Enhancing writing skills through blogs in an EFL class

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Abstract

Today Web 2.0 technologies, including blogs, are presenting both teachers and learners with new horizons in the field of language teaching and learning. A blog is an online journal which can be continuously updated by its users (Matheson, 2004). People can write their views at their own pace without space and time constraints. Blogs aid in the development of interpretive and critical thinking skills. The present study explores how a blog as a computer-mediated tool engages a group of EFL learners, at a language school in Spain, in reflective and collaborative learning, and argues that personal blogs can motivate students to build on their writing skills through self-reflection and peer feedback. The students had become more careful with planning their task and error correction before submitting their work. Collaborative skills were also fostered through students' regular interaction on the blogs.

Keywords: blogs; peer feedback; self reflection; collaborative skills

1. Introduction

Although most blogs on the Internet tend to be personal or journalistic (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Richardson, 2005), an increasing number of people have been using blogs in education (Richardson, 2005). In language learning the use of blogs is described as a way to "help students explore and assimilate new ideas, create links between familiar and the unfamiliar, mull over possibilities, [and explain] them to others. The analogue for this kind of student writing is the expert's notebook…" (McLeod 2001; cited in Lowe, 2004, p. 152). Thus the construction of knowledge becomes significant whilst the students shape and interpret their own meanings in writing upon the basis of their worldviews. Furthermore, blogs and social networking sites provide users with new opportunities and incentives for personal writing (Godwin-Jones, 2008).

The aims of the study were to perceive:
      (a) how learners can enhance their writing skills in specific tasks
      (b) how learners can provide each other with feedback
      (c) how learners can develop collaborative skills

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2. Method

2.1. Project description

The project, which lasted for five months, used a blog as a computer-mediated tool to engage a group of EFL learners at a language school in Spain in reflective and collaborative learning. Eleven students, with varied writing levels, and who were preparing for the Certificate in Advanced English examination organized by the University of Cambridge, were involved in the study. All the participants created their personal blogs so that they could read each other's views, share ideas and comment on their peers' postings.

Specific writing tasks (article, competition entry, letter, review, report, article, proposal, reference and essay) were assigned every two weeks. The eleven students involved in the study were requested to discuss an appropriate plan for each task in their blogs, before they had the opportunity, when engaged in their face-to-face discussion class, to check the appropriateness of the plan and reach an agreement on what they considered the best one for each piece of writing. Following the discussion classes (once every two weeks), the different tasks were completed by the students on their personal blog, and were edited (lexical and grammatical items were corrected) by their respective partners prior to being submitted to be assessed by the tutor.

2.1.1. Data collection

A qualitative approach was adopted and data was gathered from the blog entries, discussion classes, interviews and the two questionnaires administered at the start and end of the project. Further data was collated through a survey by means of a questionnaire conducted at the end of the study. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (1 = *Strongly disagree*) to 5 (5 = *Strongly agree*) was used to gauge the students' reactions to the blog project.

3. Discussion

3.1. The effective use of blogs to enhance writing skills

The findings show that the overall attitude of the students towards the project was positive and that blogs were viewed as a good way of communication between peers. Table 1 below illustrates the students' perspectives of the project.

Statements of the survey	Mean	Median	Mode
1. I learnt how to plan different writing tasks.	4.82	5	5
2. The exchange of views helped me to write more carefully.	3.82	4	4
3. I thought thoroughly about the issue before I planned my task.	4.55	5	5
4. I learnt new grammatical structures and vocabulary.	3.91	4	4
5. My writing skills have improved through regular writing on the blogs.	4.27	5	5

Table 1. Students' perspectives of the project.

Eight students reported that they benefited from the experience, particularly in terms of planning different tasks. They all stated that their motivation to learn had increased. Seven students also added that the exchange of viewpoints assisted them in writing more thoughtfully, and they had improved their writing skills through regular posting on the blogs.

Pedagogical intervention could, therefore, encourage students to show their ability to become independent learners through blogging. Hence it is imperative that the right type of activity is chosen when using blogs as a tool for learning so that learners can profit from the learning environment.

3.2. Peer feedback

The students found the feedback from their peers to be very useful and motivational. They acknowledged that peer feedback assisted them in planning their writing task, and it raised their awareness of error correction before completing their tasks. Table 2 below illustrates students' peer feedback perspectives.

Statements of the survey	Mean	Median	Mode
1. My spelling errors were highlighted and corrected.	4.09	4	5
2. I became more aware of error correction when writing my tasks.	3.55	4	4
3. I have become more analytical and critical in my writing.	3.27	3	3
4. The interaction with my peers helped me to plan my tasks appropriately.	3.91	4	4

Table 2. Peer feedback perspectives.

The implications of the study are that students should be clearly informed of the tutor's expectations of them and how the proper completion of each task can be beneficial to each other. It is crucial to teach students how to manage editing so that they are aware of what kind of errors they need to search for..

3.1.2 Collaborative skills

Students developed collaborative skills more in the discussion classes than through their interaction on the blogs, which may suggest that blogs foster personal rather than collaborative writing. Table 3 shows students' perspectives of collaborative skills.

Statements from survey	Mean	Median	Mode
1. I collaborated with my peers through blogging.	3.09	3	3
2. I developed collaborative skills in the discussion classes.	3.45	4	4
3. I developed a good relationship with my peers through blogging.	3.0	3	3

Table 3. Students' perspectives of collaborative skills.

Significantly, a blended learning process comprising blogs and face-to-face discussion classes can be deemed useful for students to develop and enhance their collaborative skills, which they can later make use of in their personal or professional life.

4. Conclusions

This study has given some insight into how blogs can contribute towards the enhancement of writing skills, the encouragement provided by peer feedback and the fostering of collaborative skills. It has shown that blogs can be utilized as a tool for learning outside of class, whilst both students and tutors can profit from their usefulness "for individual knowledge construction and information sharing" (Lee, 2010, p. 225). The incorporation of blogging as a tool in the writing process can, due to its interactive nature, raise students' level of motivation. The blog project in this study afforded the students the opportunity not only to think carefully about the content of their various tasks, but also to express their views on their peers' blog entries with a view to improving linguistic performance.

5. References

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