

# Algerian EFL students' perceptions towards the development of writing through weblog- writing

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**Abstract:** Weblog as a form of internet-based resources are being increasingly applied as an authentic and motivating learning tool in many educational contexts especially within EFL classrooms. This research explores the application of weblog writing as an educational tool to develop Algerian EFL students' creative writing. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of weblog- writing and the attitudes of Algerian EFL students towards this online platform and to provide innovative methods for teaching writing within Algerian Universities to assist EFL learners enhancing their writing skills. It also tended to examine the potential benefits and barriers that may affect the utilization of weblog and explore the possible solutions to get over the obstacles encountered. The research study relied on a triangulated approach which enclosed both quantitative and qualitative methods. A pre- questionnaire was used among 19 EFL students as a means to get preliminary data. This is followed by an interview in order to validate the questionnaire's accuracy. An intervention took place on the integration of the platform of blog among 15 Algerian EFL students for a period of two months where students produced narrative essays about their lived experiences, provide feedback to their peers through a rubric, and review their work in accordance to the feedback they received. Questionnaire and interview are used at the end of the intervention to investigate the students' perceptions towards the use of weblog as an innovative teaching approach. The findings of the post- questionnaire

revealed that weblog diary affected positively on their writing in English. The results are discussed, including the benefits, barriers, and suggestions for a better use of such method within Algerian context.

**Keywords:** Weblog- diary, EFL learners' attitudes, EFL writing

### **Introduction:**

Writing is mostly considered as an essential skill especially within higher education contexts since it is employed as a means for students' examinations, assignments, and dissertations. Having said that, it is worth mentioning that writing has always been considered as the most difficult skill to master (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p. 303). Following this line of thought, EFL students encounter many difficulties in acquiring writing skill, Algerian EFL students is not an exception. Consequently, many Algerian EFL students are struggling to produce a satisfactory piece of writing in English at the University level, although they have been exposed to this language in both middle and secondary school (Bouyakoub, 2015). In the same way, Saf and Ouahhoud, 2015, highlighted the most common deficiencies the Algerian EFL students face while writing in English: vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, coherence and cohesion. Aljumah, (2012) and Davis, (1997), suggested three reasons why the students are reluctant to write in English. To begin with, they do not think in English and they usually attempt to translate from their native language to English. Secondly, they may lack knowledge regarding grammatical aspects. Finally, they may lack of motivation writing in English following traditional methods of learning. Hence, the main purpose behind conducting this study is to identify the existing teaching methods of writing in order to find out the possible problems in the teaching of writing among Master students at the University of Bejaia. Furthermore, integrating weblog- writing as a pedagogical tool within EFL writing classrooms may promote Algerian EFL students' writing since weblogs include collaboration between student- student and student-tutor.

### **Literature review:**

Various online communication technologies are widely embraced inside and outside the educational context such as: twitter, blogging, and social networks sites (Halcomb and Ross, 2013). As far as weblog is concerned, it is an online journal where one can share his/ her own thoughts and ideas and it provides an opportunity for readers to leave comments on different posts where numerous subjects can be tackled (Allen, 2011).

Since 2000, the number of bloggers has been massively increased at the University level. Therefore, lecturers, researchers, and academics are immensely integrating this online platform to make the teaching- learning process much easier (Zhang, 2009).

Mali (2015) conducted an interesting study on EFL learners' attitudes on the benefits and issues of using weblog in EFL writing classes. This study concerns solely the undergraduate EFL students within Indonesian context. The students were required to produce short stories, poems, biography on their teachers, friends, parents, and memorable events. The results revealed that through blogging, the students got a chance to receive constructive feedback from a wider audience, including their classmates and teacher, promote interaction among the student- student and student- teacher, experience a very effective and enriching learning, and promoting a meaningful and authentic learning. The major limitation found included the problem of

connection. Mali (2015) suggest that there is a need for further research on the impact of employing blogs on EFL learners' writing fluency and the impact teachers' feedback on students' entries.

In the same Wei-Yu Changia and Andrew Szanajdab (2016) conducted a quasi- experimental study under the title how computer technology transforms writing performance: an application of the process/ genre approach and blogs in EFL writing courses. This study is based on a mixed method that includes the use of questionnaire, observation, interview, and students' written products. The findings indicated that the use of blog helped the students to improve their writing performance through the collaborative writing that encloses reading, sharing, giving and receiving feedback and editing. Consequently, collaborative weblog writing has shown a positive effects on the students' communicative skills. In addition, weblogs attract the students'' attention and their motivation is increased.

Thus, EFL students can benefit from the use of weblog- writing in different ways. To begin with, it can be used as a tool to promote learner- centred approach and autonomy (Tseng. 2008). Second, it can develop students' critical thinking (Can and Ozdemir, 2006) and it may promote a personalized learning experience where students can express themselves freely and students' motivation can be increased towards writing (Crook et al. 2008). Finally, weblog can promote an authentic, collaborative and interactive learning (Aydin, 2014).

### **Research design:**

This research project followed a qualitative design to explore Algerian EFL students' perceptions towards weblog- writing.

Research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of the Algerian EFL students on the use of weblogs in developing their writing skill?
2. What are the potential benefits and barriers the Algerian EFL students faced while using weblogs diaries ?

### **Participants:**

The sample of the study was 15 EFL students at the University of Bejaia, Algeria in the department of English. It included 10 females and 5 males, whose age ranged from 21 to 38 years. All of the participants are Master students from three different majors including linguistics, literature, and didactics. This means that the students were exposed to English as foreign language for a period of 3 months at the University level and they have already been studying in both middle and secondary school.

The type of this sampling was purposive sampling. This latter is based on a selection of different units such as: institutions, individuals, or groups of individuals. Maxwell (1997) described it as a type of sampling in which, "particular settings, persons, or events are intentionally selected for the significant information they can provide that cannot be obtained as well from other choices" (p. 87).

### **Research instruments:**

The data in this study is based on triangulation where different instruments were used as: blogs, questionnaires, and interviews.

### **Attitude questionnaire:**

At the end of the blogging project, a questionnaire was delivered for the students who took part in it in order to get their views regarding their experience using blog. This questionnaire was measured on a five point Likert scale to obtain the participants' level agreement which is as follow: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree. For the validity and reliability of each item, this questionnaire has been piloted on a group of students who are not form the main study and English is either their second language or a foreign language. Based on the students' responses in the pilot test, some questions have been modified and ameliorated.

### Procedure and data collection:

Before the integration of blogs, an induction was run among 20 Algerian EFL students who were interested in this project since this method of teaching is a new concept within Algerian context. This session included how to set up a blog, how to add other bloggers, and the tasks the students were supposed to produce on their blogs. Then, Each student created his/her own blog on (blogger.com) where they produced various tasks including posting an essay about their personal experiences, providing feedback to their peers through using a rubric, editing and publishing a new version for a period of 5 weeks.

Since there is a lack of internet and materials inside classrooms, the intervention took place outside the classroom.

After the intervention, a face to face a post-questionnaire was responded by 15 students, followed by an interview to get a deeper understanding on the students' perceptions towards blog.

### Findings:

The data results obtained from the post- questionnaire are presented as follow:

Blog- diary gave me the opportunity to give my own voice.	66.7%	33.3%	00.0%	00.0%	00.0%
Blog- diary helped me to develop creative writing	60.0%	40.0%	00.0%	00.0%	00.0%
Blog gave me more opportunities to practise my writing outside the classroom.	73.3%	26.7%	00.0%	00.0%	00.0%
Writing about my personal experiences through blog motivated me to write more in English.	73.3%	26.7%	00.0%	00.0%	00.0%
Writing on a blog was more interesting than writing on a paper.	40.0%	46.7%	6.7%	6.7%	00.0%
I found blog user- friendly	40.0%	53.3%	6.7%	00.0%	00.0%
Writing on blog helped me to collaborate with my peers and tutor.	53.3%	46.7%	00.0%	00.0%	00.0%
Blogging gave me access to authentic learning.	60.0%	33.3%	6.7%	00.0%	00.0%
Giving and receiving feedback helped me to foster my critical thinking.	66.75	26.7%	6.7%	00.0%	00.0%
Blog provided the avenue for students who are uncomfortable to voice their opinion in face to face classroom.	66.7%	26.7%	6.7%	00.0%	00.0%

<http://jrdsjournal.wixsite.com/humanities-cultural>

I encountered problems on the slow of internet connection.	20.0%	40.0%	6.7%	20.0%	13.3%
Our department should encourage the use of online blended courses.	46.7%	46.7%	6.7%	00.0%	00.0%

As exemplified in the table above, a significant proportion of 66.7% strongly agreed that weblog writing provided them freedom to give their own voice. All of the participants indicated that their creative writing is fostered through the use of weblogs. Indeed, the highest number of 60.0% strongly agreed and the rest of the numbers (40.0%) agreed on this statement. All of the students believed that they had more opportunities to practise their writing beyond classroom through blogging and they were motivated to write more in English about their personal experiences through this online platform; 73.3% strongly agreed on both statements and 26.7% agreed. Weblog- writing was considered by more than a half of the students as an authentic environment

The vast majority of the participants agreed that writing on a blog was more useful than writing on a paper and that blog is user- friendly, 46.7% and 53.3%, respectively. Another important trend demonstrates a considerable rate of 40.0% who strongly agreed on both statements and only 6.7% who remained neutral. Around 53.3% and 46.7% of the students, respectively strongly agreed and agreed that weblog- writing encouraged them to work collaboratively with their peers and tutor. The majority of the students found the process of giving and receiving feedback was very useful in developing their critical thinking and at the same time they felt comfortable using blog. Only a tiny minority of 6.7% stayed neutral in both statements. Around 60% of the total number found difficulties using blog due to the slow and problems of connection, while there is a small group who did not encounter any difficulty with connection, approximately 33.0%. Almost all of the students agreed on the following that their department should encourage the use of online blended courses.

### Discussion and conclusion:

The questionnaire was measured on a five point Likert scale, which are as follow: 1 strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 undecided, 4 disagree, and 5 strongly disagree. The findings gathered from the questionnaire are as follow: all of the students believed that weblog- writing has various advantages including the development of their writing skill in English.

The attitudes of the students towards blogging was positive. In more details, they reported that unlike the writing classrooms they attend, weblog provided them an authentic and interactive environment in a way that students can give share their reflections, experiences, and assess their own achievements. They also indicated that before using blog, they did not practise their writing, except during examinations and they were unwilling to write in English, but after using weblog, the students became very motivated to write. This is due to the fact that they had more opportunities to write on it, especially outside the classroom and it provided them a collaborative learning environment where they can receive feedback on their own work, give feedback, and eventually review their writing in accordance to the feedback they received from their classmates and tutor. according to the previous studies conducted by Wei- Yu Changia and Andrew Szanajdab (2016), the students developed their writing skill through the collaboration that occur between student- student and student- teacher, including reading, writing, giving and receiving feedback and reviewing. They also added that students' motivation and attention is increased

The findings indicated that the use of blog helped the students to improve their writing performance through the collaborative writing that encloses reading, sharing, giving and receiving feedback and editing. Consequently, collaborative weblog writing has shown a positive effects on the students' communicative skills. In addition, weblogs attract the students' attention and their motivation is increased.

Regarding the disadvantages, the major problem which was faced by the Algerian EFL students was connection; most of the students who live in a countryside, they either have no access to internet or they have a slow connection. This is confirmed by Mali (2015) who found that connection was considered as a major problem in the study on EFL learners' attitudes on the advantages and disadvantages of using weblog in EFL writing classrooms.

This study demonstrated that the use of technology affected the Algerian EFL students positively in developing their writing skill in English. The barriers linked with writing could be the current teaching methods adopted by the teachers in a way that teachers are unable to incorporate the innovative teaching methods (technology) in writing classes. Thus, the findings of this study can raise awareness to policy makers about the importance of technological tools within Algerian context.

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