Using Weblogs to Develop Formal Letter Writing among EFL Students at Faculties of Commerce

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Abstract

The study investigated the effectiveness of using weblogs to develop EFL formal letter writing performance of EFL first year students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University. The participants of the study (N=100) were selected randomly during the second semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. They were divided randomly into two groups (experimental and control). The researcher designed a weblog which was shared by the experimental group students (N=50), whereas the control group students (N=50) received traditional instruction. The two groups were tested before and after conducting the experiment. Data obtained through a formal letter writing test , prepared by the researcher, and were logged and analyzed using SPSS, version 21. The t-test for independent and paired samples was used to compare mean scores of the two groups on the pretest and posttest and to compare mean scores of the experimental group on the pretest and posttest. It was found that using weblogs helped EFL first year students to develop their EFL formal letter writing performance. Pedagogical implications, recommendations, suggestions for further research and conclusion were provided in the light of the study results.

Keywords: Weblogs, Formal Letter Writing

Introduction

Writing is one of the four compulsory skills in the teaching and learning processes of a foreign language. Nowadays, in most EFL courses, instructors and educational authorities in decision - making processes are following a growing trend towards a communicative environment, thus, putting aside this fundamental skill. Nowadays, as this trend is followed, EFL students are getting in trouble whenever they have to demonstrate their EFL awareness in real and concrete contexts throughout their lives, for example, when taking an international exam or applying for a job overseas.

Rogers (2005: 2) considers writing as "the use of graphic marks to represent specific linguistic utterances". He also highlights that its importance is in "the opportunity human beings have to communicate, to get a message across beyond the immediate moment, [it] allows us to exchange words at a distance, either at a distant place or at a distant time".

On the other hand, Hyland (2002: 1) affirms the impact of writing in our lives when saying that writing "has multiple roles in social, professional and academic contexts and that it has a great importance in determining our life chances. Writing is central to our personal experience and social identities, and we are often evaluated by our control of it".

It is a critical and important skill for students at school, faculty and lifelong. Writing is also important for teaching foreign / second language learners for three reasons and rationales: First, writing well is a vital skill for academic or occupational success, but it is difficult for foreign and second language learners to master. Second, writing can be an effective tool for the development of academic language proficiency as EFL learners more readily explore advanced lexical or syntactic expressions in their written work. Third, writing across the curriculum can be invaluable for mastering diverse subject matter, as

written expression allows learners to raise their awareness of knowledge gaps, abstract problem-specific knowledge into schemas that can be applied to other relevant cases and elaborate mental representations of knowledge that can be more easily retrieved, while simultaneously allowing teachers to better understand the students' state of knowledge and thinking process and thus adjust instruction as necessary (National Commission on Writing; 2004; Yih & Nah; 2009; Warschauer; 2010 & Aljumah; 2012).

EFL students need to be conscious about the importance and the rationales of writing, in general, and EFL formal letter writing, in particular and EFL instructors need to foster its learning and practice by offering different and several opportunities to write inside and outside the classroom and this is their responsibility. Nation (2009) states the importance of making sure that the uses of writing cover the range of uses that learners will perform in their daily lives. These can include filling forms, making lists, writing friendly and business / formal letters, note-taking and academic writing. Each of these types of writing involves special ways of organizing and presenting the writing and this presentation also deserves attention. Usually, within the language learning process, writing is one of the abilities that needs more attention and care since there can be some established writing rules related to the way of performing in the foreign language.

In many contexts of today's world, formal writing is needed heavily to be able to deal with different situations, for example, when: complaining, applying for a job, requesting information, countermanding orders, writing CVs, acknowledging receipt of goods, answering to advice of bills, expressing inability to pay bills, enquiring about insurance, promoting a product, establishing of an enterprise, receipting remittances, asking for quotations, offering goods, granting credit, suspending credit, refusing credit, seeking an appointment, invoicing goods, asking for travelers, appointing, asking

to act as agents, cancelling of an agency, apologizing for non-payment, etc.

It is important to recognize that in spite of its importance; sometimes formal letters writing is not taken into account as a useful tool to be taught not only for academic purposes but also for life stations.

Coffin et al. (2003) demonstrate that formal writing continues to be at the centre of teaching and learning at university stage and higher education, but is often an invisible dimension of EFL curriculum, that is, the rules or conventions governing what counts as formal writing are often assumed to be part of the common sense knowledge students have and are thus not explicitly taught within disciplinary courses.

According to Hyland (2002), formal writing, like all forms of communication, is an act of identity that serves not only to convey content materials, but also to carry a presentation of the writer. A writer's authorial identity or authorship, moreover, entails the manifestation of the writer's stance, confidence and commitment to ideas.

It is thought by most that formal letters are old-fashioned with all the technological tools and innovations that are available and existed nowadays, but the reality shows the opposite. Kolin (2009) affirms that even in this age of the Internet, formal / business letters are still vital in the world of work. He mentions various reasons and rationales to highlight the importance of formal letters, among them that letters represent your company's public image and your competence, constitute an official legal record of agreement and are the official and expected medium through which important documents and attachments (contracts, specifications and proposals) are sent to readers.

According to Nevala & Palander-Collin (2005: 2), a letter is seen as "a written message from one person to another. This message has a certain function, which the reader interprets from the writer's

formulation of the topic(s) in order to respond to it. The meaning of the message can, however, be negotiated, and it may vary according to the person receiving it. [..] The process of letter writing consists of many stages, and these often influence the choice of language used in it.".

The Problem and Its Context

Although EFL formal letter writing is important, the low and the unsatisfactory levels of EFL formal letter writing performance of EFL students seemed to be among the problems observed when attempting to write formal letters by EFL first year students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University.

It is observed that many EFL first year students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University showed little and weak interest in EFL formal letter writing activities and assignments. Moreover, the researcher held some interviews with a number of EFL first year students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University and they expressed that they were not motivated to write with the audience in mind because a single lecturer is the audience for most or all writings and assignments, which in turn, affected their performance negatively in EFL formal letter writing.

To document such a problem, a pilot study was conducted to a sample of 20 students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University. In this pilot study, a formal letter writing test, prepared by the researcher, was given to the 20 students during the first semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. The students were asked to write a formal letter (see Appendix A).

Results of the pilot study showed that students really encountered a problem in EFL formal letter writing and so they need more help and effort and up to 85% were less than the average.

In addition to the observations and the results of the pilot study, the researcher found a strong empirical evidence that supports such

problem (i.e., Witte; 2007; Yih & Nah; 2009; Arana; 2009; Myskow & Gordon; 2009; Wheeler & Wheeler; 2009; Aljumah; 2012 & Sun & Chang; 2012).

Consequently, this general agreement on the importance of EFL formal letter writing skill and the low, weak and unsatisfactory level of EFL students has provided the challenge for EFL specialists and researchers to search for effective ways to overcome such a problem. EFL specialists and researchers should feel a responsibility towards their students to maintain and develop environments that urge, motivate and help them to continue EFL learning even after school hours. This can be achieved through the use of recent technological innovations such as weblogs.

Statement of the Study Problem

The problem of the study was that EFL first year students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University showed weak and low performance in EFL formal letter writing. In an attempt to solve and tackle this problem, the study investigated the effectiveness of using weblogs to develop EFL students' EFL formal letter writing performance.

So, the study attempted to answer the followingquestion:

"How effective is the use of weblogs in developing the formal letter writing performance among EFL first year students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University?"

Literature Review

The weblog is commonly known as a blog. The term blog is a contraction of two words: web and log. Weblog, or blog for short, is used as both a noun and a verb. Weblogs are a fairly new technological tool for written communication and interaction that

appeared in many different languages. The rise in popularity has resulted in new words being added to the English language, such as: blog, blogging, bloggers and blogosphere. Weblogs are defined simply as "online diaries, logs of thoughts, reflections, a space for individuals to write whatever they choose with an option for readers to comment on what they have read" (Eastment, 2005).

a weblog is a web-based space for writing where all writing and editing information is managed through a web browser and is immediately and publicly available on the Internet (Zhang, 2009). According to Wells (2006), a weblog is an easily created and updateable website that allows people to publish on the Internet instantly even if they do not have any knowledge of HTML programming.

On the other hand, Lamshed, Berry & Armstrong (2002) state that a weblog is a web-based space for writing. They can be thought of as an online journal where all the writing and editing of information is managed through a web browser. The users of weblogs can instantly place their words and thoughts onto their own weblog site through one of the many pieces of blogging software available. A weblog can be a continually updated resource that grows over time with the accumulation of writing and other content.

Weblogs in an EFL Writing Class

Weblogs provide a safer and more relaxed environment for EFL students, especially for the shy or less confident students. They enable students to express their thoughts freely, in contrast to traditional classroom settings, students do not have to compete with their classmates for the instructor's attention (Bloch; 2004 & Glogoff; 2005).

Connecting weblogs with the classroom atmosphere allows students to explore many different teaching possibilities. For example, Richardson (2009) demonstrates that the early adopters of weblogs in

the classroom have already created a wide variety of methods for using them, and they have shown that blogs can enhance and deepen learning. Weblogs are being used as class portals, online filing cabinets for student work, e-portfolio, collaborative space, knowledge management, and even school websites.

On the other hand, Huffaker (2005: 96) states that "blogs can be used to promote reading and writing, to showcase the work of students, or to exchange ideas among students, teachers, or school administrators".

In addition, weblogs provide student writers with a large audience both within and outside the classroom. Pinkman (2005) demonstrates this by saying that blogging becomes communicative and interactive when participants perform multiple roles in the writing process, as: writers who write and post, as readers / reviewers who respond to other writers' posts and as writer-readers who return to their own posts and react to criticism of their own posts. Dieu (2004) & Richardson (2009), as cited in Aljumah (2012), reaffirm this by stating that weblogs give EFL students the chance to maximize focused exposure to foreign / second language in new situations.

Weblogs in an EFL writing class has the following rationales suggested by   Wu (2004); Johnson (2004); Campbell (2004); Dieu (2004); Ward (2004); Stanley (2005) & Arana (2009):

- The application of weblogs is a useful supplemental aid to teachers. From any computer connected to the Internet, teachers can create, edit or delete their teaching handouts, such as notes, homework assignment and review materials. All these instructors' messages will be organized in a reversed chronological order with the latest postings on the top.

- Weblogs can promote exploration of EFL websites. Since it is quite simple for instructors to put English materials online with

links to their source websites, students have more opportunities to read related articles and materials.

- The feature of automatic date-stamping for each post is quite useful. Students' emails may, for some technical glitches, not reach their teachers or be carelessly deleted by their teachers. With the automatic date-stamping function, both teachers and students know clearly when students turned in their writing assignments.

- If students do not have their own personal websites, an easy-to-use blog is a good start for them to interact with users of the cyberspace community. Most students will write more carefully if they know that they are going to publish their articles online for authentic readers who may comment on their postings.

- Instructors can easily use the weblog to organize a collaborative learning environment in which students can peer edit others' postings. Students should be encouraged to comment on their partner's postings, which can also be shared by other classmates.

Zhang (2009) states that weblogs can offer many reading and writing incentives for EFL students as blogging places emphasis on content, the possibility of speedy feedback, the option of working with both words and images, and the ability to link one post to another. The users of weblogs also say that because students know they are going to have an audience by publishing their writing on the web, they often produce higher quality work.

Using weblogs to enhance the writing skill makes students' language learning context more appealing and this fosters the improvement of various skills at the same time and the development of an autonomous learning behavior. Witte (2007) highlights that "by combining writing with online technology, teachers can provide

opportunities for students and future educators develop their digital fluency while also strengthening their traditional literacy skills".

Types of Weblogs Used in an EFL Writing Class

According to Campbell (2003); Stanley (2005) & Soares (2008), there are three types of weblogs that can be used in an EFL writing class: the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog.

The first offers daily reading practice for the students since the administrator can select links or articles to inspire students to further research class related topics. It is also possible to post riddles, questions or topic starters on which the students can comment or respond to on a consistent basis. In addition to this, the page can also serve to remind students of syllabus related issues and homework assignments. The key point in using the tutor blog is to encourage students to go further. Essentially, it is a resource for which the students can organize independent study.

The second type, the learner weblog, is actually run by the students themselves or by small collaborative groups of students. The use of this type of weblog may also entail the students to create or construct their own weblog for their small group. This gives the students more practice with several useful skills, such as: writing practice, a sense of ownership, experiences with practical, legal and ethical issues that are a part of creating a hypertext document.

The class weblog is the third type used in the language learning setting. It involves the entire language class working together for the same learning purpose or goal. Class weblogs have been used in a variety of different teaching situations and contexts. For example, conversation courses, intermediate and advanced proficiency levels, international pen pal type situations, EFL reading courses and EFL writing courses.

Features and Characteristics of Weblogs

According to Campbell (2003); Downes (2004); Bell (2005); Huffaker (2005); Richardson (2009) & Zhang (2009), weblogs are characterized by the following:

- Weblogs do not require sophisticated software or knowledge of computer programming. Everyone can participate with a variety of different easy-to-use free weblogs accounts available on the Internet.

- Weblogs provide several security options (i.e., limiting access for reading and posting, etc.). The users have total control of who is authorized to view sensitive or confidential information with blog ware's easy to use security tools.

- Many weblogs are written by only one author and visitors can not make posts or edit posts, but they can add comments to an existing post. Some weblogs are community weblogs, where all members of the community can make posts.

- Weblogs disregard the status of users - all users are equal. Users often use screen names rather than their actual names. Sometimes anonymous posting is allowed.

- Weblogs entries are generally written like a letter to someone. It often reflects the author's perspectives on issues. Comments to posts can act as a form of discussion.

- Weblogs entries can consist of text, images, audio, video and hyperlinks, with no need to email photos anymore. Through hyperlinks, readers can be sent directly to other resources. Hyperlinks are used as supporting information for any claim. Hyperlinks can bring news, pictures and other information from the outside to the weblogs' readers.

- Weblogs have an auto-archiving feature. All posts are archived. Archives can be searched by keyword, or by date. Reverse chronological order of posts allows readers to identify the most recent posts made since the last time they read the blog.

- Weblogs content can be distributed via subscriptions. A person can subscribe to many weblogs and have the content aggregated in one place.

Because weblogs maintenance and design is so easy compared to other traditional web creation software (i.e., Frontpage, Dreamweaver, etc.), it is a good tool for EFL students to construct and manage their own websites.

Several studies have highlighted the advantages of using weblogs in foreign/ second language classrooms to develop formal writing skill (i.e., Campbell; 2003; Pinkman; 2005; Bloch; 2007; Ellison & Wu; 2008; Armstrong & Retterer; 2008; Arana; 2009; Sun; 2009; Simsek; 2009; Lee; 2010; Noytim; 2010; Aljumah; 2012; Taki & Fardafshari; 2012; Sun & Chang; 2012; Khampusaen; 2012 & Dalir; Jafarigohar & Soleimani; 2013).

Pinkman (2005) & Ellison & Wu (2008) investigated the usefulness of using weblogs in the foreign language classroom. The results suggested that students perceived benefits of using weblogs as their interest and motivation towards using EFL increased. The results also showed that weblogs improved reading and writing skills of EFL students who participated in these two studies. Students were interested in continuing to weblog even after the semester finished.

A relevant study is the one found in Armstrong & Retterer (2008), in which the use of a weblog and its effects upon students was examined in an intermediate level Spanish class. The aim of the study was to have students participate in two different weblogs: a community blog and a personal blog, with each serving very different functions. Students posted their more formal writing assignments in

their personal blogs. This would serve as an e-portfolio during the semester, and students could look back on earlier postings/essays. The community blog would be a discussion board at the start of the semester and the students would post commentaries about a variety of topics and to which the other students would respond. The results of the study revealed that weblogs had positive impacts on the students' performance in foreign language as they helped them to communicate in a foreign language.

Arana (2009) investigated the use of weblogs to help intermediate students improve their EFL formal letter writing skill. The study took the form of action-research project that was carried out with 11 English intermediate students. The study lasted for six lessons plus independent work. In this study, students created weblogs, posted and self-corrected their products. The weblogs proved effective for enhancing EFL formal letter writing skill among EFL intermediate students.

Simsek (2009) explored the effect of weblogs integrated writing instruction on EFL students' writing performance. Seventy undergraduate students in the Department of Primary Education at Marmara University participated in this study. The results indicated that weblogs integrated writing instruction improved the writing performance of students. Moreover, students had a favorable perception towards weblog use.

Aljumah (2012) investigated EFL students' attitudes towards the use of weblogs in writing and also explored the advantages and disadvantages of using weblogs in EFL learning. Thirty - five Saudi students participated in this study. The results indicated that students had a favorable perception towards weblogs use in their writing classroom. Moreover, the results suggested that learner-perceived benefits of using weblogs and this increased their interest and

motivation to use EFL because of the amount of interaction and the types of feedback from classmates and instructors.

Taki & Fardafshari (2012) investigated the effect of weblogs on Iranian EFL students' writing skill and motivation. The participants were selected from a language institute and divided into two groups of experimental and control each with forty female students. The students' age ranged from 18 to 25 years at the beginning of the experiment. The control group students attended regular classes, whereas the experimental group students were asked to put their writing assignments on the weblog. The study revealed that the blogging integrated collaborative learning instruction was more effective than in-class language learning instruction. The results showed that weblogs provide a platform for EFL learners to use the language actively. The study also revealed that learners were motivated to use language and build their autonomy in learning EFL.

Sun & Chang (2012) examined how weblogs and their interactive and collaborative features help academically - advanced graduate students process their academic writing knowledge. The results showed that weblogs encouraged students to actively and reflectively engage in knowledge sharing, knowledge generation and the development of many strategies to cope with difficulties encountered in the learning process. Also, it was found that weblogs provided students with a sense of authorship as the writers of weblog entries, their purposes of writing and their authority in writing.

Khampusaen (2012) examined the outcomes of a blogging project among EFL university students on their writing skill. The results indicated that blogging enhanced students' attitudes towards writing. It was found that feedback increased students' motivation to write. Moreover, blogging improved students' writing and supported development of related skills and knowledge. In this study, blogging in writing class made students to become autonomous learners as they publish their writing online.

Dalir, Jafarigohar & Soleimani (2013) attempted to explore the effect of weblogs on the development of Iranian EFL students' writing skill. To achieve this end, the researcher designed a weblog, which was shared by the experimental group students. The participants were 50 EFL students divided into two groups of experimental and control. The experiment was conducted throughout the academic year 2012. The results revealed that the weblogs helped the students to develop their writing and there was an agreement that writing for an audience and peer review contributed to the development of the collaborative learning environment and this was conducive to developing writing skills.

Hypotheses of the study

The study attempted to verify the following hypotheses:

1- No statistically significant difference will be found in means of scores of the control group and those of the experimental group on the posttest of EFL formal letter writing.

2- No statistically significant difference will be found in means of scores of the experimental group on the pretest and posttest of EFL formal letter writing.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study springs from the strong empirical evidence of the positive impacts of using weblogs in developing EFL formal letter writing performance of EFL students at all educational levels and stages. For this, the study may be significant for EFL students, EFL lecturers / instructors, EFL curriculum developers and EFL researchers as follows:

For EFL students, the study could be an effective way for developing their EFL formal letter writing performance. For EFL lecturers / instructors, it may provide them with a framework in which they can integrate weblogs into their EFL set courses, which in turn,

enable them to get rid of traditional methods of TEFL and use new or innovative methods, such as weblogs.

It is also significant for EFL curriculum developers as it may help them to update EFL curricula in a way that meets students' varied needs and accord with the technological innovations. Moreover, it may draw EFL researchers' attention to the positive influences of weblogs. Consequently, weblogs can be a rich area for them to conduct several studies.

Delimitations of the Study

The study was confined to:

1- EFL first year students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University.

2- The second semester of the 2016-2017 academic year.

3- Blogger site was used for creating weblogs.

Definition of Terms

Formal Letter :

In the study, formal letter is operationally defined as: a letter that is written in formal language in a stipulated format for official purposes.

Weblog:

It is operationally defined as: an easily created and updatable free website that allows first year EFL students at faculties of commerce to publish their writing performance of EFL formal letters.

Method and Procedure Design

This is a quasi-experimental study to examine the effectiveness of using weblogs in developing the EFL formal letter writing performance of EFL students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta

University. In this design, there were two groups (experimental and control) which were pretested to be sure that the two groups were equal and homogeneous before the treatment. Also, the two groups were posttested after the experimentation to measure students' EFL formal letter writing performance after having the treatment. The students in the experimental group were involved in an active methodology in dealing with the writing course syllabus and participating in weblogs to practice EFL formal letter writing activities, whereas the control group students followed the traditional class-based instruction method.

Participants

The participants were 100 students in the age range of 18 to 20. The participants were randomly selected from EFL first year students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University during the 2016-2017 academic year. The participants were randomly divided into two groups of 50. The decision as to which of the two groups being experimental and which one as control was also made randomly . Thus, the first group treated as experimental (N=50) and the second as control (N=50). There was not any significant difference between experimental and control groups' mean scores on the pretest as shown in the following table:

Table 1

**The independent samples t-test for the two groups
on the pretest of formal letter writing**

Test	Groups						df	t	Sig.
	Experimental Group			Control Group					
	Mean	Std. Dev.	N.	Mean	Std. Dev.	N.			
Formal Letter Writing	5.90	0.735	50	5.80	0.904	50	98	0.607	No sig.>0.01

As displayed in Table 1, mean scores of the two groups (experimental and control) on the pretest of EFL formal letter writing were 5.90 and 5.80 respectively. The results of the independent samples t-test (t = 0.607, p>0.01) indicate that there was not any significant difference between the two groups' mean scores on the pretest. Thus, it can be concluded that the two groups enjoyed the same level of EFL formal letter writing ability prior to the experimentation.

Instrumentation

A formal letter writing test, prepared by the researcher, was used as a pre-post test in order to measure students' writing performance before and after the experiment (see Appendix B). Instructions were clear and were explained to students for the sake of eliminating any sort of probable misunderstandings.

Test Piloting

The test was piloted to a sample of EFL students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University during the first semester of the 2016 – 2017 academic year. The purpose of test piloting was to find out if any instructions appeared to be vague, receive useful feedback from students and estimate how much time students would take in answering the test. According to the pilot study, little modifications were accomplished. Therefore, 90 minutes were found to be appropriate time for answering the test .

Test Validity and Reliability

The test was submitted to a number of jurors in the field of TEFL to determine if the test measures what it is supposed to measure. Some modifications were accomplished. The jurors agreed that the test was valid in its final form.

In order to ensure the reliability of the test, the test was applied to a group of EFL first year students (N=30) from EFL first year

students at Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University out of the main sample of the study at the beginning of the second term of the 2016-2017 academic year. The same test was re-applied to the same group of students after a period of two weeks of the first application. The two applications were correlated using Pearson's Coefficient Correlation. Means of scores were logged and analyzed using SPSS. The correlation coefficient between the two applications was 0.92 , which was statistically significant at 0.01 level.

Test Scoring

To avoid the researcher's bias, two raters graded and evaluated the students' writings according to the scoring rubric, prepared by the researcher, that is shown in Appendix C. In the scoring rubric, a total of 20 points was equally divided among five components (format, salutation and closing, ideas, conventions and capitalization). Each component had four levels from 1 to 4.

Class Blog

The researcher designed a weblog with the aim of comparing the students of the experimental group, as the main users of the weblog, with the control group students who received EFL formal letter writing instruction according to the traditional class-based writing method. The weblog was accessible to the students. It provided a feature that let the administrator customize the students who were allowed to contribute to the content by posting new materials or comments. The main posts of the weblog started by the researcher, stating the materials and the topics which the students were supposed to study and write about and they were required to write and submit their writing activities in the comment bar of the weblog.

The students were asked to check their classmates' activities and send their comments as well. The editing window of the weblog

comment section had a spell-checker feature, which prevented the students from spelling mistakes.

At the beginning of each week, the researcher started materials and topics in a new post and the students were to contribute to it by writing and submitting their own posts. The students were able to choose to write in response to the original post by the researcher, or to write a comment in response to their classmates' posts.

The experimental group students were asked to surf and look for materials on the Internet and then share the interesting materials they found with the whole group. They were engaged in various techno-based activities (i.e., emailing, commenting, chatting, etc.).

Procedures of the Study

The following procedures and steps were followed in carrying out the study:

- Reviewing literature and related studies relevant to the variables of the study.

- Preparing the instruments and the weblogs-based activities and measuring their validity and reliability.

- Selecting the participants randomly from EFL first year students, Faculty of Commerce, Tanta University and dividing the selected participants randomly into two groups (experimental and control).

- Creating and initiating the class weblog with the help and the supervision of a specialist in this area.

- Administering pre-testing to the whole participants of the study (N=100).

- Implementing the experimentation: the experimental group students taught using weblogs, whereas the control group students dealt with the regular method.

- Administering post-testing to the whole participants of the study (N= 100).

- Analyzing the results statistically using SPSS.

- Discussing and interpreting the collected data.

- Providing pedagogical implications, recommendations, suggestions for further research and conclusion.

Results

The independent samples t-test was run to test the difference between mean scores of the two groups on the EFL formal letter writing posttest. Also, the paired samples t-test was used to compare the experimental groups' mean scores on the pretest and posttest of EFL formal letter writing. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3 respectively as follows:

Table 2

The independent samples t-test for the two groups
on the posttest of formal letter writing

| Test | Groups | | | | | | df | t | Sig. |
	Experimental Group			Control Group					
	Mean	Std. Dev.	N.	Mean	Std. Dev.	N.			
Formal Letter Writing	15.94	1.463	50	6.34	1.022	50	98	38.040	Sig.<0.01

Table 3

The paired samples t-test for the experimental group on the pretest and posttest of formal letter writing

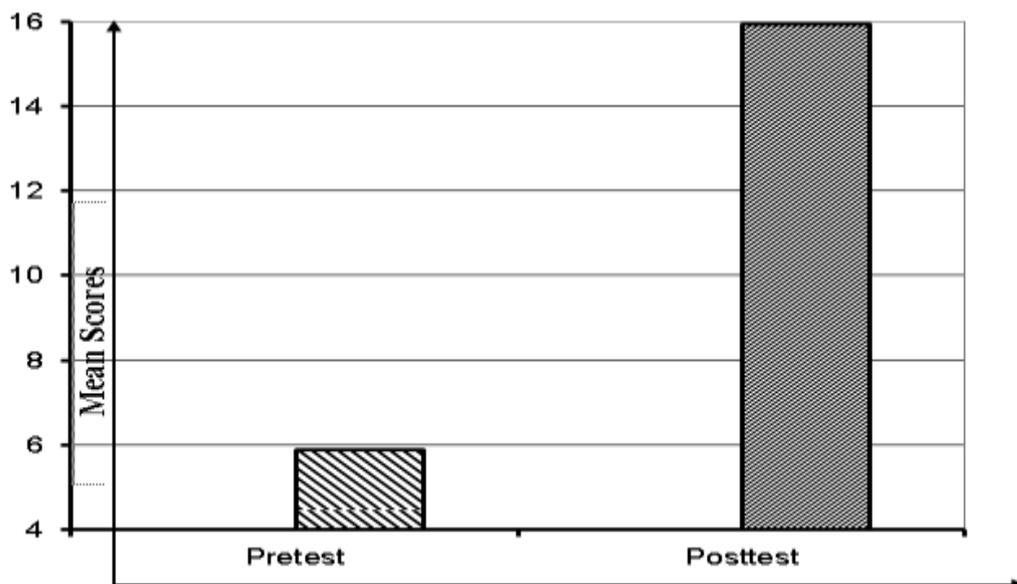| Group	Formal Letter Writing Test						df	t	Sig.
	pretest			Posttest					
	Mean	Std. Dev.	N.	Mean	Std. Dev.	N.			
Experimental Group	5.90	0.735	50	15.94	1.463	50	49	40.587	Sig.<0.01

As displayed in Table 2, mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the posttest of EFL formal letter writing were 15.94 and 6.34 respectively. The results of the independent t-test (t=38.040, df=98, p<0.01) indicate that there was a statistical significant difference between mean scores of the experimental group (M=15.94, SD=1.463, df=98) and that of the control group (M=6.34, SD=1.022, df=98) on the posttest of EFL formal letter writing in favor of the experimental group. Thus, the first null hypothesis is rejected "No statistically significant difference will be found in means of scores of the control group and those of the experimental group on the posttest of formal letter writing". and the corresponding alternative hypothesis is accepted.

Moreover, Table 3 indicates that there was a statistical significant difference in mean scores of the experimental group on the pretest (M=5.90, SD=0.735, df=49) and posttest (M=15.94, SD=1.463, df=49) of EFL formal letter writing, in favor of the posttest (t=40.587, df=49, p<0.01). Thus, the second null hypothesis is rejected "No statistically significant difference will be found in means of scores of the experimental group on the pretest and posttest of formal letter writing " and the corresponding alternative hypothesis is

accepted. The results of Tables 2 and 3 are visualized below in Figures 1 and 2 respectively:
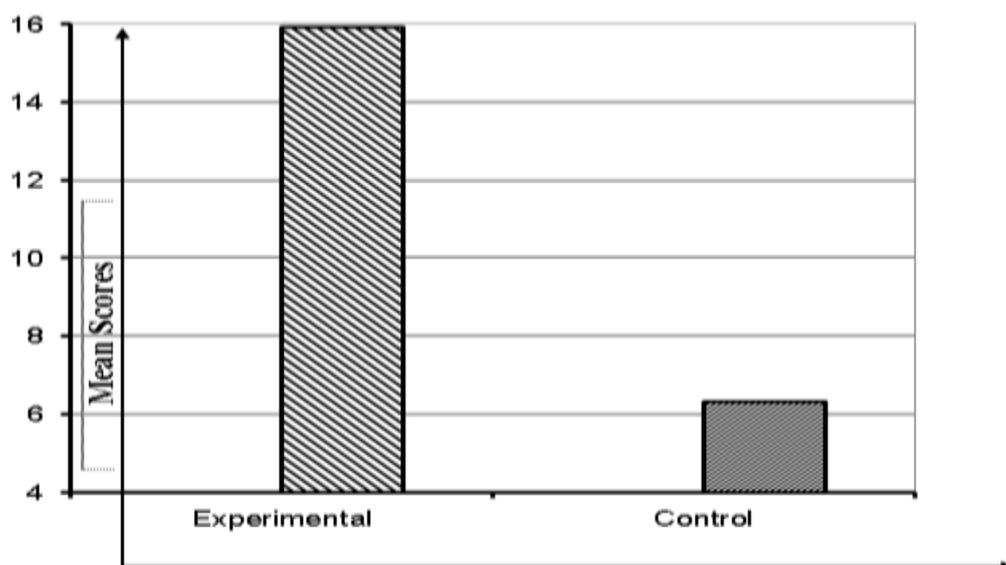
Groups Figure 1: Mean scores for the two groups on the posttest of formal letter writing

Formal Letter Writing Posttest

Figure 2: Mean scores for the experimental group on the pretest and posttest of formal letter writing

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to develop EFL students' writing performance in EFL formal letter writing using weblogs. The results indicated that the experimental group students achieved more than the control group students on the posttest of EFL formal letter writing. Moreover, there was a statistical significant difference in means of scores of the experimental group students on the pretest and posttest of EFL formal letter writing, in favor of the posttest This development was achieved through using weblogs and this proves that weblogs were statistically and educationally significant, in favor of the group taught via using weblogs (the experimental group).

Factors and reasons that might have helped the experimental group students' development in EFL formal letter writing can be stated in the following:

Students became aware of their audience, which in turn , made them write with their audience in mind and this encouraged them to pay more attention and care to the format, content , conventions and each factor related to a good EFL formal letter writing in their weblogs before publishing them online. In addition, students' performance in EFL formal letter writing was affected positively by the types of feedback provided to them.

The permanent nature of weblogs may be a factor that enabled students of the experimental group to be more comfortable and relaxed as most of them preferred blogging interaction to face- to -face interaction because it was more interesting, motivating and comfortable for them. Most students expressed in some interviews that publishing in weblogs made them feel emotionally connected, happy, motivated, interested and eager to get audience response. Publishing in weblogs worked as a motivational incentive for the experimental group students, which in turn, made them feel in control of writing their formal letters.

Features, options and facilities of weblogs may be an essential factor of the results as the students' performance in EFL formal letter writing was affected positively by such features, options and facilities offered by weblogs.

The options of having visual presentation that helped students to express their ideas and viewpoints freely, having dictionaries, limiting access for reading and posting and using hyperlinks that acted as a source of news and other information that helped students of the experimental group to improve their writing.

Moreover, the following options may also helped the students of the experimental group improve their writing: auto-achieving of all posts that helped students to determine the most recent posts made since the last time they read their weblogs, having the option of automatic data-stamping for each post that helped both instructor and students to recognize obviously the time of assignments , having the option of spell-checker that helped students to eliminate their spelling mistakes, disregarding the status of users, distributing content via subscriptions, uploading content and materials relevant to students and having the feature of equality that gave students equal chances to participate in the uploaded activities, etc.).

In addition, the weblogs' posts served as motivation for the experimental group students to achieve developments in format, content, conventions, ideas, capitalization and punctuation of the formal letter. Some students were motivated by the fact that, while posting online, their writing of formal letter was in essence published, and could be accessed and read by other classmates, the instructor or anyone around the world who have Internet connection. This, in turn, urged students to take care and pay attention to their writing in weblogs.

The students' roles in using weblogs to develop their EFL formal letter writing performance may be an essential factor. Their

roles changed from being passive consumers of information to becoming active participants. For example, they read their peers' performance, sent comments and sent and received feedback. This, in turn, shifted the instructor's role from a content expert to content guide and accordingly this helped the students to find and evaluate online resources, communicate with others online and publish their weblogs (Dyrli;2005; Richardson; 2006; Suen; 2006 & Marsh; 2012).

Another possible explanation for the effectiveness of weblogs in the development of EFL students' performance in EFL formal letter writing could be the language and writing materials provided to the experimental group students. They had the chance of more exposure to language and writing input and materials than the control group students who had limited and restricted exposure to such input and materials. The experimental group students found the opportunity to practice formal writing more than the control group students.

Moreover, writing and publishing in weblogs helped students to be engaged in collaborative learning via their participation and interaction that served as a catalyst for exchanging information related to EFL formal letter writing, allowed students to link to varied resources without much time or effort and enabled students to share each other's reviews, in turn, they could learn from each other and this helped them to write efficiently.

In addition, weblogs facilitated meaningful learning for students as they helped them to explore other weblogs that aided them to learn more about other countries and cultures, and as a result, enriched their writing performance in formal letter and gave students an opportunity to write and publish to an authentic audience that encouraged them to improve their writing in formal letter.

The ease of writing and publishing in weblogs may be an additional explanation of the results of the study as this made them ways that helped students to increase the amount of

writing while writing formal letters. This helped the students to easily post and exchange their thoughts, ideas and opinions, interact with other students from the start of all exercises and activities of writing, comment on their classmates' writing and enrich their learning experience.

The results reported in the study coincide with the studies of Campbell (2003); Pinkman (2005); Bloch (2007); Ellison & Wu (2008); Godwin – Jones (2008); Murray & Hourigan (2008); Armstrong & Retterer (2008);Arana (2009); Klages & Clark (2009); Sun (2009); Simsek (2009); Lee (2010); Sun (2010); Noytim (2010); Arslan & Sahin – Kizil (2010); Palombo (2011); Aljumah (2012); Taki & Fardafshari (2012); Sun & Chang (2012); Khampusaen (2012) & Dalir; Jafarigohar & Soleimani (2013).

Implications

A number of pedagogical implications were drawn from the results of the study as follows:

First, the results proved the positive impacts of using weblogs in developing EFL students' performance in EFL formal letter writing. Consequently, it is significant for EFL lecturers to adopt, implement and incorporate them into the students' EFL courses and lectures.

Second, students and lecturers / instructors should be aware of their new roles in weblogs – based EFL learning in which their roles are different from those in the traditional method.

Third, weblogs are only an example of the modern technological innovations. EFL instructors / lecturers should have background about other technological innovations (i.e., Facebook, Wiki, etc.) to be familiar with them and they should value and recognize their educational uses.

Fourth, the use of weblogs in developing the students' EFL formal letter writing performance has added flexibility to the teaching and learning process and offered opportunities for students to develop their EFL formal letter writing performance. Weblogs have been considered among the technological innovations that provided powerful technique for students learning through helping them develop better and faster understanding of the course content, remember and retain more information, enhance their social interaction and improve their learning and critical thinking skills.

Recommendations

In the light of the study results, the following recommendations should be taken into account when using weblogs to develop EFL formal letter writing:

1- Faculties and higher education institutes need to encourage and motivate faculty members to utilize weblogs in their lectures.

2- Faculty members should give the opportunity to their students to be familiar with weblogs, try new technology applications, share ideas, expose to various innovations and collaborate with each other on new technology projects and uses.

3- Faculties and higher institutes should provide training programs for faculty members and students that focus on effective uses of new technological applications (weblogs).

4- Specifying language activities in line with the students' needs to maximize the benefits of weblogs.

5- Incorporating weblogs in EFL courses and programs in a way that assists increasing students' achievement and performance in EFL, in general, and in EFL formal letter writing, in specific.

6- Holding training courses and seminars for EFL lecturers about ways and procedures of conducting and using weblogs in their courses.

7- Providing higher education institutions (faculties, institutes and universities) with technological devices to assist EFL lecturers implement weblogs in their courses / lectures.

8- Curriculum designers should incorporate and include several types of weblogs in EFL curricula.

9- Considering various references of using weblogs for educational purposes, in general, and in learning EFL, in particular.

10- Adopting active learning methods that maximize students' participation in EFL teaching / learning process.

Suggestions for Further Research

The researcher suggests the following areas in relation to using weblogs to develop EFL formal letter writing:

1- Further research is needed in the area of weblogs to demonstrate their effectiveness in developing foreign/second language skills, in general, and EFL formal letter writing, in particular.

2- Further research about other technological tools / innovations (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Wiki, etc.) to develop EFL students' EFL formal letter writing is needed.

3- Conducting qualitative studies in the area of using weblogs to develop EFL formal letter writing performance are desired.

4- Investigating the effect of using weblogs on developing students' attitudes and motivation towards learning EFL/ESL.

5- Additional studies can be conducted at other educational stages using different types of weblogs in the EFL classroom.

Conclusions

The results of the study showed that there was a statistical significant difference in means of scores of the experimental group students and those of the control group students, in favor of the experimental group students. So, using weblogs proved to be more effective than the traditional method based on lecturing in developing EFL students' writing performance in formal letter. The results could be useful and significant for EFL curriculum planners and developers when designing EFL formal letter writing materials and activities for EFL students at faculties of commerce. Moreover, such results are motivating for conducting several studies by other researchers.

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Appendix A

Pilot Test

Name:……………………………...

Date:……………………...……………………………………

Year:………..………..…………………..

Write a formal letter requesting information about a human resources course in AMIDEAST/ Cairo, 38 Mohie El Din Abo El Ezz Street, Dokki, Egypt. Your name is Ali and your address is 20 Zamalek Street, Cairo.

Appendix B

Formal Letter Writing Test

Name:………………………………...

Date:…………………………..…………………………………

Year:………..………..…………………...

Write a formal letter about the following:

1- Write a letter to Mr. Thomas Brown (the manager of Magic Gifts& Fun, Inc., 17253 La Sierra Boulevard, Elk Grove, CA 95403) informing him of a problem you have had with a magic set that you purchased at his store. Your name is Mr. James Peter and your address is 444 Eagle Street, Sacramento, CA 95811.

2- Write a letter to Dr. Jones Armstrong (the owner of Software Systems Company, River Buildings, Stock well Walk, London, SW17 5HG). You want to apply for the job of a computer engineer offered in Tuesday's newspaper. Your name is Merriam Jack and your address is 10 Bridge Street, London, SW 105TG.

Appendix C

Formal Letter Writing Rubric

Category	1	2	3	4
Format	Complies with less than 75% of the requirements of formal letter.	Complies with several of the requirements of formal letter.	Complies with almost all the requirements of formal letter.	Complies with all the requirements of formal letter.
Salutation & Closing	Salutation and closing are missing.	Salutation and closing have 3 or more errors in capitalization and punctuation.	Salutation and closing have 1-2 errors in capitalization and punctuation.	Salutation and closing have no errors in capitalization and punctuation.
Ideas	The letter seems to be a collection of unrelated sentences. It is very difficult to figure out what the letter is about.	Ideas are somewhat organized, but are not very clear. It takes more than one reading to figure out what the letter is about.	Ideas are expressed in a clear manner, but the organization could have been better.	Ideas are expressed in a clear and organized way. It is easy to figure out what the letter is about.
Conventions	More than 4 errors in grammar and/or spelling.	From 3 to 4 errors in grammar and/or spelling	From 1 to 2 errors in grammar and/or spelling.	No errors in grammar and spelling.
Capitalization & Punctuation	More than 4 errors in capitalization and punctuation.	From 3 to 4 errors in capitalization and punctuation.	From 1 to 2 errors in capitalization and punctuation.	No errors in capitalization and punctuation.