Collaboration through blogging: the development of writing and speaking skills in ESP courses

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Abstract. There has been a growing interest in incorporating social media in education and in language teaching in general. From a pedagogical perspective, as mentioned in Kleanthous (2016), blogs (or weblogs) appear to be effective in enhancing writing and/or reading skills, as their interactive platforms enable learners to exchange comments and offer feedback to each other, thus allowing learners to reflect on their own work and the learning process. Following our previous research (Kleanthous, 2016), this study proposes a research agenda for the effectiveness of collaboration through peer feedback in order to enhance the writing and speaking skills of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students in online settings. A preliminary analysis of data collected suggests that the interactive use of blogs in the ESP classroom has a positive impact on students' writing and speaking skills. The discussion of our results highlights the importance of social media in promoting language learning within a collaborative environment that is essentially learner-centered and teacher facilitated, as recommended by Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) researchers (e.g. Chapelle, 2001).

Keywords: blogs, collaborative learning, peer feedback, social media.

1. Introduction

Collaboration among students is believed to be beneficial because it encourages them to become motivated and engaged in the learning process, as attested by recent research. For example, Fernández Dobao (2012) investigated the effect of pair and group work in written accuracy, fluency and complexity, as well as the frequency and nature of language related episodes. Her study indicated that

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collaboration, either in pairs or in small groups, produced more grammatically and lexically accurate written materials.

Similarly, collaborative assessment in e-learning environments suggests that active collaboration among students makes them more motivated and engaged in the process of learning (McConnell, 2002). Knowing that there is an audience of readers or listeners seems to make students more motivated and, accordingly, they are more willing to put effort into assigned activities and thus do their best to perform well. Providing and receiving feedback by both their peers and instructor via this collaborative process can also be beneficial, especially in improving the students' writing and speaking skills, and their overall language development.

The focus of this paper is on the productive skills of writing and speaking because these are more easily implemented in a blog environment due to its message posting features. This paper is part of the first author's PhD research, and it aims to set out a research agenda for the effectiveness of collaboration through peer feedback in order to enhance the writing and speaking skills of ESP students in online settings. As such, the study aims to answer the following two research questions: (1) what impact does the use of blogs have on written and spoken language development in ESP contexts?, and (2) what are the students' perceptions on whether collaboration through peer feedback helps improve personal writing and speaking skills in ESP?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

43 first-year Computer Science undergraduate students at the University of Cyprus participated in this study. They were 19 to 22 year old Cypriots enrolled in the compulsory *English for Computer Science* course.

2.2. Procedure and instruments

The instructor/researcher created a class blog using Blogger (www.blogger.com) in which students became both followers and authors. Two writing tasks and two speaking tasks were uploaded throughout the semester. Students had to complete each task by a specific deadline and then comment on each other's posts as a follow-up activity after each task. The instructor monitored all comments and facilitated the discussion if some comments were not clear.

In general, students offered more comments related to the content, format and style of the written tasks, and less on correcting grammar, vocabulary and spelling errors. With respect to the speaking tasks, students provided oral comments expressing agreement/disagreement or personal views on the specific task at hand. These recordings were conducted using Vocaroo (www.vocaroo.com), in the form of podcasts, which were then uploaded to the course blog for peer feedback.

2.3. Data collection

The methods used to answer the two research questions included the collection of qualitative data such as writing samples from the learners' blog. Apart from their own posts, learners were encouraged to comment on their classmates' work by giving constructive feedback based on a set of pre-established criteria. By using their peers' feedback, students had to revise their assignments and upload the final drafts so that the instructor could evaluate them.

Following the students' initial posts, seven volunteers were interviewed in two focus-group sessions in which they were asked to report and answer questions about their perceptions and attitudes towards the use of blogs, as conceptualized in the study. The same number of students was interviewed again in the same focus groups at the end of the semester, after they had completed all blog-related assignments. Finally, participants were interviewed individually at the end of the study.

3. Results and discussion

With respect to the impact of blogs on the development of the students' writing and speaking skills in an ESP course, an analysis of the data, which included extracts from blog posts and comments, reveals a perceived improvement in the students' performance, especially in writing. A comparison was made between the blog posts and their comments (which constituted their first attempt at writing a memo on the blog), against their performance in the subsequent memo assignment, midterm and final exams. The participants' writing mistakes noted on the first task were not repeated in subsequent exams and they further improved their memo-writing skills. Regarding the students' speaking skills, due to students' hesitation to record their own speech and upload it to the blog, only one third of the students performed these tasks, therefore additional data need to be gathered to draw reliable conclusions.

An analysis of the data also revealed the students' positive attitudes towards the use of blogs for improving their writing skills. They felt it was an innovative

and interesting way to do their homework: "interesting, a different way to give my papers and get in contact with my teacher; […] helpful; reading others' posts helps understand the task better if I have difficulty". They also stated that the interactive feature blogs, through which they could exchange feedback on their work, helped them improve their writing, and made them pay attention to their peers' comments. Some participants stated that "getting comments is motivational; I didn't repeat the mistake; it's more helpful to the instructor's comments because you just read the teacher's comments and forget them, but your classmates' comments you cannot forget". Even though some participants felt uncomfortable giving comments and feedback to peers, as they felt that their classmates might be offended, they recognized in the end that by identifying errors in their classmates' work, they helped each other identify errors in their own writing, and this prevented them from making the same mistakes again: "I felt good about giving comments because I felt I was helping someone get better and it helped me express myself when I commented on others' work and it improved my writing as well". They also stated that using the blog positively affected their motivation, as they would constantly log in to check whether someone had posted a comment on their writing or speaking tasks.

With regards to the participants' speaking tasks, they stated that using Vocaroo was easy, and that completing the tasks did not take a considerable amount of extra time. However, some felt nervous about recording their voice and sharing it with their classmates, since it was something they had never done before. Finally, according to their responses, speaking tasks that take place on a blog may be more helpful for preparing a presentation, since they can be rehearsed before they are recorded: "[blogs] improved my speaking skills mostly because I had to record myself, tried more than once to have a good result […]; similar to giving a presentation, so I practiced that skill".

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the results reported here reveal that the participants perceive blogs as important tools to promote language learning within a collaborative environment that is essentially learner-centered and teacher-facilitated, as recommended by CALL researchers (Chapelle, 2001). In particular, participants felt that they improved in their writing, speaking and reading skills, especially through the exchange of feedback, although they felt hesitant and anxious about recording and sharing their own speech. Finally, they perceived blogs as motivating and fun tools that enhanced their overall language learning experience.

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