

Blogging as a way of learning to write

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Abstract

A weblog (blog or web log) is a web-based publication consisting primarily of written periodic articles or audio entries. It has recently become one of the most widely received Internet applications. Developing a blog specifically designed for language learners is first presented. An online proofreading annotation system embedded into the blog allows error correction and annotation. Proofreading exercises developed from these error annotations were demonstrated and analyzed. Examples of students' blog entries were demonstrated. Both qualitative and quantitative system evaluation and learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of the website would be described. A model resulting from students' immediate retrospective verbal reports is presented to highlight teaching and learning factors. This paper suggests that, through the provision of opportunities for keeping blogs online and writing reflection, the participants learning English as a foreign language can be encouraged to engage in writing about their diaries and reflections in English. Such online writing experience aids the building of a productive online community of practice. In addition, by encouraging participants to reflect on other's blogs, it builds up an online peer review community. The conclusion is that writing weblogs in an online environment is beneficial for helping the participants improve their writing skills, enhance their motivation to write and learn English, and can provide an excellent tool for qualitative research.

Introduction

With the popularity of networked computer interface and the development in computer-assisted instruction, communication is no longer limited to a traditional face-to-face communication mode. An innovative way of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is introduced, which includes asynchronous electronic mail systems and real-time online messengers. The CMC prompts mutual or even multiple

ways of communication that offers opportunities to produce target language in real-life situated contexts. This new mode of communication increases users' target language exposure and production, improves learning attitudes and motivation, and students are encouraged to learn autonomously and cooperatively (Pellettieri, 2000; Beauvois, 1998a; Beauvois, 1998b; Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Kern, 1995). Besides, CMC interface is normally text-based and not length-constrained. Lengthy texts are hence not uncommon, and students benefit from this to develop their reading in interaction with writing skills (Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

Web logs (named also weblogs and blogs) were presented to the public in the 90s. Blogs establish cyber-communities and bring the users a sense of belonging (Betts & Glogoff, 2005). Gutstein (1983) further indicated that blogs could build communicative real-life situated contexts for authentic language use as the traditional written dialogue journals could, and hence learners' speaking abilities were improved (Baskin, 1994 ; El-Koumy, 1998). As for the novelty of blogs, users are offered a friendly interface (Johnston, 2002) where information is instantly updated (Milne, 2004). Also, blogs center on users and learners, which encourages learner autonomy (Dettori, Giannetti, & Persico, 2005; Oravec, 2002). Consequently, educational weblogs are gaining popularity in language teaching and learning (Betts & Glogoff, 2005).

Purpose of the study

The current study aims to foster students' writing ability by developing a writing platform where they can be enthusiastic and confident about writing, and can leave the writing course as independent and lifelong writers in the target language.

This project creates a weblog for EFL students. The procedures are as follows: 1) creating an oral blog that authorizes teachers of more power in administering and providing feedback; 2) designing online courses and activities that provide students with plenty of target language input and output opportunities to enhance their communicative competences; 3) establishing evaluation criteria; and 4) evaluating the whole learning system to examine students' learning effects via quantitative and qualitative analysis of the participants' writing proficiency.

Research questions:

1. What are students' attitudes toward blog learning?
2. What are the factors hinder students' involvement in the blog?

3. Do blogging activities foster language learning? In what aspects?
4. What are the participants' writing processes in keeping blog?

Instruments

A 45-item, multiple-choice E-diary Survey was developed for the study. It consists of (1) the Learner Attitude Scale, (2) the Assistance Scale, (3) the Learner Behavior Scale, (4) the Revision Scale, (5) the Website Evaluation Scale, and (6) a background questionnaire. The items are answered on a 5-point Likert scale. Participants are asked to rate their agreement on the scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree 1 = strongly disagree).

The first scale measures participants' overall attitudes toward the E-diary website. This scale contains two parts: whether the participants satisfy with the outcome that the website and reasons that obstruct them to write on the e-diary. A high score on this scale indicates that participants confirm the efficacy of writing on the website of e-diary. The second scale assesses how helpful the website is and in what aspects the website offer to participants (grammar, vocabulary, reading, usage, structure, and logical thinking). A high score on this scale means that participants consider that EDiary can assist them in improving their writing related abilities. There are also two parts in the third subscale. One measures participants' behavior style while writing. The other assesses to what extent and in which aspects participants revise their draft (grammatical structure, word choice, content, organization, and spelling). A high score on this scale indicates that there is a large amount of interaction between the participants and others. The fourth scale is about participants' evaluation on the design of the website. A high score on this scale means that participants highly value the design that the system offers.

Results

Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of each scale. In general, the mean of each subscale was higher than overall mean, except for the learner behaviors (3.94). Among the scales, the mean of website evaluation is the highest, which means that the participants believed the quality of the functions and design of the system.

Table 1. The descriptive statistics of each scale for the Ed diary Survey

Subscale on Ed diary survey	Mean	S.D.
Learner attitudes	3.68	0.45

Help	3.76	0.48
Learner Behaviors	2.77	0.61
Revision	3.62	0.76
Website Evaluation	4.04	0.48

When the statements of each subscale were examined, greater differences were found. For learner attitude, Table 2 shows that Item 1, Item 2 and Item 3 received the top three highest mean scores. The findings indicated that participants believe Ed diary is a useful website as a tool in the development of writing ability. Participants identify the improvement of writing skills as an important learning outcome. In addition, Item 4 received the lowest mean score, which inferred that the participants view keeping a diary not only as a requirement, but also an interesting and beneficial learning process. Therefore, the results seem to indicate that Ed diary is a useful tool in writing and the participants have developed the learner autonomy to keeping a diary voluntarily with the aid of the system.

As for the reasons that the participants didn't keep a diary regularly, Table 2 shows that Item 9 receives the highest mean, which means that laziness and procrastination are the two main reasons that hinder the participants to keep a diary continually. And Item 10 is the second highest. By examining those reasons, we found that laziness and procrastination are related to human nature and time deficiency is related to time management, which all belong to the intrinsic factors and infers that participants can control those factors and change their behaviors if they would.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Scores for Learner Attitude

Questions	Mean	SD
1. I am positive to the whole Ed diary website.	4.48	.59
2. I consider that Ed diary is helpful to enhance English academic writing ability.	4.40	.58
3. Keeping a diary in the type of research type is helpful to push myself writing a thesis.	4.04	.61
4. Keeping a diary in the Ed diary is just a requirement of finishing assignment.	2.96	.84
5. Keeping a diary in the Ed diary is an interesting learning activity.	3.28	.84
6. I expect myself keeping a diary in the Ed diary as often as I can.	3.84	.90
7. When I can not achieve keeping a diary in the Ed diary as I expect, I feel stressful or blame myself.	3.16	1.11
8. Generally speaking, I am satisfied with what I have done in the Ed diary.	3.36	.76

I consider the reasons that cause me not to keep a diary regularly on the Ed diary are:

9. Laziness and procrastination	3.84	.99
10. Time deficiency	3.40	.82
11. Keeping an English diary is meaningless.	2.16	1.11
12. I am no interested in keeping an English.	2.33	1.17
13. I think keeping an English diary is a difficult thing.	3.20	1.15

CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that practice in writing, especially extensive writing, provides learners an opportunity to enhance their writing proficiency and also to sharpen their logical thinking ability that plays an important role in academic writing. The current website designs a writing forum based on the spirit of extensive writing to increase the efficacy of writing and provide more interaction among learners. For example, it provides learners handy assistance while they are composing such as the spelling checker. However, all the benefits we mentioned above are difficult to be achieved for the traditional journal writing. In fact, we can also infer that the Ed diary empowers learners' problem-solving skills.

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