

A Critical Appraisal on English Language, Writing Skills & Blogging

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ABSTRACT

Man has successfully conquered almost everything including space and the deep blue water in this post modern era of science and technology. In the recent history of mankind the important invention by the brilliant mind (human being) is the invention of World Wide Web (WWW) especially web 2.0. As discussed by researches this creation has shrunk the world to a global village. It has centralized all the information resources and repositories of wisdom and Knowledge. Modern man's approach towards life and everything has changed totally: how to consume and communicate, play and work, and deal with others through the globe be it academics, politics, cultural activities, technology and science and especially social life and pedagogy. Within a blink of an eye he can go through the vast and endless treasures of IT about all he wants. It has provided an affordable, less expensive, less time consuming opportunity to all human beings to meet the interest of their own. The post dot com hype has witnessed another phenomenal advancement in knowledge dissemination in the form of "blogs". This technology (particularly blogging) has great impact on the pedagogy of English. As in this post modern era English has emerged as Global language, International language, Internet language, lingua franca and third eye of human beings with almost 50% speakers of the total population of the world. On the one hand the main aim of the paper is to show how the technology of blogging is a source of developing language (English) skills and on the other hand will expose the drawbacks of blogging.

Key Words: Blog technology, Bloggers' posts, English pedagogy, writing skills.

INTRODUCTION

English may not be the most spoken language in the world, but it is official language of 53 countries and spoken by around 400 million people across the globe. Being able to speak English is not just about being able to communicate with native English speakers, it is the most common second language in the world. So it's competence has created opportunities of decent earning and unimaginable success in one's career. There has been never a language so widely spread and spoken by so many numbers of people as English, according to Crystal in his book *English as a Global Language*. English is internet language also, and one can have unlimited access to information on any subject. According to Molly:

English still remains the connecting web of scholars and students. By some estimates, there are more speakers of English in India than in Britain, its first home.
(Molly 2002:2)

Currently, more than eighty percent websites use English. In fact, Americans comparatively are more dependent on both computer technology and English language in all spheres of life. Most of the software are now available in English only. Hence, English language and computers constitute the basis of the contemporary digital world and are now inseparable, interdependent and integral to each other. Advanced technological world and resourcefulness of English language even compelled countries like Japan and China to initiate usage of English. In this regard, *The English Language in the Digital Age* discusses the potential of English Language in the current digital age. It looks at the impact of English language on the contemporary European information society and the scope of this language. As more and more people are taking English as their L2, its sway on internet and blogging is becoming more phenomenal and conspicuous. This implies clearly that in modern era, effective learning of English Language opens countless vistas for one's future growth and excellence. At present, all want to earn a strong command over this language for winning or reaching their cherished goals. It is now a compulsory subject particularly across Asia both in schools and colleges for aspirants belonging to varied academic programmes. This indispensable nature of the language has compelled tutors to adopt modern digital pedagogic approaches for inculcating better language skills even among learners especially writing skills for conventional way of teaching English was found by them quite uninteresting for it would restrict learners to classroom learning only. As such, the birth of blogs and their usage especially in English pedagogy has provided students with newer opportunities to get exposed to an on-line space. A blog is actually a form of internet publishing and has now emerged as an established communication tool and is used by millions of users with innumerable objectives and aims. In fact, it has drastically changed pedagogic methods for blogs have proved the greatest sources for strengthening one's academic pursuits by sharing knowledge with others. This technology promises everything including learning & strengthening of writing skills.

Marlis Hellinger and Paules in their work *Handbook of Language and Communication: Diversity and Change* discuss developments, changes and challenges of the internet in the 21st century. It throws light on how during a very short lifespan, the computer technologies including blogging have changed human lives and how humans are now reacting towards each other through social networking. These have drastically even changed the knowledge concept in the contemporary society by making it very easy, accessible and more goal-oriented. In fact, blog technology has now emerged as the latest innovation and a very useful tool in teaching and learning all over the world. It has changed the traditional approach of modern man towards his work, research, pedagogy and studies. It has done wonders by enabling the academicians, learners, researchers, scholars to share their views on-line and review the writings of great innovators of knowledge industry. Today scholars while sitting at home can get their research findings critically evaluated or appreciated and thus can improve them by going through their posts or responses which is unlike the traditional approach of reviewing. What earlier would take writers years to earn; they can have it now in moments or hours that too at an international level or platform. Great scholars or experts can view their write ups and add their posts by commenting or evaluating them critically for blogs are interactive homepages and have proved a great resource of learning and research.

Since this paper focuses on strengthening of writing skills among learners / users through blogging, the question at the very outset is how to write effectively? Generally speaking, writing is considered both the easiest and the most difficult of arts. It is the easiest because its traditional tools such as pen, paper and pencil are quite known to all and are easily available too but to gain the skill of playing with them demands enough wisdom, ample experience and greater intelligence. At the same time, it is the most difficult because for gaining command over it one has to practice regularly and give due care and diligence which other fellows who write practice i.e., to be under the guidance of good tutors or masters of this language skill. Mitchell remarks:

Writing is a process of discovering and creating meaning

(Mitchell 1996:39)

Writing comes through proper selection of thoughts, words and structures. Mitchell further states: Good writing is an extension of clear thinking, and writing competence is how the writer makes meaning in written language (Mitchell 1996:4)

According to White and Arndt:

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 (White and Arndt 1996:3).

Instances from literature make it clear that anyone can attain mastery in writing provided one has seriousness, dedication and patience. It doesn't matter what one's station or position is or where one is in his formal education. There are countless examples available in Literature for proving this stand. Who doesn't know about the formal education of William Shakespeare, Robert Burns, Daniel Dafoe, John Keats and Charles Lamb. Shakespeare was a lawyer's clerk for years; Dickens lived a life of penury and worked as a child for supporting his brothers and sisters. Joseph Conrad knew not a single word till he was Nineteen. Abraham Lincoln didn't attend a school but even then his Gettysburg speech is much quoted public speeches in English. Writing demands practice and patience for Edward Frank Allen writes:

Anyone who believes that he writes poorly because "Writers are born, not made" should recall Flaubert, a master of the literary craft sometimes struggled for days and weeks to conjure up the precise word to express a certain shade of meaning. The Roman poet, Horace, maintained that no author should publish a poem until he had laboured over it, polished it and repolished it at least nine years. Tennyson believed in smoking a pipe over every line of his poetry. Samuel Butler, who was decidedly no dullard, worked over "The Way of All Flesh" nearly twenty years, and on his deathbed expressed regret that he could make no more revisions. No one knows how many times Lincoln wrote and rewrote the fewer than three hundred words that constitute his Gettysburg address. One need only see a manuscript by Dickens, with its many crossings-out and substitutes, to appreciate that writing, even for one of the greatest of novelists, was hard work and hard work alone. (Frank Allen 2002: 3)

Thanks to modern digital world of studies especially blogging technology where one is blessed and guided heavily and thus can go on chiseling or developing one's writing skill or write ups time and again by receiving comments regarding one's writing strengths and weaknesses from the masters across the world for earning mastery over his art of writing. It means both the modern writers and learners are lucky enough for they can create a blog and can place their write ups directly on their blogs for critical comments and reviews which would directly benefit them for these would be viewed by thousands at a time across the world. Even English language pedagogy hasn't escaped the influence of computer technology for in particular blogs have done wonders in it. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007):

SNSs (social networking sites) can be defined as web-based services that allow individuals to articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection such as teacher and students.

This has made the researchers, learners and teachers to realize the popularity of blogs as educational tools. Researchers' today claim that these have truly benefitted learners or users particularly in improving their writing skills for these are fully controlled by the bloggers or authors themselves. These throw an open invitation to an unlimited internet community in the World Wide Web for sharing on virtual space ideas and arguments by writing and critically commenting on one another's posts for generating knowledge. These blog users are also quite aware of some of the distinctive characteristics of blogging such as accessibility, easy usage, ubiquity, fearless environs, unlimited space, informal format, collaborative nature, etc. and hence don't hesitate to vent their ideas across the world for all those who like them are interested in online discourses. There are scholars who have conducted various studies on bogging and teaching of English Language and have found that writing particularly on blogs have greatly helped students to enhance their writing skills. According to Ward (2004):

For language teachers, blogs are effective tools for writing and can meet many of the identified needs in teaching and learning. Blogs provide a genuinely communicative process driven and peer-reviewed learning community in which a genuine audience is connected to a student writer.

Similarly, Campbell (2003) suggests:

Blogs can be used by teachers and students as a forum for students to express opinions, co-produce ideas and share interesting information in order to communicate in an environment of English as a second language.

Nadzrah Abu Baker (2009) found:

Blogs let students compose writing with specific purposes that can encourage them to enhance their writing in language. Most blog writers use their blog as a platform for self-expression and empowerment, and this helps them to become more thoughtful and critical in their writing.

Yang (2007) observes:

Blogging application in instruction is beneficial for enhancing the exchange between students and instructor, creating knowledge, reducing misspelling and strengthening writing skills.

In the same vein, Eastment (2005) proves:

Weblog is among the most promising and newest internet applications in relation to effective writing instruction.

Since blogging is believed by many as a type of writing exercise where the blogger has to involve him / her into activities like making blog posts, viewing other bloggers' posts and thereby comment and think seriously in order to create a text. This proves greatly beneficial in chiseling the writing skills. We know that computers act as facilitators in this writing process as well for today word processor application enables the users to compose, edit, and format. Researchers revealed that the use of a word processor helps writers in proper planning, progression and compiling the final text. Pennington (2003) opines:

Word processors also influenced learners' behaviors, attitude and awareness with respect to the tasks at different writing stages in terms of mechanics, forms, or meanings.

According to Pennington (1996) the word processor fundamentally impacts student Writers in four major ways in terms of writing: (a) writing becomes easier; (b) writing becomes more extensive; (c) writing becomes more effective; and, (d) writing becomes different. Due to the spelling and grammar checking tools accessible within the word processor, corrections at the word and sentential level are mechanically provided (Vernon, 2000); therefore, students can focus more on thinking, revising, adding of content or meaning. Today computer-mediated communication provides better opportunities for engaging writers or learners online. The online writing environment enables learners to cultivate a better sense of their audience as well as to explore and integrate resources needed for developing written texts (Pennington, 2003).

This has made learners conscious of an active learning environment and these find themselves lucky as blogging leaves positive influence particularly on their writing skills. These blogs have made studies easy, effective and goal oriented for the students. They just have to know how to manage blogs which are easily set up and handled provided one has a good command over English language which is no more a language of colonizers, one country or one nation. Its use, role, influence and usage in blogging have already enabled it to earn a lasting and permanent niche for itself in cyberspace or computer technology and this way blogs have become indispensable component for many students' academics and scholars' research pursuits.

It has also been found that teaching English Language especially writing skills through blogging is at the same time a great challenge to the teachers who need to first equip their learners with digital technology and teaching methods in order to create an efficient learning ambience. They have to pay serious attention to the basic principles of learning community which includes course effectiveness, curriculum, learning tools, student engagement, materials, teachers' feedback, learners' satisfaction, etc. In this regard, many studies have critically looked at blogging and forwarded their negative findings. According to Blackstone et al. (2007):

Students who lack confidence may experience fear at having others read their thoughts. As blogs are mostly not private, it is open for display to public and this makes student feel embarrassed for fear that others might see their mistakes.

Similarly, Blackmore-Squires (2010) opined:

Those students who suffer from computer phobia may find themselves frustrated with the blogging activities and this will eventually thwart their writing improvement. Thus, it was interesting to investigate how the participants in the study perceived the influence of blogging on their English writing skills.

Thus, learning writing skills of English language through blogging is still a debatable and complex issue for most of our learners and tutors or trainers firstly are technically poor at using blogs as classrooms for teaching the most difficult skill of language i.e., writing skills. Fact of the matter is that in reality in our scenario, the plight of second language teaching is still highly pathetic and grim too. A good number of our students are still practically unable to comprehend English properly. Not to talk of writing and their speaking skills. Further, at times it seems that majority of such blog learners aren't comfortable in dealing with English as a source of Knowledge. In view of above highlighted weaknesses associated with modern pedagogy especially where instructors themselves aren't competent enough in using blogs, colleges and universities should offer short term computer or blogging technology training courses to their staff especially English. On the whole, blogging and English Language Studies demands more research endeavors or pursuits from scholars especially of digital humanities.

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