

Comparing the Effect of Blogging as well as Pen-and-Paper on the Essay Writing Performance of Iranian Graduate Students

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Abstract

In today's world, there are lots of methods in language teaching in general and teaching writing in particular. Using two different tools in writing essays and conducting a study to compare the effectiveness of these two tools namely blog and pen-and-paper was the basis of this study. This study used a quantitative true experimental design aimed at comparing the students' writing performance scores by using pen-and-paper essay writing and blogging among Iranian graduate students of University Putra Malaysia (UPM). The result of this study showed that the tools by themselves could not effect on the quality of writing essays and improvement in the students' writing performance. However, using technology and in this study, Internet can motivate the EFL learners to write more eagerly since they may like innovation in learning in contrast with traditional old methods of learning writing and practicing it. Yet it does not necessarily improve their writing performance only because of using computer and Internet. The Iranian graduate students of UPM found blog more interesting and motivating tool for writing, but it was not as easy using as pen-and-paper for them with which everyone is familiar. This research could find answers to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study and investigated the hypotheses presented then.

Keywords: essay writing, Iranian graduate students, writing performance, blogging, pen-and-paper

1. Background of Study

English language is a foreign language in Iran. Therefore, most often it is being studied in formal educational settings such as schools, universities and language institutes. According to Khajavi and Abbasian (2011), Iranians have different reasons to learn English such as travelling to foreign countries, becoming English teachers or tour guides, trading with other countries, or passing Test Of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exams in order to enter overseas universities. However, the most significant role of English in Iran is in academic settings particularly in graduate program. Similarly, Farhady (2010) states that English is mostly used as a means of educational development in Iran.

In accordance with Iran's Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education (2006), English is being taught from the first year of secondary school (year 6) until the last year of high school (year 12) for seven years. However, it is being instructed at universities as general and specialized English courses. In Iran universities as Farhady (2010) explained, a three-unit credit of general English is required for all fields of study. Besides, another four compulsory units of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) should be fulfilled by the students. Since the premier purpose of teaching English at Iranian universities is to make the students able to understand and read the written course materials in English, the university instructors rely mainly on translated-oriented method in which the language of instruction is Persian (Khajavi and Gordani, 2008; Noora, 2008). On the other hand, the medium of instruction in the English major areas namely English language translation, English language and literature, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is English. Moreover, the graduate students who aim to get a Doctor of Philosophy (PHD) in Iran are required to have a Test Of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Test System (IELTS) certificate.

As reported by Iran Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (2012), there are approximately 50,000 Iranian students currently studying abroad. They are widespread in the American, Canadian, European,

Australian and Asian universities. Following this, in the last few years, there has been a rapid growth of the Iranian students in Malaysian universities (Pourshahian, Gholami, Vaseghi&RezvaniKalajahi, 2012). According to the Iran embassy website (2012), there are currently around 15,000 Iranian students studying in different Malaysian public and private universities such as University Malaya (UM), University Technology Malaysia (UTM), University Putra Malaysia (UPM), Multi Media University (MMU) and Limkokwing University. This increasing number can be due to the fact that Malaysia is a fellow Islamic country as well as having low cost of living compared to the western countries. Furthermore, the Malaysian universities are well-known worldwide and the degrees are internationally recognized. Besides, there is no entrance exam for entering the Malaysian universities in contrast with Iranian universities (www.iranvnc.com, 2008).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Ahmadpour (2004) mentions that no application of the new teaching methods is observed in the school book content in Iran. As Khajavi and Abbasian (2011) state, the conversational skills are disregarded intensely in Iranian high schools whereas reading skill is considered more important. Besides, there is no language laboratory in most of the schools in order to improve the students' conversational skills. That is why English is not an interesting subject for some of the high school students. Likewise, Piri (2008) states that although the Iranian students were taught English language skills namely, writing, listening, reading and speaking for seven years at school, they are unable to achieve them completely during all these years.

Recently, a few studies were conducted regarding the Iranian students' English language problems at the overseas universities. A research was carried out by Mousavi and Kashefian-Naeeni (2011) in National University of Malaysia (UKM) on the Iranian post graduate students' problems in academic writing. In this research, the common errors generated by the Iranian graduate students were investigated to discover the major reasons of their problems in academic writing since English is the medium of instruction for international students including Iranian students in Malaysian universities (in this case UKM). The results displayed that their major problems in academic writing were in content and form which consisted difficulties in punctuation, grammar and spelling (form) and organizing information, expressing ideas critically and coherence (content).

Mousavi and Kashefian-Naeeni (2011) conclude that the students believe that the root of these difficulties is basically not having sufficient practice in English writing while they were studying in Iran. Additionally, the students mentioned lack of teaching experience of their English teachers, inadequate group activities inside their classes, and discouraging environment for learning English in Iran as the principal causes of not being competent in academic writing. Moreover, since English is a foreign language in Iran, the main education is in Persian and only few hours at schools and universities are allocated for teaching it. According to Pourshahian et al. (2012) study among 55 UPM Iranian graduate students, it was found out that the students had mostly difficulty in writing skills and grammar respectively.

Above all, in the context of this study, a needs analysis was conducted among randomly selected UPM Iranian students from which it was found that their problems were mostly on sentence making and connecting them together (organization), subject-verb agreement (language use), spelling, capitalization (mechanics), letter writing and paraphrasing. Although it is generally agreed that blogging conveys many potential advantages in ESL/EFL classes and much research are done on blogging, only few studies are conducted about the effect of blogging on writing performance in EFL context. Since blogging is quite a new tool for language instructors, few documented studies have been done in Malaysian universities particularly among Iranian students. Furthermore, only limited experimental studies have been conducted on the use of blogging as an online tool in essay writing compared to pen-and-paper as a conventional writing tool. Hence, a study on comparing the effect of pen-and-paper and blogging on the essay writing performance of Iranian graduate students in Malaysia seems unavoidable.

1.2 Objectives

This study tries to find an answer to the following general objectives:

- 1) To determine if there is significant difference in pretest mean scores of overall writing performance between pen-and-paper and blogging groups
- 2) To determine if there is a significant difference between pretest and posttest mean scores of overall writing performance for pen-and-paper group
- 3) To determine if there is a significant difference between pretest and posttest mean scores of overall writing performance for blogging group
- 4) To determine if there is significant difference in the posttest mean scores of overall writing performance

between pen-and-paper and blogging groups

2. Literature Review

Writing which is a means of communication represents an essential function in the professional and personal lives of human beings. It not only serves as a tool of communication in academic environment, but also should convey meaning accurately in academic writing texts. Writing effectively is a procedure which takes time; moreover, it needs considerable practice and occasionally proper instruction (Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011). Shi-Jer Lou, Shi-Chiao Wu and Ru-Chu Shih (2010) state that creating a composition or a piece of writing is an imaginative practice of integrating life, words, and language. Through making use of language's depth and originality, the personal growth process is recorded by individuals. This enriches their lives and vitalizes the employment of language. Composition can also be regarded as a combined representation of all four language skills (consisted of writing, reading, speaking, and listening) and can be an appropriate means of reflecting the overall language competence and proficiency. But, due to the complex nature of the composition's content, it is a particularly difficult subject for students. According to Obemeata (1995), the reasons for which learning English especially writing is a demanding and difficult task are:

- 1) Before English language is introduced to a country, there are other languages there which are positioned in a specific cultural background and may be foreign for the English learners.
- 2) The two skills of speaking and listening are easier to absorb like a growing child, but reading and writing requires much effort to teach and learn either in the first or second language.

As a result, writing is considered as the most complicated skill comparing to the others (Kolade, 2012). Bell and Burnaby (1984) state that writing as a complicated cognitive activity requires the writer to control different variables concurrently. These variables can include grammar, content, mechanics and vocabulary. Past researches show that there are various methods to improve writing. Having purpose in writing has been indicated as a factor in improving writing. Tribble (1996) asserts that in teaching writing teachers should be aware of their students' needs and try to determine their students' purposes in writing. Essay writing via blogging or pen-and-paper provides real topics and purposes for the students' writing and makes their writing meaningful. Bryan (2004) also states that success will be more prominent when students are engaged in a written activity with a purpose, particularly when the topics and themes are accordance with learner's interest. He also points out that writing is an attempt to establish a purpose and meaning and it is a method to discover meaning and construction in order to reach to language and meaning development requirements.

It indicates that the act of writing is far beyond the fact of only putting well organized words and structures on a white piece of paper; it is rather the act of giving meaning and substance to our thoughts. Mitchell (1996) puts it as follows: "writing is a process of discovering and creating meaning" (p.39). Writing implies more than the selection of the right structures, words and general conventions of the language; it is a mental process of using and arranging formal structures in such a way that they can create actual meaning to what the writer has in his head and wants to express in written language. "Good writing is an extension of clear thinking, and writing competence is how the writer makes meaning in written language" (Mitchell, 1996, p.4). White and Arndt (1996) also argue that: "writing is far from being a simple matter of transcribing language into written symbols: it is a thinking process in its own right, it demands conscious intellectual effort which usually is sustained over a considerable period of time" (p.3). In the same trend of thought, Hedge (2001) asserts that in order for a writing to be effective, a number of criteria are required including a careful selection of sentence structures, grammatical patterns, and vocabulary in creating a style that is suitable for the subject matter as well as the potential readers; the employment of complex grammatical schemes for emphasis and focus; high degrees of accuracy in an attempt to avoid ambiguity of meaning; and high degrees of planning and structure in the information development. That is why it is a demanding and stressful task for the students who do not obtain the required skills to transform their ideas to a consistent piece of writing; moreover, it is considered not pleasant and useful from the ESL learners' point of view (Barkhuizen, 1998; Spratt, 2001).

Barras (2005) indicates that by improving their writing, all students should be able to improve the quality of their thinking because writing and thinking are very closely associated. He also asserts that in any assessed work, between two students who are otherwise equal in intelligence and ability, the one who has a better ability in conveying his or her thoughts and ideas effectively in writing is expected to score higher marks. So it is important to recognize, from the start of their course, that their final grade will depend not only on their knowledge and understanding of their subject but also on how well they are able to convey this knowledge and understanding in writing. Likewise, Karl and Syzmaski (1990) believe the beginning of a writing to be in the air and its end on the paper and that a complicated process exists in between the two. As a matter of fact, writing needs a hugely diverse

set of skills. Thus, the conspicuity of difficulties individuals who are learning English as foreign language are facing should not be surprising. Peretz (2005) believes that writing requires drafting, revising and thinking before going on to writing. Flower and Hayes (1981) also proposed a model in which three main phases of writing were uncovered—planning, translating and reviewing. In planning phase, the ideas are produced, the information is arranged and the objectives are set. In translating phase, the ideas are put into words which include obedience from the grammar rules. Reviewing is the stage in which the text is evaluated and reorganized by deleting and adding words or phrases.

There are two approaches in teaching of writing: in Product Approach, the text book is the main medium of instruction. This approach suggests that a good writer's writing can serve as a model for the students in order to learn in what way to write and encounter less error. Based on Vanessa (2004), this approach is not suitable for the students who wish to write autonomously. However, the Process Approach helps the students to become independent writers (Kolade, 2012). In this approach, the main concentration based on Doughty and Pica (1986) is the potential for the writer to correct his text. Englert, Raphael, Anthony and Stevens (1991) believe that the fact of writing several drafts is the principle activity in process writing. The present study can be assumed as an example of process writing since the participants' essays submitted to the researcher were reviewed and given feedback, then were rewritten by the participants based on the received feedback.

Kereni (2004) asserts that proficiency in writing in the first language is a requirement in learning how to write in second language. Moreover, the structural difference between the first and the second language makes it tough for the ESL/EFL students to adapt themselves to a new language structure. Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson and Reddy (2006) states that essay writing is one of the most challenging tasks for students and they are unaware about different components of a good essay.

2.1 Importance of Writing for Postgraduate Students

According to Bristol (2006), Postgraduate students need to assess and integrate the others' ideas and words so that their academic voice is expanded. Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) indicate that writing summaries, essays and research papers is one of the requirements for university students. Huang (2010) conducted a study in which he examined instructors' and students' (undergraduate and graduate) opinions about needed skills in their degree programs. The study was administered among 432 EFL students and 93 instructors. His instrument was survey and he concluded that graduate students acclaimed writing for research papers, thesis proposals and theses as the most important skill among others. Likewise, undergraduate students and instructors ranked writing as the most important domain. Pourshahin et al. (2012) indicate that adapting with a foreign university academic requirements is a must for all the international students including Iranian students. One of these requirements is the knowledge of language with which the postgraduate students need to accomplish their research and write their theses. They conducted a research on fifty five Iranian postgraduate students in one of the Malaysian universities the result of which showed that "the most problematic area was writing skill and the second most one was grammar." They added that in postgraduate EFL/ESL classroom, writing should be brought more attention to. Kayi (2008) also claim that writing and grammar are the most challenging skills among EFL and ESL learners.

Likewise, Sadat Mousavi and Kashefian-Naeeni (2011) conducted another study in National University of Malaysia (UKM) among Iranian postgraduate students regarding the academic writing problems. The data were gathered through questionnaires among 85 masters and PHD students in Faculty of Engineering and interview among 10 (5 masters and 5 PHD) students. The findings of the study showed that the students had significant problems in content and form in their writings which can be as a result of lack of giving care to English as a foreign language. It also represents that the English language mode of learning and teaching was imperfect before entering postgraduate level. One of the problem roots was that the Iranian students received English instructions in Persian which is their first language; as a result, it would be difficult for them to read and write English academic text (Sadat Mousavi & Kashefian-Naeeni, 2011). Another reason is that when they were in Iran, they did not practice enough writing at school or university. When a writer produces a text, he or she should uncover some processes which are greatly hard activities either they are done by computers or pen and paper (Stapleton, 2010).

2.2 Use of Computer in ESL Writing

Using computers in writing classes traces back to 1980s when the writing teachers in American schools and universities applied word- processing to facilitate students' writing outputs. Kulik (2003) indicates that in the evaluation researches of the 1980s it was discovered that in comparison with others, more improvements were depicted by those of the students who were asked to compose on word processor. Similar outcomes were found by

the evaluation researches of the past decade. Despite the moderate size of impacts in the majority of word processing researches, the impacts were still large enough to be viewed as educationally meaningful. Some researchers such as Dautie (1986) state that when students write on the computer, they are interested in more writing and more revising. The teaching manner, particularly the teaching of writing, has been revolutionized by computers in the teaching of second language. The teaching pattern has shifted from examining the word-processors' role in writing in the later parts of 1980s to investigating the best ways of supporting the writing of students by computers (Foltz Gilliam & Kendall, 2000). The role of computers have changed from their usage in traditional classrooms as mere writing tools to the employment of asynchronous and synchronous network tools like the World-Wide Web, e-mails, WAN (wide area network), and LAN (Local area network) and the development of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) activities (Pennington, 2004).

The reformation of technology has produced new genres, literacy, pedagogies and identities (Warschauer, 2004). As Pennington (2003) declares, writing in a computer context is more advantageous for students than writing by pen-and-paper as a result of its "automation, flexibility and cognitive" needs. However, according to Kern and Warshauer (2000) computer, in the same vein as every other technological device that is being employed in teaching like tape recorders, overhead projectors, papers, and pencils does not generate advancements in learning in and of itself. On the other hand, Lee et al. (2009) believe that EFL writing teaching and learning problems can be reduced by using computer technologies. In traditional writing classes, the job of computer was only a writing tool; yet, nowadays Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) activities such as e-mails and blogs have replaced the old function of computer in language learning (Pennington, 2004). Moreover, comparing to pen-and-paper writing, writing by computer is more flexible and suitable for cognitive demands (Pennington, 2003).

2.3 Use of Blogs in Education

Kupelian (2001) states that as an effective educational resource, the electronic tool has not only changed the composing process, but also strengthens participation in writing activity. He continues that one reason for this is that e-mail and online chats is non-threatening atmosphere in which writers are not restricted in expressing themselves and encourages even timid students who usually avoid speaking in face-to-face discussions to participate actively in online chats. Another reason is that the Web provides a field for writers to present their work to a real and larger audience that spreads beyond classroom and school frames (Karchmer, 2001). Trupe (2002) argues that students are encouraged by e-medium to write more. One of the e-mediums which can be used in language learning and teaching writing is weblog or blog. According to Bella (2005) "A weblog, also called a blog, is an easily created and updateable website that allows people to publish to the Internet instantly." Soares (2008) asserts that the blogs because of their public and interactive aspects can be applied for educational purposes such as students' interests and class content. When students realize that they put their work on the weblog for readers in the real world, they are motivated to write (Leibowitz, 1999). Ward (2004) comments that blogs are useful instruments for language learning activities.

As Shi-Jer Lou et al. (2010) indicate, blogs enable students to interact and cooperate with each other. Yang and Chen (2007) believe a number of benefits of blogging applications in instruction to be: knowledge creation, the construction of learning files, enhancement of writing skills and reduction of misspelling, enhancement of school reputation and administration efficiency, and the enhancement of the exchange between the instructors and students. It has also been indicated by Du and Wagner (2007) that these blogs allow individuals to make their thoughts public in web pages and thus share their knowledge and thoughts. Because of the potential effect blogging has on the sharing and expressing of knowledge, blogging has a positive impact on learning and instruction (Brownstein & Klein, 2006; Dippold, 2009; Goldman, Cohen & Sheahan, 2008). Warlick (2005) suggests that "When students are writing large reports, essays, or research papers, ask them to submit their rough drafts onto their blogs. Then comment on the papers constructive criticisms. This is not to say that personal, face-to-face assistance is not needed. The advantage of using a blog is that all comments and developments are archived for study and reference" (p. 154).

Halic, Lee, Paulus and Spense (2010), in this concern, have adeptly noted that:

"The popularity of blogs among young people has made the map peeling to educators seeking to integrate computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools at the university level. These tools are seen as having the potential for enhancing student engagement and providing an environment for collaboration and creation of knowledge" (p. 1).

In the same vein, Campbell (2003) discusses the potentiality and practicability of integrating weblogs into the educational context, particularly in the field of language teaching. In his discussions, he mentioned three kinds of

blogs from which the language learners will probably benefit: the tutor blog, the learner blog and the class blog. The tutor blog is a blog which is administered by the teacher of the class. The learner blog is the one which is run by each student in the class and the class blog is the blog in which the teacher and student collaborate together in running and managing it. In the tutor blog, the teacher puts different sources and teaching materials on it and the students can read them and comment on them, but cannot send posts themselves on it. According to Campbell (2003), in the learner blog the students can update their posts continuously with their own words and thoughts. This experience gives them a sense of ownership (Soares, 2008); however, it needs lots of effort from the teacher's side to moderate it (Stanely, 2005). Bella (2005) and McDowell (2004) argue that we can use a class blog as a discussion board in which the students have chance to discuss by sending posts, leave comments or reply to the existing comments. As Campbell (2003) suggests, class blogs can also facilitate the language learning which is based on project. In this way, they can edit each others' posts and give feedback to each other, as well which is beneficial for developing critical writing skill (Soares, 2008). According to Soares (2008), blogging in a language class enables the learners to interact with other learners around the globe; therefore, they can experience real communication together with learning.

A study was conducted by Zare-ee, Shekarey and Fathi Vajargah (2009) among the Iranian undergraduate and graduate students in Iran on the use of technology in education. In their study, students' views on the application of blogs in teaching-learning processes and their actual use of blogs were investigated. The participants' familiarity with blogs which were written in English and Persian was studied and their views about the usefulness of blogs as an instructional tool in higher education were declared. The finding SOF the study showed that blogs were actually used less than it is believed they should be. It was one of the studies done in Iran related to the use of the blog in education at university level. The study did not investigate the students' writing performance and was aimed to view the students' perceptions about blog in teaching-learning process. Also, the research methodology of that study was qualitative (survey) and not experimental.

2.4 Use of Blogs in EFL Writing

A growing number of teachers and researchers who wish to measure the effectiveness of weblogs in the overall language learning, and the writing instruction in particular, have experienced weblogs. Weblogs seem to be tools that are highly valuable for the current writing instruction; particularly due to their direct relation to writing something (Simsek, 2009). Blogs have been experimentally employed in language learning as a tool in developing the reading comprehension and writing skills the implications of which imply that while blogging does not have the place of face to face interaction, it might provide an environment for practicing within which students can think, reflect, and slowly create language for real-life audiences (Pinkman, 2005). According to Eastment (2005), weblog is among the most promising and newest internet applications in relation to effective writing instruction. Hewett (2000) and Pelletieri (2000) emphasized on the positive impacts of weblogs on the enhancement and improvement of grammar fluency and proficiency. The fact that the motivation and interest of students in writing and reading is increased, and the autonomy and independence of learners is promoted with the employment of blogging in the context of EFL has been confirmed by recent studies (Pinkman, 2005; Zhang, 2009). In this vein, Sun (2009) believes that weblogs can create a dynamic forum which encourages extensive language practice and results in the development of learning strategies, authorship, and learning motivation. Furthermore, weblogs can enhance the critical and analytical thinking skills of the students (Oravec, 2002; Yang et al., 2005; Zhang, 2009). Wang (2006) suggested that Internet-based writing has some advantages such as easy publication and modification, rapid writing and immediate interaction. According to Lou, Wu and Shih (2010), blogs involve all of the above functions and characteristics. "In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, one can find blogs for professional development, class blogs, and students' individual blogs, among others" (Arena & Jefferson, 2008). Arena and Jefferson (2008) also add that releasing the blog potential for learning language is directly related to the teacher's understanding of the pedagogical benefits of such a tool. Yang (2007) indicates that blogging application in instruction is beneficial for enhancing the exchange between students and instructor, creating knowledge, reducing misspelling and strengthening writing skills.

In recognizing the weblogs' value in a writing class, Levey (2003, cited in Ward, 2004) declares that "some of the best characteristic and features of peer review are built in blogging". Besides allowing the students to review the writing of their peers, weblogs enable them to view the feedback teachers give to other students which in turn helps them in gaining a better understanding of and effective and successful writing. Armstrong and Retterer (2008) state that since blogging is easy to use and its format is conversational and informal can be a tool which engages the students in subject matter; however, employing blogs during a course does not guarantee better performance of students in writing or automatically makes them more proficient. However, the obvious fact is that through more frequent writing; and probably more informal writing, students were reported to have gained a sense of confidence

in their ability to write in the target language. It has also been added that, in the same vein as various new technologies that can be employed in the classrooms, blogs provide an additional means for foreign language interactions.

Another study was administered by Simsek (2009) among 70 undergraduate students at Marmara University in Turkey. It investigated the impacts of weblog integrated instruction on the writing performance of the students and their perceptions of the weblog employment in their courses have been investigated.

The findings implied that students' writing performance improved by weblog integrated writing. In addition, students held a favorable perception about weblog employment. A study was done by Sun (2010) in Taiwan. The research explores the impacts of extensive writing through comparing the writing performance of the last three and the first three weblog entries of the participants. A survey for examining the blogging process of participants along with their perception and understanding of the blogging has also been conducted by the study. The research's outcome indicate that the overall writing performance of participants can be enhanced by writing in blogs, and that it encourages self-governing monitoring of their own writing and creates positive attitudes toward learning foreign language writing in the participants. Based on its findings, the research infers that writing in online environments in weblogs could be beneficial in fostering the autonomy and learning strategies of learners along with enhancing their writing motivation and improving their writing skills.

Fageeh (2011) investigated the effect of blogging on writing proficiency and attitude among undergraduate students of English Department in King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The Weblog is perceived as a tool used for developing their English in terms of their attitudes toward writing and their writing proficiency by the students. They also regarded weblog as a tool that gives the freedom and opportunity of self-expressing in English, maintaining an interactive relation with real-time readers, and writing or global as well as local audiences creating interactive and active social exchanges in blogs. Generally, the attitude of students toward the employment of weblogs was positive. However, few ESL researches and far fewer in the context of EFL, concentrate on Iranian postgraduate writing performance by comparing pen-and-paper and blogging as writing tools.

2.5 Pen-and-Paper versus Technology-Based Writing

Lam and Pennington (1995) conducted a study in which they compared two groups of secondary students who used pen-and paper and computer for writing. Their writings were assessed by raters based on ESL Composition Profile (1981) and the results presented that that overall, the writing of students in the Computer group was better than that of the one in a Pen group and they were hugely significant differences in every aspect of their writing except organization and content with the superior exhibition of performance belonging to the Computer group.

There are some studies that have shown the advantages of using weblogs to enhance students' writing development. Ward (2004) carried out a short term study with forty non-native English speaker students with an intermediate language level. The study was developed in order to see how weblogs could benefit his composition class. The teacher chose four different tasks for students to write; he says that even though blogs are thought of spaces where little attention to form is paid, he wanted his students to advance in their writing. In this case, the audience for the students was peers from the same class. His findings suggest that students enjoyed the experience a lot and they said that it had helped them to improve their English. Other students expressed that the blog was a form of self expression, something similar to a diary where they could put all the things they wanted to share with others. In general, according to the author, students were highly motivated to write. Some of them continued keeping their blogs after the course finishes. Blogs have formidable potentials to use as a useful tool for the teaching of EFL writing class (Wu 2005). Although blog not originally created to use in EFL classes, it has great potential to serve as a valuable tool for teaching writing in a foreign language (Kavaliauskienė, Anusienė and Mažeikienė, 2006). However most of the researchers in this field believe that the full potential of writing class blogs still needs to be learned and explored and also a lot of work needs to be done in order to effectively use blogs in the writing class. It can be claimed that blogging is grounded in the Vygotskian theories of collaborative learning in which learners can develop their knowledge through interaction with other learners and especially more knowledgeable ones (group interaction). In language learning this help is usually provided by teacher but peer group interaction also permits the construction of ZPD whereby collective knowledge resides in the group rather than individual member (Nassaji and Cumming 2000). Blogging provides environment in which students can collaborate and share ideas.

Considering the fact that, the number of research about using blog in EFL writing class is not sufficient; a review of literature in L2 writing research on the effect of blogging on learners' achievement has shown two contradictory findings. Studies by Kelley (2008), Bayrak and Kocak Usluel (2011) tested the effect of blog on the writing achievement. They haven't found any significant differences in neither the writing quality nor the

attitudes towards writing between students who used those technologies and those who did not. On the other hand, studies by O'Connor (2011), Quintero (2008), Nepomuceno (2011), Blackstone, Spiriand Neganuma (2007), Fageeh (2011), Wu (2005), Güttler (2011) found that blogging has effective role on the development of writing skill and students' attitudes toward writing. The social nature of the blogs had a positive impact on the content and amount of writing of learners (O'Connor 2011). Blog creates an innovative, more engaging and more authentic experience and also the collaborative learning environment of blog allow students to learn through modeling and through exposure to other students' opinions, ideas (Blackmore-Squires 2010). Monitoring students' posts efficiently isn't easy because teacher need to read every single blog and highlight mistakes. In cases where the blog is outside of class time, particularly in large classes, the workload increases and it can become time consuming for both teachers and students.

3. Methodology

This study used a quantitative true experimental design aimed at comparing the students' writing performance scores by using pen-and-paper essay writing and blogging among Iranian graduate students of University Putra Malaysia (UPM). This design was applicable for this research since the researcher's goal was to compare the effect of an experimental group (blogging) and a control group (pen-and-paper) on the essay writing performance of Iranian graduate students who were assigned randomly. As Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (2002) indicated, true experimental design should be applied when we use a random assignment for selecting the groups. Randomized subjects, pretest-posttest control group design were applied in this research. In this design, subjects were assigned into experimental (blogging) and control (pen-and-paper) groups by random assignment.

This study was conducted in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), one of the public universities of Malaysia. The reason for choosing this university among the other Malaysian universities was that the population of Iranian students in UPM is the biggest compared to other Malaysian universities (N = 1411). This is based on the data obtained from School of Graduate Studies records (2009-2010 academic years). The sampling type which has been used in this research is simple random sampling in which the table of random numbers is used.

The instruments of this study were two sets of Test of Written English (TWE) which is the writing section of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) were used in the pretest and posttest. The first set of test was taken as the pretest of the participants before starting the treatment and the second set was the posttest of participants which was taken after the treatment. The TWE (Test of written English) is a 30-minute writing test required of everyone who takes the TOEFL test. This test requires the test takers to write a short essay on one topic in 30 minutes from their TWE test book to show their ability to "generate and organize ideas, support ideas in writing with examples or evidence and use standard written English formats" (ETS Website, 2011). Selecting one essay topic from the three optional ones in the pretest and posttest was the participants' task to do. The essays were rated by two raters using the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel and Hughey, 1981). It is a weighted analytic scoring scale developed for rating second language learners writing task and the descriptors are clear. It is one of the most widely used scoring scales for evaluating ESL writing (Bailey, 1999) since aspects of the writing are reflected in the scale. There are five basic features which constitute the analytic writing scale namely content (30%), organization (20%), vocabulary (20%), language use (25%) and mechanics (5%). The points given to each of the five domains would be added to yield a total score for each writing sample. The use of analytic scale in evaluating students' essays is deemed practical and reliable as it provides clear descriptors of the scale and the quality of a written piece is seen from various aspects (Bailey, 1999). In the pretest, the participants of both groups (n = 64) were given three topics to choose from. The time limit for the test was 30 minutes and the word limit was at least 250 words. The mode of writing pretest was by pen and paper for both blogging and pen-and-paper groups.

The pretest topics were as follows:

- 1) If you could change one important thing about your hometown, what would you change? Use reasons and specific examples to support your answer.
- 2) "When people succeed, it is because of hard work. Luck has nothing to do with success." Do you agree or disagree with the quotation above? Use specific reasons and examples to explain your position.
- 3) Is it better to enjoy your money when you earn it or is it better to save your money for some time in the future? Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

In the posttest, the students were given three topics to choose from. The time limit for the test was 30 minutes and the word limit was at least 250 words.

The posttest topics were as follows:

- 1) Many students choose to attend schools or universities outside their home countries. Why do some students study abroad? Use specific reasons and details to explain your answer.
- 2) Some people say that computers have made life easier and more convenient. Other people say that computers have made life more complex and stressful. What is your opinion? Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.
- 3) Some people think that they can learn better by themselves than with a teacher. Others think that it is always better to have a teacher. Which do you prefer? Use specific reasons to develop your essay.

The pretest namely the TOEFL writing test was administered at the beginning of the study to tap the students' pretest scores. The posttest, which was administered at the end of the study, had the same structure as the pretest but with different topics. The instruments of this study namely TOEFL writing tests were validated by two experienced English teachers in order to determine whether the tests are appropriate for Iranian graduate students for measuring their writing performance. They confirmed TWE as a standard test which is appropriate for the Iranian graduate students. The pre and posttest essay scores were rated by two Malaysian experienced English teachers. They were appointed due to their teaching experience and familiarity with using the same rubric for this study (Jacob's). Another reason of selecting them was that they were not Iranian which could eliminate any kinds of bias in terms of raters.

3.1 Treatment

Based on the schedule, the participants were to write six essays in an eight-week treatment and submit them to the researcher in order to obtain feedback and rewrite based on the feedback. The blogging group (n=33) wrote their essays on the blog in the form of entries. The entries were checked by the researcher and the feedback was given in the comment section. Moreover, the blogging participants could ask their questions regarding writing or technical problems of the blog in the comment section.

The pen-and-paper group (n=31), on the other hand, met the researcher twice a week at the UPM main library in order to submit their assigned written essays. The instruction, essay topics and feedback for pen-and-paper group were exactly the same as the blogging group. The difference was in the way of presenting them: the instructions and essay topics of the pen-and-paper group were in paper-published form and were given to them face to face, while the blogging group received the instructions and essay topics published on the blog. After collecting the topics from the participants, the researcher read and corrected the students' errors based on the five domains of writing performance within a week.

3.2 Data Analysis

The collected data were organized and entered into Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS, version 16) in order to be classified and different tests could be administered on the data. It was analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the groups' age, gender, semester and program of study. A paired sample t-test was carried out to compare the mean difference between pre and posttest scores of each group. Meanwhile, an independent sample t-test was administered to obtain the mean difference between both groups' pre and posttest scores. According to Ary, et al. (2002), the established levels of significance normally used in the field of education is between .05 and .01. In this study, the alpha for testing the hypothesis was .05.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Testing Null Hypotheses

H₀ 1: There is no significant difference in the pretest mean scores of overall writing performance between pen-and-paper and blogging groups.

Since the writing performance data were normally distributed, an independent sample t-test was used to observe the differences between the pretest mean scores of overall and five categories of writing performance prior to the treatment (Refer to Table 1). This was done to ensure that the results after the treatment would not be due to the differences between the mean scores of the groups before the treatment. The obtained result shows there are no significant difference between the groups' pretest mean scores [t (62), p>.05]. It indicates that the participants of both groups were homogeneous regarding their level of writing performance before starting the research. Therefore, the first null hypothesis is accepted.

Table 1. Pretest means scores of writing performance

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p.
<i>Pretest-Content</i>						
Pen-and-Paper	31	16.56	2.431	.740	62	.462
Blogging	33	16.12	2.361			
<i>Pretest-Organization</i>						
Pen-and-Paper	31	9.79	1.364	1.303	62	.198
Blogging	33	9.39	1.058			
<i>Pretest-Vocabulary</i>						
Pen-and-Paper	31	10.35	1.349	.020	62	.984
Blogging	33	10.34	1.227			
<i>Pretest- Language Use</i>						
Pen-and Paper	31	11.56	1.393	1.146	62	.256
Blogging	33	11.20	1.081			
<i>Pretest-Mechanics</i>						
Pen-and-Paper	31	2.88	.556	.140	62	.889
Blogging	33	2.86	.509			
<i>Pretest-Overall</i>						
Pen-and-Paper	31	51.15	4.952	.916	62	.363
Blogging	33	49.93	5.704			

H₀ 2: There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of overall writing performance for the pen-and-paper group.

Since there was no significant difference between groups in their pretest scores, a paired-sample t-test was applied to compare pre and posttest means of each group. By administering the paired-samples t-test, the mean and standard deviation of each group were obtained. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of pre and posttest writing overall performance and writing performance categories namely: content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics for pen-and-paper group.

Table 2. Pre and posttest mean scores of overall writing performance and writing categories of pen-and-paper group

Pen-and-Paper Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	T	df	p.
Pretest Content	16.56	31	2.43	-4.02	30	.000
Posttest Content	18.37	31	1.93			
Pretest Organization	9.79	31	1.36	-7.96	30	.000
Posttest Organization	12.33	31	1.51			
Pretest Vocabulary	10.35	31	1.34	-6.93	30	.000
Posttest Vocabulary	12.70	31	1.76			
Pretest Language use	11.56	31	1.39	-10.78	30	.000
Posttest Language use	16.25	31	2.42			
Pretest Mechanics	2.88	31	.55	-3.56	30	.000
Posttest Mechanics	3.43	31	.49			
Overall	51.15	31	5.70	-9.438	30	.000
	63.11	31	7.04			

It was evident from the comparison made between the pre and posttest of pen-and-paper group that there was increase in their scores from pre to posttest.

In the pen-and-paper group, the pretest content mean was 16.56, while the posttest content mean of this group

was 18.37, which reveals the improvement of the group in the content section. In addition, the p value which is smaller than level of significance ($p < 0.05$), is a strong evidence to show a significant difference between pretest content and posttest content. Pretest organization mean for the pen-and-paper group is 9.79, while the posttest organization mean of this group was 12.33 which indicated the increase in their scores ($p < 0.05$).

The pretest vocabulary mean of pen-and-paper group was 10.35, while the posttest vocabulary mean of the same group was 12.70; so the pen-and-paper group improved in their vocabulary after the treatment ($p < 0.05$). The pretest language use mean of pen-and-paper was 11.56, while the mean of their posttest language use was 16.25 which presents a high improvement in their language use scores ($p < 0.05$). The mean of the pretest mechanics for the pen-and-paper group was 2.88, while in their posttest mechanics they increased their mean to 3.43 out of 5 ($p < 0.05$). The pen-and-paper pretest overall mean was 51.15 while in the posttest overall it increased to 63.11, which shows the improvement of this group in overall writing performance.

H_0 3: There is no significant difference between the pretest and posttest mean scores of overall writing performance for the blogging group.

A paired-sample t-test was utilized to compare the pre and posttest of blogging group the result of which showed that there was significant difference between pre and posttest of blogging group in their overall and five categories writing performance. Table 3 demonstrates the mean and standard deviation of blogging group pre and posttest.

Table 3. Pre and posttest mean scores of overall writing performance and writing performance categories of blogging group

Blogging Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	t	df	p.
Pretest-Content	16.12	33	2.36			
Posttest-Content	19.90	33	2.41	-7.06	32	.000
Pretest-Organization	9.39	33	1.05			
Posttest-Organization	12.96	33	1.70	-11.47	32	.000
Pretest-Vocabulary	10.34	33	1.22			
Posttest-Vocabulary	12.96	33	1.70	-8.21	32	.000
Pretest-Language use	11.20	33	1.08			
Posttest-Language use	16.31	33	2.64	-12.10	32	.000
Pretest-Mechanics	2.86	33	2.86			
Posttest-Mechanics	3.31	33	3.31	-4.55	32	.000
Pretest-Overall	49.93	33	4.95			
Posttest-Overall	65.48	33	7.29	-12.05	32	.000

Pretest mean of content for the blogging group was 16.12, while the posttest mean of content was 19.90. It indicates improvement in the content performance of this group. The mean of the pretest organization for the blogging group was 9.39 while the posttest mean of content for this group was 12.96. It illustrates the progress of this group in organization scores ($p < 0.05$). The pretest vocabulary mean for the blogging group was 10.34 while their posttest vocabulary mean was 12.96; it shows that the blogging group advanced in its vocabulary score after the treatment was done.

The pretest language use mean of the blogging group was 11.20 while the posttest language use mean was 16.31 which is an indicator of high improvement of the blogging group in their language use scores. The mean of the pretest mechanics for the blogging group was 2.86 while the posttest mean was 3.31; it reveals that the blogging group progressed in mechanics score from pretest to posttest. The mean for the pretest overall writing performance of the blogging group was 49.93 while it increased to 65.48 in their posttest overall mean score (Refer to Table 4).

It is clear from the results obtained that there was an improvement in blogging group overall writing performance. The increase from pre to posttest mean scores shows that both groups, blogging and pen-and-paper, improved in their overall writing performance as well as the writing performance categories namely content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics after undergoing the treatment.

H_0 4: There is no significant difference in the posttest mean scores of overall writing performance between the

pen-and-paper and blogging groups.

In this study, an independent-samples t-test was utilized in order to examine whether there is significant difference between pen-and-paper and blogging groups in their writing performance including overall and five writing categories namely content, organization, language use, vocabulary and mechanics.

Table 4 shows the mean and standard deviation scores for pen-and-paper and blogging groups.

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of posttest overall writing performance

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p.
Pen-and-Paper	31	63.11	7.042	-1.322	62	.191
Blogging	33	65.48	7.291			

The posttest means score of pen-and-paper group was 63.11 while for the blogging group was 65.4. The result indicates that the blogging group performed better than pen-and-paper group in terms of their post writing scores, but as *p*. value is bigger than alpha [$t(62) = -1.322, p > .05$], there is no significant difference in posttest scores of writing overall performance between pen-and-paper and blogging groups; therefore the null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

4.2 Discussion

The independent variables in this research were pen-and-paper and blogging and the dependent variable was essay writing performance which was assessed by the participants' posttest scores. The effectiveness of pen-and-paper and blogging was assessed by administering pre and posttest before and after the treatment.

The paired-sample t-test showed that the participants of both groups improved in their writing performance from pre to post test. Therefore, null hypothesis 3 and 4 were rejected. This can be due to the treatment done during eight weeks. Writing like other skills of language learning needs practicing to become perfect in. By writing an essay topic each ten days and receiving feedback on the written essays, the participants became aware of their weaknesses in writing essays and tried to correct their errors based on the given feedback. This process lasted for eight weeks (six essay topics). The participants tried not to repeat their mistakes in writing the new essay topic after taking the feedback from the researcher. They could ask their questions either face to face (pen-and-paper group) or by commenting on the blog (blogging group).

This finding is consistent with Sun's (2010) study in which the participants' overall writing performance was enhanced in their last three writings comparing to their first three ones. Moreover, this study is in accordance with Simsek's (2009) study in which he found that the writing performance of university students was improved and enhanced by weblog integrated writing instructions.

By using independent-sample t-test, the posttest results of pen-and-paper and blogging groups were measured and compared together. The result revealed that there was no significant difference in the posttest results between two groups except in terms of content which blogging group outperformed pen-and-paper group. Based on ESL Composition Profile (Jacob's et al., 1981) criteria for each writing category, the total score of content is given to someone whose writing is not only "knowledgeable and substantive", but also "relevant to assigned topic" and has "thorough development of thesis". In this study, advancement of blogging group compared to pen-and-paper group in terms of content is based on the above specifications explained by Jacob's et al. (1981).

This result is consistent with the study administered by Simsek (2009) which investigated the effect of weblog integrated writing instruction on students writing performance among 70 undergraduate students of Marmara University. The finding of Simsek (2009) showed that blogging had significant effect on the students' content and organization among five categories of writing namely content, organization, language use, and vocabulary. It proves that compared to the control group, greater degrees of attention were paid to writings' content by the blogging group. The relationship of this finding with blogging can be explained through mentioning that blogs have the potential to generate a sense of audience within students which ultimately is what causes a better content (Kitzmann, 2003; Wu, 2005). Besides, the control group did not have the chance to read their peers' essays. They only met the researcher and gave her their essays. However, the blogging group could have their group members' feedback via weblog as there was no time and place restriction for the use of weblog.

In contrast, this finding is inconsistent with the result of Lam and Pennington (1995) study in which the computer group exhibited significant difference in all the writing categories comparing to the pen-and-paper

group except on content and organization.

In terms of other writing categories namely organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics, there were no significant difference between two groups in posttest scores. The reason can be due to the fact that both groups received similar instruction and feedback. It shows that using different tools in essay writing cannot make difference in writing performance improvement.

The conventional method i.e. pen-and-paper writing was useful for the participants since they could meet the researcher and ask their questions face to face; moreover, the researcher could explain their errors to them and clear all kinds of ambiguity in this regard. While for the blogging group, the only way to answer their questions and explain their mistakes was via blog which was a modern tool for the participants and they might have problems in understanding completely their mistakes and the given feedback.

In addition, the blogging group confronted some technical problems while using the blog. They had difficulties in publishing their posts, punctuating in the blog setting, rewriting their essays based on the feedback and so on. It could cause their waste of time for writing their essay topics and becoming mixed up about the different sections of blog. Although a training session was held before conducting the treatment for the blogging group in order to make them acquainted with publishing and commenting on the blog, but there were still some difficulties for some of the participants for using it especially the older ones. On the other hand, the pen-and-paper group participants were familiar to use pen-and-paper and could write more easily than the other group. Their major difficulty was to come and go to the library in order to submit their essays and take the new essay topics and feedback, while the blogging group did not need to meet the researcher and sent their essays via Internet (blog).

Since there was no significant difference between the posttest of two groups in writing categories performance except in terms of content, the result of this study shows consistency with Kern and Warshauer (2000) who wrote "The computer, like any other technological tool used in teaching (e.g., pencils and paper, blackboards, overhead projectors, tape recorders), does not in and of itself bring about improvements in learning." Similarly, Armstrong & Retterer (2008) indicate employing blogs during a course does not guarantee better performance of students in writing or automatically makes them more proficient. However, the obvious fact is that through more frequent writing and probably more informal writing, students were reported to have gained a sense of confidence in their ability to write in the target language.

5. Conclusions

In today's world, there are lots of methods in language teaching in general and teaching writing in particular. Using two different tools in writing essays and conducting a study to compare the effectiveness of these two tools namely blog and pen-and-paper was the basis of this study.

The result of this study showed that the tools by themselves could not effect on the quality of writing essays and improvement in the students' writing performance. Using technology and in this study, Internet can motivate the EFL learners to write more eagerly since they may like innovation in learning in contrast with traditional old methods of learning writing and practicing it, but it does not necessarily improve their writing performance only because of using computer and Internet.

The Iranian graduate students of UPM found blog more interesting and motivating tool for writing, but it was not as easy using as pen-and-paper for them with which everyone is familiar. This research could find answers to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study and investigated the hypotheses presented then.

5.1 Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have various implications for Iran Ministry of Education, EFL university lecturers, EFL curriculum makers, language schools, and university students. This study can help Ministry of Education of Iran to plan the new methods of teaching writing at schools and universities such as using blogs in essay writing. They can use technology in their syllabi and compare the function with the conventional methods of teaching writing.

It provides the EFL lecturers better knowledge and understanding about the graduate students' needs for writing in English language. They can use blog as a tool for teaching writing in their classes and view the students' motivation and eagerness in writing. Since this study had scheduled topics based on five categories of writing namely content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics, the lecturers can focus on each category in each session of their lectures and ask the students to write essay topics based on these categories. If the lecturers give feedback to the students, it will be more beneficial for them and helps them to improve in their essay writing.

The EFL syllabus and curriculum makers can use this study in order to design practical writing courses in which the students receive feedback. They can put writing topics in the books which are more interesting for the students to write about.

Furthermore, the English language institutes of Iran can apply the two methods of teaching essay writing namely blogging and pen-and-paper in their writing courses. By using blog as a modern tool of teaching writing they can make their students' progress in using technology in essay writing.

The findings of this research are also helpful for the students who have experienced the tedious and non-creative English courses and need to learn English language in a modern and fresh atmosphere. It encourages them to learn how to communicate in English by writing essays either by blogging or by pen-and-paper. Writing essays without being graded help them to decrease their anxiety and feel comfortable in writing.

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