The Impact of Weblog Task Assessment on Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Ability

Marjan Zamani, English Department, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

Hossein Vahid Dastjerdi*, English Department, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

h_vahid @yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of weblog task assessment on Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. To this purpose, a group of 30 English language students (both male and female) in Rozaneh Language Institute in Najafabad were selected based on their performance on the OPT. The researchers tried to select a homogeneous sample in terms of age factor and proficiency level. The homogeneous students were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. With the exception of the control group, both experimental groups received treatment. Group A received journalist tasks and group B received mystery tasks. The experimental groups were treated through a weblog designed by the present researchers. Before performing the treatment, all participants were tested to estimate their reading ability. At the end of the experiment, the participants took another test on reading comprehension. The scores of the tests were analyzed and interpreted using ANOVA. The findings revealed that the journalist and mystery tasks groups outperformed the control group. However, the mystery task proved more effective. The findings of the study can be very beneficial for the teachers of English who wish to improve Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. Actually, blogs enable us to exploit learning as a natural part of everyday life.

Keywords: Weblog, reading ability, proficiency level, journalist tasks, mystery tasks

Introduction

We live in the age of computer, and there are growing demands on almost everyone, including teachers, to become technologically literate. The use of technology in language teaching and learning has been around for many years. Language labs, tape recorders, overhead projectors, TV sets and videos date back to the 60s and 70s

Basically, weblogs are online personal journals which have been in cyberspace since 1998. The term "weblog" was coined by Jorn Barger on 17 December 1997. An Internet-based weblog, also known as a blog, is essentially a homepage managed by a writer. In the other words, a weblog or blog, is a listing of text, images, or other objects that are organized in a chronological order. Blogs are often maintained and run by a single individual, updated daily, or contain personal remarks about a topic, a personal ramble, or an update on the person's life. In many ways, many weblogs are like a personal journal or a look into another individual's life and can be a way to learn about people, events, places, and more from people around the world. As said by Grewling (2004), the main reason for using blogs in language teaching is the way they are set up because they invite participation and have the potential to democratize the classroom since each student is given the chance to participate equally. This same author and Pinkman (2005) state that blogs give students more control over their own learning, and, when created by students themselves, blogs can also give students the ownership of a personal space, a sense of belonging that is not so easily achieved in f2f environments. Parashar Panday (2007) assures that blogs offer many benefits to our students since they help to enhance the skills of communicating, sharing,

analyzing, reflecting, reading, writing, keeping records and promote collaboration among grown-ups.

The ability to read means extracting the information from the text and link with the information they already have. In fact reading is a kind of meaning-construction process and it involves "an interaction between text and reader, careful attention, memory, perceptual and comprehension processes, understanding words and sentences, along with a complex integration of the prior knowledge, language proficiency, and metacognitive strategies" (Poorahmadi, 2012, p. 29). Readers can improve their reading comprehension of textbooks assignments and direction on exams through appropriate reading materials. A reading skill can be described as "a cognitive ability which a person is able to use when interacting with texts" (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Thus, unlike comprehension, which can be viewed as the product of reading a particular text, skills are seen as parts of the generalized reading process.

Statement of the Problem

Past research on task based language learning and teaching has shown that implementing tasks has beneficial effects on improving reading skills (Ellis, 2008). While much has been said about the effect of tasks on reading, few published studies have tried to examine the effect of weblog tasks assessment on Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. Most teachers in Iran feel that there is something basically inadequate about providing the students with naturalistic language learning. Using the weblog is a good chance for the teachers to improve Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. The benefits and applications of the weblog in foreign language teaching, especially in improving reading ability, are relatively unfamiliar to Iranian language teachers. Thus, the present study tried to see whether or not weblog performance of task assessment has any effect on reading ability. To do this, the following research questions were addressed:

Literature Review

Weblog and Second Language Acquisition

At the beginning of this century especially in the latter half of 2002, the blog got rapid development, because of its advantages which are easy to search, share, communicate and that are not confined by time. The study pattern based on blog provides English learners with more widen virtual and free environment which can make students enjoy various study resources. As a new kind of accumulating knowledge, managing knowledge and ex-changing, the blog is concerned by educators' home and abroad, thus producing the new conception of "Education Blog". In foreign countries, many linguists and language-educating experts have made enormous verifiable studies regarding the blog as method of teaching and communicating. At home, "blog" teaching also gradually gains scholars and educators' emphasis. Zhengjing YU deems that with the help of the blog, English teachers authentically become guiders of study resources and students become real constructors in exercising and learning's active work, meanwhile, it can revive students' active study, which makes them become active cooperators in the process of teaching and learning.

Rahimi and Behjat (2011) did an empirical research on online and offline reading comprehension for Iranian EFL learners and concluded that the learners' reading is fostered to a higher degree when they are exposed to online texts which have links to other sites providing more reading materials. Comprehending hypertexts can sometimes be difficult as they require readers utilize different skills and strategies to overcome comprehension problems. The great advantage of reading hypertexts on the net is that learners can have access to authentic texts.

Educational Use of Weblogs

In recent years, the adoption of technologies in education has accelerated to a relentless pace. Barely little intervals passed between the arrivals of new technologies, which all claim to bring revolutions to education. There is less and less time to investigate, reflect, and assimilate the technologies to bring true values in teaching and learning. Weblogs represent the latest communication technology to catch the fascination of educators after emails, discussion forums, and mobile learning. Weblogs and other communication technologies, especially discussion forums, share many similarities. They are both communication technologies; text is the predominant medium of communication; the required computing skill is minimal; and perhaps most significantly, they are both multiple affordances.

Many of the potential learning benefits of discussion forums also apply to weblogs such as opportunities for active learning, collaborative learning, increased higher-level thinking, and flexibility in course delivery (Wu & Hiltz, 2004). Ferdig and Trammell (2004) provided a detailed discussion of the learning benefits of weblogs from the perspective of social constructivism Many educational applications of weblogs were in subject areas that traditionally relied on journal writing (Williams and Jacobs, 2004). Huffaker (2005) described a number of instances where weblogs are used to improve writing and journalistic skills in classrooms of third graders to high school students. Stiler and Phillko (2003) applied weblogs for improving journaling skills of pre-service teachers. Weblogs have also been applied in other educational purposes.

Studies on reading tasks

The review of related literature indicates the improving of reading comprehension ability can be considered as a demanding procedure and it will help the acquisition of a second language. Like any other EFL contexts, the importance of reading comprehension is undeniable in Iran. Therefore, this issue has involved the attention of many researchers and applied linguists. However, it seems that the majority of Iranian students may confront some problems to improve their reading abilities. Although, some solutions have been proposed dealing with this weakness among the students, they did not seem to be applicable. Consequently, the students require a reasonable solution for their reading deficiencies that has been remained vague so far. Moreover, this area needs more research which inspire the initiation of the current study.

Second language and foreign language teachers both seek to find the means, activities, and tasks to help language learners achieve their goals in learning languages. Thus, task holds an essential role in language pedagogy and SL/FL language research because it is used to assess what learners can do in the L2. The definition of the concept of task can determine language use. As Nunan (2004) claims, the concept of task has made its way in syllabus design, classroom teaching, and learner assessment. It has also influenced pedagogical policies in ESL/EFL classrooms. Task has been defined differently by different experts in the field (Lee, 2000; Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996).

Based on what was stated above, the following research questions were addressed in the present study:

RQ1: Does the weblog performance of journalist tasks have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading ability?

RQ2: Does the weblog performance of mystery tasks have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading ability?

RQ3: Which weblog performance task is more effective on reading ability of Iranian EFL learners?

Methodology

Participants

A group of 30 male and female English language students participated in the study. The participants were Iranian EFL learners who studied English in Rozaneh Language Institute in Najafabad, Isfahan, Iran. They were randomly divided into three equal groups, i.e. one control group and two experimental groups. The researcher managed to select a homogeneous sample in term of age factor and proficiency level. Actually, the students were selected from among the learners whose age ranged from 13 to 20 years, and Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to select students with the same language proficiency level. Also, the students were homogenized in terms of their reading ability on a reading test administered prior to conducting the study.

Instruments

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to measure the participants' language proficiency. As a Proficiency test, it is expected to be norm-referenced and is intended to "measure global language abilities" (Brown, 2005, p. 2). One characteristic of a proficiency test, as a norm-referenced test, is that it should produce "scores which fall into a normal distribution" (p. 5), which allows relative interpretations of the test scores in terms of "how each student's performance relates to the performances of all other students" (p. 4). The second characteristic of the test is that "the test must provide scores that form a wide distribution, so that interpretations of the differences among students will be as fair as possible" (p. 8). In other words, a proficiency test tends to test overall general language proficiency. So OPT was used to make sure about students' homogeneity prior to the application of the treatment.

The OPT provides reliable and efficient means of placing students at the start of a course for teachers (Allan, 2004). According to Allan (2004), the tests have been calibrated against the levels system provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (commonly known as the CEF), which has been adopted by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) as well as by governments and major institutions, including exam boards, throughout Europe.

Reading Comprehension Test

The participants were given a reading comprehension test. This test was an adopted version of three TOEFL reading texts which was validated and used by Keyvanfar and Modarresi (2009). The test included three passages and a total of 25 multiple choice times. Keyvanfar and Modarresi (2009) reported the test to be reliable in the Iranian context. This test was administered before and after the treatment as both the pretest and posttest.

Weblog

A weblog was designed by the researchers and used for the participants of the experimental groups. The weblog contained some readings which were uploaded on it each sessionThe participants had to read the readings and answer the questions related to each reading.

Procedures

This study had a quasi-experimental design (Creswell & Clark, 2007) which intended to explore the impact of weblog task assessment on learners' reading ability. The researchers implemented a quantitative design which included assembling and analyzing quantitative data. Before performing the treatment, all participants were tested to estimate their reading ability and

to make sure that they were all at the same level of reading ability. The participants of the two experimental groups received treatments, i.e.Group A received journalist tasks for a period of 12 sessions, group B received mystery tasks, and the control group received no task of any specific type. At the end of the experiment, the participants took a test on reading comprehension. It should be noted that the participants were asked to perform the tasks online, using the Internet. Because there were three groups in the study, and one dependent variable (reading ability), a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data. Then, Turkey post hoc test was used to examine the areas of difference between the groups.

Results

The OPT was implemented for the selection of the homogeneous participants. The participants were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. In the next step, both experimental groups received treatment and the control group received no task of specific type. At the end of the treatment, the participants took a test on reading comprehension.

Results of the Tests
Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the OPT*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Journalist tasks group	20	33.1500	1.03999	.23255	32.6633	33.6367	31.00	35.00
Mystery tasks group	20	33.0500	1.05006	.23480	32.5586	33.5414	31.00	35.00
Control group	20	33.3000	1.34164	.30000	32.6721	33.9279	31.00	35.00
Total	60	33.1667	1.13745	.14684	32.8728	33.4605	31.00	35.00

Table 1 indicates the mean scores of Journalist tasks group ($M = 33.15$), Mystery tasks group ($M = 33.05$) and Control group ($M = 33.17$). It is obvious that there were slight differences among the three groups. To figure out if the differences were statistically significant or not, One-Way ANOVA was conducted by the researcher.

Table 2. *Results of One-Way ANOVA*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.633	2	.317	.238	.789
Within Groups	75.700	57	1.328		
Total	76.333	59			

The results of One-Way ANOVA that are shown in Table 2 indicate that there were not any statistically significant differences among the groups ($p = .789$). Therefore, it is concluded that all participants were at the same level of proficiency.

The descriptive statistics for pre-test are presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Performance on the Pretest*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Journalist tasks group	20	14.8500	.93330	.20869	14.4132	15.2868	14.00	17.00
Mystery tasks group	20	14.9000	1.33377	.29824	14.2758	15.5242	12.00	17.00
Control group	20	14.6500	1.03999	.23255	14.1633	15.1367	13.00	16.00
Total	60	14.8000	1.10162	.14222	14.5154	15.0846	12.00	17.00

As seen from the table above, the means of the three groups were nearly the same. On collecting the data, ANOVA was performed using SPSS to see whether the differences between the three groups' yielded significant results as are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4. *One-Way ANOVA for Comparison of Group Performances (Pre-Test)*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.700	2	.350	.281	.756
Within Groups	70.900	57	1.244		
Total	71.600	59			

As seen from Table 4, the mean differences between the three groups were not significant ($p = .756$). This shows that the students in the three groups were at the same level of knowledge. Figure 4. shows a graphic comparison of the two groups on the pretest
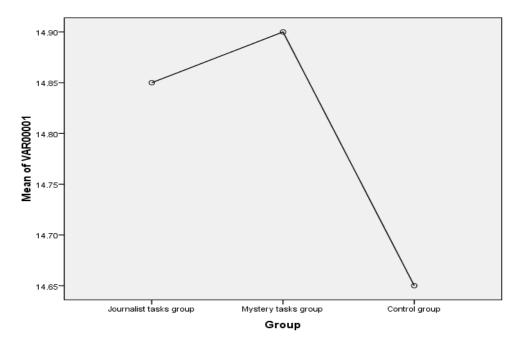
Figure 1. *Graphic Representation of Group Performance on the Pretest*

The same statistical procedure was used for the posttest results. The statistical analysis of the posttest for the experimental and control groups is presented in Table 5 below:

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Performance on Posttest*

	N	**Mean**	*Std. Deviation*	*Std. Error*	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		**Minimum**	**Maximum**
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Journalist tasks group	20	20.1500	2.64127	.59061	18.9138	21.3862	14.00	23.00
Mystery tasks group	20	23.6000	.99472	.22243	23.1345	24.0655	21.00	25.00
Control group	20	15.1000	.78807	.17622	14.7312	15.4688	14.00	16.00
Total	60	19.6167	3.89303	.50259	18.6110	20.6223	14.00	25.00

The mean score of the first experimental group increased from 14.85 on the pre-test to 20.15 on the post-test indicating an improvement. The mean score of the second experimental group increased from 14.90 on the pre-test to 23.60 on post-test indicating further improvement than that observed in the first experimental group. The control group's mean score 14.65

improved to 15.10 indicating partial improvement. In order to find out whether there are statistically significant differences in the learners' performance in the three groups, the post-test scores were inputted to a one-way ANOVA analysis with a between-group factor shown in table.

Table 5. *One-Way ANOVA for Comparison of Group Performance (Post- Test)*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	731.033	2	365.517	127.701	.000
Within Groups	163.150	57	2.862		
Total	894.183	59			

As seen from Table 6, the results *(p < .5)* showed that the difference between the performances of three groups is statistically significant. In other words, the journalist and mystery tasks had a supportive role on the Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. To illustrate where the significant differences exist among the groups, a post-hoc test (with an alpha level of .05 was conducted with the results shown in Table 7 below:

Table 6. *Post-Hoc and Multiple Comparison of Three Groups*

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Journalist tasks group	Mystery tasks group	-3.45000[*]	.53500	.000	-4.7374	-2.1626
	Control group	5.05000[*]	.53500	.000	3.7626	6.3374
Mystery tasks group	Journalist tasks group	3.45000[*]	.53500	.000	2.1626	4.7374
	Control group	8.50000[*]	.53500	.000	7.2126	9.7874
Control group	Journalist tasks group	-5.05000[*]	.53500	.000	-6.3374	-3.7626
	Mystery tasks group	-8.50000[*]	.53500	.000	-9.7874	-7.2126

The results revealed that the journalist and mystery tasks groups outperformed the control group. It can be concluded that the journalist task and mystery task groups had a significant and meaningful effect on the participants' learning. However, the mystery task group proved more effective. Figure 2 shows a graphic comparison of the two groups on posttest.
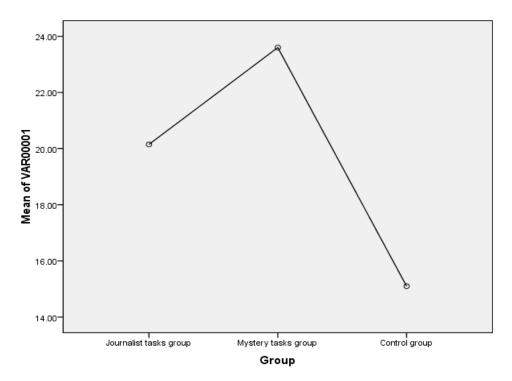
Figure 2. *Graphic Representation of the Groups' Performance on Posttest*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of weblog tasks assessment on Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. The first research question was "Does the weblog performance of Journalist tasks have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading ability?" In general, the Weblog performance of Journalist tasks did not have any significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. As for the second research question, "Does the weblog performance of Mystery tasks have any significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' reading ability?", based on the results, the Weblog performance of Mystery tasks did not have any significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' reading ability either. The third research question served to examine which weblog performance task was more effective on the reading ability of Iranian EFL learners. In this section, the three research questions indicated above will be discussed based on the results in the previous section and in connection with previous studies. Actually, the results will be compared to the findings of similar studies to see whether weblog task assessment could improve the reading skill in Iranian EFL learners.

As for the first question, it was revealed that the participants in the treatment group who had received Journalist tasks outperformed those of the control group. It can thus be stated that the Journalist tasks had a significant effect on the participants' learning. This finding supports the findings of Keyvanfar and Modarresi (2009) who sought to find out whether using task-based reading activities had any impact on the development of text comprehension in Iranian EFL learners. They found that task-based language teaching was an effective, practical, and innovative teaching method.

In connection with the second question mentioned above, the findings revealed that the participants of the treatment group who had received Mystery tasks outperformed those of the control group. This again is in line with the findings of Keyvanfar and Modarresi (2009), since in both studies the participants who performed tasks had significantly better scores in comparison

with the participants who did not perform any tasks. It can be understood that Mystery tasks had a meaningful effect on the participants' learning.

The third question sought to explore which one of the weblog performance tasks was more effective on the reading ability of the Iranian EFL learners. The results revealed that the difference between the performances of the three groups was statistically significant. In other words, the Journalist and Mystery tasks had a supportive role concerning the Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. To illustrate where the significant differences exist in the groups, a post hoc test (with an alpha level of .05) was conducted. The results revealed that the Journalist and Mystery task groups outperformed the control group. It can be emphasized, therefore, that the Journalist and Mystery tasks had a significant impact on the participants' learning, but the Mystery tasks were more effective.

The findings of the present study are generally in line with those of Dalir et al. (2013) who investigated the effect of weblogs on the improvement of the Iranian EFL learners' writing skills. They proved empirically that weblog tasks improved the Iranian EFL learners' writing skills. At the same time, the findings are also in line with those of Taki and Ramazani (2011) who investigated the effect of using e-mail to improve reading in English as a foreign language. Their findings brought to light the fact that e-mail had statistically significant effects on improving students' reading skill. However, the findings of the present study are in contrast with those of Wu (2005) who concluded that Blogs have difficult potentials to use as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing class.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of weblog tasks on Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. The findings generally provided supporting evidence for the use of weblog task performance in improving the reading skill in EFL learners.

As for the task categories, it must be noted that both the Mystery and Journalist serve the requirement of communicativeness in that they one way or another get the participants perform a particular meaningful task involving thinking constructively and solving a problem. As regards the fact that Mystery tasks were more effective than the Journalist, it can be concluded with the reservation that by all probability the former category is more contributive to the requirements of communicativeness than the Journalist task.

Another definite conclusion that may be drawn from the discussion is that the more communicative the function that the task category fulfills, the better the outcome of learning the language and using it as a means rather than an end in itself.

In summary, there were three advantages of using a weblog to improve reading skills as concluded in this study. Firstly, the use of weblog was found to be beneficial in terms of motivating students to be more interesting to them. Secondly, it was reported that weblogs could help students improve vocabulary and promote meaningful learning. Thirdly, the advantage was that weblogs could help students improve their reading instruction.

The findings of this study may be very beneficial for the teachers of English as a foreign language who wish to improve the Iranian EFL learners' reading ability. Different methods have so far been adopted to improve the reading ability of EFL learners; however, most of them have failed to overcome the obstacles and help learners with their reading. This study provided a link between technology and reading instruction. The findings of this study will also be useful for EFL teachers in Iran to build computer-mediated communication into a methodological framework and use reading practices coupled with promoting communicative proficiency in the students. Actually, blogs and other social software enable us to integrate learning as a natural part

of everyday life. The use of blogs in EFL learning promotes not only social interaction and active and social learning but also knowledge construction within a learner-centered, constructivist environment.

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