Using Blog to Enhance Writing Skill through Story Writing

Dilip Barad

Dept. of English,

M.K. Bhavnagar University, Bhavnagar

dilipbarad@gmail.com

Given the evidence that active participation in learning plays such a positive role in education, (we) find it surprising that around the world most classrooms are still predominantly lecture based. We have learned that the act of using what we learn helps a great deal in our ability to retain information. (Rhoades, 2013). If there is one thing in the learning pedagogy, which supports 'active participation' and 'act of using what learner's learn', it is story writing.

Story is a panacea. It is cure-all for all sorts of problems. As all sorts of learners, be it auditory or kinesthetic or visual; or be it kids or grown up adults or old grannies; or be it fast or slow learners; all and sundry, finds attraction is learning through stories. Stories have power to stimulate, revitalize, rejuvenate, energize, and exhilarate the learners. What else teachers want if such learners are in the class! Half of the battle is already won! The role of the teacher is done; the learning gets a smooth take off from here. It is well observed by Myrtis Mixon and Philomena Temu – "Stories told and read at home and school both entertain and educate young learners. Using stories in the classroom is fun, but the activity should not be considered trivial or frivolous." (First Road to Learning:Language through Stories, 2006). These last words 'should not be considered trivial or frivolous' are very important. We should think of wider pedagogical validation for learning through stories.

Pedagogical validation for learning through stories

Several researches have supported and validated the idea of learning through stories. Cortazzi refers to the idea that storytelling is essential to education and specifically to language teaching. (Narrative Analysis, 1994). Zipes(1995) and Morgan and Rinvolucri (1992) observe stories as elementary part of the whole language approach to learning,

influencing the "whole person" and stimulating to the subconscious. (Creative Storytelling) (Once upon a time: Using stories in the language classroom.). According to Brumfit and Johnson (1979), reading or telling stories in class are a natural way to learn a new language. (The communicative approach to language teaching).

Pedagogical support for learning through blogs

Having established importance of stories and its pedagogical implications, we should, now, look at another important aspect of this article i.e. blog. Gale of change is blowing in the pedagogy of Teaching English Language and Literature (TELL). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a catalyst agent. ICT has initiated new possibilities into the classroom. The marriage between education and Internet technology has made a deep impact on perspectives about teaching and learning. Technology, today, has revolutionized the way teachers taught foreign/second language. (Barad, Experimenting ICT in Teaching English Language and Literature, 2009). In fact, the relationship between teacher and taught has undergone a phenomenal change. (Barad, Pedagogical Issues Related to Speaking and Listening Skills & Sound Editing, 2009) The role of the teacher, the nature and context of learning, as well as the function and relative importance of course content have all been challenged and redefined. Technophobic teachers have no place in this new world order. (Barad, Experimenting ICT in Teaching English Language and Literature, 2009).

Specifically speaking about the blogs in pedagogical theory, the case study findings of Pham Vu Phi Ho and Siriluck Ushaha (2009) said that 'students expressed positive attitudes toward blog-based peer response activities'. (Blog-Based Peer Response for EFL Writing: A Case Study in Vietnam, 2009). Will Richardson observes: "Thousands of teachers and students have already incorporated Weblogs into their classrooms and into their practice. Blogs, as they are known, are easily created, easily updateable web sites that allow an author (or authors) to publish instantly to the Internet from any Internet connection. They can also be interactive, allowing teachers and students to begin conversations or add to the information published there. Weblogs are the most widely adopted tool". (Blogs, Wikis,

Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms, 2010). Thus, blogs are considered as very important tool for the pedagogical purpose in English language learning. Even the study by Triona Hourigan and Liam Murray has revealed the fact that "the potential impact of the blog writing phenomenon upon teaching and learning contexts reveals an important area for consideration for all university educators, and in particular for e-learning practitioners. (Using blogs to help language students to develop reflective learning strategies: Towards a pedagogical framework, 2010). Similarly, Di Zhang's research also supports the inclusion of blogs in pedagogical theory. (The Application of Blog in English Writing, 2009).

The Methodology: Cooperative Learning, Activation Technique, Alternative Assessment

After brief overview of pedagogical support for learning with blog, let us have a look at the methodology of the experiment under consideration. In this experiment, an amalgamation of traditional techniques (i.e. communicative language teaching, alternative assessment, cooperative learning, activating material etc) with technology (i.e. blog) is tried out and synergized result is analyzed. Most teachers have seen the reactions students can have to tasks and activities that they do not find engaging: the glassy or rolling eyes, the unfocused behavior, and the cries of "Not again!" (Rosenerg, 2009). However, if the teacher makes use of blogs for teaching writing skills through story writing, the learners can be actively engaged in the learning process. Both, 'story writing' and 'blog' are very effective activation material. If used with 'Activation techniques', which, are tools to make materials and tasks more interactive and more learner-focused, encouraging students to take more responsibility for their own learning (Rosenerg, 2009), they can work wonders in learning writing skill.

Thus, with the help of cooperative learning (Rhoades, 2013) and activation technique (Rosenerg, 2009), we will see how three groups of students with 4 students in each group practiced story writing and came up with significant generation of quality language. The language generated in this group activity has given us three different styles of writing also. Well, for several reasons, researchers and practitioners conclude the ideal size for a group

is four students (Richards & Bohlke, 2011) (Kagan & Kagan, 2009) and we followed the same pattern in this experiment. The teacher practiced alternative assessment as discussed by Ghazi Gaith in 'Using Cooperative Learning to Facilitate Alternative Assessment'. (2004). Alternative assessment is a useful means of gathering evidence regarding how learners approach, process, and complete real life tasks in the target language (Gaith, 2004) and in this experiment the teacher used *'Observing students at work'* as alternative assessment technique. Observing students at work provides valuable information regarding a number of core objectives related to student behavior, for example, work habits, persistence in completing tasks, and development of leadership and social skills. These skills include giving encouragement, respecting others, using a quiet voice, staying in-group, and checking for understanding. (Gaith, 2004).

The Experiment: Using Blog for writing skill through story writing

Three groups with four members in each were given a blog link - http://b4tl.blogspot.in/2009/08/story-writing.html (Barad, Story Writing, 2009)–, which has a brief outline of the story and an image of the lion and the mouse. The story of 'The Lion and the Mouse' (Wikipedia, The Lion and the Mouse, 2014) is quite known story to all the students. The students were asked to brainstorm the image. Brainstorming has but one rule: there is no such thing as a mistake. Anything goes; all ideas are equal and welcome. To practice brainstorming, teachers should draw on topics that students know and care about. (Rosenerg, 2009). While the students brainstormed the story, teacher observed them forming the group, assigning role to each other, emergence of the leader, his/her taking control of the group and all students do the assigned tasks. The teacher roamed around and guided students wherever they found it suitable consulting the teacher. As the students were supposed to give the outcome of their group task in form of 'comment' below the blog post shared with them, they were asking for some technicalities. As the final draft was to be typed and submitted, each group should have one member who is good in typing and knows a bit of blogging. The teacher took care of this, at the beginning, and the groups were

formed keeping this in mind. During brainstorming, the following questions were raised to the teacher:

- Should the story be written in past tense or present tense? (The teacher gave them freehand in the use of tense. The only condition was to be persistent with the tense used in the story)

- How about using adjectives and adverbs? Should it be used in abundance or wherever necessary? (Again, freehand was given to the students – with a caution to be used suitably.)

- Should it be written in formal or informal tone? (Students were informed to write in the manner they find convenient – with a caution for the usage of slangs.)

- Can the story be written in form of a 'play' with dialogues? (As the students were of the postgraduate class of major English literature, this was expected. There was no such binding regarding prose or play or poetic writing. Though, there was no question of writing the story in poetic form.)

- Apart from these, there were some technical questions regarding blog login, commenting, recaptcha etc. These technical issues were demonstrated on central screen by the teacher. As there was one experienced student in each group, the problems were resolved without glitch and interruption.

Thereafter, the member of the group who was to write the first draft of the story prepared it and the one to read it aloud read it, in their respective group. Several corrections were suggested in the story to make it grammatically error free and have a flow of the narration rather than a dull non-fictional writing. This sort of 'peer composition' enables students to assist each other in generating ideas for writing and incorporating peer feedback in order to improve their written work. (Gaith, 2004).

The final draft was to be posted as comment under the blog shared by the teacher. (Barad, Story Writing, 2009). This was the most important step in this entire experiment. It is not the technicalities or any sort of difficulties in doing so. Neither was it the objective of this

experiment to teach students 'how to blog or how to comment under a blog post'. If this was learned, it was by product of this experiment. It was observed by the teacher that the students were new to blog, learned about the learning potential of blog and self-publishing. This learning went on helping them in self-learning later on during their studies. That was the learning that happened, an unintentional learning. Here, in this experiment, this step of using blog instead of pen & paper for story writing was intended for different purpose. It has been seen that many teacher avoid group activities and learning for reasons like:

- it leads to chaos and indiscipline in the class (Rhoades, 2013) (Sulich, 2004)
- the outcome becomes difficult to manage
- the assessment of the group becomes hazardous
- the grading of the group activity becomes challengeable.

Gena Rhoades and Magdalena Sulich discussed interesting ways to tackle the problem of chaos and indiscipline in-group management, but they have not said a thing about assessment and grading or the outcome of the group. There should be transparency in grading assessment of group activity if it is to be graded for final mark-sheet. Therefore, to find a right answer to all the above-discussed issues, which makes teacher reluctant in using, group activities, is to bring in technology. The blog was found to be easy to handle and user-friendly, so it was the obvious choice among the gamut of Web 2.0 tools available.

Let us see how it worked. The change from pen & paper to blog brought in one vital difference in entire activity. This was a very important change, which took the outcome at a greater height. In pen & paper mode, students know that nobody outside the class is going see their activity. Whereas, in blog, the activity will be seen by one and all, including their parents, friends and relatives. This makes them conscious and motivates them to walk an extra mile in the activity. They seriously workout the drafts to see that they are free from language errors and tries to make it as better as possible. This simple trick of putting the task online solves the problem of 'indiscipline' (Sulich, 2004) in form of not taking work seriously and performing the task with sincerity. The adult students do not pose discipline problem as that of children. The indiscipline for adult is not to take the tasks seriously and

do it for the sake of doing it. However, if the task is to be read by anyone online, his or her attempts are genuine and the result is far better than expected. Secondly, the outcome can be managed well in form of comments under teacher's blog post. No worry about the paper being lost or damaged with the passage of time or in hurry to file the documents. It also helps in better portfolio management. (Rosenerg, 2009). It gives good opportunity for transparency in assessment. As all the students, their parents and other stakeholders can see the tasks performed, their faith in system in reinstalled. There is a feeling of faith in the grades. Besides, it provides a very good learning for one and all. The slow learners get an access to the tasks performed by the fast learners. The class learns together. The goals of cooperative learning are achieved with greater degrees of fulfillment than doing the same thing on pen & paper mode.

Enhanced writing skill - Three styles of writing in English language

Working thus, in groups, putting into practice the aspects of cooperative learning, teacher doing the job observing the students as a part of alternative assessment and the activation technique at its best in form of blog-comment, the outcome is supposed to be very interesting. The outcome is very significant and gives us ample opportunity to discuss.

Let us see the stories written by the three groups:

The story written by Group 1:

Once a lion was sleeping beneath a tree suddenly, a rat came to play there. It climbed over the body of the lion. It was unknown to the dangers and it started playing with whiskers of the lion. Soon the lion woke up and roared angrily. The rat started trembling. The lion was ready to savour the rat. The rat begged the lion to pardon and promised to help him in the hours of need. At that time, the arrogant lion smugged at the rat and left it alive. After some days, the lion was trapped by hunter in the net. The lion began to roar for help. Soon the rat came with fellow friends and saved the life of lion. And then they were friends forever. The moral of the story is - One never knows how one can be helpful to others.

(Word count 144)

The story is written with simple vocabulary. The sentence structure is also very simple. The connectors are not used effectively. A few punctuation errors can be identified. Some sentences begins with conjunctions (i.e. 'And'). It should have been avoided.

The Story written by Group 2:

Once upon a time, in a thick and dreadful forest, a lion was sleeping beneath the tree. Suddenly, a cheerful rat came to play for a while. There he saw a lion. Unknown to the dangers of lion, he climbed over the body of the lion and started playing with his whiskers. Suddenly, the lion woke up and roared in anger. The rat was trembling in fear. Watching a trembling rat, the lion pitied him. The rat was ashamed for his deed and begged to be pardoned. He also promised the lion that he would help him in his critical times. The lion, in a mood of disgust smugged at rat and left him alive. Then, one day a group of hunters trapped the lion in a net. A poor lion roared for help. As soon as the rat came to know about the trapping of lion, he came with a few friends and cut the net. In this way, he saved the lion. After that incident, they remained friends forever.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY:

1. A friend in need is a friend indeed.
2. Never underestimate anyone in your life because you never know how one can be helpful to others.
3. Friendship is like water, noshape, noplace, notaste. But it is still essential for living.

(Word count 221)

This story is written with richness in vocabulary in form of adjectives like 'thick and dreadful forest', 'cheerful rat', 'trapping' etc. There is a mixture of a few complex and compound sentences with by and large simple sentences in this writing.

In this writing, we found several typos. Here, the corrected version of the story is presented. The original with errors in space, capitalization and punctuation can be read on the blog. (Barad, Story Writing, 2009).

The story written by Group 3:

The arrogant Lion was sleeping beneath a barren tree and his arrogance, too, was, adding even bitter barrenness to the nature by making it dismal and gloomy. In such atmosphere, small, innocent infant Rat came in a jovial mood. Being in jovial mood infant started playing with the lion by climbing over the body of the lion without knowing the danger in it. In his pleasing mood, the rat continued to play with whiskers of the lion. On such pleasing atmosphere where tree forgot to blossom, wind forgot to blow, they got their charm and sense of being a part of nature. But before such happened the lion woke up and roared angrily. Everything became barren as it was before. The rat got trembled. In his fury, the lion was ready to savour the rat. The rat, innocent and small creature succumbed and begged to be pardoned. This small creature assured him to help in the hours of need in the best possible way he 'CAN'.

But, how can a small creature help 'A KING'? The king smugged the rat and gave him a chance to live.

The flow of time never remains the same. After few days, the king was trapped by hunters in the net. It was so called pity of him. He craved and roared for help. The rat, being a being of blood and flesh, without thinking anything came with fellow friends and anyhow managed to save the King by cutting the stings of the net. Only afterwards, the lion understood the value of friendship and became the friends forever. (Word count 263)

In this story, we find better vocabulary than the previous two versions. For instance, the adjectives and adverbs like 'arrogant, barren, bitter barrenness, dismal and gloomy, blood and flesh, etc. The sentence structure is quite rich with connectors like 'being in …..'.

If we compare these three stories, we find that all three of them have distinct style. The level of language and the complexity of sentence structure increases as we move from first to the third one. All three stories have a distinct mark of various styles. We can see how the image of a well-known fable can lead to the generation of language in variety of ways. None of the stories are untrue, yet all of them have different language to tell the same story. If

one group has said it in 144 words, the other said it in 221 words, the third one in 261 words. If the previous stories were written with simple expressions, this has more of literariness in its writing style. The prose of first story seems lifeless (not in negative sense). It is short and simple but it lacks energy. It does not engage the reader with the story. It may be because it does not make use of action verbs or adjectives or adverbs. The phrase like 'rat came to play' is more vague expression. If this vague expression is questioned 'how', it helps energizing the prose. The third story mentions same as 'Rat came in a jovial mood'. The third story makes use of some lovely adjectives. The adjectives like 'arrogant', 'barren', 'dismal and gloomy', 'innocent' etc helps in creating a beautiful word picture. The lack or minimal use of adjectives in first two writings makes the prose look languid and listless. The third story creates the picture of exactly what is going on. It supports the idea of 'creation', which is the ultimate goal of learning as per Bloom's taxonomy, which identifies creativity as - "It builds a structure or pattern from diverse elements. Put parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure." (Bloom, 1956). The third story with the use of adjectives and adverbs gives a sense, adds strength to sentences. It creates word picture. The details engage the reader. The liveliness, which leads to better engagement of reader, increases in each of the three stories. The gradual growth of the prose from short and simple (which is also quite beautifully written story) to more engaging, lively, energetic prose is worth taking note in this experiment. All the three groups created the stories, which are very significant examples.

The self-evaluation by the learners can help them to understand where they stand in the proficiency of writing skills. The teacher's role as an evaluator is minimized. There is self-learning on the part of learners through this mode of teaching writing skills. It was observed by the teacher than the learners are not using connectors like 'however, nevertheless, in whatever way, although, nonetheless etc. There is more use of 'and' and 'but' which also tells about the learner that they are at intermediate level in learning

English as a second language. With reference to CEFR (Wikipedia, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2014), we may infer from the writing skills of the above groups that they fall under following categories:

Groups	CEFR	Description
Group 1	A2 – Waystage to elementary	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
Group 2	B1 Threshold to intermediate	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Group 3	B2 Vantage or upper intermediate	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that

		makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

[Caption: Table1: Based on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages] (Wikipedia, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2014)

It is worth noting that none of the students who worked in these groups was able to secure C1 or C2 in the CEFR exam in the following month of this experiment. The members of group 3 were able to reach B2, which was the highest.

Conclusion

Thus to conclude we can say that using various tools and techniques which modern technology gives us an opportunity to explore incredible possibilities and can make a big difference in the learning of writing skills. It is not to say that the traditional classroom methods should be scrapped off. It is not to prove that technology is panacea. It is not to say that technology will replace traditional pedagogy and will reinvent new one. Nevertheless, time demands to synergize the traditional approach with the modern technology. In this experiment we have successfully synergized traditional techniques like communicative language teaching, cooperative learning, alternative assessment, classroom management, activating material, story writing etc with the technology like blog. This experiment yields wonderful results when all the traditional classroom techniques were performed in language lab over the internet-connected devices. Only one web tool i.e. blog was used to converge with traditional techniques. However, the openness of the blog, the ability of the blog to go out of the classroom, the potential of blog to reach beyond the limited frontiers of the classroom, the level of transparency it offers, the capacity of cooperative learning it offers and above all its accessibility (anywhere, anytime, anybody), when synergized with traditional pedagogy, the results are incredible. The learning happens. The teacher, now, no need to be the *sage on the stage*; s/he can better be a *guide by the side*.

Works Cited

Barad, D. P. (2009). Experimenting ICT in Teaching English Language and Literature. *AsiaCall Online Journal , 4* (1), 47-57.

Barad, D. P. (2009). Pedagogical Issues Related to Speaking and Listening Skills & Sound Editing. *ELT Weekly , 1* (27), 39-47.

Barad, D. P. (2009, Aug 4). *Story Writing.* Retrieved June 4, 2014, from Blog 4 Teaching & Learing: http://b4tl.blogspot.in/2009/08/story-writing.html

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain.* New York: David McKay Co Inc.

Brumfit, C. J., & Johnson, K. (1979). *The communicative approach to language teaching.* Oxford: OUP.

Cortazzi, M. (1994). Narrative Analysis. *Language Teacher* , 157-70.

Gaith, G. (2004). Using Cooperative Leanring to Facilitate Alternative Assessment. *English Teaching Forum* , 26-31.

Ho, P. V., & Ushaha, S. (2009). Blog-Based Peer Response for EFL Writing: A Case Study in Vietnam. *AsiaCall Online Journal , 4* (1), 1-29.

Hourigan, T., & Murray, L. (2010). Using blogs to help language students to develop reflective learning strategies: Towards a pedagogical framework. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology , 2* (26), 209-225.

Kagan, S., & Kagan, M. (2009). *Kagan Cooperative Learning.* CA: Kagan.

Mixon, M., & Temu, P. (2006). First Road to Learning:Language through Stories. *English Teaching Forum* , 14-32.

Morgan, J., & Rinvolucri, M. (1992). *Once upon a time: Using stories in the language classroom.* Cambridge: CUP.

Rhoades, G. (2013). Minimizing Chaos through Cooeprative Classroom Management. *English Teaching Forum* (4), 28-34.

Richards, J. C., & Bohlke, D. (2011). *Creating Effective Language Lessons.* Cambridge: CUP.

Richardson, W. (2010). *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* (3rd ed.). USA: Sage.

Rosenerg, R. (2009). Tools for Activating Materials and Tasks in the English Language Class. *English Teachign Forum* , 1-27.

Sulich, M. (2004). Keeping Discipline in the Classroom. *English Teaching Forum* , 32-35.

Wikipedia. (2014, Jun 4). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.* Retrieved Jun 5, 2014, from Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages

Wikipedia. (2014, Jan 26). *The Lion and the Mouse.* Retrieved June 4, 2014, from Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lion_and_the_Mouse

Zhang, D. (2009). The Application of Blog in English Writing. *Journal of Cambridge Studies , 4* (1), 64-72.

Zipes, J. (1995). *Creative Storytelling.* New York: Routledge.