

USING BLOGS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' SUMMARY WRITING ABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

The research compared students' summary writing ability before and after they were taught through blog, a new medium or tool for written communication and interaction in many different languages around the world. The research design is a kind of one group pretest posttest. Participants were 33 first-year students who studied EN 011 course (English in Action) in the first semester of the academic year 2012 at Bangkok University. They were divided into six groups. Five or six students in each group created a blog; www.blogger.com, and they worked together for fourteen weeks to produce six pieces of summary written work. Each member in the group worked through providing comments, editing and revising on the blog until the group got a final summary paper and submitted that to the teacher for grading. The instruments used in this study were (1) two summary writing tests (2) a questionnaire surveying students' attitude toward learning through blogs, and (3) postings on blogs to reflect their learning experience.

The results revealed that after the students worked together on weblogs, their English summary writing mean score of the posttest was higher than that of the pretest, and they had positive attitudes towards using weblogs in learning. Regarding cooperative learning experiences through using weblogs, most students thought that it was interesting, a new experience to work with their friends on the weblogs.

Keywords: Summary writing, blogs, EFL learning, online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is seen as a difficult productive skill. It conveys a meaning from the thinking process to the reader. By writing, we can share ideas, arouse feeling, and persuade other people (White and Arndt, 1991). Moreover, writing can be a good reflection of students' overall understanding of English learning. Since writing is a complicated process that involves the cognitive process, the social context and the need for people's routine life, it is not an easy skill for one to acquire. Writing ability is not acquired naturally; it requires the learner to be taught and practiced in the form of the academic environment.

A number of educators have identified two factors that cause an ineffective teaching and learning of writing. First, it comes from the students themselves; they lack basic writing skill, and they also lose confidence in writing. In addition, they need a lot of practice as they don't have enough chance to practice writing.

The students' achievement in writing skill is low because most of them do not know how to write. They cannot clearly express their ideas to the readers, and their sentences are ungrammatical (Widdowson, 1981).

Cimcoz (1999) points out those students cannot choose the right words, and they do not know how to start their writing. Second, the problem results from English teachers. They do not have sufficient and suitable teaching technique, including lack of using appropriate materials in their classes. Some materials are not updated. Besides, many teachers still use the traditional teacher-centered method in writing classes, it makes classes boring and ineffective (Sritunyarat, 2003).

In their disciplines, most students have to read and write a summary of information from journals, textbooks and other sources such as electronic publications when they do assignments in their own field of study. The ability to summarize information is, therefore, an essential skill for them. As Stotesbury (1990) states, "Summarizing entails the reduction of a text to its essential constituents which means that students have to be able to grasp the overall structure of a text and be able to distinguish the major issues from the minor ones." According to Duke & Pearson (2002), summarization is important as it requires readers to analyze the text information for important concepts, and also for information that can be deleted in order to summarize, they need to think critically both during and after reading, so students need to learn this skill continuously. Students must take time to process and reflect on what has been read. Therefore, learning to summarize can have multiple benefits for students such as improving overall reading comprehension, enhancing the quality of written summaries, and helping them retain knowledge gained in content areas.

As a consequence, we, as an English writing instructor, understand the importance of writing skill and the poor performance of students in writing; we should try to find ways to help our students develop their writing, and also motivate students to write effectively, maintain environments to continue learning to write even when out of class. However, this can be solved by using the recent educational tool, a weblog.

WEBLOGS OR BLOGS

According to Boas (2011), the term blog is a blend of two words: web and log; it is a web page with regular diary or journal entries that incorporates different postings by authors and responses to these posts by an audience.

Weblog, or blog for short, is used as a noun and a verb. Blogs are a new medium or tool for written communication and interaction in many different languages around the world (Galien & Bowcher, 2010). Hanson-Smith (2001) states that blogs are user-friendly websites. It is easy for students to create and maintain their blogs.

In addition, blogs offer a safe and relaxed environment for students, especially for shy or less confident ones in using English. In addition, Richardson (2006) supports that it is easy to set up blogs and posts are common to comment on.

Two popular websites that support the free creation of blogs are www.blogger.com and <http://wordpress.com>. They are an excellent and useful resource for teachers who need to employ blogs in their classroom.

TYPES OF BLOGS

Three types of blogs commonly used in the language classroom are the tutor blogs, the learner blogs, and the class blogs. First, the tutor blog is what the teacher sets and runs it for students to practice reading, explore of English websites, and exchange their opinions online by using comment buttons, access class or syllabus information, so it serves as a resource of links for self-study. Second, the learner blog is what an individual student creates and runs. Students can post their thoughts related to their reading. Thus, it encourages student self-expression; it also develops a sense of ownership. Learner blogs are most suitable for reading and writing classes. Lastly, the class blog is shared by both a teacher and students. Sometimes it is used by a whole class to work collaboratively. It encourages students to post messages, images and links related to classroom discussion topics. The class blog can facilitate project-based learning, and it can be used as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange (Campell, 2003).

WEBLOGS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

In recent years, interest in using blogs in classroom has been increasing due to the advancement of technology. Weblog is also gaining popularity in English language learning context. Most of educational institutions fully support the use of computer technology as a tool for language learning.

According to Noytim (2010), weblogs have been asserted to have powerful means for developing English language teaching and learning for many reasons. Weblogs offer authentic learning environment through real communication. In writing, the audiences are not only teachers but also peers including other people outside the classroom, a global audience.

Therefore, weblogs can motivate students to write more, they can write both academic and non academic. Through blogs, students can write and comment on their friends' writing, they can discuss and share their common interests and individual differences. When using blogs, students can get feedback from other audiences; they have an opportunity to read things in which they are interested and write things they really want to (Aljamah, 2012).

Likewise, Dawns (2004) points out that using blogs in writing classes improved students' writing skills. Nadzrah & Kemboja (2009) state that blogs let students write their compositions with specific purposes. Blogs are very effective tools in teaching and learning since they provide students with an environment that helps students reflect and publish their own thoughts in form of writing (Ferdig & Trammell (2004).

According to Mynard (2007) blog is a powerful tool for language instructors to encourage students to express or reflect their ideas on their learning experience and add their comments to their friends' blogs to encourage further reflection.

Blogs also integrate students into the world of interconnected media; they become familiar with using blog both as a writer and a reader. Blogs also provide a great value in developing critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy (Richardson, 2006).

As a teacher, weblogs can provide a bridge between lessons. Teachers can post materials that recycle and review vocabulary and topics presented during lessons. As well, blogs can save the teacher time as information about schedule changes, homework assignments etc. (Campbell, 2003)

Galien & Bowcher (2010) asserts that using the blogs provides students an additional as well as motivating opportunity since they publish their works in a non-judgement fun environment. Moreover, blogs provide increased and more balanced students communication and they allow the shy, quieter students to have more time to consider what to write and to formulate their responses.

According to Bloch, (2008) using blogs for teaching writing skills is very useful because of many reasons:

- blogs are easy to create and maintain;
- they encourage students to be more prolific writers;
- they make writing easier to share;
- they support group work, feedback, and collaboration;
- they provide opportunities to write outside of class;
- they can access or link to multimedia and related texts; they offer students with sense of authorship; and
- they encourage teachers to use blogs in various ways of teaching.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON BLOGS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Many researches were conducted to investigate how web-based tools could help develop the students' language ability. Apart from learning logs, chat rooms, online learning, weblogs are a kind of powerful teaching tool which were employed in many language teaching in recent years. To understand whether blogs are truly beneficial for language learning, it is essential to know the findings of the previous studies about the effectiveness of using blogs in instruction.

For instance, Doris de Almeida Soares (2008) set up a class blog with her nine pre-intermediate EFL students in a language school in Brazil. She explored the students' perceptions of the value of using blogs as a part of their English learning. She carried out three-month exploratory practice. The finding showed that the students viewed blogs as learning tools for them and blogs helped their English. Likewise, Aljumah, (2012) investigated students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of blogs in teaching English writing course for EFL Majors at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. Data were collected from 35 students through questionnaires. The result showed that students had a favorable perception and attitude towards the use of blogs in their writing class. Findings also indicated that students perceived benefits of using blogs to increase motivation and interest to use English.

In addition, Noytim (2010) investigated the potential value of weblog use on English language learning in the context of a university in Thailand. The study examined students' perceptions of and attitudes toward using weblogs. The participants were twenty undergraduate English major students who were preparing to become English teachers at a secondary level. They undertook coursework and teaching practicum in secondary schools.

For the study, students were asked to create individual blog, use free and easy to use: www.blogger.com. During a period of 15 weeks, students had to publish ten entries about their teaching experiences, shared their thoughts and ideas on their blogs. Individual students were also asked to write a response to their peers' blogs. The data from students' responses to questionnaires and interview indicated that the students perceived blogs as valuable tool to develop their English. Blogs also gave them the opportunity and freedom for self-expression in English. The findings suggested that blogs offered not only motivation for authorship and readership but also the development of writing, learning strategies, and critical thinking.

Similarly, Jones, (2006) examined ESL (English as a second language) students' perceptions as well as those of the teacher regarding the implementation of blogs in the ESL writing class. There were five students participating in the study. They used blogs for four aspects of the writing process: peer responding, editing, revising and publishing their writing assignments. The data from interviews, open-ended questions, surveys and students' reflective journals showed that the students all liked the blogging aspect of the class for writing tasks, and therefore, responded positively to the use of blogs. The most significant finding was that blogging seemed to solve some critical issues related to the students' trust and confidence in peer editing and revising.

At Bangkok University, undergraduate students in the nine faculties: Accounting, Business Administration, Communication Arts, Laws, Humanities, Economics, Science and Technology, Fine and Applied Arts, and Engineering, are required to take three fundamental English courses. Each course consists of four integrated skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. From the test, it was found that most students got low scores in the writing part, especially in summary writing. In higher education level summarization skill is essential because students have to cut irrelevant information, or condense the information from textbooks, journal, and other sources relating their field of study. Even if summary writing is an essential skill; obviously, the students' summary writing is poor quality. The majority of the sentences they wrote were grammatically incorrect, and the students cannot make decision which information was relevant and necessary to include in their summaries. In addition, students copied the sentences from the original texts in their summaries. Therefore, as an English teacher, it is necessary to find new techniques to encourage students to improve their summarization skill. Currently, educational technology such as blogs has potential values to create interesting, active, and friendly learning environment. Using blogs would be beneficial to students in terms of working in groups, getting feedback, and promoting collaboration among teams. So, the researcher decided to adopt the blogs as an innovative tool to use with one group of students enrolled in EN 011 in teaching summary writing to make this class more interesting and challenging. In this study, two main research questions are addressed as follows:

- To what extent do the students improve their summary writing abilities after learning through blogs in groups?
- What are the students' attitudes towards learning through blogs?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Objectives

1. To examine the effects of using blogs on students' summary writing abilities
2. To investigate the students' attitudes towards learning through blogs

Participants

This study employed one group pre-test post-test design. The population was 5,560 first- year students enrolled in a fundamental English course (EN011) in the first semester of 2012 academic year. There were 139 sections altogether. Since students were already assigned to their sections, the cluster sampling was employed to get one section. As a result, this study was made up of 33 students from one section participating in this study.

Instruments

The effect on students' learning was proved by three kinds of instruments. There were two summary writing tests, a survey questionnaire asking their attitudes toward using blogs in learning, and postings of learning experience on blogs.

First, the English summary writing tests designed in a parallel form were administered as a pre-test and post-test. Both tests required students to read two reading passages, each of which consisted of 150-200 words. When they finished reading the passage, they had to write a summary in about 3-5 sentences. Time allowed for each test was 60 minutes.

Second, to study how students thought about the learning process through blogs and how it made an effect on their knowledge as well as their attitude in their increased capabilities, a questionnaire containing 10 items with a choice of five rating scale responses for each was distributed to the students after the posttest.

This questionnaire was pilot-tested with 32 students in the summer class after they had participated in pilot learning of seven weeks. Improvement on the piloted questionnaire items had been made based on the students' feedback, so any misinterpretation can be prevented.

Finally, the third instrument was students' postings on blogs. To gain more details of students' attitude toward learning, all students were encouraged to post their working experience on their weblogs at the end of the course. Students could share what they got from learning with the team members. Also, they could give feedback on the difficulties they encountered and the benefits they gained while using blogs in learning.

Procedure and Data Collection

The data collection was done on week 1 and week 14. In the first week, the subjects were given a pretest. They were then placed in the high, average, and low groups according to their scores. Using mean, median, and mode to group the students, the researcher got 6 groups, each of which contained 5 members; a high student, two average students and two low students. Next, the teacher asked them to create blogs with a safe password-protected environment for students to work together. Students were suggested to use a popular, free and easy-to-use weblog provider:

Blogger. How to summarize the story was taught to the students on the first two weeks of the semester. Then, students had to read six passages from Chapter 1-3 in the textbook *American English File 3* and they were asked to write a summary of 3-5 sentences on their blogs. Each group of students was responsible for creating and maintaining their blogs to develop their sense of ownership.

The working process started with a member wrote and posted his/her summary on the blog, then other members went on the blogs and made a revision. When making any correction, students must show reasons for changing it. Moreover, each member can also post any suggestions to their group on the blogs. The teacher went online and gave the feedback, comments, or suggestions for students to improve their summary writing. Posting included 6 pieces of summaries from what they read in the textbook throughout the course (week 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13). On week 14, the intervention was followed by the posttest and questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The summary writing tests, pretest and posttest, were checked by two teachers using the same criteria. The writing scores were calculated for mean. The inter-rater reliability coefficients of the two teacher raters in pretest and posttest using Pearson Correlation were 0.92 and 0.95 respectively. The researcher combined scores from both raters and divided by two to find out the mean score of each participant. The data collected from the tests and the questionnaire surveying students' attitudes were analyzed quantitatively through descriptive statistics and dependent t-test. Concerning the students' written reflection, the data were grouped through content analysis, presented with frequency in table form.

RESEARCH RESULT

Research Question 1: To what extent do the students improve their summary writing abilities after learning through blogs in groups?

This research question explored the impacts of using blogs by examining the students' summary writing scores. In order to find out whether the students improved significantly in their writing ability, the pretest and posttest mean scores were compared by using a paired samples t-test. Table 1 shows that the mean score of the post-test was higher than that of the pre-test. As evidenced by the significant difference at the level of .001, it clearly illustrates that using blogs in learning helped the students to improve their summary writing abilities. (See Table 1)

Table: 2
Means of the Pre-Test and Post-Test of the Students

	N	\bar{X}	S.D.	t	Sig
Pretest	33	12.09	2.03	4.23	.000
Posttest	33	14.17	2.57		

Research Question 2: What are the students' attitudes towards learning through blogs?

Table: 2
Students' Attitudes towards Learning through Blogs

Statement	\bar{X}	S.D.	meaning
1. Writing on the blog gives me more useful advice and comments from teacher and peers.	4.03	.64	positive
2. Comments or advice from teacher/peers enabled me to have better understanding in summary writing.	4.24	.61	positive
3. Using blog in learning enabled me to develop cooperative skill with other.	4.15	.80	positive

4. Blog provides an exciting and motivating learning environment.	4.09	.63	positive
5. Blog helps to save my time, we don't need to meet to work together.	4.27	.72	positive
6. Writing on the blog, I and my friends helped each other to learn.	4.33	.74	positive
7. Writing on the blog can increase my responsibility in learning and critical thinking.	4.24	.61	positive
8. Working together on the blog made learning more interesting.	4.30	.64	positive
9. Working together on the blog helped me to improve summary writing skill.	4.18	.68	positive
10. I became prudent after learning through using the blog.	4.03	.68	positive
Total	4.19	.41	positive

After the experiment, the students were asked to express their attitudes toward using blogs in learning. Table 2 indicated that students had positive attitude in the overall attitude ($\bar{X} = 4.19$) and in all items. When considering each items, it was found that the highest score was on no.6 (Writing on the blogs, I and my friends helped each other to learn, $\bar{X} = 4.33$), followed by no. 8 (Working together on the blogs made learning more interesting, $\bar{X} = 4.30$), and followed by no. 5 (Blog helps to save my time, we don't need to meet to work together, $\bar{X} = 4.27$). However, the item that had the least mean score was no.10 (I became prudent after learning through using the blog, $\bar{X} = 4.03$).

As for qualitative data, the students were asked to write their learning experience and post it on their blogs. It was found that 21 out of 33 participants said that feedback and comments from peers and a teacher were very useful for them in developing their summary writing; while 14 out of 33 participants agreed that they got a wonderful learning experience through blogging. 12 students indicated that working together through blogs helped them raise awareness in writing. For instance, they realized to state the main idea in the first sentence of the summary. They had to make a careful choice of grammatical structures and vocabulary. They tried to summarize the story in their own words. 10 students showed that they learned to work cooperatively with others in groups since they had to arrange the working process suitable for all members; they had to plan the time for posting their own writing tasks as well as make themselves available for giving feedback to other members. They also claimed that they learned new vocabularies from using blogs. Some of them stated that writing in the blogs made them more responsible and punctual. If they were late to post their writing, it could affect their team members. However, two students complained that it was not convenient for them to post their writing assignments on blogs because they did not have their own computer at dormitory.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research finding indicates that blogs are powerful tools that contribute to the improvement of students' summary writing abilities. From comparing the result of the pretest and posttest, it revealed that the students' summary writing abilities significantly improved.

The positive effect of using blogs in summary writing development was probably because of the nature of blogs which offer authentic learning environment through real communication (Noytim, 2010). Apart from that, posting messages on blogs can be two types: academic and non-academic. Students can write and comment on their friends' writing freely. So, students can discuss and share their common interests and individual differences. When using blogs, students can get feedback from other audiences; they have an opportunity to read things in which they are interested and write things they really want to (Aljumah, 2012). By so doing, summary writing which was difficult and boring for students will be an easy task. Once a student analyzes the text information for important concepts and writes a summary, other team members will check the answer and provides the feedback. The working process allows students to learn from one another. In addition, Blogs help students with low proficiency who are shy and quiet to have more time to consider what to write and to formulate their responses (Galien & Bowcher, 2010). This is consistent with previous research (Jones, 2006; Soares, 2008; Noytim, 2010; Aljumah, 2012) in which using blogs could enhance students' writing skills. The significant improvement on the participants' score was due to the fact that students realized that their peers in the group and their teacher read, reviewed, and corrected their written work. The responses in the questionnaires showed that most of the students perceived the use of blogs positively after using blogs for 14 weeks. Students liked the idea of writing through blogging because blogs made learning more interesting ($\bar{X}=4.30$). This might be because students had no experience of learning through blogs before. When students create blogs and run the activities by themselves, they felt involved and motivated. Blogs increased their motivation to write more freely. Students felt relaxed because they didn't focus too much on the accuracy of writing, but on the fluency instead. In spite of this, students still increased their writing ability. This is probably a result from working together on blogs as shown in the item with highest ratings "I and my friends helped each other to learn" ($\bar{X}=4.33$).

The development can be supported by the postings showing that students believed in feedback they got from peers and teacher. The working process resulted in helping them raise awareness in writing summaries. The finding goes along with many previous studies (Ferdig & Trammell (2004), Doris de Almeida Soares (2008), and Galien & Bowcher (2010). When creating and publishing blogs, it also promoted students' creative thinking. Students had the choice to organize their ideas and content in their own ways, leading to divergent and creative thinking. The blog also provided students to view their progress and monitor their improvement. (Istifci, 2011).

In conclusion, blogs provide a new motivating and exciting learning experience; they also enhance students' creative and critical thinking skills. The students have opportunities to expose to various social interactions; between students and teachers, students and their classmates, and students and global audiences. Blogging system helps students to be active learners, so it is suitable to be implemented in language classes in order to enhance their writing ability.

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