Colloquium

The unrealistic claims for the effects of classroom blogging on English as a second language, students' writing performance

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Introduction

Blogs are easy to set up and use and have a wide range of functions, which can open up entirely novel channels of communication between people. This is probably why many educators believe that blogs have the potential to facilitate teaching and learning. For the past few years, many researchers devoted themselves to studying blogs, in particular, in the context of the writing classroom for English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL). So far, studies have tended to suggest that most ESL students liked the use of blogs in classrooms and found themselves able to express themselves freely by these means (Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, in press). Additionally, most student bloggers felt motivated to write (Sun, 2010). The reinforcement of these positive effects may also explain why student bloggers believe that they can become better writers (Wu, 2008) and why there were improvements in students' performance in writing (Chen, Liu, Shih, Wu & Yuan, 2011).

However, although blogs may seem at this point to be a great asset to ESL/EFL education, Levy (2009) points out that the use of blogs is a very labour-intensive as a methodology. Interestingly, this issue is for some reason barely discussed in previous research reports. Given this lack of discussion, it is not surprising that Levy further comments that the language improvements among students, which are attributed to blogs, are often assumed, without adequate reflection on the associated increase in teachers' workload. Levy's observation also brings about the examination of another neglected limitation in most of the previous experimental studies on blogs; this is the lack of a comparative control group (CG). Without a group to compare with, it is not possible to assess whether the significant amount of time and effort that the teacher spends on maintaining a blog project has paid off in terms of students' learning performance. This lack also makes it difficult to draw a robust conclusion about whether or not classroom blogging can significantly benefit student writers' performance.

Therefore, before classroom blogging can be recommended safely as a teaching approach for ESL learners, we propose to revisit its effect, with particular focus on ESL students' writing performance. The research question to answer, then, is this: *Are the effects of classroom blogging on ESL undergraduate writers' performance justified when compared with a traditional teaching approach?*

Methodology

The experimental comparison study was conducted on two intact writing groups of ESL majors in a university in Taiwan. Each group comprised 25 students, who were assigned to either an experimental group (EG) or a CG. Both groups were taught by the same research instructor. The project lasted for 18 weeks, during which both groups received two 50-minute lectures per week. For the EG, the lectures were held in a computer lab; each student was provided with a personal computer connected to the Internet. All the EG participants also had at least one personal

computer or laptop at home, making it feasible to blog after class. The course requirements and learning materials were all presented on the class blog, and the EG students were required to write journals, hand in assignments and to join in collaborative discussions online to provide feedback for each other's entries. Additionally, the teacher left online comments and feedback on students' entries. The CG, taught in a traditional language classroom, received the same course material as the EG, and they were also asked to hand in the same number of assignments and journals to the teacher, but this time in the traditional way—paper-based forms, on which the instructor would comment and leave feedback. In addition, the students were asked to peer-edit each other's printed journals and other writing tasks, and to provide feedback in or after class. In order to create identical course material, any extra online learning resources given to the EG by the instructor were also given in paper format to the CG.

The research adopted the pre-/posttest mode to examine student performance in writing. Each test comprised two types of writing task—a journal written to reflect on events in the students' lives and a short argumentative essay discussing social issues. Two raters were invited for the writing assessment and the average scores of the two writing tasks and of the two raters were used for data analysis. The interrater reliability between the two raters was examined using Cronbach's alpha; paired sample *t*-tests were used to examine each group's own writing improvement before and after the project; and ANCOVA (analysis of covariance) was applied to assess the differences between the two groups after the project.

Results
A high Cronbach's alpha of .840 was revealed in the test scores produced by the two raters, suggesting that the two human raters had indeed reached a high level of agreement on students' writing performance in tests; this later ensured the rating reliability and objectivity of the test results.

The results of the paired samples t-*tests*
While Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the pre- and posttests, Table 2 reveals a statistically significant difference between the tests for the two groups ($p < .05$). This result indicates that, after the experiment, both groups significantly improved their writing performance. In addition, the SD (standard deviations) of both groups dropped from the pretest to the posttest. This not only signifies that the levels of the participants' writing performance converged but also

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the pre- and posttests for both groups

Group	Test	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Experimental group	Pretest	25	72.43	5.00
	Posttest	25	74.46	2.83
Control group	Pretest	25	70.34	7.38
	Posttest	25	72.86	4.80

Table 2: Paired sample t-*test results for both groups*

	Group	Tests	Paired differences M	Standard deviation	t	Degrees of freedom	Sig. (two-tailed)
Pair 1	Experimental group	pre–post	−2.03	4.10	−2.47	24	.021
Pair 2	Control group	pre–post	−2.52	5.16	−2.44	24	.022

Table 3: *Analysis of covariance for posttest scores as a function of groups using the pretest scores as a covariate*

Source	Type III sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta^2
Pretest mean scores	340.53	1	340.53	39.28	.000	.455
Group	6.32	1	6.32	.73	.397	.015
Error	407.42	47	8.66			

indicates that both approaches to teaching writing were broadly accepted by the participants. This in turn serves as evidence for the research instructor's teaching abilities in regard to both approaches.

ANCOVA results

Table 3 shows a non-significant effect of group with a very small effect size, $F (1, 47) = .73$, $p = .397$, partial $eta^2 = .015$. This indicates no significant difference between the EG and the CG in terms of their overall writing performance on the posttest when the difference between the EG and the CG in the pretest mean scores was controlled. The result further suggests that there is no difference between the effects of the two group treatments.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the effects on performance of classroom blogging in the ESL writing classroom and compared this approach with a traditional teaching method in terms of subjects' writing performance. We found that both approaches significantly helped student writers to statistically improve their writing. The significant achievement in writing performance for the EG alone also met the findings of previous researchers (Chen *et al.*, 2011), in that blogs may serve as a platform where students' writing abilities can be enhanced. Given this, it would seem fair to conclude that the EG's advance over time justifies the use of blogs in the ESL composition classroom.

However, this argument is greatly weakened by the fact that the treatment of the CG alone had a very similar effect on the performance of the student writers. This finding clearly argues against promoting the use of blogs in the writing classroom, in particular, in conjunction with the following ANCOVA result: participants taught in the traditional way had a statistically similar performance in writing to that of the students taught using blogs in the posttest. Moreover, given the significant effort and amount of time spent on the design and maintenance of the blogs for the EG, it seems highly doubtful that classroom blogging is worth pursuing as an approach for promoting students' writing abilities, despite what previous studies have suggested.

Finally, this research examined the effects of blogs only in a product-oriented fashion, so the research result may seem a little "tacky," particularly in trying to "bargain" over time and effort for language teachers. However, given that the purpose of the use of blogs is to "facilitate" students' learning development, the finding of this research is expected to be significant to the body of blog studies because it reveals that the entire blogging format failed to achieve its goal in the context of the ESL writing classroom.

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