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How can the use of blog software facilitate the writing process of English language learners?

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Blog use may offer instructors a helpful tool for teaching writing at the tertiary level in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) classrooms. This article reports on a quasi-experimental study regarding the effect of blog-centered writing instruction on students' writing performance. Fifty intermediate English students at a Turkish university participated in the study. The control group ($n = 23$) received in-class process-oriented writing instruction and the experimental group ($n = 27$) integrated blogs into their writing processes by using a blog software. Based on the analyses of students' written work, the findings suggest that blog-integrated writing instruction might have resulted in a greater improvement in students' writing performance than merely in-class writing instruction. The study therefore supports the conclusion that English as a Foreign Language practitioners' use of blog software has potential to promote more effective writing instruction.

Keywords: blog; process-oriented writing instruction; blogging

Introduction

Internet applications that allow learners to communicate directly, inexpensively, and conveniently with other learners with no time or place restrictions (Warschauer, 1996) have brought about many advantages: namely, motivating students intrinsically, enabling them to exert a measure of control over their learning, providing them with a number of authentic materials, and allowing them to communicate with real audiences (Fotos & Browne, 2004; Moras, 2001; Schwienhorst, 1998).

These instructional benefits and their connections to writing instruction have been the subject of numerous studies (Ciekanski & Chanier, 2008; Ho & Savignon, 2007; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Shang, 2007; Warschuer & Ware, 2006). One of the Internet applications which may potentially offer a number of advantages in teaching writing is blogging (Bloch, 2007; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Throne & Payne, 2005; Wang, 2007). Simply defined as user-friendly, free virtual spaces for people to write whatever they want, and for readers to elect to record comments

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regarding these writings (Eastment, 2005), blogs have a number of pertinent features, namely:

- Offering writing practice to students (Campbell, 2003)
- Fostering a sense of ownership (Campbell, 2003; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Sun, 2009)
- Fostering a sense of audience in the students (Leverett, 2006; Ward, 2004)
- Facilitating exchange of resources (Dippold, 2009)
- Facilitating feedback on process in writing (Dippold, 2009; Liou & Peng, 2009)
- Optimizing teacher–student communication and peer interaction (Campbell, 2003; Dippold, 2009; Murray & Hourigan, 2008; Sun, 2009).

For the purpose of providing empirical evidence regarding the relationship between blog use and process-oriented writing instruction, in this study we investigated students' experiences of blogging in process writing. This study, particularly, in a quasi-experimental design, investigates whether the use of blogs enhances writing performance of students by providing opportunities for publishing written drafts, receiving feedback from both the teacher and their friends, enabling them to give feedback to their peers and to see their feedback, and increasing the time for self-study. Specifically the following research question has guided this study:

- Does the use of blog software as a supplementary tool for the writing process enhance writing performance of students?

To address this question, integration of blog use into the process approach to writing is discussed in the section below, followed by a report on the present study.

Literature review

Blogs and the process approach to writing: a meeting point

The process approach sees writing as a non-linear activity in which learners go recursively through such stages as planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, and it puts special emphasis on such concepts as audience, purpose, and interaction with peers and the teacher. The relevant literature provides a large body of research on stages in process-based writing instruction, which yields significant implications for classroom implementation and which justifies the need for a supplementary tool such as a blog.

Accordingly, in the process approach, continual interaction with the teacher and peers is underlined during the drafting stage (Tribble, 1996). Particularly, feedback is central to learning to write in a second language (Leki, 1990; Silva & Brice, 2004) as it promotes the sense of an audience in the students and sensitizes them to the needs of readers (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Nelson & Carson, 1998). Peer feedback is especially important as it contributes to understanding of good writing, promotes accuracy, and clarifies ideas (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Paulus, 1999). Therefore, to implement process writing successfully, both teacher feedback and peer feedback need to be integrated into the writing course (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Tuzi, 2004). Teachers interested in the process approach are also advised to provide students with real audience feedback other than the course tutor and the participating students (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Tribble, 1996).

With regard to revision, research stresses teacher guidance through interaction and training students on revision (Sengupta, 2000). After revision, students should be provided with opportunities to publish their writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2003).

When all these conditions for process-based writing instruction are considered in connection with the limitations of a school setting (time, overcrowded classrooms, curricular restrictions, etc.), it is apparent that teaching writing with a process approach is not always easy, and that teachers may need to find other ways to support writing instruction in schools (Gettings, 1997). Shneiderman's (2002) "create-relate-donate" philosophy may offer such support since students involved in information-sharing by using computer software such as blogs can continue their work outside the classroom on their own. To this end, Ward (2004) expresses the place of blogs in process-based writing instruction as they are likely to cater to a number of language learning needs; namely, blogs:

provide a genuine audience, are authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, provide a dis-inhibiting context and offer a completely new form with un-chartered creative potential. (p. 3)

Likewise Dippold (2009) explains the advantages of blog use in writing instruction as:

they allow writers to reach a much wider audience than just a tutor, encourage and facilitate the exchange of resources and thoughts, and enable students' work to be evaluated and assessed by peers. (p. 19)

By forming a learner blog which is run by individual learners (Campbell, 2003), the writing teacher can make use of blogging in all stages of the writing process from drafting to publishing and assessment. In the drafting stage, students can share their writing through blog pages, and this will ease the feedback process. All class members and the teacher can access drafts at any time and place in order to give and receive feedback (Dippold, 2009). Since the drafts are on the Internet, there will be no time restriction (as in the classroom context) and peers can examine the drafts for as long as they want. Apart from reviewing their peers' writings, blogs allow students to view the feedback given by the teacher to other students, which is likely to contribute to their understanding of successful writing. The use of blogs promotes an awareness of audience, a continually emphasized concept in the process approach, in the students. Further, this audience is, due to the nature of blogs, one that potentially reaches well outside the students' classroom. Due to the open-to-anyone nature of the Internet, students are aware that their work can be accessed by any Internet user (Leverett, 2006; Ward, 2004). When writing for a blog, Kitzmann (2003) observes that:

the (online) audience is not anticipated but expected, and thus influences and structures the very manner in which the writer articulates, composes and distributes the self document. (p. 1)

All these possible opportunities related to feedback through blog use are supported by research (Dippold, 2009; Liou & Peng, 2009). Blog use makes the process of giving feedback an invaluable activity for students as such a process:

provide[s] them with different perspectives on their performance and afford[s] them the opportunity to compare their tasks to their fellow students' tasks. (Dippold, 2009, p. 31)

Blog use also contributes to interaction among classmates and with the instructor as:

students [take] pleasure in composing on blogs, exchanging chatting comments with their peers and the instructor, and look[] forward to more outside visitors reading their blogs. (Liou and Peng, 2009, p. 523)

In addition to learner blogs, teachers can make use of blogging by setting up a tutor blog through which they can provide their students with extra materials (Campbell, 2003). According to their own needs, students can choose among the materials referenced by the teacher, leading to the individualization of learning. When the choice of material to study is left to the students, they will take much more responsibility for their learning (Hsu, Wang, & Comac, 2008) and develop a sense of autonomous learning, which, research has shown, increases success in writing (Sun, 2009).

Depending on the relevant literature, we hypothesized that writing through blog software will be effective in enhancing students' writing performance. By the term "effectiveness", we mean that blog use will help students to improve content and organization of their writing since it will enable them to address a larger audience, and allow them to access a larger body of materials on writing. Blog use will also aid students by improving language use and vocabulary in their writing as they can fulfill their learning needs through assistance provided by the use of tutor blogs that enable the students to reach plenty of language input. In order to test the aforementioned hypothesis, we conducted the study described in the following section.

The study

Research setting and participants

This study was conducted in the School of Foreign Languages at Karadeniz Technical University, Turkey, where students registering for various departments experience intensive instruction in English before they continue their education in their respective fields of study. All classes receive the same English language curriculum; all students at the same level of language proficiency take exactly the same English courses with the same number of class hours. The curriculum consists of four English courses: grammar (six hours), reading (eight hours), speaking/listening (six hours) and writing (four hours). The courses are not integrated and writing instruction is limited to the writing course.

This research project was implemented in the writing course that aims at enabling students to practice the language they have learned and to express themselves in well-organized paragraphs and essays. The first term is allocated to teaching paragraph types, and in the second term, the students are instructed in essay writing. In the research setting, the process approach is followed in writing instruction, and the writing activities are usually confined to in-class activities. Students are initially given theoretical information about the target paragraph/essay type, and then instructed in the use of relevant language structures. After they examine two models of the target type, they are assigned to write their own paragraphs on their own choice of topic. Feedback sessions are also held in the classroom. Due to time limitations, little time is given for peer feedback; thus,

much of the focus of these sessions is on teacher feedback. After the teacher gives written feedback, students are asked to produce a final version of their paragraphs/essays. Students have no place to publish their writings and they collect all their works in a dossier to be handed in at the end of the term for a final grade.

The study conducted in the first term when the curricular focus involved the teaching of paragraph writing had a number of pertinent features, namely:

- In two writing classes, a total of 50 students participated in this study.
- Convenience sampling procedures which “involve choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 88) were applied in drawing a sample for the study.
- One of the two classes was randomly assigned as experimental group and the other class served as control group.
- Both the experimental group ($n = 27$) and the control group ($n = 23$) were similar in terms of age (ranging from 18 to 21) and educational background.
- In the experimental group, 20 students were males and seven were females; in the control group 16 students were males and seven were females.¹
- The learners were from the departments of Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering and Forestry Engineering.
- The English proficiency level of the students was identified as intermediate through two measuring scales: (1) The ALTE (2001) Quick Placement Test (Oxford University Press, 2006); (2) English Proficiency Self-rating Questionnaire, adapted from “Self Assessment Grid” based upon European Portfolio for Languages.
- The second researcher instructed both groups on writing.

Data collection

To see whether blogging enhances writing performance of the students, a writing performance task was administered as a pre- and post-test.

At the beginning of the study, to test the existing ability of the participants in writing, students in both the experimental group and the control group were asked to perform a writing task which aimed to measure a single, integrated writing behavior and to rate students' overall proficiency. The task provided the students with choices on the topics and paragraph types that they were going to learn throughout the term. The participants were required to write a paragraph on the topic they chose. After the treatment, the same task was repeated as a post-test for both groups. To measure the difference, if any, in writing performance between the groups, three experienced English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers of writing evaluated the participants' written products by using a rubric constructed in accordance with English as a Second Language Composition Profile, a focused-analytic scale describing five components of writing along with four ranges of mastery levels (Hughes, Wormuth, Hartfiel, & Jacobs, 1983). The evaluators received training with the reader guide provided by the authors of the profile. The description of the scales and numerical weights was revised and added by considering the objectives of the writing course in research setting. The five

component scales were content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (conventions of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization) (five points) (Hughey et al., 1983).

During the research project, the control group received in-class writing instruction based on the process approach, whereas the experimental group received process-oriented writing instruction supported with blog use. Taught by the same instructor, both groups were instructed according to the same curriculum on the same paragraph types by using the same main materials; however, the experimental group was provided with extra opportunities realized only through blog use. The instructional process for both groups is further described in the following section.

Writing instruction for experimental and control groups

While designing the writing instruction for both groups, the curriculum of the research setting and administrative principles were taken into consideration. Both the experimental group and the control group were required to complete six paragraph writing assignments: descriptive, process, compare, contrast, cause, and effect paragraphs, each with a drafted version. All student work made up 70% of their pass-grade, and they took a writing quiz that contributed to their final grade at a rate of 20%. Ten per cent of the final grade was also allocated to students' class performance.

Both groups were instructed on the same paragraph types; however, instructional aid and the opportunities that were realized through the use of blog software formed the unique instructional difference between the groups. With a special emphasis on the stages of the writing process, the first week of the study was spent introducing the process approach to the students in both groups; namely, drafting, giving feedback, revising, and editing. Additionally, students in the experimental group encountered, via teacher modeling, the creation and use of blogs. Specifically, after instructors deployed www.blogger.com, a widely used free blog provider (Lee, 2009; Pinkman, 2005), students utilized this blog provider to create two different blogs, one serving as a place for publishing their writing and the other as a personal space for follow-up tasks giving them the chance to reflect on their own learning processes. Figure 1 is a screenshot of one of the learner blogs.

The students were also informed about researcher-constructed blogs that served for sharing instructional materials, online writing and language materials, and idea exchange as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.

Through these tutor blogs, unlike the control group students, experimental students were able to access all course materials including explanations and exercises at any time and place even if they missed a class. In other words, the experimental students had the chance to be exposed to more language and writing input. The writing input in the blog-supported instruction was the web materials presented on one of the tutor blogs. Students received the writing input by surfing these web materials. They experienced the opportunity to examine many more model paragraphs than the control group. For the language input, through blogging, students had the chance to access many interactive exercises and to choose according to their own needs. Exposure to significantly more input was realized by means of blog use with the experimental group, which would otherwise be impossible during class hours. The input for the control group was provided in the classroom. Though

0 0 0 1 7 8

Hit Counter

Aydın AKAR

**Friday, January 05,
Homework_6**



Living in big cities is very difficult for people and there are several reasons for this situation. The first reason that makes living in a big city difficult is air pollution. This reason is the most important problem in big cities because they have factories, cars and houses. Factories, cars and houses use chemical substances. And then, these substances go to sky and they react with other chemical substances on the sky, so this situation affect health of people. For example, they don't breathe easily or they make acid rain.

Contributors

- ◆ aysel
- ◆ Aydın

Links

- ◆ Google News
- ◆ BlackEagles
- ◆ University
- ◆ University

Previous Posts

- ◆ Homework_6
- ◆ Homework_5 (Contrast)
- ◆ Homework_5
- ◆ Homework_4 (Compare)
- ◆ Homework_4
- ◆ Homework_3 (Process)
- ◆ Homework_3
- ◆ Homework_2 (Description)
- ◆ Homework_2

Figure 1. Learner blog. Reproduced with the permission of the blog writer.

lecture based materials

THIS BLOG IS FOR INT-B STUDENTS TO ENABLE THEM TO ACCESS THE COURSE MATERIALS AT ANY TIME AND PLACE.

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH

A paragraph is an organization of a group of sentences. These sentences develop one main idea. A paragraph should have three essential parts. These are topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. Apart from these three important parts, a paragraph should also have minor details.

THE TOPIC SENTENCE

The topic sentence:

PREVIOUS POSTS

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH A paragraph is an organization...

Figure 2. Tutor blog for lecture-based materials.

they were free to use the Internet, they were not offered special help by the instructor due to the research design. Table 1 summarizes the instructional process for both groups.

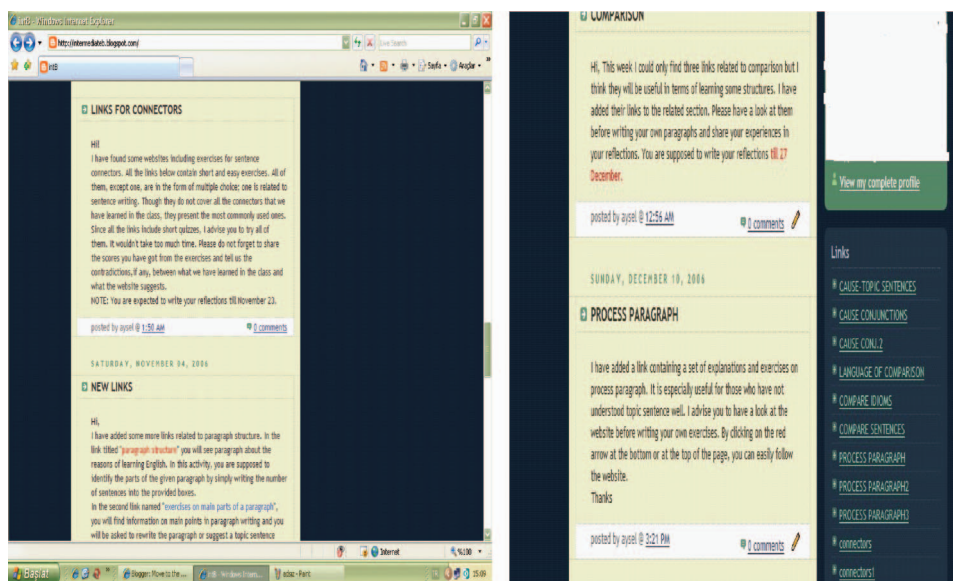


Figure 3. Tutor blogs for extra studying opportunities.

Table 1. Instructional process for control and experimental groups.

Instructional hours	Control group	Experimental group
1	The target paragraph type was introduced and two model paragraphs were examined in the classroom.	Activities replicated those for the control group students. By means of blog use, they were also directed to the websites where they could see some more model paragraphs.
2	Vocabulary and the language structure necessary for the target type were studied and the students were provided with exercises related to the topic.	The same activities were repeated but additionally tutor blogs were used to direct the students to the language teaching websites and they were provided with more language input.
Subsequent hours/ the stages of writing process	The students learnt how to write a paragraph in the target type through teacher modeling, and they were assigned to choose a topic to write about.	The same route was followed for the experimental students. Then, they were assigned to choose a topic to write about in the taught paragraph type.
Prewriting stage	The students did the prewriting activities during class time.	The students engaged in prewriting activities during class time.
Drafting stage	The students wrote the first drafts of the assignments as homework and brought them to the next class to share with the teacher and the peers.	The students published their drafts in their blogs. During the drafting process, they were able to communicate with the teacher and their peers by means of blogging.

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Instructional hours	Control group	Experimental group
Feedback stage	The students received feedback on their first drafts only from their classmates and the course instructor.	The students received feedback from a larger audience including their family members and peers studying at different universities, in addition to their classmates and course instructor.
Revising and editing stages	The students received homework assignments involving the revising and editing of drafts.	The students were able to interact with the instructor and the peers as their drafts were easily accessible through their blog pages.
Publishing stage	The students produced final versions of their paragraphs. They did not publish their works.	The students published the final version of their paragraphs through the blog software.
Follow-up	The students were required to write a reflection evaluating their learning process, which they shared with their friends in the classroom.	The students published their reflections on their blog pages.

Data analysis

In the analysis of data elicited through writing performance tasks as pre- and post-test, a paired sample *t*-test was utilized to determine if there was a difference from pre-test to post-test in each group separately. Finding out the post-test means for each group would give a clearer idea about the difference between the control group and the experimental group. The same data were analyzed through the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to see whether the difference between these groups resulted from the treatment or from the pre-existing differences. Hatch and Lazarton (1991) argue that ANCOVA makes it possible:

to control for some variable – Perhaps a pre-test score- so that the measurement of dependent variable is adjusted taking into account this initial differences among the subjects. (p. 387)

Findings and discussions

The effect of blog use on writing performance

Through the analysis of paired sample *t*-test, it was observed that there was a difference between the writing performance of pre- and post-test scores in the control and experimental groups.

As seen in Table 2, the control group increased their test scores from a pre-test score mean 47.17 to a post-test score mean 60.09. In the experimental group, an increase from a pre-test score mean 44.15 to a post-test score mean 72.29 was observed. These findings indicated that both in-class process writing instruction and blog integrated writing instruction had positively affected students' writing performance.

Table 2. Paired sample *t*-test results for writing performance scores in each group.

Groups	<i>n</i>	Pre-test		Post-test		<i>t</i>
		M	SD	M	SD	
Control	23	47.17	8.92	60.09	7.25	−6.321
Experimental	27	44.15	12.02	72.29	12.29	−16.197

A subsequent ANCOVA, which presents source of change in the post-test results, was applied to analyze this difference in post-test writing performance scores between the control and experimental groups, and to identify the source of the difference with the pre-test writing performance scores as a covariate. Table 3 shows the results of ANCOVA.

As can be seen in Table 3, both the pre-test results and the treatment (blog use) had an effect on post-test results. After taking the pre-test results under control through covariance analysis, it was determined that the treatment had a statistically significant impact on the post-test results ($F(1.47) = 33.73, p < 0.05$). As stated in Table 2, the experimental group had a higher post-test mean score ($M = 72.29$) than that of the control group ($M = 60.09$). These findings revealed that blog integrated writing instruction was more effective than in-class writing instruction in that students in the experimental group improved their writing performance significantly more than those in the control group.

Another ANCOVA was employed to analyze the difference of the post-test scores on five writing components between the control and experimental groups. Analyzing the difference of the post-test score on these five writing components with the pre-test scores as covariate was to give an idea about the influence of blogs on writing performance in detail. The findings revealed that blog integrated writing instruction had a particular impact on the components of content and organization. Tables 4 and 5 show the difference between the groups in terms of these two components.

The relation of this finding with blogging can be explained by referring to the fact that blogs had the potential to arouse a sense of audience in the students (Kitzmann, 2003; Leverett, 2006; Wu, 2005). As required by the research design, the experimental group shared their writings on the Internet with their peers and the instructor. Since there was no time restriction depending on blog use, peers could examine the drafts at any time and place, and were able to leave comments on their friends' writings. The paragraphs were generally read by six or eight different students, which could not be realized in a classroom setting. What is more, some of

Table 3. ANCOVA results for writing performance scores.

Source	SS	df	MS	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Corrected model	3,655.94	2	1827.97	26.55	0.001
Intercept	3,944.20	1	3944.20	57.29	0.001
Pre-test	1,849.17	1	1849.17	26.86	0.001
Group	2,322.31	1	2322.31	33.73	0.001
Error	3,236.06	47	68.852		
Total	228,670.00	50			
Corrected total	6,892.00	49			

the students in the experimental group had the chance to address the real audiences. Sometimes family members left comments on their writings and sometimes friends studying at different universities read their paragraphs as illustrated in Figure 4. All these opportunities provided by means of blogging most probably resulted in much more care about the content and organization of their writing.

With regard to vocabulary, language use and mechanics as other components of writing, no statistically significant difference was observed. Both groups recorded an increase from pre-test to post-test. One possible explanation of this result could

Table 4. ANCOVA results for writing performance scores: content.

Source	SS	df	MS	<i>F</i>	Sig.	Descriptive statistics		
						Groups	<i>X</i>	SD
Pre-test	17.496	1	17.496	2.058	0.158			
Group	180.672	1	180.672	21.248	0.000	Experimental	22.14	3.28
Error	399.650	47	8.503			control	18.52	2.48
Total	21,552.000	50						

Table 5. ANCOVA results for writing performance scores: organization.

Source	SS	df	MS	<i>F</i>	Sig.	Descriptive statistics		
						Groups	<i>X</i>	SD
Pre-test	47.655	1	47.655	7.510	0.009			
Groups	83.527	1	83.527	13.164	0.001	Experimental	14.77	3.20
Error	298.229	47	6.345			control	12.34	1.89
Total	9749.000	50						

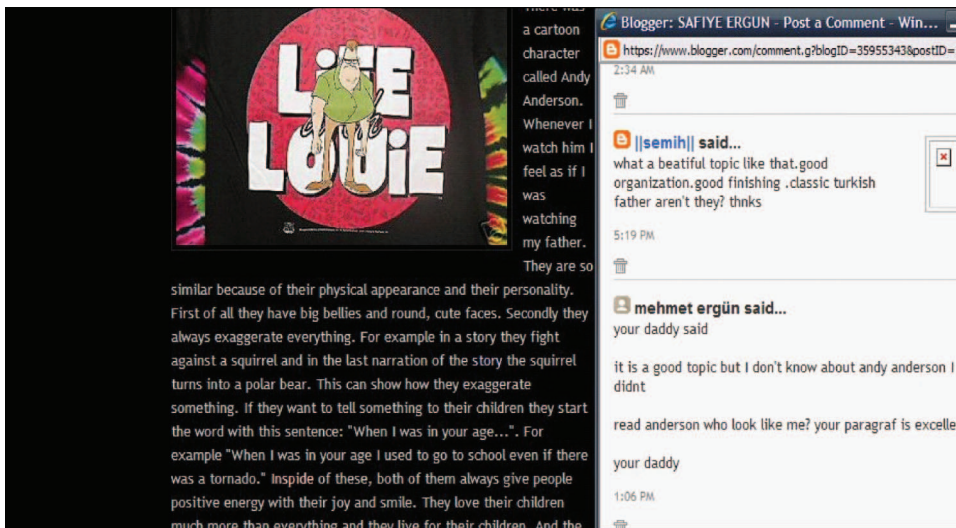


Figure 4. Real audience feedback through blog software. Reproduced with the permission of the blog writers.

relate to the fact that all the participant students received similar instruction on basic components of writing such as mechanics, vocabulary, language use, content, organization, and the types of paragraphs. While they did not differ very much especially in mechanics, language use, or vocabulary, they showed differences in content and organization of their writing.

Conclusion

The findings of the study demonstrated that the students using blog software in their writing courses outperformed those who received only in-class writing instruction in such specific areas of writing as content and organization. Such a finding may empirically support the theoretical assumption that blogging enhances writing performance (Campbell, 2003; Kennedy, 2003).

The results of the present study suggest that writing teachers might make use of blogs to support writing instruction. Incorporating such a web tool may be especially useful for those settings in which course duration is limited as in the case of this research setting. Through integrating blogs into the class, the teacher can extend the instruction beyond the school walls as blogs enable teachers and students to be together at any time and place. The finding that those students using blogs improved the content of their writing more than those who did not strongly suggests that blogs should be utilized in all settings where students have no audience other than the teacher.

Limitations of the study and prospects for further research

The method of sampling and content of treatment have implications about the need for further research:

- Though the analysis indicated superiority of the experimental group over the control group in terms of writing performance in content and organization, the difference may have resulted from the language and writing input provided to the experimental students. Because of the limited course duration for the control group, the language input in the writing course was restricted in amount. Similarly, sample paragraphs and relevant exercises were fewer than those used for the experimental students. The experimental group had the same limited course hours but theirs was extended by means of blogging. They could access the web materials including sample paragraphs and interactive exercises in the tutor blog. So, the increased chances experimental students had to receive necessary input may have caused the difference between experimental and control groups in post-test results. Yet, the point is that these chances were created through blog use. However, a further study might explore the effect of blog use by providing the same amount of material for both groups.
- Overall, it should be borne in mind that blog use by students might have contributed to their motivation since blog use as an appealing technological tool for these learners may have added to their incentives in taking up writing beyond the class walls.
- As the present study suggests, the use of blogs to support foreign language learning proves to be a useful tool to enhance learners' writing skills. While this

seems to be valid, more research studies are necessary to further investigate how different types of blogging, tutor blog, learner blog, and class or group blogs can affect writing skills and also all other language skills.

- Furthermore, such learner differences as age, gender, computer literacy, and access to computers at school and home merit further study in order to better investigate the effect of blog use on learners' language skills.
- Another issue that needs further study concerns how learners' attitudes toward paper-based homework and computer-based homework affect their writing skills. In a further study, a group of learners could be assigned paper-based homework while another group could be required to use blogs for their writing in order to engage in a comparison and contrast study regarding the use of computers versus the use of paper.

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Note

1. However, the variable "gender" was not included in data analysis because any discussion of the variable of students' gender would not make any contribution to the overall effect of blog use on students' writing skill.

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