Enhancing EFL Saudi tertiary students' writing skills by using Weblogs: Implications to EFL Program Development

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Abstract

Using technology in enhancing language learning has gained considerable attention recently. Specifically, weblogs are claimed to act as a contributing tool to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students' language learning and writing. This paper highlights weblogs' aspects that are considered to facilitate EFL writing, and describes some EFL contexts deemed relevant to the application of weblogs. The authors argue that although there are relevant weblogs' facilitating aspects, any planning and implementation should further examine weblogs' relevance and their formal applications in order to ensure effective program development. A set of direct implications to EFL program development is also presented in this paper.   The authors hope to provide insights and understanding on the link between language learning in the form of writing development and the use of technology in an EFL context. This will serve as a

starting point for implementing effective writing curriculum and technique for teaching EFL writing.
Keywords:
Weblogs, Writing as process, EFL writing, EFL contexts, EFL program development, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Using technology has facilitated language learning and writing. Specifically, weblogs are claimed to act as a facilitating tool to EFL students' language learning and writing. Weblogs have received a considerable attention for decades where people can create, update and publish their personal websites, and they have gained further notice when educators and teachers started to implement them in their reading and writing classes (Wu, 2006).

This paper highlights weblogs' facilitating aspects that have direct implications to EFL writing, and describes some EFL contexts deemed relevant to the application of weblogs.   The authors argue that although there are relevant weblogs' facilitating aspects that have direct implications to EFL writing, any program planning and implementation should further examine weblogs' relevance and their formal applications in order to ensure successful program development. A set of direct

implications to EFL which affects the EFL program development is presented in this paper.

From a previous study conducted by the author (Althobaiti 2014), it was found that EFL learners were able to reflect on their experience as well their daily life situations. However, very few were able to reflect on the elements of writing practices. The study attempted to explore the impact of using weblogs on EFL students' writing in Taif University. A weblog was created for the purpose of the study. The participants were 30 and they were asked to complete a pre-interview, paper and paper writing task, blog writing, and post-interview. Two groups were examined. The first group employed writing as final product through which students write in the classrooms under the pressure of time and the limits of consultations of dictionaries, while the second group involved in writings as a process which allowed them to have time space as well as access to dictionaries. The study managed to delve beneath the surface level of writing to a deeper writing process which focused on the clarity of ideas and structures and the emotional perspective.

Teachers must possess sufficient technology knowledge with regard to the social media platform. Teachers should be familiar with the possibilities of integrating the

different applications to accommodate students' different needs such as blogs for writing and radios for listening. They also need to know the functions of the different platforms that encourage reflection, knowledge creation and sharing.

Investigating the students' written products on Weblogs will help find better ways to improve EFL students' writing. Such investigation will also provide theoretical and practical recommendations and implications for both teachers and policy makers on the link between the use of CMC and EFL writing and the usability of weblogs in enhancing EFL students writing.

Weblogs appear to play an important role in enhancing students' writing skills and freeing them from the constraints of traditional classrooms. Such an effort is hoped to contribute to the knowledge about the possible implementation of weblogs in EFL program development.

The authors hope to provide insights and understanding on the link between language learning in the form of writing development and the use of technology in an EFL context. This will serve as starting point for implementing effective writing curriculum and technique for teaching EFL writing

EFL state of affairs

The current state of affairs of Saudi tertiary undergraduate writing calls for a massive improvement. Writing seems to be the only medium of communication with teachers in the sense that it shows students' academic progress and intellectual growth, which makes writing an important skill to acquire. All students around the world should maintain a reasonable command of writing skill in order to fulfill the requirements of the courses studied by submitting well-written assignments and answering questions in final exams (Al-Khairy, 2013). Bearing these points in mind, Saudi EFL tertiary students suffer two main deficiencies: the poor English writing performance and the lack of motivation (Mahmoud, 2014). Thus, the implementation of Weblogs in such a context is hoped to contribute to solving this problem.

The use of technology and its role in enhancing language learning in specific contexts such as EFL have not received the attention deserved (Lee, 2013). Many authors have pointed to this scarcity of research and have called for more empirical evidences in new local contexts such as EFL ones (Lee, 2013; Mahmoud, 2013). The scarcity is obvious when dealing with tertiary EFL

contexts (Aljumah, 2012; Fageeh, 2011). Saudi context is no exception. Thus, more evidences are needed from empirical studies. Researchers have emphasized this by pointing to the scarcity of research in such a context (Lin et al., 2014).

The use of weblogs as a form of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) is considered as a facilitating tool for language learning (Fageeh, 2011). Although there have been a number of studies and reviews on the utilization of weblogs as an important educational means (Lin et. al. 2009), more studies are needed; specifically, with respect to the usability of weblogs in foreign language learning contexts. Many researchers claim that the implementation of Weblogs in language learning is still in its infancy (Lin et al., 2014). The adoption of weblogs in teaching/learning processes has not received empirical evidences. This can be seen in the implementation of Weblogs in EFL contexts where students' English proficiency is low (Mahmoud, 2014).

The facilitating elements of weblogs

As in any social networking platform, numerous researchers have found the advantages of weblogs. Learners are claimed to benefit from the weblogs

technological features, online interaction, and learning process.

The integration of technology such as Weblogs is a good option to encourage students to improve their writing. Also, weblogs has the potential of providing the space for the students to express themselves and overcome writing blocks in a tension -free environment (Lee, 2010). Weblogs can raise students' attention, motivation, and confidence, and help them become better writers by acquiring more vocabulary and grammar (Aljumah, 2012). Weblogs can also encourage students to write either inside or outside the classroom (Lee, 2010). Specifically, weblogs are claimed to enhance students' writing skills, cooperative interactions, and build their self-confidence (Lee, 2013). Moreover, Weblogs encourage students to write for a larger audience than those in the classroom. That is when the students become more attentive to what they write when they account for their audience. When writing on Weblogs, students take the responsibility of their writing, observe their peers' writing, and receive feedback from their peers too (Lin et al., 2014). Furthermore, when students use weblogs, they have a practical application of their learning. They become more engaged in the process of writing and be more responsible and attentive to the writing process

(Vurdien, 2013). Also, when students are given the chance to write in weblogs, they are writing for a larger audience and thus this will result in their critical thinking skills, cooperative interaction (Halik et al., 2010; Mahmoud, 2014; Warschauer, 1995). With more efforts and exposure to the language structure and grammar, EFL students are believed to reach a higher level of competency as well as to gain a reasonable command of writing.

This paper briefly presents those facilitating aspects that are claimed to have benefitted learners in various ways and contexts. However, the bigger scope of this paper is to make the connection between the factors and their implications to EFL writing program development. This is presented in the next section.

Implications to EFL writing program development

The previous section has highlighted claims made on the usefulness and applicability of weblogs to writing. However, amidst the claimed facilitating aspects of weblogs, the authors believe that
such aspects lead to two major implications: implications to learner factors and to learning factors:

Implications to learner factors:

- **Accepting weblogs as a platform for public expression may challenge current EFL learners' cultural values because most of them are not familiar or comfortable with expressing themselves through reflective writing. Sharing, interacting, and socializing in face-to-face setting are culturally shaped and motivated.**

- **Sustaining EFL learners' genuine interest and participation on weblogs is difficult which can adversely affect research and classroom implementation. EFL learners may not be motivated to sustain participation on weblogs for various reasons. They may find that there are no incentives for them to participate. For the researchers, similar constraints on sustaining participation on online platform seem to prevail.**

- **Certain topics discussed on weblogs can be cultural taboos for the learners' culture, thus inhibiting their further participation. Students may shun away from expressing something deemed personal fearing embarrassment or ridicules from others.**

Implications to learning factors:

- **Integrating weblogs as a curricular innovation may require major changes in typically rigid ESL classroom practice, assessment, and policies, thus, affecting decision making among the stakeholders in teaching, teacher education, program development, curriculum planning, and university administration. Convincing all EFL program stakeholders requires an assurance that weblogs provides effective atmosphere and uninteruptive learning environment.**

- **The positive weblogging outcomes only inform the EFL practitioners on the successful process in writing rather successful writing acquisition. Thus, EFL research and EFL program development should focus on the process of acquiring writing skills and not on measuring writing improvement. Although weblogging changes the nature of writing (writing as process), many EFL writing programs are still based on product-oriented syllabus.**

To the EFL stakeholders, the above-mentioned implications are crucial for EFL writing program development. The authors choose "writing program development" in this paper to show its interconnectedness with the bigger EFL entities within

an institution, such as, the department, curriculum, and university.

Conclusions

The researcher considers the use of blackboard as an essential element for the improvement of EFL writing. Therefore, the inclusion of Weblogs within an EFL writing program is essential. EFL stakeholders have to be taken into consideration the EFL learner and learning factors in the program development.

This paper has described the importance of weblogs to EFL writing. It then highlights some current scenario of EFL situations that suggest the needs for such technology as well as potential constraints. It also describes the facilitating features of weblogs to writing. The authors argue that although there are relevant weblogs' facilitating aspects that have direct implications to EFL writing, future studies need to examine further weblogs' relevance and their formal applications to EFL writing and program development.

Acknowledgements:

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تعزيز مهارة كتابة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للطلاب الجامعيين باستخدام المدونات: تطبيقات لتطوير برامج اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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ملخص :

اكتسب استخدام التكنولوجيا في تعزيز تعلم اللغة اهتمامًا كبيرًا مؤخرًا. وعلى وجه التحديد ، يُزعم أن مدونات الويب تعمل بوصفها أداة مساهمة في تعلم الطلبة للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، وفي تعلم الكتابة. تسلط هذه الورقة الضوء على جوانب من مدونات الويب التي تُعد مهمة لتسهيل الكتابة في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، وتصف بعض سياقاتاللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تلك التي تعد ذات صلة بتطبيق مدونات الويب. ويرى الباحثان أنه على الرغم من وجود جوانب تيسير لتعلم اللغة (الكتابة تحديدًا) ذات صلة في مدونات الويب ؛ فإن أي تخطيط وتنفيذ ينبغي أن يختبر مدى ملاءمة مدونات الويب وتطبيقاتها الرسمية من أجل ضمان تطوير برنامج فعال. وهناك مجموعة من التطبيقات المباشرة لتطوير برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية كما تقدم في هذه الورقة. يتغيا الباحثان تقديم رؤى وفهم دقيق حول العلاقة بين تعلم اللغة في شكل تطوير الكتابة واستخدام التكنولوجيا في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.آملين أن يكون هذا المبحث نقطة انطلاق لتطبيق مناهج الكتابة الفعالة وتقنية تعليم الكتابة في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

كلمات مفتاحية:

مدونات الويب، الكتابة كعملية مستمرة، الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، سياقات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تطوير برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، المملكة العربية السعودية