An Empirical Study of the Effect of the Use of Weblogs on College English Writing

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to introduce blogging into a medical university ESL writing and to examine the effect of its use for improving students’ writing ability. The study also sought to examine ESL students’ perceptions regarding the implementation of blogs in the ESL writing. Survey research and content analysis approaches were used to collect data from thirty participants. Data analysis was performed using qualitative research. Blogging proved to be an effective tool for the writing instruction: by the use of Weblogs in college English writing, learners’ language skills were improved; because genre approach was applied to this study, learners have learned different forms of writing, which would be useful in their future life for various demands; comments from audience enriched learners’ thinking, and they widened their horizons and became more imaginative; students’ motivation of ESL writing and collaborative consciousness were both largely promoted.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of information technology, the application of computer technology to a new teaching approach is a trend of English teaching reform (Yu, 2007). Weblogs have become a potential tool to assist the delivery of instruction for writing. Although the application of the Weblogs to college English writing and teaching is broadly discussed, there are more researches on Weblogs in education abroad than at home, mainly focusing on the application of Weblogs in distance education (Yu, 2007). The purposes of this study were to explore the effect of the use of Weblogs on college English writing, and validate the rationality and feasibility of the use of Weblogs in college English writing.

This study is designed to evaluate learners’ English writing levels in terms of spelling, word order, part of speech, grammar and quantity of conjunctions before and after the study. Besides that, learners’ motivation and collaborative consciousness before and after the use of Weblogs on college English writing are also concerned. The relevant research questions are: What is the effect of the use of Weblogs on college English writing? What do learners’ motivation and collaborative consciousness change before and after the use of Weblogs on college English writing?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

A network of Weblogs is usually formed into a set of interlocking communities. Educators have quickly seized on the potential use of Weblogs for education. As a result, numerous articles are now being written on blogs.

Kennedy (2004) stated in her article on “Writing with Web Logs” that, “unlike most web sites, which generally combine static and dynamic features, a blog is produced with an active writer in mind, one who creates in an online writing space designed to communicate an identity, a personality, and most importantly, a point of view”.

Barrios (2003) claims that blogs can develop reading and writing skills, empower students to become better researchers, writers, independent learners, and develop international Web communities. Blogs for writing can be used in various ways; for example, learning journals, learning logs, thinking journals, reader response journals, reflective journals, and visual learning logs. If the journaling is to be collaborative then blogging would be an effective use for it.

There has been very limited research, positive or negative, on the use of Weblogs as an emerging technology tool for teaching (Jones, 2006). However, Jones (2006) thought “blogs might be a useful tool in teaching writing based on the experiences and perceptions of educators in the field of L1 writing and rhetoric as well as my experience
The instructional approach in this study is of genre approach. Students are required to write at least 8 compositions in the semester. The composition genres include diaries, stories, research reports, reading reports, lectures, resumes, and letters in writing sequence. At first, all the writing skills (definitions, exemplifications, problem-solutions, compare and contrast, cause and effect, etc.) in each unit of their text books are presented in the instructional blog for students to have an overview of the writing skills in the whole semester. For each genre, students are given one example to follow the form, and then, they should begin their own writing and meanwhile consider the writing skills in the process. After two weeks, comments are provided and peer comments are made, students revise the writing according to the comments, or look at the comments and then continue on the next writing assignment. At the end of the semester, a certain topic is given to write a composition for a test to examine their progress.

I had the students create individual blogs so that the students would be able to maintain ownership of their blogs, instead of having one blog for the entire class, that is, a class blog. The goal was for the students to present their writing assignments on the blogs and have peers give meaningful and critical responses to their writing. The students used their blogs for several writing tasks (peer responding, publishing) and writing assignments (diaries, stories, research reports, reading reports, lectures, resumes, and letters). They used blog features such as posting to publish their papers (blog entries) that were composed in Microsoft Word or composed directly in their blog entry space. They used the commenting feature to provide feedback on their peers’ writing. They also used commenting to read their peer feedback and audience reaction; reflect on their own writing from the comments and questions posted.

3.3 Participants
The participants (n=30) are non-English major freshmen in the researcher’s university, who began their university in September, 2010. They are of similar age (around 19 or 20). Besides, all the participants were taught by the researcher, a graduate college student who had struggled with academic writing in several courses, and who now felt that he could help others become more comfortable with writing. The participants were composed of 15 males and 15 females. They were similar in age and academic performance, and they were assigned to the instructional group experimentally.
student of linguistics and applied linguistics with seven years of teaching experience. Since ESL writing is integrated into the intensive reading, all the participants took the same intensive reading class with the same textbook *New Horizon College English* published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

### 3.4 Instrumentation

In this study, Weblog writing tests and questionnaires were employed to collect the data. Weblog writing tests were conducted at the end of the first and second semester of study. The two writing tests were used respectively as the pre-test and post-test to measure the effect of Weblog learning on ESL writing. The writing topics were different, but at the same degree of difficulty level. Questionnaires focus on students’ motivation, collaborative consciousness, and effect of ESL learning, distributed before and after the study.

### 3.5 Data collection procedures

The formal study was implemented in the spring semester of the 2010-2011 academic year in an eastern university in China. The study started on February 1, 2011 and ended on June 30, 2011. Data was collected according to the following procedures:

- Call for participants;
- Print out the pre-questionnaire and distribute to the participants before pre-test of writing;
- Launch pre-test of writing in the instructional Weblog;
- Revise participants’ blogs every two week;
- Launch post-test of writing in the instructional Weblog;
- Print out the post-questionnaire and distribute to the participants after post-test of writing;
- Analysis and report the data using proper data analysis techniques to conduct specific analysis that relates to research questions, and report the results according to APA style.

### 3.6 Data analysis procedures

In the text, place the authors’ last names (without initials) and the date of publication in parentheses (see examples in Section 5). At the end of the paper, list all references in alphabetical order underneath the heading REFERENCES.

Statistical software package SPSS 13.0 was used to analyze the collected data. Data analysis included the following steps:

- Use SPSS to do the sample demographics analysis to see the situation of the sample’s gender and major composition and the sample use of online interaction tools.
- Use SPSS to analyze the Effect part in post-questionnaire to check whether there is writing ability improvement after Weblog English writing instruction.
- Use paired samples t-test procedure in SPSS to compare the means of the pre-test writing to post-test writing to see whether there is significant improvement after Weblog English writing instruction.
- Use content analysis to analyzing and tabulating the frequency of occurrence of spelling mistakes, word order mistakes, parts of speech mistakes, conjunction use and grammar mistakes, and then use paired samples t-test procedure in SPSS to compare the means of the pre-test writing mistakes to post-test writing mistakes to see whether there is significant improvement after Weblog English writing instruction.
- Use SPSS to compare participants’ motivation and collaborative consciousness change to see whether there is difference between the pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire.

### 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 4.1 Results for research question 1

Research question 1 focuses on finding out the effect of the use of Weblogs on college English writing in terms of (1) linguistic accuracy and linguistic complexity and (2) the participants’ attitudes toward the effect part in post-questionnaire. The results of the syntactic errors, morphological errors, and lexical errors are reported in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Spelling mistakes (pre-post)</td>
<td>3.4667</td>
<td>9.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Word order mistakes (pre-post)</td>
<td>1.7333</td>
<td>9.685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Parts of speech mistakes (pre-post)</td>
<td>3.1000</td>
<td>11.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Grammar mistakes (pre-post)</td>
<td>3.8667</td>
<td>16.914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Quantity of conjunction (pre-post)</td>
<td>-3.6333</td>
<td>-16.744</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in the above table, the means of the spelling mistakes pre-post, word order mistakes pre-post, parts of speech mistakes pre-post and grammar mistakes pre-test are above zero (i.e. 3.4667, 1.7333,
3.1000, and 3.8667 respectively), while the means of quantity of conjunctions is below zero (i.e. -3.6333). The paired sample t-test shows the t value is 9.057, 9.685, 11.196, 16.914 and -16.744 respectively at two-tailed significance level of .000 (p<.01). It means that participants improve their writing ability significantly after a semester’s learning.

The results of the attitudes toward the effect part are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the attitudes toward the effect part in the post-questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mini</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words &amp; grammar</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.6667</td>
<td>.71116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.0000</td>
<td>.90972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.8667</td>
<td>.43417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.0000</td>
<td>.58722</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the results of the effect part in the post-questionnaire, all the four items have received small standard deviations. Since a small standard deviation indicates that the results are clustered closely around the mean, this suggests that participants shared a similar idea that the use of Weblogs on college English writing has an obvious effect.

4.2 Results for research question 2

Research question 2 focuses on finding out the changes of participants’ motivation and collaborative consciousness before and after the use of Weblogs on college English writing. The results are reported in Table 3 for motivation.

Table 3. Independent-samples t-test of motivation in pre and post questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>tests</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1Confidence</td>
<td>pre</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4667</td>
<td>.93710</td>
<td>.17109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.6333</td>
<td>.66868</td>
<td>.12208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Interest</td>
<td>pre</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.0667</td>
<td>.90719</td>
<td>.16563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.4333</td>
<td>.77385</td>
<td>.14129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3Exam</td>
<td>pre</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.7000</td>
<td>.87691</td>
<td>.16010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.9667</td>
<td>.80872</td>
<td>.14765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4Ability</td>
<td>pre</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4333</td>
<td>.89763</td>
<td>.16388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.9000</td>
<td>.71197</td>
<td>.12999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the Table 3, we can see participants took up a higher mean level of Motivation 1, Motivation 2 and Motivation 4 after Weblog writing instruction, while they took up a lower mean level of Motivation 3, which prove that students become interested in English writing, and their purpose of writing is more for ability than examination. Meanwhile the standard deviations of Motivation 1, Motivation 2, Motivation 3 and Motivation 4 in the post-questionnaire are lower than that in the pre-questionnaire, which indicates that the results are clustered more closely around the mean, this suggests that more participants shared a similar idea that the use of Weblogs on college English writing has an obvious effect.

The results are reported in Table 4 for collaborative consciousness.

Table 4. Independent-samples t-test of collaborative consciousness in pre and post questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaborative consciousness</th>
<th>tests</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1Eager for</td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.4000</td>
<td>.89443</td>
<td>.16330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comments</td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.5333</td>
<td>.68145</td>
<td>.12441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2Sense of achievement</td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.9667</td>
<td>.88992</td>
<td>.16248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3making</td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.0667</td>
<td>.25371</td>
<td>.04632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comments</td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.5667</td>
<td>1.04000</td>
<td>.18988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4Ask questions</td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.3667</td>
<td>.71840</td>
<td>.13116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for help</td>
<td>post</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.3000</td>
<td>1.02217</td>
<td>.18662</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the Table 4, we can see participants took up a higher mean level of Collaborative Consciousness 1, Collaborative Consciousness 2, Collaborative Consciousness 3 and Collaborative Consciousness 4 after Weblog writing instruction, which prove that students improve their collaborative consciousness in the Weblog writing course. The standard deviations of Collaborative Consciousness 1, Collaborative Consciousness 2 in the post-questionnaire are lower than that in the pre-questionnaire, while the standard deviations of Collaborative Consciousness 3, Collaborative Consciousness 4 in the post-questionnaire are higher than that in the pre-questionnaire, which indicates though the most participants shared a similar idea that the use of Weblogs on college English writing has an obvious effect, there are some exceptions.

4.3 Findings

The findings are discussed in light of the research questions in this study which are:

1. What is the Effect by the Use of Weblogs in College English Writing?

2. What do learners’ motivation and collaborative consciousness change before and after the use of Weblogs on college English writing?

4.3.1 What is the Effect by the Use of Weblogs in College English Writing?

The results of data analysis revealed that (a) by the use of Weblogs in college English writing, learners’ language skills are improved, which include correct spelling, correct word order, correct use of part of speech, correct grammar, and advisable use of conjunctions. That is because of the timely feedback from the teacher and audience. (b) Because genre
approach is applied to this study, learners’ compositions are no longer examination-oriented, and they have learned different forms of writing, which will be useful in their future life for various demands. (c) By comparison between pre-test compositions and post-test compositions, the contents are relatively enriched and the whole writings are more consistent. Comments from audience enrich learners’ thinking, and they widen their horizons and become more imaginative.

4.3.2 What do learner motivation and collaborative consciousness change before and after the use of Weblogs on college English writing?

Firstly, with the help of blog in the teaching of English writing, learners tend to have more interest in the second language community and want to learn the language in order to communicate with others more satisfactorily and to gain closer contact with them and their culture. Blog offers a more practical real life language experience, providing students with functional communicative experiences that serve the learners needs as well as motivate them to use English in their daily lives.

Secondly, the various functions of blog offer an opportunity for students to make a collaborative learning. The term “collaborative” puts its emphasis on collaborative efforts mainly among students through pair and group work to pursue goals and objectives. It also involves student-teacher collaboration in choosing and carrying out techniques and in evaluating progress.

The blog-assisted class is typically collaborative. As students work together in pairs and groups, they share information and come to each other’s aid. They are a “team” whose players must work together in order to achieve goals successfully. In such a situation, it is easy to form a collaborative learning environment. Collaborative learning environments can lead to higher efficiency and achievement as well as more appropriate classroom behaviors. As well as this, collaborative learning promotes self-direction in the learning by creating opportunities for learners to define their own goals and to determine how these goals are best met (Gao, 2007).

5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

This study is not enough to find out the most effective weblog writing instruction method, so future research should concentrate on teachers’ role in the process of weblog writing. Research for both sides—students and teachers will put up with more effective teaching and learning mode.

REFERENCES