Building Collaborative Academic Writing through Blogs: Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper attempts to provide the outcomes resulted by using Blogs in teaching Academic Writing course to 75 freshmen studentsof three faculties at Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh. Students shared their experiences and posted writing assignments on the blogs as an online portfolio. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to collect and analyze the data including pre-tests and post-tests which were mainly gathered through students' writings posted to the blogs, peer feedback, questionnaire andinterviews. The findings showed that the participants made quite outstanding participations-sharing, discussing and arguing in English successively. Further, the findings of the study reveal that collaborative learning made them more dynamic on language fluency and grammatical accuracy and provided experience of receiving and providing peer feedback using blogs that was integrated into an online instruction of teaching and learning. The findings and discussion of this paper may assist practitioners in implementing blog for peer feedback process and designing suitable activities for the use in EEL classrooms.

Keywords: Blog, Collaborative, Academic writing, Students, EFL, and Perceptions

Introduction

A blog has been defined as "a web application that displays serial entries with date and time stamps" (Throne & Payne, 2005). Blogs often include a comments feature which allows the reader to engage in discussion with the blog's writer and other readers by directly attaching a posting to the daily or topical entry (Radzikowska, 2003).

The added value of using blogs means that students produce contents that are instantly accessible on the web, which can potentially attract comments from other users, whether they are classmates or anonymous bloggers (Murray et al., 2007).

Considering the accessible feature of blogs to the mass people, it is considered as a potential platform for social communication and may be a meaningful space for educational resource and virtual learning. In the last decade, the benefits of using blogs as a pedagogical tool

have been widelyadvocated across a range of educational contexts. As Harwood (2010) notes that blogs can be a useful and adaptable learning aid that can promote student centered learning through blog activities and assignments that encourage students to communicate closely within their groups. Among several scholars who claim the strengths of using blogs as a teaching and learning tool in education, because it allows students to reflect on one's learning in the process of developing an online portfolio.

Several benefits of blogs for foreign language learning were listed by Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011).Among those, include the scaffolding which is promoted by having lessknowledgeable learners interacting with their more advanced peers and being exposed to theirwork and the autonomy and empowerment in fostering learners' confidence and desire to write. Due to the highly collaborative nature of blogs and the fact that learners have both their own and their peers' writing constantly available, they have an advantage for increased reflection and awareness about language that may foster a greater level of self-expression and self-evaluation (Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti, 2011).

Sun's findings (2009) suggest that blogs can constitute a dynamic forum that fosters extensive practice, learning motivation, authorship, and development of learning strategies.The area of EFL/ESL teachingand learning is no exception. It has been claimed that blogs help to develop learner autonomy and grammatical awareness (Harwood, 2010; Illés, 2012) as well as provide opportunities forpeer learning and collaboration (Dieu, 2004; Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011).

Hewett (2000) and Pelletieri (2000) emphasize its positive effects on improving grammar proficiency and fluency .An emerging body of studies and reviews on the use of blog peer feedback ineducational contexts have recently been attracted a great deal of research attention in development of EFL skills.Therefore, no surprise, a number of research studies have explored the use of blogs inEFL teaching and learning (Harwood, 2010; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004, Zhang, 2009).

Objective

This paper explores on the use of Blog in an EFL writing especially Academic Writing instructions. There is a great paucity and a need for studies on the use of blogs in the Bangladeshi EFL context. It describes the process involved in incorporating blog into the writing instructions and how the blog was used. It also presents and discusses the findings of content analysis of students' blog posts, comments, and aspects related to blog peer feedback such as students' views on experience of blog and peer feedback on various activities in the Academic Writing course. The rationale behind this study was to make students feel sufficiently comfortable to express themselves in written English since they were free to decide whether or

what to publish on their blogs without being forced. The aim of this study is to confirm that the collaborative and, at the same time, blogs can lead to enhance students' motivation for interaction and self-expression for the development of academic writing.

Research Method

The mixed method, consisting of qualitative and quantitative approaches, was used in this study. Factor analysis and statistics were performed to analyze the collected data.

Research Participants

Seventy-five (75) freshmen students divided into three groups from three faculties (Veterinary Science, Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology and Agricultural Engineering &Technology) of Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh were selected for conducting this research. During this study, they enrolled in a course offered by the Department of Languages. Each group was advised to operate one multi author blog site for posting their assignments and giving peer assessment and feedback on their assignments as well as sharing their English knowledge and exchanging ideas and opinions.

Research Instruments

The research instruments were the pre-test and post-test, the three group blogs based on five components of Jacobs et al. (1981) ESL composition profile and the learning satisfaction survey questionnaire.

Pretest and Post-test

Pre-test and post-test were developed. On the 6th week before the implementation of blog, a pre-test was employed. The post-test was administered on the 18thweek after the blogging activities completed. Meanwhile, the grouped students were advised to elect one group leader for registering and operating their blogs.

Blogging Sites and Materials

All participants were required to register and join their own blog. Thus, three group blogs for each group of students were registered and operated by the three groups of students (one is for DVM students, anther is for Economics, and the other is for Engineering). During Weeks 7-17, there were four writing assignments posted on each group's blog for students to complete, make comments, and give feedback on other's works. The materials of the four writing assignments were five components of Jacobs et al. (1981) ESL composition profile (content, organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics). For each group, four writing tasks designated to complete. After the completion of each assignment, it was compulsory for each and every student to comment and give feedback on other's writings. In addition, the students had to

revise and review their writings based on the comments and feedbacks. The instructor facilitated the students by guiding and checking the group members' comments.

Survey Questionnaire on Blog's Theme

In order to explore students' learning satisfaction toward Blog integrated learning, a 5-point Likert satisfaction survey questionnaire (5=strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=neutral; 2=disagree; 1=strongly disagree), consisting of 6 open-ended statements were developed.

Table 1. Themes for interviews on blogs		
Interaction(sharing/social skills)	:	"A great way to improve students' writing skills, enhance interaction among classmates and a platform to provide feedbacks"
Motivation/encouragement	:	"It is interesting, motivates students to write more, since students love to access internet"
Performance	:	"Improves students' performance"
Exposure (audience)	:	"Works as an exposure involving students through posting their activities"
Collaboration	:	"Collaborative learning makes me put more efforts to English writing"
Effective and innovative tool	:	"A very innovative method of encouraging students to write"

Research Procedure

The study lasted for 18 weeks (one semester) in 2018, containing 16 instructional weeks and two examination weeks. The first six weeks of the semester were the traditional face-to-face instruction. From Weeks 7 to 17, a blended learning with blogs was implemented. The post test, the self-efficacy scale, the satisfaction survey, and interview were conducted in the last week.

Findings and Discussions

Results of the Pre-test and Post-test

According to the statistical results, the overall mean scores of the pre-test and post-test were 65.69 and 77.019 respectively, indicating the students made significant progress in their academic writing.

Table 2: Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Overall Writing Performance for all three groups

	Mean	SD	T	p
Pre-overall performance	65.69	9.11	-6.86	.000
Post-overall performance		77.019		7.18
Pre-content	20.37	2.98	-8.04	000
Post-content		23.97		1.94
Pre-organization	14.19	1.86	-5.73	.000
Post-organization		16.73		1.23
Pre-vocabulary	13.97	2.06	-3.08	.008
Post-vocabulary		15.53		2.14
Pre-language use	14.76	2.87	-3.30	.005
Post-language use		17.20		2.47
Pre-mechanics	3.01	.56	-2.71	.016
Post-mechanics		3.32		.46

In Table 2, from the paired sample t-test analysis, significant differences in terms of overall performance as well as five components of Jacobs et al. (1981) ESL Composition Profile are noticed. In post-tests, all the blog groups obtained higher scores compared to pre-tests. This indicates that students'collaborative writing performance via blogs was improved and this shows that online platforms like blog increased students` writing ability and helped them performed better. Thus, it can be emphasized that authentic language interaction can be achieved via blog which boosts students' confidence level and improve their English language performance.

Table 3: Results of Pre- and Post-tests for the three individual Blog Groups						
Faculty & Degree	Test	N	Min	Max	Mean	Sd
Veterinary Science (DVM)	Pretest	25	16.00	64.00	40.5615	17.20422

N=25						
	Posttest	24	52.00	94.00	77.0000	12.21060
Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology (B. SC. Ag. Econ (Hons.) N=25	Pretest	25	32.00	78.00	58.0000	17.72811
	Posttest	25	81.00	97.00	91.2500	5.88794
Agricultural Engineering & Technology (B. Sc. Ag. Engg.) N=25	Pretest	24	19.00	71.00	41.5000	17.06887
	Posttest	25	55.00	96.00	81.1429	16.79709

In Table 3, the independent t-test of the post-test scores indicate that there is a significant difference in the development of academic writing in all groups separately in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use as well as mechanics.

Results of Peer Assessments on Blogs

Writing assignments and post them on their blogs were mandatory forall group members and they had to review and comment on others' works within groups. Students were encouraged to review and write comments as many as possible. Content analysis was employed to analyze the three group students' engagements on the blogs. According to Table 4, the students of Economics made the most comments and feedback on their peers' postings. In addition, the same students did the maximum reviews on their writing tasks. Comparing with the other two groups the DVM students made the least comments and feedback.

Table 4: Peer Assessment Analysis on the three Blogs				
Group	Number of Students made comments	Number of comments made	Number of feedbacks given	Number of reviews being made
DVM	23	73	65	36
Economics	25	93	82	45
Engineering	23	79	67	35

The content analysis results on the three blogs revealed that the comments on peers' work were mainly made about grammatical errors, such as tense and sentence structures as well as suggestions on the use of vocabulary.

Results of the Learning Survey Questionnaire

The statistical results of descriptive analysis on the responses to the survey questionnaire show the obtained mean scores ranging from 3.84 to 4.33 indicate the students' have a highly positive attitude towards blended instruction and agreed on the statements of the questionnaire (Table 1). "Collaborative learning makes me put more efforts to English writing" obtained the highest mean of 4.33 indicates that this blended instruction for Academic Writing in English course was effective, interesting, and satisfying. Furthermore, the blended learning activity with peer assessment and blogs also enhanced their academic writing and improve English competency.

Factors Influence Learning

The formal satisfaction survey obtained .956 of Cronbach Alpha Coefficient, indicating the survey has obtained a high level of consistent reliability. In order to further investigate the factors that influenced the students' learning, the exploratory factor analysis was employed.

The initial factor analysis resulted in 5 extracted factors, which explained 69 % of the variance (Table 5). The extracted factors are categorized into (1) course arrangement and implementation, (2) use of Blogs, (3) interpersonal relationship, (4) Academic Writing in English, and (5) the fulfillment of learning.

Table 5: Total variance explained in factor analysis			
Factor	Initial Eigenvalues	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	13.46	46.76	46.76
2	2.38	8.24	55.35
3	1.75	5.77	60.78
4	1.33	4.58	64.24
5	1.15	3.63	69.03

The collected data were analyzed statistically. Content analysis was also taken into consideration to analyze the peer comments on the three blogs. The content validity and reliability of the survey questionnaire were also established. The satisfaction survey obtained a .952 of Cronbach Alpha, indicating the questionnaire obtained a high level of internal consistency and reliability in this study.

Summary of the Survey Questionnaire

Most of the students responded to the opened-ended questions and wrote that they liked this approach. It was a new approach and interesting experience to them. Some students responded that it was an opportunity for them viewing others' works, involved them in an online group discussion platform, enhance English learning effectively. Some pointed out that different students may possess different levels of English proficiencies, thus the comments from the peers need to be very carefully examined. Contrary, some students mentioned that they had an opportunity of learning from others' comments or writings, which were very beneficial to them. Additionally, some students mentioned that they were able to learn some new vocabulary and usages. In addition, both audio and video materials posted on blog's wall were very important and effective for the students to develop communication skills.

Recommendations

From the above results, this study makes a number of useful recommendations for incorporating blog into the EFL context. First, since blog usage was effective in improving students' academic writing, teachers should make effort to integrate blog in students' learning process, such as asking students to use blog for connecting to their peers and add learning materials from different resources. This necessitates the need for learning activities which enhance information acquisition through blog. In this regard, teachers who plan to incorporate blog in their EFL teaching are recommended to design collaborative learning activities which ask students to exchange information on target topics through blogs with classmates or other people, if possible native speakers of English. Second, further research could be done to compare the results achieved by BAU students with other students to investigate possible differences and allow the generalization of the results achieved. More research is needed to replicate the study in different subject areas or skills and at different populations. Third, to make valid assessment of students posts and participation, there is a need to create a comprehensive framework that can achieve this objective. This can be done by using clear communication protocols and requirements for evaluating all types of posts.

Conclusion

The instructional variety, topics, themes and activities helped students to demonstrate impressive collaboration. They were attracted to the blogs, so as to read the posts, add comments, answer questions, post their views, agree or disagree with other's posts. The data and results seem to support the proposition that this type of blended instruction for the writing course was very effective since students participated actively and completed all assignments at their own pace in their leisure time outside the classroom. While participating in the blog activities, members of the blog groups showed great interest in what their classmates and instructor were posting to the group; therefore, they tended to log in daily to check what others had posted to the discussions which lead students to be more active and more responsible for their own learning and move forward towards student-centered approach rather than teacher-centered approach.

Consequently, students' friendships, communication, and sense of trust were established and enhanced.Thus, it can be concluded that the students possess positive attitude toward Academic Writing through blogs and blended teaching &learning approach into EFL course.

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