Blogs in Language Learning: An Analysis of Learners' Corrective Feedback

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Abstract: Blogging has triggered the attention of language educationalists as it promotes authentic and interactive online communication. This study undertakes this interest and investigates the use of blogs in the development of students' writing skills. It specifically delves into the various types of corrective feedbackoffered by learners who collaborated to complete their writing tasks. The sample for the study is a group of 30 students in a Malaysian semi-urban secondary school. Most of their writing tutorials were conducted online and all their writing activities were posted on their respective blogs. The data were collected from the students' weekly collaborative writing activities posted on their blogs. Preliminary findings suggest that the students were keen towards providing feedback on each other's online written drafts. They were also capable of collaborating and offering various corrective feedbacks in order to improve their written assignments.

Key words: Blog · Computer-Mediated Communication · Socio-Cultural Theory · Feedback · Process Writing

INTRODUCTION

Computer technologyoffers variouslanguage applications and programs, hence it provides teachers with ample resources toaid the teaching of various language skills. One of these resources is the weblog or commonly known as blog. As an online medium, it provides authentic environment, ideal for reflective and collaborative learning where learners could express ideas andexchange comments from online readers [1, 2]. Moreover, the use of blog in the development of language skills is highly attractive as learning could take place beyond the domain of the classroom.Of all the language skills, writing is often perceived as atedious processas it requires thinking, composing, drafting and developing.

Even most of the skilled writers encounter difficulties in performing their writing task [3]. For learners of English as a foreign or second language, writing is an even more challenging skill to develop and master [4]. Therefore, it is the concern of this study to investigate the feasibility of using blog to enhance students' writing process which will eventually develop their writing skills.

Statement of Problem: Process writing involves stages of writing several drafts. At each stage, learners are encouraged to provide feedback to improve and develop each other's writings. However, many Malaysian students are reluctant to comment on the works of their peers in a typical face-to-face, conventional writing lesson. They are generally submissive and less expressive when it comes to oral feedbacks.They prefer to be neutral and to "save face" as they feel threatened by comments from others [5, 6]. Besides that, some students may lack confidence in their language abilities and hence, hesitate to give comments and suggestions and feel embarrass to receive feedback from their friends [6]. Hence, this study is an attempt at investigating if blogging could providea platform, in the process writing approach, that could encourage peer feedback which is glaringly lacking in a conventional writing classroom.

Objectives of the Study: The goal of this study is to investigate the potential of blog as a platform that would promote quality interaction pertinent to the success of process writing approach. It unfolds the collaborative aspects of using blog in teaching writing and analyses the different types of corrective feedback offered by learners as they collaborate to complete their writing tasks.The study answers the following research questions:

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- To what extent do Malaysian secondary students' offer feedback on each other's drafts of their writtenassignments?
- What are the types of feedback offered by the students?
- What is the ratio of students' detail to impressionistic feedbacks?
- What are the students' perception towards giving and receiving feedback on the blog?

The answers to these questionsmay contribute to the dearth of research on blog as an emerging tool in language learning and teaching.

Literature Review: Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) can be divided into asynchronous and synchronous communication both of which differ mainly on how messages are delivered. Asynchronous CMC such as email and blog is non-instantaneous, less rapid and less time-constrained. Synchronous CMC, on the other hand, is similar to online "chat" system and video conferencing and it can only operate when interlocutors are connected to form an immediate interaction mode [7]. Despite their differences in the immediacy of messaging, both CMC environments offer great potential for language learning especially in the development of writing skills [8, 9].

Writing is a time consuming task and learners often need ample time to write drafts and provide feedback to each other. Asynchronous CMC is deemed to have better potential in developing learners' writing skills as it allows ample time for them to reflect and produce feedback. One popular asynchronous communication platform is the blog.[9]suggests that the use of weblog not only reduce writing apprehension amongst students but also allow for collaboration and feedback on content and form.

Theoretical Framework: As blog in language learning entails collaboration, interaction and social mediation, Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory is employed to govern the study. [10] believes that learning is a mental process of knowledge building. It is an interplay of learners' schemata derived from their cultural values and personal experience through social interaction and mediation (Doolittle and Hicks, 2003; Daniels, 2007 as cited in [11]). In addition, [12] claims that interaction in SLA is a form of social mediation through which learners collaborate and construct new forms. They learn and master their new knowledge through social interaction. This is the development from lower order function (with minimal

knowledge) to higher order function (perform the knowledge or skill independently). Hence, the key to realising learning objectives is collaboration within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) [13]. This is where learners' grow cognitively, collaborate and use language to create new meanings and new knowledge by receiving and giving feedbacks to develop and improve their writing [14]. In short, peer interaction is considered an essential part of the learning process. The scaffolding (assistance and tools) that learners gained in the ZPD, gives learners what they need to accomplish the new task or skill. Eventually, the scaffolding can be removed and the learners will be able to complete the task independently.

Related Studies: The use of blog as a writing tool offers tremendous advantages. [15]assertsthat students enjoyed learning with weblogs. Their attitudes towards learning English improved and there was significant interest among learners to create their own blogs to accompany writing classes in the future. In addition, [16]finds that blog gives students a great opportunity to self-respect and keep record of the discussion to be used in future. In another study, [17]establishes that blogs offer an informal learning environment that promotes writing, reading skills, collaborative and student-centred learning, encourage feedback, develop students' critical analysis of ideas and persuasive and argumentative skills. Besides that, blog was also highly favoured by the learners. [18]also concurs with the potential of using blog. Among others, he claims that blogging facilitated students' critical thinking skills, affected the quality of students' writing, provided feedback for students to improve, triggered meaningful learning and motivated students' writing and interaction.

Whilst using blog in writing is found to generate rich collaboration and feedback amongst learners, a more pertinent question to ask would be the quality of their feedback. This issue was the concern of [19] study whichreveals that peer review is as effective as teachers' feedbacks. The students in his study were willing to receive feedback from peers and they were capable of effective peer revision. In another study,[20] suggests that when learners collaborate and provide feedback, they are actually given the roles and responsibilities of the teachers on commenting on each other's drafts through a written, oral, or computer-mediated mode. The feedback could be either positive or negative and could be posed as questions, statements and imperative.

Interestingly, [21] study reveals that the experimental students focussed more on contents of their writing and the control group concentrated more on forms of

language. His students also had a generally favourable perception towards weblog as online peer feedbacks generate more effective peer awareness than FTF feedback. In addition,[22] analysed how the blog-based peer responses can help improve EFL students' writing quality. Their findings disclose that the four most common types of comments were *clarification*, *suggestion/advice*, *explanation* and *alteration*. The study also suggests that the comments did affect the students' writing quality and consequently the students expressed positive attitudes towards blog-based peer response activities. Similarly,[23] suggests that blog can be an effective supplementary tool for developing students' writing process. They claim that the use of blogs in teaching resulted in better writing quality than the traditional classroom process-based approach. Therefore, the more students collaborate and offer feedback, the more scaffolding they provide to each other. These will eventually enhance the quality of their writing.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This is a case study that employed a quasi-experimental research design. Content analysis was done on the students' feedback posted on their respective blogs. These feedbacks were analysed according to DiGiovanni and Nagaswami's Response Analysis Rubric. The rubric is comprehensive and has been used by another study[22].In addition, a survey questionnaire was employed to gauge the perceptions of the students concerning giving and receiving feedbacks on the blog.

Participants: This study was conducted on 30 form four secondary students in semi-urban school in Selangor within the period of four months. Their level of English language was ranged from intermediate to good based on their Lower Certificate Examination (PMR) results. In addition, all the students have a certain amount of experience with the computer and specifically with the use of blog.

Procedure: The students were divided into small groups of three. They first familiarized themselves with blogging and later created their respective group's blogs that were linked it to the class blog administered by their English teacher. In one month, the students were taught process writing via the blog. Each lesson started with the teacher's postings of lesson followed by instruction on the written assignment. The students' task was to post all their written drafts on the blog for other group members to read and provide feedback on content, organisation, vocabulary and grammar. The aim of the activity is to offer feedback that could improve each other's essays. The students then had to read the feedback and correct their drafts. The students were given three weeks to draft and comment on each essay. This blogging interaction lasted for4 months.

Analysis: The content of the students' feedback was analysed according to DiGiovanni and Nagaswami's Response Analysis Rubric.The smallest unit of analysis of the feedback is any word or symbol that represents meaning that fits any of the categories in the framework of [24]. The following table illustrates the categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study analysed the students' process of writing three essays. The findings reveal a total of 300 feedbacks were posted by the students on each other's drafts with an average of 100 feedbacks per essay. The detail feedback according to DiGiovanni and Nagaswami's Response Analysis Rubric is as follows:

The table shows that students gave a lot of suggestions (52%) to improve each other's essays. Besides that, they also offered lots of praises (22%) towards their peers such as '*nice essay*' and '*your story is good*'. Students also tend to give considerable number of criticisms (16%) such as '*your essay quite boring*' and '*you have so manyspelling errors*'.

Table 1: The Adaptation of DiGiovanni and Nagaswami's Response Analysis Rubric

Categories	Purposes	Level of Feedback
Praise	Reviewers praise the good points of words, content, organization of the essays.	1.Content
Criticism	Reviewers criticize the defects of words, content, organization of the essay.	2.Organization
Explanation	Reviewers explain why they think a given term, idea, or organization is unclear or problematic.	3.Grammar
Suggestion	Reviewers suggest the ways to change the words, content and organization of the essays.	4.Vocabulary
Evaluation	Reviewers evaluate the content, organization, language use and vocabulary in global or local area.	5.Mechanics
Question	Reviewers ask the writers if they do not understand a given term, ideas, words, or organization.	
Clarification	Reviewers try to get further explanations of what the writers have said or what is not clear to them in the essays.	
Restatement	Reviewers state (summarize or rephrase) what has been written or said to show understanding.	

Table 2: Percentage of Students' Feedbacks Based on Categories

Categories	Total	Percentage
Praise	67	22.33
Criticism	47	15.67
Explanation	1	0.33
Suggestion	157	52.33
Evaluation	0	0
Question	5	1.67
Clarification	4	1.33
Restatement	1	0.33
Others	18	6
Total	300	100%

The other types of feedback such as explanation, evaluation, question and restatement show either very meagre percentage or none at all. Close scrutiny of the data however shows that students did make some attempts at offering feedback on all levels. The following table presents some examples.

Levels of Feedback	Examples
Content	('*you should make it a bit longer*'),
Vocabulary	('*the word "take" in the sentence- take some time to play-is not suitable..you should use - spend some time*'),
Organization	('*there is a nice flow to your essay*'),
Grammar	– ('*please change THE to A*')
Mechanics	('*you should put a comma after when we arrived, we saw many people*').

In addition, the majority of the students' feedbacks are more detail (62.33%) than impressionistic(31.67%). An example of an impressionistic feedback is '*very good story*'. Whilst, an example of a detail feedback found is as follows:

Excerpt 1: I already read your essay and I like it. But unfortunately, you have made a mistake in your essay:

- First paragraph-OFTEN people KEPT as a ……… TRAINED for work. This sentence is tense or past tense?

This finding is encouraging as it suggests that despite the students' limited language resources, they were enthusiastic at helping each other to improve their writing.

In addition, the questionnaire data reveal that students were generally enthusiastic about exchanging feedback with their peers during their writing activity using blog. The following table illustrates the findings in detail.

The findings show that about 60% of the students like to give online feedback for the writing task and they feel relax and comfortable. Whilst almost 60% believe that they correct their drafts better online than in face-to-face interaction. Encouragingly, almost 80 % of the students feel confident about writing and receiving comments from their peers. However, about 30 % think that online feedback is not as useful and 40 % feel that such feedback can be confusing.

Thus, generally, this study concurs with previous research [15], [16], [17] and [25] that suggest the potential of blogging in enhancing students' writing experience and development. The students were more willing to offer and receive feedback from their peers and in doing so, they offered various feedbackranging from content to form. Interestingly, unlike [22],the students in this study provided more suggestions, praises and criticism in their feedback.

Table 3: Students' Perceptions on Online Peer Feedback

Questions	SA/A(%)	SD/D(%)
I like to do online peer feedback for the class writing homework.	56.7	20
Online peer feedback is not useful for revising the second draft.	26.6	43.3
I like to give feedback on my friend's draft online.	56.6	20
I feel relax and comfortable when giving feedback online.	60	16.7
I feel that feedback given online is confusing.	43.4	33.4
I do not like to give feedback online because I cannot talk to my friend in person while giving comments.	33.3	40
I feel giving feedback online is difficult.	33.3	43.3
I feel reading my friend's draft on the computer is difficult	22.1	66.7
I do not like to receive feedback online because I have to wait for my friend to post to me.	36.6	43.4
I feel it is difficult to access a computer when I want to give feedback online.	33.3	50
I am more confident communicating in English through blogging than face-to-face communication	70	6.6
I learn to correct my drafts better than face-to-face interaction.	58.6	24.1
I don't feel shy receiving comments on my writing	77.7	7.4
I am happy to discuss my writings and views with friends	73.4	10

Implications of the Study: The studysuggeststhat using blog is indeed rewarding for the development of students' writing. As blog is just a platform made available by computer technology, teachers and language practitioners must device activities that suit the needs of learners. In order to maximise the positive outcome of blogging, issues like learners' proficiency level, tasks and monitoring must be addressed. The lesson should start with simple writing tasks to more challenging ones. This way, learners can be trained to give their feedback step by step. Learners can also be coached to offer feedback at different level namely on content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. Second, the teacher can create one class blog which could serve as a point of reference. Learners could post questions or discuss openly any aspect of their writing. All these questions and answers from the teacher can be viewed by all. This is one effective way of creating a setting that encourages openness amongst learners.

CONCLUSION

This study adds to the pool of studies that harp on the benefits of blogging in language learning scenario. It is also intriguing to the young learners as they are well exposed to technology in their daily lives. The online environment offers a 'face-saving' setting that encourage collaboration and analytical thinking towards providing constructive feedback necessary for students to improve their writing skill. Therefore, using blog in language learning could contribute to a more meaningful learning experience where students benefit from their peers' experience and linguistics resources.

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