IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF L2 WRITING THROUGH COLLABORATIVE BLOGGING

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ABSTRACT
WEBLOGS (BLOGS) ARE BEING INCREASINGLY EMPLOYED IN MANY EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS AS VEHICLES FOR PERSONAL EXPRESSION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF VARIOUS EDUCATIONAL PREREQUISITES. THEREFORE, THIS RESEARCH INTENDED TO INVESTIGATE THE LEARNERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS USING COLLABORATIVE BLOGGING. 21 IRANIAN MALE AND FEMALE INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS WERE CHOSEN THROUGH THE OXFORD QUICK PLACEMENT TEST (OQPT). THE PARTICIPANTS' AGE RANGED FROM 15 TO 22. TO INVESTIGATE THE LEARNERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS USING BLOGS, A QUESTIONNAIRE WAS GIVEN TO THEM AFTER THE BLOGGING PROJECT WAS OVER. THIS QUESTIONNAIRE WAS RATED ON A FOUR-POINT LIKERT SCALE RANGING FROM 1 FOR STRONGLY DISAGREE, TO 2 FOR DISAGREE, 3 FOR AGREE AND 4 FOR STRONGLY AGREE. THE RESULTS OF THE ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE REVEALED THAT MOST OF THE PARTICIPANTS AGREED ON USING BLOGS IN WRITING ASSIGNMENTS. THE FINDINGS ARE DISCUSSED AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS ARE SUGGESTED ON HOW USING COLLABORATIVE BLOGGING MAY HELP LANGUAGE TEACHERS AND LEARNERS.

KEYWORDS:COLLABORATIVE BLOGGING; COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS; L2 WRITING; EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDE; WEBLOG; E-LEARNING.

1.Introduction

Weblogs are a flexible medium that can be used in approaches that provide educational participants with a 'middle space' of options as to how to integrate face-to-face and online modes. Weblog construction encourages the development of individual, critical voices within the broader context of classroom interactions. According to Oravec(2010, P.17) Weblogs (blogs) "are emerging in many educational contexts as vehicles for personal expression and the dissemination and critique of Internet materials".

Campbell(2003)suggested that blogs can be used for personal, educational, journalistic and commercial purposes. In terms of blogs in education, Campbell stated that there were three types of blogs that can be used in ESL classrooms: the tutor blog, the learner bog and the class blog. He suggested various positive and possible uses of these weblogs. Learners are benefitted as they can refer to the previous comments and re-read all the drafts which are stored in their weblogs(see also Heidari-Shahreza, Vahid-Dastjerdi, Marvi, 2011 for related gender variables). This retrieval feature allowed 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 Heidari-Shahreza, Dabaghi, & Kassaian, 2012; Heidari-Shahreza, Moinzadeh, Barati, 2014 b). Writing has been 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 (See for example Heidari-Shahreza and Moinzadeh, 2012 for an innovative application of computer software to teach word stress patterns of English). With the number of blogs that are available on the internet these days for sharing information to the public, it seems appropriate to study the communicative skills in students' writing through their blogs. With so much information available just from blogs on the internet these days, the exploration of student variables regarding blogging can be reconsidered and stretched out to find out how the integration of collaborative blogging can be applied in Iran.Collaborative blogging is a type of weblog in which posts can be contributed by more than one author and the authors work in a group. These posts are usually centered on a single theme. In this study attitude represented the attitudes of the participants towards the use of collaborative blogging.

This study intended to investigate EFL learning in Iranian contexts. Much research so far has been conducted on different language skills in Iran (Heidari-Shahreza, Moinzadeh, Barati, 2014a). However, most of EFL learners encounter problems in writing essays and paragraphs. Thus, this study investigated Iranian EFL learners' attitude towards using blogs to teach writing.

2. Literature Review

Writing is one of the important skills taught to EFL learners. EFL learners usually face problem in writing, due to the fact that the writing system of their mother tongue is different from English. Students cannot write well because they have limited knowledge in English grammar and vocabulary (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

According to Graves (2000), there are several ways that writing is important in our lives: "Writing is a highly complex act that demands the analysis and synthesis of many levels of thinking".Writing develops initiative. In reading, everything is provided. In writing, the learner must supply everything: the right relationship between sounds and letters, the order of the letters and their form on the page, the topic, information, questions, answers, order.Writing develops courage. At no point is the learner more vulnerable than in writing.Writing, more than any other subject, can lead to personal breakthroughs in learning. Writing can contribute to reading from the first day of school. Writing, some say, is active, whereas reading is passive.Writing contributes strongly to reading comprehension as children grow older. The ability to revise writing for greater power and economy is one of the higher forms of reading (pp. 5-6, as cited in Cotton 2002).

Yang (2008) stated that blogs can be used to teach writing, and teacher could ask students who use blogs to post their pieces of writing regularly. They can choose their best compositions per term, each composition should contain all the writing process from construct to edit, this action can be done on Facebook, too. Yang (2008) also commented that teacher and students can treat Blog as a 'blackboard' and teacher can save all the students' works. Furthermore, teacher can post and introduce articles to students; students could chain their blogs in order to share information.

Yunus, Nordin, Salehi, Amin Embil and Salehi (2013) attempted to examine the use of ICT in the teaching of ESL writing skills in Malaysian secondary schools. This study focused solely on the data collected from four English teachers in a secondary schooling Kuala Lumpur who were interviewed by the researchers. This study revealed that the use of ICT in the teaching of ESL writing was very low. Advantages of using ICT were reported to be attracting students' attention, facilitating students' learning process, helping to improve students' vocabulary and promoting meaningful learning. Disadvantages found included the difficult class control, distraction and the students' tendency to use short forms in their writing.Yunus, Tuan and Salehi (2010) used a semi-structured interview to investigate how English lecturers perceive using blogs to promote students' writing skills. In addition, they tried to understand the advantages of

using blogs in encouraging ESL students to write; they were also interested in finding out the challenges encountered by the lecturers in using blogs to promote students' writing skills. The interviews showed that the components and functions in blogs encourage ESL learners in promoting their writing skills. As indicated by one of the interviewees, blogs can help to seal the connection between the students and the lecturer. Also, it was found that blogs provide a platform for individual expression and support reader commentary, critique, and interlink age as subsequent steps. As far as the challenges of using blogs are concerned, they found that there are many challenges that hinder the lecturers from encouraging ESL learners to use blogs for improving their writing skills. The lack of time, students' lack of skills and less participation from the students are regarded as some of the existing challenges.

Simsek (2010) in another study under the title of investigated the effect of weblog integrated writing instruction on students writing performance. 70 Primary School students participated in the study. Data were collected through students, written products. Results indicated that weblog integrated writing instruction improved students.Tse, Yuen, Lo, Lam and Ng (2010) and Dawson, Drexler and Ferdig (2007) investigated motivation among students from the feedback received as a result of the blogging process and the impact of blogging on the reading skills of students. The results of these studies have been positive and have shown the positive effects that the collaborative blogging can have on the students' communicative skills in writing.

3.Methodology

3.1Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, experimental design to investigate Iranian EFL learners' attitude towards using blogs to teach writing.

3.2Research Question

What are the learners' attitudes towards using collaborative blogging?

3.3Participants

The sample of the study was 21 EFL learners including six male and fifteen female learners. The participants' age ranged from 15 to 22. The setting of the current study consisted of a language institute in Isfahan. The general proficiency level of the participants was set to be intermediate according to an OQPT and the background of the participants.The participants had already taken Basic Writing, Paragraph Writing. They created their own blogs and did all the eight blog assignments collaborating with the researcher. The sampling method for this research was non-probability sampling (selective methods) and the type of sampling was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was non-probability and hence can be subject to bias and error. According to Saumure and Given (2008), non-probability sampling relied on the judgment of the researcher).

3.4Research Instruments& Materials

The instruments of this study were Oxford Quick Placement test (OQPT), blogs, interviews and questionnaires. Multiple instruments were chosen to bring about a triangulation of data.

3.4.1Blogs

Blogs have been used forthe instrument of the study, in which the participants wrote their assignments. The participants were given explicit instructions on how to set up their blogs on Blogfa and also how to add other blogs to their reading list. Blogfawas a world-class weblog service for Persian language

speakers. It is designed to enable Persian people to rapidly configure and deploy weblogs for personal, as well as for marketing purposes.Blogfawas a wholly-owned product of RavandCybertechInc. developed by AlirezaShirazi. Blogfa, being used for blogging and hence it was chosen as the blogging software for this study.

3.4.2Oxford Quick Placement Test

The Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was used to measure the participants' language proficiency. The test consisted of sixty items with different question formats comprising of two parts. There were multiple choice, item matching, and cloze test type items in the test. In each item, there wasa missing word for which there were four options. Students were supposed to find the correct item among these options. All of the chosen participants for the present study were able to pass the test with a score between 30 and 46. Based on the test scoring level chart of OQPT, those whose scores in the test were between 30 and 46 were considered as the intermediate-level and categorized to be at the same level according to the OQPT results. The reason why the researcher of the study decided to utilize OQPT as the students' measure of proficiency was due to the fact that the test is a standard test of proficiency, and its validity and reliability were assumed to be satisfactory.

3.4.3Attitude Questionnaire

A questionnaire was given to the participants after the blogging project was over to investigate the learners' attitude towards using blogs. This questionnaire was rated on a four point Likert scale and the scales of agreement were 1 for Strongly Disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Agree and 4 for Strongly Agree. The questions in the questionnaire were adopted from a study by Iyer (2013).The validity of the items in the questionnaire were checked by the supervisor. In order to check the reliability of the items in questionnaire, it was piloted on a group of EFL students who were similar to the main participants of the present study. Then Cronbach alpha was used to check the consistency of the questionnaire. In fact, the internal consistency was calculated to be .88 for this questionnaire.

3.5 Procedure and Data Analysis

The OQPT was used for a group of EFL learners studying at a language institute in Isfahan. Then, based on the results, 21 whose scores fell one standard deviation above or below the mean score of the OQPT were chosen. At first, the participants were introduced to the blogging project by the course teacher and Blogfa was introduced to them in class. The email notification feature was also shown to the students and the attitude questionnaire was run among participants. Participants were shown how to set up their blogs and how to add other blogs to their own blog.The blog assignments were used to investigate how collaborative blogging contributed on students' communicative skills in writing. As part of the blog assignments, the participants wrote about their ideas on their own blog and, also they posted the comments for the other participants on their blogs. The participants wrote a total of five blog assignments. After 10 weeks, the attitude questionnaire was administered among the participants to see if their attitude had changed.The rubric coding schemes were three blog rubrics (Franker, 2011; ELT Blog Evaluation, 2009; Blogging Evaluation, 2007.) which were retrieved online by the researcher. The codes had been used for evaluating student blogs in other studies, in order to assess the effectiveness of the students' written work on the blogs.

4. Results

The data obtained from the questionnaire were summarized below.

Table 1: Participants' attitude towards using collaborative blogging

Questionnaire items	**Strongly agree**			
	P	P	P	P
1-The collaborative blogging experience was enjoyable.	0%	0%	66.66%	33.33%
2-The blogging software (Blogger) was easy to use	19.04%	33.33%	28.57%	19.04%

3-Reading and commenting on others' blog assignments was interesting	0%	4.76%	57.14%	38.09%
4-Reading other's blog assignments helped in writing my blog assignments	0%	4.76%	71.42%	23.80%
5-Commenting on others' blog assignments helped in writing my own assignments	0%	4.76%	76.19%	19.04%
6-Reading other students' comments on my blog helped in writing my blog assignments	4.76%	0%	57.14%	38.09%
7-Writing the blog assignments helped improve my writing skills	0%	4.76%	61.90%	33.33%
8-Reading others' blog assignments helped improve my writing skills	0%	4.76%	52.38%	42.85%
9-Commenting on others' blog assignments helped improve my writing skills	4.76%	9.52%	47.61%	38.09%
10-Having others comment on my blog motivated me to write better	9.52%	9.52%	33.33%	47.61%
11-There was enough time to finish writing all the blog assignments	0%	9.52%	47.61%	42.85%
12-I would like to continue blogging collaboratively	0%	4.76%	57.14%	38.09%

As shown in Table 1, the attitude questionnaire revealed that all of the participants (100%) believed that collaborative blogging project was enjoyable. 47.61% of the participants believed that the blogs were easy to use. The rest of the participants (52.37%) stated that blogs were difficult to use. The process of reading and commenting on blogs was found to be interesting by 95.24%. Similarly, 95.12% of the participants felt that reading others' blog assignments helped in writing their own assignments. Around 96% of the participants claimed that commenting on others' blog assignments helped in writing their own assignments. 95% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that reading others' comments on their blog assignments helped them in writing their own.

95.23% of the participants believed that writing the blog assignments helped improve their writing skills. Reading others' blog assignments helped 95.23% of the participants in writing their blog assignments. Commenting on others' blog assignments also helped 85.69% of the participants improve their writing skills. Having others comment on their blog assignments motivated 80.94% of the participants to write better. Moreover, 90.46 percent of the participants felt there was enough time to finish writing all the blog assignments. Finally, 95.23% of the participants said that they would like to continue blogging collaboratively. Accordingly, as explained most of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the positive points of using blogs for doing writing assignments.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The questionnaire was rated on a four point Likert scale and the scales of agreement were 1 for Strongly Disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Agree and 4 for Strongly Agree. The following result was obtained: Most of the participants regardless of their gender agreed or strongly agreed with the positive points of using blogs for doing writing assignments.

Most of the participants had a positive attitude towards blogging and found the collaborative blogging project to be enjoyable. They reported that reading others' blogs and also the comments from others on their own blogs helped in writing the blog assignments better and improved their writing skills. It also improved their relationship with other participants and motivated them to write more. According to the studies done by Kavaliauskieneand Vaiciuniene (2006) and Wu (2005), students improve their language skills and become more aware of using the language after reading and commenting on others' blogs. The

results revealed that the participants were open to receiving comments from others. Most of the participants found it enjoyable. The EFL learners showed positive attitudes towards using collaborative blogging for teaching communicative aspects of writing. All in all, more attention should be given to new technology of different types in teaching the complicated task of writing.Also, an investigation into possible effects of collaborative blogging on cognitive and metacognitive strategy use can be a fruitful area of research (See Tabibian and Heidari-Shahreza, 2016).

As the current study showed that using ICT has a positive relationship on Iranian EFL learners' and their performance in writing, then the problems associated with writing could lie in the teachers' inability to use the new technology in writing classes and learners' inability to execute this technique. Therefore, the results of this research can brighten the path for both language teachers and learners.

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Appendix A: Attitude Questionnaire

Please take some time to fill out this questionnaire. Your feedback will be highly appreciated and it will help in improving the collaborative blogging experience. Thank you.
Name _____ Age_____ years
Please rate the following questions according to the rating scale below

Circle the best choice '1', '2' '3' or '4'.
1 – Strongly disagree
2 – Disagree
3 – Agree
4 – Strongly agree
1) The collaborative blogging experience was enjoyable. 1 2 3 4

2) The blogging software was easy to use. 1 2 3 4

3) Reading and commenting on others' blogs assignments was interesting. 1 2 3 4

4) Reading others' blog assignments helped in writing my blog assignments. 1 2 3 4

5) Commenting on others' blog assignments helped in writing my blog assignments. 1 2 3 4

6) Reading others students' comments on my blog helped in writing my blog assignments. 1 2 3 4

7) Writing the blog assignments helped improve my writing skills. 1 2 3 4

8) Reading others' blog assignments helped improve my writing skills. 1 2 3 4

9) Commenting others' blog assignments helped improve my writing skills. 1 2 3 4

10) Having others comment on my blog motivated me to write better. 1 2 3 4

11) There was enough time to finish writing all the blog assignments. 1 2 3 4

12) I would like to continue blogging collaboratively. 1 2 3 4

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