The Use of Blogs on EFL Students' Writing and Engagement in a Saudi Private School

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Abstract

The blog is one of the recent technologies in use for teaching, learning, and practicing writing (Aljumah, 2012). Blogs are an educational tool for continuous learning outside classrooms (Vurdien, 2013). The current study aims to add to the research on blogs in EFL writing by observing the writing development of EFL learners in a Saudi context. The study also investigates learners' perceptions of utilizing blogs as tools to increase classroom engagement. The data are collected from 36 female high school students by analysing the students' writing samples before and after the intervention, conducting a questionnaire at the end of the intervention, and interviewing select participants. Although the findings did not show any significant differences between the two writing samples, the responses from the surveys indicated positive perceptions of blogs in writing and of blogs as a tool for increasing engagement. The active interaction in peer feedback and class discussion revealed that the blog is a useful tool for learning writing.

Keywords: Blogs, engagement, EFL learners, EFL writing, feedback, interaction, social context

1. Introduction

Technology and the internet play important roles in young learners' lives. Using technology is part of their daily routine and has become more affordable. Technology is commonly used at home, at work, in educational institutions, and by English language teachers (Genzola, 2016). Therefore, integrating technology with writing skills will benefit learners (Sulistyo et al., 2019). An ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tool that has recently powered EFL writing is the weblog. This aid enables the use of the computer for learning writing skills (Sulistyo et al., 2019) and is considered a new technological aid that English language teachers are encouraged to use in the classroom as it promotes communication, discussion, and the exchange of ideas (Blackmore-Squires, 2010).

The weblog is a web-based platform for writing and posting media to publish on the internet. The blogs used for educational purposes are referred to as "edu-blogs" (Aydin, 2014). Edu-blogs are one of the most useful types of blogs for academic purposes. Edu-blog is run by WordPress which is one of the biggest platforms for blogs (Riswandi et al., 2019). There are many advantages of using blogs including the ability to access them anytime and anywhere. In addition, they are editable and updatable in terms of adding posts, pictures, links, and videos (Alsubaie & Madini, 2018). Blogs also promote a collaborative environment where students can share their ideas and knowledge (Almalki, 2019)

2. Literature Review

Writing is not an easy skill to learn as it requires a cognitive process and social context (Kitchakarn, 2012). Thus, writing requires regular practice with special reference to academic writing. The current research is based on the theory of socio-constructivism which introduced the role of social interaction between learners enabling them to construct knowledge collaboratively (Vygotsky, 1978). It is believed that a social environment, culture, and stimuli are necessary for learning. When learners are actively involved in a community, knowledge is gained through communities of peers who have received equal learning. This is the key to learning development (Nordlof, 2014). Similarly, blogs can create an online community where learners have the opportunity to write for a larger number of readers compared to the traditional pen and paper method (Zhang, 2009). Blogs provide a wide virtual learning community where students can interact and exchange knowledge (Genzola, 2016). Most importantly, blogging platforms have interactive and critical elements that allow learners to communicate in a

real social context (Alsubaie & Madini, 2018).

Many studies have been published on utilizing blogs in English writing. Studies that advocate the implementation of blogs have shown its usefulness in improving learners' writing (Almalki, 2019; Fageeh, 2011; Kuimova & Zvekov, 2016). It has been found that using blogs in learning and teaching writing leads to significant improvement in students' writing performance (Chang & Szanajda, 2016; Kitchakarn, 2012). The improvement was detected at the levels of both writing skills and sub-skills such as content, coherence, accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, and critical thinking. Some reasons for this improvement are the affordance of the internet while blogging which helps students to navigate ambiguous sentence structures or vocabulary (Zhang, 2009). Another factor is the interactive features and feedback which allow students to practise authentic language and foster critical thinking in the form of evaluation and discussion (Huang, 2016; Zhang, 2009).

Other studies have sought to investigate EFL learners' perceptions and opinions on the use of blogs in learning writing. The findings show that EFL learners perceive blog writing as enjoyable, effective, engaging, and favourable as a technological-mediated tool (Fageeh, 2011; Genzola, 2016; Morris et al., 2019; Vurdien, 2013). These studies show that EFL learners prefer blog writing to pen and paper. They particularly enjoy peer feedback and feel comfortable interacting with their friends virtually (Fageeh, 2011; Lee, 2010). Learners have also expressed that they write better via blogs than in traditional writing classes (Fageeh, 2011). However, some EFL learners found traditional writing to be important as it improves handwriting (Almalki, 2019).

On the other hand, some research did not report any increased writing achievement of EFL learners via blogs over pen and paper (Özdemir & Aydın, 2015). The negative aspects were difficulties with posting blogs, errors in grammatical structure, feelings of boredom, the time-consuming nature of blogs, and feeling anxious about writing for an audience (Akda & Özkan, 2017). Other research reported a few negative responses (2 of 33) from learners such as not being able to post on the blog due to the lack of access to computers (Kitchakarn, 2012).

2.1 Blogs for Engagement

Engagement can be defined as the amount of enthusiasm, eagerness, and consistency that learners put into learning (Mebert et al., 2020). Engagement plays a vital role in learners' academic achievement; the more engaged students are, the more academically successful they become (Mebert et al., 2020). One form of engagement is called "emotional engagement", which refers to being optimistic, enjoying, and being interested while doing tasks (Klem & Connell, 2004). To illustrate, EFL learners found it enjoyable and interesting to write in blogs as it engaged them in a new experience (Vurdien, 2013). This is corroborated by Genzola (2016) and Fageeh (2011) who also reported that learners considered web-blogging for learning to write very enjoyable and engaging.

Existing research has found that collaboration between students and assignments based on real-life scenarios contribute to enhancing students' engagement (Mebert et al., 2020). It has been argued that when students write posts, they bear in mind that they have to convey a message to someone who might find it an interesting topic and might initiate an interactive discussion around the topic. Thus, blogs help learners communicate via meaning (Gómez Delgado & McDougald, 2013). However, learners' engagement and consistency of posting are dependent to a large extent on the topic of the writing. For instance, some students would not participate in the writing tasks if the topic was difficult or uninteresting (Almalki, 2019; Fageeh, 2011).

3. Statement of the Problem

Although English learning has garnered significant attention in Saudi education in recent years, learners still face difficulties in learning writing skills. Alsubaie and Madini (2018) discuss some of the reasons behind this issue: lack of practice, lack of knowledge of writing techniques, insufficient English language environment, or ineffective teaching methodology. Moreover, most EFL learners' writing is for classroom tasks (Adas & Bakir, 2013). Thus, learners are obliged to learn writing as a compulsory part of their course rather than for leisure and creativity. Therefore, some research recommends variations in teaching methodologies and supplementary materials which would facilitate the learning of different genres of writing and offer more practice (Alsubaie & Madini, 2018). Research has shown that web blogs provide a collaborative environment that allows learners to discuss their learning issues, practice writing in a meaningful context, and share knowledge which improves writing outcomes (Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011).

On the other hand, the researcher in this study and educators who have extensive experience in EFL teaching found that young learners in schools need a new method to encourage them to maximize their efforts in learning writing. Since the educational system in Saudi schools is old and outdated (Almalki, 2019), blogs are a welcome change that provide new tools of interaction for use in the educational system in the Saudi context. Moreover,

students might be enthused to engage in a new experience and challenge themselves to succeed.

In light of the reasons mentioned above, this study aims to determine whether blogs can improve students' writing skills in terms of coherence, content, and structure based on a rubric adapted from Almalki (2019). The study also aims to investigate students' perceptions of utilizing blogs in writing and the role of blogs in classroom engagement through promoting collaborative learning by activating classroom discussions, group work, and peer feedback.

3.1 Research Gap

Although blogs are popular in education, only a few English teachers use them to teach writing (Zhang, 2009). To the best of this researcher's knowledge, there is a dearth of research on using blogs in learning English writing in the Saudi context. Very few studies have been conducted to investigate EFL learners' perceptions and attitudes towards blogs in the Saudi context (Aljumah, 2012; Fageeh, 2011) and these have mainly been qualitative in nature. Other studies attempted to measure Saudi English learners' development in writing skills, specifically vocabulary, content, style, or mechanism using pre-tests and post-tests (Alsamadani, 2018; Alsubaie & Madini, 2018). On the other hand, only one study (which has also inspired the current research) used a mixed-method approach to explore how and why blogs affect EFL students' writing in a Saudi university (Almalki, 2019). Some studies examine the effect of the integration of blogs on cooperative learning and suggest that peer feedback facilitates learning of writing (Alaboudi, 2014; Algrami, 2012). However, these studies do not specifically explore whether students' engagement improves through using blogs in writing class. To fill this gap in the literature, this research seeks to detect EFL learners' improvements in both writing and engagement skills with the use of blogs. The study uses quantitative methods to measure writing development and a qualitative approach to investigate students' perceptions of blogs as a tool to increase learning engagement. Another gap that this study aims to address is the scarcity of studies targeting high school learners. All the studies mentioned were conducted in Saudi universities. However, this study investigates high school students because they need a modern educational tool that can be recommended for all ages and can be modified according to the students' levels and goals. It is pertinent that school students should also be considered as they learn writing. Writing difficulties need to be addressed before students enter college to minimize future independent learning.

4. Methodology

4.1 Objectives and Research Questions

This study aims to measure improvement in EFL writing skills and to investigate EFL learners' perceptions of the use of blogs as technology-based learning and its effect on their level of engagement.

The main research questions are:

Q1. To what extent do EFL learners show progress in writing skills using blogs in terms of creativity, fluency, accuracy, content, and coherence?

Q2. What are EFL learners' perceptions of the use of the blog as an educational tool to increase engagement?

Q3. What are EFL learners' perceptions of the use of the blog as an educational tool to improve writing skills?

4.2 Research Design

This study is based on an explanatory design using the mixed method approach. An experimental quantitative method is used since the main aim is to explore the statistical differences between EFL learners' previous and most recent writing of blogs to assess writing development. Similarly, exploring EFL students' responses to the application of the blog project and its effects on their engagement is another objective of the current study. The quantitative results were collected via the blog assignments and a survey, after which the qualitative data was gathered via interviews which were analysed at the end of the intervention.

4.3 Data Gathering Procedure

This research follows the method of Riswandi et al. (2019) in which the researcher collaborates with a teacher to do the experiment. The participants were divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. Students in the control group were taught via blackboard which was the main online learning tool during Covid 19, while the experimental group was taught through blogs. The researcher designed the class blog, posted instructions and activities, and commented on students' work. She also had a WhatsApp group with the students to discuss any issues related to the blog project. Students have four English classes per week and one of them is a writing session. Each class is 45−50 minutes long. All students receive the same English language curriculum and all are on the same level according to the standards stipulated by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. The students wrote the first draft during the class and had to publish it within the school week to allow their

classmates to comment on their work. They were able to edit and save drafts of their work during the writing process. The teacher divided them into four groups in which the leaders were responsible for managing, encouraging, and revising the comments of the group.

4.4 Sampling

The sample for this study comprised 39 Saudi female high school learners attending a private school. They were grade eleven students which is considered the second year of high school. They were in the second semester of the academic year 2020/21. As this research is an action research study during which the researcher needed to work closely with the students, it was difficult to include male participants due to cultural regulations. Moreover, the educational system in Saudi Arabia is gender based but it is worthwhile to point out that this limitation did not affect the study in any way.

The study was conducted using sequential sampling and a mixed method design in which the quantitative sampling informs the qualitative sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The sample was obtained using sampling and the participants were chosen randomly according to their accessibility and availability. The qualitative data sampling followed and was selected purposely to learn about the extreme cases that were classified in a positive or negative way during the intervention.

4.5 Data Gathering Tools

The materials used to collect the data in this study are blog post analysis, a questionnaire at the end of the intervention, and semi-structured interviews. The interview was adopted from (Yunus et al., 2013). The main instrument in the study is the analysis of the blog assignments to determine the progress of the students' writing. The first and last blog posts were analysed using a procedure similar to that of Alsamadani (2018) who compared pre-blog pen and paper writing with the last posts in the blogs. The comparison of the first and last assignments was based on certain criteria listed in a rubric adopted from Almalki (2019) which includes structure, coherence, and content. The questionnaire was in the English language and then translated to Arabic to provide a better understanding for the Saudi participants whose first language is Arabic. It is aimed to collect data on students' perceptions of using blogs for learning writing and engagement. The questionnaire was adopted from Almalki (2019) and Yunus et al. (2013) and has three dimensions: blogs for EFL writing, blogs for engagement, and blogs for feedback. The questionnaire contains 38 questions rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The questionnaire was designed on Google drive and distributed by the researcher via email and a WhatsApp link. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was reviewed by two experts in language education at King Abdul-Aziz University and Jubail University. As a first step to doing a descriptive analysis of the questionnaire, Cronbach alpha was used to measure internal consistency. The results showed a high level of internal consistency which indicated a reliable survey (perceptions of blogs) a=950 Cronbach alpha as shown in Table 2. Moreover, the questionnaire was given to four participants to identify any ambiguous items that might be misunderstood by the participants before submitting the last version.

The current study utilized interviews following the questionnaire as the second tool to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of blogs for writing and engagement. The interview was in Arabic to help students express themselves clearly. The transcripts were translated to English later on and revised by a translator. It consisted of the consent form and three parts: background information, the main questions, and the conclusion. The interviews lasted from 20 to 30 minutes and were recorded after obtaining the participants' permission. To ensure validity, the researcher did a trial interview with another researcher and the results were reviewed by two professors in the English Language Institute who confirmed its usability.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 The Blog Posts

A Mann-Whitney test was used to answer the first research question which seeks to investigate the extent to which EFL learners show progress in writing abilities using blogs in terms of creativity, accuracy, and content compared with the control group. The first and last writing samples were scored based on the rubric and the results were statistically calculated via SPSS. The results revealed that there was no significant difference between the two groups (0.953). This can be due to the small number of participants as 11 out of 18 submitted their writing in each group. Thus, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Similar findings were also obtained by Özdemir and Aydın (2015) who concluded that there was no significant difference between the two groups. Several factors may have contributed to these findings. The first writing assignment was about grandparents and their home, which is an interesting and familiar topic, while the last assignment was about a

dilemma which required thinking of a problem that occurred and how it was solved. Therefore, the first assignment was easier than the last (Almalki, 2019). To avoid this problem in the final study, the researcher will use pre- and post-tests. It is worthwhile to mention that the researcher could not pilot the study because it was online learning and the chance of cheating on the tests was high which may affect the validity of the results.

5.2 The Questionnaire and Interview

Students' responses to the questionnaire items were analysed based on the frequency percentages of the Likert scale scoring. The second question concerned the use of the blog as an educational tool. As shown in Table 1, Item 1, most students agreed that the use of the blog as an educational tool increased the level of engagement, which indicated that students have positive opinions of the blog. The largest frequency of agreement was found in item five (89%) in which students expressed that they would like to use the blog in the future. Item three (84% agreement) showed that students found the blog to be efficient. More than half of the students (70%) agreed that writing with blogs was more interesting than with the traditional pen and paper and (66%) enjoyed reading their classmates' blogs. Similarly, findings from the interview indicated that students prefer blogs to other writing methods. For example, one student said: "Blogs are better than classes because there are no deadlines and it is better than traditional classes because it is easier and more organized than handwriting."

Additionally, most of the responses (47%) agreed that writing in blogs is easy and engaging while (22%) disagreed and (29%) chose to be neutral. Scoring on the reverse item that indicated a dislike for the blog showed that most students (77%) disagreed with this item which means that they enjoyed the blog project. These findings are in accordance with Vurdien (2013) and Fageeh (2011) who pointed out that EFL learners found writing in blogs interesting, enjoyable, and engaging. Similarly, some students in the current study during the interview pointed out the advantages of blogs in terms of adding pictures, media, and a beautiful layout that made blogging more fun. They also appreciate the interaction through comments which create an interesting learning environment. For example, one student said:

> "I love to write a short paragraph and put it on my blog as I take beautiful pictures. I love to write a small sentence describing these pictures. People may see your writing, and you can have a page where you post your thoughts so you will develop your English writing and your talents in taking photos."

Table 1. First dimension: Learners' perception of blog and engagement

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. I think that the writing course with the blog task incorporated is more interesting than the traditional writing course.	70%	7%	3%
2. I feel that writing blogs is easier and more engaging than doing other writing assignments.	47%	29%	22%
3. I think using blogs in writing classes is more efficient.	84%	22%	0
4. I don't enjoy the blog project. (Reversed)	11%	11%	77%
5. I will still use my blog in the future.	89%	0	11%
6. I think that reading other classmates' blogs is interesting and enjoyable.	66%	25%	7%

The analysis of the second dimension (see Table 2) addresses the third question about students' perceptions of the blog as a tool to improve writing. The survey showed positive perceptions of the use of blogs in EFL writing. Thus, the majority of students (89%) think that completing assignments via blogs enhanced their writing skills.

In addition, a high percentage of the learners (96%) prefer checking word meanings online while blogging. Similarly, about (70%) of the students feel that blogs help them to practise vocabulary and learn new words as they read different posts. This is supported by the findings of the interviews showing that students learn while reading their classmates' posts, as one student pointed out.

> "It improves our writing and reading also as we have to read 4 writings. Writing depends on reading and unfortunately, we don't read a lot. Vocabulary banks also improved. There are students who learnt from others how to write a question in the introduction instead of a normal sentence. This encourages us to do better in the next essay. Even the titles we tend to choose now are more attractive."

Additionally, most of the students (77%) found that checking grammar online is easier with blogging. This is consistent with Zhang (2009) who pointed out that online blogging helps improve accuracy in terms of structure and vocabulary as it allows access to the internet and online resources. Accordingly, 44% of the students disagreed that their English grammar has not improved since they began blogging, while 29% agreed and 29% were neutral. This can be because features of blogs help students draft, revise and edit their work before

publishing at their convenient time. Moreover, writing for the audience raises the awareness of checking posts before being published (Almalki, 2019).

In response to item #12, half of the students (52%) preferred paper-based writing to blogs, 30% were neutral, and 17% disagreed. This in line with the findings of Almalki (2019) who found that some students prefer writing with pen and paper as they think it improves their handwriting. They also think it is easier to simply write on a piece of blank paper than to turn on a computer and type.

Table 2. Second dimension: learners' perception towards using the blog in EFL writing

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
7. I think that completing blog assignments can be helpful in enhancing my writing skills.	89%	7%	3%
8. I feel that the writing assignment in the blog task can be helpful in practising English words that I have learned.	70%	14%	7%
9. I prefer checking the meanings of difficult words in the online dictionary when blogging.	96%	3.7%	0
10. I learn new words when reading my friends' postings.	73%	21%	4%
11. In general, I feel that my English grammar has not improved since I began blogging (reversed).	29%	29%	40%
12. I prefer to write on paper rather than on blogs. (Reversed)	52%	30%	17%
13. Writing on the blog made checking my grammar easier.	77%	22%	
15. I think that incorporating blogs into a writing course is a way of integrating language learning with real life.	85%	11%	3%

The third dimension (see Table 3) also addresses the second question and clearly shows that students have a positive attitude towards online feedback in blogs. Almost all the students (93%) enjoyed receiving feedback from teachers and classmates and the majority of them (65%) liked making comments. This is in line with the findings of Lee (2010) who pointed out that learners enjoy posting and receiving feedback in blogs and perceive it as an interactive tool in which they provide support to each other. Therefore, most of the learners (69%) in this study did not feel uncomfortable or find it difficult to comment on others' postings or receive feedback. The findings also indicated that a number of students (26%) were neutral while a few (13%) feel uncomfortable about their friends' comments. This finding supported that of Fageeh (2011) who found that most students are comfortable with the interaction with their classmates through feedback.

High percentages of the responses in items #17 and #18, 83% and 78%, respectively, indicated that the comments are helpful in correcting structural errors which contributed to improving their writing. The inbuilt feature of editing in blogs makes it easy for students to edit their drafts at their convenient time after receiving feedback from classmates and teachers. Editing and revising are important stages in writing that involve a cognitive approach (Myhill & Watson, 2011). Along the same lines, this study found that 85% of EFL learners think that peer feedback fosters critical thinking in terms of being aware of error correction and analysis. This coincides with Huang (2016) who claimed that blogs help learners to become critical thinkers as they provide feedback on their friends' posts. This leads them to reconsider their own writing errors in addition to evaluating others' work.

Table 3. Third dimension: Learners' perceptions of online peer and teacher feedback and comments on blogs

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
17. Classmates' comments on my blog are helpful to me in correcting grammatical and spelling mistakes.	83%	16%	0%
18. Reading the comments and posts of my peers on the blog helped me to learn and improve my own writing.	78%	13%	9%
19. I like making comments on my classmates' posts.	65%	22%	10%
20. I enjoyed receiving peer feedback combined with tutor feedback, which gave me feedback from different perspectives.	93%	7%	0
21. I think that the teacher's comments are more helpful than peers' comments.	66%	34%	0
22. I found it difficult to comment on the blogs of my peers and the class blog. (Reversed)	4%	26%	69%
23. I feel uncomfortable about my peers' comments.	13%	26%	69%
24. I think that commenting on other classmates' blogs helps me to become more analytical and critical in my writing.	85%	7%	7%
25. I became more aware of error correction in writing my tasks and of providing feedback.	87%	13%	0

5.3 Class Discussion and Comments

Community-based learning can foster engagement through interaction and cooperation (Carlisle et al., 2017). Students' active participation in feedback and discussion using blogs showed remarkable engagement. There were 105 comments in the course of the study and the last posts received a larger number of comments than the preceding ones. The teacher's and students' comments included supportive expressions, compliments, and words of encouragement which showed their engagement and enjoyment. According to Klem and Connell (2004), the support and friendly learning environment can increase students' engagement. The comments also pointed out errors, offered corrections, and suggested alternatives. Therefore, evaluating their peers' writing enhances learners' critical thinking (Zhang, 2009). Moreover, communication and critical thinking are factors that can foster engagement (Mebert et al., 2020). The focus of the class discussion was on communication and critical thinking. For example;

> "How do animals influence our lives?" "If you had a time machine, where would you go? Why?"

Students were active in class discussions and during the intervention as they responded to each other's thoughts. They also shared ideas and opinions while engaging in the discussion which fostered their cognitive ability (Blackmore-Squires, 2010). Below are some examples of the class discussion.

> "It's really hard to choose a specific time, but I think I would go to ancient times to discover the secrets and history of things we see now."

> "Yay, imagine living with scientists and living the experience of discovering new things and theories."

Evidently, students have positive perceptions of the interaction and collaboration afforded by blogs in terms of feedback in the comments box and in class discussions. Below is an example of one participant's thoughts.

> "Blogs also enhance cooperative work as once a student asked her friend about the meaning of a word which was misspelled and then she corrected it. Also, the encouragement between students can be clear in their comments such as keep it up, amazing… etc."

6. Conclusion

Weblogs are collaborative platforms where students can practise writing in a community-based learning environment. Blogs are flexible in terms of time and provide students with a place to write, share ideas, and communicate. Although the results of this study do not show significant progress in writing, students have positive perceptions of the blog as an educational tool in EFL writing. Students are also optimistic about the use of the blog as it encourages engagement through friendly interaction and collaboration.

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