Chapter 11
The Impact of Individual Differences on Students' Perception of Writing Practice in Blogosphere

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, weblogs have widely made their way into English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning. Despite this growing research on the educational values of weblogs, the impact of individual differences on students' perception toward blogging has been rarely explored. In an attempt to fill this gap, the present case study reports on the impact of individual differences on 28 BA level, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology major students' perceptions of English writing practice in blogosphere. Data was collected from participants' responses to a post-course written interview. Adopting qualitative and quantitative data analysis procedures, it was observed that English language proficiency significantly influenced students' perceived effectiveness of writing practice in the classroom blog. The findings of this study offer several practical implications for research on weblog-enhanced language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, Web 2.0 technologies including weblogs have widely made their way into English as a Foreign Language EFL teaching/learning contexts (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Godwin-Jones, 2003). During this period, the potential of weblogs for promoting English writing practice has sparked interests among educators (e.g. Arslan & Sahin-Kızıl, 2010; Ducate

& Lomicka, 2008; Miceli, Murray, & Kennedy, 2010; Vurdien, 2013; Ward, 2004). As websites for keeping personal diaries, blogs provide learners with an opportunity to discuss and share ideas, plans, and thoughts (Wang, Lin, & Liao, 2012). Despite the abundance of research findings on the benefits of blogging for knowledge construction and writing practice (Alm, 2006; Bloch, 2007; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Miceli, Murray, & Kennedy, 2010; Sengputa, 2001; Vurdien, 2013), empirical

data on how students perceive this experience remains scant. Even fewer are studies that have explored the issue from the viewpoint of FL learners (Arani, 2005; Miceli et al., 2010).

As Sengputa (2001) suggested, without understanding the impact of web-enhanced pedagogy from learners' viewpoint, EFL educators cannot adequately investigate the educational potentials of this mode of learning. Success in technology-enhanced language learning, in other words, is crucially connected to how students perceive this experience (Alastuey, 2011; Wiebe & Kabata, 2010). In fact, "previous studies suggest that individual differences are important antecedents of beliefs about using information technology" (Wang, Lin, & Liao, 2012, p. 140). Hence, individual differences may significantly contribute to students' perception of blogosphere and their educational experience in the space. In an attempt to shed more light into this under-investigated area, the present chapter reports on a semester-long case study in two General English (GE) courses in a state university in Tehran, Iran that sought to explore the impact of individual differences on EFL learners' perception of English writing practice in blogosphere. To contextualize and clarify the possible impact of individual differences on students' technology-enhanced writing practice, after a brief review of weblogs, their features, research on the application of this technology for writing practice, learners' perception, and the role of individual differences this process, the chapter will focus on the results obtained from the aforementioned case study.

BACKGROUND

Weblog Technology and EFL Writing Practice

The emergence and evolution of information and communication technologies (ICT) has widely revolutionized every aspect of education includ-ing English as the second and/or foreign language (ESL/EFL) writing practice (Lee, et al. 2009). Computers and the Internet today play a more significant role in promoting student writing. As Lee et al. (2009) put it, "the functions of computers have been moved from a writing tool in the traditional classroom, to developing computer assisted language learning (CALL) activities… using synchronous and asynchronous networked tools" (p. 58) such as weblogs, wikis, and emails.

Widely recognized as an aggregated online journal, weblog can be defined as a ubiquitous "updatable template for writing" (Carney, 2009, p. 293) in which entries are regularly constructed and organized on a chronological basis and in reverse other (Campbell, 2003; De Andrés Martínez, 2012; Vurdien, 2013; Ward, 2004) through the use of free software like Blogspot, Blogger, Edublogs, Wordpress, and Blogfa.

Referring to them as collaborative environments, Godwin-Jones (2003) considered blogs as interactive spaces which are rich in hypertext and allow readers to react in written format. Technically speaking, a weblog can be considered as a website which supports information sharing and interactivity much beyond the conventional paper-based writing (De Andrés Martínez, 2012). The text formatting options in blogosphere resemble those of a word processing program in that the author can save the content as a draft and revise or even delete it before and after the publication (Alm, 2009). The act of adding content to the space is usually referred to as 'blogging' and the content author is called a 'blogger' (Wang, Lin, & Liao, 2012). Blog content, be it a personal diary or an educational task, and reader comments are archived and accessible when needed (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008). In addition, the blog content can be hyperlinked to other online sources (De Almedia Soares, 2008).

Since their first emergence, weblogs have enjoyed a tremendous popularity among different types of users. This burgeoning popularity, according to Bloch (2007), "has aroused the interest of

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