

Integration of Weblogs in Developing Language Skills of ESL Learners

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Learner development greatly depends on language awareness which not only focuses on language itself, but also a cognitive reflection upon language functions. Language awareness can be fostered by giving learners various choices in learning activities. The variety of choice stimulates learner interest and has a potential for learner development. This paper discusses the application of the latest innovation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which is known as weblog for learner language development. The aim of this study is to explore the pedagogical potentials of using weblog as a tool in developing the language skills of pre-university ESL students in a university in Malaysia. In addition, this study further discusses the impacts weblogging activities can have on students' motivation to write in English. Drawing on students' blogs as well as the responses given by students in interviews and questionnaires the paper ends by highlighting the benefits that can be acquired as a result of the integration weblogs in language learning classrooms.

Keywords: weblogs, activities, writing skills, information and communication tools (ICT).

INTRODUCTION

Writing is viewed as an important component of language learning. However, studies have shown that students find writing as a daunting task in learning English. Students lack writing skills and they are de-motivated to write in English. Thus, discovering new ways of teaching and learning this skill 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, and 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 application of the latest innovation of information and communication Technology (ICT), which is known as weblog for learner language development. The aim of this study is to explore the pedagogical potentials of using weblog as a tool in developing the language skills of pre-university ESL students. In addition, this study further discusses the impacts weblogging activities can have on students' motivation to write in English. Drawing on students' blogs as well as the responses given by students in interviews and questionnaires the paper ends by highlighting the benefits that can be acquired as a result of the integration weblogs in language learning classrooms.

The paper is structured into three sections. The first section will explain the process writing approach. The second section will focus on blogging as a form of ICT in second language writing. Then it will move 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.

PROCESS WRITING APPROACH

The field of research in writing is fairly young in comparison with the fields like language acquisition or reading. However, 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 (Holmes 2009). 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. However, since the focus of this paper is on weblogs in Process Writing Approach, the review of literature will cover the areas of process oriented approach, and weblogs in second language writing.

The rise of the process approach marks the beginning of a new era for second language writing pedagogy. Hayes and Flower's (1980) model of the writing process was arguably a turning point in the field, triggering a growth in empirical studies, which still flourishes today (Beard et al., 2009). 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 (Flower & Hayes, 1981, cited in Joe, 2009). The focus of writing was on two major views: An expressive view which was free and creative and a heavy influence of a cognitive view of writing. Later, a third view was recognized as part of the process, a social view (Jones 2006). According to Heald-Taylor (1986, cited in Jarvis, 2002),

Process writing is an approach which encourages ESL youngsters to communicate their own written messages while simultaneously developing their literacy skills in speaking and reading rather than delaying involvement in the writing process, as advocated in the past, until students have perfected their abilities in handwriting, reading, phonetics, spelling, grammar and punctuation. In Process Writing, the communication of the message is paramount and therefore the developing, but inaccurate, attempts at handwriting, spelling, and

grammar are accepted, know that within the process of regular writing opportunities students will gain control of these sub-skills.

In this regard, Nunan (1999) clearly states the process approach is very different from the traditional product-oriented approach. Whereas the product approach focuses on writing tasks in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms teacher supplied models, the process approach focuses on the steps involved in creating a piece of work. The primary goal of a product approach is an error-free coherent text. Process writing allows for the fact that no text can be perfect, but that a writer will get closer to perfection by producing, reflecting on, discussing and reworking successive drafts of a text (Simpson 2009). This shift requires greater learner participation and responsibility in the learning process, and with this, the teacher’s role has been shifted from an evaluator of the written product to a facilitator and co-contributor in the writing process. The collaborative effort between teachers and learners result in discovering what written language is and how a piece of writing is produced.

Stages of the Writing Process	
Prewriting	Clarifies the purpose of writing, thoughts are generated through talking, drawing, remembering, brainstorming, reading, note-taking, searching for information, free associating and questioning to generate ideas.
Drafting	This is a rough, exploratory piece of writing in which ideas are organized and written up into a coherent draft, this stage of writing should not be evaluated, but supported. Topics and concepts are generated through quick-writes, free writing, graphic organizers, journals, learning logs.
Feedback	At this stage the writer receives the most guidance on how to improve his or her writing skills. Responses at this stage typically focus on meaning, not correctness. Activities include conferencing, getting feedback, sharing work; responding to comments, suggestions, reflecting on own writing (meta-writing). Through the questions and comments raised by the instructor or peers, the writer discovers, clarifies and refines his or her writing. Accepting criticism/comments is important at this stage.
Revising	Revising means re-writing the paper, building on what has been done, in order to make it stronger. Revision adds coherence, variety, transition, emphasis and details. Revision eliminates irrelevance, wordiness and inconsistencies.
Editing	Editing is to check for and correct errors in grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, vocabulary and spelling.
Publishing	In this stage students share their final versions of writing with an audience.

Figure 1: The stages of process writing approach (Adapted from Silva,1987; Pennington, 1996; Raja Musa, 2004; Susser, 1994.)

The process approach to writing emphasizes a cycle of revision during which students draft, edit, revise, and redraft their work. In this approach, feedback from teachers or peers and the opportunity to revise written work based on the feedback are considered to be keys to students' development as writers, and the role of instruction in novice learning and appropriation of writing has become a focal concern. Teachers are to treat "the emerging text as an improvable object" (Haneda & Wells, 2000, p. 443 as cited in Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura & Valdes, 2004).

Figure 1 demonstrates the general stages of the process writing approach. Thus, the process-oriented writing approach offers a new viewpoint in giving responses to students' written work and a new way of providing feedback. Unlike the product-centered model which considers writing as a product to be evaluated, the process-oriented approach regards writing as a complex developmental task. It pays more attention to how a discourse is created through the negotiation and discovery of meaning than to write sentences without any mistakes.

WEBLOGS IN SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

Technology is increasingly becoming popular and it is being exploited for teaching and learning all over the world mostly because of its flexibility in terms of time, place and pace. The trend toward computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and computer mediated communication (CMC) in language learning have influenced the teaching of writing in both L1 and L2 settings.

To date, several studies have been conducted to examine how technology can be used in EFL and ESL classes. Majority of the studies have focused on the potentials of computer technology with regards to teaching and learning languages more effectively. Dunkel (1990), for example, states that the possibilities of computer technology as a pedagogical tool can increase (1) self-esteem, (2) vocational preparedness, (3) language proficiency and (4) overall academic skills of language learners.

The pedagogical benefits of CMC have been facilitated mainly through both synchronous and asynchronous modes. In synchronous mode of communication, students communicate with each other or the teacher in real time via internet chat sites and in asynchronous mode students communicate in a delayed way such as via e-mail (Li, 2009). CMC seems to encourage human interactions that support the language learning process. This greatly helps the learners to have meaningful, collaborative interactions regardless of culture within or across classrooms and therefore, CMC can be considered as an excellent medium to enhance new social relations.

In view of this, some of the studies focused on the benefits of using computer testing, students' perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning with technology, web-based peer review and its impacts, and the impact of technology on writing. In conceptualizing these, researchers found various information and communication technologies that can be considered as pedagogical tools to facilitate teaching and learning. These include wikis, online forums, podcasts, bulletin boards and weblogs.

The term weblog as initiated by Barger in 1997 refers to a personalized webpage which is arranged according to the reverse chronological diary form. Weblogs are kept on the web as the term weblog suggests and connected to other internet locations via hyperlinks (Du & Wagner, 2005). Campbell (2003) suggests that a weblog (or blog) can be considered as an online journal that can be updated constantly by an individual. Further he explains that since the number of users of blogs has been increased tremendously due to various reasons; blogs can be used for personal, educational, journalistic and commercial purposes.

Weblog with its dynamic features is identified as an individual or social communication channel and also as a great educational resource. In light of the pedagogic values of blogging, researchers are determined to trial blogging as a tool for learner language development. Several researchers have written about the possibilities of using weblog as a teaching and learning tool in education. Among them is Campbell (2003) who states that there are three types of educational 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.

One of the significant and emerging genres in ESL context is using weblogs to improve students' writing skills. 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 (Bragg, 2003).

Nelson and Fernheimer (2003) also indicate that blogs as an effective tool for collaborative writing projects for small groups. In particular the brief, frequent blog posts help students in the writing process. They also indicate that writing in a group blog helps students to share individual work because it facilitates revisions that can be negotiated between writer and readers. (Jones, 2006)

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. 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 environment at Abant Izzet Baysal University, Turkey. He reports that blogs as a web publishing tool 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). The researchers affirm that blogs as can be used in various disciplines as they enhance liberal learning in classrooms. In addition, Davi et al. claim that having engaged in various blogging activities, students improve their critical thinking skills, reasoning skills and also written and oral communication skills.

WEBLOGS IN PROCESS WRITING APPROACH

Studies on weblogs in educational context suggest that blogs can be used as online journals, learning logs, reflective journals, e-portfolios, group discussions and collaborative learning spaces etc. (Campbell, 2003b; Kennedy, 2003). 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.

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 (Hansen and Liu, 2005). According to Warschauer (1997), the potential of collaborative learning though CMC is related to the Social Constructivist Approach which was developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978). He 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

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 (Vygotsky, 1978)

This paper wishes to identify and discuss the characteristics of weblogs as an appropriate and effective tool in various stages of process writing approach with emphasis on the stages of peer feedback and revising. The paper is based on an observation conducted as part of a research (2010) that is being carried out in an ESL classroom. These students possess basic writing skills and average computer literacy. The students who are between 18-20 years old are studying at pre-university level. They are required to take English as a Second Language as a compulsory subject as part of the course which prepares them for the degree program. The researcher/ lecturer is using weblogs in developing these young scholars' writing skills.

In implementing weblogs in the writing process all the students in this class are expected to have their own weblog provided by Blogger.com. Blogger.com is a website where anybody can create a blog free of charge. Students can create their blogs in Blogger.com in three simple steps. They can also customize the features depending on their needs and interests. 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 and as the last step the final version of the essay will be 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. In a computer-based teaching and learning setting, the learners are not required to log on to a computer at the same time to provide feedback as weblog is an asynchronous mode of communication. Therefore, it is beyond the four walls of the classroom which provides the learners 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 teachers can guide them to be focused and observe students' negotiation. Upon reviewing students' negotiations, if the teachers find a peer or an individual student making general or superficial comments, they can redirect them toward specific comments and critical and analytical negotiations.

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. Kennedy (2003) reports on the integration of blogs into English classes in secondary schools and states that students are able to sharpen their skills through receiving and providing feedback when publishing their work on the blog where they have a real audience. Furthermore, he explains that in this way they are involved in a cycle of reflective learning.

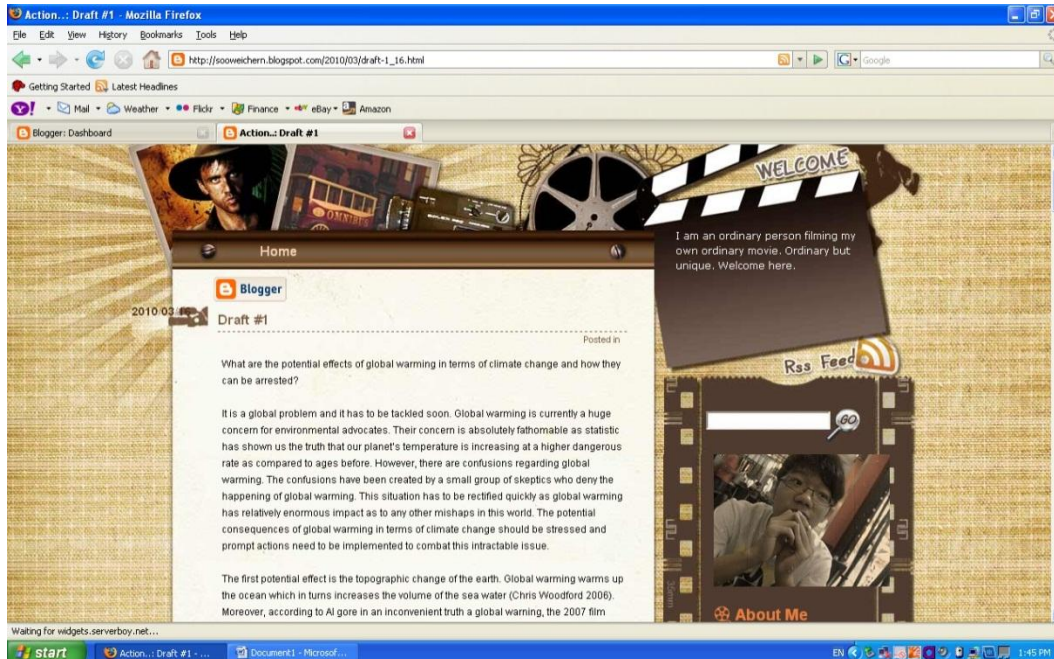


Figure 2: Assignment draft posted to a student's weblog

Figure 2 shows a learner blog where students post their assignments, tasks etc. According to process writing approach, students post their writings as drafts to the blog, and these drafts and comments can be retrieved any time students need to refer to them.

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 (Liu and Sadler, 2003, p.220). 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 weblog functions and get access to read all the drafts and comments posted. It is significant to note that in process writing approach, the suggestions made by peers are more suggestive than directive. The writers are not expected to produce an error free and coherent text as writing is seen as a developmental task. The aim is to get close to perfection by doing the task in various stages in form of a process. Figure 3 shows a sample of comments posted to the learner blog on a draft of an essay which was sent by the student writer earlier. The suggestive comments sent by the peer would help the

student writer to edit/revise the draft of the essay in order to come up with the final submission.

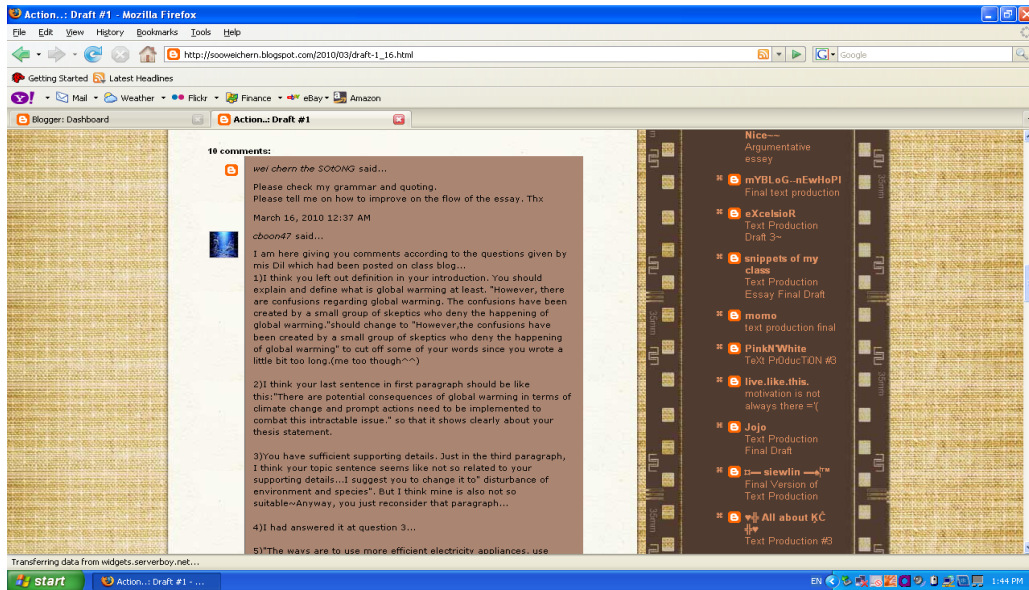


Figure 3: Peer feedback received from a student

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.



Figure 4: Peer feedback guidelines on the class blog

However, in providing 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. *Figure 4* is a snapshot from the researcher's class blog (set in 2010) where she has given her students a set of guidelines on peer feedback.

Many studies support the idea that peer review can be extremely effective for a variety of reasons when used correctly especially when students are trained on how to give and use feedback (Min, 2006). The researcher provided the student with guidelines for essay writing (See Appendix).

Thus, 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.

SUMMARY

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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APPENDIX

Peer Feedback Guidelines for Essay Writing

Name of the writer: _____

Name of the reviewer: _____

Essay Topic: _____

Instructions:

The aims of peer feedback are 1) to help improve your peer's paper by pointing out strengths and weaknesses that may not be apparent to him/her, and 2) to help improve editing skills.

Read the paper(s) assigned to you twice, once to get an overview of the paper, and a second time to provide constructive criticism for the writer to use when revising his/her paper. Answer the questions below.

1. Is there a clear introductory sentence that introduces the subject matter and the controlling idea? What do you suggest for improvement if the introductory sentence is not clear?
2. Is there a thesis statement given as the last sentence of the introductory paragraph? Is it clear and connected to all the topic sentences of the body paragraphs?
3. Do the paragraphs have sufficient supporting details and examples? How can the organization be improved?
4. Are there any paragraphs which are not supported well?
5. Are there any sentences or sections that are not clear? If so, how can they be improved?
6. Does the conclusion summarize all the main points given in the essay or restate the thesis statement? Is it clear? If not, how can the writer improve this part?
7. Does the writer cite the sources adequately and appropriately? Note any incorrect citation.
8. Are there any apparent grammatical or spelling mistakes?
9. Does the writer comprehensively cover appropriate materials available from the standard sources? If no, what is missing?
10. Additional comments: