Effects of Writing in a Class Blog on EFL Students' Attitude towards Writing

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ABSTRACT: The present study attempts to explore if writing in a class blog can improve EFL students' writing attitude. Data has been collected from a group of English language learners enrolled in an undergraduate level academic writing course at a university in Bangladesh. An experimental research design has been adopted by the teacher researcher. It is expected that the findings of the study will provide policy makers, course coordinators and writing instructors with an improved understanding of and practical considerations for an effective integration of class blogs in English writing instruction at tertiary level in Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS: attitude, blog, improvement, writing

Introduction

The term 'attitude' is used by teachers quite often in schools. It is quite common to find teachers who would often blame a student's 'bad or 'negative' attitude that interferes with his/her learning and eventually impedes satisfactory learning outcomes. Coaches and trainers from sports and physical education contend that in addition to physical strength and necessary efforts a successful player must show a 'winning attitude'. It is widely believed (Harmer 2008; Calkins 1986) that teachers' effort in forming an improved student attitude towards reading and writing is helpful to students in becoming better readers and writers. Indeed, there have been a considerable amount of discussions involving the role of attitude and motivation in learning language skills (Gardner & Lambert 1972; Gardner 2010).

Suggestions have been made regarding learner attitude and its influence on making a better ground for learning in English classrooms (Weaver 1996; Camp 1992; Rosenblatt 1995) in a number of research studies in the field of constructivist learning, self-evaluation, and students' responses to reading literature. For example, before assigning students a topic to write, writing instructors take into consideration learners' attitude towards the topic, the reader, the writing task, and the criteria for assessing writing. Topics for which learners are identified with a negative predisposition are generally avoided. Therefore, writing assignment and practices should be designed in such a way so that teachers' can extend support to students in improving and, if possible, changing their negative attitude.

Attempts to explore potential sources of negative attitude towards writing is worthwhile for at least two reasons: (1) teachers may discover that students negative attitude towards writing is a result of their fear and anxiety about the red ink and discouraging comments and grades or scores, (2) learners in general English composition courses, and academic writing classes in ESL courses, in particular, may simply fail to see usefulness of writing a particular composition and may think writing essays in composition courses are waste of time. Recognizing such potential sources of resistance and indifference to writing is the firsts step for teachers for a better understanding of what additional supports and writing practices need to be provided to students. For an anxious learner writer, a personal journal writing task without any comments from teachers on grammar and accuracy might help. A one-to-one conference for the first draft is often found to be useful in removing negative attitudes and anxiety faced by novice learner writers.

L2 writing through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

Teaching L2 composition in higher education in the CMC driven modern world must take into consideration learners' need to use the emerging writing tools (Ware, Kern & Warschauer 2016). In a CMC environment, learners writing practices are no longer a solitary act. In fact, an increasing number of technology driven writing tools provide 21st century learners with more scopes for writing

practices that are accomplished through learners collaboration and sharing. Writing on online platforms such as blogs and wikis has made it possible for learner writers to share and evaluate each others' texts. Today's L2 learners are apprenticed into new literacy practices themselves through their active engagement in online communication. In fact, a great deal of writing is accomplished outside the formal environment of the classrooms and in the informal networked space of facebook, twitter, texting, wikis and blogs (Yancey 2014).

CMC technologies have significantly impacted techniques of writing, creation of genres, formation of authors' identity, forms of the final written products, and writers' engagement with readers (Hyland 2016). For example, while engaged in making and negotiating meaning in an online environment, L2 writers are increasingly supplementing and complementing L2 resources with other semiotic resources such as visual, aural, gestural, and spatial.

More than offering L2 learners with multiple options and resources for L2 composition, CMC technologies have immensely influenced the psychological dimension of writing and reading practices. Writing researchers have held that a wider audience and readership in online writing may act as a potential stimulus, particularly for unwilling writers, to be motivated in investing more time and effort in order to communicate globally and more effectively. It has also been held very widely among writing researchers that innovations in educational technology have advanced in such a rapid pace that our current understanding of online writing production and their impact on the process of writing is still very limited. Therefore, it is not surprising that we have not been able to fully exploit the services and the affordances offered by CMC technologies for the writing development of the L2 learners. L2 writing pedagogy must address writing practices that go beyond print-based writing and accommodate use of multimodalities in online composition. Such pedagogical practices need to encourage learner writers to use CMC tools to collaborate and scaffold each other's learning. The present study is a humble attempt to understand and explore the nature of pedagogical practices needed in improving writing skills for the CMC driven real world.

Usefulness of blogs in writing instruction

Blogs promote real communication as when blog writers know their writing will be read by their peers and other internet users, they modify, edit, plan, adjust their writing to achieve specific goals, in a given context with a target group of readers. Therefore, integration of blogs in writing instruction is compatible to the principles of communicative language teaching.

A blog as a writing platform is interactive in nature and like other Web 2.0 tools they are social and community-based. The commenting feature of blog makes it an ideal tool to promote interaction of ideas between students to students, students to teachers, and students to other readers. Its ubiquitous nature makes it possible to comment and interact at any time from any place.

Learner writers play active roles as writers and readers. Learners' engagement through commenting, the social dimension of the blog in the community of the classmates, and the interactive features are conducive to features of constructivist approach to teaching. The social construction of knowledge that constructivism postulates matche well with learning experiences which are socially constructed.

The commenting features of blog allow peer writers to provide feedback and function as scaffolding to initial concepts and ideas for writing. These opportunities trigger the Zone of Proximal Development. Moreover, when learners write in blogs, the ownership of learning is bestowed upon learners as they publish their thoughts and understanding – the "authentic artifacts" (Ferdig & Trammell 2004).

Literature review

Among the various CMC tools, Blog has been widely used in foreign language teaching particularly in teaching reading and writing in Japan, Korea, Chinese Taiwan and Hong Kong (Zhang 2010). As blogs provide a platform for the development of reading and writing skills, for the acquisition of a wider vocabulary, they may be a useful resource in language learning. However, there is hardly any

empirical study reporting use of blogs in teaching writing to Bangladeshi tertiary level learners. The following section reviews extant literature in the area of blog application in writing instruction.

In a 16 week comparative experiment involving two groups of EFL college students, Lin, Li, Hung and Huang (2014) found writing journals in blogs helped the bloggers to achieve a greater improvement in their writing than the regular pen-and-paper peer group. Moreover, blog writers in this study experienced more ease in writing than those writing in traditional pen-and-paper platform. The researchers concluded suggesting that the blogging approach effectively improved students' writing skills and attitude towards writing.

Zhou (2015) conducted a study with eighty-one sophomores of non-English majors who were taught EFL writing in an 18 week long teaching experiment in-class and out-of-class by means of blog. Using pre-test, post-test, questionnaire and interview data, the researcher finds a 'significant improvement' in students' writing ability because of blog-assisted writing practices. Moreover, participants in the study are reported to have adopted a positive attitude towards the blog-assisted writing model and actively solved constraints of traditional EFL writing teaching.

In a study with advanced level MA students of TEFL in Iran, Hashemian and Heidari (2013) used Gardener's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery Questionnaire and a writing proficiency test. Using an experimental design, the study finds no relationship between negative attitude and success in L2 writing, between instrumental motivation and writing success. However, learners with integrative motivation were found to yield more success in L2 academic writing than those with instrumental motivation. Learners who had positive attitude operated better in L2 writing than those who had a negative attitude.

Usefulness of blogs in higher education has been reported by Neira-Pinerio (2015). In her two "innovative experience" with blogs in higher education she claims to have found enhanced communication skills in a digital environment, improvement in students' literary competence, increased motivation for participation, independent learning and shared knowledge all linked with the creation of literature blog.

The study

The creation and application of the blog was a direct response towards integrating ICT in higher education. The National Education Policy of Bangladesh 2010, National ICT Policy 2009, and the seventh five year plan (FY 2016-FY 2020) have placed a greater emphasis on the use of computer, multimedia and IT in education. The key features of ICT policy 2009 in the area of education and research are to:

1. Assess skills of ICT professionals and meet gaps with targeted trainings.
2. Encourage closer collaboration between academia and industry.
3. Extend the reach of ICT literacy throughout the country by incorporating ICT courses in secondary education and technical and vocational education.
4. Enhance the quality and reach of education at all levels with a special focus on Mathematics, Science and English.
5. Ensure ICT literacy for all in public service
6. Boost use of ICT tools in all levels of education.
7. Ensure that all universities provide global standard ICT education.

(Policy document by Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of Bangladesh 2009)

The present study attempted to answer the following questions:
1. Can writing in a class blog change learners writing attitude?
2. How do students perceive writing on a class blog?

Two questionnaires were designed to get data involving students writing attitude and perceptions towards blog writing. The writing attitude questionnaire was administered in the very first

class. The same questionnaire was administered at the end of the course. The blog writing questionnaire was also administered at the end of the composition course.

The objectives of the course ENG 102: Improving Composition and Communications Skills are considered during the planning and preparation of the blog writing activities. A process approach to teaching writing, where a lot of attention is paid to the different stages of writing, is supported and enhanced when blog is used in writing instruction (Ward 2004; Arslan & Sahin-Kizil 2010).

Following the process writing theory, blog-assisted writing instruction was divided into four teaching phases: preparation phase, drafting phase, modification phase and final draft phase. The blog writing activities were designed and administered during a whole semester. Students were given credits for writing on the class blog, 10% marks was assigned for the blogging activities.

1. Since blogs were new to the learner writers, a whole class (90 minutes) was spent to explain how to create a blog, how to write, edit and publish a post, and how to comment on others' blog posts.
2. Students were required to submit at least one post a week.
3. Since students in a pilot study conducted before this study did not write constructive comments and usually eulogized each other, a guideline for commenting was provided.

Results and Discussions

In answering the first question, *Can writing in a class blog change learners writing attitude?* I assigned 4 points for the option *very happy*, 3 for *somewhat happy*, 2 for *somewhat upset* and 1 for *very upset*. The value of one item (Q. no 14) was reverse coded as it was negatively worded. This was done to ensure that the highest value indicates positive writing attitude. After extracting the mean value of the scores for each student for the pretest and post-test questionnaire, I plotted them on a bar graph. The result of the procedure is shown below:
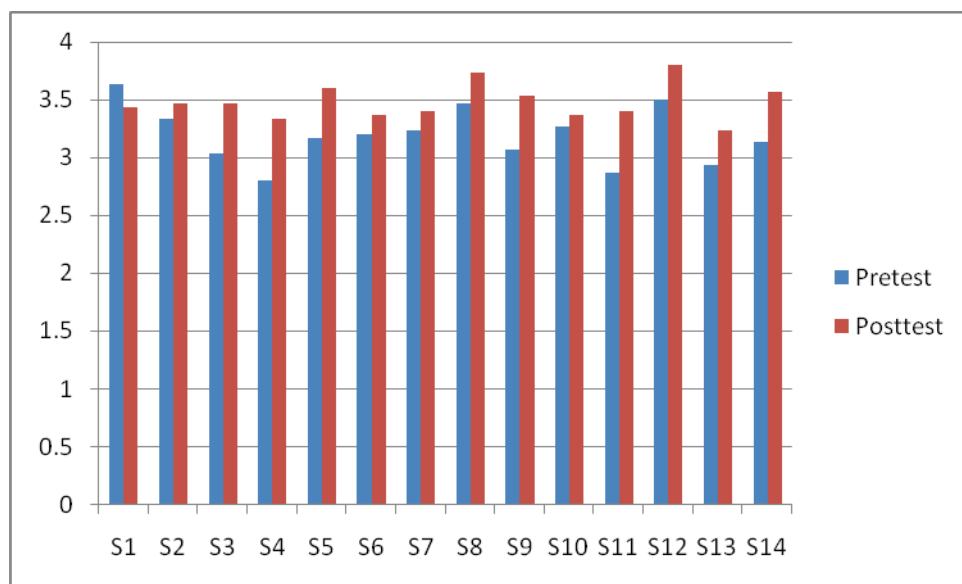

Figure 1. Mean scores of the pretest and posttest writing attitude questionnaire (student wise)

As the bar graph shows except for S1 all learners' writing attitude positively changed at the end of the course. That is, about 93% of learners in this study improved their writing attitude. S1's writing attitude changed negatively. This particular learner had no computer familiarity and did not like writing at all. He often wrote only the minimum required and did not complete the homework assignments.

A paired t-test was performed to answer the second research question. There was a significant difference in the scores of pre-test (*M*=3.19, *SD*= .24) and post-test (*M*= 3.48, *SD*= .16); *t*(26)= -3.77, *p*= .0008 (Fig 2.). These results suggest that there is a significant difference in terms of the attitude gain. Therefore, it can be concluded that learners' attitude towards writing positively changed after the course.

	Pre-test	*Post-test*
Mean	3.188095238	3.478571429
Variance	0.058736264	0.024206349
Observations	14	14
Pooled Variance	0.041471306	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	26	
t Stat	-3.773859276	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00042042	
t Critical one-tail	1.705617901	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000840839	
t Critical two-tail	2.055529418	

Figure 2. t-test scores of the writing attitude questionnaire (assuming equal variances)

Item wise mean scores plotted on the bar graph shows the following:
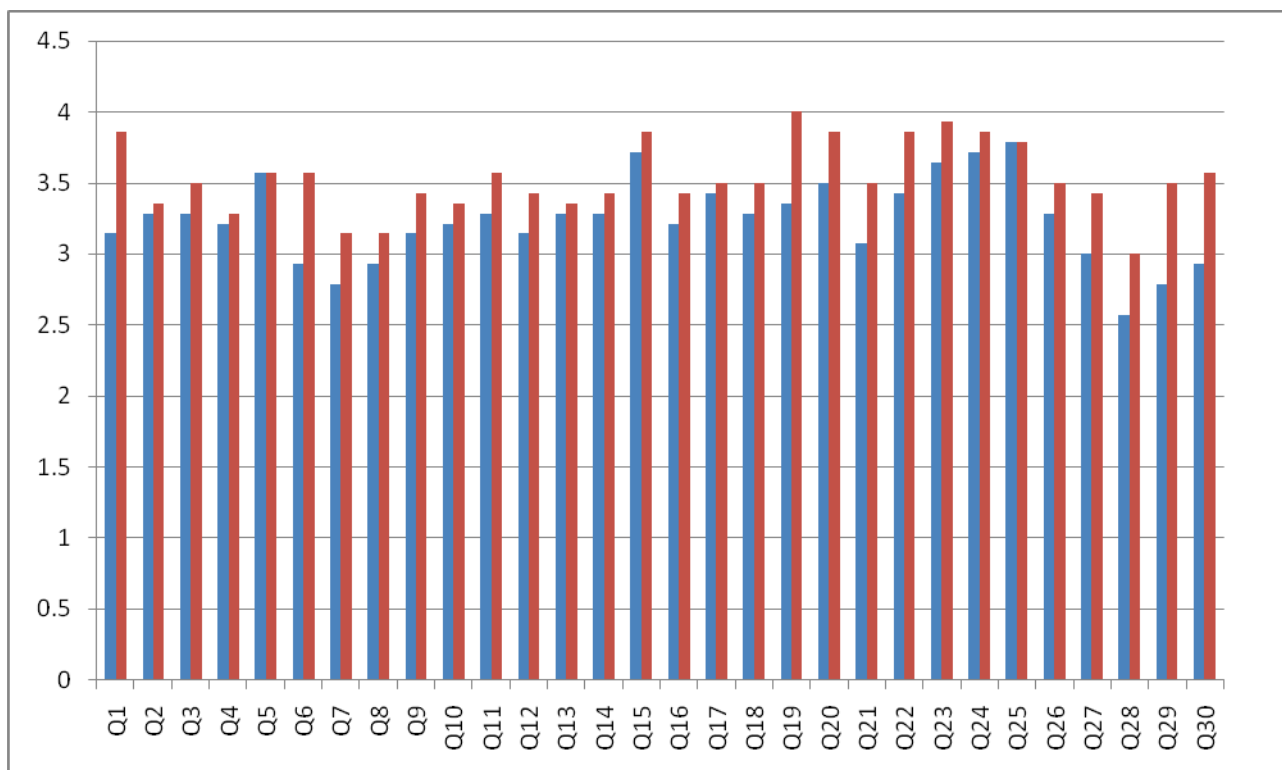

Figure 3. Mean scores of the pretest and posttest writing attitude questionnaire (item wise)

Except for item no 5 and 25 for which the mean scores remained the same, the mean scores of writing attitude for all other items changed positively. No negative attitude change was found in this analysis. In the post-test questionnaire, item no 19 scored the highest-a full score of four. The second highest

item is item no 23 scoring 3.92. The third highest items are item no 2, 16, 20, and 24 scoring about 3.86. In terms of attitude change, item no 1 and 29 registered the highest positive changes in students writing attitude. Item no 6, 19, and 30 gained the second highest attitudinal change.

To answer the second research question, *How do students perceive writing on a class blog?* I analyzed the blog questionnaire using frequency count for each response provided by the learners. The result of the analysis is discussed below:

In general, learners enjoyed reading the blog posts of the peers. About 93% (13) respondents reported they enjoyed reading the blog very much and 7% (1) reported they somewhat enjoyed. Nobody opted for the other options indicating a higher acceptance of the class blog. Moreover, students have not only consumed others reading passively, but about 64% (9) also enjoyed responding to the blog entries very much and 36% (5) reported they somewhat enjoyed. Nobody opted for the other options. The joyful experience of reading has led learners to believe that their reading comprehension has improved because of reading blog posts. About 64 % (9) reported their reading comprehension improved very much and 36 % (5) reported their reading comprehension somewhat improved after reading the blog entries.

All students liked it when they got comments on the content ideas of their writing as well as when their grammar and spelling mistakes were pointed out. This active engagement with blog writing also resulted in students taking ownership of their writing and caring more for their writing, almost 93% (13) students reported to have cared more for their writing on the blog.

The increasing acceptance of blog reading and the subsequent writing practices it triggered is due to the reported ease of writing on the blogs. About 71.5% (10) found it very much easy to use the blog for writing and 28.5% (4) opted it was somewhat easy. Nobody opted for the other options.

In general, learners perceived blog writing as helpful tool to improve their writing. About 78.5 % (11) reported blog writing helped them very much in writing better whereas 21.5% (3) reported it somewhat helped them writing better. An almost equal number of students believed blog writing increased their interests in writing and the blog project increased their interest in learning English. However, although majority of students (57%) reported that they were interested in exploring blogs outside of the class, a small number of students reported negatively. These students were perhaps more oriented towards short-term immediate goals.

Perhaps because all written posts were published online students generally deterred from copying others' work. The students' questionnaire data and the posts written by students reveal that they have not copied other writers' works. However, students widely varied while reporting whether they referred to other blog posts during writing on the blog. Almost half of the students reported that they did refer to others' writing while the remaining students reported they did not. As a result, less than half the students reported that they have waited for other peers to respond before they responded to a blog task. This is an indication that some learners need assurance and they care more for the quality of their writing.

Students not only read comments on their writing, but they also read comments on their peers writing too. An overwhelming majority of students (93%) reported that they read comments on others' posting on the blog.

Students' opinions regarding the linguistic components of writing such as vocabulary development were overall positive. Majority of the students (86%) reported they looked up words in online dictionaries while writing on the blog. Google search engine was used by 78.5% of students for looking up unknown words.

Conclusion

Students in this study did not have any prior experience with writing on blogs. However, integration of blogs in the writing instruction for a period of 14 weeks has improved the learners' attitude towards writing. The findings of the study confirm findings in previous studies conducted elsewhere. Learners had a genuine urge to check what their peers had to say about their posts. This often led students to spend more time online for reading the comments of their peers. As students had to comment following a feedback sheet, they had to read more closely. Again, some students waited as a

cautionary measure for writing a comment that they wrote after reading others' comments. Therefore, a need to read others' opinion before forming one's own opinion was promoted through the blog writing project.

Writing on the blogs has been found to have several advantages over conventional language learning tasks such as written assignments, posters, oral presentations, quizzes. First, reading and writing blogs extended the time spent on learning and transcend the physical constraints of traditional classroom learning. Students could read, write, comment any time from any place. Second, the blog writing activities offered more opportunities for increased interaction between learners outside the classroom. Finally, blog presented the possibility for real communication with internet users outside the classroom community of the students.

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