

ENHANCING EFL LEARNERS' WRITING SKILLS THROUGH BLOGGING

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some reasons why English teachers aiming to increase their learners' writing skills should use blogs in their teaching, particularly in EFL context. It is found that despite its drawbacks, putting pressure on computer illiterate learners and exposing them to non-standard English, blogging is an exceptional technological platform that offered learners numerous advantages such as it encourages them to write constructively, use English more frequently, and retain their motivation. This paper also highlights that to get most benefits of blogging, the teachers play major roles in ensuring the availability of reliable facilities (computer and the internet), teaching learners how to use blog purposefully, and controlling the bloggers (learners) to not only write their blog posts but also read, and provide feedback to their peers'.

Keywords: *EFL learners; writing skills; Blogging; Feedback.*

INTRODUCTION

Writing has received a great deal of attention as it is one of the language skills which English as foreign language (EFL) learners are struggling with. Silvia (1993) points out that the areas of writing that many EFL students perceive difficult range from composing processes (planning and revising) to written text features (fluency, accuracy and structure). The complexity of writing has challenged educators to seek effective teaching writing strategies for EFL learners. Currently, technology is dominantly used in foreign language teaching. As novel technological devices and the internet emerge, studies on how these devices might impact EFL students' writing skills are also expanding. Blogs are internet platforms which are increasingly popular

in language classrooms. They are certainly not the latest innovation of the internet software. However, their influence on students' writing skills is still fervently debated. Some disagree with the application of blogs in language teaching because it could ruin EFL students' language development (Kikuchi, 2008). Hence, this essay will critically discuss some controversial arguments on the application of blogs in teaching writing for EFL learners. It will also argue that blogging benefits EFL learners to improve their writing skills because it encourages learners to write productively, exposes them to English language use and improves their motivation.

DISCUSSION

The term blog is defined differently. Du and Wagner (2005) define a blog as an electronic journal kept by an author, who regularly updates the journal (known as blogging). Rettberg (2008), on the other hand, defines a blog as a frequently updated Web site consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order. Both definitions indicate that an author of blogs serves two functions: as a writer and an organiser. The term blog or web log is often credited to Jorn Barger, who was one of the earliest bloggers in 1997 (Rettberg, 2008). Blogs have been used for different purposes; political, economic and educational. Blogs have served as a vehicle for political discussions and have been used to both educate and motivate the public about political issues. Economists have used blogs for gaining financial benefits in online trading. The application of blogs in foreign language teaching started in 2005 and it has been used to teach writing and reading skills (Bakar & Ismail, 2009). Along with studies that investigate the effectiveness of blogging in helping foreign language learners' writing, the majority of the findings support the benefits of blogging.

Firstly, using blogs has been presumed to be an effective way to encourage EFL students to write in English constructively (Bakar & Ismail, 2009). This means, learning writing does not happen through knowledge transfer from teachers to students but it occurs because students actively improve their writing skills through attaining, generating, analyzing, manipulating and structuring the information. Constructive writing is important as it could lead EFL students to improve their writing through a series of process which includes planning, writing, editing, posting and

receiving feedback (Bakar & Ismail, 2009). Learning through these steps is essential because of two reasons. First, it maintains information processing. Bruning, Schraw & Norby (2011) point out that students could store massive information in their brain and retain it longer when they learn it step by step. Second, through these processes, students have opportunities to deeply understand information and write it in a sophisticated way before publishing it in blogs (Du & Wagner, 2005).

Another feature of blogging that accounts for constructive learning is the presence of reciprocal feedback from teachers and students (Peyton & Staton, 2000). In a traditional learning method, in which learning solely takes place in a classroom, EFL students get feedback for their writing only from their teachers. On the other hand, when students learn writing through blogging, they could get feedback from many sources such as teachers, peers and general viewers. Feedback is important as it accounts for progressive writing. EFL students could use feedback to reflect what they have learnt and identify the areas of writing they need to improve (Ray & Coulter, 2008). One research that investigates 41 secondary school students in China who use blogs reveals that most of these students have positive perceptions toward blogging because of the presence of viewers or readers who persuade them to exhibit their writing skills (Bakar & Ismail, 2009). The readership in blogging also aids these students to write better because they are aware of the need to check grammar and spelling before posting their writing (Bakar & Ismail, 2009). This awareness could stimulate EFL students to have longer persistence in learning writing even though they are struggling with inadequate skills.

Using blogs is an example of constructive mixed-blended teaching. In this method, teachers teach their students in a classroom and integrate blogs or other technological templates as media for students to practice. Teaching writing takes places in two phases: initially teachers explain the theory of writing and give examples in a classroom and finally guide students to practice writing using blogs. The benefits of using mixed-blended teaching are allowing students to find the coherence of lesson in the class and in the real world (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) and encouraging students to explore the concepts of their learning rather than simply follow series of steps dictated by teachers (Du & Wagner, 2005). A study that investigates

teenagers in Hong Kong who learnt writing through blogging confirms that using blogs has helped these students write well because they could learn individually or collectively (Ward, 2004). In the study, the students designed their own blogs or used group blogs to practice writing within six months. The study reveals that the use of blogs has strengthened students' relationship with peers and enhanced their self-confidence to write in English. This might happen because these students perceive learning more authentic, meaningful and frequent.

Using technology such as blogs also benefits teachers in an EFL context in a way that they could create teaching materials that suit particular local needs without solely relying on textbooks recommended by government or institutions (Hess, 2001). However, integrating blogs in a foreign language classroom would not be successful unless students are willing to devote their time to self-study by using computers and the internet. The opponents of blogging argue that blogs are not applicable for students who live in remote areas where the access to computers, printers and the internet are limited (Mitchell, 2010). Other students that could be disadvantaged are those who are not very proficient in English. Instead of enjoying learning through blogging, these students could feel under pressure to use blogs by considering that their friends and other people would read their post (Leki, 1992). This feeling could cause them to lack confidence to write in English or to be apprehensive of making mistakes. The anxiety of making mistakes is another serious problem because students would never be able to write in English without practicing to use it. A study investigating 40 Japanese students learning writing through blogging shows that at the end of the class only two students continued using blogs. This happened because most of them were not confident enough to post their writing (Kikuchi, 2008). However, this finding is not sufficient to conclude that using blogs is ineffective. Rather, teachers should seek for a solution to make blogs effective learning tools and to diminish student's feeling of writing anxiety.

Writing anxiety can be minimized through collaborative learning (Leki, 1992). Teachers could ask reluctant students to create and organize blogs in groups. This task would encourage each student to contribute in blogs as well as support each other. Blogs are web tools that allow EFL students to practice writing individually or

to work in teams. More importantly, blogs have different varieties that serve different functions. Soares (2010) points out that blogs comprise three types; tutor blog, learner blog and class blog. The first type of blogs is managed by teachers. It is used to update parents and students about their school and classroom. A learner blog, on the other hand, is controlled and organized by individual students. It resembles online journals or portfolios. Students could use this blog to express and archive their experiences and opinions. The last type of blog, the class blog, is maintained by teachers and students. This could function as a medium where students post assignments and share information. Based on the varieties of blogs, it seems that teachers in an EFL context have alternatives to choose blogs that could effectively accommodate students with different writing levels.

Secondly, besides encouraging students to write constructively, blogging also exposes EFL students to language use. In a foreign language context, students learn writing in a minute amount of time. In Indonesia, for example, students learn English for only two hours per week. Moreover, English writing is used in certain domains such as at schools and in some international institutions. This means EFL students lack exposure to the language. However, the use of blogs offers some strategies to cope with this problem. First, EFL students could use blogs as a medium to engage with language without time limitation. Students could access their blogs at any time as long as they have the internet connection. Second, foreign language learners could communicate with people either inside or outside classroom in a meaningful way (Pinkman, 2005). They could heighten the sense of community in their classroom through online interaction and receive feedback from peers and teachers. They could also interact with general readers including native speakers. Further than that, while blogging, the bloggers' roles are as consumers and producers of writing (Kelly, 2008). This means, they not only read other bloggers' writing but also produce their own and share it with others. Rettberg (2008) describes the roles of bloggers with two analogies: "journalists and opinionists". Both of these words reflect that bloggers are autonomous writers who have capabilities to search information from many sources independently, report their findings creatively and publish it in blogs. As a result, using bogs is beneficial because it exposes EFL students to use

language more frequently and it also develops students' autonomy. Anderson (2005) proposes that novices could only improve their expertise by deliberate practice. In other words, the more students write on their blogs and make use of feedback, the more likely they will be able to improve their writing skills.

However, there are some constraints that may hinder students' learning writing through blogging. Blogs could be intentionally hacked and accidentally deleted (Wrede, 2003). If this is the case, the learning target may not be achievable since the students would no longer be able to operate their blogs. Blogging is also claimed to cause EFL students to indulge in slippery writing (Kikuchi, 2008). It means, learners could possibly read the writing that contains jargon and non-standard language. As a result, they could adopt or use inappropriate language in their own writing. Hence, it is assumed that blogs could improve students' fluency in writing but it decreases the accuracy. The major constraint in applying blogs in class is the absence of feedback. The use of blogs would be meaningless if students or bloggers could not get any feedback on how their writing skills have developed. Based on this constraint, the teacher should encourage students to actively make posting and give feedback for their peers' writing.

Finally, blogs are exceptional internet platforms that can enhance students' motivation in writing (Richardson, 2009). Blogs have some functional features such as interesting templates, comment and sharing sections. EFL students could use these features to draw readers' interests to visit their blogs and leave comment for their writing. The use of blogs could also cater variety of students' learning styles (Ward, 2004). For example, visual learners could use blogs to improve writing through the visual features such attaching photos and emoticons. Auditory learners could use audios or videos to make their learning more interesting. Alexander (1994) points out that the most powerful and positive learning outcomes occur when the task given match with students' interests (cited in McInerney & McInerney, 2006).

There are two approaches that teachers can use to enhance EFL students' motivation to write in English (Campbell, 2005). First approach is guiding students to extrinsic motivation such as grade or appraisal. For example, teachers could ask students to create a blog and use it to practice writing. This task is then assessed

based on the number of posts, comments and the quality of their writing. A second approach is to simulate students' intrinsic motivation. For example, students might be assigned to voluntarily write their experiences on their own blogs. This task aims to stimulate students to practice writing more frequently. Campbell (2005) points out that the extrinsic approach is less efficient because students could stop using blogs when appraisals or grades are no longer given. Pinkman (2005) supports this argument. Based on his investigation on twenty university student's attitudes toward using blogging, he found that the students acknowledged learning through blogging was useful to help them with writing, especially when the teacher assigned them to organize a blog in team and this assignment was graded. However, many of these students quitted blogging after the task was finished. This indicates that encouraging students to use blogs through external motivation mechanism will not always lead to the constant use of blogs.

Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, seems to generate more powerful impacts on students' motivation to write. This happens because students are aware of the benefits of blogging for their learning. There are two specific dimensions of intrinsic motivation: self-efficacy and sense of ownership (Bruning, Schraw & Norby, 2011). Self-efficacy directly links to students' behavior (Bruning et al., 2011). When EFL students believe that they have ability to write or to organize blogs, they will have positive attitudes toward blogging. Students may also use blogs to deepen their understanding of tasks or materials they have learnt in the class. This could lead students' willingness to practice writing, sharing with others and using technology in order to improve their skills. However, the problem is not all students have high self-efficacy. Reluctant students seem to have low self-efficacy which may be influenced by some factors such as teaching strategies or instructions, task difficulties, peers and teachers' attitudes (Bandura, 1986 as cited in Bruning et al., 2011). Referring to this theory, teachers could support reluctant students to improve their learning by eliciting supportive learning environment as well as solid relationship between teachers and students. In addition to self-efficacy, writing in the public, yet controlled environment of a blog, could also develop unique sense of ownership (Barton, 2005) in which the authors of blogs tend to manage their blogs in a more controlled manner

to attract the readers' attention to visit their blogs and to leave some comments (Bakar & Ismail, 2009). For example, in spite of only posting their writing, the students could also upload some photos and videos to make their blogs more interesting.

However, there are some considerations that teachers should take into account in order to help EFL students improve their writing through blogging (Richardson, 2009). Before integrating blogs into a writing lesson, the teachers should familiarize themselves with blogs, check the availability of the internet and train students in how to operate blogs. The goals of the lesson should also be specified, unless the use of blogs will be meaningless. The teachers also need to control students' performance, encourage students to provide feedback and keep them safe. Safety is one crucial point that teachers need to consider because students could possibly interact with many general bloggers outside of class. Therefore, it is very important that teachers give clear instruction about how to use the blogs in the lesson. They should also give clear guidelines about how often students should post, how long the posts should be, how many hyperlinks should be included in each post and what is inappropriate to write (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004 as cited in Richardson, 2009). In cases where students are assigned to conduct research and then post their findings in the blog, they should be required to link to their sources when possible, to avoid the temptation of plagiarism.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that teachers can use blogs to help students write constructively, promote student's autonomy and enhance their motivation. Blogging could be a solution for writing problems that many foreign language learners are struggling with. EFL learners could improve their fluency by frequently post their writing on blogs. However, the accuracy element cannot be simply obtained through blogging. Hence, EFL learners need extra self-study time to acquire this skill. Moreover, teachers who aim to integrate blogging in their teaching need to be aware of their students' need, teaching context and learning goals in order to get the most benefits of using blogs in their teaching. Blogging seems to be very beneficial to help the students improve their writing skills as long as teachers use it purposefully in the lesson.

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