

Developing Students' Communicative Writing Skills through Blogging

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Abstract

Blogs have gained popularity among language teachers as a tool to develop students' writing skills. However, using blogs in teaching writing has not been widely practised in Indonesia despite the positive effects on students' learning as reported in the literature. This paper examines the development of students' communicative writing skills through blogging. The data were collected from students' writing based on different themes posted in a class blog over a five-week period. Using Franker's ELT blog rubric as a framework of analysis, the findings were classified into four codes of communicative skills in writing: creativity, critical thinking, voice and comment. The findings indicate a general improvement on the students' communicative skills in writing based on these codes. Students also responded positively towards the use of blogging in developing their communicative skills in writing. Not only blogging helped to develop their minds critically and evaluatively, they were able to write their thoughts and respond to others' point of view freely without the presence of the instructor and fellow friends. Such findings indicate that with the advance of technology in education, blogs can be an alternative medium for teaching writing in class, especially in this IR4.0 era.

Keywords: *Blog, EFL, Communicative Writing Skills*

Introduction

Blogs have existed in the cyberspace community since 1998 and have gained popularity among language teachers as a tool to develop students' writing skills. They are no longer seen as just an internet tool, but as a very useful medium of teaching and communicating with the students (Sullivan and Longnecker, 2014). As blogs are communicative in nature, using them in the classroom can make writing classes meaningful to the students of this digital generation as they can freely share their opinion and feelings through writing with teachers, peers and the public. This is attested by Chu, Chan and Tiwari (2012) that writing on blogs is a powerful tool for discussion in the modern digital area. The unique structure of blogs provides a dynamic platform for language learners as it allows students to publish what they write immediately, thus, see themselves as authors. As put forward by Warsehauer (2010), blogs can represent a tool to combine publishing and discussion of students' writing in a single medium.

Empirical studies have shown that blogging can help students improve their writing skills (Johnson, 2004; Pinkman, 2005; Zhang, 2010; Sun, 2010). It also allows cooperation (if it is done collaboratively), which

enables further improvement in the writing skills. In addition, blogging also improves the attitudes of EFL students towards English language learning in the EFL contexts. Using blogs in the classroom is also beneficial for the teachers too. The use of blogs can save time as teachers can give general feedback to classes as well as individual feedback on the blog.

Despite the pedagogical benefits as reported in the literature, using blogs in teaching writing has not been widely practised in the Indonesian EFL classrooms. This study, thus, explores the use of blogs in developing Indonesian EFL students' communicative skills in writing with the hope that instructors will consider adopting it as a tool in teaching writing in the classroom.

The Use of Blog in Teaching Writing

A blog is a web page with a diary or journal (Efimova, 2009). As the writing and editing of the information is managed through a web browser or handheld devices, such as smart phones and tabs, blogs can be considered as online journals. The journals, which are called entries, can be typed directly into the browser and can be published immediately on the internet.

Hamon (2011) asserts that blogs can be a powerful tool in learning to write as they can be continuously updated by the authors with their own words, ideas, and thoughts through software that allows the materials to be published quickly. The accumulation of writing and other contents can create learning notes and resources for others. As blogs are interactive, communication can occur between the author and readers in the form of threaded discussion through the author's and readers' responses.

Blogs can be set up to teach the writing skill in a communicative way. There are many types of blogs that can be utilized in the classroom such as tutor blogs, learner blogs, class blogs (Campbell, 2003), classroom news blogs, mirror blogs, showcase blogs, and literature response blogs (Zwalinski, 2009). All these blogs vary in terms of functions and contents. However, basically, they share the same features in developing students' communicative writing skills. Instructors may motivate, encourage, stimulate and provoke students to write through the materials posted in the blog. Students may react, respond and communicate with the teacher giving support and guidance. The form of evaluation may occur depending on the objectives set by the instructor.

This present study only examines the class blog used by an instructor in teaching writing to a group of EFL students. The instructor felt that this was an appropriate choice as a class blog involves collaborative work

between teachers and students (Campbell, 2003). Stanley (2005) concurs that this type of blog serves as an extracurricular extension of the classroom, motivating students to do further research and write in-depth about the topic mentioned in class. Besides, they can comment, and get feedback and correction or evaluation both from their friends and teachers. A common classroom activity using blog in a writing class may be illustrated by the following figure:

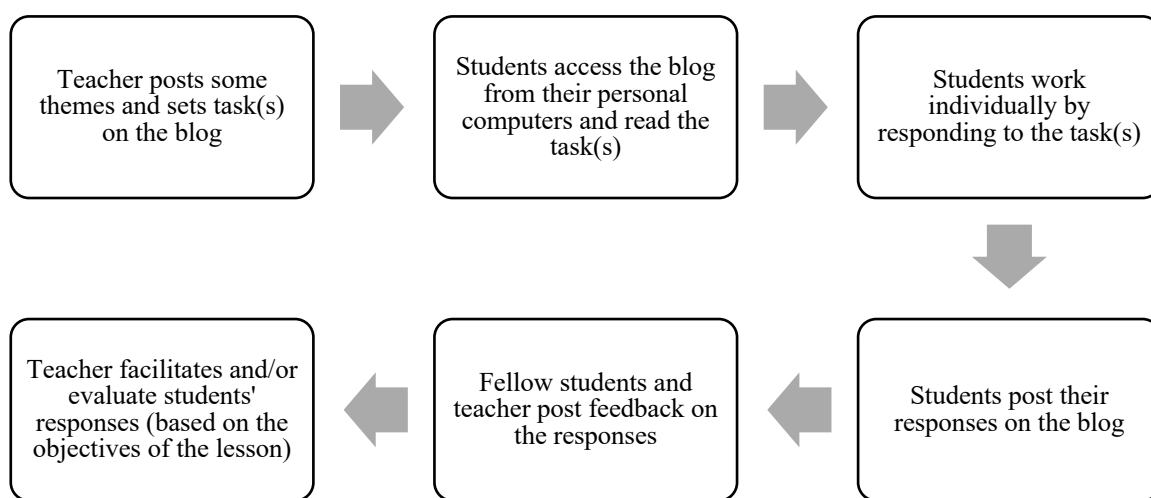


Figure 1: Common Classroom Activity Using Blogs in a Writing Class

The activity shows that the use of blogs in a writing classroom can be highly communicative and interactive. It demands participation from the blog group members. The writing product may improve as learners become aware that their responses are read not only by the teacher but by other students, too. This is in line with Alsamadani's (2018) study that investigated the effectiveness of online blogging for students' individual and group writing skills. The findings indicate that learners dramatically improved their writing skills in terms of content, word choice, style, language mechanics and other language elements. Along the same line, Wang and Woo's study (2010) saw the improvement of students' critical thinking in writing through blogging. The findings show that students display improvement in information sourcing, linking information to arguments and viewpoints justification.

Communicative Skills in Writing

Chu, Chan & Tiwari (2012) put forward that any kind of writing brings about communication. Communicative skills in writing is needed by a writer to enable him/her communicate his/her ideas and thoughts in meaningful form in giving arguments or comments, in a way that it can be received and easily understood.

These skills are reflected in the way a writer expresses his/her thoughts clearly. This paper considers a writer's communicative skills under the following codes: creativity, critical thinking, voice and comment.

Creativity in writing involves expressing one's thoughts and feelings with imagination, spontaneity and real. Hale (2008) defines creativity in writing as the writer's ability to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions, instead of simply stating facts and information. Writers may include creative elements in bringing out their ideas in their writing to reach out to the others. These include metaphors, poetic expression and entertaining non-fiction writing (Waldman, 2007; Grover, 2012; Gutkind; 2007). Additionally, writers can enhance their creativity by using features that are allowed in blogs such as pictures, sounds and hyperlinks, which is not possible in the traditional paper writing method.

As communication is described as the process of getting ideas across and receiving messages, it often involves the process of analyzing and evaluating. It is in this process that critical thinking is perceived as an important communicative skill. Pohl (2000) attests that critical thinking is categorized into creating, evaluating, analyzing, applying, understanding and remembering, of which creating, evaluating, and analyzing are the higher order thinking skills. Thus, a critical thinker would ask important questions when writing about a certain topic or able to identify well-justified conclusions. He/She may also be open to different viewpoints. In addition, a critical thinker may consider both sides of the coin when writing about an issue, and show a sense of inquisitiveness to enhance his/her personal wealth of information (Lai, 2011). Blogs can set as a platform to promote critical thinking. As put forward by McGuiness (2013), a writer's active thinking may happen as a result of writing blog posts and commenting on feedback received from the readers.

Voice is a form of self-expression and the substance of one's writing self (Amezotchi, 2009). In blogging, a writer's voice is defined as 'a feel or style that is suggested in his writing, which makes it personal to the lives of the reader' (Goins, 2011, p. 5). In other words, a writer can create a new pattern of writing based on their creativity in expressing their thoughts, feelings and emotions. There are different types of voices usually found in blogs, such as informative, friendly, humorous, inspirational and dreamy (Cutmore, 2012). Writers usually use their own voice style to connect with the readers and keep them engaged. Having this code of communicative skill helps writers acquire a sense of voice a community of writers in English (Bloch, 2007).

Comments are found in blog posts, usually immediately, following the post entry. In this section, readers can write their opinion or reaction to the content of the post. This may lead to a two-way communication between the writer and reader, leading to further discussion of the topic. The number and types of comments received from the readers may promote healthy and interactive community, as well as affect the writer's mo-

tivation to write. Generally there are six different types of comments, namely, disputative (comments that disagree with the writer and other commenters (Mishne and Glance, 2006), non-disputative (comments that do not bring about any disagreement (Mishne and Glance, 2006), critical (comments that make the writer's point clearer and more emphasizing (Muse, 2000), subjective (comments that are usually personal, expressing feelings or concerns with regards to the topic (Yang et al., 2009), positive (appreciative comments that lead to the writers feeling motivated (Grand, 2013) and negative (comments that contain non-constructive criticism and might be rude and offensive (Gunelius, 2013).

The Study

As mentioned earlier, although blogs have been successfully implemented in teaching writing, this is not a common practice in Indonesian classrooms, especially in the EFL writing courses. The objective of this study is to find out whether blogs can be used as a platform to develop students' communicative skills in writing. It is motivated by the fact that in this digital era, instructors need to utilize other platforms than the traditional pen and paper writing to encourage students to write and to enhance their skills in writing. Thus, the research questions for this study can be expressed as follows:

- a. Does blogging help develop students' communicative writing skills?
- b. What is the students' perception on the use of blogging in developing their communicative writing skills?

Data Collection Procedures

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection procedures. Prior to conducting the study, the researchers explained the nature of the study to both the instructor and potential participants before they could decide whether they would like to participate or not. Although the blogs could be accessed by public, the participants were given assurance that the data collected would only be used for the analysis of the study.

The main data for this study were blogs posted by EFL students in the class blog of an English Writing Skills (EWS) class in a public university in Indonesia. These students were from the International Undergraduate Programme who enrolled in the Argumentative and Descriptive course, which was offered as an elective subject. They had taken the Basic Writing and Paragraph Writing courses which were pre-requisites for the EWS courses.

The blogs were written based on weekly topics selected by the class instructor, which were: i) Four songs no.5, ii) Yogyakarta's next sultan: when feminism meets tradition, iii) A poem: Everyone's green, iv) Young Indonesians work toward political change, and v) International marriage. For each of the themes, the instructor prompted the students with some questions that could help instigate the students' thoughts and emotions in writing their blogs. In this study, ten students were randomly chosen from the class list. The blogs written by these 10 students were then taken each week over a five-week period as samples for data analysis, making it altogether 50 blog entries.

An interview was later carried out with these students to gauge their experience in using blogs for developing their communicative skills in writing. The interview questions were adapted from Pinkman (2005) on using blogs in the foreign language classroom. In addition, the instructor was also interviewed to find out the overall accomplishment of the students' writing.

Data Analysis

To find out whether blogging had helped to develop the students' communicative skills in writing, the analysis involved close reading of the blogs. Scores were given by the researchers on the four codes of the communicative writing skills, that is, creativity, critical thinking, voice and comment, found in the students' blogs. These scores were adapted from Franker's ELT Blog Evaluation (2011) rubric on these codes (Appendix 1). The scores were checked and moderated by another instructor who had more than twenty years in teaching writing skills. The frequency statistics was then used to get the total mean score of the codes. The composite scores for all the codes were determined by using total score in SPSS. The level of the codes was classified under four categories based on the mean score as shown below.

Table 1: Mean Score and Categories of Communicative Writing Skills (CWS) Code Level

Total Mean Score	Categories of CWS Code Level
0.00 -- 0.99	Very Low
1.00 – 1.99	Low
2.00 – 2.99	High
3.00	Very High

On the other hand, data from the interview were qualitatively reported based on the instructor's and students' account of their experience in using blogs in the classroom.

Findings and Discussion

In general, the analysis indicates an improvement of communicative writing skills in each of the codes examined for all the themes. According to the instructor, there was an overall improvement in terms of motivation in completing the writing activities. The students showed positive response towards the use of blogs as a medium. They were able to write freely without feeling scared of the instructor or embarrassed in front of their friends in the classroom. They also freely gave comments to each other. It seemed that the students were willing to embrace a new platform of learning writing readily.

It is also important to note that the learning of other skills in language, such as grammar, vocabulary and style, also occurred incidentally. The students would ask the instructor to check their writing, and they would revise, edit and proofread their work before posting it in the blog.

As for the communicative writing skills, there was an indication of improvement in the four codes of creativity, critical thinking, voice and comment each week. However, it is important to note that the scores indicating the improvement might not be gradual for each code as they largely depended on the topics of the blog. The analysis in Table 2 shows that the highest level of the students' communicative writing skills is the critical thinking code (2.7). This is followed by comment (2.6), creativity (2.48) and voice (2.46) codes.

Table 2: Overall Scores of Communicative Writing Skills Codes

Theme	Creativity	Critical Thinking	Voice	Comment
1: Four songs no. 5	2.6	2.7	2.5	2.6
2: Yogyakarta's next sultan: When feminism meets tradition	2.2	2.8	2.4	2.5
3: A poem: Everyone's green	2.8	2.5	2.6	2.7
4: Young Indonesians work toward political change	2.5	2.9	2.4	2.6
5: International marriage	2.3	2.6	2.4	2.6
Total	12.4	13.5	12.3	13.0
Mean	2.48	2.7	2.46	2.6

Critical Thinking

As can be seen in Table 2, the critical thinking code tops the participants' communicative skills in the blogs examined (overall mean score =2.7). The mean score ranges from 2.5 to 2.9 each week. The fourth theme records the highest score of 2.9 while the third theme records the lowest score of 2.5. Having looked at the scores and themes, it can be concluded that the participants' ability to give critical responses in the blogs

largely depended on the topics. The four topics (1, 2, 4 and 5) provided opportunities for them to respond critically to the discussion. Topic 3, on the other hand, was more on exploring their creativity.

As critical thinking is a desirable goal for higher education graduates, the use of blogs may be able to achieve this. The analysis of the blogs indicates that the students demonstrated two types of critical thinking in their blogs, i.e analytical critical thinking and evaluative critical thinking. Analytical critical thinking involves a writer to sort, screen and select ideas based on the information at hand while evaluative critical thinking involves one to evaluate existing information that can be collected from sources like example, experience or communication. In these blogs, the students were able to provide arguments, raise questions, make assumptions and even gave implications on the topics given.

Comment

The analysis shows that comment ranks second in the participants' communicative skills in the blogs (overall mean score =2.6). The mean score ranges from 2.5 to 2.7 each week. The third theme records the highest score of 2.7 while the second theme records the lowest score of 2.5. Having looked at the scores and themes, it is clear that blogging encourages two-way communication between the writer and readers. As attested by Ingold (2007), comments are an important feature of blog which naturally leads to interaction. In teaching and learning, this blog feature can be used to learn writing skills.

Leaving comments and responding to comments had also been an enriching experience for the students. Not only it provided opportunity for the students to practice writing, it also helped them to enrich their knowledge about the topics discussed. It is also indicated that teaching and learning took place in the comment section. The blog threads show that the instructor responded to and corrected the comments left by the readers. Students learned new vocabulary, styles and register, and grammar structure away from the conventional classroom platform. This is shown by their correct use of these elements in their later blogs. This is supported by Ranadhani (2018) who stated that teacher's comment helped students to improve their writing by communicating feedback to allow students to act, commit and change in their writing.

Creativity

The third highest score is creativity (overall mean score =2.48). Table 2 shows that the mean for the creativity code ranges from 2.2 to 2.8. The first and third themes record the highest mean of 2.8 and 2.6 respectively, whereas the second and fifth themes record the lowest mean of 2.2 and 2.3 respectively. The findings suggest that students' skill of creativity depended on the topic of discussion. The first and third

themes opened doors to creativity as students were asked to create their own poems and songs while putting in their thoughts about the content of the songs and poems posted by the instructor. High scores were awarded based on the creation of songs and poems, as well as expressions used in giving their opinion, such as idiomatic expressions and metaphors. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the students' creativity was enhanced through the insertion of pictures and videos. This is in line with Trisnaningsih's (2017) findings in her Project Based Learning that students' creativity and writing skills could be influenced by treatment. This is supported by Pawliczak (2015) who claimed that excellence in teaching writing may involve varied tools for thinking like journals, blogs, online discussion and dialogue journals, among others.

The second and fifth theme did not encourage creativity as they were more on the argumentative side. Thus, the postings mostly contained informative, direct and factual statements. Hence, it is important to note that, instructors need to choose relevant materials appropriate to the skill(s) to be developed or enhanced.

Voice

As mentioned earlier, there are various types of voice found in blogs like informative, friendly, funny, inspirational and dreamy. Bloggers usually choose their own style in voicing out their opinion. This is because a good and consistent blog voice leads to effective communication, more attractiveness and more fans. This may also affect the number of readers or followers of the blog.

In the present study, voice scores the least among the codes in the students' communicative writing skills (overall mean score =2.46). The analysis indicates that most common voice found in the blogs was informative. The contents mostly communicated opinion with facts or information of the topics. This is not surprising as the students were new to the concept of blogging. Thus, they had not found their own blog voice, and have yet to explore the various styles that they can adopt in expressing their inner voice.

Students' Perception on Blogging Experience

On the whole, the students' responded positively towards the use of blogging in developing their communicative skills in writing. They claimed that writing using blogs had provided them with motivation to write as they were able to develop their minds critically and evaluatively. They felt comfortable using the medium compared to the conventional writing in the classroom approach. The blog activities could motivate them to engage in more active and interactive writing. This was because they were able to write their thoughts and respond to others' point of view freely without the presence of the instructor and fellow friends. This is in line with *Akçay & Arslan's* (2010) study which found that blogs can help students who were uncomfortable

speaking up in the classroom, as they could become active participants in the online world. This is confirmed by Student 7's response in the present study that

"...because by using blog, we are not directly face to face with the teacher. This reduces fear, so, you become more confident in writing.."

The blogging activity also encouraged the students to communicate with each other. It provided an environment where they could freely express their ideas by leaving and responding to comments. As attested by Student 5,

"... Absolute freedom of expression. Well, you can still have your writing removed if you violate policies, but overall, you can just write about everything..."

Cho, Schunn and Charney (2006), put forward that blogging can start 'two or more-sided interaction'. The respondents stated that the blogging activities encouraged communication. One of the respondents in this study claimed that he wanted to write more when he received comments. Student 2 claimed that,

"...I built communication through material or some topic that is important for each other and other people who read also gave comments on my blog, and I answered their comments directly. I communicate directly with them..."

Most of the respondents admitted that the blogging activities had helped them improve their writing skills from the language aspects, which is important for effective communication. They viewed blogging as a positive tool to improve their writing style as they knew people would be reading their posts. Writing blogs had made them become careful about the use of style, register, grammar and structures. They made sure they edit and revise their writing before posting. As confirmed by Student 1:

"...If I want to write something, I will be careful on the pattern of grammar before I publish it. In this way we can improve our writing skills..."

The use of blogs, thus, can provide students with the opportunities and space to improve their writing skills. It can help students with their self-learning process, learning with and from others, and express themselves better.

Conclusion

This study has indicated that blogging can serve as a platform for students to develop their communicative skills in writing. The shift from teacher/instructor as audience to other students for their writing had increased students' motivation to write and voicing out their opinion freely. As attested by White et al. (2000),

writing on blogs is a powerful tool for communication in the modern, digital age. Blogging can also keep the students engaged as it allows creativity while communicating their thoughts. The findings, thus, suggest an alternative medium for teaching writing, especially in this IR4.0 era.

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Appendix 1

Rubric for Evaluating Student Blogs & ELT Blog Evaluation (Franker, 2011)

Element	Exemplary (3)	Proficient (2)	Partially Proficient (1)	Unsatisfactory (0)
Creativity	Postings are creatively and fluently written to stimulate dialogue and commentary.	Postings are generally well written with some attempts made to stimulate dialogue and commentary.	Postings are brief and unimaginative and reflect minimal effort to connect with the audience.	Postings are written in a halfhearted, disjointed manner that reflects no awareness of effective communication.
Critical thinking	Postings frequently demonstrate use of upper-level thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and	Postings sometimes demonstrate use of upper-level thinking and illustrate a thoughtful approach to the content.	Postings rarely demonstrate use of upper-level thinking and illustrate a thoughtful approach to the content.	Postings almost never demonstrate use of upper-level thinking and illustrate a thoughtful approach to the content.
Voice	Postings are written in a style that is appealing and appropriate for the intended audience and a consistent voice is evident throughout.	Postings are written in a style that is generally appropriate for the intended audience and an attempt is made to use a consistent voice.	Postings are written in a style that does not consider the audience, and the author's voice is difficult to identify.	Postings are carelessly written with no attempt to consider the audience and no awareness of author voice.
Comments	Writes comments on other students' blog postings that are consistently positive, respectful, and succinct while providing a meaningful addition to the discussion.	Writes comments on other students' blog postings that are generally positive, respectful and add value to the discussion.	Writes comments on other students' blog postings which often fail to show respect for other opinions.	No comments written.