



RESEARCH PAPER

The Effect of Online Article Writing on Pakistani English Language Graduates' Writing Skills

¹Kainat Zeb and ²Muhammad Waqar Ali*

1. MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Islamia College, Peshawar, KP, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Islamia College Peshawar, KP, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author | waqarali@icp.ed.pk

ABSTRACT

In wake of current digitalization of knowledge, the use of virtual tools and platforms is proliferating to cultivate English language skills. Despite the research conducted in this area, there is still room for further inquiry as little research is available in the context of Pakistan. With the intention to fill the gap, this study aimed at fathoming the impact of online writing articles on the language proficiency of English language learners/graduates. Primarily, the current research intended to investigate whether the language skills of learners improves by online writing and whether self-assessment has a positive impact. The study is a quantitative research. Consequently, a 15-item questionnaire was designed to collect data from English Graduates, currently working as content writers across Pakistan. 5-point Likert-scale was employed to measure the participants' perceptions. The findings show that online writing practices have a positive impact on overall language skills in general and lexico-grammatical competence in particular. Additionally, they admitted that online article writing can prove a better contributor than other traditional writing practices carried out in a language classroom to enhance their English language skills.

KEYWORDS Blogging, Language Proficiency, Online Article Writing, Productive Skills

Introduction

Language skills are divided into two types: receptive skills and productive skills. Receptive skills are reading and listening while productive skills are speaking and writing. Writing is an important skill in language as it helps to communicate different ideas and concepts. However, some language learners are unable to communicate fluently and effectively through writing. Writing practices were confined to the language learning classrooms in the past, but now there has been a better change in writing practices. With the developing age, the use of the Internet has increased which enables people to communicate world widely. This has brought numerous benefits such as increased student motivation, access to authentic materials, and opportunities for effective interaction in real-world contexts. Among these internet tools, blogging and article writing are particularly advantageous for learning languages proficiently. The significance of writing skills extends beyond geographical borders, underscoring their worldwide importance.

Writing plays a pivotal role in literacy by empowering individuals to express their ideas and emotions with effectiveness (Alsubaie & Madini, 2018). Writing serves as a medium for transmitting information and functions as a wellspring of knowledge, influencing the development of language and thought patterns. Writing practice enhances not only students' comprehension but also proficiency in language. Consequently, students should engage in activities that allow them to practice generating cohesive writing such as blogging or article writing. For quite some time, blogs have been used as an important

platform where people can engage with the world in various fields. Blogs can be a better platform to practice writing skills for the language learners. Blog writing can enhance all language skills as it involves writing, speaking, listening, and reading (Du & Wagner, 2005). However, students do not engage in blog writing outside the classroom (Campbell, 2003). Another issue is the chronological organization of blogs on websites in which the older posts get buried beneath newer ones, which makes the feedback and self-reflection process difficult (Falchikov, 2002).

Literature Review

Reading and writing are considered complementary skills, collectively known as literacy skills. Unlike oral skills, which may develop more naturally, reading and writing require conscious effort and are often acquired through formal education settings (Cameron, 2003; Weigle, 2002). Literary skills are important for the progression of second language learning, especially within formal educational environments (Carson, 1990). When considering online writing, the significance of literacy skills in second language acquisition remains paramount, particularly within the realm of digital communication. In the digital age, where much of our writing occurs online, proficiency in reading and writing becomes even more essential. The learners with the help of the internet communicate extensively and effectively without the restriction of place and time. This brings several benefits to the learning and teaching of language and improves the interaction of people in different social contexts. Out of the array of internet tools available, blogging stands out as exceptionally beneficial in foreign language education. A blog, derived from the term "weblog" coined by Barger (1997), serves as a website where content such as text, images, media files, and data are consistently posted and arranged in reverse chronological order (Alsubaie & Madini, 2018). The act of managing or updating a blog, including the addition of new content, is known as blogging.

Furthermore, an individual responsible for writing and publishing these entries is often referred to as a blogger (Rostami & Hoveidi, 2014). Richardson (2010) characterizes blogs as easily accessible and updatable platforms, enabling writers or students to publish content directly onto the internet from anywhere with an internet connection. Within academic discourse, it is emphasized that writing extends beyond mere transmission of knowledge; instead, it is viewed as a source of knowledge itself. Furthermore, it is recognized not solely as a platform for problem-solving, but also as a resource for managing language and thoughts (Alsubaie & Madini, 2018). Hence, students ought to possess knowledge and comprehension regarding coherent and effective writing.

That said, the utilization of weblogs as an effective method for teaching various skills and addressing learning challenges has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly in the realm of foreign language education. By incorporating weblogs into both classroom and extracurricular activities, students are allowed to engage more deeply with various tasks and to reflect on their learning progress. This environment allows them to reconsider their word choices and phrases at their own pace and in a relaxed setting, devoid of stress and anxiety. Additionally, weblogs serve as a platform for practice aiming to encourage active participation among students and foster a collaborative learning environment (Mynard, 2007; Noytim, 2010; Dippold, 2010). Blogs, also known as weblogs, are like online diaries where people write about their thoughts and share links. They're a way to communicate with others on the internet. These are online journals updated regularly and have been a presence in the online community since 1998. The release of *Blogger*, a free blog hosting service, in August 1999 significantly accelerated the proliferation of blog sites (Blood, 2000).

Over time, blogs expanded their influence into various professional domains, notably journalism and business. Using a blog doesn't require any knowledge of HTML. As a result of this user-friendliness, even though blogs weren't initially designed for language classrooms, students are increasingly using them in educational settings across the globe. Blogs possess significant potential as an effective tool for instructing EFL writing classes (Zhang, 2009). To publish weblogs, bloggers meticulously craft their writings, fully aware that their work will be shared online and open to scrutiny by other students. This exposure makes them vulnerable to criticism. Upon reading the weblogs, readers aim to offer feedback to the bloggers, often providing constructive criticism. Consequently, writing weblogs can foster a sense of critical thinking among students (Noytim, 2010). Therefore, blogging seems to align with current constructivist learning theories and supports writing theories (Flowers & Hayes, 1981).

Guth and Helm (2011) highlighted the significance of weblogs in cultivating "multi-literacies," which play a crucial role in contemporary communication. They posit that various online collaborative tasks can enhance a range of skills, encompassing linguistic, communicative, and intercultural competencies. Moreover, weblogs offer students and language learners a platform to reflect on their experiences (Mynard, 2007), thus contributing to the creation of an authentic learning environment when integrated into language classrooms (Gluth & Helm, 2011). Tseng (2008) uncovered the effectiveness of blogs in English classes for medical students, particularly in fostering free writing and peer correction. Furthermore, blogging promotes learner autonomy, instilling in students a sense of ownership and responsibility for the content they share on their weblogs (Yang et al., 2005; Lowe & Williams, 2004). Godwin-Jones (2006) suggested that blogs offer a fertile ground for collaborative learning, encouraging feedback and creating a student-centered environment conducive to debate, articulation of ideas, and critical analysis of each other's writing. Peer feedback, as described by Falchikov (2002), involves reflective criticism of the work or performance of other students based on previously identified criteria. This feedback can occur through either one-off activities or a series of meetings during which students provide feedback to peers on increasingly refined versions of written work.

Weblogs offer a versatile platform for self-expression in English, catering to both local and global audiences (Noytim, 2010). The importance of writing and reading blogs in language learning was also highlighted by Ferriter (2009). The use of blogs in language language-learning context was advocated by Montero-Fleta and Perez-Sabaster. According to them, blog writing has the potential to boost the motivation and writing of language learners. Mynard's (2007) study focused on how weblog writing can enhance language learning and learner autonomy, suggesting that blog writing enhances student self-reflection. Similarly, Kavaliauskiene and Mazeikiene (2006) also proposed that blogging improves the learner's autonomy by increasing awareness of activities performed by the students. In addition, Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) argue that blog writing effectively improves the cognitive and metacognitive skills of the students, empowering them to make well informed decisions about themselves. Wang (2009) after examining the impact of blog-assisted electronic feedback, highlights the necessity of student training regarding writing and editing the blogs of their peers to improve the cooperative learning experiences. The increase of these tools in recent years has increased the motivation level of students to engage in blog writing and other electronic communication resources (Averianova, 2012).

Blog writing in the English Foreign Language teaching has faced challenges. According to Campbell (2003), students manifest disinterest in blogging outside the classroom. Students usually are reluctant to participate in blog writing outside the classroom which does not result in the complete utilization of the writing practice. Moreover, blog websites have a chronological organization of blogs in which a previously

written blog gets buried under the newer ones. This limits the overall feedback a student can get from a teacher or peer (Falchikov, 2002). If a student is more comfortable in self assessing the blogs after some writing practices, he/she will not be able to find his/her blogs on the website easily.

Considering the sensitivity of the activity for improving writing skill of the Pakistani EIL learners, this paper aims to explore the effectiveness of online article writing as a means to improve language proficiency. Unlike blogs, online articles do not get buried beneath the newer articles and each writer has his or her records of the written articles. Similarly, graduates of the English language do not require much feedback from peers and instructors. Therefore, this study will only examine the English language graduates who write articles as a hobby or as a freelancer regularly. Based on this, the study will examine whether such writing practices can contribute to the overall language proficiency or not specifically in the absence of a feedback mechanism.

Material and Methods

Design

A quantitative research design is chosen for this study to provide an overview of the language proficiency among English language learning graduates. For its relative efficiency and logistic ease for collecting data in quantitative studies (Johnson & Christenson, 2020), a 15-item questionnaire was developed on a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questions focus on the area that highlights three main aspects: (1) whether article writing has a positive impact on language skills, (2) how far writing articles outside the classroom is effective, and (3) how far writing proficiency improves without the pressure of being assessed. The approach of this study is to examine the impact of regular article writing on various aspects of language proficiency, especially vocabulary, expression of ideas and fluency in writing. By collecting the data from participants across diverse geographical areas, the research aims to identify potential differences in language skills before and after article writing. As the use of online applications for collecting data has been suggested in multiple studies (Salma, Uzunboylu, & Muti, 2020; Bhalerao, 2015; Ha, 2022), the questionnaire was designed on and administered online through using Google Forms to get information easily from different locations of the participants.

Participants

Owing to a limited target population, the purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data from participants. The participants (n = 60) were selected from different websites or platforms, namely, *Oddlystylish*, *Jeansoutfits*, *Freelancer*, *WritersWeekly*, *Copykackers*, *DigitalOcean*, *Longreads*, and *Listverse* where English language graduates were actively participating as content writers. The male participants (n = 47) outnumbered the female partakers (n = 13). With the intention to minimize cultural and/or regional effect on language learning, they were chosen from different regions across Pakistan, such as Lahore (n = 12), Peshawar (n = 9), Kohat (n = 6), Faisalabad (n = 8), Mansehra (n = 7), Karachi (n = 11) and Islamabad (n = 7). The participants were in the writing process for more than five months. This selection process made the study more valid as the participants' responses were based on first-hand experience in the subject matter.

Results and Discussion

Questions were asked from the participants in which the options 'agree and strongly agree' favoured the positive impact of article writing on language learning and proficiency. The frequency analysis revealed that most of the participants have selected these two options repeatedly. On the whole, an overwhelming majority agreed with the, indicating that article writing had a positive influence on language skills. However, a few participants remained neutral in their responses, and only 4 participants manifested their disagreement with the questions. Among all the questions related to the positive impact of article writing on language learning skills, no one selected the option to disagree or strongly disagree.

Table 1 witnesses that all save few writers (90%) acknowledge improvement in their language proficiency is due to online article writing. After writing for some months, participants reported being more convenient and confident in expressing their ideas in the English Language. Likewise, the majority of the participants (93%) agreed that online writing practice has contributed more than the traditional learning practices usually conducted in a language classroom to improve their language proficiency. Such practices are having a positive impact on language learners. All of the participants agreed that having such practices in language classrooms would increase language proficiency.

Table 1
Language Proficiency

Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
S1: I can express my ideas effectively in English after writing articles online for some time.	0	0	9.6	90.4	0
S2: Online article writing has improved my language proficiency more than traditional language learning practices.	6.7	0	0	26.7	66.7
S3: If online article writing activities were included in my Graduate program, I would have improved my language proficiency.	0	0	0	60.0	40.0

Concerning lexico-grammatical aspect of language proficiency, nearly three-fourth of participants (73%) agreed that article writing on a regular basis has enhanced their grammar skills and language expression (Table 2). Additionally, all the participants, as indicated in Table 2, exhibited agreement to the statement about improvement in their vocabulary. It indicates that online article writing effected increment to their lexicon, thereby improving their overall language proficiency. This practice has also encouraged them to learn complex new words as they (80%) feel motivated for learning new lexical items. Furthermore, writing an article is a process, in which first data about a topic is collected. For the collection of data, writers search and read different material on the topic. This process also leads to the improvement of the reading skills. Every three out of four respondents (73%) recognize the role of online writing on improving their reading skills. According to the data analyzed, reading and writing ultimately improve the language structure as well.

Table 2
Grammar and Vocabulary

Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
S4: Online article writing has improved my knowledge of grammar and sentence structure in English.	0	0	26.70	66.30	7

S5: Online article writing has improved my vocabulary skills.	0	0	0	100	0
S6: Online article writing regularly motivates me to learn new vocabulary	0	0	20	73	7
S7: Online article writing platforms have provided me with the opportunity to polish my writing skills.	0	0	20	80	0
S8: Online article writing has improved my reading skills.	0	0	27	60	13

Regarding the role of self-assessment in bettering language proficiency, 93 percent of the participants conceded to the viewpoint that online writing platforms also serve writers to polish their writing as they sometimes revisit and review the older articles to fathom the progress they are making. English language graduates are quite capable of assessing their own writings. Results show that participants' self-assessments have improved their language proficiency (Table 3: S10). Moreover, the fear of being assessed sometimes limits the originality of ideas; sometimes consciousness affects the flow of writing. This issue was addressed in the questionnaire and almost every respondent (96%) agreed that without the pressure of assessment, the participants write more fluently. To make this aspect easier, there should be separate sections for writers to keep their articles for self-assessment. With exception to some neutral responses (14%), none of the participants disagreed with this statement (Table 3: S12); therefore, a separate section can be beneficial for the writers.

Table 3
Self-assessment

Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
S9: I sometimes check my old articles to see the improvement.	6.7	0	0	26.3	67.0
S10: Self-assessing my written articles helped me improve my language proficiency.	0	0	6.7	86.6	6.7
S11: Without the pressure of being assessed, I can write more fluently.	0	0	4.2	95.8	0
S12: A website for students with separate sections to keep their articles is beneficial for self-assessment.	0	0	14.3	71.4	14.3

According to Table 4, a huge number of respondents (93%) agreed that such practices have made the learners write on any topic without hesitation regarding language as a medium to communicate. Correspondingly, the participants (93%) view that online writing has proved to be more convenient for language learners, as they can write at any place or time (Table 4). Furthermore, online writing practices have proved to build the confidence level of language learners. Save a few neutral responses, three-fourth of the participants (74%) admitted that the availability of their previous work on the websites contributed to ameliorating their language skills.

Table 4
Convenience and Confidence

Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
S13: Online article writing has helped me to write on any topic without hesitation regarding language structure or expression.	0	0	6.7	80.0	13.3

S14: Online article writing provides me with pace and convenience that allows me to practice writing more effectively	6.7	6.7	6.7	33.3	46.7
S15: If my old articles had vanished from the website, I would not have improved my skills as effectively as I have now.	0	0	25.6	66.7	7.7

Discussion

The study highlights a potential benefit of regular article writing tasks on language proficiency. According to Brown (2007), article writing not only improves writing proficiency but also develops critical thinking skills because they articulate their ideas and opinions in writing. The language students will foster their creativity and self-expression. It was noted that students' reading skills also improved if they are involved in writing practices (Johnson, 2010). Similarly, the data of this research shows that online writing practices improved the language proficiency of the learners.

This study fills a gap addressed in the previous research studies while collecting data from the participants. Previous studies highlighted that the old blogs of the writers are difficult to find out as new blogs get on the top of the website. It thereby leads to a lack of feedback from peers and self-assessment (Falchikov, 2002). However, this study has proved that article writing has a benefit for writers as they can keep track of their older articles for assessment. Moreover, learners who are not confident to share their thoughts and feel fear of assessment can also improve their language learning skills. This study reports that article writing does not necessarily involve feedback from peers or teachers. A writer does not have to mention his or her name while writing an online article. Students involved in such practices are free to choose a topic and write on it using any writing style that suits the writer. This process motivates and creates a sense of ownership in the writer's writing (Hyland, 2006). In Table 3, data shows that learners can write more fluently when they do not have a fear of being judged or assessed. Moreover, the higher level students might not require feedback for motivation, so for those who want to self-assess their writing, a specific website with their section would be beneficial. This does not mean that writers who seek feedback will be at a loss, there are comment sections available below every article, and the readers can provide feedback which can also be motivational for some.

Furthermore, students sometimes lose interest in blogging outside the language learning classroom (Campbell, 2003). They take it as a task and participate only in the classroom. However, the accessibility and the convenience of online platforms for article writing present an opportunity to enhance language learning outside the classroom (Gee, 2003). This gets more interesting as these writing practices are not tasks, do not require feedback, and do not have a deadline to meet. Furthermore, proper practice should be carried out by the instructors, to achieve the goal of language learning skills, as participants stated that this way of practicing was more effective than the traditional ones. Most universities have computers and the internet but cannot manage the execution of activities because there are many language learners with little digital equipment and few instructors to facilitate every student. To resolve this issue, institutions should create a dedicated website where students can publish their articles. By doing so, students will be able to perform writing practices at home with more convenience and personal space. This will not only provide the students with a real-world audience for their writing but also encourage autonomy and self-directed learning.

By embracing digital tools and platforms, educators and institutions can tap into students' intrinsic motivation and harness the power of technology to enhance learning outcomes. While this study was conducted on English language graduates, the implications should extend to secondary-level education as well. There should be a website developed for students so that they can practice writing outside the classrooms. Promoting this culture in secondary schools will also result in the improvement of the digital literacy of the students. The data shows that students feel more relieved if they practice writing at their place with convenience. This flexible environment will extend the learning process and the student will be able to take ownership of their learning journey.

The previous studies on blogging as an effective way to enhance language skills, employ pre-test and post-test measures to find the changes in skills. However, in this study, the participants were already engaged in article writing activities for months, so conducting experimental research would have been redundant. This aspect limits the findings to measure the impact of online writing on language proficiency over time. This study has chosen language graduates to measure whether they find online writing beneficial for language learning skills or not. Moreover, the use of a questionnaire delimits the study as it focuses on the self-reported perceptions and experiences of the participants. However, the study suggests avenues for future research, such as experimental research to find the differences between articles written with the help or feedback of an instructor and written articles without the help or feedback of an instructor among language graduates. Similarly, researches are needed to explore language proficiency development through online writing in different contexts and conditions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study investigates the impact of article writing on a regular basis on the language proficiency of English language graduates. With the help of quantitative research design and analysis of the responses given by 60 participants, this research aimed to assess improvements in the acquisition of vocabulary, expression of ideas, writing fluency, and other minor skills. Consistent writing practices in the target language do not help the writer with the mentioned skills but improve the accuracy in reading and writing. As a content writer, these graduates were supposed to read the already available data from the internet and write on some topics adding their own ideas and opinions. In this process, the reading, writing, and sentence structure of the writers were improved. According to the data, participants were taking less time in writing after the first month of writing articles online. The findings highlight the potential benefits of engaging in article writing. Such practices should be introduced in the Language curricula, providing students with additional opportunities to practice and self-assess themselves.

The objectives of the research were addressed effectively through analyzing the questionnaire responses. The analysis revealed that participants have observed a positive change in their writing skills, vocabulary, and reading skills. The participants have also reported that article writing has motivated them to learn complex vocabulary and expressions of the English language. Moreover, most of the participants are of the opinion that having the fear of being assessed might limit the actual proficiency and motivation of a student to practice writing and write their opinions or ideas. Though they do like the comments of their readers on the written articles. They enjoy the self-assessment in order to improve their writing expression and arrangement of the ideas while they welcome feedback from readings for motivation.

In addition, EIL learners' exposure to online platforms for practicing language skills in general and writing skills in particular may improve the same exponentially. It is

therefore recommended that the learners be encouraged to employ online writing forums and blogging websites to improve their writing skills. Moreover, the language instructors should guide the learners in the classroom about how to access and use such forums; it will thereby bring in diversity in the learners' writing as they will be exposed to different styles and genres of writing.

Recommendations

The limitations of the study should be acknowledged: small sample size and use of self-reported questionnaire. Future studies can be conducted by expanding the sample size and employing a mixed method approach to measure the relationship between article writing and language proficiency. Another major avenue for future research is to find out how much online writing improves the reading skills of English language learners. That said, the current study could not conduct gender-based comparative analysis of the issue. An intensive enquiry can shed some light on whether male or female writers benefit more from the online writing platforms. Additionally, this paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge in language education by spotlighting the potential benefits of online writing practices in language curricula. Educators can enhance the student's language skills by providing them with opportunities to engage in meaningful and authentic writing activities. Therefore, further research in this area will enrich our understanding of the impact of writing on language learning.

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