

Interactive Weblogs: Breaking Barriers in L2 Writing in the Philippines

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Abstract

Mastery of the rules of a language is often clearly reflected in written outputs. In the Philippines, where English is a second language (L2), students are oftentimes reluctant to perform writing tasks as this will expose their ignorance in the skill. With the ubiquity of social networks in mind, this study sought to find out students' needs and motivations in writing, with weblogs used as learning journals in a virtual teaching and learning environment. The experimental method was employed in this research. A standardized writing test from the Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) and TOEFL Writing test were used in gathering the data. Data were treated with statistical tools such as weighted mean, frequency count, standard deviation and t-test. Results revealed that the respondents from the experimental group and the control group can comprehend meaningful input but their knowledge of the rules governing sentence construction and the actual writing of the material (application) are the root cause of their difficulty in writing. The experimental group has been found to have improved their writing ability specifically in the knowledge and application dimensions, indicating that weblogs have generally made a huge difference in performance. Hence, it was recommended that weblogs be used in writing subjects to motivate the students to discover the joy of writing. In addition, further studies should also be done concerning how to best motivate students to explore the full potential of blogs as learning aid.

1. Introduction

English language learning is a complex process of acquiring the ability to comprehend and apply its structure to communicate largely in various domains. Mastery of the language is clearly reflected in printed forms- writing.

Writing is the most complex of the four areas in language learning. Students are quite adamant to embark in the journey of the written world fearing that this will expose their ignorance in expressing their thoughts and emotions. Still, development of the ability to write will give them the facility to be able to finish the arduous tasks they are going to face in the academe.

Furthermore, writing clarifies and extends understanding. It enables the person to clarify and deepen his understanding of a new concept and to find ways to relate it to other ideas within a discipline. It also makes an individual a potent thinker and an active learner as he eventually gains a better understanding of himself in recording, clarifying and organizing his personal experiences and innermost thoughts (Axelroad & Cooper, 2000).

Educators must devise new strategies to rekindle the fire of using their writing ability in the midst of cyberspace and social networks.

Thus, language learning needs the best motivational strategies, especially in writing. Using electronic media resources provides appeal to many students (MacBride & Luehmann, 2008). The world of today's student is saturated with alluring media images and messages. In the past, music and film engage students in listening comprehension, vocabulary building, and grammar lessons. Now, internet search activities can draw them into writing.

A new technology strategy in the teaching practice is weblogs that spark online conversations and improve student writing. Weblogs are online (on the web) journals or diaries (logs) which can have audio and visual media embedded, and often include hyperlinks to other websites. Blog is the common reduction of the word weblog and is used as both a noun and verb in various forms (blogging, blogger, to blog, etc.). Blog was first included in the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 1999 (BBC, 2004) and the print version of the Oxford English Dictionary in 2003 (USA Today, 2003). In 2004, Merriam-Webster said it was the most commonly accessed word of the year and they finally included it in their print dictionary in 2005 (BBC, 2004). These popular media increase their interest and the volume of their writing. Blogging might help language learners to obtain, process, and construct words in the English language.

In the last few years, there have been a lot of experimentation with regards to blogging. All of these are happening inside the classroom. Much of this experimentation is informal and research focusing on blog use in English language classes is still relatively scarce in the literature. There are endless possibilities of using blogs as learning journals in the virtual teaching and learning environment.

1.1. *Background of the Study*

Students are motivated to use technology to write. Using this idea, teachers can assimilate what the students are already doing through personal websites/blogs and classroom content with a meaningful audience. Students, no matter what their gender or ability level is, need to see that writing is a vehicle to show individual thought on subjects, and that this is powerful. Technology, such as web logs, can provide one part of the answer, but educators should recognize that the key to conscientious writing among students is that they need to be a more active part of the educational community.

The aim of this study is to shed light on a range of student needs, and show that the different ranges in levels of motivation to write with consideration for an audience can be addressed through web logs. A very real audience is out “there,” the Internet, for students to use.

As blogs become more and more commonplace, educators in recent years have begun seeing the potential of blogs for teaching and learning. At this time, using blogs in education, particularly in language learning is still novel and there had not been many formal studies done on this topic.

Studies that have been published include research on blogging effect on learner’s autonomy, increasing writing fluency as a place for writing assignments, posting class materials and as a way to open up communication with bloggers outside the classroom.

University students, nowadays, specifically in the Philippines, particularly in Southern Luzon are “tech savvy” and communicate widely in social network sites and blog spots to express their uncensored thoughts through blogging. Since language learning is a communicative process, this growing interest can be channeled to develop their writing ability in English.

As a language teacher, the researcher has been searching for a tool that will motivate her students to write effectively. Blogging can create a huge impact in the preparation of materials for language teaching. Through this, students will discover once again the necessity of writing effectively in English in their own turf- the internet.

Thus, the researcher believes that this new insight in learning the English language will considerably motivate the students in the Philippines especially in Southern Luzon to communicate widely in the English language guided by rules set by the researcher conducting the writing lessons. Expertise in written communication will definitely aid them in choosing their career path, where the use of this skill is inevitable.

1.2. Objectives

This study was conceptualized to discover the effectiveness of interactive weblogs as a tool to improve the writing ability of Tertiary Students studying at the Philippines specifically at Southern Luzon State University. The results of which will lead to the improvement of the level of performance and development of further interest in writing through weblogs.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of performance of the respondents in terms of the following writing dimensions for both the control group and the experimental group:
 - 1.1 Knowledge
 - 1.2 Comprehension
 - 1.3 Application?
2. How significant is the difference between the two groups in terms of their level of performance in the following dimensions
 - 2.1 Knowledge
 - 2.2 Comprehension
 - 2.3 Application?
3. How significant is the difference in the level of performance of the experimental group before and after using weblogs?
4. How significant is the difference between the two groups in terms of their performance level after the use of weblogs in the experimental group?

1.3. Assumptions

Based on the identified objectives, the following assumptions were drawn and were proven in the study.

There is no significant difference between the writing ability of those who are studying writing in English through blogging and those who are using the traditional method.

There is no significant difference between the performance of the experimental group before and after using weblogs.

There is no significant difference between the two groups in their performance level after the experimental group use weblogs.

1.4. *Significance of the Study*

Since this study will focus on the effectiveness of using weblogs in writing, the following will be able to adopt solutions, innovations or strategies this study can offer.

Students. This study will open up opportunities to hone their skills in writing in preparation for their future careers and preparation for their participation in the global arena.

Educators/Teachers. This will offer another strategy that can be used in achieving proficiency in learning the English language specifically in the written domain.

Administrators. This will help them realize that creating a program for language learning is an integral part of any learning process. Aside from this, this endeavor is in consonance with the university's thrust in social development specifically in the following dimensions: instructional/resource materials and teaching approaches/methods/techniques

Curriculum Planners. This will lead to the accomplishment and development of methodology suitable to the needs of its clientele.

Future Researchers. This study will lead them to the path of discovering related problems rooted from the findings of this research and the possible solutions to remedy those difficulties especially in language learning.

1.5. *Scope and Limitations*

This study centered on the effectiveness of weblogs in L2 learning as a tool to improve the writing ability of the Filipino students specifically at Southern Luzon State University during the S.Y. 2012-2013. Its limitation lies on the 80 students who served as respondents who comprised the experimental group and the control group. Also, it is further limited to the following dimensions for assessment: knowledge, comprehension and application which were tested through the Purdue University's OWL (Online Writing Lab) and TOEFL.

2. **Framework**

2.1. *Theoretical Framework*

A number of theories supporting teachers' efforts to understand second language writing and learning have developed since L2 writing first emerged as a distinctive area of scholarship in the 1980s. In most cases, each has been enthusiastically taken up, translated into appropriate methodologies and put to work in classrooms. Equally, however, each has typically be seen as another piece in the jigsaw, an additional perspective to illuminate what learners need to learn and teachers need to provide for effective writing instruction.

Following first language learning composition theorists such as Elbow (1998) and Murray (1985), many writing teachers see their classroom goals as developing L2 students' expressive abilities, encouraging them to find their own voices to produce writing that is fresh and spontaneous. These classrooms are organized around students' personal experiences and opinions and writing is seen as a creative act of self-discovery. This can help generate self-awareness of the writer's position and to facilitate "clear thinking, effective relating, and satisfying self-expression" (Moffett, 1982).

Teachers here see their role as to provide students with the space to make their own meanings within a positive and cooperative environment. Because writing is a developmental process, they try to avoid imposing their views, offering models, or suggesting responses to topics beforehand.

Instead, they seek to stimulate the writer's ideas through pre-writing tasks, such as journal writing and parallel texts. This orientation urges teachers to respond to the ideas that learners produce, rather than dwell on formal errors (Murray, 1985), and to give students plenty of opportunities for writing.

In contrast to the rigid practice of a more form-oriented approach, writers are urged to be creative and to take chances through free writing. Typical writing tasks ask students to read stories, discuss them, and then to use them as a stimulus to writing about their own experiences.

This approach, however, leans heavily on a social view of the writer and on an ideology of individualism which may disadvantage second language students from cultures that place a different value on 'self-expression'. In addition, it is difficult to extract from the approach any clear principles from which to teach and evaluate 'good writing'.

It simply assumes that all writers have a similar innate creative potential and can learn to express themselves through writing if their originality and spontaneity is allowed to flourish. Writing is seen as springing from self-discovery guided by writing on topics of potential interest to writers and, as a result, the approach is likely to be most successful in the hands of teachers who themselves write creatively.

On the other hand, most teachers are familiar with process writing techniques and make use of brainstorming, peer and teacher feedback, multiple drafts, and so on. Writing is seen as a process through which writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to create meaning. It is more of a problem solving activity than an act of communication - how people approach a writing task as the solution to a series of problems. Essentially, process theorists explain writing using the tools and models of cognitive psychology and Artificial Intelligence.

Thus, the former theory about learning the rudiments of writing is favored by educators for its flexibility and novelty.

2.2. Conceptual Framework

The researcher used the Input- Process-Output Model. Input includes respondents in terms of control and experimental group. It also incorporates the lessons that were utilized in the study featuring the methods of paragraph development namely: Description, Narration, Cause and Effect, Comparison, Contrast, Classification, and Definition.

Process constitutes the assessment of weblogs as an interactive tool in terms of knowledge, comprehension, and application through a standardized writing test.

On the other hand, the output is composed of the improved level of performance of both the control and the experimental group in terms of their writing skills. In addition to this, the development of further interest of the students in writing through weblogs comprises the outcome of this study.

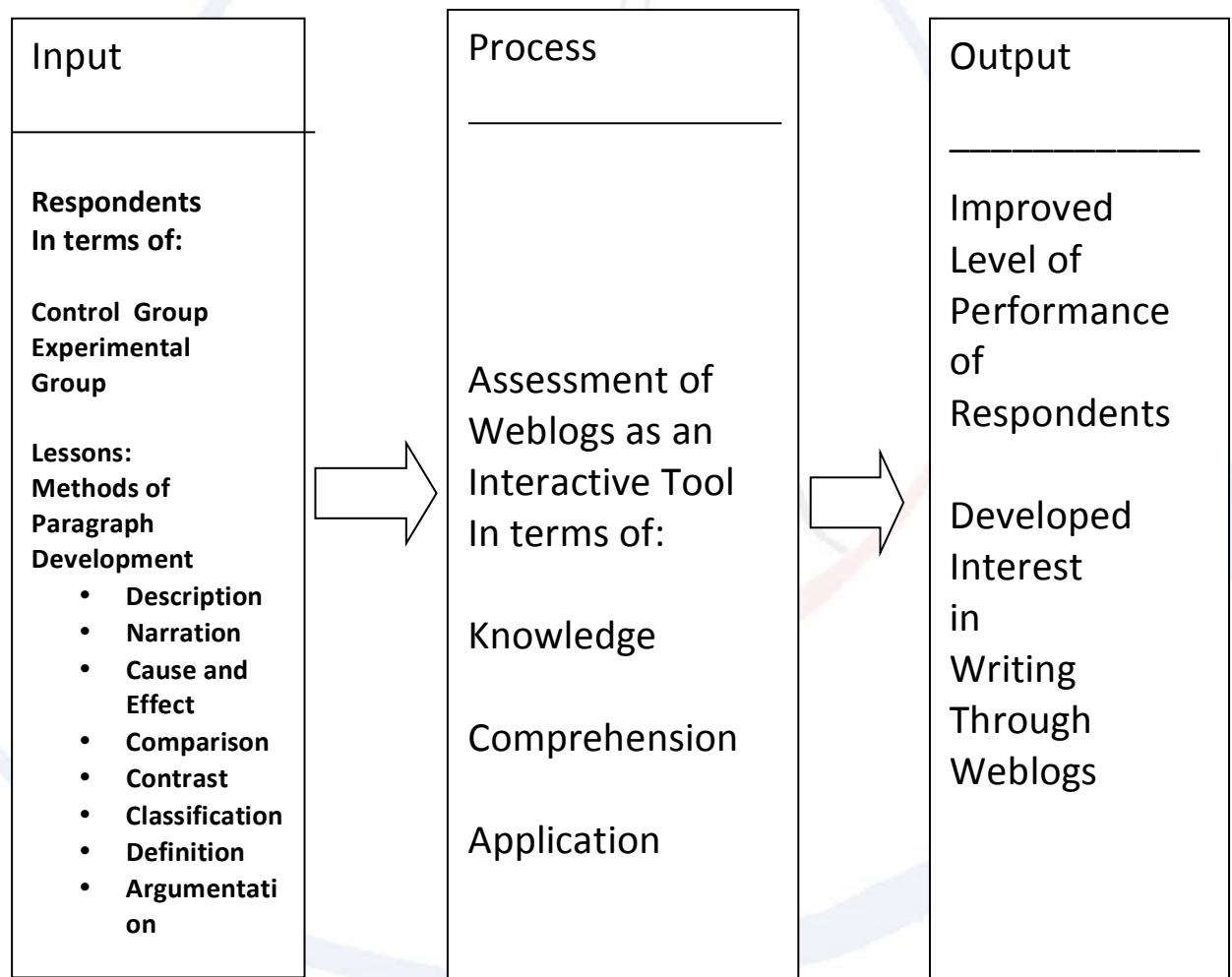


Fig. 1. Input-Process-Output Model of the study

3. Design and Procedures

3.1. Research Design

This study used the experimental method of research. This is one of the strongest available method for educational researches to use in comparing treatments and its effect. The researcher has an opportunity to exercise more control than in most researches. Choosing this method would ensure that the results would be conclusive and deter the occurrence of threats to validity.

3.2. Sampling and Sampling Technique

The respondents were purposively chosen and were divided into the experimental and the control group. They were composed of 80 freshmen students from Southern Luzon State University. The researcher's standardized tests were distributed at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester to determine the effectiveness of using weblogs.

3.3. Instrumentation

A weblog was constructed by the researcher which featured paragraph writing lessons. Consequently, for each topic, instructions were stated after the interactive activity which includes videos and pictures. The experimental group utilized the researcher's blog to be able to study writing and do the online writing exercises, while the control group are submitting their papers personally inside the classroom.

To determine its effectiveness, a writing test from the Purdue University was used to assess their competence. The test was composed of six parts. Each part has its own corresponding questions to measure the respondent's level of writing ability, namely: Knowledge, Comprehension, and Application. Then, another writing test was given to each group from the TOEFL writing test to determine the effectiveness of the methodologies used in both groups.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The researcher administered the questionnaires to the control and experimental group after getting the permission from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences to be able to evaluate their writing performance.

In the conduct of the study, post- tests and pre -tests were also conducted to ensure the validity of the proceedings through the abovementioned standardized writing tests.

3.5. Statistical Treatment of Data

The following statistical tools and techniques were used to ensure valid and systematic presentation, analysis and interpretation of data: weighted mean, frequency count, computation of grade, standard deviation and t- test.

4. Results and Discussion

This presents the analysis made and interpretations of data gathered through the use of the questionnaire. Findings were presented in tabular forms and the details were organized based on the statement of the problem presented.

The first part presents the level of performance of the respondents in terms of the following writing dimensions for both the control group and the experimental group: knowledge, comprehension, application.

The second part previews if there is a significant difference between the two groups in terms of their level of performance in the following dimensions: knowledge, comprehension, application.

The third part shows if there is a significant difference in the level of performance of the experimental group before and after the use of weblogs.

Lastly, this part presents if there is a significant difference between the two groups in terms of their performance level after the use of weblogs in the experimental group.

4.1. Level of Performance of the Respondents in Terms of Knowledge, Comprehension and Application

Table 1. *Level of Performance of the Respondents in terms of Knowledge*

Level of Performance	KNOWLEDGE			
	Control		Experimental	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Above Average	0	0%	0	0%
Average	2	5%	6	15%
Below Average	38	95%	34	85%
TOTAL	40	100%	40	100%

Table 1 shows the level of performance of the respondents in terms of knowledge. From the 40 students in the experimental group, 38 or 95% obtained a below average level. The control group, on the other hand, shows that 34 or 85% of the respondents falls on the same level.

Table 2. *Level of Performance of the Respondents in Terms of Comprehension*

Level of Performance	COMPREHENSION			
	Control		Experimental	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Above Average	39	98%	38	95%
Average	1	3%	2	5%
Below Average	0	0%	0	0%
TOTAL	40	100%	40	100%

The table shows the level of performance of the respondents in terms of comprehension. The data focus on the level of performance of the experimental and control group. It indicates that both have above average performance in terms of comprehension. In the control group, 39 or 85% are above average and in the experimental group, 38 or 95% got the same level of performance.

Table 3. *Level of Performance of the Respondents in terms of Application*

Level of Performance	APPLICATION			
	Control		Experimental	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Above Average	0	0%	0	0%
Average	0	0%	0	0%
Below Average	40	100%	40	100%
TOTAL	40	100%	40	100%

Table 3 presents the data concerning the level of performance of the control and experimental group. The data under the level of performance show that both the control group and the experimental group fall under the below average level with the same frequency of 40 or 100%.

This concretizes the concept of Robles (1990) that every sentence have more than just words in it. Words go together in certain ways according to the system called grammar. He also stated that awareness of the sentence's basic parts and patterns is a must to develop English proficiency.

This means that most of the students in the experimental group had a below average performance in the knowledge and application writing dimensions, whereas in the comprehension dimension, it is above average. The study conducted by Veluz (1991) that aimed to enhance students' awareness in writing an organized and logically arranged sentences and ideas proved that indeed students are having some difficulty in their writing ability.

Among the writing dimensions, comprehension has the highest number of frequency followed by knowledge and application. Students develop in different phases. Alcantara (2003) even asserted in her book that the process of learning is seen to be natural and gradual, through which students' progress at their own rates. In the Philippines, the objectives of the English program are: to equip the learner with adequate language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing; and develop those skills to a level so that he can use the language efficiently and independently in oral and written communication.

4.2. Significance of Difference of the Experimental and the Control Group in Terms of the Writing Dimensions

Table 4. *Significant Differences of Two Groups on their Level of Performance in terms of Knowledge*

	Control	Experimental
Number of Students	40	40
Mean	71.83	74.40
Standard Deviation	4.21	3.77
Observed Significance Level	0.005	
T-value	2.880	
Decision	Reject the null hypothesis	

Level of Significance = 0.05

Decision Rule: ***Reject the null hypothesis if the observed significance level is less than the level of significance***

The data show that the difference in the scores in the test of knowledge in both the control and experimental group is significant at .005 level with a T- value of 2.880

Table 5. *Significant Differences of Two Groups on their Level of Performance in terms of Comprehension*

	Control	Experimental
Number of Students	40	40
Mean	95.88	95.08
Standard Deviation	2.89	3.73
Observed Significance Level	0.287	
T-value	-1.072	
Decision	Accept the null hypothesis	

Level of Significance = 0.05

Decision Rule: ***Reject the null hypothesis if the observed significance level is less than the level of significance***

The table presents the significance of difference in the test of comprehension of the experimental and the control group. Since, the observed significance level is 0.287 with a T- value of -1.072, there is no significant difference in the test scores for comprehension of both groups.

Table 6. *Significant Differences of Two Groups on their Level of Performance in terms of Application*

	Control	Experimental
Number of Students	40	40
Mean	66.75	69.73
Standard Deviation	3.22	3.12
Observed Significance Level	0.000	
T-value	4.198	
Decision	Reject the null hypothesis	

Level of Significance = 0.05

Decision Rule: ***Reject the null hypothesis if the observed significance level is less than the level of significance***

The table shows that the difference in the test scores of application of the experimental and the controlled group is significant with a T- value of 4.198 at 0.000 observed significance level.

The data conveys significant difference on the knowledge and application dimensions with an observed significance value of 2.880 and 4.198 at 0.05 level of significance, respectively. Comprehension, on the other hand, shows that there is no significant difference between the two groups with a computed t-value of -1.072 at 0.287 level of significance.

This clearly identifies the similarity of the level of performance of the experimental and the control group in the knowledge and application. They only differ in the comprehension level. To develop the comprehension level, appropriate materials should be used. In fact, as Monica Taylor covers in her article, “Using Collateral Material to Improve Writing Performance,” building a library of materials for struggling students can be a drawn out process, but can be accomplished over time, and then monitored for use (Taylor, 2001).

4.3. Significance of Difference on the Level of Performance of the Experimental Group Before and After Using Weblogs

Table 7. *Significant Differences on the Level of Performance of the Experimental Group before and after the Use of Web Blogs*

	Before	After
Number of Students	40	40
Mean	70.98	87.48
Standard Deviation	3.45	4.80
Observed Significance Level	0.000	
T-value	-17.653	
Decision	Reject the null hypothesis	

Level of Significance = 0.05

Decision Rule: ***Reject the null hypothesis if the observed significance level is less than the level of significance***

Table 7 shows that there is a significant difference in the scores of the experimental group before and after the use of weblogs.

The data exhibits that there is a significant difference on the level of performance of the experimental group on the writing dimensions in terms of knowledge, comprehension, and application with a t value of -15.460, -3989, -32.419, at 0.05 level of significance, respectively. In a short blog posting titled “Do weblogs improve

writing?”, Bernstein (2004) advocated that “Frequent writing improves writing”, “Writing for an audience improves writing”, “Writing that matters improves writing”, and “Writing on a computer improves writing”. Therefore, this medium can really make a difference in the performance of the students in the long run.

4.4. Significance of Difference Between the Experimental Group and the Control Group After Using Weblogs in Terms of the Writing Dimensions

Table 8 reveals the significance of difference between the experimental group and the controlled group after the use of weblogs in terms of the writing dimensions.

Table 8. *Significant Differences on the Level of Performance of Two Groups after Using Web Blogs*

	Control	Experimental
Number of Students	40	40
Mean	84.25	87.48
Standard Deviation	4.49	4.80
Observed Significance Level	0.003	
T-value	-3.103	
Decision	Reject the null hypothesis	

Level of Significance = 0.05

Decision Rule: ***Reject the null hypothesis if the observed significance level is less than the level of significance***

These data show that there is a significant difference in the scores of the control group and experimental group with a T- value of -3.103 at .05 level of significance.

According to the data presented, knowledge and application are significant with a t-value of -4.632 and -5.119, respectively at .05 level of significance. In contrast, comprehension has no significance with a t- value of -0.510 at .05 level of significance. This supported the study of Ware (2004) who interviewed college-level ELLs that had participated in threaded discussions and debates and found that those that are often afraid of making usage mistakes or being embarrassed by an unintelligible accent, relish the chance to share their thoughts and ideas with their classmates in an environment that seems safer to them.

In addition to this, MacBride and Luehmann (2008) discuss blogging as a way to “capitalize on emerging technologies” and student interest. They also cited increased

exposure time with the content and increased inter-student communication as beneficial to overall learning.

Lastly, Bower (2006) explores how the teens of the 21st century are doing this through online communities, discussion boards, and blogging. He suggests that teachers take the opportunity to go to where the students already have an interest, to capitalize on these out-of-school literacy practices.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

Based on the comprehensive findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The respondents from the experimental group and the controlled group can comprehend meaningful input but their knowledge of the rules governing sentence construction and the actual writing of the material (application) shows mediocrity.
2. The level of performance of the experimental and the control group in terms of knowledge and skills are at par with each other. They differ in comprehending reading materials in preparation for the writing activity.
3. The use of interactive weblogs is effective in developing the writing ability of the Filipino students in the experimental group.
4. The experimental group and the control group experienced development in their writing ability, specifically in the knowledge and application dimensions. Their comprehension level are not correlated with each other

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn, the researcher recommends that:

1. A comprehension test in writing should be given to Filipinos specifically in their first year in the tertiary level to know their abilities as basis for the construction of lessons in the course syllabus.
2. Weblogs should be used in L2 writing subjects to motivate the students to discover the joy of writing.
3. Professors/teachers should attend seminars and workshops, specifically in writing through the use of multimedia/innovations to enhance their skills and to upgrade their knowledge in the field of classroom instruction.
4. Future researchers may conduct studies using weblogs in other subject areas and update/upgrade the site to be able to cope up with the fast changing trend in the virtual world.
5. Security features should be added to protect the intellectual property rights of future bloggers.

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