Blogs As An Effective Tool to Enhance Writing Skills in EFL Classes: EFL Learners' perceptions

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Abstract: One of the new approaches of teaching and learning English is by integrating technology in the classroom environment. Blogging is a tool that can function as a facilitator in the whole language learning process by providing students with the environment that encourages them to learn. The present paper focuses on the blogs as an effective media to improve learners' language skills, notably writing. Data was obtained from a group of twenty students at the English Department through conducting a semi-structured interview. The participants were asked about their perceptions and the benefits of using blogs in EFL class, particularly in promoting learners' writing skills. Findings suggested that the participants have positive perceptions and attitude in using blogs to enhance their writing They also perceived the benefits of blogs in increasing interest and motivation to use English because of an interaction with, and feedback from classmates and teachers. This contributed to the development of collaborative learning environment and this was conducive in promoting writing skills**.**

Keywords: Blogs; English as foreign language; writing skills; learners'perceptions

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the advance of the internet, as the core of technology, the educators are encouraged to start thinking of the potential uses, benefits and challenges for teaching and learning. In fact, they are trying to find innovative and effective ways to incorporate the modern information and communication technology (ICT) in their teaching. An active use of this trend can make learning easier for students and be a useful instrument for achieving educational goals. Many authors highlight the importance of implementing ICT in EFL learning.

According to Cutter (2015), technology enables students to foster their success in the English language. Learners become more motivated when they work on computers and use modern devices than they are working with textbooks (Cutter, 2015). On the other hand, Mujtaba (2013) points out that the use of technology in English teaching and learning can offer an extensive variety of multimedia content and other channels of communication between learners. The same author also explains that technology has helped to change teacher-centered approaches towards learner-centered ones. Students have become more active learners by increasing their autonomy.

It is noteworthy, that learners' autonomy is a central issue in language teaching, and Arno (2012) argues that technology is a best ally to help EFL teachers to achieve this. He says 'technology provides access to authentic text, tools for their analysis, and online communication resources. It has also become a powerful tool to facilitate students' immersion in the discourse community' (Arno, 2012, p.92).

Other authors claim that with the help of ICT, students can be active, motivated and involved in language learning process. They can find new information that cannot be found in traditional tasks and it also help to develop their language creativity (Pourhosein, Banou and Zabihniaemran 2015).On the other hand, Genc (2009) writes: 'many researchers in EFL teaching profession pinpoints that good motivation have a positive effect on

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foreign language learning. Students can see the real world in the classroom, and they can be motivated easily' (p.136).

Thus, internet technology allows diverse learning, drives motivation, promotes learner autonomy and independence, encourages innovation and creativity, establishes interaction, boosts communication and fosters cooperative learning. In other words, it provides teachers with a variety of resources to use in their lessons, and offers students a positive environment that encourages them to learn.

In the hope to prove the importance of using the internet as a learning tool, scholars worldwide are conducting many studies. Among these studies, the incorporation of blogs technology in EFL classes to improve learners' language skills, notably writing. This is the aim of the present paper. However, before presenting a review of the studies on the advantages of blogs within the context of EFL process and their efficacy in promoting students' writing skills in particular, the term blog and some related concepts must be defined.

2. What is a blog?

Blogs are online personal journals that are regularly updated. Campbell (2003) defines weblog as; 'An online journal that an individual can continuously update with his/her own words, ideas and thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so'. Technically, it is a type of website usually arranged in chronological order from the most recent "post" at the top of the main page to older entries toward the bottom. "Blog"—a blending of the words web and log, which is "a web page that contains a running log of commentaries, multimedia, and hyperlinks" (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008). Armstrong and Retterer (2008) explains that Blogging software began to appear designed to enable individuals to publish their own weblogs quickly and easily and without the previous HTML coding requirements. With the advent of these applications, the weblog, unlike a webpage, required little technological sophistication and was therefore accessible to many webpage, required little technological

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sophistication and was therefore accessible to many different types of audiences (Blood, 2002) .

According to Wikipedia, the expression weblog was first used by Jorn Barger in 1997 in his blog. In his words: A weblog (sometimes called a blog or a newspaper or a filter) is a webpage where a weblogger (sometimes called a blogger, or a pre-surfer) "logs" all the other webpages he finds interesting. The format is normally to add the newest entry at the top of the page, so that repeat visitors can catch up by simply reading down the page until they reach a link they saw on their last visit.

In August of 1999 the release of Blogger, a free blog hosting service, fostered the rapid growth of blog sites (Blood, 2000). Later, blog genre extended into various professional realms especially journalism and business. The cover story of the first issue of Fortune magazine in 2005 introduces "10 tech trends to watch in 2005", and blog ranks the first one. "According to blog search-engine and measurement firm Technorati", Fortune reports, "23,000 new weblogs are created every day – or about one every three seconds" (Blood, 2000, p.34).

Blogs give opportunity to their users to be in contact with each other in relationships where they can learn, share ideas, make friends with and even do business with people who have similar interests from around the world.

3. Blogs in education

The introduction of new technologies such as blogs has encouraged EFL teachers to start thinking of the potential uses, benefits and challenges for teaching and learning in the EFL language classroom. General discussion around blogging suggests blogging can be good for reasons of self-expression, communication, sharing of ideas and reflection. All these reasons seemed particularly valid and exciting reasons to incorporate blogging into the EFL classroom to improve FL writing skills. Muehleisen (1997) adds that learners become interested with the internet because 'students see the Internet as trendy and want to be a part of it'. Students are

increasingly using blogs and a lot of support for blogs has been generated. Zhang (2009) affirms that; "Blogs have formidable potentials as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing classes" (2009: 66).

Blogs offer a collaborative environment whereby students can read each other's posts and in some blogs, they have a facility to comment on each other's work. Therefore, students are essentially writing for an audience, which is said to improve writing capacity (Zhang, 2009).These characteristics of blogging provided the researcher with ideas as to the usefulness of blogs in teaching writing. Indeed, blogs can motivate language learners not just to connect to the internet to view pictures or watch videos, but also to write and share ideas and opinions—something that is usually dreaded by students in language classes. Before discussing how blogs can enhance students' writing skills in the empirical study, it is interesting to provide insight into some of the advantages of their use.

4. Advantages of using blogs in EFL class writing

In educational contexts, blogs are valuable platforms for constructivist learning: pupils co-construct their knowledge through interaction with others, with benefits being evident at an academic and social level (Albaugh, 2013; Noel, 2015). Here, learners are authors as well as audience, users and creators, not simply consumers of technology. Blogs can also be used as an organisational tool and an environmental option as "there's a good chance the class can go paperless as students simply post their work online for peer and teacher response." (Richardson, 2006, p. 23). This trend permits the students to extend their learning beyond the classroom walls.

Teachers also need to consider that blogging can facilitate the teaching of new literacies that pupils will need to master in the information society (Richardson, 2006). As student spend more and more time online, for Richardson (2006), it is crucial to teach them the skills to analyse and manage information, how to assess trustworthy sources, how to be a critical reader and viewer, and how to organise and summarise information. To make their learning more enjoyable and easier to engage and reach many

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more readers, the students can integrate in their postings videos, podcasts, images and hyperlinks, making it easier to engage and reach many more pupils and a greater diversity of learning styles or the differences in individuals' learning. Classroom blogging can also be differentiated to meet learners'needs (Sawmiller, 2010).

Moreover, Johnson (2004) points out that from any computer connected to the Internet, teachers can create, edit, or delete their teaching hand-outs such as notes, homework assignment, and review materials. All these teacher's messages will be organized in a reversed chronological order with the latest postings on the top. Blogs can promote exploration of English websites (Campbell, 2004). Since it is quite simple for teachers to put English materials on line with links to their source websites, students have more chances to read related articles.

If students do not have their own personal websites, an easy-to-use blog is a good start for them to interact with users of the cyberspace community. As Campbell (2004) emphasizes that simple customization of templates can help students build "a sense of ownership and unique online identity". Most students will write more carefully if they know that they are going to publish their articles online for authentic readers who may comment on their postings. The application of the blogs boosts certainly the process of EFL learning. Teachers can easily use the blog to organize a collaborative learning environment in which students can peer edit others' postings (Dieu, 2004; Mitchell, 2003). Learners should be encouraged to comment their partner's postings, which can also be shared by other classmates.

In an article describing how blogs are integrated with educational activity as resources both for students and teachers, Oravec (2002) claimed that blog development can "empower students to become more analytical and critical" (p.618). Although she did not present any statistical data to prove that students using blogs would become more analytical and critical, I believe that students who are aware that their classmates will read their postings and comments will be more careful before they post them.

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Psychologically speaking, the use of blogs in the classroom can help students working in a safety and comfortable environment. For example, more introverted learners, who are shy and vulnerable to the social pressures of adolescence (Sawmiller, 2010) and feel more uncomfortable engaging in face-to-face discussions in classroom settings (Albaugh, 2013; Richardson, 2006; Sidek & Yunus, 2012), blogging is a tool with great potential. For such learners, blogging and commenting on blogs support them by allowing their voices to be heard, socially co-constructing meaning in a nonthreatening and responsive environment (Albaugh, 2013; Sidek & Yunus, 2012).

Others still lack the confidence to interact orally or in written form with their peers, and avoid becoming embarrassed and frustrated in front of more proficient peers. Given time and the possibility of practising and looking for additional material (Meinecke et al., 2013), sometimes supported by more proficient language learners, an appropriate asynchronous tool such as a blog can allow these learners to work in a safer environment, at their own pace and make relevant progress, as Pop & Gomez Martinez (2003) indicate. The teacher may even use blog entries as a springboard for classroom discussions which, in turn, can also improve the overall quality of the blog entries (Albaugh, 2013). Further, Pinkman (2005) calls our attention to the fact that blogs give learners the feeling of control and ownership, not easily attained in a face-to-face setting.

5. Significance of study:

The present research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of blogs to enhance writing skills in EFL Algerian context. There are many reasons why this study is significant. First, the research contributes to the related literatures in terms of the importance of using blogs in EFL tertiary education to improve students' writing skills. Second, the study helps teachers and learners to depart from traditional pedagogical methods to adopt a digital innovation as a method conducive to develop learners' language skills, notably writing. Third, this study provide practical

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recommendations for teachers, learners, curriculum designers and decision-makers in education.

Taking into consideration the significance of this research study, some questions stand out:

1-How do EFL learners at the faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts respond to the use of a blog as a tool to improve their writing?

2-To what extent blogs are used in the classroom?

3-What are the benefits of incorporating blogs to enhance writing skills?

4-What are the constraints that hold back students' successful blogging and comments?

6. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to allow for a detailed rationale regarding the research approach and methodology used in the study, and to present the data analysis that was done in order to investigate whether the blog can be seen as an effective tool to improve writing in the EFL classroom. The sample group consists of 20 students in the English Department at Djillali Liabess University. All the participants studied English as a foreign language. The individuals are asked to write on topics of their choice before and after the use of blogs to check their writings with and without the use of blogging. The study was conducted in two stages with a (1) pre-test and (2) post-test. To draw a valid and useful comparison, the participants were asked to write their topics before and after utilizing blogs to examine how blogging can affect their writing skills in terms of writing ideas, style, mechanics of writing, socializing, discussion and other writing practices. In the pre-test, the participants used the traditional pen-and-paper method, while in the post-test; they used blogs to write their topics. Next, the pre-test and post-test of individual and group writing results were compared, analyzed, and assessed to examine the effect of blogging on the participants' writing performance. Moreover, the participants were interviewed to explore their perceptions concerning the

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benefits of using blogs in the classroom, to what degree they are using blogs, and what might be some of the factors that could prevent them from using blogs as a pedagogical tool.

7. Findings of the study
-The students' perceptions about using blogs in general

All students in this study were familiar with the Internet. However, some of them were not familiar with blogs. 20% of them had their own blogs and had been actively using blogs for personal purposes, while 80% of them heard about blogs before but had no knowledge about them. Since they had to participate in blogging, they were encouraged to learn from their teacher and their friends how to build their own blogs.

In all, 60% of students said that it was easy to create their blogs, while the others said it was hard for them to create a blog, but almost all managed to complete their task and found that writing on blogs was interesting and fun.

-The students' perceptions about using blogs as an effective tool for writing

95% of the students felt that using blogs in the class as a writing tool was a good idea. The others preferred the traditional method and found the use blogs difficult to their tasks.

-The students' perceptions about the benefits of using blogs

91% of the students benefited a lot from this activity. They indicated that when using blogs they were able to write better because they were more aware of the need to check grammar before posting 65%, and when writing papers, some of them did not carefully check their grammar 25%. Most probably, they realised that when writing online, the Web site is open for everyone to read, and they tried their best to write using correct grammar and sentence structure. They indicated that when writing blogs, they could write effectively 97% and be creative though their English language skills were limited 82%. On their blogs, some students inserted links related to the discussion topic for readers who wanted to read further on the subject. The students' intention of putting in links on the blogs was

for the group members to read and discuss the ideas from the links and to use the information to develop their group project work.

-The students' handicaps in using the blog

Some students who are not familiar with technology experienced difficulty in commenting and accepting the comments due to their lack of confidence and lack of trust. Others lacked confidence when writing comments initially and therefore they need to be instructed on how to give good feedback and how to support their peers. The learners need to understand how to write a good post as well as how to comment on other people's work and accept the comments made on their posts.

8.Conclusion

The current work presented how blogs can contribute in developing the writing skills of tertiary learners. The data revealed that students had a positive perception on the implementation of the blogs in the course to enhance their writing skills. It was proved also that the use of this new trend improved the quality of writing essays as compared to traditional mode of writing. Moreover, learners found the use of blogs in their class motivational in that they offered new opportunities for more practice and better educational outcomes. In fact, the blog created an innovative, more engaging and more authentic experience for the students that enable them to respond positively and enjoy using it. The study showed that writing by using blogs led to a collaborative learning environment that allowed students to learn through exposure to other students' opinions, ideas and perspectives. Thus, writing by incorporating peer review, self-editing and revising undoubtedly impacted on the students writing quality.

It is noteworthy to mention that despite the fact that blogging offers some positive aspects as a tool for writing, there are constraints in its use. For example, there are students who are not familiar with technology may

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find themselves frustrated with this new process and this could lead to their failure in using blogs. Henceforth, a well-organized instructional design with an understanding of the benefits and challenges of blogging in mind can make it an effective tool for English classes.

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