



The Role of Dialogic Blogs in Learners' Writing Achievemen

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Abstract

The present review article discusses the significant role of technology, particularly blogging, in the development of the writing skill. Similar to the conventional classroom teaching, practitioners and researchers view blogs as tools for constructing grammar and writing skills and dispersing knowledge. In spite of the fact that learning through blogs can advance higher development of identity and bring about collaboration and social interaction, it can offer higher opportunities for learners to represent and express themselves, fostering the skills to develop and build their own community (Love, 2004; Spangenberg, 2004). Blogging is not presumed to be a substitution for conventional classroom writing pedagogy, neither just an issue of delivering classroom writing into digital space of the 21st Century, but, instead, it is writing in an innovative way that cultivates, among learner bloggers, a strong interest to write for the aim of communication and expression. The advantages of blogs, specifically in comparison to other technological advances such as discussion boards, are overviewed in this article. Besides, the relevant empirical investigations that have endeavored to explore the role of blogging in the cultivation of writing and learners' attitudes towards it are presented. Considering that the majority of research studies have pinpointed the potential of blogging in writing development, it is suggested that teachers use models to familiarize their learners with blogging prior to actively using it in their writing classes.

Keywords: Blogging, Writing skill, Technology, Learner attitude, Innovative practice

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Introduction

Technology is developing quickly and its application in educational instruction has risen intensely over the past years. Technology has been subject to research in order to ensure its usefulness for different language skills including writing skill (Gousseva-Goodwin, 2000; Taki & Jafari, 2017). A few scholars acknowledge the employment of different technological aids such as telecommunication, electronic mail, use of computers in the classroom to instruct the writing process, and computer writing programs that are found to exert influence on learners' composition skills (Gousseva-Goodwin, 2000; Wang & Wen, 2002).

Today, a large number of young people get involved with media and technology as deeply engrained practices; these are in fact part of their everyday lives (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Several scholars have postulated that a 21st Century learning context needs to encourage the development of learners' critical thinking, their skills to find and appraise knowledge reflexively, their capability to communicate their meanings to other individuals, and their deep comprehension of the ways knowledge is developed, evaluated, and implemented (Dede, Korte, Nelson, Valdez & Ward, 2005). In this review, the state of research with respect to the relationships between technology and more efficient writing are explored, together with whether a 21st Century learning tool such as blogging would pave the way towards critical thinking and enhanced learner accomplishment.

From among the emerging technologies for writing skill, one can note "Blogging" as an educational tool. Blogging is web-based and is identical to online diaries and forums by enabling the writers to articulate information by means of the social online network. In the educational pedagogy, it is assumed that blogs can constitute an effective learning tool. Blogging provides the learners with the opportunity to monitor the way their ideas shape, they can get feedback from remote audiences, practice their responses, and write at their own pace (Lombardi, 2007). The present review article overviews the recent trends in blogging and presents implications for practice in the classrooms. In particular the following research questions were proposed:

1. How has the practice of blogging evolved throughout the years?
2. What are the implications for practitioners based on current empirical research?

In the following sections, the theoretical foundations supporting blogging, the history of blogging together with the research carried out so far to trace its value are presented.

Theoretical Grounds

In the realm of technology in L2 writing, the metacognition theory and sociocultural theory assume a significant position. Below, these theoretical frameworks are explained.

Metacognition in writing

Elbow (1991) asserts that thinking need not be isolated from writing; thus, he introduced the technique of “free writing” as a way to formulate a writer’s opinion. Elbow maintained that writing need to mirror the process of creative imagination (Elbow, 1981). Flower and Hayes (1981), both cognitive psychologists, also viewed writing as a thinking process in their writing model. Their cognitive writing model posits that writing is a greatly complicated, goal-oriented, and recursive activity (Jesson, Parr, & McNaughton, 2013). They proposed a model of what writers perform when they go through the writing process. Writing through blogging can be explained in light of the metacognition knowledge. Metacognition knowledge relates to an individual’s own thinking process in learning. More particularly, there are three main forms of thinking process in metacognition knowledge. The first category includes “declarative knowledge”, which highlights an individual’s own skills, understanding their own capabilities in learning which would bring about “task knowledge”. Task knowledge underscores the ways an individual realizes the demands of a task in terms of content, length, and the type of writing (Khezrlou, 2019). Lastly, there is “strategic knowledge” which refers to an individual’s own ability for using strategies to obtain information and carry out the problem solving effectively and appropriately.

To summarize, metacognitive theory is a crucial aspect of the writing process since it is concerned with three main strategies: a) developing a plan of action; b) sustaining/monitoring the plan; and c) measuring and revising the plan, and it is requires a higher degree of endeavor and commitment when learners need to include technology into their writing activities (Garner, 1990).

Sociocultural Theory

A second theoretical position that is related to technologically-informed L2 writing is the sociocultural theory. Learners’ ability to learn and write does not take place only through their own individual cognitive capacities and processes. It is also being impacted and contributed both consciously and unconsciously by the learners’ social and cultural environment that encloses them as well.

Socio-cultural is a well-known theory in L2 learning that emerged from the work of Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized that social, cultural, institutional, and historical aspects in the environment of an individual (e.g., parents, caregivers, peers, mass media and the culture on the whole) are potential determiners of the mental development of that individual. Vygotsky (1981) postulated that everything is acquired on two levels: first, through interaction with others, and second, through consequent addition into the individual’s cognitive structure. As a result, the sociocultural theory focuses on the roles that contribution to and activity in the social interactions and culturally developed activities can have in the formation and growth of cognition.

This notion has been referred to as the community of practice which takes place where there is social interaction between individuals, at home, at school, by the implementation of mass media which are all presumed as sources for the community of practice (Wenger, 1999). Undeniably, classroom blogging, as an online learning tool, can act as a very useful context for second language learners who share comparable interests. In this way, they can learn, discuss, and develop new knowledge with each other in their everyday lives, which would in turn become beneficial for learners and their writing developments.

Method

The purpose of the present review article was to provide a body of knowledge on the use of blogging in the L2 classrooms based on theoretical support and current research and present implications for teachers to take advantage of blogging in their writing courses. This review process commenced with the collection and analysis of recent studies on the use of blogging in language classrooms. To determine this work, research over the past two decades of publications in technology and learning journals, including *CALICO*, *Computer Writing and Research Lab*, *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, *ReCALL*, *Language Learning and Technology*, *Learning & Leading with Technology*, *System*, *RELC*, *Foreign Language Annals*, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*. Works published in edited volumes and book-length studies were also taken into the analysis during the same period. Several dimensions of these studies such as the rationale that researchers provided for examining the integration of blogging into classroom practice, types of research purposes and findings, and the theoretical traditions underpinning the studies. The subsequent stage in this process was to examine historical development, attending particularly to the theoretical viewpoints in order to better understand the conventions shaping current work. The overview of the theoretical sources behind the studies, thus, led to the specification of substantial studies in this area of inquiry. The final stage of the present review article was devoted to the consideration of current work on blogging. We noted, for instance, the connection of the studies to theoretical traditions, the significance of blogging for the research, and types of blogging practices. Such categories also facilitated noticing the lacunas in current research and to envision possible new directions for future studies.

Blogging over the Years

The establishment of the idea of “Weblogs” commenced in 1993, and it was later summarized into “blogs” in 1999. Blogging functioned limited to a handful number of genres in the beginning, such as commentary, diaries, and knowledge-work. It did not have a joined genre for writing (Ward, 2004). Blogs were used by some practitioners as the main Web site for their courses in place of other mainly used courseware instructional means such as Blackboard (Wrede, 2003). The fundamental expectation was that blogs are suitable for online individual journals for learners, for writing and for monitoring written work. It could be a robust tool for group-working online, a platform to advance and encourage participation among

learners, to gain evaluative feedback, criticisms and discussions for teaching goals. Wrede (2003) mentions that “Blogs are not special because of their technology, but because of the practice and authorship they shape” (p 2). In line with this stance, Kennedy (2004) contended that since blogs include a Web site, journal, and free-form writing dimensions, they are capable of cultivating writing and literacy skills and at the same time presenting a sanguinely natural form of meaning expression.

Blogging is considered as a plain and supportive tool for non-professional writers (Lacina& Griffith, 2012). Over the past few years, there have been a plethora of many virtual platforms for writing and interaction such as hypertext, chat rooms, news group, discussion groups, and peer-to-peer document sharing networks. Blogs have appeared as a modern room for interacting by means of the Internet. They have stimulated knowledge development in the domains of interaction, writing, and rhetoric studies from scholars aiming to target the social, rhetorical, and discursive significance of writing employing blogs (Lee, 2010). A number of teachers have been found to be making use of blogs in their classes, and they have reported their impressions about blogging coupled with writing theory and instruction (e.g., process, post-process, and genre) (Chu, Chan, & Tiwari, 2012). Blogs can potentially equip teachers and student bloggers with a participating, fruitful writing opportunity that demands no technological expertise of Hyper Text Markup Language or HTML while providing access to an immediate publishing press (Kajder & Bull, 2003). Jesson, Parr, and McNaughton (2013) and Nelson and Fernheimer (2003) postulate that blogging is a prevailing tool for constructing a social classroom environment. Blogs can advance greater classroom negotiations, and the persistent postings can develop a continual activity of learning and reflection. They propose that learners could both engage in individual work or small group activities in virtual classroom contexts (Lai & McNaughton, 2012; Nelson & Fernheimer, 2003).

Since blogs are actually interactive, they are presumed to lead to enhanced classroom community and communication by connecting one blog to other blogs and developing groups with shared interests. Consistent with the discussion boards, Blogs can mark an engaging purpose and style. Blogs also lead to a sense of ownership to a greater extent compared to the discussion boards, since discussion boards usually belong to particular administrators, or teachers of a particular course to monitor and control the activities and comments within it (Wrede, 2003; Ward, 2004). Readers are able to reply to any given entry with a comment, and consistent negotiated discussions can occur both inside the classroom context, across other classrooms, and also offer access to other learning contexts and materials (Barrios, 2003). In contrast, blogs are dissimilar to extended discussion boards since the self-publishing in the former incites ownership and responsibility for online content (Kajder& Bull, 2003). Blogs are ascribed to an individual who possesses ownership of his or her dialogues and reader involvement.

Empirical Evidence

Previous research has provided contradictory findings adopting both the qualitative and quantitative designs on the effect of technology on learners' writing gains. Some researchers have asserted that engagement with technology in the form of laptops, online writing, and blogging is able to foster positive influence on learners' performance and writing as well as on their attitude and motivation (Bloch, 2002; Hertel, 2003; Khezrlou, 2018; Khezrlou, Ellis, & Sadeghi, 2017; Knoy, Lin, Liu, & Yuan, 2001; Kramsch, A'Ness, & Lam, 2000; Sadeghi, Khezrlou, & Modirghameneh, 2017; Warschauer, 1996; Wresch, 1993). Daniels (2004) and Englert, Manalo, and Zhao (2004), for instance, found that the fifth grade learners' involvement in a number of technological aids such as blogging could strengthen learners' enthusiasm toward writing and the quantity and quality of their writing, more than with traditional instructional methods. Furthermore, learners' attitudes toward writing on the screen were enhanced (Braine, 2001; Wang & Wen, 2002). Xie, Ke and Sharma (2008) conducted a phenomenological study to investigate the effect of blog on learners' feelings and their experiences. Using a blog for reflexive journal writing led to both positive and negative (hesitant) attitudes about the use of blogs. The findings advocated the idea that blogging could be employed to empower reflective thinking, facilitate the learning progress, provide a sense of community, and enable the learners to figure out new technologies, while, the negative perceptions were related to the ambiguity in the accurate use of blogs since it was a new tool, the prerequisite and role of previous experiences, and also issues related to privacy (Xie, Ke & Sharma, 2008). Campbell (2004) explored learner attitudes toward a classroom blog, which was adopted to serve as a platform to distribute and discuss assignments, exchange ideas in an attempt to prepare for speaking topics, and to post reading clarifications of assignments and materials. Based on Campbell's (2004) quantitative and qualitative findings, learners really enjoyed learning with blogs. Their attitude toward learning enhanced, and there was significant interest among learners to develop their own blogs to complement writing classes in the future (Campbell, 2004). McGrail and Davis (2011) probed the effect of classroom blogging on learners' perceptions with respect to the use of academic blogging as a tool for learning and literacy. McGrail and Davis (2011) recommended that blogs epitomized a new type of space for learning that integrated the traditional classroom experience to new opportunities for discussions, sharing of passions, and the teaching and learning from others beyond the classroom context. Besides, McGrail and Davis (2011) confirmed that writing also made learners become conscious of the significant role of audiences, which was supposed to be coupled with the quality of learners' writing. Garcia, Moizer, Wilkins and Haddoud (2019) reported that participants realized higher degrees of learning from using blogs, yet the advantages of implementing blogs was highly influenced by learners' attitudes towards the use of technology in teaching and learning, their realization of the usefulness of blogs, and the degree to which they have used blogs beforehand. In a recent review article by Reinhardt (2019), the synthesis of studies on the use of social media including

blogging have specified common findings, such that social media can bring about the development of intercultural, sociopragmatic, and audience awareness, language learner and user identities, and particular literacies. Kim (2018) also found that the use of both voice and text blogging was better than voice blogging. Thus, in summary, there is some, albeit mixed empirical evidence that blogs provide a positive accomplishment in terms of learners' learning.

From the sociocultural perspective, class blogs can be developed mainly for intercultural exchanges to advance learners' cross-cultural awareness (Cairney, 2007). In support of this, Baker's (2000) study with 4th grade learners that investigated the use of a writing component using computers reported positive outcomes in terms of learning opportunities as well as sustaining learners' ease of access to a lot of sources of information on the Internet and blogging. Blogging as a learning instrument encourages learners to get involved in social interaction with other bloggers by means of sharing information and knowledge, which would in turn promote their motivation to practice their writing (Oravec, 2002). Besides, Read and Fisher (2006) and Huang and Liu (2007) interviewed learners who had developed their own individual blogs in order to discover more about what goals might impact the learners to get involved in writing with their blogs. Both Read and Fisher (2006) and Huang and Liu (2007) found that one of the fundamental causes is for communicative intentions. This is the dialogic role of blogging since the implementation of class blog can be an important way for the provision of out-of-school support to the classroom practice and develop an extensive connection for the learners (Read & Fisher, 2006; Huang & Liu, 2007). Read and Fisher (2006) recommended that learning more about learners' blogs and their norm outside of school can morph the classroom writing into a self-sponsored writing, which would foster learners' writing achievement. They further explicated that one technique to achieve this purpose is to benefit from the social potential of the school setting (Read & Fisher, 2006). Learners can interact and negotiate together in their classroom by discussing topics on their blogs.

Other promising results, (e.g., Bloch, 2002), indicate that learners were greatly motivated to write, and they produced more text when exposed to technology in their tasks. On the other hand, some studies have revealed either no significant differences when using technology or reported negative effects (see Biesenbach-Lucas, Meloni, & Weasenforth, 2000; Gonzalez-Bueno & Perez, 2000). These negative or disadvantaging results (mostly quantitative) displayed that the adoption of the technology could not advance or make a difference in particular aspects of writing and writing development. Other researchers also discovered no significant difference in writing including both quality and attitude (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2000; Gonzalez-Bueno & Perez, 2000; Perez, 2003). Specht (2019) indicated a mediocre trend towards the blogs that did not lead to a community, nor an environment that promoted self-reflective practice. The role of the teacher also seemed to become viewed as the only motivating factor, resulting in a low uptake in posting on the

blog, and even lower in commenting. It is probable that these findings may be dependent on the learning goals that have been established, the types of tasks and activities used, types of technology used in the classrooms, the period of time that it lasted, and how it was used.

There are other aspects that can lead to the discrepancy and inexactitude of the results considering the role that technology plays in learners' writing. The majority of these studies was from the past two decades – since the technology and its application are consistently evolving, the extent of the effect of blogging might in the same way change or develop. Presently, learners and teachers are more familiar with technology than ever before (Knoy et al., 2001; Hertel, 2003; Wrede, 2003).

Implications for Teachers and Education Authorities

Based on what Lacina and Griffith (2012) recommend, in order for learners to achieve a qualified writing in second language on their individual blogs, “baby steps” need to be carried out inside the classroom context to prepare learners prior to integrating a blog into their learning experience. Thus, teachers are encouraged to provide learners with opportunities to spend time searching and creating through the use of models and guidelines (normally a paper-based activity) within the classroom. Adhering to those frameworks and guidelines, teachers need to clearly explain the criteria and expectations regarding the ways a complete qualified blog should appear (e.g., develop a rubric with learner expectations and details for blogging and use this rubric in every school curriculum). According to these criteria rubric, teachers need to clarify the essential expectations such as, word limits, spelling, choice of contents, graphic choice and so forth.

Teachers need to work in order to advance choice in topics when developing a blog, since this facilitates the development of a writing community. Mills and Chandra (2011) observed the significance of a supportive community of writers in the environment of blogging. In a blogging context, there are more opportunities for collaboration in developing and sharing of a learner's writing compared to the traditional writing classroom – and consequently, the development of a supportive community of learners may be crucial. Since blogging, particularly in the Iranian English teaching contexts, is still in its infancy, then empirical research is definitely needed to test these assumptions.

Lastly, education authorities might benefit from workshops that talk about new technology uses in everyday classroom teaching and what teachers need to obtain in the implementation of blogging as a learning strategy (e.g., ensuring learners' comfort with the use of blog, motivating teachers to provide more feedback to learners and attempt to entail blogging as much as possible in the classroom so as to establish it a section of learners' every lives). Education authorities can also make the role of technology in language learning bold through the establishment of certain

workshops and training activities for teachers to better inform them about the possibilities of using blogging in different ways in the classroom.

New Lines of Enquiry

Although the research on the effects of blogs has resulted in mixed and inconclusive findings, it is warranted to carry out further research to provide a more comprehensive insight into how blogging can be used to serve writing development. The negative effects of blogs can be compensated by means of running workshops for learners on how to write effectively and what are the expectations on the contents that need to be posted on blogs to avoid findings of unqualified nature; published posts that could result in a decline of responses received. Lacina and Griffith (2012) proposed that in order for learners to have qualified writing pieces on their individual blogs, “*baby steps*” need to be performed within the classroom to make the learners ready before integrating a blog into their learning experience. Learners need to be afforded the chances to spend time analyzing and developing through the use of models and guidelines (usually in the form of a paper-based activity) within the classroom. Within those models and directions, there should be norms and expectations evidently stated with regard to how a complete qualified blog needs to look like (e.g., create a rubric with learner expectations and details for blogging and use this rubric in every school curriculum). These aspects need to be investigated systematically to provide empirically sound evidence.

Different strategies can be used with blogging to enhance dialogic activity within the classroom context as well as prepare learners to feel more comfortable with their blogging and responding activities (Lapp, Wolsey & Shea, 2012). One possible strategy is to find a blog article and write it on the blackboard in the classroom, the learners then read the content and write evaluative feedback on sticky notes then the whole class would appraise the qualities and further improvement needed based on those responses (with the teacher). Another effective intervention workshop would be to develop a classroom activity where learners get to practice their open-ended answers to one another. Through this activity, not only higher quality of responses would be established in later blogging experiences, but it could also enhance further dialogic string interactions of learners responding to one another - in their blogs as well. Needless to add, all these possibilities await further research for a robust empirical support as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion to the review that blogging is a practice procedure to writing development for second language learners, it can be held that every one of the expected general impacts of blogging would simply be augmented through usage. As the general theme observed is that blogging and technology can bear significant advantages for learners’ learning and their writing achievement, there is a need to

integrate blogging into the curriculum. In so doing, teachers would be able to promote literacy skills while yet being interesting for learners. This is significant for the Iranian context where adherence to traditional methods of teaching writing or simply the ignorance of writing skill can be replaced with more interactive and interesting method of blogging.

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