0.0%	39.4% (13)	60.6% (20)
9. Blogging can improve the quality of academic writing.	0.0%	3.0% (1)	39.4% (13)	57.6% (19)
10. Blogs can motivate me into more active, interactive writing.	0.0%	0.0%	81.8% (27)	18.2% (6)

5. Conclusion

The results of this study suggested that the participants had positive perception on the use of blog to polish their writing skills and they had also portrayed a positive attitude in using blog to improve writing skills. Most of the participants agreed to varying degrees that writing on blog had made them use academic writing style and register correctly, apart from training them to choose the correct sentence and paragraph structure, decide on their word choice and spelling cautiously, check on their grammar and revise their style of presenting their arguments in writing. Obviously, the students perceived blogging as an effective tool in teaching writing in English which helped to improve and their writing and keep them motivated. It is suggested for further research to emphasize on the challenges of integrating blogging for teaching and improving writing as well as obtaining data from the lecturers.

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