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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 199 (2015) 372 – 380

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

GlobELT: An International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional Language, Antalya - Turkey

The effects of blogging on EFL writing achievement

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Abstract

Few studies were conducted on the effects of blogging specifically on English as a foreign language (EFL) writing achievement. Moreover, those studies did not address the effect of blogs on writing achievement in the Turkish EFL context. Thus, this study aims to investigate the effects of the use of blogs on EFL writing achievement among Turkish EFL learners. In this experimental study, a background questionnaire, a writing achievement pre-test and a post-test were administered to a sample group of 40 EFL learners. The data gathered were used to provide a statistical analysis to address the research question. Results indicate that blogging itself does not provide a better performance in terms of writing achievement, while the process-based writing instruction positively affects their achievement in both traditional and blog environments. It is recommended that teachers should be aware that the use of blogs does not guarantee better writing achievement among Turkish EFL learners and should create a writing environment in which they encourage students to write in the target language to increase their writing achievement.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Hacettepe Üniversitesi.

Keywords: English as a foreign language; blogs; writing; achievement

1. Introduction

In the broadest perspective, writing as a productive skill in the process of foreign language learning can be considered as a process and a product in which both bodily and intellectual elements play a considerable role (Sokolik, 2003). As a result of the paradigm shift from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness in the field of language learning since 1950s (Brown, 1987), process and project-based writing instructions have become more popular among teachers and learners. On the other hand, writing in EFL can be viewed as a problematic area. Among those problems, the lack of writing achievement constitutes a significant place.

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Another problem faced during EFL writing is learning environment, defined as the physical elements, psychological or inner states and the effect of social and cultural factors in classes (Okan, 2008). First, one of the main problems brought by learning environment is the lack of classrooms which are designed specifically for language learning and include necessary audio-visual devices. For instance, Lowyck and Clarebout (2004) assert that learners' perceptions about the style of instruction facilitate language learning. The students, who have positive attitudes toward learning environment, are more likely to be successful in language learning. Second, crowded classrooms lead problems in EFL writing. According to Yaman (2009), the rising number of the learners in classrooms affects learning negatively. That is, the more students a classroom has, the more language learning becomes inefficient.

1.1. Theoretical framework

According to Raimes (1991), process-based approach mainly focuses on how students write. It is in parallel with constructivism which claims that each person is unique in terms of interpretation of the world. It is a learner-centered approach in which learners have control over processes of their writing. For Zamel (1983) writing is "non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (p.165). Writing is a process of discovery, focusing of not only final product but also the processes such as thinking, drafting and reviewing. As a result of latest developments in the technology that created an integration of writing into computers, this approach is reinforced by providing both collaborative writing opportunities and skill development using computer-based programs. In this sense, Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs and podcasts may bring learners great opportunities for collaborating each other during the writing process.

There exist theories and approaches which have a contribution to writing with blogs. First, constructivism has an effect on writing in respect to the cognitive processes which learners experience. Namely, while writing, a student has to think more carefully about what is going to be written and social conditions in which the learner experiences, thus, she constructs new information based on the prior knowledge. As an online writing tool, a blog enhances collaboration construction in the course of interaction (Dyrud et al., 2005). Second, collaborative learning helps understanding and respecting each other's thoughts, beliefs and ideas, increase writing achievement, and greatly contributes social interaction among group members. Third, situated cognition has an important effect on writing, as it deals with learning environments that help learners to have better understanding of concepts. Fourth, autonomous learning leads the teacher and students' roles to change dramatically. For online writing, the role of teachers in this practice is to monitor and guide students, and revise their writings during the process when it is necessary. Little (2000) asserts that the condition in order to reach the desirable goals of teaching in autonomous learning is to enable teachers to have their own independence. Fourth, the learning situations which support self-determination are very advantageous in terms of learners' creativity, attention, cognitive development and achievement.

In conclusion, blogs constitute a constructivist way of learning (Richardson, 2010). By reaching the information and making and the meaning in mind, learners develop a high level of thinking skill. Blogs are also a collaborative learning tool which has aroused a great interest among educators lately (Godwin-Jones, 2003). By writing comments, critics and feedback to each other's page and interaction among users are necessary to improve the overall quality of a blog. Blog discussions may help to improve feeling of community among students (Miceli et al., 2010). Blogs not only support collaboration but they also help autonomy. Learners may decide the topic and write freely whenever they want. By using blogs, ownership and creativity are stimulated. Learners use the foreign language in a comfortable way, they learn about the target culture, which is impossible to learn from textbook alone (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008).

1.2. Literature review

There has been a widespread consensus among scholars about the positive effects of process-based approach (Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1983). For example, Ho (2006) examined 200 upper and lower primary school students to find what extent process writing helps to develop writing skills. Results showed that process-based writing is beneficial for both upper and lower level students. Process-focused writing may be beneficial for improving writing skills and fostering positive attitudes towards writing. In his study, Lee (2006) found that learners used more sophisticated sentences in their final drafts. In addition, Boas (2011) investigated how teachers may integrate up-to-

date technology to improve writing in the classroom by using a blog and a Ning network. Results showed that process writing integrating with latest technology helped to improve writing skills, collaborative working and digital literacy. In another study, Muncie (2002) investigated whether process writing has an effect on students' vocabulary development at a Japanese University. The results showed that there was a positive correlation between vocabulary development and writing as a process approach. Although there are many studies in favor of process writing, some studies have found fairly limited or no contribution to writing skills. Graham and Sandmel (2011) reviewed 29 experimental and quasi-experimental studies conducted on different grades to see whether process writing helps to improve learners' writing skills and achievement. They found that process writing didn't have any significant effect on students' motivation and writing skills. Similarly, Barnhisel et al. (2012) conducted a study on first year college students in Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They found process approach has no positive effect on students' writing.

Blogs provide various opportunities to both teachers and EFL writers. According to Aydın (2014), blogs are useful and practical tools and they can be easily benefited in EFL context. Wu (2005) asserted that provided that the instructions were well-organized, blogs would definitely help teachers for better students' writing performance. Noytim (2010) examined the potential value of blogs in a language learning context in Taiwan. The results showed that the students accepted blogs as a useful tool in terms of improving writing, reading, vocabulary, self expression, thinking skills and social interaction. Hashemi and Najafi (2011) claimed that blogs have enormous usage in teaching writing in the EFL context, whereas Koçoğlu (2009) found that blogs were beneficial for learners in both developing writing skills and sparking interest. Vurdien (2013) also found that blogs improved writing skills in particular tasks, fostered collaboration and helped to understand the effect of the learners' feedback. Similarly, Arslan and Şahin-Kızıllı (2010) noted that blog-oriented writing may have had a significant effect on developing students' writing performance. Finally, Sun (2010) carried out a study in order to find the effects of extensive writing by examining different phases of blog entries written by participants. The results of the study demonstrated that blogs might be useful in developing students' writing skills, boost motivation and stimulate learner autonomy.

1.3. Overview of the study

This study aims at examining the level of EFL writing achievement in both traditional and blog environments in the EFL Turkish context. There are certain reasons that make the current study significant. First of all, the study contributes to the related literature in the scope of the efficiency of process-based writing in traditional learning environment and blog-oriented environment in a global scale and the Turkish EFL context. Then, it contributes to the literature in terms of the effects of the utilization of blogs in EFL writing instruction. In other words, the study constitutes to the literature on the effectiveness of the use of blogs on writing achievement. Finally, the research is significant as it presents practical recommendations for teachers, learners, curriculum developers, material writers, and educational policy makers. By bearing these concerns in mind, one research question was asked to assess the effectiveness of using blogs in EFL writing achievement in the scope of process-based-approach:

- Does the use of blogs in EFL writing affect the writing achievement?

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

The sample group consists of 48 freshmen at the ELT Department of Balıkesir University. The group consisted of 30 (62.5%) female and 18 (37.5%) male students. All of the participants have been taught English as a foreign language during their high school education. With the aim of determining their language proficiency, their Foreign Language Examination (FLE) scores were used.

2.2. Tools

The data collection instruments consisted of a background questionnaire, writing achievement pre- and post-tests. Background questionnaire interrogated the participants' age, gender, academic achievement, and the scores they received in the FLE. The second tool was writing achievement test including TOEFL writing topics.

2.3. Procedure

This experimental study used a three-step procedure: (1) administration of background questionnaire and writing achievement pre-test, (2) practice, (3) administration of writing achievement post-test. Background questionnaire and writing achievement pre-test were administered during the second week of the Fall semester in 2014. Then, participants were assigned randomly to in control and experimental groups. In the practice process, the participants were given four-week detailed process-based writing instruction. During the process, participants in the control group completed their tasks in a traditional pen-paper writing process, while the subjects in the experimental group used blogs to complete their tasks. Finally, the post-test, having the same content with the pre-test, were administered in order to compare two groups at the end of the semester.

2.4. Data analysis

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS software. The essays written by the subjects at the beginning and the end of the study were assessed by two EFL instructors to obtain intra- and inter-rater reliability. As shown in Table 1, the inter- and intra-rater reliability coefficients, pre- and post-test reliability and overall reliability coefficients were calculated in Cronbach's Alpha. Data showed a high level of reliability. Then, mean scores, standard deviations and standard error of means regarding content, organization, discourse markers, sentence construction, mechanics and total scores for both pre- and post-tests were calculated. Finally, independent sample t-test and paired samples t-test values were found to compare the data obtained from control and experimental groups.

Table 1. Inter-rater and intra-rater reliability of the pre- and post-tests.

Scorers	Pre-test		Post-test		Overall
Scorer 1	0.87	0.90	0.91	0.93	0.92
Scorer 2	0.71		0.93		

3. Findings

Table 2 presented paired sample t-test results to see whether there was a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test scores in terms of writing achievement. The significance values indicated that there was a significance increase in writing achievement. First, it should be noted that the values for the significance levels for the overall scores was found to be .00 except mechanics. In terms of content, there was considerable correlation between two scores, as the significance level for content was .00. What is more, with regard to organization, it was found that the significance was .00, which showed that two tests were significantly correlated. Moreover, as the significance levels for discourse markers, vocabulary and sentence construction were 0.00, it was found that there were statistically significant correlations between the pre- and post-test scores. Regarding mechanics, the significance was found to be .01. Last, as for significance levels for the final scores, it was found that there existed to be statistically significant relation between pre- and post tests ($p=.00$).

Table 2: Paired samples test for the control group.

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig.
Content	Pre-test	9.59	1.84	.45	.00
	Post-test	13.15	2.50	.62	
Organization	Pre-test	5.31	1.43	.35	.00
	Post-test	7.00	1.36	.34	
Discourse	Pre-test	3.25	.98	.24	.00

markers	Post-test	4.78	1.34	.33	
Vocabulary	Pre-test	5.09	1.29	.32	.00
	Post-test	7.00	1.89	.47	
Sentence construction	Pre-test	11.31	2.51	.62	.00
	Post-test	13.87	3.37	.84	
Mechanics	Pre-test	2.78	.40	.10	.01
	Post-test	3.12	.46	.11	
Total score	Pre-test	37.28	7.42	1.85	.00
	Post-test	48.84	10.35	2.58	

As seen in Table 3, the paired sample test results indicated statistically significant differences regarding the scores for content, organization, discourse markers, vocabulary, mechanics and overall test for experimental group; however, no correlation was found in terms of sentence structure. The significance level for the overall scores was found to be .00 which showed significant correlation between the pre- and post-test results. The significance of content was .01 that showed there was a significant correlation. When organization was considered, the significance was found to be .03. The significance for discourse markers was 03. Regarding vocabulary, the significance level was found to be .01, which demonstrated that pre- and post-test results were correlated. On the other hand, as for sentence construction, the significance was found to be .16. This value indicated that there was no correlation between the scores for sentence structure. Last, in terms of mechanics, the significance was found to be .01.

Table 3: Paired samples test for the experimental group.

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig.
Content	Pre-test	10.75	2.16	.54	.01
	Post-test	12.75	2.09	.52	
Organization	Pre-test	6.00	1.49	.37	.00
	Post-test	7.18	1.55	.38	
Discourse markers	Pre-test	3.84	.97	.24	.03
	Post-test	4.87	1.47	.36	
Vocabulary	Pre-test	5.68	1.66	.41	.01
	Post-test	7.40	2.15	.53	
Sentence construction	Pre-test	12.96	2.66	.66	.16
	Post-test	14.50	2.52	.63	
Mechanics	Pre-test	2.87	.46	.11	.01
	Post-test	3.25	.40	.10	
Total score	Pre-test	41.93	7.65	1.91	.00
	Post-test	49.37	10.40	2.10	

The values of pre-test scores shown in Table 4 did not show any statistical significance in terms of blogging effect on writing achievement when the scores obtained from the participants in the control and experimental groups

were compared. However, overall mean score of pre-test was 36.38 for the control group, while it was 41.94 for the experimental group. In terms of content, the pre-test mean score was 9.13 for the control group, while it was 10.81 for the experimental group. When organization was considered, the value for the mean of the pre-test was 5.15 for the control group, whereas it was found to be 5.84 for the experimental group. As for discourse markers, the pre-test mean score was found to be 3.40 for the control group, as it was 3.81 for the experimental group. Regarding vocabulary, the mean score was 4.90 for the control group and 5.65 for the experimental group. With regard to sentence construction, the mean value of pre-test for the control group was 10.95, while it was 13.05 for the experimental group. The mean pre-test result of mechanics of writing for the control group was 2.79, whereas it was 2.92 for the experimental group.

Table 4: Pre-test scores for the control & experimental group (Independent samples test).

	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.
Content	Control Group	9.13	2.03	.43	.09	.76
	Experimental Group	10.81	2.00	.45		
Organization	Control Group	5.15	1.40	.30	.00	.96
	Experimental Group	5.84	1.42	.32		
Discourse markers	Control Group	3.40	.98	.20	.39	.53
	Experimental Group	3.81	.90	.20		
Vocabulary	Control Group	4.90	1.23	.26	.07	.79
	Experimental Group	5.65	1.58	.35		
Sentence construction	Control Group	10.95	2.41	.51	.06	.79
	Experimental Group	13.05	2.46	.56		
Mechanics	Control Group	2.79	.39	.08	.22	.64
	Experimental Group	2.92	.44	.10		
Pretest total score	Control Group	36.38	7.07	1.50	.25	.61
	Experimental Group	41.94	6.98	1.60		

Similarly, according to the values of post-test scores shown in Table 5, there were no significant differences between the scores obtained from the scores in the control and experimental groups when compared. The overall mean score of post-test for the control group was 49.50, as it was 49.37 for the experimental group. With respect to content, the mean value of post-test was 13.39 for the control group, while it was 12.67 for the experimental group. Regarding organization of writing, the post-test mean score was 7.28 for the control group, whereas it was 7.10 for the experimental group. When discourse markers were considered, the post-test mean score for the control group was 4.84; on the other hand, it was 4.67 for the experimental group. In terms of vocabulary, the post-test mean score was 7.05 for the control group, while it was 7.22 for the experimental group. The post-test mean score of sentence construction for the control group was 13.89, as it was 14.37 for the experimental group. As for the mechanics of writing, the value of post-test mean score for the control group was 3.10; on the other hand, for the experimental group, it was 3.17. As a result, those valued did not show statistically significant correlations between the scores obtained from control and experimental groups.

Table 5: Post-test scores for the Control and experimental group (Independent samples test)

	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.
Content	Control Group	13.39	3.09	.70	.58	.44
	Experimental Group	12.67	2.22	.49		
Organization	Control Group	7.28	1.78	.40	.00	.95
	Experimental Group	7.10	1.57	.35		
Discourse markers	Control Group	4.84	1.34	.30	.38	.54
	Experimental Group	4.67	1.51	.33		
Vocabulary	Control Group	7.05	1.96	.45	.01	.90
	Experimental Group	7.22	2.22	.49		
Sentence construction	Control Group	13.89	3.77	.86	1.87	.17
	Experimental Group	14.37	2.48	.55		
Mechanics	Control Group	3.10	.45	.10	.03	.86
	Experimental Group	3.17	.46	.10		
Posttest total score	Control Group	49.50	11.74	2.69	.98	.32
	Experimental Group	49.37	8.90	1.99		

4. Conclusions and discussion

Three conclusions were reached in the study. First, it was concluded that the use of process-based writing instruction has considerable positive effects on writing achievement in a traditional learning environment. Speaking specifically, process-based writing instruction increases achievement in terms of content, organization, discourse markers, vocabulary, sentence construction and mechanics of writing. In other words, in a process-based writing class, learners improve their knowledge related to the content, have better organization skills including the use of punctuation, capitalization, paragraph and essay development methods and techniques, use discourse markers more effectively, use vocabulary more appropriately, construct sentences more correctly and improve skills related to mechanics of writing. Second, the study concluded that the use of blogs in EFL writing in a process-based approach positively affects writing achievement. In other words, when blogs as an online writing environment are used in a process-based approach, learners considerably increase their achievement in terms of content, organization, discourse markers, vocabulary, sentence construction and mechanics of writing. However, it should be noted that the use of blogs has no positive effect on sentence construction. Third, when the comparison between the uses of traditional pen paper and blog writing is considered, it is concluded that blog writing is not superior to traditional pen-paper writing environment regarding writing achievement. Namely, both groups demonstrate similar increase in their writing achievement. As a final point, Yakut and Aydın (2015) point out that the reason why there is no difference between traditional and blog environment is related to several factors. First, students who participated in blog activities have problems regarding blogs due to technical issues. Second, learners have lack of experience of the use of blogs. Third, they were accustomed to traditional pen–paper activities throughout their educational lives.

A comparison of the conclusions drawn in this study to the findings obtained from previous is provided below. First of all, according to the conclusions obtained from the study, process-based writing instruction has a positive influence on writing achievement in a traditional learning environment. Similar findings are also obtained by Zamel (1982), whose studies highlight the favorable effects of process based writing on writing achievement. In addition, the study concludes that the use of blogs in EFL writing through process-based approach have a positive effect on writing achievement. The results match the findings, which show the favorable influence of using blogs in process-based instruction (Chen, 2012). In this study, it is also explored that blog writing is not superior to traditional pen-paper regarding writing achievement. However, this conclusion contradicts with the results of prior research. For instance, Lin et al. (2014) report that blogging contributes the students to improve their writing compared to the traditional pen-and- paper instruction.

In view of the findings, some practical recommendations can be presented. First, EFL teachers should be well aware of the positive effects of using process-based writing instruction on writing achievement in a traditional learning environment. Namely, teachers should directly use process-based writing approach to promote learners' writing achievement in classroom environment. Additionally, policy makers, curriculum developers and material developers should be aware of the positive effects of process-based approach on EFL writing achievement. In other words, writing activities are needed to be organized in accordance with the dynamics of process-based approach to increase writing achievement among EFL writers. Second, EFL teachers should also use blog-oriented environment in addition to traditional classroom setting to increase writing achievement in a process-based approach. For this purpose, policy makers, curriculum developers and material developers should pay attention to the contribution of blogging to writing achievement, and develop materials, techniques and procedures that are suitable for blog-oriented writing. By this way, it will be possible to integrate blogs into their classroom settings for improving EFL writing achievement. However, target groups should be also aware that the use of blogs as a learning environment does not bring any extra advantage when they are compared to traditional learning environment. That is to say, while the use of blogs increases writing achievement, it does provide more improvement than the use of traditional learning environments.

This research is limited to 48 EFL learners in the ELT Department of Education Faculty of Balıkesir University. Second, the study was limited to an experimental research design that includes pre-post tests, a treatment group and a control group, and random assignment of the participants. Third, the focus of the research is confined to the dependent variable, EFL writing achievement. Moreover, the tests used for measuring writing achievement are limited to the topics designed for TOEFL. Further research should focus on other approaches, namely form-focused, genre-based, and reader / audience-dominated approaches in addition to process-based approach. Research should also focus on the variables that may affect writing achievement among EFL writers such as EFL writers' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, self-efficacy and affective states. In addition, there is a need for research on other Web 2.0 tools such as wikis and podcasts and social media environment such as Facebook and Twitter. Finally, in addition to experimental studies, qualitative, quantitative and correlational studies need to be carried out. As a final point, demographic variables such as age, gender, proficiency levels and familiarity of Internet use should be examined in terms of EFL writing achievement.

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