5th World Conference on Educational Sciences - WCES 2013

University level EFL students’ self blogging to enhance writing efficacy

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Abstract

In the field of foreign language education, Web 2.0 technologies put forward new scopes for both teachers and students. Among these technologies, blogs have a remarkable place since they provide teachers and learners with new horizons. Among the three types of blogging which are tutor blog, learner blog and class blog (Campbell, 2003), self-blogging and its role on the writing-efficacy of learners in writing have received the least attention in research. The present study aims to investigate the impact of self-blogging on the writing efficacy levels of university level advanced foreign language learners. Data for the study came from writing-efficacy scale (Yavuz-Erkan and İlflazoğlu-Saban, 2011) and the semi-structured interviews with the participants. The results and the implications were discussed in the following sections.

Keywords: Blogging, writing efficacy, EFL students

1. Introduction

In the field of foreign language education, Web 2.0 technologies put forward new scopes for both teachers and students. Among these technologies, blogs have a remarkable place to provide teachers and learners of foreign language with new horizons. As Matheson (2004) conceived that a blog is defined as an online journal that has an asynchronous nature, allowing its users to write, publish and share their writings without any time, place and space constraints. In this respect, blogs are stated to be beneficial in the sense that they promote learners’ critical thinking before and during the posting process (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Richardson, 2005). Even after the sharing on the blogs, because of peer-feedback sessions on the posts, learners continue monitoring and critiquing each other.

Blogging has been popular due to its contribution to users’ knowledge and skills improvement by helping learners and teachers explore and digest new ideas, create connections between known and unknown (McLeod, 2001). Therefore, blogging allows both parties in language education to expand their language knowledge, fill the gaps in their study skills as well as staying in touch with others in a virtual learning context (Huffaker, 2004).

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Furthermore, the assessment and monitoring of students’ works and giving feedback out of borders of the classrooms can be listed as other benefits of blogging in the process of language learning and teaching.

The significance and role of blogs in study skills; namely, writing, reading, listening and even speaking, have also been approved in the literature. Liaw, Chen & Huang (2008) revealed that students having internet access has been motivating students to read extensively. In the same line, Yang (2009) suggested the integration of blogging into writing and reading classes due to its interactive nature. Students can have the chance to read their peers’ language and give/receive feedback interactively. There have been also other advisable ways of blogging as a tool in the foreign language classrooms. To illustrate, the use of blogging to increase reflectivity of learners and their strategy use during written language production are the ways suggested. In a similar vein, the major benefits of this tool are stated to be its being encouraging and facilitative with respect to exchange of ideas and self-reflection (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). In this way, the learning environment turns to be a student-centered one in which learners can virtually collaborate, ask for feedback, and share their own opinions about their peers’ writings. In terms of pedagogical purposes, blogs in language learning process promote dialogue between students and teacher through the exchange of ideas out of class. Specifically speaking, due to the limited amount of time to use foreign language in the expanding circle countries (Kachru, 1992), use of blogs to enhance and practice language out of class time is of great benefit for the foreign language learners.

The theoretical background for the use of blogs in language classroom is based on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) due to its collaborative learning nature. Especially, the idea that social interaction facilitates learning in the learners’ zone of proximal development has a supportive role in the language learning process. Additionally, scaffolding as an associated concept based on the principle of learning as a socially constructed process, is an important construct to base blogging and make its role clearer.

1.1. Self-blogging in Foreign language writing classes and writing efficacy

Writing is a challenging and demanding skill for foreign language learners because of the fact that it may cause cognitive and behavioral anxiety. More specifically, writing within a limited amount of time by considering both structural and organizational patterns may generate worry for the learners (Cheng, 2004). Blog writing can be helpful to overcome these concerns because of its asynchronous and flexible nature. As Campbell (2003) puts it, there exist three types of blogs that can be integrated into writing classes, namely, the blog prepared and monitored by the instructor, the self-blogs of the students monitored by them individually and the class blog that is open for the students’ idea sharing under the monitoring of the teacher. It does not matter which type of blogging is used as a tool in writing classes since any of them provides real audience and a collaborative environment. Thus, they can interact, receive/give feedback on each others’ pieces of writing (Barlett-Bragg, 2003). Moreover, becoming bloggers help learners to develop organizational and monitoring skills together with self-reflectivity and self-efficacy.

As Bandura (1997) suggested, human competence is highly dependent on self-efficacy and the mediation between beliefs and behaviors are created by self-efficacy. The strong positive correlation between self-efficacy of learners and their achievements in their language learning has been proved in the field (e.g., Schunk, 1981; Pajares, 2003). According to the self-efficacy theories, when students perceive high self-efficacy, they try harder and use the knowledge and skills they have (Kim & Lorsbach, 2005). Therefore, the efficacy level of students in the writing classes is a strong determinant of their writing skill development and achievement. Despite the growing number of self-efficacy studies in academic areas, such as Science and Mathematics, less attention has been given to writing skill courses in foreign language contexts. As Schunk (2003) stated that in order to improve writing performance, subject matter knowledge, skills and high-efficacy are the prerequisites to improve writing performance.

There are many studies identifying the positive and facilitative role of making use of blogs in writing classes of different levels (Bernstein, 2004; Wu, 2005; Arani, 2005). However, there is lack of attention on the effect of self-blogging on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students’ efficacy levels regarding their writing skills. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role of self-blogging on university level EFL students’ self-efficacy in English composition class at the.

Specifically, this study attempts to answer these research questions:
1. Is there an effect of self-blogging on the learners’ writing-efficacy? If so, how?
2. What are learners’ opinions about self-blogging with respect to their efficacy?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Thirteen advanced Turkish EFL students at an English-medium university in Turkey participated in the study. Their average age is 19. They were juniors, majoring in English language teaching at the Faculty of Education and taking various courses such as English Composition, Oral Communication, Introduction to English Phonology for the purposes of both improving their teaching skills to become more proficient in English and in their language production. During the study, the participating students were taking English Composition course, in which they were required to complete weekly assignments on writing, create a student blog, and write comments on their peers’ blogs. At the very beginning of the course, the students were trained at creating and organizing their own blogs. Then, they have written their weekly assigned writings (paragraphs and essays on various topics) on their blogs and commented on their peers’ writings via blogging.

2.2. Data collection

The main purpose of the study was to explore the impact of self-blogging on the writing self-efficacies of the students and their perceptions regarding self-blogging and their efficacy. Therefore, data gathered through both quantitative (writing self-efficacy scale adapted from Yavuz-Erkan and İflazoğlu-Saban, 2011) and qualitative data sources (semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants). With the concern of eliciting detailed and strong data a mixed method design was applied.

2.2.1. Writing self-efficacy scale

The scale for measuring the participants’ self-efficacies for writing was first developed by Yavuz-Erkan (2004). The scale in the present study was a 28-item Likert scale adapted by Yavuz-Erkan and İflazoğlu-Saban (2011), in which four-point Likert scale ranging from “1) I do it very well” to “4) I do not do it well at all” was used. Each statement elicits the participants’ efficacy in their writing ability and aims at evaluating their opinions on their writing efficacy. The scale was administered both at the beginning of the course (1st week) and at the end of the course (14th week) so as to measure possible changes in each students’ writing self-efficacy associated with use of blogging. The Cronbah’s Alpha was computed to see the reliability value of the scale and it was found to be ,743 which can be stated to be a moderately high reliability value.

2.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

So as to find out the opinions of participants on self-blogging and their writing efficacy, semi-structured interviews were administered with four randomly-selected students at the end of the English Composition course. It was a focus group discussion, in which questions regarding the nature of blogging, the structure of self-blogging, its advantages and disadvantages, and their efficacy levels in writing were asked (See Appendix). The data gathered from the interview were used to strengthen and crosscheck the questionnaire data.

The focus-group interview was recorded with the permission of the students. In order to analyze this qualitative data, the recording was transcribed, and content analysis was conducted. The content of the focus-group interview was then categorized in order to find out students’ perceptions on self-blogging and their writing self-efficacy.

2.3. Data analysis

Due to the limited number of participants the data gathered from pre and post questionnaire data were analyzed through non-parametric test of Wilcoxon Signed Rank statistics on SPSS 17. After the transcription of interview data, data were analyzed by following content analysis method.
2. Results and discussion

As can be seen in the following table, the mean self-efficacy scores of the participants in the beginning of the semester was 2.04, and after the 14 week period of course during which all the participants prepared and used their self-blogs as an instrument, their average self-efficacy was increased to 1.85. Even though, the post-test mean score is lower, the reason for this result is due to the Likert design of the questionnaire. Since 1 is assigned to “I do it very well” and 4 is assigned to “I do not do it well at all”, the decrease in the mean actually shows the increase.

|                | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Minimum | Maximum |
|----------------|----|-------|----------------|---------|---------|
| Pre-mean       | 13 | 2.0495| .59073         | 1.39    | 3.18    |
| Post-mean      | 13 | 1.8599| .69795         | 1.07    | 3.11    |

However, the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank statistics of which purpose is to investigate whether self-blogging throughout 14-week semester has resulted in any significant change in the writing efficacy of the participants revealed no statistically significant change (Z = -.785, p = .432).

When the interview results were analysed, this statistical result appeared not to be surprising. The participants stated that self-blogging helped them to improve their skills in terms of technology use; however, it was stated to be demotivating in terms of writing. This result was explained by one of the interviewees;

“I went on writing my essays on a piece of paper and then transferred it into my blog. Even though, it was beneficial to get used to computer, I did not feel comfortable in sharing my essays because after publishing it, everyone would read it. Briefly, my fear to do any mistakes increased, and I hardly took risks for complicated sentences.”

That is to say, on the contrary to the studies which argued about the role of blogging in increasing efficacy (Bernstein, 2004; Wu, 2005; Arani, 2005), this study demonstrated that self-blogging did not enhance the writing efficacy of the students.

Another reason for this result may be the educational and traditional habits of Turkish students. They generally grow up with the fear of making mistakes in language production. That’s why; their anxiety levels are generally high in language classes. Due to this possible reason, they might feel uncomfortable.

Despite the insignificant change in their efficacy level, some of the participants mentioned the benefits of peer feedback and publishing written materials. They stated that it is an important tool for their own career both as a student and a future teacher. This result was explained by one of the students;

“Since my friends would give feedback, I was writing more carefully. I designed my blog accordingly and reviewed my writings before publishing and while typing. In the future, I can use blogging with my students.”

Therefore, in spite of the fact that self-blogging did not cause any increase in their writing efficacy, it definitely added to their reflectivity and monitoring skills. This result is in line with the Barlett-Bragg’s (2003) study in which he argued for the effectiveness of peer-feedback through blogging.

Additionally, according to the self-efficacy theories, when students perceive high self-efficacy, they try harder and use the knowledge and skills they have (Kim & Lorsbach, 2005). Thus, it will not be wrong to claim that although there is not any significant change, there is a change in the writing self-efficacy levels of students to some extent as a result of effects of peer-feedback because the students tried to be as perfect as possible.

3. Conclusion

All in all, with the argument that in the field of foreign language education, Web 2.0 technologies put forward new scopes for both teachers and students, the present study aimed to investigate the impact of self-blogging which has a remarkable place in language learning and teaching process, on the writing efficacy levels of university level foreign language learners. Data for the study came from writing-efficacy scale (Yavuz-Erkan and İflazoğlu-Saban,
2011) and the semi-structured interviews with the participants. Even though the results of the study did not reveal a significant effect of self-blogging on the foreign language learners’ writing efficacy, it is clear that students’ awareness regarding the importance of this tool and its useful applications raised in the end of the semester.

This study has also some implications for writing classes in academic settings. The results implicated that blogging can be used as a hands-on activity in the writing classes so as not to improve writing self-efficacy but to help students develop metalinguistic awareness, through which they can see their linguistic mistakes and pay more attention to sentence construction. This, in turn, means better paragraphs or essays for students. Besides, use of self-blogging makes students improve their technological skills.

Future studies on the relationship between writing self-efficacy and blogging can be conducted with cross-cultural settings with a larger sample to see if there are differences between nations.

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