

Analyzing the Impact of Blogging on Writing and Grammar Editing Skills of Engineering Students

Tarun Patel

Assistant Professor of English,

Govt. Engineering College, Gujarat Technological University, Gandhinagar

1. Introduction

Writing has long been considered an important skill for any graduate. It helps one cultivate understanding and an ability to think critically by comparing various pieces of literature. Long ago, it was a challenge to make students write and manage the drafts they produce, but with the advent of Internet and other Internet-based technologies, it has become easier – and so to enable and allow them to write more and compare their own writings with the ones produced by their peers.

Educators around the world have been using various Computer and Internet-based tools to polish their students' writing skills. Some of the tools which have been used excessively are Microsoft word, Blogs, Social media sites out of which blogging has been incorporated widely in various learning environments. Blogging has been with us for more than fifteen years now.

2. Benefits of blogs and blogging

The blogs have immense potential for improving teacher-student interaction in educational settings. Students find blogging activities valuable for language learning (Arani, 2005; Hall, 2005; Pinkman, 2005; Walker, 2005). College level students found blogging as a motivating activity as they were able to experience authentic writing in context (Brooks et al., 2004; Kavaliauskienė et al., 2006). It allows students to practice writing skills such as summary, paraphrases and development of voice (Brooks et al., 2004; Laitner, 2007).

Additionally, blogging gives the language learners an opportunity to practice using the language that they have learned in class (Pinkman, 2005), raise language awareness and promote learner

development (Kavaliauskiené et al., 2006), practice writing (Tu, Chen & Lee, 2007), share and receive feedback (Barrios, 2003; Kennedy, 2003; Laitner, 2007; Minugh, 2008) and present learners with a space to reflect on their language learning (Mynard, 2007).

Here are some more benefits:

- The use of blogs in a class allows students to see general comments as well as comments that are directed to them individually
- They can also see how their writing has progressed over time through blogging (Johnson, 2004)
- Blogs provide the students with an audience and comments, voice, conversations and dialogue, ownership and choices as well as archives (Davis, 2006, 2008)
- It gives students a sense of recognition – especially when there are responses for their blog posts i.e. writings
- The students get a bigger audience made up of their peers, teacher and other readers. It can motivate them to produce better quality of work
- Comments feature allows the students to receive feedback from not only the instructor but also from their peers (Blackstone et al., 2007; Ward, 2004)
- With blogging activities, discussions between students are no longer bounded by time or place (Flatley, 2005)
- Blogging also enables students develop their own voice via writing (Brooks et al., 2004; Davis, 2006, 2008)
- It also helps shy students to speak up in a classroom and share their ideas and to be heard by many (Downes, 2004; Song & Yuen, 2008)
- At the same time, blogging also has a potential for developing relationships between learners and building communities (Bloom, 2008; Tomei & Lavin, 2007)
- Another important development that can be seen in the students is – ability to think critically. Conversations and dialogues on blogs can promote critical thinking and the construction of knowledge among the students involved (Richardson, 2004, 2009)

- Blogging orientes the learners towards communication in the networked world (Kavaliauskiené et al., 2006)
- It also helps the educators to reach each and every student and establish individual interactions with them.

While considering the above mentioned benefits, it would be worthwhile quoting Richardson (2004, 2009) on how blogging helps students:

Blogging is a genre of writing that has great value in developing critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy. It allows students to reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think, carry on writing over a period of time and engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that leads to further writing and thinking. Students get to learn how to search for information on the Internet, read the information in order to understand it and respond to it by posting their thoughts on their weblogs or leaving comments to the original weblog writer.

3. Blogging and learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has become a prominent aspect of worldwide educational environments in past two decades. Learner autonomy is all about learners taking charge of their own learning (Usuki, 2002). Learner autonomy occurs when the student handles all aspects of the learning process from planning to assessing performance. It also allows the learners to autonomously make the decisions regarding what they will learn, how they will learn it and under what time frame the learning will take place (Sert, 2006).

Blogging serves as a great platform to encourage learner autonomy among the students enabling them to have a role in planning, controlling and evaluating their own learning). Blogging moves students away from teacher dependence towards independent learning. It also allows them to negotiate understanding and meaning about ideas and concepts through collaboration. While involved in blogging, students use each other as a learning resource and begin to take charge of and take responsibility for their own learning.

Working with peers to improve command over English language writing skills is also called 'comprehensible output' (Swain, 1995). It is as important as comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003) because learning takes place when a student encounters a gap in their linguistic knowledge of the second language (L2). Pedagogical blogging enables learners of English to receive and produce comprehensible input and output as it incorporates many of the principles underlying cooperative learning.

4. Integration of blogging in engineering course

Keeping the works where incorporation of blogging has resulted into positive manner showing the signs of improvement in various domains, it was integrated into first year engineering (Information Technology) class and thirty students were invited to participate in the experiment. Eighteen of them were males and twelve were females. Out of thirty, nine students had English as a medium of instruction during their schooling. They were having a reasonable understanding of Basic English grammar. But for many of them it was difficult to apply their understanding to contextualized grammatical errors in their own texts.

The students were informed about the advantage they would get while writing on blogs. They were told that they will get an opportunity to practice analyzing, synthesizing and presenting information using this modern writing platform. Students started using blog posts to introduce themselves, talk about their hobbies, their interests and their future plans. The majority of the tasks were such that they involved simple writing tasks and commenting on the classmates' blogs.

The students were devised into groups of five i.e. six groups in total and their group members for them were their 'blogging buddies'. The objective behind creation of these groups was to make them exchange comments on each other's blogs. Regular comments from the readers work as a motivating factor for the blogger (Blackstone, Spiri and Naganuma, 2007).

All the students were asked to comment on their blogging buddy's posts and they were also encouraged to comment on other members' posts within the blogging group. They were required to form their posts in formal English. Also, they were encouraged to post their comments and suggestions in the formal language only.

The students were also given in-class grammar improvement sessions to help them improve their own writing and also to gain an insight to help their peers. They were taught to correct article errors, pronoun errors and so on. They were also instructed to correct mistakes related to organization, structure and cohesion in their writings and also point out such mistakes in their blogging buddy's posts through comments. They were given a hands on practice on some of the common mistakes in English language writing to help them develop ability to find some and suggest corrections. Parallel to these sessions, their blog posts and comments on their blogging buddy's blogs were monitored by the teacher. It brought in the environment of seriousness among the students having their teacher as one of the evaluators and observers.

The students were allowed to blog and post comments from their comfort zones. Mostly they worked from the college computer labs and some of them used their laptops to work from home.

To promote further learner autonomy, in the classroom sessions, the students' blog posts and various improvement comments were discussed in open. This gave them insights if they were going wrong in their own writing or at the time of suggesting corrections.

5. Activity span and incorporation of other resources

The activity continued for eight weeks. In the process, the students were also informed about various language learning resources available on the Internet. One of them was esl.about.com which worked as a wonderful source of learning various grammar concepts and taking tests.

6. Analysis of blog posts and comments; findings

After the eighth week, all the data from student blogs were copied into thirty documents. The peer comments were also copied into respective documents for the analysis. It was found that the students had posted ten posts on their blogs on an average. And an average post had received eight comments from peers.

Here are some examples of suggestions made by the students through comments:

- A. It should be 'told' and not 'tell'
- B. You have written "Ya, I know that". I think you should be more formal and write "Yes, I know that"
- C. I think you have made many mistakes in articles in your post no. 3 and 4. Why don't you check it again and make corrections?
- D. Hi, I feel we cannot write 'peoples' because 'people' means many persons. So please replace 'peoples' with 'people'
- E. In your hobbies posts, you have said "advantages of reading". I think you should write "benefits of reading"
- F. You have written "twenty-first century" in the third line. Make it "21st century". It will look better.

After this, all the blog posts were analyzed to check whether the students had improved their written text in the editing process. It was analyzed from various aspects like articles, pronouns and tenses. The grammatical forms used by the students in their first posts and later posts were compared to find out any signs of improvement. The comments were checked to find if the students were able to give fruitful suggestions to their peers.

The following table shows the change in the length of the text produced by students during the course of experiment.

Post Nos.	No of words (Avg)
1	70-80 words
2	70-100 words
3	80-100 words
4	80-100 words
5	80-120 words
6	90-140 words

7	90-150 words
8	90-150 words
9	110-180 words
10	110-180 words

Table 1. Increase in text length

As the table shows, there was a remarkable increase in number of words produced by the students in their blog posts.

The following table shows the original and edited posts by the students reflecting the successful as well as unsuccessful edits.

Original post	Edited post	Successful edit	Unsuccessful edit
1. It was such a important occasion for me to recall.	It was such an important occasion for me. I could still recall it.	√	
2. He will study for half hour.	He will study for half an hour.	√	
3. Arun and Paresh are classmates and he has been friends for last 10 years.	Arun and Paresh are classmates and they have been friends for last 10 years.	√	
4. Nirav like study in the night.	Nirav likes to study at night.	√	
5. I go to book store and brought books.	I go to book store and bring books.		√

Table 2. Editing suggestions

There were more than 2100 such corrections / improvement suggestions on the blogs. Out of them more than 1600 were in the category of ‘successful edits’.

At the end of the experiment the students were asked to give their feedback on the program. A Likert scale survey was adopted to collect their views. The following table shows students feedback.

Sr. No.	Statement	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1	I liked the integration of blogging for writing improvement.	70%	30%	-
2	Blogging helped me to identify	55%	40%	5%

	mistakes in my own writing.			
3	Blogging helped me to identify mistakes in my friends’ writing.	60%	35%	5%
4	It required me to put my thinking skills at practice while finding mistakes.	62%	28%	10%
5	Blogging was a positive and interactive learning experience for me.	54%	39%	7%
6	I liked having blogging buddies.	40%	44%	16%
7.	My blogging buddies encouraged me to write better.	43%	38%	19%
8.	Feedback via comments helped me improve my writing.	58%	35%	7%
9.	Sharing my feedback was a challenging task.	60%	37%	3%
10.	In future, I would like to participate in such activities.	63%	32%	5%

Table 3. Student Feedback

As the table shows most of the students liked the idea of integrating blogging tasks in to writing improvement program. And 95% of the participants showed interest in participating in similar programs. This justifies the success of the blogging and grammar-editing blend for the improvement of overall writing skills.

Conclusion

This was a successful experiment which resulted into overall student satisfaction and engagement in the learning process. The best part of this trial was – student interaction – which is something difficult to achieve in a traditional learning environment. Here they were made to

use the technology which was something new to them and so they were excited to be a part of this experiment.

Integration of some other tools such as Facebook and Twitter could also show fruitful results in line of this experiment. Even blogging can be adopted to focus on different aspects of language with the new features such as video integration and audio uploads.

Also, the concept of self-paced learning was experienced by the students and it allowed the autonomy to be practiced inside the classroom with the use of Internet. Blogging activities can surely help the English language teachers in targeting different aspects of language teaching and improvement and help students stay motivated by the promotion of student-centered learning.

References

Arani, J. A. (2005). Teaching Writing and Reading English through a Web-Based Communicative Medium: Weblog. *ESP World*, 4(3). Retrieved September 23, 2011, from http://www.esp-world.info/Articles_11/TeachingReadingandWritinginESP_throughaWeb-BasedCommunicativeMedium.htm

Barrios, B. (2003). The Year of the Blog: Blog as Writing Practice. Retrieved July 11, 2011, from <http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/barrios/blogs>

Blackstone, B., Spiri, J. & Naganuma, N. (2007). Blogs in English language teaching and learning: Pedagogical uses and student responses. *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, 6(2), 1-20.

Blackstone, B., Spiri, J., Naganuma, N. (2007). Blogging in English language teaching and learning. *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, 6(2), p 1-20.

Bloom, J. T. (2008). A Community of Bloggers: A Study of Secondary School Class Blogs. PhD Thesis. Capella University. Retrieved September 13, 2011, from ProQuest.

Brooks, K., Nichols, C. & Priebe, S. (2004). Remediation, Genre and Motivation: Key Concepts for Teaching with Weblogs. Retrieved September 12, 2011, from http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/remediation_genre.html

Davis, A. (2006). Blogs and Pedagogy. Retrieved September 18, 2011, from <http://anne.teachesme.com/2006/05/31/blogs-and-pedagogy/>

Davis, A. (2008). A Vision for Classroom Blogging. *Learning & Leading with Technology*, 17.

Downes, S. (2004). Educational Blogging. *EDUCAUSE Review*, September/October, 14- 26.

Flatley, M. (2005). Blogging for Enhanced Teaching and Learning. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 68, 77-80.

Hall, J. M. (2005). Weblogs in English Teacher Training Discussion at JALT 2005 —Sharing our stories! Retrieved September 12, 2011, from <http://www.englisheducation.iwate-u.ac.jp/Hall/Blogs/BlogFrontPage.htm>

Kavaliauskiené, G., Anusiené, L. & Mazeikiené, V. (2006). Weblogging : Innovation for Communication in English Class. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 3(2), 220-233.

Kennedy, K. (2003). Writing with Web Logs. *Technology & Learning*, 23(7), 11-13.

Krashen, S. (2003). *Explorations in language acquisition and use*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Laitner, B. (2007, March 18). Dog won't eat this homework. *Knight Ridder Tribune*, p. 1

Minugh, K. (2008, April 10). Burbank students use blog to learn English. *McClatchyTribune Business News*. p. G1.

Mynard, J. (2007). A blog as a Tool for Reflection for English Language Learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 24. Retrieved September 8, 2011, from http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/pta_Nov_07_jm.pdf

Nehir, Sert. (2006). EFL student teachers' learning autonomy. *Asian EFL magazine*, 8 (2).

Pinkman, K. (2005). Using blogs in the foreign language classroom: Encouraging learner independence. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 1(1), 12-24.

Richardson, W. (2004). Reading and Blogging. *weblog-ed: learning with the read/write web*. Retrieved September 20, 2008, from <http://72.14.235.104/search?q=cache:2GKiLReaOC0J:weblogg-ed.com/2004/03/31/+reading+and+blogging&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=5>

Richardson, W. (2009). *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.

Song, H. S. Y. & Yuen, M. C. (2008). Educational blogging : A Malaysian university students' perception and experience. Paper presented at ascilite, Melbourne. Retrieved September 18, 2011, from www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/melbourne08/procs/song.pdf

Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidelhofer (Eds.), *Principle and practice in applied linguistics: Studies in honor of H.G. Widdowson*, pp. 125-144. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tomei, J., & Lavin, R.S. (2007). Weblogs for building learner communities. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT 2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Tu, C.C., Chen, P.C., & Lee, M.Y. (2007). Fostering EFL Learners' Writing Competence through Web-Based Guided Writing. *WHAMPOA- An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 53, 224- 244.

Usuki, Miyuki. (2000). Promoting learner autonomy: learning from the Japanese language learners' perspectives. ERIC: FL026604.

Walker, J. (2005). Weblogs: Learning in public. *On the Horizon*, 13(2), 112-118.

Ward, J. (2004). Having a BALL with Blog-Assisted Language Learning. *LORE: An EJournal for Teachers of Writing*. Retrieved September 21, 2011, from <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/lore/digressions/content.htm?dis13>