

Be Creative and Collaborative: Strategies and Implications of Blogging in EFL Classes

Catherine Karen Roy¹

¹ English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Catherine Karen Roy, English Language Institute, Women's Main Campus, King Abdulaziz University, P.O. Box 42817, Jeddah 21551, Saudi Arabia. Tel: 966-506-029-443. E-mail: catherine.karen.roy@gmail.com

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Abstract

The 21st century has seen the emergence of blogs as an authentic writing practice that provides students with a sense of immediacy by allowing them to document their lives as stories or to engage their classmates with real or imaginary tales. In this study, Saudi EFL students were asked to post their writing in a blog and collaborate with their peers to edit that writing. This research used Storybird.com to offer students an opportunity to blog on curriculum topics. By sharing their entries with each other, students developed collaboration skills, individual voices, and responsibility for their writing. This research concludes by discussing the project's implications (the peer collaboration involved gave students ownership of their writing and a better understanding of standards), challenges (time and privacy constraints), recommendations specifically for the Saudi context, and general recommendations for implementing blogging in the curriculum.

Keywords: blogging, technology in the classroom, teaching writing, Storybird.com

1. Introduction

In the EFL classroom, students tend to view writing activities merely as tasks to be completed in exchange for marks. Often, students memorize a paragraph that they then write on the day of the test. In draft after draft of that paragraph, students engage in a process inhibiting, rather than encouraging the artful production of stories; instead of challenging them to creatively engage in storytelling, typical writing tasks only involving paper and pen end up as exercises in students' rote memorization of the teacher's corrections to their work. Because from the start such work fails to provide motivation and collaboration, these students do not experience the potential of collaboration to help them to develop a purpose for writing, a unique voice, and a sense of online writing community. Having observed this problematic situation, I devised the experiment I discuss in this paper to awaken in my students artful storytelling—that is, storytelling that incorporates images and imagination in anticipation of and response to peers' ideas—and to foster peer collaboration via online communication. I used Storybird.com in my EFL classroom to introduce technology that would teach writing, approximate the students' preferred social media environment, and also maintain the privacy boundaries required in the Saudi context: I assumed that incorporating technology to teach writing while maintaining those boundaries would be key to increasing the students' motivation.

Previous work in this area (Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2004; Blood, 2000; Dippold, 2009; Hu, 2005; Lowe & Williams, 2004; Pinkman, 2005 and Ward, 2004;) explained how in order to boost students' motivation teachers could replace the traditional paper and pen approach with Web 2 technology while also encouraging a collaborative environment, one in which peer editing and comments help students to improve their writing skills and feel more motivated to produce artful storytelling by combining images with simple paragraphs, as in short picture books. The images awaken the students' creativity and add an artful touch to their writing.

My study builds on that earlier research on blogging (Note 1) and provides step-by-step guidance on how to employ this online approach with students. This paper begins with a description of a case study that shows how involving students in writing personal posts and also commenting online on each other's stories increased their interest and facility in writing. It then summarizes the students' views on the extent to which they perceived themselves as having improved or having been able to improve from peer and teacher feedback, explores the implications of the experiment, and makes recommendations for other EFL teachers interested in using blogging

to teach writing to EFL Saudi students.

The general public thinks of blogs as consisting of authors' regular entries on personal websites that are accessible to anyone. These entries have titles, text, and links, and blend comments, thoughts, essays, and perspectives on selected issues so as to encourage further discussion. "The key elements of the blog are regular, chronologically posted journal entries that may contain links to other sites and often allow readers to post responses" (Catera, 2005, p. 46). What differentiates blogs from emails and all other forms of electronic expression is that they are forums that are accessible online, thus forming a sense of a larger online community. "Compared to email, these discussion forums facilitate group exchanges, and they maintain a log of all messages in a threaded, hierarchical structure" (Godwin-Jones, 2003, p. 12); at the same time, blogs project a sense of their authors' ownership of their blog websites. Web entries can allow students to express their thoughts on a regular basis and provide interested students with equal opportunities to engage in online discourse. However, to comply with Saudi schools' strict security and privacy policies, I established a closed form of online blogging: one that was inaccessible to anyone outside the class. Although students could publish and comment using pseudonyms, they knew that every entry came from someone in the class and that I could monitor and block posts at any time. For this experiment, I chose four blog topics (an apology letter, an invitation letter, the best tourist spots in Saudi Arabia, the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning) taken from or inspired by the curriculum that I thought would help prepare students for their final writing test. Students were not asked to provide any external links to accompany their posts, but they could do so if they wanted to. After students published their blogs online, their classmates could post comments in response to that work.

This research tested both the encouraging and the challenging aspects of blog writing in correlation to the hypothesis that, compared to traditional methods of teaching writing, blogging would generate more interest and collaboration, develop more engaged writing skills, and be more enjoyable. In addition, it assumed that blogging would be more accessible than an oral tandem or Skype exchange would have been: "the weblog [...provides] the ability to communicate without the inhibitions and preconceptions that accompany most face-to-face interactions" (Ward, 2004, p. 4). From my perspective as a teacher, the blogs my pupils wrote ultimately formed a portfolio that documented each student's development not just grammatically but also creatively, since, unlike public blogs, which are organized chronologically, these blogs were organized thematically. The primary obstacles to the effective use of this approach were stories that were too short or that were written in point form rather than complete sentences, unreflective entries, and lack of collaboration (students were at first unsure about how to provide feedback and how much the original blogger would value any peer feedback compared to the teacher's comments). During this experiment I had to encourage students to give each other feedback; to do so I suggested not only that learning is part of everyone's background but also that the collaborative elements of blogging and peer editing are particularly apt for learning how to write better. At the same time, I pointed out that blogging helps students to become independent learners, a particularly significant point in the Saudi Arabian context where community is more important than individuality.

In several ways, blogging helps students to develop as independent learners. In itself, "whether face-to-face or computer-enabled, [dialogue between peers] can facilitate, or scaffold, the process of learning" (Hewings & Coffin, 2007, p. 226) while collaborating with peers; but in addition, blogging allows students to reflect on posted contributions and revise their own logs in response. Blogging also helps pupils to develop awareness of and thoughtfulness about academic expectations, since blog entries are viewed as a platform on which students can rehearse their writing skills (Note 2). As for the long-term benefits of this approach, "once learners take responsibility for their learning, they [are] more able to capitalize on learning environments both in and out of the classroom, hopefully making them life-long and efficient learners" (Pinkman, 2005, p. 12). Thus, the principle benefit of this approach lies not in the incorporation of technology into classroom learning, but in the enduring effect of fostering effective, independent learning.

The main hypothesis of this study was that by requiring students to write for an audience and anticipate peer feedback, not just the teacher's corrections, blogging would transform students' perception of their writing tasks in the sense that they would be writing for their peers and therefore would adopt a positive attitude toward blogging that in turn can increase their motivation to convey their stories more artfully: that is, by choosing imagery and expressing their thoughts as short stories. These findings support the theory that because bloggers anticipate their readers' reactions to their blog entries, blogging in itself encourages motivation and collaboration (Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2004; Dippold, 2009; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004). In short, blogging can boost the students' sense of accomplishment as writers and engage them in writing for their audience.

To test my hypothesis, I offered students the opportunity to write and collaborate online in order to complete two curriculum-based writing tasks. These participants were then asked to complete questionnaires about their views

on that process, thus providing valuable insights into the advantages and implications of blogging as an approach to teaching writing to EFL students in Saudi Arabia. My recommendations for using blogging in the Saudi EFL classroom are based on three main conclusions I drew both from observing the students as they engaged in blogging and from their comments on these questionnaires. First, the implications of the study are invaluable for revitalizing the teaching of writing in EFL courses, particularly given contemporary learners' interest in online forms of expression and communication (though self-censure is usually prevalent among Saudi EFL learners). The use of blogging in this experiment suggests that because it gives students a significant audience ready to provide immediate feedback, blogging has strong potential to increase students' interest in other writing assignments. Second, this study also highlights the implications, precautions, and guidelines that apply specifically in the Saudi context; students collaborating and exchanging ideas online on how to improve their writing must have online privacy: in other words, blogging had to be done on a site that people outside the English Language Institute could not access. Finally, this study suggests the importance of grouping students when employing peer editing. My students only benefited their fellow group members (they commented only on the posts of the two other bloggers in their groups). In the end though, all those stories were accessible in an online folder as writing samples the students could consult in preparation for their final test (Note 3).

Even if students share an educational and cultural background, as my students did, some have better writing skills than others and can exercise those skills as they provide feedback; while weaker students can also offer valuable comments, those with already superior writing skills may benefit more from blogging. Therefore, I recommend grouping students with different levels of ability whenever possible and let them write under a pseudonym if they want so they do not feel criticized.

1.1 Aims, Challenges, and Implications of Blogging

One of my aims in conducting this research was to see whether this new online blogging forum could shift the impetus for corrections and revisions from me, the teacher, to the students' classroom peers. A second aim was to address the challenges of using blogs in the Saudi EFL classroom: although students privately employ all kinds of social media, they typically are not expected (and often not allowed) to use any of these social media on the university campus because of the risk of compromising their own or others' privacy: for example, photographs and Snapchat are forbidden on campus. As for other social media like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, not all students would like to add all their classmates to their accounts as "friends" or be "followed" by all the new students in their English class. As a result, I had to establish guidelines that would allow my students to retain their privacy or anonymity while still being able to enjoy collaborating on, commenting on, and peer editing each other's stories. I also needed to assess the students' initial reactions to this approach to teaching writing, and to monitor both the benefits the students saw in receiving feedback from this online platform and any changes in their senses of creativity and autonomy. While previous research (Blood, 2000; Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2004; Dippold, 2009; Hu, 2005; Lowe & Williams, 2004; Pinkman, 2005 and Ward, 2004) has focused on using diary entries and free topics to facilitate the development of writing in the EFL classroom, my study extended that work by exploring how well blogging helped such students to achieve the same outcome.

In my experiment, the focus was to engage students in the English language and encourage them both to collaborate and to share their blogs with the class. Like Dippold (2009), Hu (2005), and Mynard (2007), in my research I also sought to foster peer interaction outside class time: I believed students could help each other improve their writing, and I saw it would be motivating to let them read some of their classmates' blogs while discovering this new way of incorporating technology to learn writing. "We often seek out new ways for students to connect to the target language. We surmise that the more links we can build between the study of the language and its use in natural settings, the more likely it is that students will achieve solid communication skills" (Cartera, 2005, p. 46). That goal accords with what instructors are expected to do especially at the English Language Institute at KAU. According to the Pedagogical Development Head of ELI, language educators, as part of their service to and development of the program (Note 4), are responsible for facilitating the increasing integration of technology into their classrooms and for encouraging collaboration amongst their students—in other words, for developing new and engaging ways to use a target language: In this the context of technology integration, the academic value of blogging can appear only when teachers clarify guidelines, specify sites that the Head of Educational Affairs has deemed to be allowed (Note 5), and explain to students how they can remain private/anonymous while also enhancing their writing skills.

The university already offers each class its own online platform, called Blackboard. However, for my purposes, this interactive computer-mediated communication tool was very limited: it did not allow for individual stories, just a thread of messages; it did not permit students to upload images; and it was teacher-centered. So I chose to set up blogging using the site Storybird.com in order to give students a sense of ownership of their writing and to

provide them with opportunities for creativity in the form of writing their own short picture books. Storybird.com provides images but does not allow the uploading of other photos. Like Blackboard, Storybird.com provides a secure and private forum, but only the latter offers the picture-book format. I therefore used Storybird.com to give students the opportunity to produce their own stories based on curriculum topics and to post these entries as writing samples the whole class could access and review.

Students in every community around the world are subject to expectations and restrictions that shape their development: blogging therefore differs depending on the blogger's cultural context. Saudi students are not generally expected to post anything publicly online as part of a class; even less often are they asked to comment on each other's work. From their first years in school, Saudi students learn that memorization is highly praised and writing is a skill that only certain people develop. So students are not generally predisposed to see themselves as potential writers.

Like their peers anywhere, EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia who want to explore this new method and maximize the benefits of blogging must be well prepared, anticipate their students' reactions, and consider both the impact of past instruction and the possibilities for future teaching. In addition, an instructor acting as an e-moderator should facilitate the online exchange so that students will be successfully engaging with, responding to, interacting with, and reflecting on each other's posts (Salmon, 2003).

I found that blogging helped students to gain an increased awareness of their audience, which in turn directly increased their motivation to be more interesting to others and therefore heightened their overall engagement in the writing process. The pivotal questions for other educators applying these findings are thus how teachers can best incorporate blogging into their classroom practices, and then how they can measure the benefits—for their students, the potential increase in students' motivation and thoughtfulness in writing; for themselves, the successful integration of the newest technological trends in their teaching of writing. It is also vital that teachers adjust their teaching approaches to accord with the technological platform interests that might best motivate their students in the 21st century, while also being mindful of the cultural context and privacy of their students.

1.2 Blogging as an Emerging Field in EFL Writing Classes

Because I introduced blogging into my EFL classroom to enhance writing skills and heighten motivation through peer collaboration, this article discussing that project fits into the cumulative understanding of the emerging field of teaching writing through blogging. The subject of how peer feedback can increase motivation and nurture a self-motivating inner voice has been investigated by Blood (2000), Brooks, Nichols, and Priebe (2004), Hu (2005) Pinkman (2005) and Ward (2004). That blogging has a social aspect is reflected in how students are directly motivated by audience awareness (Ward, 2004): "The weblog provides a genuine audience, is authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, provides a disinhibiting context and offers a completely new form with [...] creative potential" (Ward, 2004, p. 3). As demonstrated by Lowe and Williams (2004), writing students engaged in blogging become increasingly aware of the public power of writing: because they start writing with an audience in mind, they come to see writing as a socially responsible activity, a task that will generate an authentic response rather than a mere exercise to perform in exchange for a passing grade. Thus, they take ownership of their texts and therefore can anticipate authentic public responses to them; in contrast, a typical problem with conventional assignments in writing classes is that the students' only audience is their teacher (Lowe & Williams, 2004). Researching the use of peer responses to blogging in collaborative second-language writing classes, Liu and Hansen (2002) analyzed the most effective contexts and activities for the instructor to provide, useful strategies that they might employ, and the pros and cons for students of offering peer responses. In relation to L2 (the language someone is learning or knows in addition to their mother tongue ["L1"]) classroom learning, Liu and Sadler (2003) focused on the differences between electronic and traditional modes of peer reviewing and found that although it may be more motivating to students to use technology for peer editing, those who provide feedback using the traditional pen and paper tend to write more feedback than those using technology. And in relation to peer versus teacher feedback, Tsui and Ng (2000) concluded that, although students value teacher feedback as being more academically important than peer responses, student feedback is nonetheless crucial to the development of students' writing skills because peers provide student writers with an audience and purpose that they feel more personally connected to: "peer comments have the specific roles of enhancing a sense of 'real' audience in the students, raising the students' awareness of strengths and weaknesses of their own writings, encouraging collaborative learning and fostering an ownership [of the original words and thoughts] of text" (pp. 167-168).

While writing for a meaningful audience, expecting peer feedback, and improving as a result of that feedback are clearly important, McLuckie and Topping (2004) point out that for the teacher aiming to use blogging in the

classroom, merely providing the means for interaction is insufficient. Attention should increasingly focus upon the pedagogical principles underpinning effective online peer interaction. Virtual learning environment architecture should incorporate user-friendly and customizable tools for supporting and scaffolding higher quality discourse in online discussion environments. (p. 578)

To truly benefit fully from online collaboration, then, students must be taught how to provide feedback and respond to each other's posts (Note 6). Learning how to give and receive feedback and then review their work is a basic step in students' gaining learner autonomy.

Teachers who use blogs in their EFL classrooms are encouraging learner independence, helping students to practice newly learned vocabulary, giving students responsibility for their writing, and encouraging them to become life-long autonomous learners (Pinkman, 2005). In their book *Web 2.0—New Tools, New Schools* (2007), Solomon and Schrum consider how technologies are challenging and impacting teaching and learning: while how much and what educators teach the next generation matters, how students are being educated in a growing globalized and interconnected world matters more. The authors emphasize that teachers must ensure that this new generation will be equipped with the technological skills they will need to be successful, and point out that blogging is one way that students can use technology while also learning how to express themselves creatively: "using collaboration and communication tools with educational methods that also promote these skills—such as project-based learning—will help students acquire the abilities they need for the future" (Solomon & Schrum, 2007, p. 13).

If one assumes that telling stories is part of who people are in society, and that lives are, after all, told in and framed by stories (Bruner, 2000), then one must encourage EFL student writers to develop their own voices (Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2004). By the term 'own voices' I mean the student's own words and thoughts to write a story. On the one hand, comments or ideas expressed in blogs can trigger more ideas (Dippold, 2009). On the other, the act of writing encourages reflectiveness and mindfulness in the writer: "foreign language students need to draw on previously learned language in order to write a blog entry, which means that they are very likely to be reflecting on their understanding of the language as they compose their blog entries" (Mynard, 2009, p. 3).

1.3 Hypotheses on Motivation and Corresponding Research Design

The idea of blogging and collaborating online was a strategy I used primarily as a way of addressing the motivational issues of first-year students in the English language program of the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdulaziz University and of helping these students to develop their own voices and ownership of their writing. In addition, this suggestion aimed to provide students with an audience that would provide feedback in order to foster collaboration and to make writing more fun: as Cetera (2005) pointed out, "introducing EFL students to blogging can generate in them a new fascination with the dynamism of writing and language" (p. 46). My hypothesis was that peer editing through a form of blogging like that provided by Storybird.com could increase collaboration and the development of writing and assessing skills amongst my students.

2. Method

My first step in incorporating blogging into my English 103 course at KAU was to ask those students interested in blogging in class to set up student accounts on Storybird.com so that they could join our online classroom, a virtual space which was not accessible by the general public. Students could use their cellphones, an iPad, or a laptop, though initially all opened their Storybird.com account on their cellphones (the majority on a Samsung Note 4®). To help students make a bank of writing samples that they could draw on for their final writing task, and to make the blogging process as useful as possible to the students, I not only provided them with topics relevant to the curriculum but also asked them to provide feedback on each other's stories. To ensure that everyone got feedback, I then divided the students into groups of three, so each pupil had to comment on two other blogs as well as writing their own blog. Some prompts I provided to elicit peer feedback were these: "What did you like? What confused you? Did you find any mistakes or punctuation errors? Are the images culturally appropriate? Do they relate well to the story?" For the purposes of this class, the blog entries were not as free and dynamic as blog entries on a personal website might be: due to the students' cultural and contextual constraints as well as to their limited time for this project (they already were spending eighteen hours a week studying English, which was not their major), I decided to ask participants to write short stories using Storybird.com. I chose curriculum-related topics for the students to blog on because otherwise they might have been less willing to take part in this experiment, might have stopped participating partway through the project, or might not have been fully engaged in it. In this blogging activity students could choose to draft and revise their blogs as many times as they liked, on paper, online, or using a combination of those two methods.

2.1 Participants' Characteristics and Sampling Procedures

The participants were one group of 25 Saudi girls, aged 18 to 20, in a level 103 class at KAU. The other six students in the class decided not to participate, mostly due to absences on the day of the experiment or to time constraints (they were unwilling to blog from home). These participants had all started their studies at the English Language Institute of KAU in August, 2015, and none were repeating the course, though some had slightly better English skills than others. All had had English instruction in high school. They engaged in this research, which directly complemented their work in English 103 (March 2016), during the last two weeks of that seven-week course.

I asked the students if they were interested in using blogging to complement their coursework and told them that although their participation would earn them no extra credit, they would be offered a modest reward of a chocolate and a sticky-notes pad for joining in. I explained that this project would involve them in posting their stories as a way to receive feedback and thus to learn from each other; and that this activity would also provide them with writing samples they could draw on later when doing writing tests. They could blog either during allocated class time (40 minutes) or while waiting for their turn in class on the day of their speaking tests. Because this study involved only one sample group from a single class, the students were all at the same point in the curriculum, though they could choose from the four topics provided: an invitation letter, an apology letter, the pros and cons of online learning, and the best tourist spots in Saudi Arabia (Appendix A). Students typed all their blog entries in class after agreeing to allow me to collect data on their participation, in conformance with ELI's policy, and the questionnaire that the students completed after their participation remained anonymous and locked in my private home office.

My introductory lesson on using Storybird.com was delivered in class but required the students' cellphones and therefore, just as with any cellphone app, students initially needed some time to open accounts on Storybird.com and become familiar with the blogging tools there. Because students were tempted to access WhatsApp or Instagram during the experiment, I had to monitor the class to ensure that participants stayed on task. In the first of the three hours the students spent on this project, I introduced them to online writing, provided them with instructions on how to open individual accounts that would allow them to participate in the class's blogging work, showed them how to publish their web logs and feedback, and clarified how to select culturally appropriate images already available in Storybird.com to use in their blogs. Since many of the students' phones enabled them to access Storybird.com but not to type on that platform directly from their phones, instead of composing their stories during this introduction these students as well as some of the others wrote their stories later, either on their own home computers or on shared laptops I brought into the classroom for students to use while waiting their turn for the speaking exam session.

For this experiment I needed to ensure students knew how to give each other useful feedback, which meant knowing not only where on the web-page to click in order to upload their comments, but also how to follow specific commentary guidelines for content, grammar, coherence, and correctness; otherwise, most feedback would have consisted only of "good work!" or "I liked your story." I therefore found it essential to highlight for my students that this online-writing and feedback approach to improving their writing in English would help them to better understand the task, be more observant about others' writing, and form a community online.

In their initial stages of blogging for class those who could not write directly on their phones tended only to jot down key ideas in point form because they did not feel comfortable typing their stories online immediately in the necessary complete sentences and paragraphs. For those students who did not want to start writing online immediately, I therefore edited these initial points, either in Word or by hand, to help them write their first posts; they then wrote their second or final drafts online. This procedure benefitted students as much as possible by allowing them to read only the most correct versions of each other's stories. For the students, then, the overall goals of writing a story on Storybird.com and exchanging peer feedback were to be able to use the writing samples they published online to help them prepare for their writing test, to foster a sense of community and collaboration in the classroom as they became increasingly aware of acceptable standards for a given writing task (be it the apology letter, the invitation letter, the description of their city), and to enjoy writing purposefully for a valued audience.

2.2 Measures and Observations

My assessment of this blogging activity was based on my observations of the students' entries in Storybird.com and their written responses to a post-experiment questionnaire (Appendix B). The measurements derive exclusively from the blogging being done by the students participating in this research project. The cultural validity of this experience as exemplifying and applying to the Saudi context was ensured by the homogeneity of

the sample group: all of those taking part were Saudi girls aged 18 to 20 in their first year at KAU.

2.3 Research Design

The subjects used blogging to complete tasks that were already part of their curriculum. Neither experimental manipulation nor control groups were utilized. Unlike the regular free writing that is characteristic of blogging, the blogging that I asked these students to do required them to choose from amongst four topics that I guessed might appear on their final test. The overall strategy of this experiment was for me to ask students to post their stories on Storybird.com, to monitor those entries and the feedback that they provided each other, and to assess the responses to the questionnaire.

3. Results

Blogging in the EFL classroom is an emerging teaching and learning strategy that has been praised for how it engages and inspires learners while developing their individual voices as writers as well as their awareness of quality—or at least compliance with standards—in writing. However, the question of how best to guide students through the steps of posting and responding to blogs has not yet been fully explored. The monitoring role of the teacher whose students undertake blogging must not be underestimated: that instructor must check the students' entries for plagiarism, cultural appropriateness of images, and useful feedback. In some cases, the instructor may have to intervene to ensure that the activity functions well and that students' writing actually improves: in other words, the teacher's careful monitoring directly contributes to both the teacher and students' effective time management and beneficial outcomes for this activity.

The commonplace and extensive communication that takes place via WhatsApp amongst students in any Saudi class before a major task suggests how collaboration and a strong sense of belonging to a community are typical cultural characteristics. Nevertheless, instructors must equip beginning classroom bloggers with examples and controlled or guided practice in producing feedback so that these students can eventually comment effectively on different aspects of writing, from grammar and syntax to punctuation and paragraph structure. Without such guidance, many students would feel little motivation to comment constructively on each other's posts; only the stronger students might participate, causing imbalances in both the quantity and quality of feedback from participants. Thus, the teacher should take care to prepare students to give useful feedback.

Using Storybird.com and the online feedback approach might initially seem time-consuming if the experiment is run only through a limited time like a week for instance: setting the website up for class use, giving students clear guidelines for choosing images and publishing their stories online, and then helping the students use the site for the first time took me 40 minutes. Nevertheless, the technology can release considerable potential in students, awakening a passion for writing and being creative that can ultimately lead students to see writing as a creative expression of their ideas, an engaging means of conveying opinions and sharing personal stories, and a way to develop their unique authorial voices. And compared to using traditional pen and paper, working online makes it easier for students to collaborate on, coordinate, and share their work.

Audience awareness and a strong sense of community prevail at ELI (and perhaps at other Saudi universities). I wondered whether students simply needed to learn how to provide effective feedback. Providing feedback is not only a way for students to share responsibility for what someone else is saying, but also a means of increasing their understanding of writing standards. As a result, the more students are encouraged to become involved in peer evaluation, the greater the chance that they will gain assessment skills and better understand when their own writing meets or surpasses academic expectations.

3.1 Statistics and Data Analysis

The post-experiment questionnaire revealed that 60% of the participants felt it was important or very important to be able to write creatively (see Appendix B). When asked if they found the images in Storybird.com helpful in developing ideas, 36% were neutral, but 28% found those images somewhat important and 24% found them very important to writing in a beautiful and artful way. Thus, 52% of students viewed images in Storybird.com as significantly contributing to their creative writing process.

Then, in order to assess the students' level of motivation, I asked "Would you like to use this approach in your other classes next module?" The majority of students (88%) indicated that they would like to continue using Storybird.com in the next module of the course; and their responses to the next question showed that 72% said they preferred writing with Storybird.com to using only pen and paper.

These questionnaire results indicate that a strong majority of students would like to continue using Storybird.com in the next module. Then, to test the hypothesis that the overwhelming majority of students favoured online writing not only because technology is more fun to use than traditional methods but because of

blogging's collaborative component, I asked two questions to measure the actual benefits of peer feedback to students' improvement in writing: "Do you think that your peers' feedback gave you more ideas?" and "Do you think you can become a better writer as a result of your peers' feedback?" Fifty-six percent of the respondents said that peer feedback was "somewhat important" or "very important" in providing them with more ideas. This observation supports Catera's (2005) view that blogging makes writing activities not only more fun but also more similar to what students would do in their free time: communicate with each other online. In response to question six, however, 10 students (40%) responded they had a neutral opinion whether or not that peer feedback would make them better writers.

4. Concerns about Choosing an Appropriate Blogging Site

When selecting an online site for this project, I thought that anonymity (or at least the possibility of anonymity) would play a role in the success of the experiment: I wanted my students to avoid reading direct criticism from their peers, and therefore in my final question on the post-experiment questionnaire, I asked students how important they perceived anonymity to be in this experiment. To my surprise, less than half of the class (44%) responded that anonymity was somewhat or very important when providing peer editing; 28% were neutral and 28% said it was not or was only slightly important. In Saudi Arabia, however, the teacher must ensure that, like Storybird.com, the chosen website protects students' online work from access by anyone outside of the class. Another advantage for the teacher using Storybird.com with the class is that the website allows the teacher to make folders for each topic covered with the class so students can leave their stories in the folder devoted to their chosen topic. In other words, it is a good way for the teacher to track students' work and improvement throughout the module.

Although students responded in the questionnaire that they had not experienced any problems with the website, I had noticed that initially, I had to ensure that students opened student accounts rather than regular accounts on Storybird.com; a student account publishes blogs only within the class, whereas a regular account allows a blogger to publish stories on the website as an individual author and cannot join any online groups.

5. Discussion

My hypotheses were that by using Storybird.com as a tool in my writing class, my students would become more engaged writers as they gained awareness of their audience; and that the online collaboration that would ensue would help develop the collaborative skills the students would eventually need for independent learning and in the workforce. Knowing how to respond to a piece of writing is as important as developing one's writing skills, and one way of achieving that goal is to ask them to provide peer feedback and assessment (Cassidy, 2006; McLuckie & Topping, 2004).

Students in the Women's Main Campus at KAU, like most students in Saudi Arabia and beyond, view their ability to use technology both in and out of the classroom as a way to show others that they are sophisticated, modern Saudi women. One way in which teachers at the English Language Institute of KAU can capitalize on that desirable social identity is to incorporate blogging as a classroom practice. To that end, instructors at KAU should also make sure that students are becoming increasingly autonomous learners. Blogging as described in this paper, allows students a degree of this kind of autonomy, since it gives students the choice of what to write about and when to do that writing. In general, students prefer to write on subjects that relate to their social identity and that they have had experience with, and can therefore describe or reflect on independently.

Of course, especially for those students who are afraid that blogging will expose their lack of proficiency, the teacher must emphasize that beyond promoting cognitive development through writing and peer editing, blogging is intended to encourage language use and participation; and that through this online communication, students can expect to improve and to accomplish tasks that contribute directly to their learning experiences.

Regarding plagiarism and task performance, students must understand that teachers are fully aware of the Google translate tool: students therefore cannot expect to be able to simply copy and paste texts that Google has composed for them. Student writers must also be reminded of the potential audience they may have beyond their current English class if they write in English rather than Arabic: if they can write in English they may be able to reach people internationally, no matter which issues are being discussed or which forum they are being discussed on: Facebook, Twitter, or a personal website. In any class in Saudi Arabia, however, the teacher must be sensitive to the cultural setting by avoiding forbidden topics (at KAU, such topics include women driving, women in sports, love, and movies).

If our aim as teachers is to develop in our students' skills that they will be able to employ in the future, would explaining that aim to KAU students at the ELI help them to accept blogging as a course component? Since

students at the ELI are already positively inclined to master technology and to collaborate, they simply need to learn how to best respond to each other's work in order to use blogging as a productive writing and collaborative tool. As Hanrahan and Isaacs (2016) concluded, "peer [feedback] will help students to contribute constructively in collaborative efforts" (p. 54). Their online participation in blogging will also build their self-confidence, lead to better understanding of the criteria involved in tasks, and thus support work that meets or surpasses standards. Through awareness of writing for a peer audience alone, students show increased awareness in their writing (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2016; Oravec, 2003).

To set additional blogging tasks, teachers could ask writing students to post blog entries using language easily understood at the lower intermediate level and providing readers with cultural understanding on socially acceptable topics (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005). For instance, in their blog entries students could link their travel abroad to cultural references about those experiences, information which would be particularly beneficial to scholarship students going to those countries. These posts might contain the students' expectations, their thoughts before leaving for and after returning from their travels, or their critical thinking about cultural aspects and events in the countries they visited. In this case, instead of relying entirely on their imaginations, students would be practicing how to write reflectively and how to appeal to a wider audience. In fact, blog entries are increasingly common in the spheres of politics, social networking, and celebrities. By blogging, students will be preparing to participate in that larger community and possibly to thus foster cultural understanding between different nations.

From my perspective as the instructor, though, three ways to extend benefits of this project should be noted. First, it seems students need a certain amount of time to learn to take peer feedback seriously and then to depend more on each other than on the teacher, as Hyland and Hyland (2006) also observed. Second, the majority of the class (40%) felt neutral about the potential of peer feedback to improve their writing, a perception that may be due to the paucity or poor quality of the feedback they initially received in response to their online work. In order to perceive the full potential for collaboration and online comments to improve their writing, these students would have to have received appropriate training and plenty of practice and advice about providing effective and beneficial feedback to their peers. My last concern is that for students, the initial steps of drafting, editing, and re-writing posts is time-consuming, though this investment in time does yield online stories that form a bank of writing samples the students can draw on later during the module.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

More research should be done into how blogging and providing peer feedback should be incorporated into writing classes, and into the factors that influence motivation: for instance, if grades were assigned to blogs, students might resist peer feedback. And although the following issues have to some extent been studied in an Asian context by Liu and Carless (2006), more research is also needed into how to optimize the quality and benefits of peer feedback, how to incorporate the activity of providing feedback into the curriculum, and how to encourage blogging beyond the classroom.

Overall, I found that conducting this experiment was a challenge because students were unfamiliar not only with how to provide peer feedback but also with how to use online blogging as a means of doing so. Nevertheless, students viewed the peer collaboration that resulted from blogging positively (Note 7). Most importantly, as Lowe and Williams suggest, students should feel that through blogging they are connecting to a valuable public (Lowe & Williams, 2005). In short, fellow instructors, in considering how to employ online technology in your classroom, whether in Saudi Arabia or in another country, remember its potential to help students be creative, collaborative, and independent!

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Appendix A

Four Sample Blog Entries

1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Living in Jeddah

Story by Ebtsam:
Jeddah has many advantages and disadvantages. First, I would like to discuss the pros. Jeddah is a big city and it is one of the biggest in the world! In Jeddah you can find international restaurants and malls.



Status: **Published**

Content: 6 pages · 152 words

[View on site](#)

Started: Mar 1, 2016
Updated: Mar 1, 2016
Published: Mar 1, 2016

[Unpublish story](#)

Change assignment:

Free topics for the writing exam

Grading:

Letter Or numeric (1-100)



The biggest disadvantage is that it is an expensive city. It costs quite a lot for the apartment, food, furniture etc.

2. An Apology Letter

Please accept my apologies

I am really sorry for missing your brother's wedding party. I cannot come to your wedding party next week because I have a picnic with my friend at the Redsea and we have a presentation and quiz with my friend. I am really sorry because I cannot call you today because my phone does not work. I am really sorry and I hope you are not angry with me.

Your friend asma



3. An Invitation Letter



Dear Ruba,
I would like to invite you to my birthday party. It is going to be at my house in Alhmra district on Saturday at 9 pm. You should wear a dress or anything you like. You should look very beautiful in there.
Also I'll invite our friends I hope they come and it is okay if your mother comes with you. We are going to have a great time! First we will dance and will give you free shesha for all. Then maybe we can play.

Status: **Published**

Content: **3 pages · 143 words**

[View on site](#)

Started: Mar 2, 2016

Updated: Mar 2, 2016

Published: Mar 2, 2016

[Unpublish story](#)

Change assignment:

Free topics for the writing exam

Grading:

Letter

Or numeric (1-100)

Submit

Grades are displayed privately. Students are notified when graded.

Your notes:

These are private and only appear in this dashboard.

Story Text:

[1] It's time to celebrate! It is my birth and I would like to invite my best friend to celebrate with me.

[2] Dear Ruba, I would like to invite you to my birthday party. It is going to be at my house in Alhmra district on Saturday at 9 pm. You should wear a dress or anything you like. You should look very beautiful in there. Also I'll invite our friends I hope they come and it is okay if your mother comes with you. We are going to have a great time! First we will dance and will give you free shesha for all. Then maybe we can play.

[3] Later, we are going to swim. Also my mother is going to cook some great food for example kebsa and she will bake a cake. I hope to see you soon! Big hugs, Rawan

4. The Pros and Cons of Distance Learning

Distance learning

Distance learning is a kind of education program. There are more cons in this study method.

First, some employers don't accept online degrees. Also, there is a lack of social interaction while studying online. Furthermore, in distance education, the salary is less than those who completed their studies on campus.



Appendix B

Post-Experiment Student Questionnaire

Table 1. Students' perceptions of how helpful the pictures in Storybird.com are

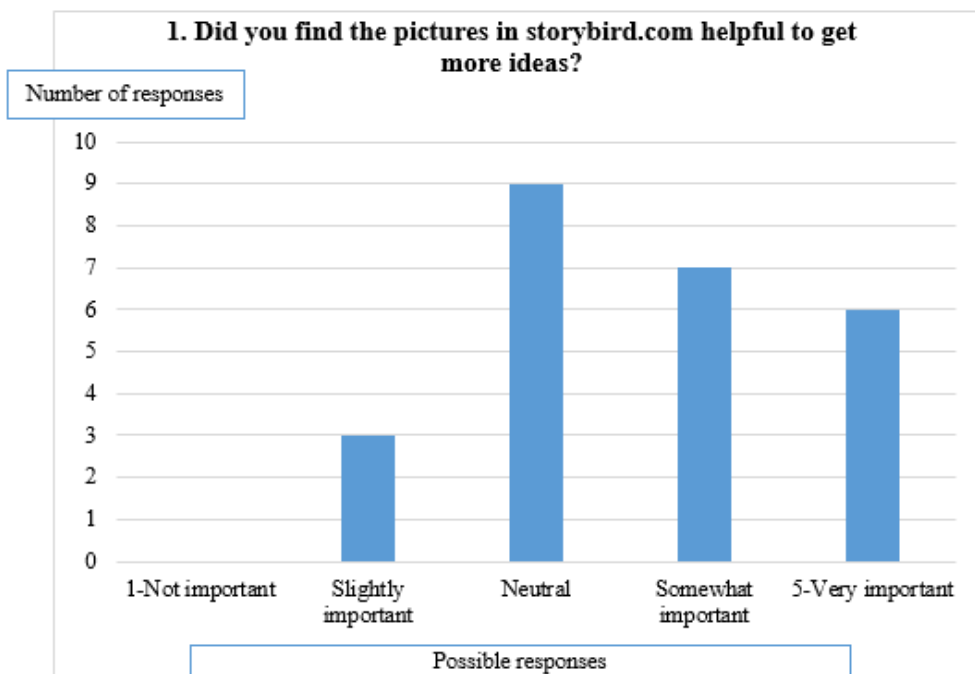


Table 2. Students' perceptions of how important it is to write in a creative way

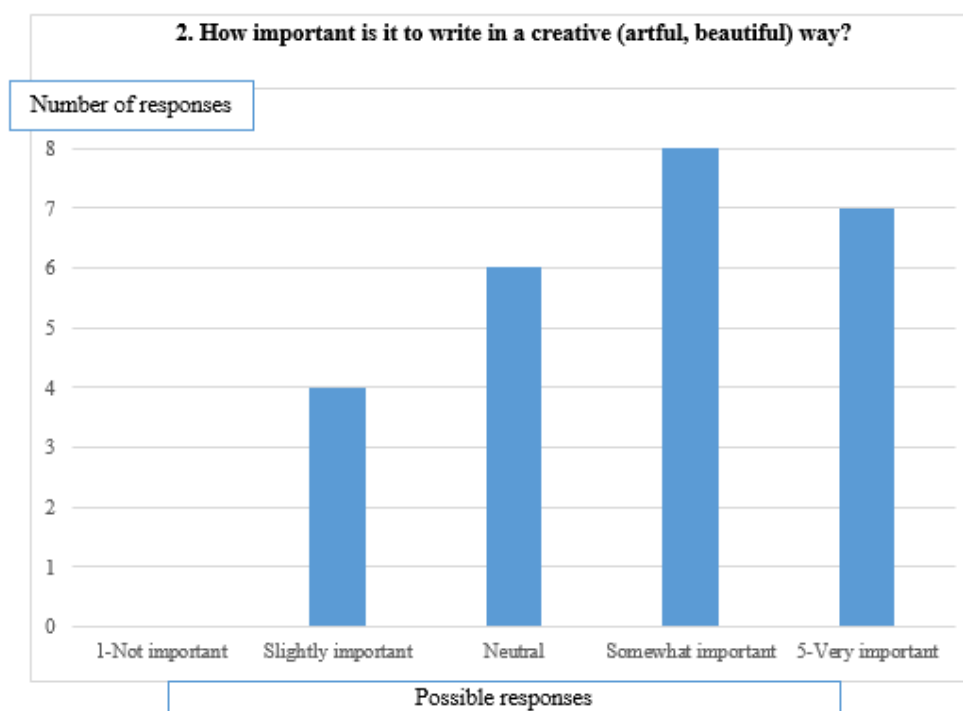


Table 3. Students' willingness to continue using Storybird.com

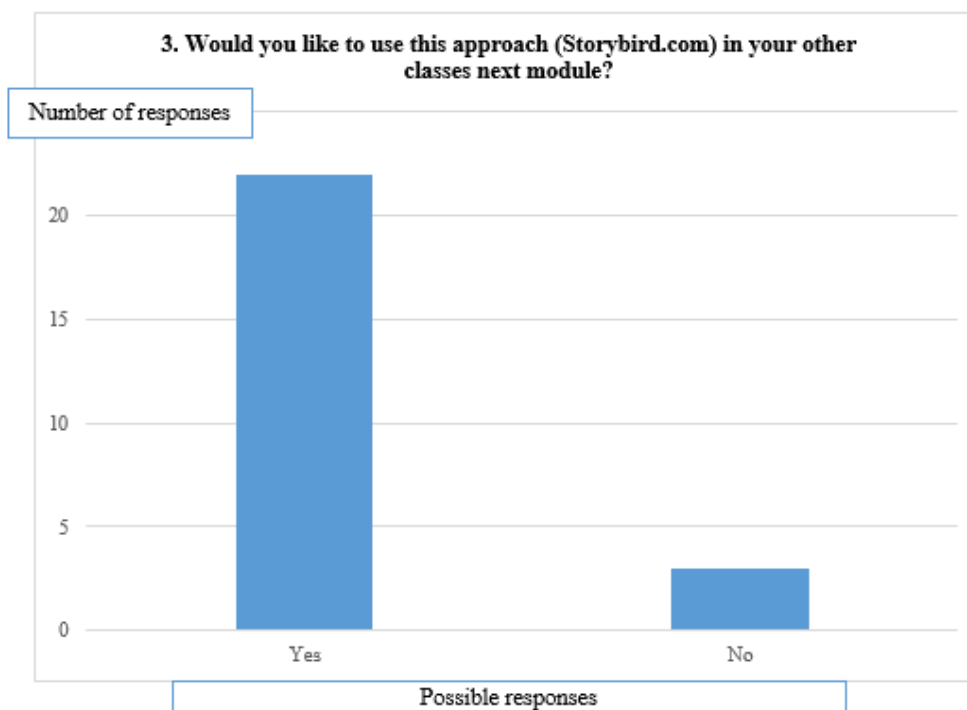


Table 4. Students' preferences for pen and paper versus Storybird.com

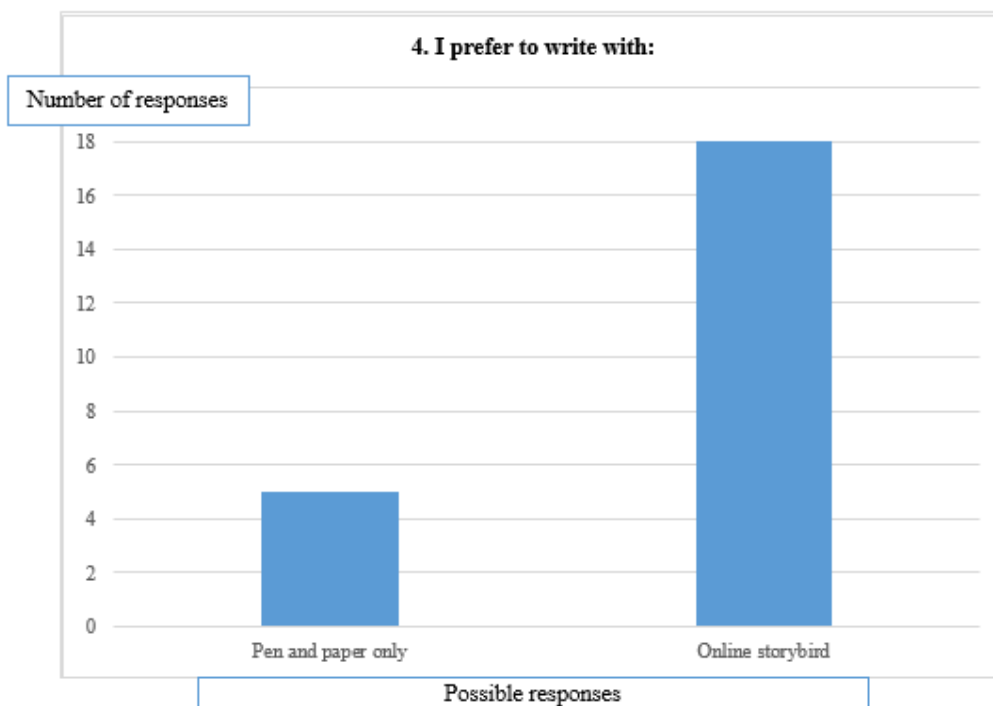


Table 5. Students' responses to peer feedback

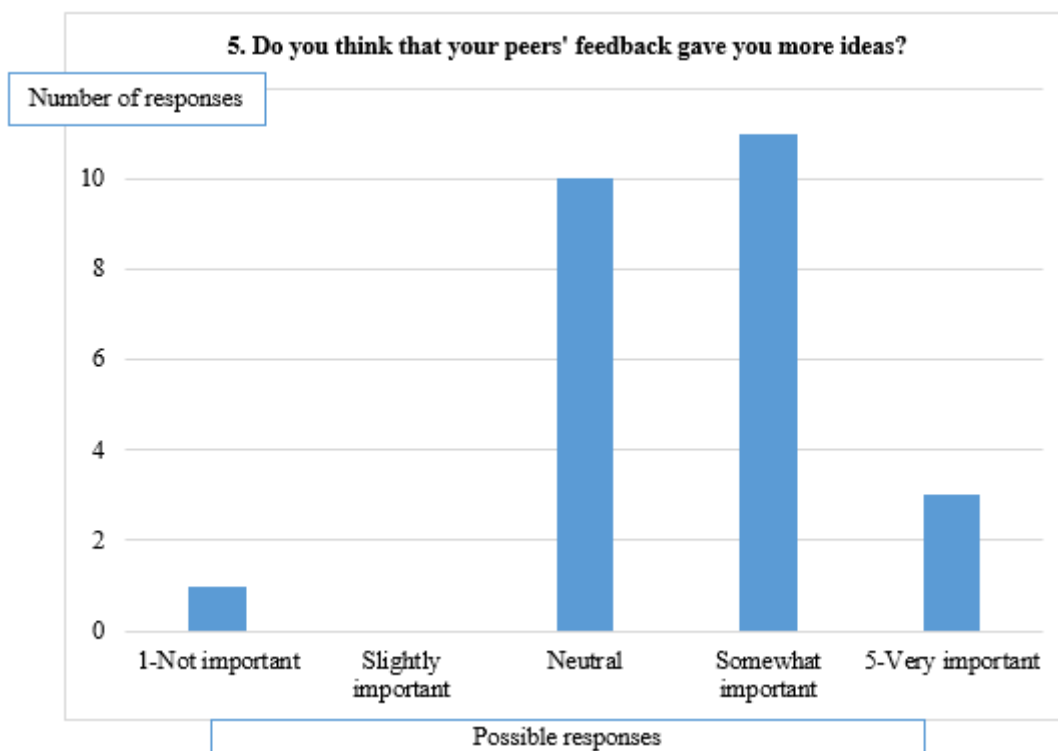


Table 6. Students' perceptions about the usefulness of peers' feedback

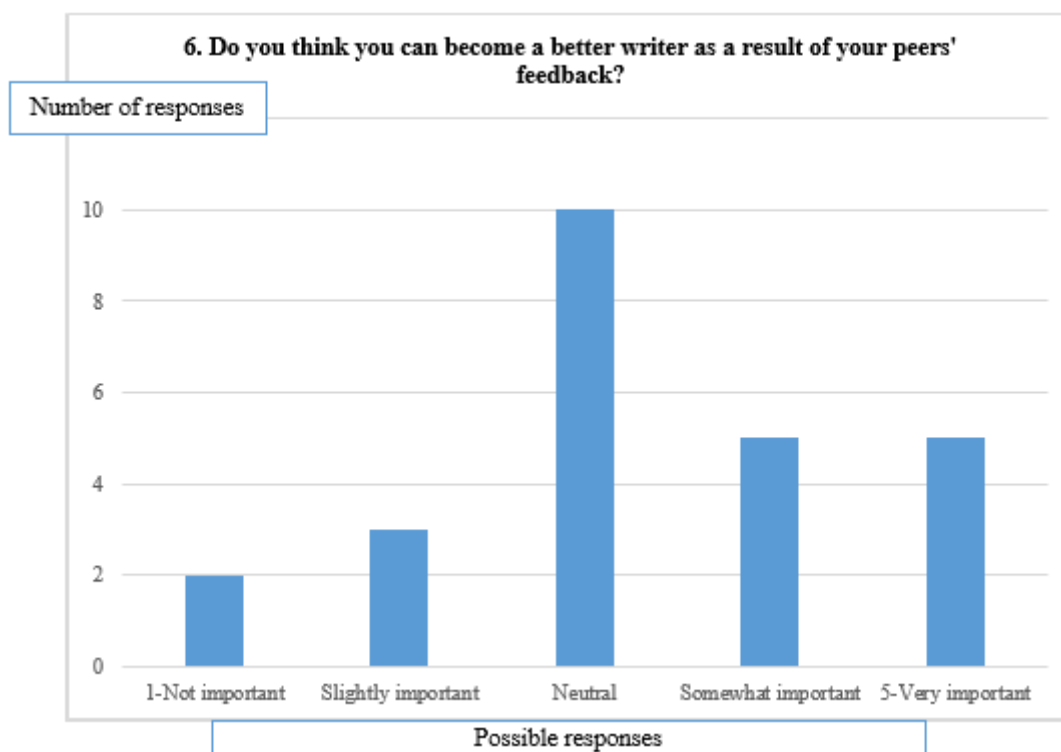
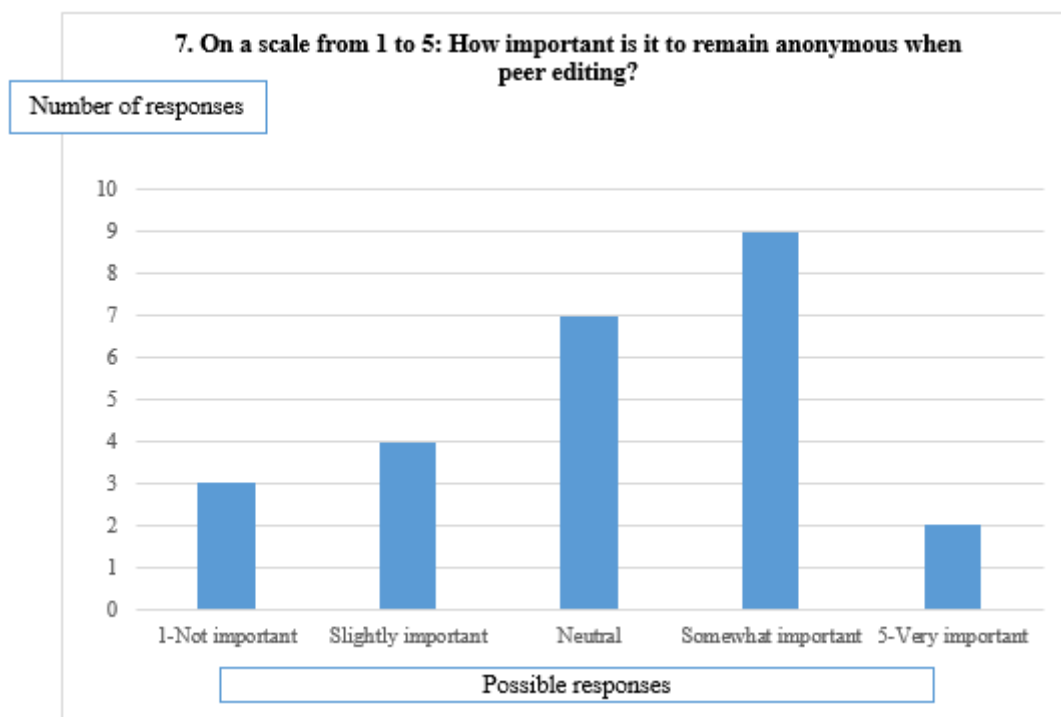


Table 7. The importance of anonymity



Notes

Note 1. In this paper, the terms *stories*, *web entries*, *blog entries* and *posts* are used interchangeably.

Note 2. For more research on the learning element of peer editing, see Liu and Carless (2006).

Note 3. For blogging to be a useful educational strategy, students must receive corrections and comments from peers with stronger writing skills. Therefore, the teacher must group students to ensure that everyone gets roughly the same amount of feedback from which to improve.

Note 4. The integration of technology in the classroom can also count towards a teacher's personal goal for her yearly pedagogical development evaluation

Note 5. Twitter and Facebook, for example, would not be appropriate. Instructors who are new to using blogging in the classroom or who are unsure must check with the department's Head of Educational Affairs

Note 6. For a more detailed introduction to social networking, collaboration, and Web 2.0 tools for the foreign language classroom, see Lomicka and Lord (2009).

Note 7. For more recommendations about using blogging as part of the ESL English class, see Blood's *The Blog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining your Blog*, Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl's *How can the use of blog software facilitate the writing process of English language learners?* (2010), and Lowe and Williams' *Moving to the public: Weblogs in the writing classroom* (2004). Other available blog directories include www.livejournal.com and blogger.com. See Richardson's *Blogs, wikis, podcasts, and other powerful webtools for classrooms* (2006) for guidelines on using blogs, wikis, podcasts, and other powerful web tools in class.

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