

Improving expressive writing in EFL through blogging

Rana Namouz¹, Hagit Misher-Tal², and Orly Sela³

Abstract. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of integrating blogging into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum on students' performance in expressive writing. Previous studies have shown that integrating blogging into EFL learning raises students' motivation and develops their linguistic and social skills as a result of the interaction between the blogger and his/her readers. In the present study, 22 high school Israeli-Arab students were asked to post guided essays to personal blogs and comment on each other's posts. The blogs were analyzed and the students' errors categorized, counted, and recorded over a four-month period. In addition, the students filled out a questionnaire at the end of the study period aimed at understanding their attitudes towards the process and the blogging experience. The results of the study showed a significant improvement in writing quality and a decrease in the amount of student errors. Moreover, the students expressed a positive attitude towards using blogs as a platform for developing writing skills.

Keywords: EFL, expressive writing, linguistic development, blogging.

1. Introduction

Expressive writing in EFL has been emphasized in the last few years, particularly in relation to technological development and information and communications technology. Therefore, EFL students face the challenge of learning expressive writing, especially when the linguistic rules of their mother tongue are different from those of the target language (Ismail, 2011). A number of approaches to teaching writing in EFL have been discussed over the last two decades, with a combination of the process approach and the genre approach being considered the most effective. Both these approaches emphasize writing as a cognitive process

1. Oranim College, Kiryat Tiv'on, Israel; rana.n3456@gmail.com

2. Holon Institute of Technology, Holon, Israel; Hagitmt@hit.ac.il

3. Oranim College, Kiryat Tiv'on, Israel; orly sela@oranim.ac.il

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requiring planning, gathering information from different resources, and receiving feedback which enhances self-reflection and revision (Badger & White, 2000; Daskalogiannaki, 2012; Silva, 1990; Tangpermpoon, 2008; Zen, 2005).

Recent research has shown that the integration of social networking into learning has benefits in exposing students to a wide range of information resources and connecting the learner with a large number of learning partners. Research has demonstrated that weblogs positively affect students' writing, raise their motivation to learn, and develop their social skills. Having the possibility of collaborating with others and receiving feedback makes weblogs a suitable tool for elevating the writer's expressive ability. The negotiation of meaning between the writer and his/her audience assists him/her in the process of developing their ideas and improving their writing (Gedera, 2012; Hashemi & Najafi, 2011; Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011). Research has also shown that blogging improves EFL skills. Blogging by its nature enhances the expansion of the learners' lexical and grammatical knowledge, since they constantly search for complex structures to express themselves clearly (Hashemi & Najafi, 2011; Yunus et al., 2013).

Based on the ample evidence of the qualities of blogging in promoting the writing process, a research question concerning the practice of blogging was formulated: In what ways does blogging affect the writing skills of EFL high-school learners?

2. Method

Twenty-two high school students from an Arab school in Israel took part in an action research project. The research group studied four weekly English classes as part of the school curriculum, and according to the Israeli Ministry of Education requirements.

In the beginning of the study, each of the participants established a personal blog through <https://www.blogger.com>. Before receiving each writing task, the participants prepared for it through different in-class activities, such as brainstorming and learning the relevant grammar. The participants were then asked to upload their essays to their personal blogs within two days. Eight writing assignments yielded 178 posts which were collected and analyzed. The analysis included error counting and classification.

In order to comprehend the efficiency of blogging in promoting writing, four main parameters were examined: grammar errors, vocabulary errors, spelling errors, and the general grading each assignment received. A repeated-measures ANOVA test

and a post-hoc test were conducted to reveal the significance of differences among the assignments. In addition, a teacher's log was kept, where the in-class and log activities were recorded. Furthermore, a satisfaction questionnaire, using Likert scale questions and one open-ended question, was given to the participants at the end of the study period, in an attempt to support the numerical data and understand the participants' perception of blogging.

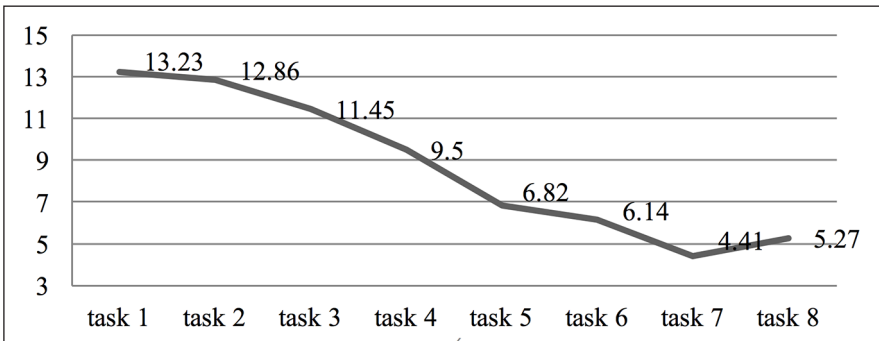
3. Results

The results show a significant decrease in the amount of errors of all types detected in the students' posts throughout the research period.

3.1. The number of errors of all types

The study yielded 1557 errors. The results show that the average number of errors of all types dropped from 13.52 errors in the first writing assignment to 5.27 errors in the eighth assignment. The ANOVA test revealed a significant difference between the assignments ($F(2,20)=40.64, p<0.001$). Figure 1 illustrates the results of the average number of errors.

Figure 1. The average number of errors

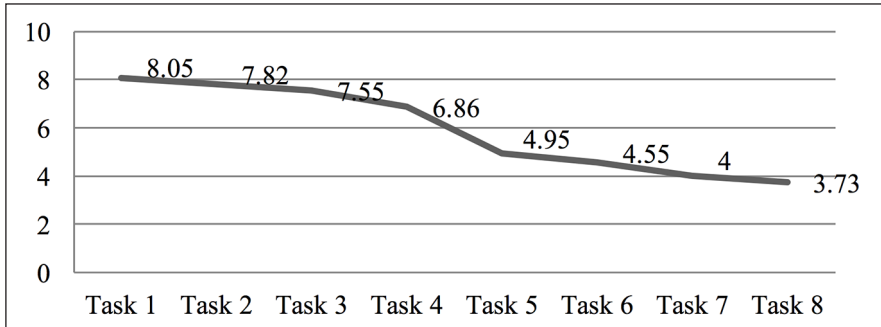


3.2. Grammatical errors

The grammatical errors classification included the following error types: errors of tenses, word order in a sentence, adding/omitting an unnecessary auxiliary, omitting articles, errors in capitalization, adding unnecessary pronouns, run-on sentences/fragment sentences, and wrong use of apostrophes.

The results show that there was a significant decrease in the number of grammatical errors made by the participants throughout the eight assignments, and the ANOVA repeated measures test showed a significant difference between the tasks ($F(2,20)=57.32, p<0.001$). Figure 2 exhibits the averages of grammatical errors in each of the eight tasks.

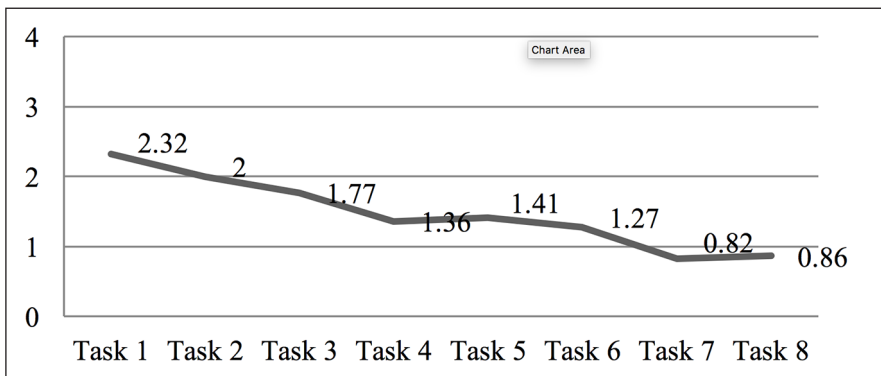
Figure 2. The average number of grammatical errors



3.3. Vocabulary errors

After counting the vocabulary errors, the results demonstrate a significant decline in the average number of vocabulary errors. The ANOVA repeated measures test showed a significant difference between the tasks ($F(2,20)=4.57, p<0.001$). Figure 3 illustrates the decline in the average number of errors.

Figure 3. The average number of vocabulary errors



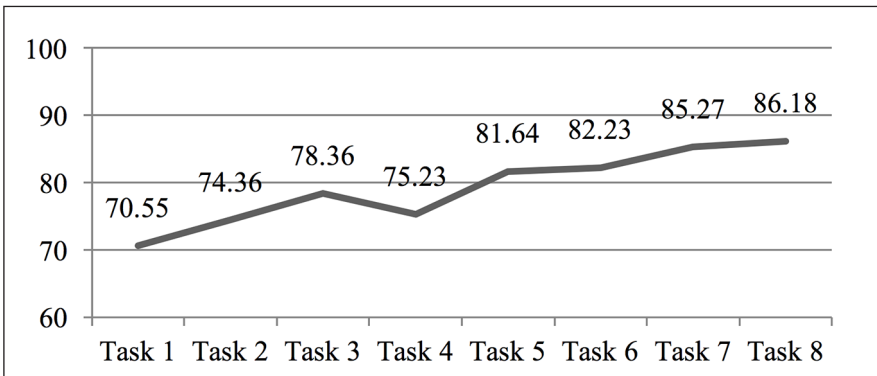
3.4. Spelling errors

The results also revealed a decline in the average number of spelling errors throughout the research period. While the average number of spelling errors in the first task was 2.86 errors, it declined gradually from task to task and an average of 0.68 errors was detected in the last task. The ANOVA repeated measures test also indicated a significant difference between the different tasks ($F(2,20)=7.12$, $p<0.001$).

3.5. The average grading of tasks

The results indicate a 16 point increase in the average grading each task received according to the rubric of the Israeli Ministry of Education for assessing written presentations at this level. The difference between tasks was significant ($F(2,20)=65.03$, $p<0.001$). Figure 4 indicates the increase in the average grading of the tasks.

Figure 4. The average grades of the tasks



3.6. The questionnaire results

The questionnaire results reveal a positive attitude towards the blogging experience. Most students felt that the integration of blogs improved their expressive writing skills significantly. Most of the participants agreed that the feedback they received from their peers contributed to their development in writing in EFL, as well as elevating their sense of responsibility towards their learning.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The results of the present study have demonstrated the efficiency of blogging in promoting expressive writing in EFL. Blogging and massive peer feedback empower learners' use of language. The results also indicate that blogging enriches lexis and develops the use of correct grammatical structures. The results of the grading indicate that the quality of writing has increased significantly as a result of the reduction of errors; it seems that the students have become more aware of their writing and noticed their mistakes, which enabled them to correct them and avoid repeating them. The results of the present study enforce other studies' findings regarding the efficacy of blogging (Gedera, 2012; Hashemi & Najafi, 2011; Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011; Yunus et al., 2013).

The implications of the study are that an emphasis must be put on the process of writing through blogging; i.e. the process has to include explicit and implicit teaching of logistic skills, in addition to preparing the students for correspondence in a blog, such as methods for providing constructive feedback and responding to it. Moreover, the choice of tasks affects students' improvement; tasks which arouse discussion and debate are preferable for developing writing skills.

In conclusion, the engagement of blogging in teaching EFL writing is effective for K-12 learners, on condition that it is accompanied by conventional methods of teaching and much guidance throughout the process on using technology properly.

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