The Role of Weblogs in Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge and Writing Ability

Parisa Ghaderi[* 1], Fatemeh Behjat[2], Mohammad Rostampour[3]

1, 2, 3. Department of English, Abadeh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Abadeh, Iran

*Corresponding author: Parisaghaderi93@yahoo.com

Abstract

Nowadays Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is becoming not only enormously popular but also increasingly important in our lives and education system. Generally, learners are usually eager to work on computers or with various kinds of modern technology. This research was carried out to find out whether using weblogs is effective in Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary and writing skills. To do so, two samples of learners were selected through an OPT test as the control and experimental groups, and a pretest of vocabulary was administrated. Then, the traditional methods of teaching vocabulary and writing were used for the control group, and weblogs were used for the experimental group. After three months of instruction, another test of vocabulary and writing was given as the posttest to the students of both groups to assess their achievement. The results of the analysis of ANCOVA showed that weblogs were more effective than the traditional ways of teaching vocabulary and writing.

*Keywords***:** vocabulary, weblog, writing skill

Introduction

A blog can be set up and maintained by a teacher to be used by her/his students. The teacher usually manages the content and customizes the settings. A weblog (or blog) is a web-based space for writing where all the writing and editing of information is managed through a web browser, which is immediately and publicly available on the Internet (Godwin-Jones 2003). There are a range of potential applications of blogging technology in education and training. It can be used for learner and teacher communication, delivery of learning materials, mentoring learners, collaboration and professional development for teachers, and knowledge management. As blogs have become more and more commonplace, educators in recent years have noticed the potential of blogs for teaching and learning. Yet, using blogs in education and particularly in language learning is still new, and there have not been many formal studies done on this topic. For many years, weblogs or simply blogs have been considered as an online free space for computer users to implement in different fields. For language learning, all four language skills, including writing, speaking, listening and reading, can be involved by implementing the weblog. Beside these features, it is a place for pronunciation check through uploading different software which can be used online. It is also a place for vocabulary building (Du & Wagner, 2005).

Studies that have been published include research on blogging's effect on learner autonomy, increasing writing fluency, as a place for completing writing assignments (Ward, 2004; Wu, 2005), posting class materials (Johnson, 2004), and as a way to open communication with bloggers outside the classroom (Pinkman, 2005). However, it is clear that much language classroom blogging is occurring without being reported in English language learning literature. This study aims at investigating the use of weblogs in teaching vocabulary and writing skill to intermediate learners.

As Hourigan and Murray (2010) argue, "blogs can successfully promote self-expression in a place where the L2 learner/blogger is developing deeply personalized content" (p. 210), which in turn "encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of students" (Godwin-Jones, 2006, p. 13). Weblogs offer learners the possibility of creating an online individual identity, which triggers a sense of agency and autonomy. As Campbell

(2003) suggests in his study, class blogs can also facilitate the language learning which is based on project. In this way, they can edit each other's posts and give feedback to each other as well, which is beneficial for developing critical writing skill (Soares, 2008). According to Soares (2008), blogging in a language class enables the learners to interact with other learners around the globe; therefore, they can experience real communication.

A study was conducted by Zare-ee, Shekarey and FathiVajargah (2009) among the Iranian undergraduate and graduate students in Iran on the use of technology in education. In their study, students' views on the application of blogs in teaching-learning processes and their actual use of blogs were investigated. The participants' familiarity with blogs which were written in English and Persian was studied, and their views about the usefulness of blogs as an instructional tool in higher education were declared. The finding of the study showed that blogs were actually used less than it is believed they should be. It was one of the studies done in Iran related to the use of blogs in education at university level. The study did not investigate the student's writing performance and was aimed to view the students' perceptions about blog in teaching-learning process.

Another empirical study on weblogs was administered by Simsek (2009) among 70 undergraduate students at Marmara University in Turkey. It investigated the impact of weblog integrated instruction on the writing performance of the students, and their perceptions of using weblogs in their courses. The findings implied that students' writing performance improved by weblog-integrated writing. In addition, students held a favorable perception about weblog employment.

Similarly, Fageeh (2011) investigated the effect of blogging on writing proficiency and attitude among undergraduate students of English Department at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The weblog was perceived as a tool used for developing their English in terms of their attitudes toward writing and their writing proficiency by the students. They also regarded weblog as a tool that provides them with the freedom and opportunity for self-expressing in English, maintaining an interactive relation with real-time readers, writing for global as well as local audiences,

and creating interactive and active social exchanges in blogs. Generally, the attitude of students toward the employment of weblogs was positive. However, few ESL studies in the context of EFL concentrate on Iranian postgraduate writing performance by comparing pen-and-paper and blogging as writing tools. The present study aimed to address the following questions:

1. Does using weblogs help Iranian EFL intermediate female students improve their vocabulary knowledge?
2. Does using blogs lead to an improved performance in the writing skill of Iranian EFL female students at the intermediate level?
3. What are the Iranian students' attitudes toward the use of blogs in vocabulary learning and writing ability?

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study were 60 intermediate female students studying at Ava Language Institute in Shahrekord, Iran. All of the participants were native speakers of Persian and experienced learning English language from the beginning to intermediate in the same institute. In addition, they studied English in their schools. Their age range was between 18 and 22.

Instrumentations

The instruments in this study were a researcher-made vocabulary test (an achievement test) piloted by the teacher before conducting the actual study. It included 40 vocabulary items and a composition topic for writing test. The validity of the test was confirmed by two experienced teachers, and its reliability was estimated using Cronbach's alpha.

Another instrument used in the present study was a written survey whose validity was confirmed by some experts. In order to measure the students' attitudes toward positive and negative features of weblogs, a list of 11 items in the form a survey was given to the experimental group in the last session of the term.

Procedure

Through an OPT test, 60 learners who were homogeneous in terms af language proficiency were selected. After the pretest test, the students randomly were divided into two groups of experimental and control. The control group included 30 participants who were randomly selected and received traditional teaching methods on vocabulary learning and writing skill. The experimental group, comprising 30 participants, enjoyed blogging as the treatment. In both groups, a vocabulary test which was based on their textbook words and a topic for paragraph writing was given as the pre-test. After this, the students in the control group were taught new vocabularies and writing skill through traditional approaches like translation into and from the target language and vocabulary memorization. However, in the experimental group, after each session, the students referred to the teacher's weblog and found new words along with their definitions, synonyms, antonyms, pronunciations, new words in sentences, and some exercises on the completion of sentences with the new words. For writing, the teacher gave instruction through her weblog, and then, the students received a topic from their teacher; they were to write a paragraph on it. Additionally, all the students sent comments on each other's writings and corrected each other's mistakes.

The results of both tests were analyzed using the SPSS program. First, the data of both groups' pretests were analyzed separately in order to find the mean and standard deviation of vocabulary and writing scores. The same procedure was followed with the scores of the post test of each group. Independent sample t-tests were employed to see if there were significant differences in vocabulary acquisition and writing performance of the control and experimental groups. The hypothesis was tested at a 0.5 level of significance. To analyze the questionnaire, the scores were generated by a 5 point Likert scale, and the results were analyzed through descriptive statistics.

Results

To answer the first research question addressing the effectiveness of blogs on the participants' vocabulary learning, an ANCOVA were run

between the participants' scores of the experimental and control groups on the pretest and posttests. The descriptive statistics of the pre-test scores are presented in Table 1

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Performance on the Vocabulary pretest

Group Statistics				
Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest of experimental group	30	24.8000	1.86437	.34039
Pretest of Control group	30	24.9333	2.37709	.43400
Posttest of experimental group	30	33.1333	1.69651	.30974
Posttest of control	30	25.6000	2.37225	.43311

As shown in Table 1, the mean of the control group in the pretest was higher than the experimental group (24.9 and 24.8 respectively) and the standard deviation of two groups were also different (4.2 and 3.6). But, in the posttest, the experimental group improved to a great extent. After collecting the data, an ANCOVA was performed using SPSS to analyze the possible differences between the two groups' vocabulary posttest scores. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
ANCOVA Results for Participants' Performance on the Writing Skill Pretest

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable:VAR00002					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	870.854[a]	2	435.42	109.29	.000
Intercept	217.104	1	217.10	54.49	.000
VAR00001	19.587	1	19.58	4.91	.031
Group	858.619	1	858.61	215.52	.000
Error	227.080	57	3.98		
Total	52842.000	60			
Corrected Total	1097.933	59			

a. R Squared = .793 (Adjusted R Squared = .786)

As indicated in Table 4, it can be argued there is a significant difference between the two groups. As the mean score of the experimental group was significantly higher, it can be stated that the group who were instructed through blog performed better in the vocabulary test. This finding supports the positive effectiveness of using weblog in teaching vocabulary items.

The Second Research Questions

In order to answer the second research question addressing the effectiveness of blogs on participants' writing skill, another ANCOVA was run between the participants' scores of the pretest and posttest in both experimental and control groups. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics for the participants' performance on the vocabulary and posttest

Group Statistics				
Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest of Experimental group	30	16.6333	1.71169	.31251
Pretest of Control group	30	15.8333	1.41624	.25857
Posttest of Experimental group	30	10.3000	1.20773	.22050
Posttest of Control group	30	14.7333	1.14269	.20863

As illustrated in Table 3, the means of the experimental and control groups in the pretest were nearly same. But, in the posttest, the mean of the experimental group decreased significantly in the posttest. ANCOVA was performed using SPSS to analyze the possible difference between the two groups' writing scores. The results are showed in Table 4.

Table 4
ANCOVA Results for Participants' Performance on the Writing Skill Pretest and posttest

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable:VAR00002					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	296.396[a]	2	148.198	107.488	.000
Intercept	108.871	1	108.871	78.965	.000
VAR00001	1.579	1	1.579	1.145	.289
Group	265.913	1	265.913	192.867	.000
Error	78.588	57	1.379		
Total	9775.000	60			
Corrected Total	374.983	59			

a.   R Squared = .790 (Adjusted R Squared = .783)

Based on the results in Table 4, it can be argued there is a significant difference between the groups. In fact, the group who were instructed through the weblogs have significantly performed better than the group instructed through traditional methods. These results support the positive effectiveness of using weblog in teaching writing.

The Third Research Questions
Questionnaire analysis
        Regarding the third research question, the participants were asked to express their attitude toward weblogs implementation, through completing a questionnaire on the pones and cons of using technology in general and weblog in particular. To describe and summarize the collected data, the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18 was put into use. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Questionnaire Items with the Related Frequencies and percentage

ITEMS	SD %	D %	ND NA%	A%	SA%	M	SD
I enjoy learning through weblog.1.	2.5	0.0	17.5	32.5	47.5	4.22	0.91
2. Using technology in class takes up too much time.	52.5	27.5	15.0	2.5	2.5	1.75	0.98
3. I learn a lot through weblog	0.0	5.0	10.0	52.5	32.5	4.12	0.79
4. Blogging doesn't changes my attitude towards writing in English.	72.5	17.5	10.0	0.0	0.0	1.37	0.66
5. I would be a better learner if I knew how to use technology properly.	2.5	0.0	22.5	20.0	55.0	4.25	0.98
6. Using weblog helps me to improve my English writing.	0.0	0.0	5.5	50.0	45.0	4.40	0.59
7. The use of weblog in classroom is not necessary.	62.0	25.5	10.0	0.0	0.0	1.45	0.67
8. The disadvantages of using blog is more than its advantages	40.0	37.5	17.5	0.0	5.0	1.92	1.02
9. Computer application in language classes increases my motivation.	0.0	0.0	27.5	32.5	40.0	4.12	0.82
10. by getting help and correction from other classmates, I learned to make correct structures.	0.0	2.5	15.0	37.5	45.0	4.25	0.80
11. I will use blog in learning English	2.5	0.0	5.0	42.5	50.0	4.37	0.80

SD: Strongly disagree   **D**: Disagree   **ND NA**: Neither disagree nor agree
A: Agree   **SA**: Strongly agree   **M**: mean   **SD**: standard deviation

It can be seen from the data in Table 9 that the majority of the students (%80) enjoyed using weblogs. Not only did they not find technology implementation a time-consuming process, they found it useful for learning new materials (Items 2 and 3). Item 4 indicates that most students (%90) changed their attitude towards writing in English. A great number of participants (%75) agreed that if they knew how to use technology appropriately, they wouldl be better learners. Item 6 illustrates that, writing

skill can be improved through weblogs. In response to Item Seven,%75 of students found it essential to have technology or weblogs in their classrooms. Items 9 and 10 maintained that when using technology, students are more motivated in class activities, getting help and correction from other classmates. At last, Item 11 indicates that the majority of students (%92) preferred to use weblogs in learning English.

Some items such as Item 1 (I enjoy using weblogs), elicited students' attitudes toward positive aspects of weblog whereas other items perceived students' attitude toward negative features including Item 2 (using technology in class takes up too much time) Items 1,3,5,6,9,10, and 11 indicated positive features while Items 2,4,7 and 8 suggested negative features. The descriptive statistics of positive and negative features are shown in Table 10.

Table 6
EFL learners' Attitudes toward Positive and Negative Features of Weblog

Features	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Sd
Positive	1.1	1.1	14.6	38.2	45.0	4.25	0.82
Negative	57.5	26.9	13.1	0.6	1.9	1.62	0.87

As can be seen in Table 6, the majority of students (%83.2) *agreed or strongly agreed* with positive aspects of weblogs in the classroom.

Discussion

The present study attempted to investigate the effect of blogs on vocabulary learning and writing skill of intermediate EFL students. It also explored Iranians' attitudes toward using weblogs in EFL classes. To this end, three research questions were formulated.

The first two research questions sought to investigate the effectiveness of weblog on EFL learners' vocabulary learning and writing skill. The results of the independent sample t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the learners' performance in the experimental and control groups. In other words, weblogs had a positive effect on the students' vocabulary learning and writing. The results for the first and second research questions were consistent with the following studies. These

results support Campbell (2003) who stated that through the learner blog, the students can update their posts constantly with their own words and thoughts. This finding is also consistent with Simsek (2009) who studied the impacts of weblog on the writing performance of the students and their perceptions of the using weblog in their course. The findings represented that students' writing performance improved by using weblogs in writing. In addition, they had a positive view regarding to using weblog.

Among the recent studies, Fageeh (2011) investigated the effect using blogs on writing skill and their perception among undergraduate students of English Department in King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The weblog was perceived as a tool used for developing their English in terms of their attitudes toward writing and their writing proficiency by the students. In addition, the results showed outperformance of the experimental group.

Contrary to the findings of the present study, Zare-ee, Shekarey and Fathi Vajargah (2009), in their survey regarding the students' views toward using blogs in teaching, found that students had negative attitudes toward using weblog. However, the results of this study revealed that generally students had a very positive attitude toward technology implementation. As presented in the results, they "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with positive features of technology in language learning (Items 1,3,5,6,9,10 and11), including enjoyment, teaching new things, writing improvement, improving language skills, motivation, and the future plans to use technology, while they "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" with negative aspects of technology (Items 2, 4,7and 8), including being time-consuming, changing attitude, unessential, and technology disadvantages.

The present study was designed to determine the effect of weblog instruction on vocabulary learning and writing skill in the context of Iran. The results of this provided support for the notion that using weblogs can influence students' vocabulary learning. This study has shown that the application of technology in EFL classes can result in course satisfaction. In addition, learning with weblogs also showed positive activity engagement; based on the results, through weblog application, we can have more student-centered classes and more interactive classes However, we should keep in mind that mere presence of weblog cannot facilitate learning or bring

satisfaction. At first, training courses should be provided for instructors in order to know how, where and when to use weblogs. The second thing to be done is a detailed analysis on the weblog contents to present a clear road map to instructors to apply appropriate weblog related to the course objectives, Therefore, the application of weblog will not be time-consuming. Finally, to increase learners' engagement and autonomy, it can be used for instruction.

The results of this investigation provided support for the notion that using blogs can improve students' vocabulary learning. This study has shown that the application of blogs in EFL context can result in course stratification. In addition, learning with technology could also show positive activity engagement.

Moreover, analyzing the students' attitude using blog and technology, it can be inferred that participants generally have a positive attitude toward technology. It can be seen from the data that the majority of the students enjoyed using blog. They stated that using a weblog is not time-consuming, and they found it useful for learning new material. We also witnessed that students' attitude towards the improvement of language skills and they believed that their language skills, can be improved through blogs and felt relaxed in working with weblogs. The positive effect of technology was observed in the students' idea. They believed that when using blogs, students are more motivated and engaged in learning. Most of the students reported that they would prefer to use blogs in learning English in the future. In addition, the descriptive statistics of positive and negative features showed that in terms of positive aspects of technology implementation, majority of the students "agreed" or "strongly agreed". However, we should keep in mind that the mere presence of blogs cannot facilitate learning satisfaction.

Using weblogs in and outside the classroom, the students have the opportunity to work more on different tasks and to reflect on their own learning. They have the chance to reconsider the chosen words and phrases in more time and in a quite relaxed condition without any stress and anxiety. Furthermore, as it is desired, weblog is a tool for peer correction. It is highly recommended by many scholars to be implemented as a tool to involve all

students in order to correct each other and to encourage active participation of all students (Dippold, 2010; Mynard, 2007; Noytim, 2010).

References

Campbell, A. P. (2003). Weblogs for use with ESL classes. *The Internet TESL Journal, 9*(2), 51-   62.

Dippold, D. (2009). Peer feedback through blogs: Student and teacher perceptions in an advanced German class. *ReCALL,* 21(01), p. 18-36.

Du, H. S, &. Wagner, (2005). Learning with weblogs: An empirical investigation. *Proceedings   of the 38th Annual Hawaii International Conference on, IEEE*

Fageeh, A. I. (2011). EFL learners' use of blogging for developing writing skills and enhancing attitudes towards English learning: An exploratory study. *Journal of Language and Literature, 2*(1), 31-48.

Godwin-Jones, B. (2003). Blogs and wikis: Environments for on-line collaboration. *Language Learning & Technology, 7* (2).

Godwin-Jones, R. (2006). Tag clouds in the blogosphere: Electronic library and social networking. *Language Learning and Technology*, 10(2), 8-153.

Hourigan, T., & Murray, L. (2010). Using blogs to help language students to develop reflective learning strategies: Towards a pedagogical framework. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 26(2), 209-225.*

Johnson, A. (2004). Creating a writing course utilizing class and student blogs. *The Internet TESL Journal, 10* (8), 10-10.

Mynard, J. (2007). A blog as a tool for reflection for English language learners. *Asian EFL Journal,131-40.*

Noytim, U. (2010). Weblogs enhancing EFL students' English language learning. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, 1127–1132. Retrieved from: www.sciencedirect.com (Feb. 2012).

Simsek, O. (2009). The effect of weblog integrated writing instruction on primary school students   writing performance. *International Journal of Instruction, 2*(2), 31-46.

Pinkman, K. (2005). Using blogs in the foreign language classroom: Encouraging learner independence. *The Jalt CALL Journal, 1*(1), 12-24.

Soares, D. (2008). Understanding class blogs as a tool for language development. *Language Teaching   Research, 12*(4), 517-533.

Ward, J. 2004. Blog assisted language learning: push button publishing for the pupils. *TEFL Web Journal,* 3(1) 130–139. Retrieved October 25, 2015 from http://w ww.teflWeb -j.org/v3n1/blog_ward.pdf

Wu, W. S. (2005, March). Using blogs in an EFL writing class. In meeting of the *2005 Conference and Workshop on TEFL and Applied Linguistics*, Department of Applied English, Ming Chuan University, Taiwan. *Egitim Fakultesi Dergisi-Hacettepe University Journal of Education, 40*, 93-104. *Journal of Classroom Research in Literacy, 4*, 40-49.

Zare-ee, A., Shekarey, A., & Vajargah, K. F. (2009). The educational usefulness and use of blogging in higher education: Male and female Iranian undergraduate students' views. *World applied sciences journal*, *7*(2), 211-219

Biodata

Parisa Ghaderi has got her BA in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) from Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord branch. She has got her MA in TEFL from Abadeh branc. Her area of research is language teaching.

Fatemeh Behjat is an assistant professor in TEFL and a faculty member at Islamic Azad University, Abadeh Branch. She has also a 14-year experience in teaching English at Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch, The Iran Language Institute, and the Zand Institute of Higher Education. She has so far published papers in local and international high quality journals and presented papers at international conferences at home and abroad. Her area of interests is language learning and teaching.

Mohammad Rostampour is an assistant professor at Islamic Azad University, Abadeh Branch, Abadeh, Iran. He got his B A in English Language and Literature, then M A And PhD in TEFL. He has published some papers on different areas of language at international conferences and language journals. His main areas of interest are language teaching methods, discourse analysis, and dialects.