

Blogging: Promoting Peer Collaboration in Writing

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Abstract

Writing has not been an easy task to all learners of a foreign language. Different ways have been used in arousing learners' interest to support existing traditional pedagogic practices. For instance, weblogs have been incorporated in the teaching – learning process as to make it meaningful where the construction of knowledge comes from students and the help from peers. This study employed a qualitative approach and triangulation along with thorough observations, informal interviews, and personal reflections. Learners were encouraged to collaborate more through sharing ideas, and write in the process of learning. The study depicts how blogging is beneficial to the learning of a foreign language where learners have to delve in the task which is totally different from the conventional writing task practiced within the classroom only. The findings show that respondents' active participation and contributing assistance were continuous throughout the process. They indicated obvious readiness, eagerness and satisfaction.

Keywords: Blogging, Writing, Teaching, Learning, Foreign language, Collaboration

1. Introduction

This study intended to discover how blogging helps in promoting peer collaboration among students during the process of writing. Learning English in the 21st century has mostly changed from being teacher dependent into learner-centered. This paradigm shift has changed the teachers' role from a provider to become a resource person. Likewise, learners need to master certain skills which include critical thinking, communication and collaboration. The emergence of information and communication technology (ICT) has increased the possibilities of using technology as a powerful medium of delivery, instruction, and communication (Lim, 2003). The digital age provides huge resources for students to learn from and work with others.

Blogging offers the potential to increase collaboration between the teacher and the students and among the class as a whole, which resulted in the increasing of understanding of the subject being taught. The use of blogs in classroom is parallel to the emergence of technologies worldwide and in the educational system itself. Learning English has changed; from a mere conventional static process to a more innovative and authentic process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching Writing in the Digital Age

The Malaysian government has introduced various initiatives to facilitate greater integration of ICT to enhance the effectiveness of education. This was outlined in the country's ICT Master Plan, Vision 2020, which calls for sustained and productivity-driven growth, which can be made possible only with technologically literate and critically thinking workforce (Belawati, 2003). The need to integrate ICT in teaching and learning at all levels of education is deemed essential.

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ICT does not change the teacher's work, but it offers possibilities for change. Teachers need to readjust and update the techniques they have been using and to question their personal attitudes towards writing. The various changes brought by ICT in education are of great help and offer a wide range of interactive tools to forestall students' major problems and to render writing a more interactive and enjoyable experience (Zenaidi, 2006).

ICT is used to support teaching, to sustain interest in students and help them to feel relaxed and enjoy the learning process. Students can develop their writing skill when they use writing to carry out activities that are meaningful to them. These students might have problems because writing combines so many different brain functions: language, memory, motor function, ability to generate ideas, to organize ideas or find the right words to convey ideas, the ability to understand and apply rules, for instance, in grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and even handwriting (Center for Implementing Technology in Education, 2006). While there are no easy answers to these types of general problems, there are ways to create an environment using a variety of technology tools in which students will be more successful. By doing this, teachers are tapping into the students' strength to overcome their weaknesses.

Teachers need to encourage students to write; they need to promote writing by responding to the content of the text rather than to the form; and they need to provide multiple opportunities for students to engage in writing for reasons that are real and important to the individual student. The more teachers use interactive ICT tools to teach writing, the more they are enthusiastic, positive, motivated, passionate, and engaged (Zenaidi, 2006). Consequently, teachers are able to pass this passion on to their students. Finally, writing is no longer a passive, tiring, boring and frustratingly hard task. Instead, it becomes something that is regarded as a natural way of communicating, naturally linked to oral language and reading, an individual and a shared experience, an interactive experience, challenging and fun, and promoted by ICT.

2.2 Teaching Writing Using Blogs

The modernization in technology has brought about many changes in the pedagogical aspect of teaching and learning. The process has dramatically changed during the past decade where teachers usually resort to overhead projectors as the cutting edge media to be used in their teaching (Postlethwait, 1972 in Brescia & Miller, 2006). However, the range of possibilities in exploring with new technologies has grown dramatically. The growth has been largely fuelled not only by the mere presence of technology indeed, but the expectation on the part of learners that technology will be used as a tool to enhance the classroom experience and their learning (Tileston, 2004). The eagerness of learners in receiving new technologies has caused them to embrace web-logs, commonly referred to as "blogs" (Oravec, 2003; Oravec & Philleo, 2003). Blogging has emerged and has been accepted by most, especially becoming popular with the youth, who actually make up a large part of the community of bloggers. It has emerged as the leader among a variety of web-based instructional possibilities as it allows learners the ability to interact in a more public venue sharing their thoughts, ideas, interpretations, hopes, and fears with anyone willing to spend time looking on the Internet (Martindale & Wiley, 2005).

2.2.1 What is a Blog?

A blog is short form for weblog (Jacobs, 2003), and is written by individuals or groups of people on the World Wide Web. It is analogous to an online diary or journal that has open access. A blog can focus on any topic and is frequently updated in reverse chronological order so that the most recent entry appears first. Blogs allow readers to leave written comments as well as links to other websites, photos, and sound files. Blogs are one of the next directions in e-learning and e-education (Ellison & Wu, 2006) as they provide creative spaces for learners to co-produce ideas and knowledge (Hiler, 2002). Often described as an online journal, the concept of blogging is more complex where bloggers open their writing to the Internet. Bruns and Jacobs (2006) note that the use of blogs has proliferated, not only for individuals but it goes to communities who use blogs to communicate and share ideas with one another.

2.2.2 Blogs in the Classroom

Blogs should not be used as a substitute for teachers or as the only tool in the teaching and learning process even though learners are said to be very skillful with computer or computer-related technology. All proven methods should be incorporated in classroom teaching and as any other method, blogs can supplement and enhance traditional teaching methods (McDowell, 2004). Some advantages according to McDowell (2004) include:

- a) Providing a centralized place for regular writing practice,
- b) Allowing the teacher and other learners to comment and provide feedback on individual posts, and

c) Giving a voice to students who may not feel comfortable speaking aloud in a classroom setting or who are overshadowed by the more vocal students.

Utilizing weblogs is an excellent way to fuse educational technology inside the classroom. It provides an arena where self-expression and creativity is encouraged. Its “underdetermined” design yet intuitive and easy to learn (Cassell, 2002) makes it equitable for both genders in many age groups and simple for teachers to implement.

Blogs are both individualistic and collaborative. They promote self-expression, a place where the author can develop highly personalized content (Huffaker, 2005). As a kind of online learning, blogs offer greater flexibility to the learners. They have the freedom to study at any time, at any place, and at their own pace. This definitely can increase learners’ motivation. According to Dornyei (2001), “The relevance of autonomy to motivation in psychology has been best highlighted by the influential ‘self-determination theory’ which states that freedom to choose and to have choices, rather than being forced or coerced to behave according to someone else’s desire, is a prerequisite to motivation.”

Another important outcome of using blogs in classroom is that it allows the students the experience of learning in a novel way which may include texts, graphics, pictures, sound and videos. This novelty increases their motivation and helps them in comprehension (Krajka, 2004). Ferdig & Trammel (2004) noted four distinct learning advantages for blogging: the use of blogs a) helps students to become subject-matter experts, b) increases their interest and ownership in learning, c) gives them legitimate chances to participate, and d) provides opportunities for diverse perspectives both inside and out of the classroom.

2.3 Promoting Peer Collaboration

The digital age offers huge resources for learners to work together and learn from each other. What can be seen in most school systems is the tendency to encourage competitive rather than co-operative learning. Inevitably, these students will be the future workforce which requires them to work as teams. Pan (1999) posits that knowledge is a social construct, built through collaborative efforts and dialogue among persons with different perspective. In order to encourage a collaborative mindset, it is appropriate to socialize students into acceptance of and respect for viewpoints rather than their own. This is important as learners observe and internalize the process of learning through peer interaction which is modeled by their peers (Marie & Coope, 2002). Peer collaboration should not only be seen when students are completing their tasks but the benefits that it can produce to students in the long run. They will be trained to work together on a variety of topics and resolve conflicts, which in the end will help them to learn about their differences, their interdependence and perhaps motivate them to another level.

Instead of being alone, they will be helped by others. Thus, anxiety and uncertainty are reduced as students find their way through complex or new tasks. The situation is no more the traditional direct-transfer or one-way transmission in which the instructor is the only source of knowledge or skills, the knowledge holder or disseminator, but rather a coach or facilitator (Fauziah et al., 2004). Through using the learners’ experience, meaningful understanding can be encouraged (Chisholm, 2005). Moreover, Gokhale (1995) mentions that, in addition to the need to perform, learners not only take ownership for their own knowledge but are responsible for their group members learning as well. Teacher’s intervention is significant in the success of group learning. Therefore, “recognizing and building on their knowledge and experience and responding to their needs” is important for teaching and learning (Gultig et al., 1998).

3. Methodology

This study can be defined as an ethnographic case study which focuses on describing the activities of a specific group and the shared patterns of behavior it develops over time (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). The primary data collected were used for the purpose of revealing the ‘big picture’ about the effectiveness of blogging in promoting peer collaboration among students in the learning of writing. The study used the case study design of seven groups of students in a government secondary school in Penang Island, Malaysia. The use of this method emphasized description and interpretation within a bounded context (Merriam, 1990) with the purpose of presenting the case of promoting peer collaboration through blogging within a certain time frame. The central focus was on the observation of learners’ attitudes towards accepting blogging as a writing tool and their personal perspectives towards blogging. In this study, various data collection methods were employed. Data were collected from readings, observations, and interviews. Later, these were analyzed and narrated from their opinions. The instruments used in the data collection were classroom observations, interviews, and students’ opinions through e-mail so that a richer description of the study was obtained.

The process of using multiple methods, data collection strategies, and data sources to obtain a more complete picture of what is being studied and to cross-check information is called triangulation (Gay et al., 2006). The strength of the process is that the weakness of one is compensated by the strength of the other. The data collection procedures carried out for this ethnographic case study consisted of three stages, namely, (1) the preliminary stage, (2) the preparatory stage, and (3) the final stage/in-depth study.

3.1 The Preliminary Stage

In this stage, the researchers collected different kinds of documents on the experience studied. Some issues were identified and later grouped together into categories which become the instrument in the observation form. Students were informed and introduced to blogs and blogging and an informal discussion was carried out to know their level of knowledge of the Internet, the use of e-mails, and some basic knowledge of downloading or uploading articles or images. Basically, most of the students have their own e-mails, and the know-how of using the Internet. Unfortunately, many were unaware of blogs but preferred My Space or Friendster more.

3.2 The Preparatory Stage

This is when all instruments were prepared. Blogs were created, designed and ready to be posted. Students were introduced to their blogs and then allowed to explore so that they would have the hang of it before other topics were dealt with. Different kinds of shortcomings were accounted and listed down in order to find some justifications for them. There were three instruments used in the study: observations in the classroom, interviews with students, and personal opinions by students through e-mails. All these were employed to collect relevant data for the study. The observation form was prepared and commented by an expert. Items were scrutinized in making sure that they were valid and able to be measured. The structured interview questions were also prepared and commented. As far as possible, a simple language was used to make sure that students could understand without having to explain more. The audio recorder was used to record the interviews.

Four items were categorized in the observational form which includes: (1) attitudes and motivation, (2) peer work collaboration, (3) learner autonomy, and (4) writing skill. There were eight classroom observations conducted throughout the study. The contents in the classroom observation form consisted of the above-mentioned four categories with each category divided into its respective focus.

3.3 The Final Stage/The In-Depth Study

At this stage, the observations were carried out while students were doing their tasks. Detailed notes were jotted down during the process while at the same time the researchers tried to help those groups who needed help. Having collected the data, transcribing the interviews, the evidence from the repeated classroom observations, and the personal opinions were done. Opinions were then grouped through a process of guided data reduction which was done by forming categories from the raw data obtained to describe the data condensed (Tesch, 1990). One of Guba's (1981 in Gay et al., 2006) criteria for validity of qualitative research is to establish an 'audit trail' where external auditor assisted to examine the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Triangulation in terms of using various methods of data collection contributes to the verification and validation of qualitative analysis in many ways like (1) checking out the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods, and (2) checking out the consistency of different data sources within the same methods (Burns, 2000).

The interviews were carried out at the classroom and preferably in an informal mode. A specified set of questions was used to elicit specific information from the case students. Using a structured interview format allows the qualitative research to ask all the participants the same series of questions (Gay et.al, 2006). To ensure the quality of the structured interview, the researchers had used questions that varied from convergent to divergent, which include a mixture of open-ended and closed questions. A closed question (convergent) allows for a brief response such as yes or no. Subsequently, an open-ended question (divergent) allows for a detailed response and elaboration on questions in ways that the researcher might not have anticipated (Gay et al., 2006). Data were also collected from students' personal opinions which were sent through e-mails to the researcher after all the procedures had been completed. These opinions were collected as a source to compensate for students who were a bit shy to express themselves during the interview, and who felt that they were able to give a better opinion or judgment if they were able to see what they were saying.

4. Findings

4.1 Peer Collaboration

In a teaching and learning environment, help that comes from peers are more acceptable compared to those coming from the teacher. Usually, students and their peers are able to help each other better due to their similar age, interest, and common understanding. However, in certain cases, teachers do play a role in assisting their students in the class.

4.1.1 Work in Groups

Many participants like working in groups, and they mentioned it without any hesitations. When the question was posed, 59.1% of them sounded very sure of themselves. Their answers were very firm:

“Good!” [CS2]
“Mm..Very good!” [CC3]
“Mm...Great!” [A2W4]
“Fun!” [W1]
“Yes.” [WS3]
“Aaa...yes!” [bG1 & bG2]
“Aaa...fine!” [GG2]
“I enjoy to blogging in a group.” [CC1]

About 27.3% of the participants showed that they like working in groups but not much eagerness was shown. Only 4.5% of the participants did not give any response.

“Okay. We can change our idea.” [WS1]
“Okay.” [A2W1, A2W3, CC2]
“Aaa...okay.” [W3]
“Quite fun.” [GG4]
“Aaa...I think...aaa...fine.” [WS4]

In another instance, 9.1% of the participants showed that they would like to have their own blogs so that they can work on it by themselves. Most probably, since the blog was shared by a few participants and there was time constraint, the participants felt that they needed to hurry so that the other group members were able to write their posts too.

“...For me, I think it's just, just okay because I want my own blog...and because I can create as I like.” [CS3]
“Aaa...quite fun but I think I want to have my own blog.” [GG3]

4.1.2 Group Work Helps in Writing

Around 81.8% of the participants agreed that group work helps them in their writing because they could get help from other members of the same group, and members from other groups.

“Yeap!! I can improve my writing, my words...that's all.” [CS2]
“Improve my language.” [CC2]
“Of course!” [GG3]

However, there were about 18.2% of the participants who did not sound sure of themselves when answering the question.

“A bit.” [WS2]
“Sometimes.” [WS3]
“I think yes, maybe.” [GG2]
“Aaa...sometimes.” [A2W4]

4.1.3 Working in Groups is Challenging

In constructing a learner-centered environment in writing activities, students usually have to work in small groups. However, working in groups is not always easy but a challenge to students who have to build positive interactions in order to foster social skills and noble values. They learned certain values such as team work and not being selfish. They knew that even in their own groups, which they had chosen on their own at the beginning of the research, differences still exist.

“.....Sometimes they do not cooperate in groups. It’s difficult to do blogging.” [CC2]

“Sometimes I was angry because someone in my groups did not cooperate.” [WS1]

“But the most important is blogging in groups teach I about friendship and we must not be selfish when do work together.” [CC3]

“.....Sometime my group and I not have same opinion and taste. That was the challenge begins and how I handle this challenge to make sure that we don’t fight each other, and stay as teamwork.” [CS3]

However, they managed to overcome the problems and no conflicts arose till the end of the study.

4.1.4 Has Peer Collaboration Increased in Blogging?

From the observations carried out, peer collaboration exists and could be seen clearly. All participants within their group and those from other groups collaborated in completing their posts. They were willing to fill in each others’ gaps and they were sharing their learned skills in blogging. During observations, it was clearly seen that participants help each other with spelling, finding appropriate words in the dictionary and checking sentence structures. Participants were also ‘teaching’ those who were unable to download and upload pictures or photos in their posts. There was also division of work especially in A2W’s group. As soon as they knew what the topic was for the session, they quickly assigned their participants to search for relevant materials. Peer collaboration was obviously seen amongst participants because of their different abilities and know-how. They managed to help one another in many areas and they seemed to enjoy themselves in a different environment.

4.1.5 Writing Task

Writing is not an easy task to carry out mostly by students with average proficiency, where the environments at home and in school do not really support them. The introduction of blogging, which was really new to the participants, was really welcomed by them. They felt that they had more ideas to write and easily helped by their peers. This is because a few restrictions were lifted. They had other factors to motivate them such as having the freedom to include their own ideas, not restricted to formats, being more informal in writing and able to listen to songs.

4.1.6 Learn and Use New Vocabulary

The introduction of blogs was aimed as an eye opener for the participants to see new words and gather new information, since many of them seldom take the opportunity in forcing themselves to read other materials than their school text books. Learning new words will not just help them to progress much if they are unable to use them in their writing task. Many of the participants found that they have learned new words during the process, but a few have forgotten what the words were. It was also found that there was a mixture of answers when it comes to usage because the participants will use it (50%), sometimes may use it (27.3%), or will never use it (22.7%), as shown below:

“Yes...such as ‘hilarious’.” [WS1]

“If it is...necessary to use this word, I will use it.” [A2W1]

“Mmm...what can I say, yes, yes. One example, aaa...one of me word...aaa...that...aaa...’tak ingat’(cannot remember). Yes, I usually use in my speaking and in other subject when I write.” [W4]

“Yes... ‘withstand’.” Usage: “Aaa...sometimes.” [CC1]

“Yes... ‘distinction’.” Usage: “Mmm...Yes.” [CC3]

“Aaa...yes. Aaa... ‘cow dung’.” Usage: “Aaa...sometimes.” [A2W4]

“Yes...aaa... ‘patient’.” Usage: “Yes.” [CC2]

“Yes. Article...aaa...about global warming.” Usage: “Sometimes.” [W1]

“Yes...example...mmm...I can’t remember!” Usage: “In other subject. I not use in speaking.” [W3]

“Sometimes...aaa...example is ‘exotic’, ‘martial art.’” Usage: “Sometimes.” [GG2]

“Yes... ‘reckless’.” Usage: “Sometimes.” [GG4]

“Aaa...yes! ‘Contestant’.” Usage: “Mmm...I, I use it.” [GG3]

“Mmm... ‘extraordinary’.” Usage: “Aaa...yes.” [A2W2]

“Aaa...yes... ‘extraordinary’.” Usage: “Mmm...no.” [WS4 & WS2]

“Yes... ‘celebration’.” Usage: “No.” [WS3]

“Yes...aaa... ‘crook’.” Usage: “Aaa...yes!” [WS2]

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the study show that promoting peer collaboration through blogging produces positive results even to students with average proficiency level. However, the amount that each student gains from this kind of environment is very subjective since learning a language is not exactly the same as learning other factual subjects. The differences among students, their attitudes, abilities, interest, likes/dislikes, and so forth, could affect on how much they would benefit from this strategy. Nevertheless, an environment which creates an avenue for students to share not only ideas but their differences will eventually help students achieve their goals in learning. Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* emphasized the important role of the environment. According to him, the idea of ZPD is the student's performance, under the guidance of adults or co-operation from their peers; it would be better than using their own ability alone, and in this way, they can achieve a higher level of potential development (Mok, 2008). He continues that, according to Vygotsky, student's early understanding normally comes from the support of educated adults, teachers or peers through interactions. Such support would enable students to make further progress in the zone of proximal development, and which is beyond student's independent ability to achieve.

The implication which can be seen here is that students benefit support and guidance from better students, and that collaborative learning is to be encouraged in the classroom. To expand knowledge, lecturing, demonstrating and rote learning are no longer suitable, if they were the only strategy used in the classroom. Spady (1992) states that the learning process should be structured in such a way that all children can learn. However, he informs teachers that although all children can learn, it does not necessarily happen at the same time; that all learners will learn the same things in a fixed period of time. The desired outcome of a learning task may not be achieved during peer collaboration as some learners within the group may require additional time to internalize, understand and master the skills needed to complete the task. Therefore, peer collaboration has to take into account and accommodate for different ways of learning as well as the rate at which learning may happen (Gultig et al., 1998). Berlach (2004) indicates that peer collaboration focuses on the ability of a learner to demonstrate the skills acquired during peer interaction rather than on the development of cognitive schemes. Thus, it suggests that the quality of content internalized is of less importance than achieving the stipulated outcome.

In addition, enabling peer collaboration needs to be carefully considered as there is no guarantee that all learners have learnt. In any collaborative efforts, dynamics play a significant role in attaining the goal. Teachers should not misunderstand Vygotsky's concept of mediation where both teachers and students are engaged in an activity to create learning. Having students to help each other in completing task does not mean teachers are free from carrying out their responsibilities. The role of an active teacher is to move the learner from a current level of understanding to a level of understanding that is just beyond what he already knows (Byers, 2007). Classroom roles change: both teachers and students take on more complex roles and responsibilities (Smith & Macgregor, 1992). The use of computer in the writing class was well-received by the participants of this study.

They really enjoyed themselves and were able to work effectively as a group. No problems arose in dealing with group members during the class observation. Even though dissatisfaction occurred while blogging, they learned to deal with the problems and accept them as a challenge. In terms of motivation, it is evident that blogging motivates the participants who had never been exposed to blogs before. Cunningham (2000) contended that affective factors such as attitudes towards writing and motivation can be improved. Nonetheless, whether students have improved their writing abilities by learning new vocabulary, or so forth, is something subjective and needs more thorough study. Becoming autonomous is difficult to perceive and not evident in the observation. Students need more opportunities to build confidence in knowing what they actually want in their learning process. On the other hand, teachers should provide ample opportunities and guidance in making them more responsible towards their learning.

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