

EFL Students' Perceptions towards Blogging in EFL Writing Courses: A Turkish University Context

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to reveal student perceptions regarding the integration of blogs into writing courses. Of the 25 students that were present at the courses, 9 were interviewed one-on-one before and after the implementation of blogging. The first set of interviews provided insight into the students' perceptions about blogs and how blogs could benefit their learning process. The second set of interviews, on the other hand, shed light on the participants' beliefs and feelings about blogs after their 6-week blogging experience. The analyses of the first set of interviews revealed that almost all of the participants were new to blogging, particularly for educational purposes. However, they were convinced that blogging could improve their proficiency in English from various aspects. The second set of interviews, on the other hand, confirmed the participants' beliefs regarding the potential benefits of blogging. They expressed that blogs helped them keep calm when writing in the target language by providing a real audience without the pressure of having teachers and friends around. Their comments pointed to an increase in their social relationships in their face-to-face courses, as well. In addition, all of the participants reported positive feelings about their blogging experience. These results of the study indicate that writing courses can be turned into an enjoyable experience with the help of blogging.

Keywords: blogging, web 2.0 tools, ELT, technology in ELT, L2 writing

1. Introduction

With the recent developments in technology and the widespread use of the internet and social networking websites among students, the need for integrating internet-based technologies into classrooms has been on the rise. Thus, modern facilities and changing experiences of the younger generations need to be taken into account to create a better learning environment where students take responsibility of their own learning. Both learners and instructors are able to easily access the Internet, which has made the inclusion of technological tools into course routines inevitable. Teachers, nowadays, are expected to benefit from technological facilities to provide a high quality foreign language education. Blogs, in this respect, are one of the most frequently used tools in foreign language education, particularly for reading and writing courses. Different from the other popular forms of tools for socialising such as Facebook, as Galien and Bowcher (2010) suggest, blogs 'can provide a public forum for an individual's thoughts, ideas, tips, commentaries or anything else that one would like to keep a regular written record of' (p.6). As teaching through blogs and providing a virtual learning environment for additional learning opportunities for learners have become a widespread teaching practice, it is vital to investigate the issue from different aspects.

The target of languages is to ensure the communication among their users, and English language teaching, in this respect, aims to provide learners with knowledge of English to be used for communication. Foreign language teaching is one of the fields that require supplementary activities as language learning cannot be restricted to school environment where learners do not have chance to practise the target language with real persons. Internet, in this sense, offers various applications and tools to support language learning with its communication facilities (Abdallah, 2011).

Web 2.0 tools such as Blogger, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and so forth, defined as "a concept that takes the network as a platform for information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design and collaboration on the World Wide Web." in Wikipedia, allow for sharing information and interaction with other internet users. In other words, Web 2.0 tools are applications that enable their users to communicate with other users. Thus with the invention of Web 2.0 tools, internet-based technologies offer virtual learning environments and have become more beneficial in foreign language teaching and learning. Web 2.0 tools, as Morgan (2012, p.166) states, have "...the potential to greatly enhance opportunities available for language students to make meaningful use of their target language in real-time context and to publish their own work online".

The internet, especially Web 2.0 tools, are popular nowadays because they provide learners with a learning environment anywhere and anytime (Neo & Neo & Yap, 2008; Lee, 2016), which takes the learning experiences out of the classroom and highlights learner autonomy. Technology-enhanced classrooms pave the way for active

learning, as well. Teachers, finally, with the help of technological facilities, can quit salt lecturing and be the guide they have been expected to be (Newman & Scurry, 2015).

As technology and internet-based technologies have been increasingly playing a role in educational context, researchers try to focus on the changing needs of the new age. McLoughlin and Lee (2007, p. 664), for instance, focus on the “increasing demand for new educational approaches and pedagogies”.

Thus, new approaches to be developed should include Web 2.0 tools for a better learning environment, as Web 2.0 tools are learner-focused; learners hereby are in control of the learning environment. A direct quote from İstifçi, Lomidadze and Demiray’s (2011) study sheds light on the issue:

The most important advantage of Web 2.0 tools in education, and in language learning in particular, is its simplicity. To obtain required information about any subject it is enough to just enter the correct keywords into the searching system (like Google), or in the social network, and wait for the replies. Some tools of Web 2.0 are used in language learning most effectively (p. 202-203).

Former technologies allowed for a one-way interaction: learners could interact with only computers (Pinkman, 2005). The invention of Web 2.0 tools, however, paved the way for interaction with real persons. One of the most popular Web 2.0 tools that enable learners to communicate is Blog, and Blog takes its name from the combination of ‘Web’ and ‘Log’ (Karaman & Kaban & Yıldırım, 2010, Introduction section, para.1). In Güttler’s (2011) words a blog is “something rather simple; 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.” (p. 60).

Blogs gained their popularity in the late 1990s with the introduction of Blogger.com, which is a free website to create blogs. Blogs are generally easy to maintain and they allow their users, as mentioned by Güttler (2011, p. 60), to leave / read comments, to see feeds of updated content of various blogs / websites, and to share the content of blogs. Although blogs can be used for writing, reading, speaking and listening skills (Morgan, 2012), they are mostly used to improve writing and reading skills.

The use of blogs has become more and more popular as the new generation is now familiar with all kinds of technological facilities more than ever. As Halic, Lee, Paulus, and Spence (2010) maintain:

The popularity of blogs among young people has made them appealing to educators seeking to integrate computer mediated communication (CMC) tools at the university level. These tools are seen as having the potential for enhancing student engagement and providing an environment for collaboration and creation of knowledge.

Blogs are considered to help ‘provide a real audience for student writing, to provide extra reading practice for students, to increase the sense of community in a class, to encourage students to participate, to create an online portfolio of student written work’ (Zhang, 2009, p.66).

Additionally, blogs might also cut down the time spent in classroom to make announcements (İstifçi, 2011). Blogs are free to use and easy to access and they provide multi-language support (Karaman & Kaban & Yıldırım, 2010, Introduction section, para.2) and these factors increase the use of blogs for educational purposes. Kim (2008, p.1346) expresses that “students take advantage of blogs to enhance their study... they share their learning experiences and express their thoughts to the instructor through course blogs”.

There are studies into the effects of the use of blogs on the students’ level of motivation as well. Galien and Bowcher (2010), for example, argue that the relaxing atmosphere of blogs, the interaction among students and the think time they provide to their users naturally result in higher levels of motivation in students. İstifçi (2011), after conducting her own case study, concluded that class weblogs were motivating for her participants. According to İstifçi (2011), the non-judgemental nature of blogs relieves the students and enhances their performance in the use of the target language.

Thus, one of the most beneficial features of Web 2.0 tools overall is the feedback option they provide. The blog comments are considered to be important as they are seen as a tool to maintain the interaction in blogs. ‘Peer feedback’, ‘teachers’ comments’ (Muncie, 2000) and ‘computer-based responses’ (Brandl, 1995; Warschauer et al., 1996) are among the most widely used types of error feedback (Norouzian and Farahani, 2012). As Boud (2000) suggests, the feedback students give each other might be a type of evaluation and can contribute to the progress of students. The comment option of blogs can easily turn into online peer review. In addition, previous research indicates that foreign language learners think error feedback is useful for them (Norouzian & Farahani, 2012). However, not all feedback is equally beneficial. After a study with participants who were advanced university ESL students, Ferris (1997), pointing to the type and quality of the feedback provided by the participants for the writing drafts in her research, stated that:

A significant proportion of the comments appeared to lead to substantive student revision, and particular types and forms of commentary appeared to be more helpful than others (p. 315).

Briefly, the use of blogs for educational purposes is not so new, however, has not got a long history, either. The issue should be handled from different perspectives, taking into various variables, to ensure blogs’ efficacy in foreign language classrooms.

The purpose of the current study is to find out the student perspectives on blogging prior to and after a six-week blogging project. The research questions that guided the study are as given below:

- 1) What are the students' perceptions of blogs as educational tools in foreign language courses prior to the blogging project?
- 2) What are the students' perceptions of their blogging experience in foreign language reading and writing courses after the six-week blogging project?

2. Methodology

The study was carried out in the School of Foreign Languages of Atatürk University during the fall semester of 2015-2016 academic years. The participants were chosen randomly from the voluntary students who were at that time in the same language preparation class. The major of participants was engineering and their level of exposure to English and familiarity with technology prior to coming to university varied. Of the 9 participants 4 were females and 5 were males. Their age ranged from 18 to 20.

Before starting to use blogs in classes, participants of this study were asked some pre-study structured interview questions regarding their understanding of what a blog is. This interview did not only shed light on their expectations from blogs and attitudes towards using blogs in classes but also provided the needed information so as to make blogs more beneficial for their use. The researchers, after the interview, explained what a blog was and how they could be used with educational purposes. Students were also given information regarding the webpage that was to be used throughout the semester. For the blogging project, www.kidblog.org was chosen, as it was suitable for beginners with its ease of use.

The main study included writing assignments after finishing each unit in the reading textbook that was followed that semester. Students taking the class were asked to use the vocabulary of that specific unit to encourage them to reuse the recently learnt words in a paragraph which they know their friends and teacher will also read. Each student was required to share at least 12 posts for the writing class; however, there was no restriction as to the number of posts. They were asked, but not forced, to add comments on their peers' blogs after reading their posts. The teacher also left comments when necessary. The purpose of the feedback by teacher was mainly to encourage students to share more posts. To ensure participation and joy, the teacher shared posts regularly titled as 'just for fun'. These posts were meant to get the students' attraction and keep blogging experience as fun as possible. The students were also allowed to share pictures, videos, articles and the like on their blogs to create a more friendly atmosphere. A computer lab was provided to the students to ensure participation and eliminate potential problems due to restricted access to computers and the Internet. After a six-week application with the whole class, the participants of the study were interviewed to find out their perceptions of their online peer interaction, factors affecting their motivation, ideas about learning effectiveness as well as their blogging experience as a whole.

The research followed a qualitative design to provide comprehensive answers to research questions as well as to shed more light on their blogging experience in writing classes from students' perspective. The data collection tools involved interviews pre and post blogging Project and blog entries. The pre study interview questions were inspired by Pinkman's (2005) pre project questionnaire. In addition, a few questions were added to understand the expectations of students from the blogging project in writing classes. Fageeh's (2011) and Yang & Chang's (2011) questionnaires gave the researchers' ideas for developing questions for the semi-structured interviews that were conducted after the blogging project was finished.

The recorded interviews were originally conducted in Turkish to encourage the participants to express their ideas in more detail. The researchers transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim prior to translating them into English and analysing them under the light of previous research.

3. Research Findings

The questions of the first interview yielded important background knowledge regarding the previous experience of the participants with blogging. The analysis of the participants' answers to the first four questions clearly show that 8 of the 9 participants had an idea what a blog was, however, not in detail. Only one of them had previous experience with blogging, and he admitted his blog was only about computer games. Thus, almost all of the participants were new to blogging in the beginning.

The sixth and eighth questions were about the purpose of blogs and their potential benefits in English writing classes. Participants apparently expected improvement in basic skills, with a focus on writing and reading skills. The focus was on writing and reading skills, however, P7 held a different point of view than her friends. She believed that blogs could improve their 'pronunciation', too, with the help of videos that could be shared.

The participants seemed to be aware of the benefit of the fact that everyone can see a post once shared. They agreed it would be 'great' to be able to reach their teachers' 'announcements' no matter what time it was. As P1 maintained:

'I can't come to school that day, but I can learn what I missed... I can learn because teacher can share on blog... or my friends. With this, I don't have an excuse for not doing homework... or writing a paragraph.'

Participants also thought this feature of blog would increase a sense of 'responsibility' in them and encourage them to complete their assignments 'within the given time'.

Blogging was seemingly expected to increase motivation levels of students, also, for different reasons though. P1, for example, maintained that they have a short attention span and tend to get bored easily. According to him, the videos shared through blogs can help raise their motivation level.

P4, on the other hand, admits to be an introvert, and then adds blogging can motivate her 'to write English' mainly because of the comments left by her friends. Participant 7 says she may 'feel motivated to complete homework' if she sees her peers doing it.

Blogging is believed to be more fun compared to classroom teaching. The participants express that they expect the use of blog to be 'fun', 'enjoyable', and 'encouraging'. They think blogging can induce their 'ambition' as P6 explains. They also agree that they will feel 'more comfortable' when they share a post than speaking or sharing anything in English in traditional classroom environment. Participant 4 also believes this experience will 'encourage' them to write in English.

The participants held the belief that blogging can 'improve relationships within the classroom'. P6, for example, expressed that blogging, with the help of 'comments', can increase 'the amount of communication among classmates.' P1 also believes the blogging project will be a good chance for 'socialising', especially for those who are 'introverts'.

With a focus on peer correction and peer interaction, participants also emphasised that with the help of blogs, they expected to have a chance for 'learning out of classroom', which they admitted was new to them.

The second semi-structured interview took place after the six-week blogging project, the answers of participants were expected to shed light on their feelings regarding the blogging experience.

According to the analysis of the answers, the participants mostly liked socialising through comments and sharing videos as well as funny or interesting pictures. They also believed it improved their basic skills in the target language. P4, for example, maintained that she 'improved' her 'writing ability'.

The blogging project also seems to have contributed to their confidence. According to P6, he felt 'relaxed in the virtual learning environment'. He added that he enjoyed the 'thinking time' the online platform provided them with.

When asked about the advantages of blogging in English writing classes, they firstly listed the 'ease of use'. They added they liked the 'language practice' it provided. They also reported that a shared online platform where they could post not only the assignments but also their ideas was beneficial and motivating. They agreed they could socialise and get to know each other better in a shorter time. The following comments by the participants reveal their thoughts regarding the benefits of blogging:

P2: 'I expressed my opinions easily because there was no interference'

P1: 'Blogging was motivating, and colourful!'

However, two of the participants added, although they liked blogging, the process 'wasn't without its disadvantages'. They reported physical discomfort and tiredness resulting from the long sitting hours in front of the computer. They also mentioned the difficulty of typing and how much time it took.

The feelings related to the blogging experience seemed to be positive for all of the participants. They said while blogging they felt 'safe', 'confident', 'motivated', and 'relaxed'. They also expressed that they experienced an increase in their self-esteem in English courses because of the relaxed learning environment blogs provided them with.

With positive feelings related to blogging, the participants also described their blogging experience with positive words. P1 thought blogging was 'helpful in learning'. P2 maintained that blogging created a 'relaxing atmosphere'. P3 said he found blogging 'a bit tiring, but still good'. According to P5 and P9, blogging was 'awesome and fun!'

4. Discussion

The interviews held at the beginning of the study revealed that participants expected blogging to improve their 'basic skills', which was confirmed by the second interview following the blogging project.

The participants, after blogging continuously for six weeks, reported they felt their 'writing ability', 'vocabulary', and 'reading skills' improved. They also added they started to feel 'more comfortable' when writing after the project. This may be the result of their constant exposure to the target language, as well as the relaxed atmosphere an online learning environment provided them with. The research conducted by Aljumah (2012) also suggested that blogging could result in enhanced writing skills, enlarged vocabulary, and improved grammar.

The participants admitted feeling 'relaxed' without the presence of their teacher or other students around

them. The participants enjoyed having control over when to share a post or when to read one. In addition to feeling relaxed, they reported being 'more open' to their friends and sharing more 'personal information' within a shorter time than it would normally take. Previous research also confirms that students tend to reveal personal information on their blogs even when not asked to (Leslie & Murphy, 2008).

The participants also reported that they liked being able to personalise their page, changing the colour of their writing, posting some sentences in bold letters and keeping their profile pictures updated. The students actively using their blogs changed their layout at least once throughout the project. One participant said that she liked changing the layout with an aim to 'reveal' her 'personality and preferences'. Others commented they liked how their friends' pages gave them clue regarding their 'lifestyle and hobbies'. Leslie and Murphy (2008, p. 5) also found out that their participants made use of technical features provided by blogs to 'reflect their personality and display emotions'.

Although the participants of Li's (2014) study reported traditional teaching could have supported collaborative learning more, participants in this study said that blogging improved the social interaction within the classroom, and helped them learn from not only their own but also their peers' mistakes. Comments are an important feature of blog which naturally leads to interaction (İstifçi, Lomidazde & Demiray, 2011). As a previous study (Wu & Wu, 2011, 327) reveals, too, blogging can start 'two or more-sided interaction'. Students, during the project, seemed to love receiving comments from their friends and teacher. One participant said he wanted to write more when he received comments. Another said he paid more attention to his writing style because he knew his friends were reading his posts, especially when they left comments. Aljumah (2012, p.109) also argues that 'the presence of a real audience' determines the quality of their posts. Vurdien's (2011) findings also emphasised the importance of peer feedback and how motivating it can be. However, despite the fact the students were eager to receive comments, the number of comments was fairly small at the beginning of the project, which only noticeably rose towards the end. This may be the result of their lack of linguistic ability in the beginning, as suggested by Leslie and Murphy (2008).

The participants in this study reported the ease of blogging as the most favourable advantage. The findings of Wu and Wu (2011) also showed that blogging was considered relatively easy by the users. Blogging was reported to provide participants with adequate amount of language practice. The participants of Aljumah's (2012) study also mentioned blog as being a beneficial writing tool.

The physical discomfort long hours of blogging caused, as reported by a few participants, seemingly did not affect the positive attitude towards blogging. All of the participants reported positive feelings regarding their blogging experience. The findings regarding the feelings about blogging experience are in line with Wu and Wu's (2012) study, which also reported positive feelings pertaining to blogging.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

As revealed by the present study, blogs can be used as efficient learning tools in EFL classrooms. Blogging can be a motivating factor for students for a number of reasons. First of all, blogs are easy to use and a good source of target language for learners. In addition, the real audience blogs provide seem to play a vital role in the work of writing students produce. Thus, EFL teachers might integrate blogging into their routine to attract the attention of students, particularly of those who have most likely been educated in traditional classrooms. However, using a blog requires a certain amount of technological competence in the first place. Thus, it's teachers' responsibility to improve their skills related to the use of technology before starting such a project. They should also ensure their students have access to the Internet on certain days for a certain amount of time to rule out excuses related to the issue. It may be beneficial to integrate technology into the traditional classrooms, instead of merely relying on technology. This study is expected to show that writing does not have to be a boring class, and that a number of changes may change the fate of the writing class altogether. In addition, researchers hope that teachers in Turkey will feel encouraged to try blogging as a teaching / learning tool, as it has already gained popularity around the world.

This study included 9 participants, however, as the observations revealed, the positive feelings related to blogging applied for the whole class (25 students) using the blog. A further study may benefit from a higher number of participants, as well as a questionnaire in addition to the interviews to back up the study. The project may be continued for a longer time, also, to see the long-term impact of blogging on students' learning and motivation level.

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Notes

Note 1. This paper was presented at the 2nd International Symposium on Language Education and Teaching in Rome, Italy on 20-23 April, 2017.