Reading Comprehension: Blog Exposure in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Context of Iran

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Abstract

The present study aims to provide experimental evidence on exploring the blogs to develop Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. To this end, forty intermediate female learners after taking the placement test were randomly assigned to control and experimental group. After twenty two sessions of blog exposure, a comparison of the reading test scores of the control and experimental groups revealed that EFL learners favor surfing the blogs which can act as an effective strategy of improving their reading comprehension.

Keywords: Blogs, EFL learners, Reading Comprehension

1. Introduction

Practical use of technology-integrating programs has become a new pedagogical strategy in education in any situation. A variety of research studies declare that technology inspired classes are in fact more effective than traditional educational environments (Grgurović, Chapelle & Shelley, 2013; Starkey, 2011). Warschauer (1998) argues that "to know English well in the present era includes knowing how to read, write, and communicate in electronic environments" (p. 758). In an age where internet has become everywhere, it is vital that teachers be aware of the importance of online communication to help students get more practice in the target language. For this reason, weblogs, often called 'blogs', can take the form of online journals that a person can easily update (Campbell, 2003). Although blogs were not originally designed to be used for instructional goals, they do provide many brilliant opportunities for language teachers and students familiarizing them with online strategies and techniques (Ward, 2004) and create a calm environment for students of English to experiment the target language with their new digital skills. Many teachers are becoming progressively aware of the potential profits of blogs in education as tools for collaboration among students. However, the strategy of using blogs is still widely unexplored (Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Baniabdelrahman, Bataineh & Bataineh, 2007), and research into the use of blogs for increasing language skill is still limited (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Kuteeva, 2011).

There are some studies that claim blogs are useful learning tools since they can increase students' reading comprehension, writing skills, and improve learning autonomy (Ward, 2004; Gracia-Sanchez & Rojas-Lizana, 2012; Ducate, Lomicka & Lord, 2012). In addition, blogs "expand students' analytical and critical thinking skills" and "provide an authentic learning context for learners" (Noytim, 2010, p. 1128). Another reason why a blog is a useful learning tool is that it provides students with "the ability to communicate without caring for the challenges that accompany most face-to-face communication" (Ward, 2004, p. 4). It is thought that on blogs, students will show less anxiety while participating in discussions. Inhibited and intimidated students in class sometimes become the most clamorous ones on the blog since the blog arouses the interest to interact and communicate among students (Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011, p. 442).

For the reasons outlined above, using blogs as a pedagogical technique will help the students access a comprehensive understanding of the content of materials in second language learning and provides novel opportunities for language learning. Today more than ever, the role of educational technology in teaching is of great importance because technology in the field of education can be an unbelievable influential tool. As a result, this study aims at investigating the effect of surfing blogs on EFL learners' reading comprehension.

2. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Mayer's (2005) cognitive theory of multimedia learning is an applicable theoretical framework to examine multimedia learning and the cognitive processes involved in L2 learning. Multimedia is addressed as the combination of text and pictures. Mayer (2005)

provides experimental evidence supporting his theory and argues that learning in multimedia environments is simplified when the information is presented through the verbal and visual channels in a way which doesn't overload the working memory. Mayer and other cognitive investigators arguing multimedia theory assert that learners learn more from words and pictures than from words alone (Mayer, 2005). It means that a cognitive process is involved to associate words and pictures to maximize learning effectiveness. Multimedia learning theory is rooted in the field of cognitive psychology (Winn, 2004) declaring that learning is a function of internal mental processes that are best represented through an information processing model (Smith & Ragan, 2005). The goal in developing the multimedia theory is to produce meaningful learning experiences which Mayer defines as a "deep understanding of the material" (Mayer & Moreno, 1998, 2003, as cited in Sorden, 2005, p. 272). For the reasons outlined above, the area of second/foreign language acquisition (S/FLA) would clearly benefit from the examination of cognitive theory of multimedia learning.

3. Literature Review

Weblog referred to as a definite method of integrating technology into the classroom is like a personal diary that allows learners to deal with it easily and gives them enough space needed for creativity and expression. Accordingly, there are many websites that let students create their own weblogs so that they can continue their learning outside the walls of the classroom in anytime and anywhere. Campell (2003, p. 1) defines weblog as "an e- journal that learners can constantly update with their own words, ideas, and thoughts through software that lets them easily do so". In addition, Godwin-Jones (2003, pp.13-14) refers to it as " a web-based space for writing where all the writing and editing of information is monitored through a web browser and is instantly and publicly available on the Internet". In like manner, Galien and Bowcherc (2010, p.6) clarifies it is a fairly new tool for written communication and cooperation which appears in many different languages". Similarly, Efimova and Fiedler (2004,p. 490) mention that it is "A personal diary-like format website activated and processed by easy to use tools and free for everyone to read". Richardson (2009, p.17) asserts it is "An easily created and updated website that allows the writer or (writers) to publish their comments immediately from any Internet connection."

To check the effectiveness of blogs in L2 learning, we will review the findings of the previous studies conducted to investigate the usefulness of applying blogs in the L2 contexts. Among these studies, some of them are designed to see students' affective perceptions to the use of blogs in L2 contexts. Almeida Soares (2008) checked nine pre-intermediate EFL Brazilian students' perceptions of the value of using blogs as a part of their English learning. After a three-month exploratory practice, the findings revealed that the students viewed blogs as a learning tool. Another study by Armstrong and Retterer (2008) explored the use of blogs at an intermediate level in a Spanish class. Sixteen students in the class were writing online by means of the blogs. In this study, most students expressed a positive experience of writing the blogs. They mentioned that blogging was an engaging stimulator to communicate in a foreign language. The overall experience of blogging suggested to be a rewarding one for the

students. By the same token, the study by Jones (2006) sought to examine ESL (English as a second language) students' attitudes regarding the implementation of blogs in the writing classes. The participants were five students who used blogs for four aspects of the writing process: peer responding, editing, revising and publishing their writing assignments. The data from interviews, open-ended questions, surveys and students' reflective journals suggested that the students all liked the blogging aspect of the class for writing tasks, and responded positively to the use of blogs. Ducate and Lomicka (2008) reported the students' reactions to blogging based on a year-long project in which students were learning French or German as a L2 being engaged in reading blogs at the first semester and writing blogs at the second semester. Data from students' blogs, reports, inquiries and interviews of focus group suggested that students enjoyed the process of blogging and would like to continue to use the blog as a learning tool in their future target language classes. In Ward's study (2004), 40 participants were asked to read each others' blogs and give comments. A survey regarding the efficiency of using blogs as a learning tool was distributed. The findings showed that most of the students selected writing the blogs to writing the traditional journals and believed that writing on blogs can advance their English language skills.

Despite of the studies referring to a positive perception regarding students' affective views to the use of blogs for L2 learning, there are still some studies reporting a more negative attitude. For example, Wu (2005) implemented blogs in two of his freshman English classes. One constituted English majors and the other consisted of non-English majors. A blog survey was distributed to both classes at the end of the semester. The study asserted that blogs were still not well known at the time. Therefore, students rarely posted entries on their blogs. In addition, since students felt that they did not update frequently enough or they did not have the confidence or motivation to share ideas with friends, not many of them invited their friends to read their blogs. Another study by Chiao (2006) reported similar findings. Students' attitudes and perceptions toward using a blog-based system were examined. Data in the study were the transcripts of teacher-student interviews as well as the feedbacks from the questionnaires. The analysis of the data showed that, due to lack of assurance and their defenses of privacy, most students posted less than five articles in the entire semester.

Blogs impose a brilliant approach to overcome many of the limitations in current methods of EFL reading instruction. Standing on the shoulders of the blog (Baker & Torgesen, 1995; Miduser, Tur-Kaspa, & Leitner, 2000; Speziale & La-France, 1992; Sung, Huang, & Chang, under review) has the capability of providing EFL learners with the same opportunities for autonomous and target reading practice and immediate corrective feedback as using blog. In recent years, many new methods of language learning have been made possible by the unique features of using blog, including social interactivity, connectivity, individuality, and immediacy (Attewell & Webster, 2004; Chinnery, 2006; Klopfer, Squire, & Jenkins, 2002; Soloway et al. (2001).

Some studies have indicated that using blog has great potential for providing students with novel, real, cooperative and conversational experiences both in and outside the classroom. However, the focus of using blog is mostly on speaking (Kukulska-Hulme, 2005), vocabulary (Thornton & Houser, 2005), phrases (Thornton & Houser, 2005; Morita, 2003), and grammer

(Sung, Huang, & Chang, 2006), rather than reading skills. Moreover, most subjects in recent studies of using blog have been college students. Few studies have investigated how using blog improves the reading skills of students. The subject of the studies by Zurita and Nussbaum (2004) (6- and 7-year old children) and Soloway and his co-workers (2001) (K-12 students) are exceptions, but the learning aim in these studies was English reading skills. Using blog has turned into an everyday object for teenagers and many believe that these can be used to facilitate the language learning process.

The review of the research on the use of blogs in L2 contexts suggests that students enjoy blogging and view blogs as useful learning tools which help their learning in the target language (e.g., de Almeida Soares, 2008; Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Jones, 2006; Ward, 2004). Yet, in some studies, students were not positively and actively involved in the use of blogs (e.g., Chiao, 2006; Wu, 2005). In conclusion, more researches addressing this issue need to be conducted to gain more confirmatory findings about how L2 students respond to the use of blogs affectively to improve their reading comprehension.

4. Research Questions

The following question is addressed in this study:

What effect does surfing blogs have on EFL learners' reading comprehension?

5. Method

5.1 Participants

The participants of this study were intermediate female EFL students at a private English language institute located in Kerman, Iran. They ranged in age from 15 to 25.A Cambridge placement test (CPT) was used to have almost homogenous groups .After administrating the CPT, 40 students who were randomly and equally assigned to the experimental and control groups (20 students in each group) were selected as the sample of this study. They were all native speakers of Persian and had previously attended 5-10 terms of general English instruction.

5.2 Instruments

Two sets of reading comprehension assessment scores were used as measures in this study. A pre-test was conducted to identify whether the two classes were at a comparable level at the beginning of the study. The reading comprehension test contained thirty five multiple-choice and open ended questions. A post-test was conducted to measure the degree of improvement in learners' reading comprehension at the end of the implementation period. The content of the tests focused on the topics covered in the syllabus at this level and did not include new items. To consider the internal consistency reliability (to evaluate the degree to which different test items that probe the same construct produce similar results), split-half reliability

as a subtype of internal consistency reliability was used. The process of obtaining split-half reliability begun by splitting in odd & even items of the test that were interested to probe the same area of knowledge in order to form two sets of items. The entire test was administrated, the total score for each set was computed, and finally the split-half reliability was obtained by determining the correlation between the two total set scores. The reliability of the test was (0.89). The researcher also consulted experts and specialists in English language and methodology for referring the validity and the reliability of the study tools.

5.3 Procedure

At first, a pre-test was conducted to identify whether the two classes were at a comparable level at the beginning of the study. Over one semester, both groups participated in the study for 22 sessions, and 10 reading comprehension texts were practiced in both groups. During this period, the control group was given paper-based reading comprehension worksheet homework. Each worksheet corresponded to the topic and language of one unit of the course book. Both groups were given three days to complete the reading task homework. At the beginning of the study, the experimental group was given a demonstration of how to use the blog, do the reading task and post their comments. The reading activities were divided into several parts to be received via blogs everyday up to the next session. The main point that should be mentioned is that the control group received the same reading activities on the paper but the experimental group received them via blogs. After 22 sessions, a post-test was conducted to measure the degree of improvement in learners' reading comprehension at the end of the implementation period.

6. Results

To answer the research question, the independent and paired sample T test were used (tables 1&2). Regarding the P – value that is more than 0.05 (P – value =0.09), it can be said with more than 95% confidence, that mean of reading comprehension in control and experimental group in pre-test was not significantly different (t=0.05, df=38, p>0.05). And regarding the P – value that is less than 0.01 (P – Value 0.003), it can be said with more than 99% confidence, that mean of reading comprehension in control and experimental group in post test was significantly different (t= -2.99,df=38, p<0.01). It means that the mean of reading comprehension in experimental group in post test (M2=16.63, SD2=1.98) was significantly more than control group (M1=14.55, SD1=2.38).

Table 1. Independent T Test of Reading Comprehension

Group (pre)	Reading Comprehension			T-Test	df	P-Value
	Total number	Mean	Std.Deviation			
Control	20	13.55	2.58	0.05	38	0.9
Experimental	20	13.51	2.57			

	Reading Comprehension			T-Test	df	P-Value
Group (post)	Total number	Mean	Std.Deviation			
Control	20	14.55	2.38	-2.99	38	0.005
Experimental	20	16.63	1.98			

Regarding the P – value that is less than 0.01 (p – value=0.0005), it can be said with more than 99% confidence, that mean of reading comprehension in control group was not significantly different in pre-test and post-test (t= -8.11, df=19. P<0.01). It means that the mean of reading comprehension in control group in post test (M2= 14.55, SD2= 2.38) was not significantly more than the pre- test (M1=13.55, SD1= 2.58). Additionally, the effect size was ES=0.40 and r= 0.19. It could be said that the effect size was very small. It showed that the control groups' reading comprehension did not change significantly in post test. And regarding the p – value that is less than 0.01 (p – value=0.0005), it can be said with more than 99% confidence, that mean of reading comprehension in experimental group was significantly different in pre-test and post-test (t= -18.25, df=19, p<0.01). It means that the mean of reading comprehension in experimental group in post-test (M2=16.63, SD2=1.98) was more than pre-test (M1=13.51, SD1=2.57). Additionally, the effect size was ES=1.39 and r=0.57. It could be said that the effect size was large. It showed that the experimental group's reading comprehension changed significantly in post test.

Table 2. Paired T Test of Reading Comprehension

CG Time	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	T-Test	df	P-Value
pre-test	20	13.55	2.58	-8.13	19	0.0005
post-test	20	14.55	2.38			
EG Time	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	T-Test	df	P-Value
pre-test	20	13.51	2.57	-18.25	19	0.0005
post-test	20	16.63	1.98			

7. Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the present study investigated the effect of surfing blogs on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. The findings of this study indicated the superiority of surfing blogs in experimental group which is a confirmation of the research hypothesis: surfing blogs can positively affect Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. Comparing the effectiveness of surfing blogs, the present study in line with several other studies (Brker & Torgesen, 1995; Mioduser, Tur-Kaspa, +& Leitner, 2000; Spezial & La-France, 1992; Attewell & Webster, 2004; Chinnery, 2006; Klopfer, Squire, & Jenkins, 2002; Soloway et al., 2001) found that surfing blogs is significantly effective in fostering EFL learners' reading comprehension. Web-based education can provide both a pedagogical innovation and a channel of communication capable of engaging the whole class. Technology enables language learners and instructors to make a different kind of curriculum and establish a different relationship with each other. Blog-Assisted Language Learning (BALL) not only supplies the teachers with an exciting new way to approach communicative language learning, it also gives the students new reasons to enjoy reading. Web-based communication can be used as one of the most appropriate tools for teaching reading comprehension and due to its unique features and attractions; learners would be highly motivated to get involved in the task of reading comprehension.

8. Conclusion

The present study examined the impact of BALL on learners' reading comprehension. The findings show that blogs can be used as a supportive environment to develop and grow EFL learners' reading comprehension. The easy access to the weblog from any computer with internet at anytime and anyplace is an efficient aspect of reading surfing the blogs. With this intention, participants can easily and freely use blogs to create, edit and share any reading task with their classmates. For this reason, students tend to read enthusiastically when they can read fluently the teacher and other students' blogs. In like manner, students' confidence is increased when practicing reading their teacher and their classmates' blogs. This is because the asynchronous nature of blogs allows the learners the freedom to read their own and their peers' postings without any space and time constraints.

Technologies are known for acting as a supporting tool within the classroom. Using blog technology is currently a favorable approach to remove many of the obstacles in current method of EFL reading instruction. Standing on the shoulders of the giant internet (Brker & Torgesen, 1995; Mioduser, Tur-Kaspa, & Leitner, 2000; Spezial & La-France, 1992) using blogs has the capability of providing EFL learners with the same opportunities for independent and targeted reading practice. Many new methods of language learning are made possible by the unique features of using blogs, including portability, social interactivity, context sensitivity, connectivity, individuality, and immediacy (Attewell & Webster, 2004; Chinnery, 2006; Klopfer, Squire, & Jenkins, 2002; Soloway et al., 2001).The current findings show that blogging in the classroom is a highly effective way to support reading comprehension. Coupled with the increased motivation, blogging acts as a springboard for

authentic learning of reading texts. Teachers should search for ways to create novel and authentic experiences within the classroom as a way to attract all learners. Blogging proffers a positive way to create this experience since it involves student engagement, communication and collaboration with one another, and brings out of school experiences inside the classroom.

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