Blogging in EFL Learners' Academic Writing

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Abstract

Firstly known as "weblog", soon shortened as "blog" in 1999, blogs have always been an important part of online culture. Since then their static nature has changed, and they have offered new opportunities, which in return has started to draw the attention of both educators and researchers increasingly. Soon they have assumed a critical place in language learning, specifically in writing classes. As a result of their nondecremental role in language learning, this study aimed to investigate the effects of using blog in academic writing and determine the attitudes of learners of English as a foreign language at tertiary level. The results indicated a considerable increase in the success scores of the students who used blogging in academic writing, confirming that blogging improves students' writing skills. In parallel with this finding, students also expressed positive attitudes towards the use of blog in their writing activities, which together could imply that students with positive attitudes towards blogging are likely to become better writers.

Keywords: Blogging, Academic Writing, EFL

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INTRODUCTION

We are living in the age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the effects of which can be seen in every field. Young generations are already born in these Technologies, and this has led to a paradigm shift, from traditional methods to more interactive and autonomous learning by the help of rapidly emerging digital technologies. And it is not surprising that English Language Teaching (ELT) as a field which has always been open to innovations and first tester of the new technologies, has been experiencing this inevitable change. This also requires a continual investigation of their use in different circumstances with different learners in education.

Blogs are popular examples of such technologies that allow users to easily maintain content on the Internet by making the most use of digital graphics, video and audio. They are authentic, interesting and communicative; they can serve a variety of purposes in a foreign language learning classroom (Pinkman, 2005). They can be used as a forum for teachers and students to express their opinions, co-produce ideas and share information in order to communicate in an environment of English (Campbell, 2003; Hiler, 2002). Since they require no technical knowledge, it is almost is easy for everyone to use blogs and become instant publishers on the Internet. Furthermore, they offer 'multimodality' which includes texts, images, audio and video files, and links to the other websites and this makes it an ideal tool to be used for all four language skills (writing, speaking, listening and reading) in language classes. Despite their potential to be used for all skills, blogs offer their greatest potential for writing.

Blogs and Writing Skill

Blogs offer many advantages for language learners, especially to develop writing skills. They offer writers a free space to express and share their ideas with the Internet community. Hence as Richardson (2006) suggested they serve as a constructivist tool for learning where students learn as they construct knowledge from ideas and shared information from other student's Works. Cequena (2013) reported that students' writing skills were enhanced when they used blogs for essay writing together with their positive perception on their peers' constructive feedback on their blog posts. Similarly, Akdag and Ozkan (2017) found that the blog is an effective tool for students to improve their English writing skills which enhanced the students' eagerness to write and fostered autonomous writing. Nadzrah and Kemboja, (2009) report that students believe that using the blog as a writing tool in the class is a good idea which helped them write better and effectively since blogging allowed them to be creative although they had limited proficiency in the language. Ward (2004) used a blog in his reading/writing class at the university level and found that blogging provides an alternative way to teach and assess authentic writing and reading skills and also using blogs might increase student interest in their reading and writing. McDowell (2004) suggests that using blogs for educational purposes can enhance learning opportunities since they increased interactivity and promoted reflective activities among students, who also expressed positive feedback on the use of blogs as learning tools. Sun (2010) asserted that blogging might help develop students' writing skills, increase their motivation, and stimulate learner autonomy. Despite all these findings; however, there are also some findings such as Blackstone et al. (2007) which state that students who lack self-confidence may be hesitant to let others read their thoughts since blogs are open to the public.

All in all, though blogs are not new, they have evolved a lot since they were first introduced. They are still novel, and their contribution to writing skill at an academic level still needs to be researched. Thus this study aims to contribute to the growing literature on the use of blogs at an academic level, specifically trying to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the effects of using blog in academic writing?

2. What are the attitudes of learners of English as a foreign language at tertiary level?

METHOD

In this part of the study, there are explanations about the model of the research, study group, data collection and analysis of the data.

Research Model

This research aims to determine the effects of using blog in academic writing and the attitudes of learners of English as a foreign language at tertiary level. To that end, pretest-posttest control group quasi-experimental design was employed. In quasi-experimental design which is described as the best research design that explains the cause-effect relationships between the variables, the treatment is performed after the pretest and at the final stage, posttest is given to determine the effect on dependent variable (Fraenkel, & Wallen, 2011). The research design is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Design View

Group	Pre-Experiment	Experimental process	Post experimental
Experimental	PreTest (AWS)	Traditional environment + Blog	PostTest (AWS)
Control	PreTest (AWS)	Traditional environment	PostTest (AWS)

AWS:Academic Writing Success

Independent variables: Blog + traditional environment and traditional environment

Dependent variable: Academic Writing Success

The experimental group used class blog in addition to traditional method, whereas the control group received only traditional learning to compare both methods and see the effects of using blog on students' success. Moreover, an attitude questionnaire has also been distributed to the experimental group students to determine their attitudes towards the use of blog in writing classes. It was developed by Fageeh (2011).

Study Group

The study was carried out on the university English preparatory students. While determining the participants' criterion sampling, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was employed and great attention was paid to meet the criteria determined for the purpose of the study. Pretests were applied to determine the preliminary information of the participants in two branches which were determined before the study was iniated and also to check the homogeneity of the distribution. After the pretest, it was determined that there was homogeneity (Levene Test F = .363, P> .05) between the two branches. In the study, unrelated samples t-test was performed to test whether there was a significant difference between the pretest scores of the students in both groups before the experimental process. The difference between students' arithmetic mean scores was not found significant (t (36) = .258, p> .05).

Table 2. Study Group Gender Distribution

Study groups	Gender Female		Male		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Control Group	12	63.15	7	36,84	19	100
Experimental Group	16	84,21	3	15,78	19	100
Total	28		10		38	

As detailed in Table 2, the study was carried out with a total of 38 students, 16 female and 3 male students who formed the experimental group, and 12 female and 7 male students who formed the control group. The study ended with the participation of all students in the posttest.

Data Collection

In the research, a writing rubric was used to evaluate the paragraphs that the students wrote in the pretest-posttest stages, and a questionnaire was used to learn their opinions about the use of blogs in writing classes. 3 academicians (1 Prof. and 2 Associate Professors) from the English language teaching department and 2 English instructors that are specialized in testing took part in the development of the rubric. Depending on the cumulative normal distribution used to test the statistical significance of the KGO ratios obtained as a result of the Lawshe technique calculation, the minimum value at $\alpha = .05$ significance level should be .59 for eleven experts (Lawshe, 1975). It has been concluded that the experts have reached an excellent consensus (KGO> .99; $\alpha = .05$) on the suitability of the rubric created with a group of 5 experts, KGO = 1 (Lawshe, 1975). The rubric developed in line with the data obtained was found to be suitable for measuring the paragraph. The participants in the experimental group were also requested to answer a questionnaire related to their perceptions and perspectives towards the use of blog in writing classes. The questionnaire was developed by Fageeh (2011) by reviewing a variety of sources in a CMC environment. It consists of two factors and total 14 items. Pretest and posttest applications were done in the classroom environment invigilated by teachers.

In the first stage, both groups were asked to write paragraphs about the same topic as a pretest and the writing skills of the students were evaluated by using the developed rubric. Afterwards, both groups (control and experiment) received information and training on writing academic paragraphs. A class writing blog was created and the students in the experimental group were asked to share their written assignments on the class blog during the research. The control group handed in their assignments to their teachers in the classroom. After eight weeks, both experimental and control group students took posttest and their paragraph writing skills were evaluated. In addition, the attitude of the experimental group students towards the use of blog in writing class was examined.

Data Analysis

For the pretest and posttest, both groups were asked to write paragraphs on the same subject with an interval of 8 weeks, and they were evaluated with the rubric. Since there are two groups which are homogeneous and the distribution fulfils the assumption of normality, t-test was used in analyzing the data. In order to test the effectiveness of the environments, a 2X2 split-plot pattern was used and two-factor variance analysis was performed for mixed measurements to analyze this research question. The significance of the difference between the mean scores of the groups was interpreted at the level of 0.05 and the SPSS program was used in the analysis of the data.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented below according to the order of sub-problems and research methodologies.

Findings for academic paragraph writing success

A split-plot pattern of 2X2 was used to test the effectiveness of the learning environments in which students were learning. In the pattern, the first factor refers to 2 separate experimental environments (traditional environment and traditional + blog), and the second factor refers to the measurements before and after the experiment (pretest-posttest) (Büyüköztürk, 2004). For the analysis of this research question, two-factor variance analysis for mixed measurements was performed. The pretest-posttest average scores and standard deviation values of the environments are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Average and Standard Deviation Values of Learning Environments

Group	N	Pretest $\overline{X}$	S	Posttest $\overline{X}$	S
Control	19	6.58	2.36	12.00	2.29
Experiment	19	6.37	2.66	16.47	2.54

The results showed that the average success score of the students in the traditional setting was 6.58 before the experiment, and then increased to 12.00 after the experiment. The average success scores of the students in the environment where the blog is used in addition to the traditional environment are 6.37 and 16.47, respectively. Accordingly, it can be said that there is an increase in the success scores of students who study in both the traditional environment and the environment where the blog is used additionally. Two-factor ANOVA results on whether the changes observed in the achievements of students in two different environments show a significant difference are given in Table 4.

Table 4. ANOVA Results of the Pretest-Posttest Scores of the Environments

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	sd	Mean Square	F	p
Between subjects	355.908	37			
Group (Individual/Group)	86.329	1	86.329	11.550	.002*
Error	269.079	36	7.474		
Within Subjects	1636.500	38			
Measurement (Pretest-Posttest)	1145.066	1	1145.066	244.338	.000*
Group*Measurement	104.224	1	104.224	22.240	.000*
Error	168.711	36	4.686		
Total	2058.270	119			

P*<.05

The results showed that the success of students studying in two different environments significantly differed from pre-experiment to post-experiment, in other words, the common effects of repeated measures factors on success were found to be significant (F (1-36) = 22.240, p <.05). This finding shows that both learning environments have different effects on increasing students' success. The environment in which the blog was used has been found to be more effective in increasing students' achievements.

Findings regarding the use of blogs in the academic paragraph writing process

In the study, the reliability coefficient, the suitability of the sample size and whether the data showed normal distribution were examined. As a result of the analyzes detailed in Table 5, the analysis techniques to be applied for the purpose of the study were determined.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Ort.	Sd	max	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach Alpha
Blogs and the way I changed my writing	19	36.42	3.64	40	-.341	-.1.819	.908
Blogs and my attitudes towards learning writing	19	26.47	3.37	30	-1.411	1.927	.863

*p<.05

As a result of the analysis, the Cronbach Alfa internal consistency coefficient of the measurement tool, which measures the levels of students' "Blogs and the way I changed my writing" was calculated as .908, and "Blogs and my attitudes towards learning writing" as .863. The examination of Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient results indicate that both factors have high reliability. The analysis performed to determine whether the measurement tools show normal distribution showed that the arithmetic mean, mode and median values were close to each other and were within the range of kurtosis-skewness coefficients (± 2.0). In addition to these values, the Q-Q graph was also examined and it was observed that the points in the graph were within the boundaries evaluated above or close to 45 degrees. In addition to the fact that the values of kurtosis-skewness in the range of ± 2.0 in a data set are acceptable criteria for normal distribution (George, & Mallery, 2003), it was concluded that the measurement tools used in the study showed normal distribution when the Q-Q chart data were evaluated. In the study, the relationship between students' "Blogs and the way I changed my writing" and "Blogs and my attitudes towards learning writing" was analyzed with correlation analysis as well as descriptive statistics. Accordingly, as a result of the analyzes made in Table 1, it was determined that the experimental group students' Blogs and the way I changed my

writing "(X = 36.42) and" Blogs and my attitudes towards learning writing "(X = 26.47) levels were quite high. The relationship between the students' "Blogs and the way I changed my writing" and "Blogs and my attitudes towards learning writing" levels was examined with Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis (r). The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 6. The Relationship Between "Blogs and the way I Changed my Writing" and "Blogs and my Attitudes Towards Learning Writing"

	N	r	p
Blogs and the way I changed my writing	19	.865[*]	.000*

*p<.05

When Table 6 is examined, a positive, very high and statistically significant relationship was found between the students' "Blogs and the way I changed my writing" and "Blogs and my attitudes towards learning writing" (r = .865, p <.05).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study, which aims to determine the effect of blog usage on success in academic paragraph writing process and to determine students' attitudes towards blog usage, is designed in a semi-experimental design. The results obtained in the study together with suggestions based on these results are presented below.

An increase in the academic paragraph writing success scores of the students in the pretest and posttest in both control group (pretest $\bar{x}$=6.58, posttest $\bar{x}$=12.00) and experimental group (pretest $\bar{x}$=6.37, posttest $\bar{x}$=16.47) was observed, which can be attributed to the practice and training that both groups received during the natural flow of their academic English writing course. However, the comparison of the posttest scores of the groups shows a considerable increase in the success scores of the students in the experimental group which confirm that blogging improves students' writing skills. And which is in line with the other studies that investigated the use of blogs in the foreign language classroom to develop writing skills (Campbell, 2003; Şimşek, 2003; Jones, 2006; Kelley, 2008; Anderson, 2010, Armstrong, 2010).

To put it more explicitly, students might have felt more autonomous, which is described by Dickinson, (1996) and Little, (1995) as taking the responsibility in setting up one's own learning strategies and should be promoted as an explicit goal of teaching and learning (Little, 1995). The notion that the blogs can enhance the learner autonomy is supported by the findings of other researches Blood, (2002); Godwin-Jones, (2006); Oravec, (2002). Also, knowing that their paragraphs would be seen not only by their teachers but also by their peers must have forced them to have more self-control on their writing, led them to be more careful when choosing their words, structures and use academic writing style. These are all strongly expressed by the students in their answers they gave to the items of the scale. "Writing on the blogs made me more careful about sentence and paragraph structure, check word choice and word spelling more carefully and check my grammar more carefully". These findings imply that students with positive attitudes towards blogging are likely to become better writers.

It was determined that the levels of "Blogs and the way I changed my writing" and "Blogs and my attitudes towards learning writing" were quite high. The analyzes conducted to determine the relationship levels revealed a positive, very high and statistically significant relationship between the two factors. This relationship implies that students have developed positive attitudes towards the use of blog in academic writing which in return rewarded them with higher writing scores. In other words, it can be alleged that students are pleased to improve their writing skill by using blog and benefitting from its affordances over the traditional method. They believe that blogging can improve the quality of academic writing. They feel comfortable writing on the course blog and blog can motivate them into more active, interactive writing. These positive attitudes towards writing are also in accord with other studies carried out by positive attitudes towards writing (Fageeh, 2011; Jones, 2006; Lee, 2010; Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Kelley, 2008).

Consequently, this study revealed some insightful findings on the use of blogs in language learning to improve writing skill of learners of English as a foreign language at tertiary level. Studies larger than the sample size of this study, which is a limitation of this study, could be carried out. Also, this study merely focused on the use of blogs in academic writing. Further studies that focus on the use of blogs with other language skills at different levels could be conducted.

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