

## Writing Online: Using Blogs as an Alternative Writing Activity in Tertiary ESL Classes

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### Abstract

This paper presents how Blogging may be used as an alternative activity in tertiary writing classes. Particularly, this paper would discuss how Blogs can be included in academic writing class. The discussions will initially revolve on the language learning theories that support the framework of blogs—the characteristics of Blogs that make it an appropriate classroom activity for improving writing proficiency. Then, the paper will further discuss the processes that were undertaken within the Blogging project. Finally, sample Blogs and commentaries to these blogs would be investigated to see some meritorious characteristics and experiences that support Blogging as an effective activity in developing and improving writing proficiency.

**Keywords:** Blogging, Academic Writing, Teaching Writing

### Logging In: Blogs and their Pedagogical Values

Recent technological advancements are usually borne out of merging different things, discoveries, or ideas. These innovations lead to further discoveries that aim to make living more convenient than it was in the past.

In the case of computer technology, merging the internet with the field of communication has produced what has become popularly known as “Blog”—a blending of the words *web* and *log*, which is “a web page that contains a running log of commentaries, multimedia, and hyperlinks” (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008). Early internet websites only showcase photographs and texts that are uploaded by web developers, something that limits potential web authors from writing and publishing articles since these are beyond basic computer skills.

The birth of Blogs opened a lot of opportunities for language learners to express and share their ideas with the boundless internet community. Blogs quietly entered the World Wide Web in the late 1990’s, but because of its rapid popularity among individual writers who wish to share their thoughts online, web designers started to develop blog sites that are easier to create and maintain. Armstrong and Retterer (2008) explains that Blogging software began to appear designed to enable individuals to publish their own weblogs quickly and easily and without the previous HTML coding requirements. As Blood (2002) explained, with the advent of these applications, the weblog, unlike a webpage, required little technological sophistication and was therefore accessible to many different types of audiences.

This innovation further contributed to the rapid growth of interest in blogging. “In a recent survey, the Pew Internet and American Life Project estimated that some 12 million Americans published their own blogs and 57 million read blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006 as cited in Armstrong & Retterer, 2008). This trend is further supported by findings from

other studies such as that of DeBell and Chapman (2006) cited in Krashen (2008), which discovered that “81% of high school students use the Internet, [this] indicates that Internet use among the general population will continue to increase.”

The internet’s ability to quickly connect people from different regions of the world and have them share ideas and experiences with each other in real-time may be one of the reasons for its popularity. Aside from this, blog sites have been designed to be “customizable”, allowing the users to modify the presentation of their page—i.e. colors, themes, pictures, among others.

Furthermore, Muehleisen (1997, cited in Fox, 1998) adds that learners become interested with the internet because “students see the Internet as trendy and want to be a part of it, others are also drawn by the practical aspects of job skills acquisition and on learning skills that will be useful in life”

These characteristics of blogging provided the researcher with ideas as to the usefulness of blogs in teaching writing. Indeed, blogs can motivate language learners not just to connect to the internet to view pictures or watch videos, but also to write and share ideas and opinions—something that is usually dreaded by students in language classes.

### **Writing as a Dreaded Classroom Activity**

Among the four macroskills of language, writing appears to be the most difficult. It is unlikely for learners to be enthusiastic and excited to do writing tasks (which is usually a “desk” activity) as compared to speaking tasks (where they are usually asked to move around the classroom). The fact that writing outputs are documented or recorded makes students think twice (or more) whenever asked to write. It is normal for students to avoid being scorned and criticized because of the errors committed in English. Thus, outputs tend to become mere *requirements* in language classes more than the fact that it should be *a means of expressing ideas and emotions*.

Soven (1999) explains that “By the time most students enter high school, they are beginning to dislike writing.” This may be attributed to the fact that learners begin to realize the demands of writing. As students work with their outputs, they start to notice that there are various factors such as Mechanics (spelling, capitalization, and punctuation) and Grammar that should be carefully checked. Moreover, students begin to shift their attention to other tasks that are assigned to them, in language classes and in other subjects.

Aside from grammar and mechanics, students also begin to encounter important elements of writing such as unity and coherence. They begin to realize that mastery of grammar and mechanics is not enough when writing; that their ability explain grammar rules and identify grammar errors, are insufficient since writing demands context from which these rules will be applied.

Finally, students begin to notice the demands of writing tasks in terms of the content—i.e. information that would be included in the output. Towards the more advanced level of writing, students begin to find out that their technical know-how of writing becomes useless if they don’t have the necessary data or information that would be included in the output. Most students find it difficult to write simply because they don’t know what to put in their paper.

These observations and realizations fuel the search of language teachers and researchers for better and more effective ways of teaching writing.

## Teaching Writing: The Search for the Holy Grail

Teachers are normally in a state of dilemma when it comes to teaching writing. Should the teacher prioritize accuracy? Or should the teacher focus on content? These two important considerations when teaching writing have become the central issues in answering the essential question: “How should writing be taught?”

The search for the ‘holy grail’, so to speak, of teaching writing led to the development of various approaches to teaching writing. Related to this search is the growing demand to develop and improve the writing competencies of learners. Thus, it is imperative for language teachers to be equipped, not just with the knowledge regarding the different approaches that have been utilized by teachers, but also with the skills of implementing them, given the variety of learners that teachers may encounter at a given point in time.

Badger and White (2000) presents an overview of the prevalent approaches to teaching writing over the past 20 years. “Process and product approaches have dominated much of the teaching of writing that happens in the EFL classroom. In the last ten years, genre approaches have gained adherent.”

From the label itself, product approaches prioritize the final product of writing or student outputs, e.g. essays, reports, letters, stories, etc. Brown (1994) describes that in product approaches, “Compositions are supposed to (a) meet certain standards of prescribed English rhetorical style, (b) reflect accurate grammar, and (c) be organized in conformity with what the audience would consider to be conventional.”

Badger and White (2000) further explains that in product approaches, learning to write has four stages: (a) familiarization; (b) controlled writing; (c) guided writing; and (d) free writing. The familiarization stage aims to make learners aware of certain features of a particular text. In the controlled and guided writing sections, the learners practise the skills with increasing freedom until they are ready for the free writing section, when they use the writing skill as part of a genuine activity such as a letter, story or essay.

This means that the teaching of writing primarily focuses on training students with the appropriate rules of grammar and have these rules correctly applied in written compositions.

While there is nothing really wrong with giving attention to the linguistic aspects when writing, the greatest criticism against product approaches is its inability to make learners “create” language. Since learners focus on the language rules, they have the tendency to box themselves within these rules and fail to explore other ways to express their ideas and emotions.

On the other hand, process approaches to teaching writing are seen to focus more on content or message rather than the rules of language. “Writing in process approaches is seen as predominantly to do with linguistic skills, such as planning and drafting, and there is much less emphasis on linguistic knowledge, such as knowledge about grammar and text structure” (Badger & White, 2000).

According to Brown (1994), process approaches do most of the following:

- (a) Focus on the process of writing that leads to the final written product;
- (b) Help student writers to understand their own composing process;
- (c) Help them to build repertoires of strategies for prewriting, drafting, and rewriting;
- (d) Give students time to write and rewrite;
- (e) Place central importance on the process of revision;

- (f) Let students discover what they want to say as they write;
- (g) Give students feedback throughout the composing process (not just on the final product) to consider as they attempt to bring their expression closer and closer to intention;
- (h) Encourage feedback both from the instructor and peers;
- (i) Include individual conferences between teacher and student during the process of composition.

Thus, the very difference of process approaches from product approaches is its priority on generating ideas rather than accurately using the rules of grammar when composing.

However, similar to product approaches, process approaches also received a number of criticisms. One of which is its “freeness” which may lead to compositions that are authentically written by learners, but may have too many grammar lapses, since grammar rules are not given as much importance as it receives in product approaches.

Another development in the approaches to teaching writing has been dubbed as the “genre approaches”. Genre approaches have similar characteristics with product approaches in a way that both “regard writing as predominantly linguistic but, unlike product approaches, they emphasize that writing varies with the social context in which it is produced” (Badger & White, 2000). Thus, genre approaches focus on analyzing different texts and finding out essential characteristics of the text such as purpose, situation, relationship between writer and audience, and the pattern of organization used to develop the idea within the text.

Dudley-Evans (1997) as cited in Badger and White (2000) identifies three stages in genre approaches, “First, a model of a particular genre is introduced and analysed. Learners then carry out exercises which manipulate relevant language forms and, finally, produce a short text.” These stages resemble product approaches in a manner that both “manipulate” available language (i.e. from the model text) instead of “creating” language.

A more recent approach to teaching writing appears to have been a product of synthesizing the three previously discussed approaches. This has come to be known as the Process Genre Approach. In this approach, “writing involves knowledge about language (as in product and genre approaches), knowledge of the context in which writing happens and especially the purpose for the writing (as in genre approaches), and skills in using language (as in process approaches)” (Badger & White, 2000).

Thus, the process genre approach trains learners to become “analyzers” and “creators” of texts. They are taught to look into the different characteristics of texts written according to specific purposes and to process these characteristics as they create their own text.

This brief review of the different approaches to teach writing provides a macroscopic view of how writing should be taught and learnt. It provides realizations as to the elements that language teachers should consider when designing programs for enhancing writing proficiency. These are the elements that the researcher considered in the development of blogging as an alternative activity in academic writing classes.

## Blogging the Language Classes

Using blogs in classes is innovative and modern, but it is not necessarily “new”. In fact, various studies across the globe have been written to report the observations and realizations gained from using blogs in language classes. These studies present the advantages and disadvantages of blogging as implemented in language classes.

One of these studies is an article written by Izquierdo and Reyes (2009) entitled: *Effectiveness of Blogging to Practice Reading at a Freshman EFL Program*. Primarily, blogs are seen as contributory in the development of reading skills—an essential element in making students write. Language teachers have proven how important reading is in connection to writing. Brown (1994) explains that “Clearly, students learn to write in part by carefully observing what is already written. That is, they learn by observing, or reading, the written word.”

Blogs provide authentic reading texts for learners to observe and analyze, making them aware of the conventions of writing—i.e. grammar, mechanics, unity, coherence, etc. Izquierdo and Reyes (2009) analyzed the characteristics of blogs to explain their potential strengths in practicing and improving reading skills among learners. A synthesis of these characteristics is provided below by the researcher to amplify the analysis of Izquierdo and Reyes (2009).

1. **Relevant**-Blogs allow teachers and students to upload content pertinent to their courses on the web and reach out to people providing opportunities to promote student-teacher, student-student, and student-others interactions.
2. **Accessible**-Blogs are published instantly, without much time investment. Blogs are accessible to all who might be interested in making contributions in a relatively lengthy period of time, without moving physically or attending face-to-face (f2f) classes
3. **Interactive**-Blogs have proven to be of great use in foreign *language* courses because images, songs, podcasts, and videos can be uploaded so students can be exposed to them in a real multimedia environment
4. **Interesting**-Blogs invite participation and have the potential to democratize the classroom since each student is given the chance to participate equally. (Grewling, 2004 as cited in Izquierdo & Reyes, 2009)

Moving on from reading to writing, blogs are perceived as essential in developing writing skills. In an article written by Soares (2008) entitled *Understanding class blogs as a tool for language development*, she studied EFL learners in Brazil particularly to find out if the learners see blogging as a learning tool and to identify how blogs are used in other language teaching context.

Blogs in classes are more than an avenue for writing. They are seen as a “joint effort between students and teacher. It may be seen as a way to foster a feeling of community between the members of a class” (Campbell, 2003; McDowell, 2004; Stanley 2005 as cited in Soares, 2008) Thus, blogging is not just about the activity of writing but it involves the sharing of experiences and information as well as responding to what others have written.

In addition to this, blogs have also been regarded as a “therapeutic intervention” in a sense that it helps learners to release certain emotions, which may lead to “an immediate feeling of relief and initially increase a person’s ego strength” (Nagel & Anthony, 2009). Hence, if programmed appropriately, blogs can potentially boost the affective domain of learners, making them perceive writing not as a dreaded class activity but as a means to help express emotions and ideas. As what Krashen (1982) proposes, in his affective filter hypothesis:

Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter—even if they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device. Those with attitudes more conducive to second language acquisition will not only seek and obtain more input, they will also have a lower or weaker filter. They will be more open to the input, and it will strike “deeper”

Aside from these affective factors, blogging is also seen as a form of a writing exercise that allows learners to increase the quality and quantity of their written outputs through frequent posts and comments. In the study of Armstrong and Retterer (2008) they have found out that their learners, who were involved in an experimental blogging class, wrote more compared to students who were involved in a “traditional” form of writing class.

...our blogging students were writing ten times more than some students at the equivalent level, and in some cases writing as much as those who write in a non blogging format. Data from this study affirms what other researchers have documented about computer-assisted writing. Daiute (1986, p. 3) wrote, “...one of the main observations has been that students of all ages find writing on computers and communicating in cyberspace to be highly motivating—an attitude that has not been reported regarding traditional writing instruction environments.” In another study, Huffaker (2004, p. 63) reported that the average blog posting among his subjects was 2000 words per blog. Lohnes (2003) wrote that a weblog used in a Political Science course at Middlebury College produced over 100 pages of text/student “For many of them, the writing became a ‘fun’ activity rather than something that was seen as drudgery or a hurdle to be overcome” (p. 11). Pennington (2003, p. 189) argued that students working in a computer medium tended to write less self-consciously and were more engaged in the process, which resulted in greater involvement with the task and ultimately led the student to write for longer periods of time and produce longer texts.

On the other hand, despite the advantages, these researchers have also found some “glitches” on the use of blogging in language classes. A summary of their findings is as follows:

1. **Platform-** One of the major problems that beset blogging in class is the platform or the blog site which will be used by the class. Aside from the ease of use and security or privacy issues, the cost of creating one’s own platform may be too much for a language class. “The major disadvantages, of course, were hardware/software and support costs.” (Armstrong & Retterer, 2009)
2. **Learner Competence-** While almost all learners nowadays are adept at using the computer and the internet, not everyone may be familiar with blogging, and this may lead to delay or problems before and during the program implementation. In the study of Izquierdo & Reyes (2009) they found out that “Many of the low *proficiency* students

in this program do not have regular access to a computer and have not worked with blogs before.”

3. **Economic Status of Learners-** In the Philippine educational scenario, not everyone can afford the “luxury” of using computers and connecting to the world wide web. This may potentially hamper the implementation of blog projects in language classes.

These citations on the effectiveness, benefits, and even the disadvantages of blogging in relation to ESL/EFL writing provided the researcher with a number of considerations regarding the design and implementation of the blog project.

### **Blogging in the Academic Writing Class**

#### **Rationale and Objectives**

As mentioned earlier, the researcher’s experiences and researches in teaching writing have led to various realizations regarding learners’ difficulties when it comes to writing in English. Thus, to address these problems, the researcher designed and implemented a blogging project as a supplementary writing activity in his Academic Writing classes. The primary objective of the study is to provide the learners with an alternative and additional writing activity that would allow them to practice and develop their writing skills. Moreover, the study aims to identify and explore the possible benefits of Blogging in developing Academic Writing skills.

Blogs are considered as an alternative for journal or diary entries that have been practiced in various language classrooms throughout the years. However, unlike diaries and journal entries that are usually kept confidential between the teacher and the student, a blog is usually broadcasted and shared to different readers in an online community. This becomes advantageous since it allows learners to discover and practice writing outside the class hours and beyond the four walls of the classroom—something that may contribute in motivating the learners to write.

Parallel to the related literatures reviewed in this study, the researcher (who is a blogger himself) recognized the benefits of blogging in the development of a language learner’s writing skills. Aside from the boundless possibilities of customizing and personalizing one’s blog site, one can also increase linkages and networks through blogs, which are often found in social networking sites. These characteristics allow learners to interact with other learners and at the same time allow them to express their ideas and emotions via written mode.

Moreover, blogs provide an avenue for practicing writing because of the frequency of posting blogs. At the same time, comments to blogs contribute in making learners reflect upon their blogs.

These features constitute the rationale for creating a blog project as an alternative and additional writing activity.

Thus, given the rationale of this study, the researcher would like to identify the effects of blogging in the development of the participants’ writing skills. Moreover, the project aims to find out how the participants perceive blogging before and after the study.

## Participants

The participants in this study comprise of Sophomore College students enrolled in Academic Writing Classes. They belong to different academic programs, i.e. BSE English, AB/BSE Literature, and BSE General Science. Out of a total of 79 students from these classes, 36 students (6 males and 30 females) volunteered to participate in the blog project after the researcher announced it in all the three classes. Necessary information regarding their personal profiles were gathered through a “Blogger Profile Survey” conducted prior to the implementation of the blog project.

The survey collected important personal information that would contribute in the analysis of how blogs may be used in language classes. The bloggers’ age range between 17 and 19 years old. This entails that the participants are knowledgeable and skilful as regards the use of computers and internet. In terms of their resources, 69.44% of the participants said they have personal computers with internet connection at home, while 30.56% do not have and only connects to the world wide web by renting in computer shops.

The participants’ “virtual profiles” were also checked by identifying the social networking sites that they maintain. The survey revealed that the three most popular social networking sites among the respondents were Facebook (35 out of the 36 respondents), Multiply (34), and Friendster (29). Other sites such as Hi5, Twitter, Plurk, Tumblr, Wordpress, Digg, Flixter, Formspring, Tagged, Badoo, and LinkedIn also surfaced out of the survey. This supports the initial premise that the learners are adept at using the internet together with the features and applications offered by various social networking sites. Having more than one social networking site to maintain reflects how much time and effort these learners devote in using the internet. Moreover, out of these 36 volunteers, 50% or 18 students said that they have been posting an average of one blog every month using their social networking sites. The other half of the group said that this blog project introduced blogging to them.

However, it should also be noted that among the 36 volunteers who signed up to join the blog project, only 27 of them continued with the program and posted blogs.

These data provided the researcher with necessary inputs regarding the participants’ competencies in terms of using and manipulating features of different social networking sites. Moreover, these data helped the researcher to identify which among the various social networking sites would be the most appropriate and useful platform for the blog project.

## Platform

Identifying the platform or the blog site which will be used for the blog project is very important in the design and implementation of blogging as an alternative writing activity for language learners. Soares (2008) recommends that teachers who intend to implement blogging in their classes should have “trial blogs before [deciding] on ‘the real thing’ with students, checking if the platform chosen caters for all [the] wants and needs.” The researcher heeded to this suggestion and reviewed a number of social networking sites which will be the most appropriate for the specific needs and objectives of the project.

Prior to the review, the researcher set specific criteria for identifying which social networking site would be the most appropriate for the blog project. Three criteria were considered upon the review of the social networking sites. They are as follows:

- a. **Security**- the ability of the site to secure privacy among the participants, i.e. secure personal information and prevent unsolicited posts or comments which may be defamatory or derogatory;
- b. **User-friendliness**- the ability of the site to offer services conveniently so that the participants would use lesser time in manipulating the features and instead focus on the blogs that they will write and publish; and
- c. **Customizability**- the ability of the site to be customized or personalized according to the preferences of the participants, i.e. themes, colors, graphics, font sizes, font styles, etc. Customizability also involves the ability of the site to be specifically programmed for selected users, i.e. to create groups and sub-groups

After reviewing and analyzing the features of various social networking sites that include blogging as one of their many features, Multiply ([www.multiply.com](http://www.multiply.com)) emerged as the most appropriate platform for the blog project. Although Multiply is not a perfectly designed social networking site, it surpassed other potential platforms in terms of the criteria set specifically for this study. Despite Facebook being the more popular social networking site in the Philippines, Multiply offers more options for securing information, manipulating toolbars and applications, and personalizing its appearance—criteria that are considered essential in the design and implementation of the blog project in language classes.

Throughout the project, the researcher served as the blog administrator who monitors and filters the posts. Primarily, the administrator's task is to identify whether the blogs may or may not be posted. During the first stages of the project, the participants were clearly briefed about the Project Mechanics that would serve as their guide.

### **Project Mechanics**

Implementing a blog project in language classes should be carefully designed. Part of this careful planning is the identification and presentation of the project mechanics among the participants. It is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to inform the participants about the objectives of the study, the roles that the participants will play, the do's and don'ts in the project, and the benefits that they will gain out of their participation.

In this research study, the participants were informed about the project mechanics prior to the implementation of the project. The following are the mechanics that were observed throughout the blog project.

1. Students coming from different Writing classes are **INVITED** to join the blogging community. From these different writing classes, a single "blog-class" will be created online. Once the program has commenced, other members of the classes who did not join are allowed to comment, but not as bloggers anymore. Hence, no incentives will be given.
2. Bloggers are also the monitors of other people's blogs and they are expected to post comments or suggestions.

3. The task of the bloggers is to upload blogs on a regular basis (at least once a week). On the other hand, the commenters' task is to regularly monitor a blogger's entry and comment on it positively or negatively (provided that comments do not defame or disrespect the blogger). Commenters may post comments on more than one blog.
4. Bloggers should take note of the following security/privacy guidelines:
  - a. Do not reveal personal information in the blogsite;
  - b. Immediately report concerns (e.g. uncalled for attitudes, disrespectful comments, etc.) to the moderator, i.e. teacher
5. The blogging project is divided into three phases:
  - a. Phase I: Moderator blogs- during the first two or three weeks, the moderator would post the blog and the task of every member of the blog class is merely to comment;
  - b. Phase II: Personal blogs- these are blogs which tackle anything personal and interpersonal, e.g. latest fashion, fads, trends, movies, TV shows, etc.; and
  - c. Phase III: Opinion blogs- these are blogs which tackle latest issues on politics, school matters, teaching and learning, provided that it does not destroy or disrespect any personality, institution, religion, ethnic or minority groups, gender, etc.
6. Blogs are not graded, but as incentives for participating, bloggers will get additional points in the FINAL grade of the Academic Writing class, depending on the number of blogs that they have published within the semester.

5-9 blogs= +1

10-15 blogs= +2

16-20 blogs= +3

Note: Those who were able to post a particular number of blogs but stopped from participating before the end of the semester will not get the incentive points.

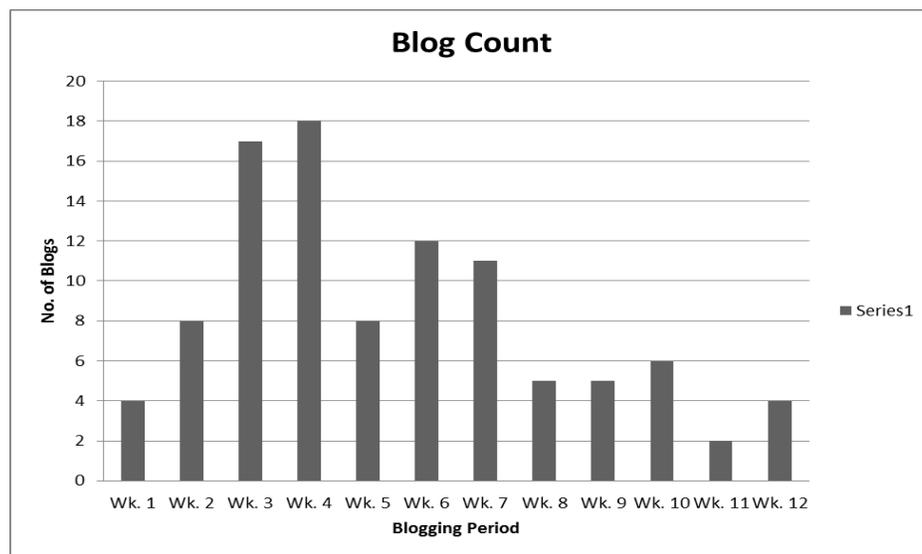
7. A "blog" is considered a "blog" only if it contains relevant, original, and substantial topics. "Pointless" posts, i.e. those that do not really have a focus topic and discussion will not be posted.
8. For ease of use and accessibility, the blogsite that will be used for this project shall be Multiply ([www.multiply.com](http://www.multiply.com)). Hence, participants are expected to create their own multiply site, if they do not have one yet.
9. The Blogging project commences on the 4<sup>th</sup> week of June 2010 and will be labelled as WEEK 1 in the Blog Log. Blog log is the record keeping tool that the moderator uses to monitor blogs and comments. Blogging project ends on the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of September and will be labelled as WEEK 12.

### Project Outcomes

Throughout the 12-week implementation of the blog project, the researcher yielded important data regarding the quantity and quality of blogs posted and the perceptions of bloggers on blogging as an alternative writing activity.

In terms of the quantity of blog posts, the 27 participants who pushed through with the project published a total of 101 blogs online within the duration of 12 weeks. Among these blogs, the least number of words in a blog post is 146, while the maximum number of words is 1,546. On the average, blogs are composed of 561.36 words. These figures provide important revelations and realizations as to the effects of blogging in motivating learners to express their ideas and emotions through writing. Despite having no provisions regarding the number of words per entry, and despite the absence of any evaluative measure or grading system for each blog entry, the participants, through the frequency of their posts and the quantity of words for each posts, showed significant interest in writing and posting blogs.

Figure 1 presents the blog count for each week. This data shows a significant increase of posts during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> week of the project (i. e. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> week of July).



*Figure 1.* Blog Count per Week

This trend explains that during the first two weeks of implementation, most bloggers did not post their blogs. Perhaps the reason behind is the fact that 50% of the group do not have any experience on blogging. This may have hindered them from writing, or perhaps they wrote but hesitated to post it online for fear of criticisms. However, as presented in the Blog Count, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> week, a significant increase may be observed. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> week, 17 blogs were posted, while 18 blogs were published on the 4<sup>th</sup> week. This may be due to the growing interest of the participants upon seeing their classmates' posts and comments to each other. This supports the claims that blogging is not merely a writing activity but an avenue for sharing experiences and information.

However, after the 7<sup>th</sup> week (i. e. 1<sup>st</sup> week of August), a downward trend may be observed. This may be attributed to the growing number of requirements and tasks that the participants are engaged with. August and September are crucial months in the university since these presage the end of the semester, which is tantamount to deadlines for submitting academic requirements. Since it has been clearly defined in the project mechanics that blogging is merely an additional activity and not a major requirement in the Academic Writing course, some have probably opted to minimize their blog posts and

focus on other requirements. Later discussions on the perceptions of bloggers will further support this premise.

On the other hand, in terms of the quality of their posts, the researcher observed a wide array of topics that the participants chose to write about. It should be noted that the project mechanics did not limit the bloggers on the topics that they may write about. During the first few weeks of the project, most posts focus on narratives about personal experiences that are mostly filled with emotions, e.g. topics on Love, Relationships, Friendships, etc. However, as the blog project progresses, less personal topics began to emerge. Some bloggers began posting about their Interests (e.g. dancing, singing, and acting), Movie or Book Reviews, Critiques and Observations on Society (e.g. politics and individual behaviors), and even General Information topics. This may be attributed to the motivation that the participants gained from observing different topics posted by the their fellow bloggers, including the moderator.

Finally, the perceptions of bloggers regarding their experiences in participating in the blog project were determined by the researcher through a Post-project survey. The survey particularly sought for the bloggers' views regarding the (a) benefits of blogging, (b) their realizations after the project, (c) the problems that they have experienced, and their (d) opinion on having an online writing class as a substitute for the traditional classroom setting.

The participants presented highly positive remarks regarding their blogging experience. Most of them responded positively in the survey and mentioned how enjoyable and challenging the blog project is. Other benefits of blogging according to the participants are as follows:

- a. Gaining new friends
- b. Learning to spend time wisely when using the internet
- c. Having more time to practice writing
- d. Writing with less pressure and more confidence

One blogger specifically mentioned that *“students with all academic constraints and pressures need other avenues to release their ‘stress,’”*

Regarding the realizations of the bloggers, most of them mentioned about “netiquette” or network etiquette. Since blogs are monitored and filtered by an administrator, the bloggers learned how to think before pushing the button. They have learned how to assess the content of their blogs before posting them and making them accessible to the whole world. This realization of the bloggers is very significant since it provides another benefit for blogging, which is educating the learners about the importance of being careful when posting any content (e. g. blogs, videos, and pictures) on social networking sites. Other realizations are as follows:

- a. Blogging is not just a hobby, it also makes writing classes more interesting for students;
- b. Blogs cannot please everyone;
- c. Blogs can be a “gratifying” medium for writing;
- d. Blogging is a good way to learn and practice writing; and
- e. Internet can be of better use aside from gaming and browsing

Aside from the benefits that the participants gained, the researcher also identified certain problems that were met during the blog project. The most common problems that were revealed through the Post-project survey are the *hectic schedule* and the *lack of*

*resources*. The former proves the assumption presented earlier regarding the downward trend that was observed after the 7<sup>th</sup> week of the blogging project. Indeed, the learners had to prioritize other requirements over blogging. On the other hand, the latter shows the constraints of not having a personal computer. Since 30.56% of the participants do not have their own computers and internet connection, they would have to spend extra money just to go online and post their blogs. Other problems that were identified by the bloggers are as follows:

- a. Writer's block or the lack of ideas to write
- b. "Intolerable bloggers" who post derogatory comments outside the blogging community
- c. Distractions, such as online gaming and other applications provided by social networking sites

Finally, when asked about their opinion regarding substituting traditional classroom setting with an online writing class, 83% of the participants expressed positive response. Their specific reason for vouching an online writing class is its convenience, its ability to connect to a wider audience, and its "cool" features (something which may be minimal, if not absent in traditional classroom setting). On the other hand, 17% of the participants said that they do not agree with the proposal of having an online writing class in exchange of the traditional writing class. Particularly, they stressed the negative aspects of online writing such as the risks that it brings to learners (i.e. privacy and security), the inconvenience that it would bring to those without a personal internet connection, and the absence of a "physical mentor" who would guide the learner through the writing process.

These perceptions of learners reveal a lot of important information regarding the viability of blogging as an alternative activity in writing classes. The positive and negative opinions of the participants contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding the use of technology in language classes.

### **Logging Out: Blogs and their Contributions to the Teaching of Writing**

The discussions in this paper presented how blogs can contribute in developing the writing skills of tertiary learners. In theory and in practice, blogs—at least in this study—have been proven helpful because of its positive characteristics such as its ability to provide an alternative avenue for practicing writing, its authenticity, and its 'interactivity'. Furthermore, despite minimal disadvantages such as accessibility and security, an appropriate project mechanics and platform or blog site can address potential threats in the design and implementation of a blog project in writing classes.

Therefore, blogging can be used as an additional or alternative writing activity which would motivate learners to view writing as a means of expressing meaning and not merely as a requirement in language classes.

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