


Bloggging for Collaborative Learning in the Writing Classroom: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The primarily qualitative analysis reported in this paper is to investigate how the students, in a student-centered pedagogical focus, perceive their own learning progress in e-peer feedback activities, including the effectiveness of the use of blogs for e-peer responses in an L2 writing class. Thirty-two second year Vietnamese students at a university in Ho Chi Minh City participated in a 15-week writing course. Data collection was from the 20-item questionnaire and eight semi-structured interviews. Results of the study revealed that when students perceived good progression in their writing skills when they got involved in e-peer feedback on the blog and their writing was longer after revisions. In addition, the students highly evaluated the use of blogs for e-peer feedback activities because of its usefulness and effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

E-Peer Feedback, Global and Local Areas, Peer Response, Revision, Writing Quality

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the role of the CMC to implement e-peer feedback in writing classrooms has become a focus for research. Applying e-peer response activities can empower students in the learning process and make writing classes more collaborative. Working in the technological environment allows students to take more active and autonomous roles when seeking feedback since they can ask questions whenever they wish and take the initiative in discussions (Warschauer et al., 1996). Student conferencing makes discussions more “student-centered”, fosters a sense of communication, encourages a sense of group knowledge, and increases student participation (Warschauer, 2002). Braine (1997), Sullivan and Pratt (1996) assert that putting students to work together in the technological environment can lead to better writing products and more focused quality peer response.

To some extent, literature has argued about students’ preferences and enhancing writing quality based on peer feedback. The first aspect of the debate relates to the preferences among students towards the e-peer responses. It is worth noting the students’ perceptions of e-peer response in order to get the most collaboration in the learning process as the methods that match particular students’ learning style or preferences often work best (Treglia, 2006). According to the “student-centered” approach, students are considered as the central subjects in the teaching/learning process. There should be a high level of agreement from both the instructor and the students to gain effective results

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in the learning. Pedagogically, when the classroom instructor obtains a high degree of agreement from his or her students, he or she will have a better chance of gaining the students' collaboration in the classroom activities; successful of teaching will emerge from this. However, it is not an easy phenomenon to investigate. DiGiovanni and Nagaswami (2001) examined students' responses in both electronic and traditional modes of peer review to see whether online peer review could become a viable option to the traditional peer review and found that students preferred face-to-face peer review to online peer review because students felt more comfortable to talk to their peers face to face rather than by computer. Similarly, Tuzi (2004) claimed that the students in the study preferred traditional peer response to e-peer response even though the e-peer response had a greater impact on revision than traditional peer response. Relating to writing quality, Sullivan and Pratt (1996), Pham and Usaha (2013), and Song and Usaha (2009) found that the writing quality did improve in the e-peer response mode from the first to the final drafts. However, Braine (1997), and Braine (2001) found the improvement of writing quality in the traditional classroom was higher than that of the e-peer response class. Furthermore, Matsumura and Hann (2004) found no significant difference in the degree of improvement between the online indirect response and face-to-face response. There should be qualitative investigation to see how the students themselves gauge their own improvement in the learning process. There have been so few studies conducted to explore students' perceptions on the use of e-peer response to investigate whether the tool the instructors/researchers used is favorable to the students. The purposes of this paper are to investigate the students' attitudes on the improvement of the quality of their writing as well as their attitudes toward e-peer feedback.

With regards training the students to conduct e-peer feedback on the blogging environment, Simsek (2010) claims that weblog integrated writing instruction is more effective than in traditional writing instruction as applied in the writing classroom to help enhance students' writing outcomes. It not only helps students improve their writing abilities but also impacts positively their writing content and organization. Also, Arslan and Sahin-Kızıl (2010) posit that employing blogs to teaching writing skills is very helpful for the teachers and students because the students are given essential space to develop their creative ideas (Wooda, 2012). Furthermore, Hsu and Lin (2008) assert that in the writing environment of blogs, students felt ease of use and enjoyed their learning processes towards blogging. Also, students participating in blogs were motivated intrinsically to contribute knowledge to others because they enjoyed helping each other. People were eager to share their thoughts and experiences with others. Yet, Hall and Davison (2007) claim that the blog environment encourages positive and productive exchanges in educational settings. Blogs help explicit peer aid in terms of clarifying of the purpose and concepts of the material covered in the module. In addition, the role of blogs creates a sense of community and encourages reflective learning in an educational context.

Specifically, Pham and Usaha (2016) conducted a study with 32 students at a university in Vietnam using the blogs to help students compose their writing, provide e-peer responses on each other's writings, then revise their writing products based on the e-peer responses. The study found that e-peer response activities on the blogs could help students provide more comments on global areas than on local areas. In addition, the student writers enhance their writing revisions and quality. Similarly, Yang (2016) found that students in the experimental group made more local and global revisions on their own and their peers' writing papers as well. Pham and Nguyen (2014) indicated that most of the comments given by e-peer responses were incorporated into revision. The students benefited from the e-peer response activities since they had to evaluate their peer comments before incorporated them into their revisions.

With regard to students' perceptions on employing blogs in the writing classrooms, Fageeh (2011) indicates that the blog is a useful tool to develop students writing proficiency and attitudes. The students have seen the blog as an opportunity to express their ideas in English, writing for many different audiences and enhance interactions among learners. In terms of linguistics, Montero-Fleetaa and Pérez-Sabaterb (2010) stated that employing the blog in the writing classroom improve students' use of language and writing fluency.

Earlier research investigated the applications of blogs into pedagogy was vacant in exploring the ultimate goals behind the preferences of using blogs in professions. The aim of enhancing learning outcomes needs to be further investigated. The authors of the current study took the advice of Ward (2004) that, as language teachers, if we want to equip our students with the ability to communicate in the online era, we cannot afford to ignore blogging, or neglect the opportunities that this new medium offers. Like the student portfolio before it, the weblog faces challenges with practicality and security, but ultimately provides an alternative way to teach and assess authentic writing skills. Therefore, the current study was conducted to investigate following research questions.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the students' perceptions on the use of e-peer feedback in the writing classroom?
2. To what extent do the students evaluate their writing skills improve during the e-peer feedback activities?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants and Setting

Totally, thirty-two students from a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Their English proficiency ranged from 401 to 493 TOEFL PBT test, were conveniently drawn to participate in this study. They were all sophomore and enrolled for an academic writing class to study on how to write a paragraph in English. They students were divided into groups of four do peer feedback on the blogs to help each other improve their writing products. The students wrote their papers at home and uploaded on their blogs to receive feedback from their peers. Their blogging activities were composing academic paragraphs assigned by the teacher and posted them on their blogs. Then other group members, one by one, in turn read and provided feedback to clarify some mistakes or errors from the written papers. After that the student writers could revise their writing based on the peer feedback.

In every class meeting, the teachers drew peer feedback from the groups randomly and showed on the projector to help students learn how to enhance their feedback skills. For each writing assignment, the students had 4 days for peer feedback and 3 days for revision before submitted to the teacher. Data collection was from the questionnaire and semi-structure interviews of 8 students. Cronbach's Alpha for the questionnaire was .936 and was analyzed by the SPSS software for mean scores.

Semi-structured interviews were used in the present study. Eight students were randomly invited to provide answers in the semi-structured interviews which were implemented after the training to see how the students perceived the effects of the e-peer feedback for L2 writing revisions. The interview questions focused on the effects of peer comments from drafts 1 – 3 for the sake of the focus of the current study. The interviews were tape-recorded and conducted in Vietnamese so that the interviewees would feel at ease to respond to each question. The interview data were translated into English and every effort was made to keep the translation as close to the original as possible. Then the two versions (English and Vietnamese) of the necessary data used for analysis were checked by two senior teachers at the university where the current study took place to obtain agreement on the translation. Revision and modification were made as recommended.

4. FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What are the students' perceptions on the use of e-peer feedback in the writing classroom?

To provide answers to this research question, data from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to analyze. The criteria for the Likert-type scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) and was set as following: low evaluation: 1 – 2.66; medium evaluation: 2.67 – 4.33; and high evaluation: 4.34 – 6. Table 1 presents the students' perception of using the blogs for peer feedback in an L2 writing classroom.

Table 1 reports the effects of e-peer response on writing quality, the students posited that posting their writing on the blog for their friends to read and comment made them take more care about their writing quality (mean = 5.16; S.D = .723). Montero-Fletaa and Pérez-Sabaterb (2010) also found that writing for a purpose in blogs for professional development encouraged the students to produce language more fluently. They were also more concerned on correctness which led us to consider blogs as a potential tool for the development of foreign language linguistic skills. This really helped instructors reduce their job when they had to take care of large writing classes (from 32 to 50) because of the current situations in universities in Vietnam. Peer comments via the blog were confirmed to be useful for revision (mean = 5.06; S.D = .564). In other words, students incorporated peer comments in their revisions in order to produce better products. Also, the students agreed that peer response activities via the blog provided them with more spare time to think about their peers' opinions on their writing (mean = 4.69; S.D = .693); the students stated that thanks to peer comments, they could reorganize the ideas in their writing more logically (mean = 4.88; S.D = .871); and their writing quality improved not only the content (mean = 4.91; S.D = .731), but also the vocabulary, structure, grammar, and spellings of their writing (mean = 5.06; S.D = .801) were better after each revision. This suggested that the students considered the comments on both global and local levels as important. One should not dominate the other. Finally, the students preferred their peers commenting on the content and organization of their writing to spellings or grammar, or structure (mean = 4.94; S.D = 1.162). In other words, comments on global issues were preferred by the student writers. These findings correspond with Yang's (2010) that peer response and self-correction activities enable students to monitor, evaluate, and adjust their writing processes in the pursuit of text improvement. Following is the qualitative analysis based on collected data from in-depth and semi-structured interviews.

The data from the semi-structured interviews indicated that writing activities on the blogs helped them learn more about computer literacy. The computer helped them edit their essay and helped them check the grammar and spellings when they had mistakes. In addition, this kind of activities could help them share their ideas to their peers, not to the teacher only as the traditional learning methods.

Table 1. The effects of e-peer feedback for writing quality

No.	Items	Mean	S.D
1	Posting my writing on the blog for my friends to read and comment makes me take more care about my writing quality.	5.16	.72
2	I found that my peers' comments on my blog were very useful for my writing revision.	5.06	.56
3	Peer response activities via the blog provide me with more spare time to think about my peers' opinions on my writing.	4.69	.69
4	Thanks to the peer comments via the blog, I can reorganize the ideas in my writing more logically.	4.88	.87
5	After each revision based on my peers' comments, the content of my writing is much more abundant.	4.91	.73
6	After each revision based on my peers' comments, the vocabulary, structure, grammar, and spellings of my writing improve a lot.	5.06	.8
7	I prefer my peers commenting on the content and organization of my writing to spellings or grammar, or structure meaning.	4.94	1.16

Also, this kind of activities open their mind when they received feedback from their group members, and they could express their meanings to their peer freely compared to face-to-face- feedback. More importantly, this kind of activities could help them improve their writing quality based on their peers' feedback.

I used to write on the blog before. But this is the first time I have written essays based on my own thinking and capability and share with other people. At first, I felt a little embarrassed and shy. However, after the first posting, I found my friends' comments were so helpful for my writing. At that time, I realized that working on blog was good and more convenient...

Firstly, the writing on the blogs was a good way because we could access the Internet and learned more things on it. Secondly, as Kid's saying that it didn't take us a lot of time. We could copy the writing to our computers; we could retype it and post it onto the blog. In general, this way was so exciting rather than focusing on taking notes of what the teachers were saying. That made me sleepy. However, writing on the blog made me awake Hotvit - S_{31}).

Because when we were not face-to-face with friends, we could express all what we wanted to say. But when we were face-to-face, we were afraid that we made our friends unpleasant when we talk [about their mistakes]. But we knew how to use good words to make them happy. In general we knew how to make them not upset. We also praised them. If not, it was so boring.

One student stated thanks to this activity, she learned more knowledge from other websites and improved her writing skills. websites. She also claimed that the Word could help her check grammar and spellings.

Although learning writing via the blog had some disadvantages, but thanks to it, I learned knowledge about websites and the blogs. In addition, when I used the Word Processor to write, it could help me check grammar and spellings, so it was very convenient. Learning via the blogs was interesting and attractive. I didn't feel bored anymore.

Candyvan (S_4) stated that the e-peer response engaged the students to help one another improve their writing quality, "The first advantage is that we all can help one another: my friends can help me and vice versa. Then it will make our writing better". Also, she liked the method of posting her essays on the blog for her group members to provide comments, "I like that method because there are many readers observing it and giving comments on it," and "I really want others to read and comment on my writing after posting so that I can know whether my writing is good or not". Candyvan also stated that "using the blog is very interesting and it is good place to share good information with friends and public on the Internet".

Some students stated that the Internet access helped the students work anywhere without limit of distance. Some students stated that the e-peer response was very useful because it helped group members become more active and closer in the learning process. They could realize their weaknesses in writing so that they could revise to improve it.

I learned a new learning method in this course. That was learning writing by using the blog. It was very useful. Besides, it helped us train our writing skills; it also helped us improve our group working ability. When we worked in a group we could help one another to rewrite our essays. From my friends' comments, I learned many things from them in my group. Especially, there was one person who wrote very well. She often had very interesting ideas. Her knowledge was deep and wide. I learned many useful things from her.

In fact, learning in this way [e-peer response] was very useful because everyone had a chance to be closer to each other. Especially, everyone in the group had to work hard and more active. Although

we were in the same level, we were in the same course; sometimes I felt that my friends were very good. I liked my friends' comments very much because it helped me realize my weaknesses in my writing and I tried to write better my subsequent drafts. I hope that after this course everyone in our class had lots of improvement in writing.

Some students stated that thanks to viewing other's writings, the students could learn experience from peers' writing mistakes; then they could avoid those mistakes on their own essays. Also, they could learn new vocabulary and ideas when read their peers' writing.

Whenever I read my friends' essays, I found the interesting ideas to help improve my writing. In addition, I learned experience from my friends' mistakes to avoid repeating them in my own essays... Some good comments helped my writing become better... I am not worried about my grammar, structure or vocabulary because I often write a draft before posting it on my blog. So, I like my friends to comment on the content.

Some students stated that nobody was perfect, so they received their peers' comments on the blog because those were very good for revising his drafts. Therefore, they really liked to get many comments from their friends.

Since this was the first time, I posted my essay on the blog, so I had to accept that I had mistakes and others did too. Furthermore, nobody is perfect. The important thing is that we are learning for our improvement. We should accept our unavoidable mistakes. And, what our friends commented on the blogs was very good for us. At that time, we knew what our mistakes were and edited those after that. At the same time, we could also comment on our friends' mistakes, so I think it is good. I really liked to get many comments from my friends.

With regards to the students' perceptions on the use of e-peer feedback in the writing classroom, the findings of the present study contradicted those of DiGiovanni and Nagaswami's (2001), and Tuzi's (2004). However, the findings of the current study were consisted with previous studies such as Hsu and Lin's (2008) and Noytim's (2010). Also, the findings were corresponded to Ware (2004) that writing online made students comfortable with their peers in the classroom. Particularly, this study shared the common claim with Halic et al. (2010) that blogging is potential to enhance students' participation in the learning process. As a result, the student writing outcomes would work out. In order words, using blogs to promote students' participation in the classroom was supported by Weigle (2002) that writing is not solely as the product of an individual, but as a social and cultural act when the students post and share their writing online. According to the "student-centered" approach, the students are considered as the central subjects in the teaching/learning process. The current study found that the blog, as one of the CMC tools, was confirmed to be useful for e-peer response activities. Blog is a platform which provides students a collaborative and communicative environment to help and learn from one another. This was supported by Hyland (2002) that writing is as a collaborative activity because writers can benefit from focused response from a variety of sources. The findings of the current study was seen as innovative in the pedagogical context where teacher-centered approach was still dominant because the students found themselves as responsible for their own learning processes.

Research Question 2: To what extent do the students evaluate their writing skills improve during the e-peer feedback activities?

In order to respond to this research question, qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed.

Some students confirmed that their writing quality of Draft 3 was much better. At first, she could not know how to make her writing better. But after receiving comments from peers, she could find out some mistakes that she could not make it by herself. In addition, her group members provided many good and useful comments because their purpose was to help one another improve their writing quality. Also, thanks to peer response activities, she could learn from her friends' strong points in order to apply for her writing.

[My essay was] Much better. I felt that my draft was not ok at first. Its ideas were not as perfect as I expected, but I didn't know how to make it better. Then, when my friends commented, I realized my mistakes, and when I provided comments on my friends' essays, I also learned many different ways to apply to my essay.

Latern (S₁₀) confirmed that her Draft 3 was different from Draft 1 in terms of content. She added more ideas during the revision and she found her writing was logical. Kid (S₁₁) and Hellogutbye (S₂₈) stated that their third drafts were more interesting and longer compared with the first drafts, "It improved a lot because it was longer and had more interesting ideas." Baovy (S₁₂) claimed that her writing quality was better and had more academic styles in terms of thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting sentences and concluding sentences. Suoimo (S₁₆) stated that her writing quality improved about not only the content, but also the grammar and structures, "I gave just a few examples in Draft 1. In Drafts 2 & 3, I provided more examples. I improved not only about the content but also about grammar and structures."

Kid (S₁₁) stated that he had used the blog before the training, but this was the first time he posted his writing on the blog. At first, he felt embarrassed to show his writing to his friends to provide comments. Later on, he found this method very useful because thanks to it, he found his peer comments really helpful to improve his writing quality. In addition, he stated that he liked his group members because they provided very good comments.

I had known the blog for a long time. However, I was a little embarrassed when posting my essay on the blog. At first, I was afraid that when everyone read my essay; if it was good, no problem; but if it was bad, so embarrassed. However, after a while, I realized that this method was really useful. Thanks to it, I found that my friends' comments help me improve my writing skill much. Thank friends in my group so much. All of you commented on my essay so well. In fact, I didn't have time to write these words to flatter all of you. Although some comments seemed not related to my writing, thanks anyway, thanks so much. There was only one essay left, wish all of you get best achievement. I love you all my friends.

In short, the student writers perceived their writing quality improved in both global and local areas. Also, they found their writing had enough characteristics of thesis statement, topic sentences, controlling ideas, and conclusion. These findings were supported by Berg's (1999) and Stanley's (1992). In addition, they felt satisfied with their writing quality after the e-peer response activities. Also, because of receiving good comments from peers', the students asserted that their writing quality improved in lengths.

The results of the present study indicated that the students themselves found their writing quality improve when applying blog for e-peer response. In other words, the students' writing improved remarkably after receiving peer comments via blogs. In addition, the lengths of the students' essays did increase from the first to the third drafts. The results echoed the conclusions reached by Sullivan and Pratt (1996), Braine (1997; 2001), Ahern & Everett (1994), that the writing quality did improve in the computer-assisted classroom from the first to the final drafts. In addition, the findings of the present study also bolstered the results of Berg's (1999) that training students in how to participate in

peer response had positive effects on revision types and writing outcomes. Montero-Fleeta and Pérez-Sabaterb (2010) found that writing for a purpose in blogs for professional development encouraged the students to produce language more fluently. They were also more concerned on correctness which led us to consider blogs a potential tool for the development of foreign language linguistic skills. Also, Hyland and Hyland's (2006) contention that electronic response through peer response increases student writing outputs, enhances student motivation, provides a nonthreatening environment, makes papers more readily available for sharing, and allows instructors greater opportunity to monitor peer response.

5. CONCLUSION

First, to explore the students' perception on the use of e-peer feedback in the writing classroom, the results of the current study reveal that most of the students obtained a perception that their writing skills enhanced thank to the e-peer feedback activities. Second, in terms of exploring the students' evaluation on the improvement of writing quality, qualitative data showed that training the students on how to blog with academic writing, the students collaborated in the learning writing activities, particular in promoting students in peer response activities in writing classroom. Actually, technology is a social facilitator in order to provide students opportunities for collaboration, group work, and interaction (Liu & Yang, 2005; Oliver & McLoughlin 1998; Beauvois, 1995; Sringam, 2000). This solves the problems found by Nguyen (2004) that group-work practice was still unsatisfactory because of lack of motivation and students' characteristics. Third, in terms of creative writing, the current study changes the situations when Luu (2006) and Tran (2006) claim that the educational system of teaching compositions in Vietnam brought students to learning by rote, no chances for creativeness. Fourth, the findings of the current study confirm that blog, one of the tools of computer-mediated communication, allows students to take more active and autonomous roles in the learning process and fostered the approach of "student-centered" (Warschauer, 2002). Finally, as educators, if we get away from students, they will run away from us; but if we go with them, they will walk with us. No matter what the teachers have used the blog or not, thousands of students have been using it for their own purposes. If we take advantage of this widely used medium and adapt it into our own classrooms, we can get co-operations from students in learning.

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