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Scaffolding Students' Understanding of English Writing by Weblogging: A Preliminary Survey

Daisuke Nakamura

Abstract

The present paper investigates the usefulness of the tutorial weblog as scaffolding for freshmen's understanding of the contents of the writing class. Despite its small sample size (N =15), a questionnaire survey conducted at the end of the class shows: (a) further explanations posted on the tutorial weblog made students' knowledge of English writing more robust; (b) homework assignments promoted students' self-learning by checking other peers' writing, probably leading to learner autonomy. The paper concludes that weblogging or, more generally, Mobile Assisted Language Learning should be incorporated into formal higher education.

Keywords: Computer Assisted Language Learning, Mobile Assisted Language Learning, weblogging

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), in association with rapid and continuous development of computer technology, has been widely studied and its (positive) effects on various aspects of second language acquisition (SLA) have been shown (Oxford & Oxford, 2009). One of its merits is that teachers can compensate for limited time spent on formal teaching by posting further explanation on the class weblog, for instance. Students can catch up with the class by checking information provided by their teachers, and asking for further explanation by commenting on the weblog. Therefore, CALL has particular potential to promote or scaffold students' understanding of the contents of the class.

However, some problems peculiar to CALL (e.g., self-evaluation of information provided by the Internet, or computer literacy) have been pointed out (e.g., Dippold, 2009; Vallance, Vallance, & Matsui, 2009). These are particularly troublesome for freshmen since they have just graduated from high school where teaching of computer literacy might be limited and varied across schools. Possible solutions to these problems are use of mobile technology available for smartphones that are possessed by the majority of today's students, and with which they are already familiar (sometimes called "digital natives", Prensky, 2001). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the effects of weblogs as scaffolding tools for an English writing course. In particular, students' perception of the usefulness of the tutorial weblog is investigated by a questionnaire. In so doing, general overviews of CALL and Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) are provided first. Then, the effects of the weblog on the development of writing skills are reviewed before describing the results of the present study.

CALL and MALL

CALL, as its name suggests, includes various forms of technology such as social networking systems (SNS); weblogs, Wikis, Twitter, and mobile apps (Gitsaki, 2012), websites, or Learning management system (LMS), and thus encompasses any forms of learning that employ computer technology as learning tools (see Blake, 2011, for a concise review). CALL, therefore, involves various devices (e.g., desktops, laptops, iPads, iPods, and smartphones) that can run the above (SNS) apps (Chinnery, 2006).

While CALL has incidental merits (universal access to information,[1] or concurrent development of computer literacy, Vallance et al., 2009) and teachers perceive its positive effects on their teaching (Aydin, 2013), some problems have been pointed out. Vallance et al. (2009) provided: (1) how to evaluate information (provided by the Internet); and (2) (Inadequate)

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1   However, Hsu (2013) argues that not all students have connections to the Internet.

development of digital skills, as examples of such problems. While (1) is ubiquitous among all types of CALL, (2) can be mitigated by MALL, specifically using devices which are already familiar, such as mobile phones (Hsu, 2013).

MALL is one specific type of CALL, that is, CALL employing mobile technology. Crompton, Muilenburg, and Berge (Crompton, 2013a, p. 4) defined MALL as "learning across multiple contexts, through social and content interactions, using personal electric devices." One general advantage of MALL over traditional or other types of CALL is thus its accessibility; students can search for the meaning of a particular word using dictionary apps or search for information by connecting to the Internet, for instance. Therefore, students need not be "anchored to one place while learning" (Crompton, 2013b, p.49) and thus learning happens everywhere, inside and outside the classroom (Hamm, Saltsman, Jones, Baldridge, & Perkins, 2013).

The utility of MALL is made possible by students' regular possession of smartphones. Khaddage and Latterman (2013) found that over 90% of German, Japanese, and Australian students used smartphones regularly. In addition, students perceived the use of mobile technology positively (Hsu, 2013; Moura & Carvalho, 2013). Hsu studied students' perception of MALL and found that while there were significant regional differences among students (e.g. applicability to EFL teaching), in general, they perceived MALL positively.

In sum, MALL can mitigate problems due to the lack of computer skills that other desktop types of CALL have faced, since students can use the already familiar smart- or mobile phones. The next section briefly reviews some studies incorporating weblogging into writing courses.

Weblogging

Weblogging (or simply blogging) originated from online (personal) journals and now has various communicative functions such as online provision of news (Carney, 2009). In a CALL context, weblogging can be regarded as one type of MALL, since students can access blog sites via smart- or mobile

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phones. Some studies found that weblogging promoted: (a) simultaneous acquisition of computer skills (Murray & Hourigan, 2008); (b) peer feedback (Dippold, 2009); and (c) learners' autonomy (Aim, 2009). Within second language (L2) writing research, some found positive effects of weblogging on basic and advanced aspects of L2 writing (Lee, 2010; Murray & Hourigan, 2008; Raith, 2009; Sun & Chang, 2012). These are reviewed below.

In Lee's (2010) study, in a task-based language teaching framework (Samuda & Bygate, 2008), freshmen and sophomores engaged in various tasks: writing about their reactions to assigned readings, describing the contents of podcasts, writing about personal interests, or oral recording. Students were required to respond to their peers' entries posted on each personal weblog. The results showed that students wrote longer entries (around 300 words) and evaluated teachers' and peers' feedback as useful for their writing.

Raith (2009) investigated the effects of the existence of online audiences on students' writing about reading journals. Grade 9 students at a secondary girls' school were required to write summaries of the chapters with or without comments in either online (their own weblogs) or offline (pen-and-paper) journals. The results of a questionnaire and a guided interview conducted after the completion of the project showed that weblogging promoted awareness of the audience, which resulted in students' efforts to make their weblogs more interesting and understandable for potential readers. Furthermore, they even tried to interact with their audiences. In contrast, the majority of the students (66.7%) in the pen-and-paper journal group did not show the influence of the audiences.

Murray and Hourigan (2008) asked students to reflect on their processes of language learning as well as to write 300 word essays on their personal weblogs. Analyses of the reflective learner blogs demonstrated that some advanced learners showed stylistic aspects of writing (e.g., How to be effective and successful when proofreading our texts, Murray & Hourigan, 2008, p.94). This suggests that weblogging, if it is reflective in nature, brings learners from concentration on basic aspects (e.g., vocabulary and grammatical accuracy)

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The use of weblogging for reflection on writing is further investigated by Sun and Chang (2012). However, in this case, reflection is facilitated by collaborative dialogues or peer feedback. Graduate students were asked to post reflective entries related to their own writing as well as comments on peers' entries. Contents of students' blog entries were mostly concerned with negative reflection on their writing (e.g., "My grammar is terrible") and sharing learning experience (e.g., "If an online dictionary could not provide adequate information, I would use Google"). Collaborative dialogues, developed among peers by commenting, showed that peer feedback seemingly helped understanding of the contents of academic writing (e.g., "I think the use of transition words can also help! You may also find some useful information in Swain's book").[2]

Taken together, these studies show that weblogging promotes not only writing fluency itself, but also awareness of other important aspects of writing (e.g., assumption of the audience, objective or critical but constructive point of view on their own or their peers' writing) particularly if it is reflective (self-reflection or peer-feedback) in nature. However, these studies conducted the weblog projects as an almost independent learning module apart from the contents of formal teaching in the class or as the whole class itself. Moreover, it is too demanding to have personal weblogs because students in the present study had to master different software such as Microsoft Word and LMS with little computer literacy within a single semester as noted below. One interesting question is thus how we can scaffold students' understanding of the course contents by posting further information on the class blog as well as providing some writing assignments without requiring them to construct their own personal weblogs. Therefore, employing a questionnaire conducted as an assignment after the completion of the main parts of the course, the present study investigates:

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2   Examples cited here all come from Lee, 2010, p.48 and p.50, respectively.

Research Question (1)

Does weblogging help students' understanding of the contents of the writing class?

Research Question (2)

If so, what kinds of information do students perceive as effective and why?

The Present Study

Participants

Originally 21 freshmen (6 men and 15 women, aged between 18 and 21) were invited. However, 6 of them did not submit the questionnaire and thus the remaining 15 freshmen (2 men and 13 women) constituted the subject pool.

Writing Course

A writing module that participants engaged in was a part of the Integrated English (IE) program. The IE program was a semester-long intensive English learning program (15 classes) and consisted of a core module taught by a native speaker of English twice a week, a listening module and a writing module held once a week. These three modules were united thematically (See http://www.aogaku-daku.org, for detailed information). In the writing module, students learned the structure of the English paragraph and how to organize it (e.g., topic and concluding sentences) as well as a few grammatical exercises (e.g., active and passive voices). They were required to submit three types of paragraphs (classification, comparison-contrast, and persuasive) of around 150 words. In so doing, they edited their peers' paragraphs by critically examining the paragraph structure (e.g., whether concrete examples were provided or whether transition words were appropriate) after the completion of each first draft. Then, based on the peer editing, they completed the final draft of each paragraph type. While engaging in these activities in the class, an instructor asked them to check a tutorial weblog (see below) at least twice a week. At the end of the writing module, students were asked to complete a questionnaire that investigated the usefulness of the tutorial weblog.

Weblog

The present study differed from previous studies in that: (a) only the instructor constructed the class weblog and students were not required to possess their own; (b) students wrote simple sentences as regular assignments in a comment column as well as comments, if any. The reasons for these were that since students in this study had to master the use of Microsoft Word, as well as LMS called CaLabo LMS powered by the CHiele company, with low computer literacy. Nakamura (2013) showed that students felt difficulty in mastering CaLabo LMS (e.g., uploading assignments or checking feedback from their instructor). Therefore, forcing students to master personal weblogging within a semester seemed excessively demanding and thus tutorial weblogging was employed instead.

The tutorial weblog was created in a freely available blogging site called Seesaa blog (blog.seesaa.jp) and password-protected. The tutorial weblog provided three categories of information.

(1) Explanation. This category provided further explanation of the contents of the class where students felt difficulties in understanding. Information was provided based on students' responses to questionnaires that investigated what contents they were uncertain about and posted in the CaLabo LMS every week. Explanation was sometimes supplied with links to relevant websites that offered useful information. 10 explanations were given in total. An example is given in Appendix A.

(2) Homework. This category included vocabulary exercises. Students were asked to write five simple sentences once or twice a week, using at least one of the words that the program assumed they had learned and that were taken from two textbooks: *Interactions 2* (Kirn & Hartmann, 2014) and *Interchange 2* (Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 2013). The instructor provided five model sentences for each exercise and students wrote their own in the comment column. As a part of the course requirements, students were given one point for the completion of each exercise. 15 exercises were provided in total. An example is provided in Appendix B.

(3) Information. This category provided general information or advice.

Since some students encountered difficulties in connecting to the CaLabo LMS where their instructor provided important information, feedback, and personal consultation, only pertinent information was posted on the tutorial weblog as well. 10 pieces of information were provided in total.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire that required comments on the utility of the tutorial weblog was posted in the CaLabo LMS at the end of the course. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions that investigated students' frequency of access as well as the categories of information that they found useful, and open questions where they wrote their thoughts in English. Students were given one point for completion of the questionnaire since it asked them to *write* their comments in English. An example is given in Appendix C.

Analyses

Analyses of the data were both qualitative and quantitative since the questionnaire involved multiple-choice and open questions.

Results and Discussion

Research Question (1): *Does Weblogging Help Students' Understanding of the Contents of the Writing Class?*

Students' frequency of access and distributions of their responses to the question on the utility of the tutorial weblog (What is the most useful section to your learning?) are depicted in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

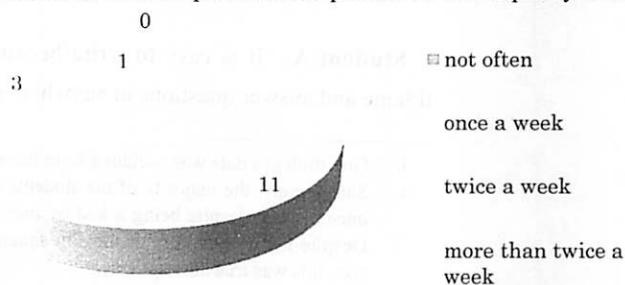Figure 1. Distributions of the responses to the question on the frequency of access

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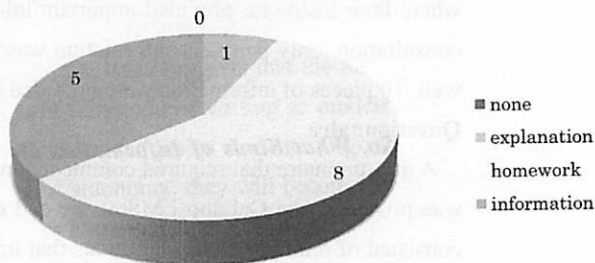uency of access

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Figure 2. Distributions of the responses to the question on the most useful category

Chi square tests on the question concerning the frequency of access showed statistical significance, X^2 (2) = 11.2, p = .004. However, the data did not satisfy the criterion of the chi square tests; all cells should have at least 5 frequencies in this case and thus was unreliable. Chi square tests, in contrast, did not reveal statistical significance on the distributions of three categories of information (explanation, homework, and information), X^2 (2) = 5.286, p = .071.[3] However, the data did not meet the criterion of the chi square tests as all cells should have at least 4.7 frequencies in this case. This unreliability due to an extremely small sample size. Therefore, descriptive statistics and qualitative data were used in the analyses below.

At the descriptive level, it seems possible to argue that the tutorial weblog was indeed useful for scaffolding students' understanding of the contents of the class.[4] This was because they chose neither the "not often" nor the "none" responses to the questions on the frequency of access and the utility of the tutorial weblog, respectively. The following examples describe students' positive perception of the tutorial weblog because of its easier accessibility.

Student A. "It is easy to write because I can access this page with my iPhone and answer questions in anywhere else."[5]

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3   One student's data was excluded from the analyses since she chose multiple options.
4   Surprisingly, the majority of the students (N =11) accessed the tutorial weblog only once a week despite being asked by their instructor to do so at least twice a week. Despite the unreliability of the Chi square tests due to the extremely small sample size, this was true descriptively.
5   Students' comments are given as written: errors are not corrected.

Student B. "It was easy to access from any devices for example PC, smart phones. Moreover it was good for me to do the exercise because blog is comfortable for me."

Research Question (2): *If So, What Kinds of Information Do Students Perceive as Effective and Why?*

Figure 2 shows that students perceived both explanation (N =5, 33.3%) and homework (N = 8, 53.3%) as useful. For those who chose the "explanation" response, the reason for their choices was informal relearning or confirmation checks. The following examples confirm this interpretation.

Student C. "When we cannot understand the topic, for example peer-editing, we can learn about it in our home. Also, we can study English more."

Student D. "We can improve out understanding to read teacher's comment."

For those who chose the "homework" response, the tutorial weblog functioned as modeling: students could write simple sentences, checking others' writing including the model sentences provided by the instructor. Writing fluency also seemed to be promoted by this category. The following examples confirmed these interpretations.

Student E. "We can see what others write so we can read them and learn any technic from them. When I took a mistake to write a blog exercise, I found it by seeing blog exercises of others. So this point help us in some ways."

Student F. "The good points are that we have a chance to practice writing sentences using the required words. Also if we don't understand something we are able to look at the blog for some information."

Student G. "We write a lot of English sentences. And the teacher decide which word we should use, so we can write sentences without any problems."

In summary, the tutorial weblog helped students to understand the contents of the class because students were able to catch up with the class by confirming their understanding based on further explanation posted on the tutorial weblog or by seeing other peers' writing. The former indicates that the tutorial weblog

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can make the class proceed smoothly, possibly without leaving behind some students in a classroom, and can entrench knowledge of English writing. On the other hand, the latter suggests that the tutorial weblog also promotes self-learning by checking others' writing as models for their own writing. In this sense, this function facilitates students to go through a first step toward the development of autonomy: they will become less dependent on their teachers. In both ways, the tutorial weblog provides scaffoldings for students' understanding of the contents of the writing class. However, it should be noted that future studies must investigate the relationship between students' perception of the usefulness of the weblog and any actual improvement in their writing, indexed by some performance measures.

Conclusion

The present study, despite its small sample size, confirms the idea that weblogging scaffolds students' writing skills in many ways as previous studies have shown. The present study particularly found the following two points: (a) further explanation posted on the tutorial weblog made students' understanding of the contents of the class more robust; and (b) the availability of peers' completions of the homework assignments provided models which may encourage students to become autonomous learners. These were because the tutorial weblog in the present study did not require them to have their own personal weblogs, which would be highly demanding for freshmen with low computer literacy. Of course, technology is just a part of teaching (Carney, 2009; Chinnery, 2006); mastery of the technology itself is not a main aim of the course. However, as the present study shows, since the weblog or more generally MALL can be employed using many devices that students are already familiar with and has positive influences on their learning, it should be incorporated into formal education (Khaddage & Lattermann, 2013). In this sense, formal higher education is interdependent with informal education (Cochrane, 2013). The following two voices function as concluding sentences of this paper.

Student H. "I want to continue this blog in other class."

Student I. "I can practice writing English sentences on the blog. If there were not the blog, I didn't have opportunities to practice writing. Thanks to the blog, I can write more English sentences."

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Appendices

Appendix A

<u>More on peer-editing or review</u>

Dear all,

Some might still need further explanations on the peer-editing. Let's read the following persuasive paragraph, as an example.

Aoyama Gakuin University is a best place to study English. There are many native-speakers who know how to speak English to non-native speakers. Moreover, there are many English classes. Furthermore, textbooks in almost all classes in the department of English are written in English. Therefore, it's really fantastic to learn English at Aoyama Gakuin University.

As a reader, how can you improve this paragraph?

(1) Before the second sentence, we need a transition word "First".
(2) We need concrete names with detailed descriptions; B J is one example (concrete name) for the first reason. you can add a particular episode with her; Reading, IE, phonology, grammar, etc with detailed descriptions of one of them; *Interaction 2* and *Interchange 2* for the second reason as well as descriptions of how these textbooks are useful.

In these ways, you can **specify** how the paragraph should be re-written, *providing your own concrete ideas (concrete names or descriptions).* No first draft is the final draft; there are many points we should improve! Help friends improve their own writing by **your concrete suggestions.**

Appendix B

The Silk Road exercise (2)

Dear all,

this last blog exercise covers *Interaction 2 (pp.168-195)*. Write 5 simple sentences using at least one word from the following boldface words: *merchants, mosques, network, oasis, pitcher, project, region, routes, silk, spices, statues, flowered, spread, significant, vast, to this end, continue, culture, founded, project, technology*, and *traditional*.

Model sentences: Merchants constructed mosques.

Mayumi made a curry rice with Asian spices.

There are significant decreases in the birth rate.

We should catch up with rapid development of digital technology.

Foreigners want to know more about Japanese traditional culture.

この記事へのコメント

Mosques are significant places for Muslims.

A specialty of this region is spices.

Silks were brought through these routes.

She has a flowered carpet.

We should continue to learn foreign cultures.

Student A

Posted by XXX at 2013 年 07 月 12 日 21:05

Appendix C

A Blog Questionnaire

Name:

Answer the following questions:

(1) How often have checked our blog?

a) not often b) once a week c) twice a week d) more than twice a week

(2) What is the most useful section to your learning?

a) none b) information c) homework d) explanation

(3) What are good points in our blog? Write your opinion in English below.

(4) How can we improve our blog? Write your opinion in English below.

(5) Are there any comments on our blog? Write them in English below.

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