

How Blog Discussions Shape Year 12 Students' Argumentative Writing

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the potential value of a class blog in shaping argumentative writing skills in the context of Grade 12 ESL learners from a school in the Maldives. It examined how blog discussions shaped the argumentative essays. Data were collected from the blog discussions, essays written by the students, and from interviews. The findings indicated that blogs helped the learners to shape arguments and develop content. Moreover, it facilitated the organizing of content and provided language input for their essays. Finally, it also confirmed that blogs have a positive effect on composition through collaboration, motivation and building confidence in students.

Keywords: Student's learning, blog and writing, writing skills

1. INTRODUCTION

As we move into a fast globalizing 21st century, competency in English has increasingly become necessary as the language serves as an international lingua franca across the world. As the Maldives, a small archipelagic nation consisting of 1200 islands formed naturally into 26 atolls, with *Dhivehi* as the mother tongue, embarks on active participation in the global society to meet its developmental needs, more emphasis has been placed on English. Teaching students to merely perform better in school examinations is no longer sufficient. Instead, students in the Maldives need to be prepared to deal with the challenges of an increasingly global and technologizing society as well as perform effectively in the workforce of the nation. Problem solving, reasoning and analyzing are pivotal for their future, as workplaces become more demanding. Critical thinking and argumentative skills are crucial elements in decision-making (Byrnes, 1998). An important space where these skills can be mastered is through the development of argumentation and writing skills as they study English. Argumentative writing is more complex and challenging due to its generic structure. However, because argumentative writing is a crucial skill during the school years and beyond (Nippold, 2000; Crowhurst, 1990), students need to learn to compose argumentative essays. It trains students to weigh different issues critically using their skills of argument and prior knowledge, before arriving at sound and rational conclusions (Reznitskaya et al., 2007).

However because of the complexity involved, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners may dislike or even dread such writing tasks in the classroom finding them boring or difficult (Winer, 1992; Cimcoz, 1999). This leads to poor performance in writing. In settings like the Maldives, writing pedagogy is traditionally linear with a focus on genres such as the narrative providing little opportunity for the use of higher order thinking skills such as reasoning and critique. Chuo (2004) reveals that one of the most prominent problems affecting students' success in composition is their attitude towards their writing task. Hence, he urges teachers to adopt innovative and interesting instructional activities like online writing programmes to encourage students to engage actively in their writing tasks. This is in line with the pedagogical shift towards a process-oriented approach encouraging self-expression and idea-forming (Nunan, 1991) in the Maldives. A constraint, however, is the fact that this is not widely carried out with teachers citing time as a problem. As technology use may be asynchronous with students working on their own time outside the lesson, this constraint of time and pace may be overcome. The present

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study, therefore, explored the use of blogs in composing argumentative essays among Grade 12 ESL learners of Maldives. Support from capable peers and collaboration through blog discussions help learners to progress through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) through scaffolding (Storch, 2005) stretching student-writers beyond their current level. In addition, the process of blog discussions encourages students to use language while they interact with each other through the blog to negotiate, to explain and to compromise with peers while discussing ideas. These processes are central in learning the skill of argumentation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a growing body of literature on the use of technology as an effective learning tool in English language teaching (Churchill, 2009; Arslan & Kizil, 2010; Tan, 2010; Shih, 2011; Vurdien, 2013). As the applications on the Internet allow learners to communicate directly, inexpensively and conveniently with other learners with no time or place restrictions, there are many advantages. These include students' motivation, the provision of authentic tasks and allowing the learners to communicate with a real audience (Arslan & Kizil, 2010).

"Blogs", also known as weblogs or online journals (personal journals), which have recently become a collaborative technology, is a relatively new way to express thoughts in public. Weblog or blogs is an asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC), which provides another means of online communication (Murray & Hourigan, 2008). Since 1998, blogs have gained increasing popularity among Internet users in the cyberspace community (Blood, 2000, Campbell, 2003). Pertinent to this paper is the fact that blogs are gaining popularity in the educational realm and are extensively used in English language learning contexts such as process writing and improving speaking skills (Diaz, 2009 & Li, 2009). It is evident that blogging has a huge potential to enhance learners' communication, interaction, collaboration, personal reflection and the development of critical thinking and writing skills. The interactive features of posts enable multidirectional communication among students (Diaz, 2010 & West, 2012). More and more ESL educators have employed this accessible technology in classroom instruction and language learning (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Richardson, 2005). Research (Arslan & Kizil, 2010; Gadera, 2011; Lin, Lin & Hsu, 2011) shows that the features of blog can facilitate the process writing approach in the stages of planning, drafting, editing and revising. Most blog writers ("bloggers") use this environment for self-expression and empowerment, as writing in blogs helps people become more thoughtful and critical in their thoughts, ideas, and opinions, among other things (Campbell, 2003).

Argumentation, which formed the focus of this study on blogging, requires the writer to possess sophisticated cognitive and linguistic abilities (Nippold & Ward-Lonergan, 2010). This writing genre includes arguments and counterarguments. One of its characteristics is the dialogical dimension, which results from taking two opposing points of view into account (Adam, 1992). Adam (1992) considers the minimal argumentative movement to consist of an initial claim and its supporting arguments, a series of counterarguments, and a conclusion, moves which student-writers might engage in as they discussed a topic in the blog. More specifically, argumentation (Toulmin, 2003), comprises the following elements: a claim, which is an assertion presented in response to a problem; data, which includes the evidence or grounds on which claims are made, a warrant, which supports the link between the claim and data, backing, known as support of the warrant, a qualifier, which indicates the probable nature of the claim, and a reservation, which refers to the conditions under which the warrant will not hold and cannot support the claim.

Studies that focus on using blogs to improve writing skills show that blogs can be easily integrated into a virtual ESL writing environment (Murray & Hourigan, 2008). For instance, Palombo's (2011), exploratory and design-based descriptive study revealed that sixth grade students' blog experiences facilitated their writing process and improved their written products. Research also demonstrates that integrating blogs into portfolios or e-portfolios contributes to more effective writing, as noted by Klages and Clark (2009) in their study that integrates e-portfolios and blogs. Godwin-Jones (2008) also found that using portfolios as a tool for practicing language skills could be linked to blogs. Further, research indicates that using blogs to enhance writing skills has considerable effects on EFL learners with respect to their writing performance, their ability to monitor writing, their attitudes towards and perceptions of writing, and their interactions and participation in writing projects. For example, Arslan and Kizil's (2010) quasi-experimental study to examine the effects of blog-centered writing on intermediate learners' performance found that blog-integrated writing instruction improved learners' writing performances. Similarly, Sun (2010) compared learners' writing performance to determine the effects of extensive writing on writing abilities and concluded that blogs enhance overall writing performance, promote autonomous writing, and result in positive attitudes towards EFL writing. In relation to process writing, Boas (2011) found that blogging provided opportunities for learners to engage in pre-writing, drafting,

peer reviewing and revising. In relation to academic writing, Gallagher (2010) found that the use of blogs in composition classes increases learners' motivation to engage in academic writing.

Benefits of using blogs in language learning include the learning opportunities afforded by blogs for learning English through the tasks the students engage in. As a result, they can also improve their knowledge about their own language (Kavaliuikiene et al. 2006). The ideation of language learning using blogs emerged because blogs are seen as tools for learning which will eventually improve students' language learning through its multimodal form (Campbell, 2003). Thus, its uses were recognized for developing students' language in general, or in specific skills like writing, or used as an extension to traditional teaching and learning. A study conducted by Hall and Davidson (2007) showed that blogs improved students' writing skills in learning from the flexibility of blogging. Another study by Nadzrah (2007) found that low proficiency level students were able to write constructively using blogs which was further supported by Nadzrah and Kemboja's (2009) study on a group of Social Sciences students taking a general English proficiency course. Their findings indicated that blogs diminished barriers to learning English by providing students the opportunity to write freely without being judged for their grammatical mistakes. Campbell (2003) adds that blogs can be used for collaborative work through the effort of an entire class. It can serve as a free form bulletin board for learners to share thoughts on a common topic assigned as homework. Weblogs, thus, seem to be an extremely valuable tool for writing instruction since they are directly related to writing something. Changes in writing pedagogy resulting from the communicative approach, and cognitive and socio-cognitive views of learning have influenced computer applications causing the advent of weblogs (Wright, Knight, & Pomerleau, 1999).

Finally, Ward (2004) explains that for the language teacher, the weblog is a timely arrival which can fulfill many of the needs identified for the effective teaching of writing. The weblog provides a genuine audience, is authentically communicative, process driven, peer reviewed, providing an unusual context which offers a completely new form with unchartered creative potential. By forming a learner blog, the writing teacher can make use of blogging for all the stages of the writing process from drafting to publishing and assessment.

3.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper draws on a qualitative case study which explored how blog discussions could help ESL students develop argumentative writing. Therefore, the purpose of this study delved into how students used the blog discussions with their peers to compose their own argumentative essays. For the purposes of this paper, however, the following research questions will be addressed:

- How do Grade 12 ESL students use blog discussions to compose argumentative essays?
- What are students' perceptions on the effects of using a class blog in composing argumentative essays?

The thrust of the discussion will be to demonstrate how key aspects of the composing process (generating ideas to develop content, structuring and organizing content according to the genre of argumentative essays, and acquiring language to express ideas) were shaped through the blog discussions the student-writers had with their peers.

4. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study was exploratory in approach as it sought to develop an in-depth understanding of how blog discussions might shape Grade 12 ESL learners' argumentative writing. This approach drew from Creswell (2011) who writes that a case study design should be considered when: a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; b) the behavior of those involved in the study cannot be manipulated; and c) when the researcher want to cover contextual conditions because the researcher believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study. The present study was naturalistic as it explored learning to write within the context of a secondary school. However, this study is limited to the Grade 12 students of the Maldives so that the findings obtained from this study may not be generalized to the whole population of ESL learners in the country. Additionally, the study focuses solely on blog discussions, which makes the oral discussions that take place in the classroom beyond the scope of this present study. In accordance with the ethics of research, when verbal consent was given by the principal of the school for the study to be conducted, a permission letter was obtained to gain formal entry into the research site. Consent forms were given to the participants in order to get full participation.

4.1 Research setting

This study was conducted in an Atoll Education Centre in the Maldives (AEC). AECs are the largest schools in each atoll, consisting of students from nearby islands. These schools are rich in resources with impressive infrastructure compared to the smaller schools in the islands. Facilities include Internet access, computer labs, smart boards and projectors. The school was established in 1984 as a secondary school and started higher secondary in the year 1998. Initially, *Dhivehi* was the medium of instruction. This shifted to English when changes were brought to the education system in 1985. At the time of the study, the school had an enrolment of 317 students with two A-level classes comprising a science and a commerce stream class.

4.2 Participants

The participants comprised ten Grade 12 students who sat their A 'level examination in June 2015. The English proficiency level of these students ranged from less- proficient to proficient, though there were two highly proficient students. Although they had already had experience in argumentative writing in their O 'level, their writing skills were quite basic. Among the 10 students who participated in the study were six female and four male students aged between 16 to 17 years. The key participants of the research included four students: one highly proficient learner and three proficient learners based on their O-level results. The selection criteria used included proficiency level and active participation in English lessons. In accordance with the ethics of research their consent was obtained. Pseudonyms are used so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Therefore, the students in this study are identified as Aisha, Ishan, Shaiha, and Shama.

4.3 Data collection

The data in this study was obtained from blog discussions, students' essays posted in the blog and interviews. However, the introductory lesson on argumentative writing was observed to develop an understanding of the background and context of the study.

4.3.1 Setting up the blog

In collaboration with the teacher, a class blog, 'Virtual Class 2014' was set on the blogger.com website. The researcher conducted two sessions to explain how the students were to use the blog using a power point presentation describing the process involved. During the first week students were given information about the structure of an argument through the blog.

4.3.2 The task

From the first week, a thread "*Technology brings more harm than good*" was posted and students were given two days to comment. Students posted comments (see Appendix D1). Once the comments were made, they were asked to upload their essays (see Appendix E1) based on the comments made during the blog discussion. The essays were posted in the blog.

In the second week, the thread was "*Social media like Facebook, twitter, etc. should be banned to school students. Do you agree or disagree?*" The third thread was "*Do violent video games cause behaviour problems?*". Students followed the same procedure throughout.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data collected comprised of blog discussions and student essays. Data obtained were closely examined, coded and analyzed qualitatively according to the focus of the research question which was how students developed their argumentative essays using input from the blog discussion. Therefore, the final essays of the four key student participants were analyzed in order to identify how blog discussions were used in the essays. The analysis was done mainly on the development of the content, organization of the content and language use.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following discusses the findings of the study, how blog discussions shape Grade 12 students' composing of argumentative essays. Also, the effects of blogging in learning to compose argumentative essays are probed through data on students' perceptions obtained in interviews.

5.1 How do Grade 12 ESL students use blog discussions to compose argumentative essays?

To capture how students used blog discussions to compose their argumentative essays (see Appendix E1-E3), four key participants' essays were examined in relation to the blog discussions. This was to identify how blog discussions were used in composing the essays in relation to the key aspects of written composition: content, organization and language use. The content was analyzed into two categories, direct use of blog discussions and elaborated ideas from the blog.

5.1.1 Developing the content of composition

The analysis of students' writing revealed that all the students used ideas from the blog discussions and elaborated on them to develop the content of the essays. In his first essay of five paragraphs (see Appendix A1) on the topic "Technology brings more harm than good", Ishan used the ideas from the blog discussion to develop the content of his essay. Three paragraphs were developed from the peer discussions on the blog. Below is his first paragraph.

Figure 3: The first paragraph of Ishan's essay (see Appendix A1)

In the same way, Shaiha also used ideas from the blog discussions in developing the content of her essay on the topic "Social media like Facebook, Twitter should be banned to school children". All the paragraphs, except the introductory paragraph and conclusion, were developed from the ideas which were posted in the blog. Some ideas included her own posted points while others were from her peers. The second paragraph of the essay as seen from the snapshot (Figure 4) was developed from Asha's argument on the blog. Similarly, the following paragraph was written using the idea posted by Shama. The argument was how social media help students to show their creativity.

Figure 4: The first two paragraphs from Shaiha's essay (see Appendix A2)

5.1.2 Organizing the content of the essays

The next analysis was on the organization of the content of the essays. The findings revealed that there is no particular order for the selection of ideas from the blog discussion. However, except for one, all the three students introduced their essays on "Technology brings more harm than good" based on the first comment which was about technology making life easier. Conversely, other comments were used randomly and based on the stance they

took in the introduction. If the stance was positive, positive comments were used to develop the paragraphs and vice versa. The data from the other topics also showed similar results that there was no particular order in selecting the comments from the blog. It was also proved that the selection of comments depended on the stance the student had taken. The following example extracted how Shaiha organized the ideas in the essay from the blog discussions.

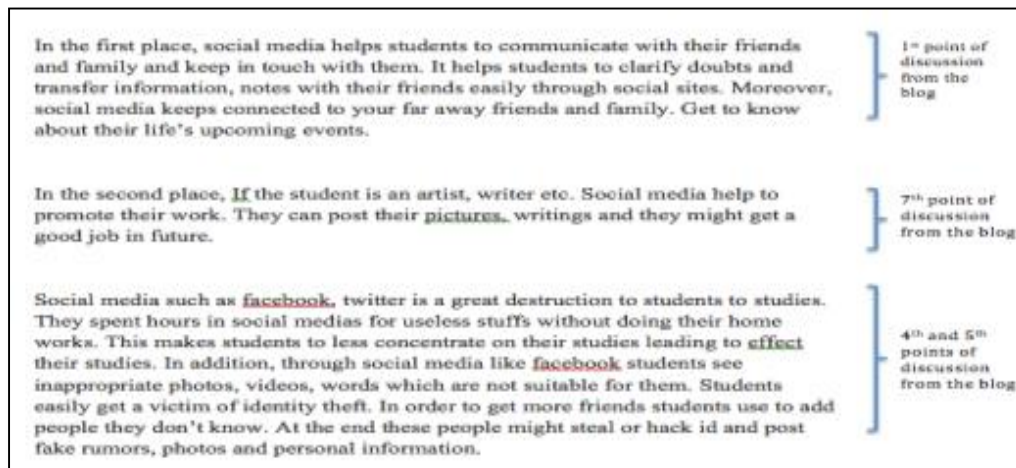


Figure 5: Organization of the points from the blog in Shaiha's essay

5.1.3 Language use in the essays

Finally, analyzing the language used in the essays showed that some words and phrases were used directly from the blog discussion and some words were used in another form or as a synonym. Some of the commonly copied direct words include *communicate*, *distraction*, *dependent*, *victims* and *bully*. However, the essays on the first topic "Technology brings more harm than good" did not show much use of the words from the blog discussion, although, one or two students used a few words in their essays (see Appendix A3). However, interestingly, some students copied direct sentences from the blog discussion to develop their content. Therefore, it was evident that blog discussions helped in their use of vocabulary and also in sentence construction. The following extract was taken from a students' essay on the third topic, "Do violent games cause behaviour problems?" Highlighted words were either copied directly or used in another form.

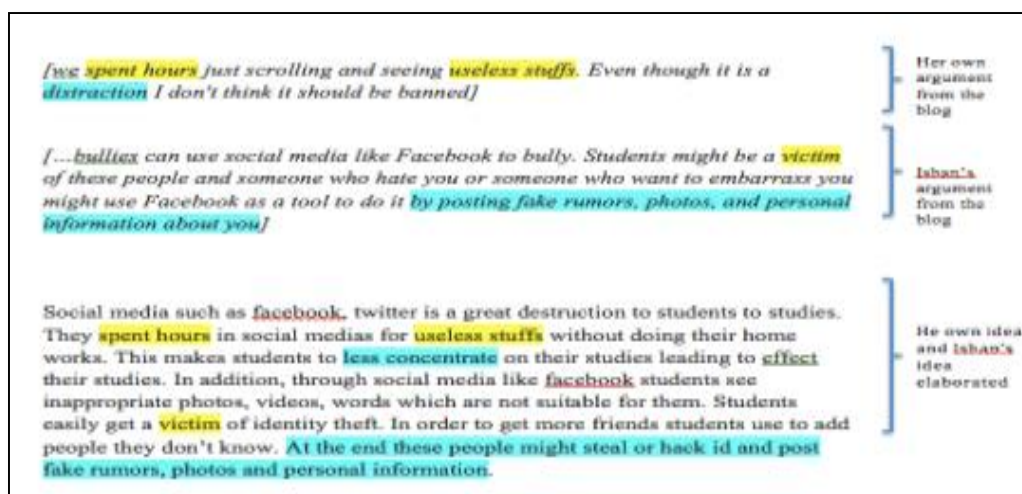


Figure 6: Language items used from the blog discussion

In short, the essays showed that students used the blog discussion as a springboard for their content development. Ideas were organized according to the stance students took and the discussions were used accordingly to fit in with their essays. Students used words and sentences directly from the blog discussions to develop their ideas in the essay. The more proficient student, Aisha, did not use words directly from the blog discussion; however,

interestingly ideas from the blog were elaborated on in her essays. At the same time, a proficient student, Shaiha, used the most number of words and sentences from the blog discussion directly.

With regards to the results obtained, learning is considered to be more effective through interaction and cooperation with others rather than through individual work (Du & Wegner, 2005), this was proved as students composed their essays. The asynchronous feature of the blog helped them to work at their own space to form argument at the prewriting stage which paved way for composing the essay easily. Several studies have shown that collaborative learning results in better learning outcomes compared with individual-oriented learning (Alavi, 1995; Piccoli, Ahmad, and Ives, 2001). Blogs, which have collaboration-supporting features such as web publishing, instant feedback and a public online environment, can be a convenient and effective platform for informal and comparative conversation and interaction among students and instructors (Du & Wagner, 2005).

5.2 What are students' perceptions on the effects of using a class blog in composing argumentative essays?

To answer this question, a focus group interview was carried out with the key participants of the study. Their responses were (see Appendix B) analyzed for themes in relation to their perceptions. The themes which emerged from the data included: the blog as an authentic alternative learning space and the blog as developing student-writers' confidence.

5.2.1 The blog as an alternative learning space

The data indicated that all four students felt that a blog is an important tool in English language learning for the multitude of benefits it provides learners. The following example was taken from Aisha's interview. Her view is that it acts as a virtual classroom without any constraints of space and time, providing her an expanded learning space: As it acts as virtual classroom, it can really help learners. I would say that it is a good starting point to practice writing, as there are no time constraints, they can take their own time and write.

In addition, the other participants also had a similar opinion that blog as a virtual language learning space where they did not face time constraints. In addition, the use of blogs can enrich the interaction among students and also provide a platform for practicing L2 skills apart from the real class teaching, a view supported by the research on blogging (Arani, 2005; Arena 2008; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Alexander, 2006). Their studies show that blogging enables creating social networks and learning communities where users have opportunity to interact and communicate their ideas. Through this process, knowledge is constructed. Thus, blogging facilitates collaborative approaches in language skills. It also offers an authentic environment for L2 learners who have limited opportunities to be exposed to the target language in an authentic environment.

5.2.2 The blog as developing the student- writers' confidence

The data suggested that blogs develop ESL writers' confidence in providing opportunities for them to write and publish freely. The students' perceptions revealed that blog could be a starting point for the learners especially the shy and less confident learners to build confidence in writing. The following were the comments made by Shaiha and Ishan respectively:

"...and I feel it is one of the encouraging ways to get confident in writing as it provides opportunity to express our ideas freely and we know that our peers only share it. So I feel that those who are shy in class also have an opportunity to build the confidence in writing..."

It provides space for hesitant students to express their views. In class not everyone gets chance to contribute due to the time constraints.

The results of interviews and reflections on students' essays revealed that the blog helped them improve their writing skills mainly because it provided vocabulary, content and organization of ideas by reading their peers' posts. They also stated that since their essays would be published online in the blog, they were compelled to write well and use correct grammar in the essays. As what Zhang (2009) had found in his study, blogging "affects the quality of writing," (p. 67) since students have their audience in mind while writing. Similarly weblogs enhance students' analytical and critical thinking skills (Noytim, 2010). When posting blogs, bloggers compose their blogs and monitor their writing carefully because they are aware of the fact that their writing will be published virtually and viewed online by their peers. The findings also revealed that that the asynchronous nature of blogs allowed students the freedom to reread their own and their peers' postings without any space and time constraints,

which provided them with the opportunity to acquire new grammatical structures and vocabulary and as a result, build on their writing skills (Vurdién, 2011). Therefore, blogging may be considered an effective platform in facilitating the development of students' writing skills as evidenced by this study. In addition, researchers indicate that blogging has been portrayed as a language learning tool which can increase second language writing fluency and language learner motivation (Bloch, 2007; Lee, 2010), and recommend them as a means of promoting multi-literacies (Choo, 2010).

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study attempted to explore how blog discussions shape Grade 12 students' argumentative writing. The analysis of the data suggested that blog discussions had a great influence in helping students form an argument, and compose argumentative essays. This was evident from the essays written by the students.

In examining how students use blog discussions to compose the argumentative essay, the data showed that blog discussion worked as a catalyst for developing student essays. Students used the discussion in three ways. Firstly, blog discussions were used to develop the content of the essays. Secondly, blog discussions were used to help them organize the content and paragraphs of the essays. And thirdly, blog discussion helped some of the student writers in terms of vocabulary and sentence construction. Some students directly copied sentences and words while others used synonyms and different forms of the words used in the blog discussion.

This study assumes significance in many respects. In the first instance, the findings will contribute to the current pool of limited information related to this specific field especially with regards to the Maldives. Secondly, the findings could also provide the necessary insights for syllabus and material design for the Writing paper in the English as a Second Language in the context of English education. Thirdly, the English department of secondary schools can also draw from the findings to help improve the teaching and learning of the subject. Finally, it may also help change the pedagogical strategies of teaching writing in general through the incorporation of technology and creation of alternative learning spaces.

The findings of the study indicated that argumentative writing is not as easy as some teachers may have assumed. As a result of this complexity, students need time and practice in developing the skill of argumentation and effective essay writing. Writing cannot be taught using merely the traditional chalk and board method in which teacher writes down the topic and the students write the essay. ESL learners, especially, need lot of prewriting tasks, which will prepare them to do the actual writing task. Blogs offer a valuable space for this. As teachers are bound by many constraints like time, and the covering of the syllabus just using classroom-based methods of teaching writing may not be best for students. Therefore, as in this study, the integration of blogs in teaching writing can be implemented. To put light back on the findings of this study, it shows that blog discussions were useful in enabling the students to compose their argumentative essays. Therefore, in a nutshell, it is seen that blogs can be an effective and motivating force for technologically savvy generation of learners. For this reason, it may benefit from incorporating blogs in teaching writing in higher grades.

7. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to gain further insights into the effectiveness of blogs in writing lessons, following directions could be taken into consideration in future research. At first, the results of the study may have affected to some degree by classroom setting, in which the students did not have internet access during class hours which resulted in less motivated students to avoid the participation. Therefore, in future research, it is important to consider the environmental factors which may affect the effectiveness of the blog. In addition to that, as this study was solely on argumentative writing, which is one genre of writing in the higher secondary syllabus, future research could be conducted to include using blogs to teach different genres of writing which can allow for the diverse interest of learners. As this study did not allow students to have their own blogs, due to various reasons, future research could consider student blog as well. By doing so, students become more autonomous learners engaging in greater interaction with their peers.

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