

The Pedagogical Potentials of Weblog in Developing Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract

Writing is viewed hugely important, yet it is a daunting task for both English as a second language (ESL) teachers and learners. With the development of different approaches to teaching in general, numerous approaches to the teaching of writing have been evolved such as product, process and post-process approaches. Although these approaches have changed the role and status of writing over the years, writing still appears as one of the difficult areas to tackle as students lack academic writing skills and they are de-motivated to write in English. In view of this, researchers show an interest in looking into the possibilities of using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools for language teaching and learning. This paper discusses the application of the latest ICT tool, which is known as weblog as an effective tool in ESL classrooms. The aim of this study is to explore the pedagogical potentials of weblog in developing the writing skills of ESL learners. In particular, this paper wishes to identify and discuss the characteristics of weblogs as an appropriate and effective tool in assisting the learners in various ways to improve their writing skills. This study will further highlight the benefits of web logging activities and the impacts of these activities on students' motivation to write in English as autonomous learners.

1. Introduction

Writing, as one of the key components of language learning is undoubtedly essential in tertiary education. However, studies have shown that students consider writing as an extremely difficult area in learning English. Students lack writing skills and they are de-motivated to write in English. Thus, discovering new ways of teaching and learning would be beneficial to all involved in teaching and learning. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in teaching and learning have offered many ways of improving the learner's writing skills such as using online forum, wikis, and weblogs. Although various studies have shown the possibilities of using weblog in accomplishing tasks in the classroom, in particular, using weblogs as online portfolios or journals where students can improve their writing, research on the use of weblog as a tool for the process writing approach is relatively new and it is an area for further research.

This paper discusses the integration of the latest innovation of information and communication Technology (ICT), which is known as weblog with the process writing approach for learner language development. The aim of this study is to explore the possibilities of using weblog as a pedagogical tool in developing the writing skills of ESL learners. In addition, this study further discusses the benefits of web logging activities to develop the students' writing skills, and the impact these activities can have on students' motivation to write in English as independent learners. The paper is based on an observation conducted as part of an ongoing research in 2010, that was carried out in an ESL classroom. The



students participated in this project, possess basic writing skills and average computer literacy. The students are between 18-20 years old and are studying at pre-university level.

This is a short version of the paper and is structured into three sections. The first section explains the process writing approach. The second section focuses on blogging as a form of ICT in second language writing. Then it moves on to discuss where and how blogging can contribute and facilitate the process writing approach. In other words, how weblog assists students to improve their writing skills. In the latter part, the paper presents samples of web logging activities in an ESL classroom which are based on the researcher's class blog and learner blogs to highlight the practicality of the methods and discussions.

2. Process Writing Approach

There have been numerous approaches to the teaching of writing in the history of language teaching. These writing approaches have evolved with the development of different approaches to teaching in general, which have in turn contributed to the changing role and status of writing [1]. The pedagogical approaches to second language writing emerged at different times since 1960's. They are Product, Process, Post-Process, Socio-cultural and genre approaches which have contributed to the development of the writing pedagogy.

The rise of the process approach marks the beginning of a new era for second language writing pedagogy. The traditional product-oriented view of writing which regards writing as linear and fragmented procedure is thus contrary to the actual writing process. In process-oriented writing, writers are able to make modifications to the written text or make changes in their original plans as they review their writing.

3. Weblogs in Second Language Writing

The term weblog as initiated by Barger in 1997 refers to a personalized webpage which is arranged according to the reverse chronological diary form. Aaron Campbell (2003) suggests that blogs can be used for personal, educational, journalistic and commercial purposes [2]. In terms of blogs in education, Campbell states that there are three types of blogs that can be used in ESL classrooms: the tutor blog, the learner bog and the class blog. He suggests various positive and possible uses of these weblogs. The integration of blogs in English classes report that web publications provide the learners with a real audience and a collaborative environment where students interact by proving and receiving feedback and thus, enhancing their writing skills [3].

Arani (2005) conducted a research on using weblogs to develop writing, reading and communication skills in English for Specific Purposes among non-native speakers of English at Kashan University of Medical Sciences in Iran [4]. And the results showed that students preferred to write on the weblog than the traditional ways, and weblogs can improve English in the context of ESP.

Tekinarslan (2008) conducted a study on the experiences of an instructor and an undergraduate class who used blogs in their teaching and learning in Turkey [5]. He reports that blogs as web publishing tools can be used to improve the students' writing skills while improving other skills such as information searching and literature review skills. Similar results were shown in the study conducted by Davi et al. (2007) [6]. The researchers affirm that blogs can be used in various disciplines as they enhance liberal learning, critical thinking skills, reasoning skills etc. in classrooms.

On the other hand, Process Writing Approach emphasizes writing as a process or a developmental task in which prewriting, multiple drafting, and revising are considered important in assisting learners to develop

their writing skills. In the process of multiple drafting, peer review which is referred to as peer editing, peer evaluation, or peer response comes in as a step where the writer is exposed to meaningful interaction with peers, a greater exposure to ideas, and new perspectives on the writing process [7]. According to Warschauer (1997), the potential of collaborative learning through CMC is related to the Social Constructivist Approach which was developed by Lev Vygotsky [8]. Lev Vygotsky claims that the construction of knowledge is socially oriented. He believes that learning occurs through interactions with and within the environment in which these interactions take place and cultural tools influence learning to a great extent. One of Vygotsky's (1978) major claims, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the distance between the actual development level of a learner and the level of potential development under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers [9]. In view of this, the application of weblogs with the Process Writing Approach, which is the focus of this paper, appears to offer additional benefits to the ESL learners.

In implementing weblogs in the writing process, all the students in the class participated in this research project are expected to have their own weblog provided by Blogger.com. All students' blogs are connected to the class blog which is created by the researcher/lecturer for cross references. Students are mainly involved in developmental writing and after drafting students publish their work in their blogs. These writings are based on the lessons, discussions and assignments they need to complete. As the next step, students are asked to provide feedback on their peers' work using the comment feature of the blog. Before students start commenting on and critiquing their peers' work, students are given a set of guidelines which can help them to be focused. With the help of the comments they receive from their peers, students are to revise and edit their work. As the last step, the final version of the essay is published in the blog for the researcher/ lecturer to do the evaluation. On the other hand, the class blog which is linked to all the students' blogs provides additional and supplementary materials for the students. For instance, reading materials, useful links to online dictionaries and referencing systems, guidelines etc.

The following discussion includes the various ways that weblogs benefit and facilitate in particular the feedback and revising stages of process writing approach. Having the features to support the peer feedback in process writing, weblogs offer more flexibility than face to face peer feedback in terms of time, place and pace. The discussion highlights how beyond the four walls of the classroom the learners are provided with the opportunity to take time to reflect and engage in the activities when convenient and at their own space.

Weblogs make the revising stage easier where the learners can add what they would like to express and also can change any points that they think are not appropriate. It is easy to edit and revise using weblogs because the learners can make use of the edit post and delete post features since typed feedback can be amended any time before being forwarded to the writer.

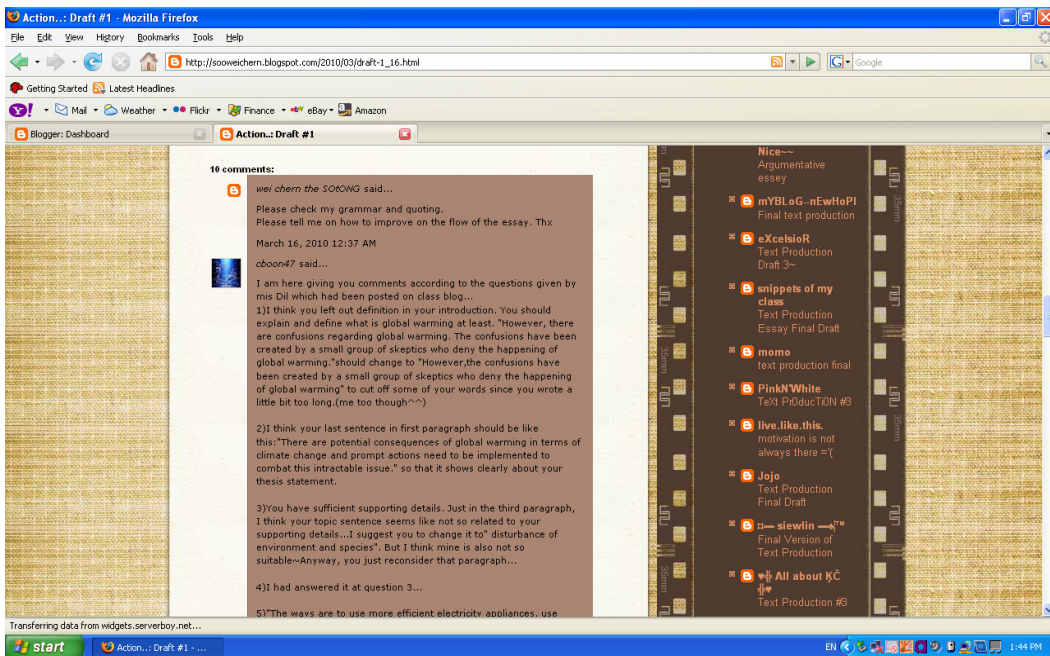
Weblogs can be used as a tool for observation: student-based observation and teacher-based observation. In the latter, weblogs provide teachers with total access to every individual learner blog where students' progress can be monitored. Based on the students' interaction and comments, the teacher can guide them to be focused and observe students' negotiation. In the student-based observation, weblogs enable the learners to observe their own progress. Learners are benefitted as they can refer to the previous comments and re-read all the drafts which are stored in their weblogs. This retrieval feature allows students to enhance their autonomy in making corrections and reflecting on their writing. This motivates students to reflect on the process of learning in which they are actively participated in a recurring learning cycle. Figure 2 shows a learner blog where students post their assignments, tasks etc. in drafts.



Figure 2

Using weblogs in the stage of feedback in process writing approach is less “face-threatening” compared to asking the students to mark and comment a paper in red ink, cross out some sentences, or use question marks and exclamation marks in the margins. This may make the student writer feel embarrassed, and unwilling to accept the suggestions provided by the peers [10]. The traditional way of providing feedback using pen and paper limits interaction as the students do not get to see all their peers’ writing. Whereas in weblogs, the learners can become the followers of their peers’ blogs using the follow weblog function and get access to read all the drafts and comments posted. Figure 3 shows a sample of comments posted to a learner blog by a peer.

Figure 3



Another way of providing feedback in classrooms is in form of oral comments where students have to see their peers in a face to face setting. This is considered not only time consuming but it also makes students feel uneasy to listen to their peers when they point out their weaknesses. Weblogs is a useful tool to help students feel less stressful as they do not need to see their peers when giving and receiving feedback. Weblogs give this opportunity to learners to feel more comfortable. In addition, some learners have problems with their own listening comprehension skills which create tension in oral feedback process. Using weblogs, they feel less pressure since they do not struggle or understand the peers' accent or unknown words and other related issues.

In proving feedback in process writing, it is important to instruct and guide the learners how to give effective and helpful comments. This is another stage that weblogs can benefit process writing. Guiding students to give comments not only helps to improve the quality of feedback but also assists students to write and revise their own drafts in a more analytical and skillful way. The following snapshot is from the researcher's class blog set in 2010 where she has given her students a set of guidelines on peer feedback.



Figure 4

The findings in this research emphasize that weblog-based peer review sessions in process writing approach undoubtedly can teach students writing skills, particularly writing to a real audience. The learners are able to see different ideas and points of view other than their own and revise their drafts effectively with the suitable features in the weblog. Learning to effectively review the peers' drafts may then ultimately result in creating better self-reviewers.

4. Conclusion

Although the vogue of blogging is becoming increasingly popular, the use of weblogs in process writing approach is still in its stage of infancy. Therefore, studies on this area will add to the area of teaching and learning in numerous ways. It will provide the pedagogical practices and guidelines for the educators to



incorporate blogging as a tool in the writing process. To ensure optimal participation of learners and maximize the level of motivation to write in English, blogging opens new doors for teachers to systematically monitor the students' writing skills. In addition, the implementation of blogs into the curriculum offers encouragement and self esteem to students, and allows language teachers to actively engage with their students. As such, this will help to enhance the areas of independent learning (learner autonomy), and student-centered learning.

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