
English blog writing---an effective way in college EFL writing teaching

Qin LI

College of Foreign Languages, China Three Gorges University, Hubei, China

Email address:

jennylh@sina.com

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Abstract: English blog writing, a newly-applied communicative method based on the Internet provides a suitable and practical platform to remedy the traditional EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing teaching. This paper tends to illustrate the importance and necessity of English blog writing by presenting the practical stages and reporting a case study with non-English majors in a Chinese university.

Keywords: English Blog Writing, College English Writing Teaching, EFL Teaching and Learning

1. Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary Online defines the noun blog as 'a frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary'. It has become one of the most popular ways of communication (e.g. e-mail lists, BBS--bulletin board system, Internet forum etc.) through the Internet owing to its advantages since Justin Hall began his personal blogging in 1994, who is generally recognized as one of the earlier bloggers. First, it is simple in manipulating. As long as one has access to the Internet and can navigate a website, s/he can register for a blog account to own his or her "territory". Second, it is well-structured in framework. The posts are well-categorized according to time, topics or some other items. Bloggers can arrange them as they like, especially they can hide those private information or anything they do not want to show in public. Third, it is constantly-updating in contents. To keep pace with the high rate of information transmission, bloggers are usually motivated to update their posts to sustain others' attention on their blogs. Fourth, it is open and interactive. Blog is not a one-way information delivery system, but provides multidimensional interactive information for bloggers to learn the opinions and feedback from others and spark new ideas through collisions of different views. Last but not least, it is a good way to show individual characters. Bloggers are free to express themselves whether in terms of contents or design such as

blogging interface, template and so on. All these above make it a very efficient tool for teaching English writing to foreign language students.

2. Theoretical Background

Social constructivism suggests that learning is an active process where learners devote to discovering principles, concepts and facts for themselves with instructors acting as facilitators but not teachers (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). It is strongly recommended that learners should learn in a social context to share each other's views, which is called collaborative elaboration (Godwin-Jones, 2003). It is effective for learners to collaborate in tasks and discussions to achieve a shared understanding of the truth in some aspect regardless of different background and skills (Duffy and Jonassen 1992). Moreover, motivation is another crucial assumption for learners according to social constructivism. According to Glasersfeld (1989), sustaining motivation to learn is strongly dependent on the learner's confidence in his or her potential for learning. Based on these theories, English blog writing seems to meet all the principles social constructivism requires. As blog has become increasingly commonplace in recent years, researchers and educators have begun drawing attention to its role in language learning and teaching. Although there is relatively little research on blog use in EFL writing teaching, researches on blogging's effect on learner autonomy, increasing writing fluency, blog as a

place for completing writing assignments, posting class materials and as a way to open communication with bloggers outside classroom tend to indicate that English blog writing appears to be an ideal way in the teaching of English writing to foreign language learners (Johnson, 2004; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004; Wu, 2005 as cited in Zhang, 2009)

3. Six Reasons why English Blog Writing may Help EFL Writing Teaching

There are numerous reasons for using blogs in education (Stanley, 2005; Godwin-Jones, 2006). Based on the author's own teaching experiences, six main reasons why English blog writing may help EFL writing teaching will be summarized as follows:

3.1. Dynamic and Rich Learning Environment

Unlike conventional classroom teaching, blogs can be used as on-line personal journals for students. Teachers and students can upload any useful teaching and learning materials and links they filter to blogs to share with each other, which can provide rich writing materials for students to improve their writing efficiency. Furthermore, through the Internet, it is possible for students to communicate with many more native speakers in writing than before.

3.2. A Good Way to Motivate Students' Writing

On one hand, compared with writing in the paper, softwares of word processing are more likely to help students modify spelling and grammar errors which are usually huge obstacles for foreign language learners to face. Students can free themselves from the anxiety they often have when writing in the paper, which might stimulate their writing desire; on the other hand, by publishing posts on the Internet, students may have more readers than teachers, which can encourage their ownership and responsibility as students. Therefore, they may be more thoughtful and introspective in terms of content, structure and wording while writing. And this also gives students an explicit purpose for English writing when they know they are interacting with an authentic audience.

3.3. Teacher-Student and Student-Student Interaction

Through English blog writing, teachers can give comments on students' posts, select good articles to demonstrate in class and get to know more about students, which may promote the emotion between teachers and students and help teachers teach in accordance with students' individual aptitude. Since time is usually limited in class, it will definitely solve the problems aroused by lacking teacher-student face-to-face communication. Likewise, students can develop their ability of critical thinking when they are engaged in collaborative learning through their interactions with others. Students are often

encouraged to evaluate each other on what they read and write. Therefore, it is possible for them to improve English writing skills when encountering new ideas through interaction with other students with critical thinking.

3.4. Facilitating Meaningful Learning for Students

As foreign language learners, the practical aim to learn English is to use it freely in real communication. In real life, it is not very common for students to have chances of talking with English native speakers. However, students can explore different blogs, links to learn more about different cultures, nations and people who communicate with them through blogs, which may inspire them to gain better understanding of the English language and its culture and improve their writing as well.

3.5. Students' Effective Reflection Tool

Reflective learning and thinking, originally defined by Dewey (1933), is purposeful learning and thinking toward a goal, which enables students to integrate new ideas with prior knowledge to learn through reflection. English blog writing make it possible for students to post their ideas, opinions, commentaries, and reflections. Through reflection, they are likely to know their defects and shortcomings and try to improve themselves in writing.

3.6. High Efficiency of Teachers' Feedback

Due to time constraints in class, teachers usually fail to spend sufficient time on giving feedback on individual student's writing. English blog writing can solve this problem. Teachers may give timely feedbacks on students' posts and students can also discuss with teachers if they have any questions about feedbacks, through which the line of communication between teachers and students may stay open.

4. Five Steps to Integrate English Blog Writing with EFL Writing Teaching

According to Campbell (2004), three types of blogs have been described for use in English writing class: the tutor blog, the learner blog, and the class blog. A tutor blog is created and monitored by the teacher to provide daily reading practice, course or syllabus information, assigned tasks and so on for students. It can also serve as a resource of links for self-study. Students run learner blogs, either individually or as a small collaborative group, which can be used as a platform to express themselves through free writing and also a forum in which they discuss their writing. The class blog is run by the entire class and is the result of the collaborative effort of the whole class. It can be used for posting messages, images, and links related to classroom discussion topics in English. Class blogs can also serve as a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange.

4.1. Step 1) Preparation Stage

At the first stage, the teacher creates a tutor blog and students create their learner blogs respectively. And then the teacher can create a class blog or nominate a student to do so. The teacher can set up blog groups according to students' different levels of English writing. The teacher can assign a writing task per week or ten days according to the entire writing teaching plan of one semester, offering relevant writing materials, background information, useful links of writing tips, such as <http://www.freelancermagazine.com/ten-practical-tips-for-writing-in-english/> etc. Students can also search learning information by themselves and post it to blogs to share with their peers before writing. They may be encouraged to write whatever they like initially, to write for themselves and to record their life bit by bit in order to develop their interest in English writing. Gradually the teacher can assign topics or provide several topics for them to choose in accordance with the teaching plan.

4.2. Step 2) Drafting Stage

Students begin brainstorming on the topic (decided by students themselves or assigned by the teacher), and exchange ideas about contents and structure before writing. The teacher can participate in discussion to give some instructions and monitor students' whole writing process using RSS (RDF Site Summary) to solve students' problems in time as well. Students start drafting with the help of word-processing softwares and post their writings on their blogs after modifying by themselves making full use of the relevant information provided by the teacher or information searched by themselves through useful links.

4.3. Step 3) Evaluation Stage

At this stage, students are required to evaluate each other's works according to the criteria posted by the teacher in class blog. Before evaluation, the teacher is expected to inform students of some key aspects of commenting on others' writings, such as content, structure, coherence, grammar, vocabulary etc. Students may find their own writing problems in the process of evaluating works and exchanging ideas based on their careful reading and critical thinking. After students' evaluation, the teacher should post his or her own comments or opinions on the blog timely for students' modification. In particular, the teacher can assess students' evaluations, which may help students evaluate others' works more objectively and effectively. Additionally, students can also express their different thoughts about evaluations from the teacher and their peers. All these evaluations can be repeated in a cycle.

4.4. Step 4) Modifying Stage

Students may modify their writings based on their reflection on the teacher's and their peers' evaluations and repost them to blogs which may receive repeated evaluations.

Likewise, this phase can also be cycling.

4.5. Step 5) Sorting Stage

At the final stage, some excellent works may be selected by the teacher or recommended by collaborative groups to be posted in the class blog in order to encourage those who have done a good job. The teacher can organize all the students to appreciate good writings and share writing feelings with the representatives, which may sustain students' writing enthusiasm. Usually, at the end of each semester, students are required to write about their own reflection on writing experiences in the whole semester and post to blogs to share with others.

5. The Application of Blogging in College EFL Writing Classes

5.1. Preliminary Survey of Blog Using in CTGU (China Three Gorges University)

First of all, before the application of blogging in English writing class, a survey about the current situation of the daily use of blogs among students was conducted. As has been expected, as many as 32 (20%) students have been using blogs in their daily life with the main purpose of recording their life and making friends. However, none of them has ever written in English in their blogs.

As far as the quantity of blog is concerned, the result is quite disappointing. 18 (about 11%) students confessed that they posted fewer than two articles and 6 (6%) of them said they only posted three to six articles every month.

5.2. Description before the Case Study

Before the main study, students were encouraged to set up their own blogs and invite their classmates to read and comment their postings in English. However, 93 (58%) students indicated that they hadn't invited their friends or classmates to read their blogs. The main reasons why they didn't invite their classmates to read their blogs are as the followings: a) 'It's quite a shame to ask someone to read my blog since I don't want to show my privacy to others'; b) 'I am lack of self-confidence in my English writing'; c) 'I don't want others to comment my postings because they are my personal things'. In general, all students in this study were familiar with the Internet. However, some of them were not familiar with blogs. Since they had to participate in blogging, they were encouraged to learn from their friends how to build their own blogs. In all, 139 (87%) students said that it was easy to create their blogs, but almost all managed to complete their tasks and found that writing on blogs was interesting and fun (148; 93%). Most importantly, all of them suggested that writing on blogs should be a class requirement.

Based on the results above of the preliminary study, some kinds of stimulation methods were adopted here. For example, students would be given extra corresponding

marks in terms of the number of people they invited and the quantity of comments they gained.

The main study, which lasted for a semester (four months), used blogs as computer-mediated tools to engage two classes of college non-English majors in CTGU in English writing course. Altogether there were 160 students with varied writing levels, and who were preparing for the National College English Test--Band Four, were involved in the study. All the participants were required to create their personal English blogs so that they could read each other's views, share ideas and comment on their peers' postings.

Specific writing tasks (compositions with the level of Band Four, letters, chart description, news report, comments on the current events, and daily life on campus, etc.) were assigned every two weeks. All the participants, divided into 16 groups with ten in each group were requested to discuss an appropriate plan for each task in their blogs, before they had the opportunity of face-to-face discussion in class, to check the appropriateness of the plan and reach an agreement on what they considered the best one for each piece of writing. Following the discussion classes (once every two weeks), the different tasks were completed by the students on their personal blog, and were edited (lexical and grammatical errors were checked and corrected) by group members prior to being submitted to be assessed by the teacher.

5.3. Results and Discussion

The findings show that the overall attitude of the students towards the study was positive and that blogs were viewed as a good way of communication among peers. It is indicated that when using blogs students were able to write better (148; 93%) because they were more aware of the need to check grammar before posting (118; 74%), which is due mainly to the fact that they realized that when writing online, the Web site is open for everyone to read, and they paid more attention to the lexical and grammatical points. Moreover, it is also shown that when writing blogs, they could write effectively (156; 98%) and thoughtfully (132; 83%).

Hence, students have been encouraged to become independent learners in the process of blogging. It is imperative that the specific writing environment has played a vital role in improving their writing which can be observed clearly in their writing progress mainly in terms of vocabulary richness, sentence coherence, grammar and rhetorical devices. In addition, the feedback from their peers appear to be very helpful and motivational. 142 (89%) students claimed that they would like to reflect on what they wrote and what they planned to write next.

However, the collaborative skills could be developed more (137; 87% agree with it) in the face-to-face classroom discussion than writing and interacting through blogging. Thus, it is suggested that a blended learning process integrating blogging with classroom writing teaching can be regarded useful and helpful for students in terms of enhancing their collaborative skills.

5.4. Pedagogical Implications

As discussed above, blogging appears to be an effective and interesting way for EFL college students to practice and publish their writing. Students tend to benefit a lot from it in such an interactive social environment, which may motivate students to improve their writing and accomplish more reflection tasks. Most importantly, they can practice the language using different skills, especially in writing, in an authentic learning environment to develop their independent learning abilities. It has been suggested that it is crucial for teachers to integrate online learning environments with pedagogy, such as blogging due to the significance of this activity type, which may influence students' various aspects.

6. Conclusion

In accordance with the theory of social constructivism, English blog writing serve EFL writing teaching in an effective way with the complete process of "collaborating - writing, thinking - sharing, appreciating - learning". Based on the previous studies and the report of the case study, the paper summarizes the advantages of English blog writing and its essential steps to integrate with EFL college writing teaching. It is hoped that the present study will bring some helpful enlightenments to English teachers.

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