

Enhancing EFL Writing Instruction through Technology in Iran

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Abstract

The application of technology in English language classrooms has recently become a common practice around the world. However, Iranian EFL teachers are not very experienced in dealing with technology. By the same token, understanding teachers' attitude and their real experience of technology in EFL context is important. The aims of the study are to find out EFL teachers' belief of using technology in teaching of writing after integration and ways to improve teaching practice with help of blogging through the theory of community of practice. A total of 7 EFL teachers from two different universities participated in this study. They have experienced an online environment as a means to share their knowledge of teaching of writing to improve students' writing skill. The results from the interviews indicated that the online environment helped students to grow positive attitudes toward writing skills and it improved their writing. They also considered online technology as an effective teaching tool that can change the way they deliver their teaching of writing.

Keywords: technology, teacher perception, community of practice, writing, blogging

1. Introduction

The ubiquitous technology occupies almost every part of our lives and communities. The advent of technology and the widespread adoption of advanced technological measures have led to a new digitalized era by providing unique alternatives to reach larger audiences than ever before. It affects our living atmosphere, the way we think and acquire knowledge, and it renovates our education as well. The integration of technology has attracted much attention with the emergence of technological tools in educational areas (Rigi 2015). Due to its benefits in education such as providing opportunities for collaborative learning, autonomous learning, student-centered learning, higher order thinking, and problem-solving, technology is highly in demand especially in higher education at an astonishing rate. Therefore, technology has already found the zeal for its integration in the realm of education. One of the fields of education in which the influence of technology inclusion is undeniable is teaching and learning of English as foreign language (EFL). Although this is a well-understood fact in many parts of the world, the use of technology in the Iranian context of higher education is currently associated with some uncertainties. Technology integration is still deemed as a modern method for the teaching and learning process in Iran. In the Iranian EFL context, its use has always been restricted to conversation and listening classes. Iranian EFL teachers are overlooking the significance of technology integration into the other two skills of reading and writing.

Implementing technology in EFL context increases students' confidence and encourages them to be EFL active learners (Chartrand 2004; Wu, Yen & Marek 2011; Prihatin 2012; Mollaei & Riasati 2013). Therefore, EFL teachers are encouraged to incorporate technology in their teaching. However, according to Thang et al. (2010), the assumption that once technology is introduced, the integration will follow next cannot be always true as teachers need to be trained and supported in integrating technology. Moreover, factors that prevent teachers from integrating technology should also be identified and rectified. Thus, successful integration of technology into education, among other things, depends on the preparation of teachers. Teachers need to familiarize themselves with new methods of teaching and learn how to make the most effective instructional use of new technologies for teaching and learning. Using technology in education involves supporting and encouraging teachers to use technology in their instruction. Technology-enhanced learning environments provide ample opportunities for teachers to boost their instruction and teaching practices. As the teachers are the key elements in educational environments, they can bring about changes in education and classrooms only through improving their abilities to teach. In a technology-integrated environment, teachers can create an atmosphere where the physical boundaries between teachers and students make no sense, and where the process of learning and retention for student is facilitated leading to their progress and flourish. Therefore, the integration means boosting teaching abilities.

Writing is always considered as an important skill in the EFL context. Many researchers came to consensus that technology could solve the problems faced in a writing class (You 2004; Degi 2005; Ozbek 2006; San 2007; Darus, Ismail & Ismail 2008; Hafner 2010; Suzuki 2011; Aydin & Yildiz 2014). Technology can act as a medium to improve the teaching instruction and students' achievement in writing. It supports learning, enhances students' motivation to write, and promotes creativity. However, it is unfortunate that technology is not practiced in writing classes in Iran. The lack of interest in this skill is apparent among EFL students (Zandi et al. 2014). When it comes to writing, many students are not motivated and find it a difficult and boring task. Lack of motivation stops students from producing quality writing. Taking into account the students' lack of interest in

writing skill, EFL teacher should implement a novel method which is engaging and motivating. Therefore, different ways of teaching through technology should be acquired and practised for effective writing instruction in EFL context in Iran. This study suggests that community of practice is a suitable theory for better integration of technology into practice of teaching in the Iranian context.

Proposed by Lave and Wenger in 1991, the community of practice consists of people who build knowledge and relationship through interaction and mutual commitment (Wenger 1998). CoP comprised of three main elements of domain, community and practice (Wenger et. al 2002). Once organized well, these elements will make a CoP an ideal network for sharing knowledge.

This theory contends that learning is a social process which requires individual's commitment. Since this theory focuses on social construction of knowledge, it is a promising method to improve through negotiation of instruction. CoP can look at change and transformation as a result of involvement in different contexts. Hence, it increases the impact of teachers' valuable negotiation on teaching practice and students' achievement. Change in teaching practice is possible through social participation in communities of practices which is the result of negotiation of meanings. In community of practice, teachers can engage in discussion related to their teaching practices to improve their teaching. They can improve their teaching practices through building relationships and actual application of knowledge (Abigail 2016). The learning community can be fostered online with the help of an interactive technology. Interactive technology can facilitate learning and knowledge building among the members of online community. Online community makes it easier for the teachers to access best teaching methods, share and exchange ideas. It also helps to build relationship for more collaboration and support.

2. Related literature

A great number of researchers agreed upon the effectiveness of the use of technology in education and how it is beneficial in developing teaching methods and students' achievement in language learning education (Frigaard 2002; Schofield & Davidson 2003; Miner 2004; Timucin 2006; Young 2008; Pun 2013; Haswani 2014; Ghavifekr & Rosdy 2015). All these studies confirmed that various technologies from computer to web increased the quality of students work. However, many Iranian EFL teachers are still following traditional model of teaching; and technology integration has no place in their teaching practice. This may arise from their perspectives toward integrating technology, time, the accessibility of technological resources, and program preparedness (Coghlan 2004; Jacobsen & Lock 2005; Lai & Kritsonis 2006; Mishra & Koehler 2008; Ismail & Almekhlafi 2010; Otroshi & Bourdet 2012; Gilakjani & Leong 2012). Teachers lack of knowledge, relevant skills and experience to deliver the teaching methods through technology could be another reason that stops them from integrating technology. Their perspectives and challenges are deterrent factors in integrating technology for improving teaching and learning qualities. Much has been written on the use of technology and teachers' perspectives on its use in EFL education. However, very little research has been conducted on the integration of blog as an interactive technology into writing class in the realm of EFL in higher education level in Iran.

Many researchers believed that teaching and learning opportunities can be expanded through appropriate application of technology (Akele 2013, Behzadi 2015; Ghavifekr & Rosdy 2015). Therefore, technology can lead to learning and development in learners' different skills. As a focal point of every educational system, students are expected to be exposed to a patterns and methods of learning which engage them and motivate them the most. It is in this sense that technology becomes imperative as a companion in education especially in learning and teaching of English language. Hence, the overarching aim of this paper is to help Iranian EFL teachers become aware of the potential of technology in changing the learning environments, and also assist them to become comfortable with a technological tool that supports the teaching of writing.

To this end, the realm of English education in Iran needs a huge change and this transformation is possible through embracing the current trends in the educational system. That is, EFL teachers should keep themselves updated and learn integrating different technologies into teaching. As technologies are considered essential tools in any educational system, they can increase the quality of EFL education in Iran by offering unlimited benefits to the students including effective learning environment, confidence and learning autonomy.

3. Methodology

For the purpose of technology inclusion, 7 EFL teachers from two Universities in Iran namely Abadan and Behshahr Universities were involved in the project. The participants were selected based on the purposeful sampling using several criteria such as (1) three years of teaching experience, (2) teaching at the same university where the study is conducted, and (3) interest in participation in this inquiry. The teachers were briefed on their role in the online activity and were trained on blogging in a workshop session. A blog site was created for them to discuss issues related to teaching of writing. Teachers were interviewed before the involvement in the blogging activity. The participants were expected to share the teaching issues on blog and organize their own blog accordingly. They were required to participate in discussion about teaching writing and give comments and share ideas in online forum. The researcher observed their activity throughout the blogging activity and provided

them technical and emotional support whenever needed. The blogging activity lasted for 5 months. The teachers engaged students in blogging activity were interviewed again to find out the influence of technology on students' writing. They provided different tasks for students to engage them to write with their classmates such as collaborative writing on a certain topic. The interview protocol was carefully designed based on the blog input by the teachers during the five months. The interview data were analysed by identifying the emerging themes to reveal the teachers' perception on the usefulness of technology on students' writing.

4. Findings and discussion

The results revealed that the participants of this study found blogging a useful tool which improved students' writing as it gives them awareness about their work. Technology improved student's lack of motivation and helped them to produce better works comparing to their traditional classes. The discussions and sharing ideas within the online community contributed to the improvement of the teachers' instruction. Several themes emerged from the interview transcripts of the teachers based on participants view on the effect of blogging on the student writing including critical thinking, awareness of the audience, increased motivation, increased creativity, peer editing opportunity, collaborative learning, and blog posts as a quality model for writing.

Critical thinking

Teachers in this study believed that technology helped the EFL students to develop critical thinking skills. In the final interview, teachers stated that blogging promoted thinking among the students. Comparing to the past, the students put effort for their writings and engaged in discussions and interaction about writings which boosted their thinking and problem solving skills.

T2:

...The comments the students received from their peers improved their writing as it involved thinking. After careful consideration and discussion, the students incorporated the suggested corrections on their writing...

EFL teachers agreed that blogging could spur thinking among the students as they became engaged in the process and producing works after reflection and correction. They believed that even small discussion on writing worked as a way to improve students writing as it engaged them in thoughtful interaction with their classmates.

T4:

Online engagement led to thinking and development... Students used their mind and conveyed their ideas at the time of editing. Peer-editing helped them to think more analytically about writing and organize their compositions more appropriately.

Teachers indicated that blogging lead to higher learning and reflection among the students. Involving EFL students in interactive activities which bolster questioning and discussion can enhance their engagement and improves their writing. Online environment acts as a powerful tool to help them use their knowledge of writing in a new setting, question their knowledge, and take action to amend it. While interacting with classmates and engaging in evaluating each other's writing, the students developed problem solving skill. This kind of engagement helps them to feel responsible for their work and boosts reflection and retention. Hence, technology can create an environment that enhances the problem-solving skills among EFL students.

Awareness of audience

Teachers of this study were on the view that blogging let the students be attentive of audience and write better. This serves as an impetus for students to be more thoughtful and cautious while working on the content and structure of their writing. These teachers revealed that the students were motivated to write better having in mind their audience. Therefore, awareness of the audience affected their writing significantly. T1 stated in her last interview that blogging worked well to make students aware of their writing and students tried to post better work as they are aware that their classmates are watching them.

T1:

... Well, when they write just for me, they know they're in class and this is what you do in here. But when they are a part of blog along with other students, they're doing something that goes beyond class and they do their best...

T7 noticed improvement in students' writing as a result of being public. Being aware of the audience helped his students write better.

T7:

...When they publish their work online, you could see real investment in their work... I feel students were more responsible about their work because they realized that their composition will be seen by all...

Teacher believed that technology provided a conducive environment for writing. EFL students improved their writing having in their mind the readers' needs. Therefore, teachers can expect better writing from the students

as they want to adjust their writing based on the audience. As teachers stated, many companies increase students' incentive to develop better writing. The participants confirmed that audience can solve students' lack of motivation in writing. For many students, the audience could work as an incentive to get them involved and motivated. Therefore, the audience in blog worked as a source of motivation, an avenue for feedback and self-progression.

Increased creativity

Teachers concurred that blog gave diversity to teaching and the change was reflected through some works of the students. Almost all the teachers in this study revealed that blogging led to creativity in writing. They argued that blog has been viewed positively by their students as an interesting platform on which they freely posted their writing. In the final interview, T1 explained that videos and pictures made the students creative in their writing. She later mentioned that adding these materials to the blogs helped the EFL students write more.

T1:

...When I look at my blog, I feel thrilled to see their creative works. Some students could not produce creative works but they tried to be part of blogging and engage in commenting. They had good time writing through blog during this semester...

T3 also agreed that students' creativity came from the use of video and picture in the blog.

T3:

Many of us use paper and pencil writing in our classes which is not engaging and motivating for the students. When students are excited about their writing they will take more care of their work. The most appropriate way is to spark their creativity by providing ways to get excited and passionate about the work. The video and picture were good option for this purpose...

T2 explained that students showed a lot of interest in writing through blog and developed good writings.

T2:

...Blogging was an excellent possible way to enhance creative thinking and writing among our students. I feel happy that I had a chance to see the transformation...

T5 mentioned the creative work had no place in his writing classes earlier. He was on the view that using technology in teaching writing inspires students to use their imagination.

T5:

It was good to see my students were engaged and even some showcased their creativity in the blog...I came to know that to be creative you do not need to be a talented person, it needs creative ideas, imagination, collaboration and visual tools...

Teachers noticed a huge change in students writing. Some teachers made a comparison between their traditional class and online class and declared that their students tend to be more interested in writing through blog. They mentioned that comparing to the conventional composition class, blogging triggered creativity among the students to the extent that some of them composed poem. They all agreed that the online atmosphere, pictures, films, and editing feature of blog led to creative work.

Increased motivation

Teachers of this study acknowledged that integrating technology into the teaching of writing triggered higher motivation in learning. At the last interview, instances indicative of interesting online atmosphere among students were found. For example, 'blogging sparked my students' interest to write better', 'they are much more motivated to write with blog' and 'the role of blog in writing is motivator' and so forth. T1, for instance, demonstrated peer-review and publishing online motivated her students. Compared to the earlier writing classes, she believed that her students tend to be more interested in writing. From the interview excerpt, it was obvious that she felt that blogging was a way of helping learners to create their own understanding of learning.

T1:

...I believe the role of technology in writing is a motivator. I mean every time we want them to write they were much more motivated with the use of blog. They were enthusiastic in the blog... I thought I was doing well for my students, but I really wasn't doing anything in my writing classes to improve their writing...

T2 perceived that online tool shaped students' writing. She mentioned that technology increased the desire for writing and improved their work. She affirmed that technology is a promising tool for unmotivated writing students.

T2:

...My students were always hesitant. They could not even start writing with a given topic. It was hard for them to write or give their opinion...I am sure they didn't care about their writing earlier. They were just trying to connect sentences to complete a paragraph. Now they are cautious about their writing...This interactive technology increased their motivation as they participate in the discussions...

T3 opined that blogging worked as an incentive for students to produce more. Their motivation was increased by being exposed to many readers. T3 stated that he found students excited about their work as they wanted to show off their ability of writing to their classmates.

T3:

... I've noticed that publishing in blogs motivated my students to write better because they wanted to make an impact on their classmate with their writing. Some students even wrote with the hope to interact with their classmates...

T5 made some statements on students' lack of motivation in writing. He perceived that the students do not believe they could write well as they are not given the chance to realize that writing matters. Later, he described how blogging motivated the students. He indicated that writing for classmates improved students' writing. It was a bit of extra motivation when they were sure their classmates saw their work.

T5:

... We should provide them the chance to create writing for a large audience to enhance their motivation. For this, blogging did it best to make the student have access to all of the classmates...I found my students motivated publishing their work for a large audience and this was evident from the amount of their online interactions...

As stated by T6, blog grabbed students' interest in writing. He believed technology engaged students in the learning process, motivated them and led to creative works. He indicated that students were more focused on their writing during blogging.

T6:

...I could feel my students' consent on their work...All I wanted in my classes was to see students find meaning in their writing, rather than leading them to my own conclusions. I think this is a true learning, having them to find their unknown creative identity by delving deeper into the topic, triggering their curiosity and providing them stimulant environments...

EFL teachers confirmed that blog enhanced students' motivation and helped them to write constructively comparing to the previous semesters. Earlier in their first interview, they explained that students were not motivated to write and most of them participate in classes to only pass the course. However, later they noticed, *technology provided them a more positive outlook on writing*. All the teachers believed that *the biggest problem in their writing class was to get students to write as they were reluctant to write*. They indicated that the peer-editing, entertaining online design and audience motivated students.

Collaborative learning

Many teachers believed that blogging taught the art of collaborative learning to the students. Within blog, students were engaged in collaborative learning while working on common tasks and editing. When students involved in shared creation, they interacted to reach the shared concept of meaning. For example, T2 declared that her students were engaged in collaborative learning while writing online. She believed editing one another's work helped students to step outside their norm and allowed them to do something they could not do on their own in the class.

T2:

...Collaborative classroom is what we are missing the most. One of the great ways to have EFL students write with full interest is to have them collaborate on a work. Working in a group would let them step outside their norm to do something they were not able to do earlier...

T3 explained that the writing which students developed during these months was communication-centered. The advantage of peer editing for students was that they could interact with their classmates both in pre-writing activities and peer review. He stated that this experience gave him the understanding that writing is less about the actual writing and more about the students' ability to think and reflect on the process. He noticed that students improved by taking into account how time and patience affected their writing.

T3

... It is good that their writing changed from an individualized task to a social activity. At the same time, they enjoyed editing and interacting. I think their frequent conversations about writing was helpful...another lesson for all was that good writing is the one students get indulge in every steps and to remember that haste makes waste...

Most of the teachers were on the view that the process of giving and receiving feedback by students made their writing a collaborative task. They believed that with the integration of technology in writing class, one can expect collaboration among students as it allowed the students to work together on their writing.

Commenting and peer-editing

Teachers of this study also admired blog for granting feedback and editing opportunity to EFL students. According to them, the activity in the blog was communication-centered for students and let them revise their

own writings based on the feedbacks. Blogging offered opportunities for students to improve their writing via interaction and editing. It created a meaningful writing experience for them. T3 asserted that commenting affected his students writing performances. The comments which students received from peer classmates improved their writing and paved the way for the students to believe in themselves as a writer. He stated that in the writing classes students usually work individually.

T3:

... Commenting and editing were the most influential part which helped them improve. The students worked in group and engaged in editing. Working in the group gave them motivation and gave soul to their writing...

T4 called his previous class a mechanical class which was a cycle of composition, submission and evaluation. The feedbacks students received by the teacher offered little assistance to develop their writing abilities. He believed that commenting helped them to improve as it gave them a new role.

T4:

I am pleased to witness blog provided my students a space to review their works. Commenting gave them the ability to improve...When I compare my teaching to the past, I found the earlier boring...In my old writing classroom, student writing was evaluated by me...

T5 believed that technology engaged students in the learning process. He was on the view that blogging gave students opportunities to write freely. Comments they received from their friends helped them have control on the processes of writing and develop a positive attitude towards writing.

T5

I believe blog is a unique instructional tool with great potential for encouraging a positive attitude toward composition...Commenting for many students was a stage they needed to develop their writing...

T6 held that feedbacks were useful part of blogging for students and it improved their writing. Peer review helped students in planning their writing, and it raised their awareness of error before finishing their writing.

T6:

...Many of them clearly communicated their views. They also developed an understanding of how to write in a way to influence others...through reading the comments they found their faults and improved their writing...

Like other teachers, T7 postulated that peer editing should be incorporated into writing classes to encourage students to write and help them improve their work

T7:

...I haven't taught writing this way and found it useful for writing class. I have tried different ways in my class and I was against students' editing. This experience showed me peer editing is beneficial for students because they could at least involve in writing in a meaningful way...

Teachers demonstrated that the interaction and peer editing made the students active in writing process and increased the desire for writing better. According to them, editing section stimulated the pre-writing stage of process writing. This way, students extended positive attitude toward composition through the editing part. Teachers found peer editing very useful and motivational for students and believed that it increased students' confidence in writing by triggering thinking and self-expression.

Blog posts as a quality model for writing

The teachers of this study valued blog for its sharing features as it provided different writing models for students. They maintained that when students have access to the quality and poor writing online, they could compare the works and improve their own work accordingly. Among the participants, T1 declared in the final interview that blog provided her weak students good models for improvement. She held that the published assignment provided good source of improvement for students.

T1

...students who had a difficult time with a particular assignment could see examples that were submitted before completing their own assignments. One plus point about work presented in public was that they could see different works to get ideas to improve their writing...

T3 also described that students corrected their own writing by reading other works online. In other words, students' work served as model for other students. He believed students gained their abilities to write from reading others' samples.

T3

...It was not just the writing itself which affected the quality of writing. In my view, they used the entries to improve their writing. This way they submitted a better work ...

Prior to this study, the teachers were not happy about EFL students' writing. These teachers had no prior experience of implementing technology in the writing skill and they were not sure how it could impact writing. However; they had positive beliefs toward technology and considered technology as a valuable tool. At the end

of study, teachers' hesitation was turned into confirmation. They mentioned that this experience gave them awareness of benefits of technology in teaching of writing. They became familiar with the actual effects of a new way of teaching and many were keen to have technology in their future writing classes. Therefore, teachers would gain awareness about usefulness of technology when they witness how technology facilitates student performance.

Findings revealed that technology enhances and improves students' writing. As the findings of this study demonstrated teaching with technology pave the way for fruitful learning and encourage EFL students to do better on writing by connecting them with other students to share, reflect and revise their work. Blog provided the students a learner-centered atmosphere in which they took responsibility for their learning. The collaborative endeavor in editing and giving and receiving feedback from other students helped them gain confidence, and led to social construction of knowledge.

The integration of technology into writing class changed classroom from the lecture-centered to a student-centered classroom. Students became empowered to take ownership of their learning through the editing and commenting feature of blog. According to the teachers of this study, the commenting aspect of blogging assisted students to improve their writing in the best possible way. They could work collaboratively in the blog to edit each other's work. Teachers felt their students devoted more time to writing and were motivated. Interview analysis also provided evidence that teachers considered blog as a powerful tool for teaching writing. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to use blog for improving writing instruction in Iranian context. Overall, the teachers found technology integration fruitful because it provided evidence of the usefulness of this technology tool for students writing.

Conclusion

The main emphasis of the Community of practice is to create an effective learning community that enhances and supports learning within social context. Building online community was a way to let the teachers experience collaborative environment to share views and practices. Moreover, CoP emphasized the urge to provide professional development opportunities and peer-peer discussion among Iranian teachers. As it was observed from the interviews, the integration of technology into teaching of writing made the English classroom more interactive and collaborative. Blog worked as a catalyst for change and triggered motivation and creativity in students. When planning on a writing instruction, EFL teachers need to vigorously consider what motivates students to write better. Students have no inclination to be good in writing if they know they are writing just to pass the course. To have an active learning environment, teachers need to incorporate instructional practices that are technology-oriented. This way, teachers are able to encourage students and motivate them to write better. The result indicated that the instructional methods which incorporate technology are diverse and engaging. It certainly has the potential to impact student motivation in writing. The potential that blogging offered in this study paves the way for technology integration as a means to motivate EFL students to write meaningfully and creatively.

The findings of this study indicate that integration of technology can improve the way teachers deliver their teaching and the way student can learn. Blogging supported the teaching of writing by offering various ways to increase motivation in the learners. Considering the qualities of blogging in improving students' writing, it is recommended that EFL teachers invest more time in garnering knowledge about new technologies for teaching. Relevant training plays an important role in the use of technology in EFL classes as well. EFL teachers should update themselves on how to teach effectively with the various technology tools, and devise novel methods and techniques of teaching.

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