THE EFFECTS OF COLLABORATIVE BLOGGING ON COMMUNICATIVE ASPECTS OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' WRITING

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ABSTRACT

THE PRESENT STUDY WAS AN ATTEMPT TO INVESTIGATE HOW COLLABORATIVE BLOGGING AFFECTED THE COMMUNICATIVE ASPECTS OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' WRITING PERFORMANCE. 21 IRANIAN MALE AND FEMALE INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS WERE CHOSEN THROUGH THE OXFORD QUICK PLACEMENT TEST (OQPT). AT FIRST, THE PARTICIPANTS WERE INTRODUCED TO THE BLOGGING PROJECT BY THE COURSE TEACHER AND BLOGGER WAS INTRODUCED TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN CLASS. PARTICIPANTS WERE SHOWN HOW TO SET UP THEIR BLOGS AND HOW TO ADD OTHER BLOGS TO THEIR OWN BLOG. THE PARTICIPANTS WROTE A TOTAL OF EIGHT BLOG ASSIGNMENTS. AFTER 10 WEEKS, THE ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE WAS ADMINISTERED AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS TO SEE IF THEIR ATTITUDE HAD CHANGED. 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 RESEARCHER ALSO POSTED COMMENTS ON THE PARTICIPANTS' BLOGS. THE PARTICIPANTS WROTE A TOTAL OF FIVE BLOG ASSIGNMENTS. RESULT SHOWED THAT , A LOW DEGREE OF THE COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS OF WRITING WERE OBSERVED IN THE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN BLOGS BY THE PARTICIPANTS. A CHI-SQUARE TEST WAS RUN AMONG THE FOUR SUBCATEGORIES OF COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS, THE RESULTS SHOWED THAT THAT THERE IS NO STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DIFFERENT SUBCATEGORIES OF COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS.

1.Introduction

Huffaker (2004) stated that the Internet continues to generate new applications that not only foster individual expression, but also cohesive community development. Current research in computer–mediated communication (CMC) environments such as chat rooms, newsgroups, and multi–user domains (MUDs) have revealed interesting trends in the way individual identity is presented, language is used .and interactions have transpired (Calvert, et al., 2003 ;Crystal, 2001; Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2003). One of the latest developments in computer–mediated communication(CMC) is the weblog, or "blog." Blogs are personal journals made up of chronological entries, not unlike a paper diary. The features of a blog include instant publishing of text or graphics to the Web without

sophisticated technical knowledge, ways for people to provide comments or feedback to each blog post, the opportunity to archive past blog posts by date, and hyperlinks to other bloggers. These features not only distinguish blogs from other forms of CMC, they provide new opportunities for people to present and express themselves online.

According to Huffaker (2004), adolescents make up a large part of the community of bloggers, often referred to as the blogosphere. This article discusses the application of one of the latest Information and Communication Technology(ICT) tools, which is known as weblog. 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.

The ability to write well can have a profound impact on our lives. In discussing the importance of writing to learning, Suleiman (2000) asserts that "writing is a central element of language, any reading and language arts program must consider the multidimensional nature of writing in instructional practices, assessment procedures, and language development." (p. 155). Writing classes in academic schools have never stopped. Without the stability of written records, a lot of knowledge concerning human civilization becomes impossible. The ability to write well can have a profound impact on our lives. These days many students use social networking sites such as Facebook, my space, Weblogs, Whats app. and hi5. With English being used as a global language for communication in education, business and technology, it is essential that students need to be able to communicate in English. Good writing skills are, therefore, important in today's world of technology where people want to share ideas and communicate over the internet. However, it should be mentioned that even at post-graduate level some Iranian EFL learners have problem with writing properly. Electronic and on-line applications and soft-wares can enhance the situation to be more rewarding and easier to handle. This is what seems to be ignored in Iranian context, and there is a missing link between writing instruction and the new technologies. Blogging, posting homework assignments using PowerPoint, YouTube and so on can help to provide these links. Previous research on blogging has held similar aspirations, that "...the capabilities of blogging for self-presentation and social interactivity would assist students to forge a stronger sense of personal empowerment and expressive entitlement, on the one hand, and increased connection to a shared learning community, on the other." (Farmer, Yue & Brooks, 2008, p.2). according to the existing literature, a gap is felt within the area of teaching writing.

This study tried to find out whether this electronic media could be an appropriate tool toward mastering communicative aspects writing or not. Therefore, it focused on how collaborative blogging could affect the communicative aspects of Iranian EFL learners' writing .

2. Literature Review

Of the four skills in English, writing is considered to be the most complex and difficult skill to master. This difficulty, according to Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 303)," lies not only in generating and organizing of ideas but also in translating these ideas into readable texts."

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), SNSs are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view the pages and details provided by other users within the system.

Research on using Facebook and blogs in educational settings, especially in developing writing is a new concept (Wan, 2011).Yet, there are some studies that have investigated their use in the educational field generally and in the writing classroom particularly. Facebook and blogs are only examples of many technology tools (Wikis, Myspace and Linkedin) to mention a few that are used by educators to empower learners by granting them an opportunity to express their opinions. They help assist students with their reading and writing skills as well as their collaboration in learning (Leight, 2008).

2.1 Communicative Skills in Writing through Collaborative Blogging

According to Iyer (2013), "communication skills are skills that enable a person to convey information so it is received and understood" (P 21). Communication skills in writing are shown in the way a person is able to express his/her thoughts clearly. This study focused on four communicative skills in writing, namely, critical thinking, creativity, voice and comments. According to Thompson (2000) any kind of writing brings about communication, and writing on blogs is a powerful tool for communication. Blogs can be viewed as a platform for students to improve fluency by writing new posts and also commenting on their peers' work. The following items are considered as four writing communicative skills.

2.2.1 Creativity

As far as creativity is concerned, this form of online collaboration can be used to create powerful connections among students, collaborations and give students opportunities to display their creativity (Johnson, 2010). Creativity in writing is defined as the ability of the writer to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions rather than simply stating facts and information (Hale, 2008). Iyer (2013), claims that "I see collaboration as the natural first step of the creative process (P.21). In addition, Iyer (2013) not all projects can accommodate, a phase of creative exploration and exchange" (P.21). Collaboration is good for creativity, but smart choices about the characteristics of the partners should be made .

2.2.2 Critical Thinking

Following creativity, critical thinking is another important communicative skill in writing. "Critical thinking is a form of realistic and perceptive thinking that focuses on deciding what to do and how to do it" (Iyer, 2013, P. 22). According to Pohl (2000), critical thinking has been categorized into creating, evaluating, analyzing, applying, understanding and remembering, where creating, evaluating, and analyzing are the higher order thinking skills. Critical thinking, as such, has been defined as the process of analyzing and evaluating thinking with the goal of trying to improve on it (Paul & Elder, 2008).

Pohl (2000) believes that critical thinking can be seen as having two components: 1) a set of information and belief generating and processing skills, and 2) the habit, based on intellectual commitment, of using those skills to guide behavior

According to Mc Guinness (2013), a lot of clarification in thinking happens as a result of writing blog posts and commenting on feedback received from others. When writing on blogs, students must carefully monitor what they write, as it will be available to the public. This process of writing carefully leads to the development of critical thinking skills. (Iyer, 2013, P 23)

2.2.3 Voice

This process involves not only expressing one's own views but also observing feedback from others since blogs involve a two way communication and comments are exchanged back and forth. The different types of blogging voices usually found on the internet are informative, friendly, humorous, inspirational and dreamy (Cutmore, 2012). Freese (2013) believes that finding a writing voice can be a struggle, whether you're writing a novel, short story, flash fiction or a blog post. Some may even wonder, what is voice in writing? A writer's voice is something uniquely their own. It makes their work pop, plus readers recognize the familiarity .

2.2.4 Comments

According to Ferdig and Trammell "the comment function allows others to communicate relevant feedback thereby facilitating the scaffolding of new ideas" (2004, P. 1). In addition, Ferdig and Trammell (2004) believe that the blog has a single author, there are some group blogs where contributors post and

debate short essays and opinion pieces. The comments represent the opinions of the author(s) and their interpretations of an event, content or context."

As far as creativity is concerned, this form of online collaboration can be used to create powerful connections among students, collaborations and give students opportunities to display their creativity (Johnson, 2010).

Blogs can be looked upon as a medium to promote critical thinking skills among students. According to Mc Guinness (2013), a lot of clarification in thinking happens as a result of writing blog posts and commenting on feedback received from others. When writing on blogs, students must carefully monitor what they write, as it will be available to the public. This process of writing carefully leads to the development of critical thinking skills. (Iyer, 2013, P 23).

As a result of writing on blogs, students can try and find their blogging voice by communicating with a wider audience. A good and consistent blogging voice leads to effective communication, more appeal and more fans, and also influences the readership on the blog. Freese (2013) believes that finding a writing voice can be a struggle, whether you're writing a novel, short story, flash fiction or a blog post.

Iyer (2013) explored the effects of collaborative blogging on communicative skills in writing of Thai EFL students. The participants were 12 fourth year university students studying English as their major field of study. The participants wrote a total of eight blog assignments, completed two questionnaires, one before the start of the study, and the second after writing all the blog assignments. An interview was also carried out at the end of the study. The results revealed that most participants had not written blogs before, and were relatively new to the concept of blogging. The findings brought to light the fact that the communicative skills in writing, based on the four codes chosen for the study, namely creativity, critical thinking, voice, comments and contributions, Drexler, Dawson and Ferdig (2007) carried out a study between pre-service teachers and third-grade students to help the students complete a five-paragraph essay as part of an assignment. The study used collaborative blogging in which each student posted their assignments on their respective blogs. The assignment involved each student to write a paragraph contributing towards an essay. The students were given instructions on how to use the blogs before starting the study. improved as a result of collaborative blogging. This study was a success in that it not only improved the writing skills of the students but other skills they learned through the collaboration process were transferred to other subjects and other facets of their life.

A study conducted by Kavaliauskiene and Vaiciuniene (2006) indicated that the experience of writing on blogs (for an audience) provides opportunities to help students improve their knowledge of English. Nadzrah (2007) also found that blogs let students compose writing with specific purposes that can encourage them to enhance their writing in the language constructively.

3. Methodology

As said in introduction This study tried to find out whether this electronic media could be an appropriate tool toward mastering communicative aspects writing or not. Therefore, it focused on how collaborative blogging could affect the communicative aspects of Iranian EFL learners' writing.

3.1 Research Questions

-Does collaborative blogging contribute to the communicative aspects of Iranian EFL learners' writing ?

3.2 Research Hypothesis

Base on the aforementioned research question the following hypothesis was formulated.

H0: Collaborative blogging does not contribute to the communicative aspects of Iranian EFL learners' writing.

3.3 Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 21 EFL learners including six male and fifteen female learners. The participants' age ranged from 15 to 22. The setting of the current study was a language institute in Isfahan. The general proficiency level of the participants was set to be intermediate according to an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) and the background of the participants. The participants had already taken Basic Writing, Paragraph Writing as necessary credit courses for students of Teaching English as Foreign language (TEFL). The participants created their own blogs on Blogfa and did all the five 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 is non-probability and hence can be subject to bias and error.

3.2 Research Instruments& Materials

The instruments used to collect data were Oxford Quick Placement test (OQPT), blogs, interviews, and multiple instruments were chosen to bring about a triangulation of data.

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 was a 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.

Blogs were the instrument chosen for 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. Blogfa is 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.

Blogfa is a wholly-owned product of Ravand Cybertech Inc developed by Alireza Shirazi. Blogfa, being used for blogging and hence it was chosen as the blogging software for this study. The following figures are snapshots that display the steps in creating a blog on Blogfa.

3.3 Procedures

At the onset of the study, the OQPT was run among 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 the participants 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 researcher also posted comments on the participants' blogs. The participants wrote a total of five blog assignments. The topic for the first blog assignment was 'behind the beautiful frozen waterfall'. In week two, blog assignment 1 was posted on the researcher blog and participants started writing in their own blogs and posted two comments on two other participants' blogs.

Following this, the topic for the second week was 'a lovely beach with white round table besides two white chairs' which the participants were required to look at Blogfa and then write about what they thought of the picture. After the first two blog assignments, the selection of topics for the remaining three blog assignments was open to the students. This was carried out in order to give them an opportunity to become independent in their learning and take control of decisions they needed to make while they communicated through their blogs. The students could write the blog assignments at their homes if they had internet or write them in the computer lab in the university or wherever they had convenient access to the internet. In week three, the participants as well as the researcher gave feedback on the participant blogs in the comments section on Blogfa. The same process was repeated for blog assignments 2 to 8. Then the course instructor and researcher printed out and collected the blog assignments for analysis. After 10 weeks, the attitude questionnaire was administered among the participants to see if their attitude has changed.

3.4 Scoring

The participants' blogs were scored based on the rubric designed for this study. (see Appendix B). The points for each type of communicative skill: creativity, critical thinking, voice and comments ranged from 0 to 3 where 0 = Unsatisfactory, 1 = Partially proficient, 2 = Proficient and 3 = Exemplary.

3.5 Data Analysis

The rubric coding schemes were three blog rubrics (Franker, 2011; ELT Blog Evaluation, 2009; Blogging Evaluation2007.) 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 learners'' written work on the blogs. The performance of the participants was scored in terms of creativity, critical thinking, voice and comments based on the rubrics.

4. Results

The research question was The effects of collaborative blogging on communicative aspects of writing . in order to measure the effects of blogging collaboratively on communicative aspects of EFL learners' writing, it was needed to code the communicative aspects of writing. According to Saldana, (2009) "a code in qualitative research is a short word or phrase that characteristically assigns a collective, noticeable, essence-capturing, and/or suggestive attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (P.56). The codes which were used in the present research, were taken directly from blog rubric-coding schemes online that were appropriate for the present research. The rubric coding schemes were three blog rubrics (Franker, 2011; ELT Blog Evaluation, 2009; Blogging Evaluation, 2007) which were retrieved online by the researcher and checked by the supervisor. The blog assignments were classified into the following codes: creativity, critical thinking, voice, and comments. The scores allotted to the participants are show in Table 4.1 below

Table 1

Communicative Skills in Writing Performance of the Participants

Participant	**creativity**	**Critical thinking**	**Voice**	**comments**
1	14	16	12	13
2	15	13	11	12
3	16	10	14	9
4	12	10	7	8

5	14	13	11	8
6	15	10	13	9
7	14	12	10	8
8	14	11	8	12
9	17	12	13	10
10	16	14	15	7
11	18	11	10	10
12	14	12	8	9
13	17	13	11	10
14	18	11	9	12
15	13	10	11	13
16	17	15	12	9
17	17	14	15	8
18	13	11	10	10
19	18	12	10	8
20	15	10	9	10
21	14	9	11	13
Total	321	249	230	208
Mean	15.28	11.85	10.95	9.90
Percentage	31.84%	24.70%	22.81%	20.63%

Table 4.1 shows the frequency and percentage of the scores obtained by the whole participants in the eight blog assignments. In fact, the scores gained by the participants in the four communicative aspects of writing are given. For example participant number one scored 14 in creativity, 16 in critical thinking, 12 in voice and 13 in comments. As shown, creativity with 31.84% was the criteria which scored the first among the four scoring criteria. Differently stated, 31.84% of the blog assignments were scored to be creative. Accordingly, a low degree of creativity was observed among the participants performance in their blog assignment. As the next criterion, critical thinking accounted for 24.70% which still is low in degree. In other words, only 24.70% of the blog assignments were identified to include some critical thinking activities. The third criterion which still scored lower than the two previous criteria was voice with a percentage of 22.81%. Finally, comments with a percentage of 20.63% accounted for the least criterion as applied by the participants in their blog assignments. Therefore, as displayed a low degree of the communicative skills of writing were observed in the writing assignments in blogs by the participants. In fact, less than 50% of the communicative criterion was seen in the blog assignments of the participants.

Thus, the participants showed a low degree of communicative skills in writing, with a higher degree of creativity and critical thinking, compared to voice and comments. Figure 4.1 depicts different criteria of communicative aspects of writing.

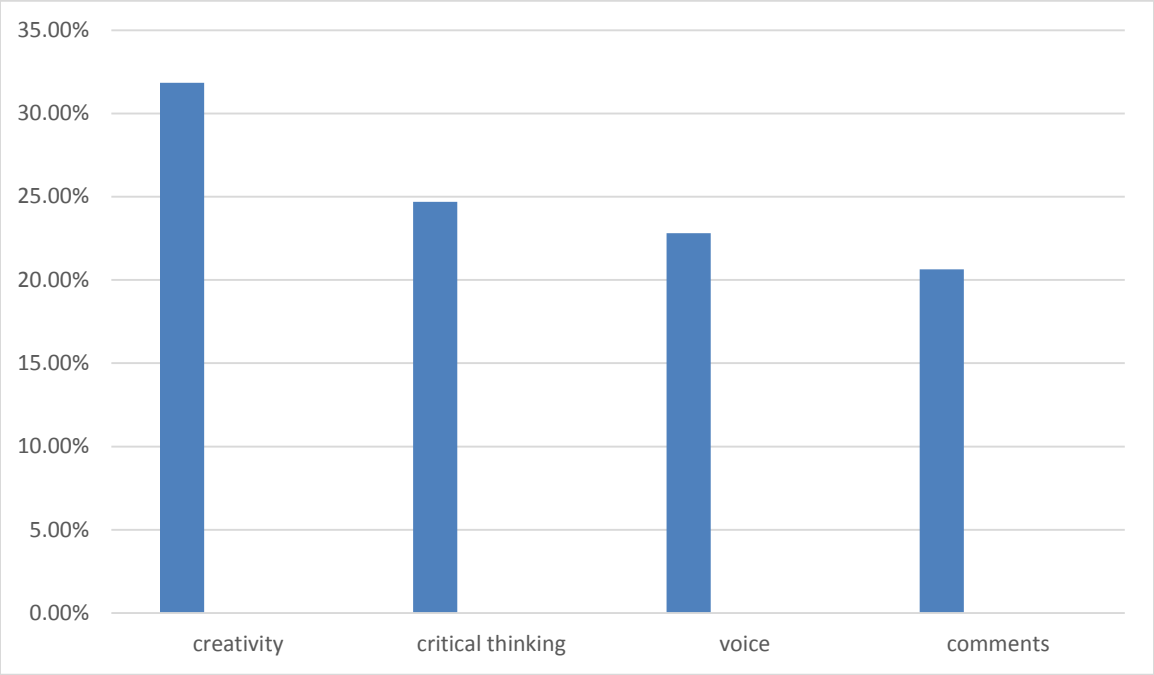

Figure 4.1 Communicative Skills in Writing Performance of Participants

Based on Figure 4.1, all the four criteria of communicative skills in writing were found to be less than 50% showing that the communicative skill of the participants has no improved due to assignments in blogs. However, from among the four criteria of communicative skills, creativity and critical thinking were found to be more than voice and comments among the four criteria.

A Chi-square test was run among the four subcategories of communicative skills, the results are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.2

Results of Chi-square test between subcategories of communicative skills

frequency	**Communicative skills**	
Chi-Square	**000.a**	**000.a**
df	**3**	**3**
Asymp. Sig.	**1.000**	**1.000**

According to the figures given in Table 4.2 the significance level is 1.000, which is higher than the observed level of significance (.05<.1.000). This tells us that there is no statistically significant difference between different subcategories of communicative skills.

5. Discussions

The current study intended to compare the effects of using collaborative blogging on communicative aspects of Iranian EFL learners' writing. In a quest for finding the answer for this question, after

gathering the required data using writing tasks, and analyzing the gathered data, it was made clear that less than 50% of the communicative criterion was seen in the blog assignments of the participants. Thus, the participants showed a low degree of communicative skills in writing, with a higher degree of creativity and critical thinking, compared to voice and comments.

In justifying the findings it should be noted that even though, the participants displayed low scores, the process of commenting on the blogs made the participants get to know each other and their blog writing styles outside of the classroom. These writing styles gave the participants ideas on what to write and how to write in their own blogs. Using creativity and humor, some participants managed to keep a conversation going on the blogs. The response to this creativity and humor motivated them to continue writing on the blog. The participants did not seem to be shy about voicing their opinion on the blogs. They communicated with others, by putting questions across to them in the form of a blog post or comments. The participants were seen as communicating on Blogger from time to time during the course of the study.

Based on the results in the area of critical thinking, the participants displayed a certain degree of critical thinking, depending upon their topics of their interest and possibly their background knowledge and experiences on that topic. The topics such as money and Valentine's Day seemed to bring about more interest and more discussion was generated from these blog assignments. This showed that if the participants were given topics that related their own lives, they felt motivated to carry on communicating through blogs.

Regarding the display of participants' voice in their blog assignments, there was a varying degree in the participants' contribution, and a reason for this might have been anxiety while writing on the blogs..

Overall, it was found that writing the blog assignments in their own time encouraged the participants to feel less anxious and contribute to the study. The results of this study lend support to the study by Iyer (2013) who revealed that the students displayed a low degree of communicative skills in writing: (26%-32%) for creativity, critical thinking, voice and comments. They showed a positive attitude towards collaborative blogging and found the process of blogging and commenting helped in their writing skills and developing good relationships with each other.

6. Conclusion

The study was in fact an attempt to shed more light on the point whether using the ICT tools can enhance writing performance of Iranian EFL learners or not As it was illuminated in the preceding section of the study, the findings of the study revealed that in spite of the positive contributions of blogging, using collaborative blogging cannot enhance the communicative aspects of writing ability of Iranian EFL students. All in all, more attention should be given to new technology of different types in teaching the complicated task of writing.

The findings may well suggest that the incorporating blogging practices as a type of ICT tool in EFL writing classes in Iran may be fruitful for both the teachers and learners.

The findings of the study can also provide insights for university language professors by demonstrating the role of one of the instruments to be used in writing classes, namely, blogging. This way the Iranian professors may come to know how to teach the instructional materials relating writing, and how to improve writing ability of students.

The findings of the study will, therefore, be helpful for teachers, so as to enable them to decide whether learners should be given some opportunity to use new technology in their writings.

Even though, investigating the role of using new technology in writing performance of EFL learners can be of importance in foreign language writing skill, like any other study, this study also has a number of

limitations, some of which could influence the findings and restrict the generalization of the results. Here are some of the limitations of the research at hand.

Firstly, the study was restricted to pre intermediate EFL students who were Iranian, and the results may be different with students of other levels. Furthermore, in a different environment which may include non-Iranian participants, different results may be obtained.

Secondly, the participants of this study, included 21 EFL students. However, the same study can be conducted with a higher number of students .

finally, in the present study only one of the ICT tools, namely weblog was considered. Other studies can broaden the literature with other ICT tools.

This study focused on the effect of using collaborative blogging on enhancing writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. Other studies can examine the effect of other types of ICT tools like the new applications installed on cellphone on writing performance of the EFL students.

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