

***Ball: Using Weblogs to Improve English Academic Writing  
and Attitudes Towards It***

Mashaal M. Al Amr, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

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## 1. Introduction

Most studies' findings confirm that the use of technology - whether it is customized language teaching software, an Internet medium, or a word processor – facilitates communication among students (Campbell, 2003; Cummings, 2004; Fageeh, 2011; Hertz-Lazarowitz & Bar-Natan, 2001; Huffaker, 2005; Lewis, 2009; Miyazoe, & Anderson, 2010; Montero-Fleta & Pérez-Sabater, 2010; Mynard, 2006; Noytim, 2010; Rashtchi & Hajihassani, 2010; & Xie, Ke, & Sharma, 2008).

Moreover, it enhances their English language acquisition process, as well as their motivations and attitudes. This is due to the fact that such methodology provides learners with authenticity in content and settings (Lewis, 2009).

This research addresses one of the Internet's new communication tools, Weblogs, and its effectiveness in promoting English writing ability, as well as enhancing the attitudes of students towards English writing.

The National Commission Reports on Writing (2003, 2004, 2005) stated that most American high school students do not meet the basic requirements in this skill. This is regarded as an alarming sign, considering the fact that English is their first language. It is also an indicator of the complexity of writing as a language skill and an academic process (Graham & Perin, 2007). The case is far more complicated and challenging in the ESL/EFL context, considering the fact that English is not the learners' native tongue. In addition to the language barrier, Cummings (2004) stated in an article that some learners of a foreign language writing class tend to be shy, uncooperative, silent, unmotivated, and sometimes a little aggressive, which might lead to an unsuccessful learning experience. Furthermore, Casanave (2002) said that the motivation of those who actually want to learn a language is much higher than that of those who are forced to learn it. Students who enroll in writing courses mandatorily might not perform as well as students who choose to attend it. Nevertheless, integrating computers into EFL classes changes students' behaviors, as it reduces their apprehension, hesitation and hostility, enhances their motivation and positive attitudes, and encourages them to participate (Cummings, 2004).

The situation could not be any more different in Saudi Arabia, particularly since English is taught as a foreign language and at a later stage of students' education. Most English language students in Saudi Arabia are not exposed to writing essays till they reach college level (Al Kahtani, 2011). Moreover, Grami (2012), Ghobain & Grami (2012), and Grami & Alkazemi (2011) stated that Saudi students have been among the lowest achievement levels in the IELTS English writing test.

Nowadays, verbal literacy is no longer enough; it must be complemented by another significant aspect, that is, digital fluency (Huffaker, 2005). Currently, people use the Internet on a daily basis for multiple purposes, such as communicating, researching, sharing information, and various other reasons. Digital fluency means being comfortable and well-oriented when using technology (Huffaker, 2005; Hertz-

Lazarowitz & Bar-Natan, 2002). Studies show that educational technology can promote both verbal literacy and digital fluency (Huffaker, 2005). Therefore, many EFL classrooms are integrating the use of the Internet into the curriculum, not only to make it more appealing to learners but also to achieve verbal literacy and digital

fluency (Campbell, 2003). In the case of academic writing, it is highly significant to design techniques that accommodate both types of literacies because they are considered requirements in most academic and professional domains. Hence, it is only natural that there is much emphasis on designing learning environments that enhance academic writing skills due to their importance and their complicated nature (Hertz-Lazarowitz & Bar-Natan, 2002). In the case of this study, Weblogs will be utilized as a pedagogical tool that enhances students' verbal literacy in terms of writing and also accommodates youth's interest in digital fluency.

## **2. Research questions**

The questions of this study are as follows:

1. What are the effects of Weblogs on developing the English academic writing of English-major students compared with traditional methods of writing instruction?
2. Can Weblogs enhance English-major students' positive attitudes towards writing in English?

## **3. Methodology**

### ***3.1 Settings of study***

The population of the study was female freshman English-major students at the College of Arts at King Saud University in Riyadh, KSA. The participants' ages range from 19 to 23 years old with a mean of  $n=20.9$ . They are all native speakers of Arabic. Moreover, all of them had experienced at least six years of EFL instruction in grades 7 through 12 before going to college. In college, they are taking English language courses that focus on language skills such as speaking, reading, and writing along with language elements like grammar and vocabulary.

The course in which this study took place, entitled Essay Writing (ENG 312), is a two-credit academic course that is mandatory for all students of the English Language and Literature Department at KSU. The course is designed to teach students academic English writing skills. Essay Writing (ENG 312) is preceded by a writing course entitled Composition II (ENG 213) and followed by Advanced Writing (ENG 413). Composition II introduces students to writing paragraphs and short essays, while Advanced Writing prepares students to write research papers. Essay Writing (ENG 312) offers practice in producing longer essays of several paragraphs. Attention is given to two types of essay writing, classification and process-analysis essays.

Another objective of this course is to teach students to use grammar in the following points: tenses, modifiers, punctuation, relative pronouns, and prepositions. In addition, they are introduced to the methods of Modern Language Association (MLA) in research and documentation. The textbook used in this course is *Refining Composition Skills, Rhetoric and Grammar*, fifth edition by Regina L. Smalley, Mary K. Rutten, & Joan Rishel Kozyrev (2001).

This study took place in the first semester of the academic year 2012/2013. It included 50 students who enrolled in the course. The sample of the study consisted of 25 students in the control group and 25 students in the experiment group. The instructor verbally instructed the experiment group to clarify whether they had ever participated by posting on Weblogs or if they ran their own. All participants reported that they had

no previous experience in using Weblogs.

This study used one of the quasi-experiment research designs, which is the nonequivalent control-group design. The design, introduced by Gravetter and Forzano (2011), uses two letters, O and X. The letter X represents the treatment while the O represents the observation or measurement.

O X O (treatment group)

O O (nonequivalent group)

Before instruction, the two groups took the same pre-test to measure their performance in writing. Afterwards, the experiment group was taught the two types of essays using the textbook as guidelines. They were requested to submit their assignment essays as blog posts using their group's Weblogs. They went through this process for 120 minutes once a week in the course of eight weeks. The control group was taught to write using the course's textbook and submitted their essays on paper.

At the end of the semester, both groups took the post-test. Moreover, a questionnaire was given to the experiment group after instruction to document their attitudes towards the use of Weblogs as a writing tool.

In this study, the independent variable was the method of teaching. The dependent variables were the performance of students in terms of writing abilities and their attitudes reflected in the questionnaires.

### ***3.2 Instruments***

#### ***Writing assessment (pre-test/post-test)***

The assessment was in the form of an essay-writing test based on types of essays previously addressed in a prior academic writing course. The test instructed students to write a 700-word essay. Both groups took this test and four writing instructors, along with the researcher, rated their performance at the rate of two raters per exam. The rubric used for assessment was the ESL Composition Profile, which proved its reliability in multiple studies (Jacobs et al., 1981). According to them, composition evaluation is classified into two main categories: holistic scoring and frequency-count marking. The term holistic means "any procedure which stops short of enumerating linguistic, rhetorical, or informational features of a piece of writing" (p. 4). Oller (1979) stated that while a holistic evaluation is far more subjective than frequency-count marking, this subjectivity is regarded as strength rather than a weakness. This is supported by empirical studies that proved that counting methods do not accurately reflect the teachers' judgments of the quality of students' writing (Mellon, 1969; Jurgens & Griffin, 1970; Nold & Freedman, 1977; Evola et al., 1980). Instructors using this method base their evaluations on their impressions regarding the composition as a whole, which is achieved by applying the ESL Composition Profile to each essay entry.

#### ***Students' blogs***

The groups' blogs were the medium through which the participants practiced English writing, communicated with their peers, and provided each other feedback. The 25 participants were divided into groups of five. Each group was in charge of a Weblog, and they were instructed to post four blog posts, of which two were to be classification essays and two were to be process-analysis essays. Hence, there were a

total of 5 blogs and 20 blog posts. The duration of the treatment exposure was two hours per week for a total of eight weeks. In every group, each member was assigned with one of the following tasks: secretary, coordinator, facilitator, language expert and Web expert. The secretary was in charge of reading the comments and replying to them, and the coordinator would assist the language expert in constructing the essay. The facilitator would provide the group with the required resources and references, while the Web expert was in charge of the blog's design and posting the group's entries. The instructor assigned the role of language expert based on students' language skills and abilities to overcome any linguistic problems. Moreover, participants exchanged roles in each blog post. After each blog post, the groups read their peers' essays and provided them with feedback regarding their language; not content. Their blogs were observed and evaluated in terms of their written language, rhetorical style, and feedback they provided each other. The length of the assignments (i.e. essays) for both groups, experiment and control, were within an average of 250-350 words. In addition, the instructor of the course, along with two other raters, evaluated the blog posts using the ESL Composition Profile, which was used for the pre-test and post-test as well.

### ***Attitude-measuring questionnaire***

The first aspect of the questionnaire was based on the literature review of Berry et al. (1999), Lorber (2004), Wagner (2008), Capretz et al. (2003), and Burgess (2008). It included ten items that measure participants' attitudes towards writing, which was administered before and after the experiment. The second and third aspects of the questionnaire were adopted from Fageeh (2011) and were introduced to the experiment group after the treatment. The second aspect included eight items that measure participants' perceptions on how Weblogs improved their writing. The third aspect measured participants' attitudes towards learning English writing using Weblogs. It consisted of six items that addressed participants' attitudes towards using Weblogs as a writing tool. All items were introduced in the form of statements. The participants were provided with a Likert scale of five possible answers per statement: strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). The questionnaire was introduced to participants in their native language (Standard Arabic) to eliminate any variation due to their variation in English language proficiency.

### ***3.3 Procedure***

The study took eight weeks. The first step of this study was running the pre-test for both the experiment and control groups. The test took place in the second week of the semester. Each group included 25 participants, and the test examined their writing proficiency by asking them to write a five-paragraph essay that is approximately 700 words long. Both groups were given an hour to write their essays as this is the amount of time usually given during writing exams in the department. The tests were assessed using a holistic scoring evaluation method by two raters, an external marker and the researcher. Before commencing with the treatment, the experiment group responded to the ten-item attitude questionnaire that measures their attitudes towards writing.

The next step was teaching the material to both groups, each of which practiced writing using different tools. This phase was conducted over six weeks. Both experiment and control groups were introduced to two types of essays: classification and process-analysis. In addition, the researcher ensured that the control group didn't

use blogs as a medium of communication or publishing throughout the experiment. They were specifically instructed to submit their assignments individually in hard copy. The experiment group, on the other hand, practiced writing both types of essays by posting their assignments on their groups' blogs. Every group had its own blog and all members of all five groups were assigned with specific roles: secretary, coordinator, facilitator, web expert, and language expert. In every "blogging" assignment, the members were instructed to switch roles so that they go through the experience in whole. Furthermore, the participants commented on each other's posts and provided feedback regarding the writers' language in addition to the instructor's evaluation using the holistic scoring evaluation (i.e. ESL Composition Profile).

At the end of the experiment, both groups took the post-test, which had the same instructions as the pre-test. In addition, the experiment group responded to the attitude questionnaire once again. They responded as well to another attitude questionnaire that addressed two parts: the first was how the use of Weblogs changed their writing, and the second part measured their attitudes towards writing using blogs.

#### **4. Findings**

This research aimed to investigate the use of blogs as a pedagogical tool to teach writing and enhance students' positive attitudes towards writing. The sample of the study was fifty second-year students at the department of English Language and Literature at the College of Arts, KSU. The research was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the effects of Weblogs on developing the English academic writing of English-major students compared with traditional methods of writing instruction?
2. Can Weblogs enhance English-major students' positive attitudes towards writing in English?

The quasi-experiment research design answered the questions using pre-tests and post-tests, along with attitude-measuring questionnaires. Their responses were statistically analyzed. A t-test was applied to both the pre-test and post-test mean scores of both groups in order to measure their score differences. In addition, t-tests were also applied to the experiment group's responses to the first aspect of the questionnaire before and after the treatment to measure the improvement of their attitudes towards writing. Furthermore, the percentages of the second and third aspects of the questionnaire were added to the first one to measure the impact of blogs on their writing and their attitudes towards using it as a writing tool. The results of the data analysis will be discussed in this chapter in detail.

##### ***4.1 Results of pre-test & post-test***

To answer the first research question (What are the effects of Weblogs on developing the English paragraph writing of English-major students compared with traditional methods of writing instruction?), t-tests were applied to the control group and the experiment group to determine their levels prior to the beginning of the study.

To assess their levels, the researcher used the ESL Composition Profile as a rubric. The maximum mark was 25.

First, the researcher needed to determine the initial equivalence between groups at the beginning of the experiment. Therefore, she applied a t-test to the mean scores of both

groups' pre-test. According to the findings demonstrated in table (4-1), the mean score for control group's pre-test was 13.68, with SD of 3.97, while the mean score of the experiment group was 13.38, with SD 3.16. The t-value was 0.327 and the significance value was 0.746, which is larger than 0.05. There were no significant differences in the scores of the pre-test of the control group and experiment group. Hence, it can be concluded that the writing ability of both groups is of equivalent status before the experiment.

**Table (4-1): T-tests of difference in pre-tests between groups**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>df.</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Control</b>	13.68	3.97	24	0.327	0.746*
<b>Experiment</b>	13.38	3.16			

\*Significant at the (0.05)

The next step was to apply a t-test to the pre-test and post-test scores of the control group. The analysis aimed to detect any improvement in the control group's writing ability after the experiment. As table (4-2) shows, the mean score of the control group pre-test was 13.68 with SD of 3.97, and the mean score of the post-test was 15.06 with SD of 3.23. The scores reflect some improvement in the control group's writing performance during the time of the experiment. The significance value for both means was 0.004, which was less than 0.05, thereby indicating some significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores of the control group.

**Table (4-2): Differences in pre-test and post-test of control group**

<b>Test</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>df.</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Pre-test</b>	13.68	25	3.97	24	0.327	0.004*
<b>Post-test</b>	15.06	25	3.23			

\*Significant at the (0.05)

Similarly, the same procedure was used to measure the difference between the scores of the pre-test and post-test of the experiment group. As demonstrated in table (4-3), the mean score of the group's pre-test was 13.38 with an SD of 3.16, while the mean score of their post-test was 17.90 with an SD of 3.06. The comparison between both mean scores indicates significant development in the experiment group's writing performance. The statistical significance is represented in the significance value of 0.001, which is less than 0.05.

**Table (4-3): Differences in pre-test and post-test of experiment group**

<b>Test</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>df.</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Pre-test</b>	13.38	25	3.16	24	0.327	0.001*
<b>Post-test</b>	17.90	25	3.06			

\*Significant at the (0.05)

Another t-test was made to compare the achievement between groups after the experiment, in which the scores of their post-tests were measured. In table (4-4), it can be seen that the mean score of the control group's post-test was 15.06 with an SD of 3.23, while the experiment group's mean score was 17.90 with an SD of 3.06. The T-value was 96.294, with a significance value of 0.001. The variation between the groups' scores indicated that the experiment group had significantly improved their writing ability compared to the control group. Furthermore, the significance value is 0.01, from which it can be concluded that there was a significant statistical difference between both groups in favor of the experiment group.

**Table (4-4): T-test for differences in the post-test between groups**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>df.</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Control</b>	15.06	25	3.23	24	96.294	0.001*
<b>Experiment</b>	17.90	25	3.06			

\*Significant at the (0.05)

The results shown above strongly support the first hypothesis of the study, which states: The use of blogs improves students' English writing ability compared to those who don't use blogs.

#### **4.2 Results of questionnaire**

The questionnaire was designed to answer the second question of the study: (Can Weblogs enhance English-major students' positive attitudes towards writing in English?).

To measure the improvement of participants' attitudes towards writing after the use of blogs, a questionnaire of ten items was distributed to the experiment group before and after the experiment. The answers to the questionnaire items were coded on a five-point Likert scale.

25 participants responded to both pre-course and post-course questionnaires. A t-test was applied to their responses to measure any improvement in their attitude towards writing. Table (4-5) illustrates the variance.

**Table (4-5): T-test for pre-course & post-course questionnaire**

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Questionnaire</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>df.</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Attitude towards writing</b>	Pre-course	3.25	2.72	24	13.549	0.000*
	Post-course	3.96	2			

\*Significant at the (0.05)

In the previous table, the mean score of the participants' pre-course questionnaire was 3.25 with an SD of 2.72, whereas the mean score of their post-questionnaire was 3.96 with an SD of 2. The significance level was 0.00, which indicated significant improvement in their attitudes towards writing.

In terms of the first aspect of the questionnaire, there was a significant positive change of mean scores in eight out of ten items, which reflected an overall improvement in the participants' attitudes towards writing in English. However, their responses did not reflect any positive improvement in terms of two statements: Statement no. 4 (to find difficulty in expressing ideas when writing in English) and Statement no. 6 (to find difficulty in using the language correctly and appropriately when writing in English).

The second aspect was to measure the participants' attitudes towards writing using blogs, which included eight items. As explained earlier, a Likert scale was used to analyze participants' responses to the questionnaire. The following table, table (4-6), shows the average of their mean score and standard deviation.

**Table (4-6): Average Mean Score & Std. Deviation of the Questionnaire's Second Aspect**

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Average Mean</b>	<b>Average Std. Deviation</b>
<b>Impact of Blogging on Writing</b>	4.15	0.250

The average mean for this questionnaire was 4.15, which indicates that participants had a positive attitude towards using blogs in academic writing, as most of them agreed with most statements.

The third aspect was to measure the participants' attitudes towards the experience of blogging, which included six items. The following table, table (4-7), shows their responses in detail.

**Table (4-7): Average Mean Score & Std. Deviation of the Questionnaire's Third Aspect**

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Average Mean</b>	<b>Average Std. Deviation</b>
<b>Attitudes towards Blogging</b>	3.71	0.243

The mean average score for this part of the questionnaire was 3.71 with an SD of 0.243. The average mean score reflects participants' agreement with most questionnaire items.

### **5. Conclusion & Implications**

In summary, the findings gained from this study, along with the findings of other studies on the subject matter, were all in favor of the use of Weblogs. They are helpful and effective tools that improve students' writing ability by making writing more fun. Weblogs helped the participants develop more positive attitudes towards writing, themselves, and blogs.

The study's procedure and conclusions have a number of implications in regard to the methods of teaching writing and the use of blogs in particular.

Blogging gives learners a sense of ease, engages them in the process, and makes them aware of the fact that their audience is not just their instructor.

Blogging also provides the instructor with a variety of methods to pursue when teaching writing. An instructor can start a class blog where all learners can participate by posting their essays, giving feedback, or asking for assistance. Another way to use blogs is for learners to keep them as a personal journal in which they reflect on blogging and writing experiences and interact with readers.

In addition, blogs represent a good opportunity for instructors to apply the collaborative learning method, which also facilitates the writing process. Collaborative writing reduces learners' stress over their written production and encourages them to share their language proficiency along with content, thereby improving their performance in writing.

Moreover, blogging is an effective medium that facilitates writing and gives it an interactive aspect. Writing and interacting through a blog can significantly raise learners' awareness of two important concepts: authorship and readership. Thus, learners become more responsible about what they write, as they are aware that their audience is not only the instructor. Blogs can be just as helpful in improving other language skills, such as reading, as well as various other skills, such as peer feedback, critical thinking, and learner autonomy.

Furthermore, topic choice is an important aspect in writing. Most learners prefer to write about a topic of their choice, as it makes them more engaged in the process, which reflects significantly on their written production. Giving learners an

opportunity to choose their topics frequently is an important matter. Although they might choose a topic that is somewhat challenging, knowing that they are working collaboratively, posting their essay online, and expecting their peers' feedback gives them a sense of motivation and drives them to take on the challenge.

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