

*Original Research Article*

# The Effect of a Class Blog on the Academic Writing Fluency and Accuracy of Eighth Graders

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Abstract

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The study aimed at investigating the impact of using a class blog on enhancing academic writing fluency and accuracy of thirty male eighth graders at a private school in Mount Lebanon. One class served as the control class and was engaged in the traditional collaborative process writing approach. Students in the control class used the traditional writing process approach whereas students in the experimental class had to post their essays on a class blog where their classmates had to read and comment on their writings on the class blog. Before the intervention, the control and the experimental classes had to write descriptive essays which served as the pre- tests. The treatment lasted one academic year during which the two classes completed seven collaborative writing tasks. After the intervention, students also had to write descriptive essays which served as the post-tests. At the end of the study, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the participating teacher. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed statistically and thematically. It was found that this new digital forum seems to be more effective than traditional collaborative writing in motivating students to write longer and more accurate essays. This new digital forum allows learners to feel that learning can be fun by using these new tools.

**Keywords:** Academic fluency, academic accuracy, process writing, blog

## INTRODUCTION

Writing is recognized as an enormously complex activity (Olander, 2007). It needs time, effort, practice, learning, and teachers' instruction. Academic writing is particularly more problematic for second language and foreign (ESL/EFL) students. In their attempts to write compositions, second language students are usually challenged by problems of grammar in context and semantics. In a survey of seventy-two studies, Silva (1993) highlighted the difficulties second language writers have in terms of the composing process (e.g. planning and revising), and written text features (e.g. fluency, accuracy, structure) as this researcher summarized the distinct nature of writing in second language. Hinkel (2002) also notes that grammatical accuracy has a strong impact on the assessment of second language student

writing, and that students often lack the practice and do not apply the knowledge of the grammar they learn.

Writing accuracy is an important concern in the EFL writing classrooms. Students' writing performance is usually evaluated based on how accurate they are in lexico-grammatical areas, spelling and punctuation. In some classes students are asked to write after analyzing the main components of a sample text. They are actually required to imitate the organizational characteristics of the sample texts. This is what is done in product-based approaches to teaching writing. In process-product approaches, where a model text is present, students should also prepare their piece of writing after a careful examination of the sample text (Gholami and Bazarmaj, 2013).

## Theoretical framework

According to Raimes (1983), process-based approach mainly focuses on how students write. It is in parallel with constructivism which claims that each person is unique in terms of interpretation of the world. It is a learner-centered approach in which learners have control over processes of their writing. In other words, it is a challenging process involving various sub processes that occur not in a linear manner but cyclically and in varying patterns. Thus, producing clear effective writing is a hard and creative act in which meanings must be made explicit, terms clarified, and personal experiences transformed into language (Myles, 2002). As a result of latest developments in the technology that created an integration of writing into computers, this approach is reinforced by providing both collaborative writing opportunities and skill development using computer-based programs. Researchers believe that utilizing weblogs may have positive impact on language learning (Dizon, 2016; Downess, 2004; Kelley, 2008) even though it may be demanding for the teachers who are still not well trained to use this current forum.

One theory that underlies the use of blogs for English learning is the Collaborative Learning Theory, (Johnson & Johnson, 1989) which emphasizes interaction among learners. Using blogs facilitates collaborative approaches in writing (Godwin Jones, 2003). Research has confirmed positive uses of the blog which include writing for an audience and peer review, the development of a student's analytical skills and the development of a sense of community through a collaborative learning environment via weblog (Blackmore- Squires, 2010). Firstly, blogs have also been identified as tools that give a purpose to writing; students write for an audience and not just for their tutor. According to Blackmore-Squires (2010) students will be more thoughtful if they know they are writing for an authentic audience. Secondly, the blog could empower students to become more analytical and critical, in turn improving a student's self-confidence. In other words, writing a blog encourages students to think about their own opinions and also consider how their views may be interpreted by others before they publish their post (Oravec, 2002). Thirdly, writing on a blog aids users in enhancing their creativity and autonomy (Warschauer and Liaw, 2010). Fourthly, collaborative learning helps understanding and respecting each other's thoughts, beliefs and ideas, increase writing achievement, and greatly contributes social interaction among group members (Ozdemir and Aydin, 2015).

## Literature review

There has been a widespread consensus among scholars about the positive effects of process-based approach (Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1983). The process

approach lets students "manage their own writing" by giving students a chance to think as they write" (Brown, 2001, p. 336). That is, students convey their messages to the readers in written form through the complex writing process; prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Second, Nunan (1992) also affirms that the [process] approach also encourages collaborative group work between learners as a way of enhancing motivation and developing positive attitudes towards writing. For example, Ho (2006) examined 200 upper and lower primary school students to find what extent process writing helps to develop writing skills. Results showed that process-based writing is beneficial for both upper and lower level students date technology to improve writing in the classroom by using a blog and a Ning network. Results showed that process writing integrating with latest technology helped to improve writing skills, collaborative working and digital literacy.

Blogs provide various opportunities to both teachers and EFL writers. Fellner and Apple (2006) confirm the positive impact that blogs have on learners' fluency. The results of their study revealed improvements in writing fluency achieved when using blogs among a group of low proficiency, low motivation students. Besides, Montero-Fleta and Perez- Sebater (2010) found that students who were engaged in blogs to practice writing skills were able to write more fluently than students receiving traditional lecture-discussion and were more concerned in writing accuracy.

Sun (2010) carried out a study in order to find the effects of extensive writing by examining different phases of blog entries written by participants. The results of the study demonstrated that blogs might be useful in developing students' writing skills, boost motivation and stimulate learner autonomy. More recently, Alharbi (2015) also assure that using new forums such as blogs and wikis have a positive impact on academic proficiency. His study which was conducted on sixty EFL college students showed that blogs and wikis could improve not only reading and writing but also grammar proficiency and written fluency.

Finally, Dizon (2016) affirmed the positive impact of using blogs on academic fluency. The results of his study which was conducted on seventeen low-level and intermediate level students over a course of twelve weeks showed significant improvement. The low-level group made a significant improvement doubling the number of words written in the allotted time. Moreover, the intermediate level group also demonstrated a positive gain in terms of word count.

## Overview of the study

This study aims to investigate whether posting students' essays on a class blog would enhance students' academic writing fluency and accuracy in the EFL

Lebanese context. There are certain reasons that make the current study significant. First of all, the study contributes to the related literature in the scope of the efficiency of process-based writing in traditional learning environment and blog-oriented environment in the Lebanese EFL context. Then, it contributes to the literature in terms of the effects of the utilization of blogs in EFL writing instruction. In other words, the study constitutes to the literature on the effectiveness of the use of blogs on academic writing fluency and accuracy. Finally, the research is significant as it presents practical recommendations for teachers and learners. By bearing these concerns in mind, two research questions were asked to assess the effectiveness of using blogs in EFL academic writing performance in the scope of process-based-approach:

RQ1. What are the relative effects of using a class blog on the academic writing fluency of eighth graders?

RQ2. What are the relative effects of using a class blog on the academic writing accuracy of eighth graders?

## Hypothesis

The expected outcomes of the study are higher student engagement and motivation due to the ubiquitous features of digital learning, a stronger sense of autonomy and control over the academic writing process. Furthermore, a general improvement in the students' academic writing was anticipated due to the socially collective practice of peer editing and authentic publication opportunities.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The students participating in the study were thirty eighth graders (males) who are learning English as a second language. The sample was selected from a private school in Mount Lebanon since the researcher is a teacher and coordinator at the school. The number of students in each participating class was fifteen students. The students' ages were between 13 and 14 years.

### Tools

The data collection tools consisted of a pre-test and a post-test and an interview. The pre-test was administered before the inception of the intervention while the post-test was administered at the end of the academic year after seven months of the treatment. The scores of the two classes before the treatment were compared to their scores at the end of the study. Moreover, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher who

participated in the study to gauge her opinion regarding the use of the process-based approach and the blog in the study.

## Procedure

This quasi-experimental study used a three-step procedure: (1) administration of pre-test, (2) practice, (3) administration of post-test. The pre-test was administered during the second week of October 2015. All students had to write a descriptive essay about a memorable place they went to. Then, participants were assigned to control and experimental groups. During the practice process which lasted for seven months, participants in the control group wrote seven essays using the writing process approach and typed their essays on Microsoft word files, while the subjects in the experimental group posted their seven essays on the class blog. All the students in the class had access to their classmates' essays. Each student in the class had to read at least the essays of two of his classmates and comment on their essays in fifty words. In May 2016, the post-test, having the same content with the pre-test, was administered in order to compare the results of the two groups.

## Data analysis

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS software. The essays written by the subjects at the beginning and the end of the study were assessed by the researcher. Then, mean scores, standard deviations and standard error of means regarding number of words, grammar, spelling, sentence structure, word choice, and capitalization for both pre- and post-tests were calculated. Finally, independent sample t-tests were used to compare the data obtained from control and experimental groups.

## FINDINGS

An independent sample t-test was used to find out whether there was a statistically significant difference in the fluency scores of the pre-tests of the control group and the blogging group. Another independent sample t-test was used to find out whether there was a statistically significant difference in the accuracy scores of the pre-tests and post-tests of the control group and the blogging group. Table 1 below presented the results of the independent t-test of fluency scores.

Table 1 indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the fluency writing scores of the pre-tests ( $M=219.31$ ) of the control group and ( $M=242.76$ ) for the blogging group with  $p= 0.291$ .

**Table 1.** Comparison of fluency scores of the control and blogging class

	Pre				Post			
	Control	Blogs	% of variation	P-value	Control	Blogs	% of variation	P-value
<b>Number of words</b>	219.31	242.76	10.70%	0.291	285.69	297.65	4.18%	0.651

**Table 2.** Comparison of accuracy scores of the control and blogging classes

	Pre				Post			
	Control	Blogs	% of variation	P-value	Control	Blogs	% of variation	P-value
<b>Grammar</b>	1.92	3.88	101.88%	0.056	3.45	3.00	-13.16%	0.616
<b>Spelling</b>	0.92	0.29	-68.14%	0.078	1.45	0.38	-74.22%	<b>0.005</b>
<b>Capitalization</b>	0.77	0.53	-31.18%	0.563	0.73	0.25	-65.63%	0.176
<b>Word Choice</b>	1.54	1.65	7.06%	0.835	1.36	1.56	14.58%	0.707
<b>Sentence Structure</b>	2.38	2.59	8.54%	0.821	2.82	3.81	35.28%	0.273

Results also indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the fluency writing scores of the post-tests with (M= 285.69) for the control group and (M= 297.65) for the blogging group with  $p= 0.651$ .

These results also indicated that using blogs did not have a significant effect on the writing fluency of this experimental group since both the control and the blogging experimental group showed a gain in the word count.

Table 2 below showed the results of the accuracy scores of the control and the experimental classes.

Table 2 above shows that there was no statistically significant difference between the results of the pre-test scores of the control class in comparison to the results of the blogging class in any of the five tested categories. However, results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the post-test scores of the blogging group in "spelling".

First, results indicated that there was not statistically significant difference in "grammar" between the post-test results of the control group (M= 3.45) and the post test results of the blogging group (M= 3.00) with ( $p=0.616$ ) and percent of variation (-13.16) in favor of the blogging group.

Results also revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in "spelling" between the post-test scores of the control group (M= 1.45) and the post-test scores of the blogging group (M= 0.38) with ( $p= 0.005$ ). This decline in the number of grammar mistakes could be attributed to a positive effect of the experiment on grammar. Students could have learned from the remarks that their classmates had provided.

Results also revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in "capitalization" between the post-test results (M= 0.73) of the control group and the post-test results (M= 0.25) for the blogging group with ( $p= 0.176$ ). Though the difference was insignificant, there

was a steady decline in capitalization errors (-65.63%) percent of variation in favor of the blogging group.

Results also revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in "word choice" between the post-test results (M= 1.36) of the control group and the post-test results (M= 1.56) of the blogging group with ( $p= 0.707$ ).

Results indicated that there was no significant statistically difference in "sentence structure" between the post-test results (M= 2.82) of the control group and the post test results (M= 3.81) of the blogging group with ( $p=0.273$ ).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the claims from the researchers and the findings of the previous research, students using the class blogs were expected to significantly outperform those in the control groups in terms of academic writing fluency (Dizon,2016; Sun, 2010; Oravec, 2002) and accuracy (Alharbi,2015; Alshumaimeri,2011). However, the results of the current study refute the first hypothesis that assumed that posting students' essays on a class blog would lead to a statistically significant difference in the academic fluency post-test scores of the blogging class. In fact, both classes, the control and the experimental classes showed gains in their post-test scores of academic writing fluency. The second hypothesis that assumed that a class blog would also would lead to a statistically significant difference in the academic accuracy post-test scores of the blogging class was also refuted. In fact, there was a statistically significant difference between the scores of the control group and the experimental group only in "spelling".

As Web technology becomes an integral part of language education today, this study shows how a blog's

interactive features can transform the writing process which is considered one of the hardest skills from a traditional uninteresting task to a satisfying activity. This new digital forum allows learners to feel that learning can be fun by using these tools. The findings of the study also allowed for rethinking of the role that blogs can play in writing instruction, and how human-computer interaction, now an inevitable reality, can be judiciously incorporated in our pedagogic decisions. Despite the various advantages that this web tool can potentially bring to language instruction, it is important to note that technology itself does not guarantee better education (Sun and Chang, 2012) and that an interactive web discussion forum does not automatically make students learn. In the current study, students used the class blog minimally. They seldom referred to it to make alterations in their writings or to provide feedback for their friends to make the learning more interactive. Therefore, if this new digital forum is to be used as a platform to extend and encourage student learning, teachers need to monitor students' interaction, be actively involved, and provide timely intervention. In other words, they should be the catalyst that invigorate the interaction among students by leading the discussions and responding to queries online or in class to reach the optimal use of these platforms. After all, if we want to extend student-centred learning by allowing them to access their friends' writings, we should monitor this activity in order not to leave our inexperienced academic learners fumbling in the dark.

The present study confirms the conduciveness of the collaborative interaction on blogs in providing the element of joy throughout the writing process. However, the results presented are not meant to serve as evidence of students' success or failure in becoming academic writers in English. Building on what the study has found, longitudinal studies should be carried out in the future to further enrich our understanding of the long-term effects of using blogs, that is, whether posting students' writings on blogs and providing an authentic audience for their writing would change their perception about the notion of writing which in turn would affect the way they write academically. Moreover, more features from the blogs could be used in future research which may lead to improved outcomes. However, longer training sessions for both teachers and students, and more timely interference from instructors is highly recommended.

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