

A One-Stop Class Blog to Promote Collaborative Writing Activities

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ABSTRACT

Blogs have been found to assist learners to develop their skills through virtual teamwork. This paper reports on a preliminary study on the use of class blogs to support collaborative English writing activities. Observation and evaluation were conducted in a second year writing class comprising 30 university students over a period of one semester. In designing the ICT-based learning, the process suggested by Oliver, Harper, Wills, Agostinho & Hedberg (2007) was followed: rule based process, strategy based process, incident based process and role based process. Further interviews on students' interests, objections and constraints faced in using the class blogs were conducted to assess their functions in learning. The findings showed that blogs had encouraged collaborative writing activities, such as sharing knowledge and negotiation (Brown, 2001), support (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), consultation (Hedge, 2000) and appreciation (Yau, et al., 2003). Students' grades in the writing tests increased and the content of their writings improved after this activity was implemented. The issue faced by teachers was typically on the validity of the post contents or comments as there was a possibility for students to post on behalf of their peers. For students, their primary obstacle was the accessibility to the Internet on campus.

KEYWORDS: Communication technology, pedagogical tool, blog, writing, collaborative activities

Introduction

The contribution of the Internet in this digital era has assisted in enhancing the process of teaching and learning. The online world encourages students to be more actively involved in the tasks given by teachers. As a result, students' learning is promoted through digital devices from consequential activities which engage with real audiences. Among the digital devices, Blogs are found to be one of the popular asynchronous online platforms which have been employed in teaching and learning (De Almeida Soares, 2008). This has been found to be especially so in higher education (Fard, Tasir, Ziden, & Esa, 2010; Abu Bakar, Latif & Ya'acob, 2010; Normand-Marconnet & Cordella, 2012; Song & Chan, 2008; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Blogs are one of the alternative technological tools that can help students develop their skills, especially writing, through virtual collaboration (Normand-Marconnet & Cordella, 2012; Sollars, 2007; Våljataga, 2010).

Blogs are increasingly considered as a teaching and learning platform in the pedagogical sphere. Våljataga (2010, p. 20) says that "blogs can be used to support several pedagogical aims and scenarios, ranging from individual knowledge management and competence development to group-based learning activities". The feature of blogging, which exhibits collaborative writing activity, is through the production of each blog post and responses by audiences or followers. Using blogs in teaching and learning, students learn how to participate and become present in the community. Even those who consider themselves as outsiders among their peers are driven to be involved in the activity. The process of participation that is distributed socially becomes the central activity of a meaningful learning context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The students are also placed in a state where they can be dependent on what they are doing. Barab and Duffy (cited in Mayes & De Freitas, 2007) further add that to make the learning dependent in an informal setting, the materials should be set in a constructivist tasks order to make the materials and learning activities authentic to the social context. Appropriate design of the materials by the teachers can lead students to form their knowledge and abilities.

Blog activity in collaborative learning

In educational contexts, several advantages of using blogs are found to promote collaborative learning, help students increase their sense of audience and assist teachers in understanding their student writers and learning (Xu, 2008). The scenario in promoting a collaborative learning is when teacher-students in a particular class own a blog and all members are invited to share ideas, write their stories and conduct other social communication activities together. Members are also invited to give comments, add information and give feedback. Comments are one of the collaborative features of communication which increases interactivity within the blog environment (Suzuki, 2004); they are interactions that involve the exchange of thoughts, feeling, or ideas between members that create mutual effect on each other (Brown, 2001). This setting can encourage critical, analytical and analogical thinking and further promote creative, intuitive and associational thinking (Richardson, 2006, cited in Huette, 2006). A blog may increase the students' sense of audience when it belongs to a group or community of students because it allows them to gather and interact to achieve particular goals (Connell, 2005). This situation makes them aware of their writing and to whom they are writing (Kennedy, 2003). Yau et al.

(2003, p. 2) also state that collaborative learning occurs when “every student learns from everyone else, no student is deprived of the opportunity for making contributions and appreciating the contributions of others”. The attitude on appreciation can also motivate other students to continue writing and share knowledge through the class blog.

A number of studies have shown that blogs positively stimulate students’ writing experiences in the classroom. Song and Chan (2008) conducted a study on Malaysian university entry level students’ perception on the use of blog as a transformational technology for teaching and learning. By the end of the semester, their study revealed that students were ready to accept this medium to be a part of their learning environment as they found blog a useful and effective learning and assessment tool. Another study by Fard et al. (2010) looked into the use of blogs in the students’ learning process. Blogs were found to give positive outcomes towards students as the mutual connection between viewers and blogger showed a high and positive correlation coefficient. For L2 learning in ESL classrooms, specifically, Abu Bakar, Latif and Ya’acob (2010, p. 140) found that blogs offered students positive support “to take charge of their own learning in collaborative manner, set their own learning goals, developed new knowledge, improved their language skills, built their self-confidence and provided fresh dimension to life in the classrooms”.

A more recent study on collaborative blogging on communicative skills is by Iyer (2013) on its effects in writing of Thai EFL students. A total of 12 participants were to write eight blog assignments and the communicative skills in blog writing were analyzed based on four codes, namely creativity, critical thinking, voice, comments and contributions. Creativity is to convey new ideas and share imagination with others, while critical thinking is to develop the expression of thought. Voice is to provide opportunity to communicate ideas and views to others and finally, comments and contributions show the students’ communication with each other and efforts made to offer ideas. These codes were found to improve as a result of collaborative blogging.

The present study

For Universitas Syiah Kuala in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, Wi-Fi has been available in campus for all staff and students since 2008. However, writing classes have always been taught using the traditional method. These involved giving specific topics to the students individually or in groups after lectures on a subject matter. Their assignments and final projects were typed and printed for submission. Feedback, comments and grades were provided on the submissions. From one view, this method enables students to keep a record of what they have learnt, and they could improve their drafts by learning from the teacher’s feedback. However, from another point of view, the students were not engaged in collaborative activities as they did not learn from each other. They did not have the chance to read and learn from their friends’ writings, nor give peer feedback. In general, the learning process was teacher-oriented and students did not have much initiative to explore and improve their skills from peers. For that reason, a more effective atmosphere which involves students’ participation in writing activities with multi-interactions among peers was needed. It was important for us to seek new tools and services to build an environment that can further reinforce their learning.

Considering the benefits of blogs in enhancing the students' motivation and its contribution in improving writing skills, and furthermore with the accessibility of the Internet available in our campus, we decided to use blogs to complement the direct teacher-student instructive method in our writing class. This innovation was expected to boost the students' motivation and enhance their learning ability through collaborative writing. Furthermore, blogs allow responses to postings from teachers and students instantaneously. Teachers and students can instantly respond to a post right after it is published. This differs from the traditional writing evaluation method where feedback takes time to be distributed back to the students by the teachers. Accordingly, this study sought to answer two research questions:

1. What is the collaborative writing activities found in the class blog?
2. What are the students' perceptions on the use of the class blog?

Despite previous studies having shown that blogs improve performance in writing skills, there was still a need to study the use of blogs especially in English as a foreign language context. The rationale for this is because the use of blogs in English language education, in developing countries such as Indonesia in particular, is still new. Therefore, this research is hoped to benefit other teachers who also intend to implement blogs as a part of their teaching activities especially to enhance writing skills.

Method

Participants

We investigated the initial use of blogs over one semester in an English writing class. The class, *Writing II*, was for undergraduates who were in their second year. The class was held twice a week, totalling a number of 32 meetings in one semester. A number of 30 students enrolled the class with an age range of 17-25 years old. We planned the blog activity before the semester started and inquired about the students' familiarity with the Internet on the very first day of class. All of them said that they were very familiar with the Internet. As a start, every student had a Facebook account and half of the students were on Twitter, Multiply, Friendster and Hi5. From 30 students, 18 owned personal laptops. For those who did not, they had borrowed their friends' laptops, used the ones available in the main library or those at the *Warnet* (an abbreviation from '*warung Internet*', which means Internet shops available to the public).

Instruments

In conducting this study, we used a class blog as our first instrument of collecting data (e.g. the students' posts) and from these posts we identified the collaborative writing activities based on the literature. The second instrument of our study was the interview with the students to obtain their perceptions on the use of class blog during the semester. The use of these instruments is explained as the following.

(1) Class blog

We had chosen blogs over other social networking software such as Wikis or Moodle as our students were not very familiar with them. Furthermore, even though Wikis and Moodle have

more features than blogs, blogs seems to be simpler and do not require knowledge of HTML and HTP (Smith & Baber, 2005; Kennedy, 2003), and they are easy to publish (Pendrod, 2007). Moreover, 23 out of 30 students were known to have accounts in some blogs and 15 of them even had their own blogs. The first author also owned a blog and most students were members of her blog. For others, this was their very first introduction into blogging, collaborating and publishing work online. Blogs also expanded our possibilities of writing together even when no specific room was available as it is adaptable in terms of program, location, interaction and communication (Collis & Moonen, 2001). This is substantiated by Cheong (2002, cited in Zaidieh, 2012, p. 20) that “the social networking is easy and quick in term of accessing accessibility, reviewing, updating, and editing learning material needs anytime and anywhere”.

Campbell (2003) mentions that there are three types of blogs used for educational purposes, namely: the tutor blog (run by the class teacher), the learner blog (run by each student in the group individually) and the class blog (run by teacher and students collaboratively). Some of our students were new to this technology and some of them did not own personal computers or laptops. Considering these issues and the fact that the objective of involving blogs in our writing activities was to promote collaborative writing among students and also with their teachers, we chose to use a class blog where both teachers and students could mutually work together and assist one another under one digital circle.

Course of action on the use of class blog

Similar to the face-to-face communication, online communication also needs rules to keep our goals on track. Consequently, we set a few guidelines and expectations for the blog activity. In putting theory into practice, Oliver et al. (2007) mention four things to be considered when designing an ICT (Information and Communications Technology) based learning to promote quality outcomes, namely: rule based process, strategy based process, incident based process, and role based process. They were employed as the following.

(a) Rule based process

Writing II is a compulsory beginner’s course for students in English writing in the study program. It was the continuation of *Writing I* given in the third semester. In *Writing II*, the main subjects to be covered in the class included simple main idea, supporting sentences, comparison and contrast. Therefore, to achieve the learning goals through our class blog activity, rules were set for signing up and posting.

In signing up, both teachers and students owned one blog. The class blog was primarily created by the first author. As this was an initial trial on blog activity conducted in our classroom, we wanted to avoid outsiders participating in it. There was the possibility of a blog being read by thousands of people that may constrain the use of blogs for educational purposes and further have unknown “netizens” respond or give comments unexpectedly (William & Jacobs, 2004, p. 233). Therefore, the teacher-students’ blog was restricted to the class and outsiders were not allowed to become followers. It is demanding enough for teachers to evaluate students’ writing as to read through all their work is time consuming (Kennedy, 2003) let alone permit other non-student members to participate in the blog. For

that reason, only members of the class could post, give feedback or comments in our class blog and this made it easier for us to identify and evaluate our students. They were asked to sign up in the blog with their real names. Every post or comment made by students was also followed by their full names in brackets.

The first blogging activity started after two months of the course to complement the teacher-students direct learning method. We needed time from a few class meetings to set out the instructions to operate the technology and rules to begin with. The students were divided into 10 groups, consisting of three students each. Each group was to post an assigned writing topic in the class blog. We did not assign the task individually to students as Sollars (2007) says that it may be better for hesitant or introvert students to start working in a large or small group to encourage them. Hence, their first effort for publication was through group work. This could increase their confidence as they would have time to edit and ensure together as a team that the draft was appropriate before the final product was circulated.

In posting, we had also set rules about who and what to post. Each week, one group was chosen to become the host of the blog with a specific topic to be written in 250-300 words. Barab and Duffy (cited in Mayes & De Freitas, 2007) suggest that materials should be authentic to the social context, and so we chose topics which involved issues in our education system, such as writing a thesis as the university's requirement, achieving a certain score in TOEFL as a graduation requirement, wearing uniforms to school, and teachers to be replaced by the Internet. The writing genre followed the university's syllabus such as narrative and descriptive writing. The host could upload videos and pictures to support their text. Creativity was also encouraged; therefore, the host could change the background colour or design accordingly. Students were warned against plagiarism from the beginning of the course and were warned that plagiarism could result in them failing the course.

(b) *Strategy based process*

Oliver et al. (2007) emphasize that activity needs tasks. Learning through blog depends on the activities that are designed. Students' interactions through comments on the threads lead them to enhance their knowledge by negotiating in the writing process, such as asking for clarifications, learning new vocabulary and at the same time improving their writing. These actions direct the students to become active participators or contributors rather than merely passive recipients of knowledge (Brandl, 2002).

Accordingly, in our class blog activity, for other students who were not host of the week, they were to post feedbacks and comments on the comment thread. They could argue, propose, agree or clarify the issues presented by the host as the options were limitless, but within the boundaries of appropriate language. The use of indecent language was not given any mark. Every student had to post one comment with at least two to three lines of text within the comment thread. They were also allowed to comment on other students' comments on the post, so feedback was not only oriented to the post by the host. The teachers also provided comments for every post to support a dynamic environment, and these could be debated by the students as well.

(c) *Incident based process*

Oliver et al. (2007) see this process as the learning which forces students to be exposed to, or take part in the participation of a task. This enables students to make their own decision about what they are going to do. In view of that, one of our rules was that every student must comment on the post of the week. This action was to get all students to participate and be involved in the writing task given to the host.

(d) *Role based process*

Oliver et al. (2007) explain that this process involves students taking different roles. They also explain that the outcome of the learning process is gained through students' participation. In our class blog, despite that we were the one who appointed the host of the week and topic for the group, thus the students were the active executors in this activity. Every student had the chance to become the role of host and commenter in the process.

From all the posts or writing from the students in the class blog, we observed the collaborative activities which were formulated based on the literature and there were aligned with our data or content of our students' blog writing. These collaborative activities were *sharing knowledge* and *negotiation* (Brown, 2001), *support* (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), *consultation* (Hedge, 2000) and *appreciation* (Yau, et al., 2003).

(2) *Interviews*

To further assess to what extent the class blog was functional to our students in collaborative writing activities, the first author interviewed every student on their interests, objections and constraints faced in executing this task near the end of the semester. As this was our initial trial on this particular method, it was important to gain information from the first batch of students for future improvement and planning. The perceptions of the students on whether the use of the class blog had assisted in improving their writing skills were also obtained. The students are coded as SS1 until SS30 in this paper.

The first three questions asked during the interview were from De Almeida Soares (2008) and we have added questions number four and five to suit our current situation:

1. What's your opinion about this activity?
2. How motivated are you with the blog?
3. Does it help you to improve your English writing?
4. What have you learned from this activity?
5. What are your constraints in conducting the class blog?

Findings

Class blog collaborative writing activities

We found that writing in the class blog presented productive outcomes. Students were seen to engage in situations where they commented based on the host's post. The long thread of comments on every post indicated reciprocated interaction between them. It showed us that every student had put in an effort to participate. An extract from a students' post is as shown in Figure 1 with the topic statement: "Students do not have to write thesis anymore". Figure 2 illustrates some the comments in the thread by other students following the post.

Figure 1. A post by Group 4

Host: Group 4
 Names: SS4, SS17 and SS12
 Topic: Students do not have to write thesis anymore

Thesis is an academic writing. It constitutes of a requirement for undergraduate students to get the bachelor's degree. All university in Indonesia require their students to write a thesis as a requirement to get bachelor's degree. The thesis has to be written before the students follow the sidang (final exam). Because, when sidang is going on, examiner will examine the students by asking some questions about the content of their thesis. By those questions, the examiner can evaluate whether or not students can defend their arguments which is written in their thesis.

On this point, we disagree that the students do not have to write thesis anymore. Because, what they have to give to their department and their university to show their ability about what they have learned without writing a thesis. There are several reasons why we disagree if students do not have to write thesis anymore. First, the students must have an evidence of their ability about what they have learned in the university. For example, all along 8 semester, they had studied in university, writing thesis is a possibly thing to prove their ability. Second, thesis can prove whether or not the students are reasonable to get the bachelor's degree. Third, as university students, they must be able to write scholarly paper in order they can write a thesis is easier.

Figure 2. Comment threads following the post by Group 4

(SS10)
 Basically, I agree with your statement if university students have to write a thesis to get bachelor's degree. But your statement 'writing thesis is a possibly thing to prove their ability' is not reasonable to me. Because in fact, not all students make their own thesis. Most of them have paid someone to make it. For that fact, how can the thesis become a possibly thing to prove students' ability?

A reply of that comment
 (SS13)
 Her quote that 'Because in fact, not all students make their own thesis. Most of them have paid someone to make it'. I just want to say, how did you get the fact? In writing, if we put facts we must show how do we get the fact. I mean you have to show us the sources where you get it, but unfortunately, you do not show it to us.

(SS6)
 I agree with her (SS10) that was said: "how can the script become a possibly thing to prove someone's ability? I think you should be careful to make the reasons. Because if your reasons is not related to your topic. It could not be good. But overall all good ☺"

(SS14)

Paragraph 2 line 1: I think “On this point” should be “At this point.” That is the right grammar I think.

(SS21)

I agree with the writer. It is true that placing all the emphasis on the thesis seems very dangerous, but almost all universities in this world have students to write thesis or research report to get a degree.

(Teacher)

I get your point and good job! But needs to pay more attention on grammar. For examples: par. 1 line 5 change “By” to “From”, par. 1 line 7 change “is” to “are”. (SS14) is correct. Par. 2 lines 2-3...question or statement? There some more which you have to take notice in the whole text, I don’t want to give it all away ☺ Can anybody else spot them? Oh, another important matter: please add references to support your views!

A reply of that comment

(SS22)

Miss, I think in paragraph 2 line 5 they have to remove “an” too. Then they have to change “about” to “on”. Am I right or wrong?

(more comment posts)

(SS17)

Thank you for your comments and suggestions. We will fix it immediately. Hopefully for the next article, we will be better.

From all the blog posts, a number of collaborative activities were found among students. As mentioned earlier in the Method section, we have found them to be: *sharing knowledge*, *negotiation*, *support*, *consultation* and *appreciation*. They are explained in the following sections.

(1) *Sharing knowledge*

We discovered that the students were exploring and sharing their ideas in the comment threads whereas this condition was not seen in the classroom activity. This collaborative exchange of ideas provides mutual understanding among them (Brown, 2001). For example, after Group 4 (host) posted their writing (see Figure 1), other students tried to give comments in the form of ‘agree or disagree’ following their reasons and suggestions, such as by SS10, SS6 and SS21. The experiences and opinions brought up by other students in the comment threads could be discussed either directly in the class blog or later during the face-to-face meeting in class.

(2) *Negotiation*

The process of negotiating meaning (Brown, 2001) among students also occurred at the same time, such as the comment by SS13 who asked for clarification of SS10’s comment. SS14 who offered a correction in the host’s grammatical error suggests that the student has become a contributor of knowledge (Brandl, 2002). The feedback by the teacher was not only for the host, but for other students to read as well. It is expected that all students can learn from the teacher’s correction to further improve the quality of their writing. This can be seen by the comment provided by SS22, where she also took part in addressing some grammatical errors made by the host and added her comment as a reply to the teacher’s. This initiative meant that the students did

not just pay attention to the post by the host, but also to the discussion developed by the community as a whole.

(4) Support

Another important account found from the comments and feedback of students was support (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Every student was seen to reinforce each other. Jacobs (2003, cited in Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 233) says that “the readers of blogs, who post comments in reply to entries, often positively reinforcing the opinions of the blogger, but sometimes disagreeing on points of philosophy, politics or social comment, and occasionally ‘flaming’ the blogger for opinions expressed”. Regarding our class blog, we found numerous examples of support from students towards each other. Examples from Figure 2 are such as SS10 who started her comment with encouragement, “I agree with your statement...” before pointing out her disagreement with “But your statement...”. Then there is the comment by SS6, who provided an argument to the opinion of the host but later cheered them by giving a compliment, “But overall all good”.

(5) Consultation

We also discovered that the less skilful and active students which we detected during the direct teacher-students learning session were also willing to provide comments to the host’s posting. They felt that in the class blog they had time to firstly write a draft of their comment on a piece of paper which could be edited. They could also consult their peers, and revise the comments again until they felt confident enough to post them on the blog. The blog activity also focused on the students rather than teachers; they were forced to be active in the community. A positive side to this ‘force’ was that it encouraged students, especially the reluctant ones to become what Hedge (2000) described as self-directed learners, who motivated themselves to reach a certain goal. It empowered the shy or marginalized students to emerge in the online community (Pendrod, 2007).

(6) Appreciation

Finally, by the end of the comment threads, one of the hosts posted a personal appreciation towards all his peers and teachers for their comments. This indicated that his group was open to constructive feedback to further improve their writing. Showing appreciation was important to maintain a sense of connection, interaction and trust among the students. As proposed by Yau et al. (2003), when students learn from each other, this is when they can learn to appreciate the work of their peers. This attitude can stimulate other students to improve their performance in writing.

Students’ perceptions on the use of class blog

Consequently, information given by students from the interviews helped us to evaluate the implementation of the blog activity. From the questions (Q1-Q5), the responses from our students were as following.

Regarding Q1, 87.5% of the students said that they enjoyed writing in the class blog. The typical responses for those who accepted this activity was that learning to write by using the class blog gave them opportunity to read their peers' work and vice versa. As they were also able to comment and give feedback to each other, they could share ideas and learn from each other. Some excerpts (E) from the students who viewed the class blog positively are:

- (E1) *We can read our friends' work. We can share, become more active and using something new in class such as this technology for learning is interesting. (SS6)*
- (E2) *I can compare my writing with my friends'. I can learn more by reading more work of my friends'. (SS8)*

For those who viewed the activity with uncertainty (12.5%), it was because they felt that they were not that good in writing. Therefore, if their peers could read their work and judge them, it would be embarrassing. However, they claimed that as over the semester, they felt more comfortable and confident to post and comment in the class blog compared to at the beginning of the semester as the face-to-face meetings with the teachers and other students made them become more familiar with each other every week.

For Q2, 87.5% of students found that collaborative writing through blog increased their motivation in writing, and another 12.5% were not very motivated or interested even though they also found blog to be useful for them. A positive comment from a student was:

- (E3) *Yes! If we just write on paper, it is only me and the lecturer who read it. But with the blog, everyone can read it. So it motivates me to write better, to write something good. (SS7)*

A negative response was:

- (E4) *Not really. Blog is just a media to post our writing. But I am not really motivated to write more because of it. (SS4)*

Referring to Q3, all students agreed that the class blog had improved their writing. They had gained knowledge from the comments, feedback and postings from their peers. They also claimed that correction from the teacher assisted them in improving their writing.

- (E5) *The comments made us aware of our mistakes. We get more knowledge from reading our friends' posts. Our friends can criticize us, but whenever they praise me, I am so happy! (SS2)*
- (E6) *I learn a lot! Because we learn how to write from blog, our friends can comments and give critics towards our writing. So I discover more about my writing weaknesses in academic writing. I can improve from them. (SS30)*

As for Q4, 75% of the students found that the blogs enhanced their writing ability such as expressed in E7. However, 25 of the students were unsure whether they had learned anything from this activity, such as stated in E8.

- (E7) *Yes. There were so many posts by friends, so many comments, so I learned positively. The feedbacks from the teachers and friends helped me write better. (SS3)*
- (E8) *I don't think so. It just a facility that let other people read my work. If it is not good, it is embarrassing. (SS24)*

For the constraints we asked in Q5, 65.5% said that it was related to accessibility to the Internet, which was slow at times. Another 35.5% did not report any constraints. Regarding the Internet, they said they could do their homework at home as they had better access there. When the connection was slow in campus, they used the facility in the *Warnet* such as stated in E9.

- (E9) *Yes, we had to go to hot spot area. Sometimes the Internet is slow and it doesn't connect. So I have to go to the Warnet. (SS27)*

Implications of the class blog

Having conducted writing tasks through a class blog, we are assured that this method can benefit students by enhancing their writing skills through collaborative work. First of all, students were engaged in collaborative task and collaborative thinking. These are among the advantages found in a blog activity (Xu, 2008). This was shown in the effort they took to work together to produce a piece of writing and post it on the class blog. Secondly, the students were put in a situation where they had to “become visible” in the community by participating in the thread comments. This pushed them to be more courageous to provide comments, even if it was only in one sentence. Some students were even seen to give comments more than once and provide arguments and clarifications to their posts or to those posted by others in the class. Brown (2011) explains that this kind of interaction creates mutual effects on each other. It also enhances students' critical, analytical, and analogical thinking (Richardson, 2006, as cited in Huette, 2006). Thirdly, students were comfortable using this platform in their English language class as evidenced by their eagerness to be active in the class blog community. As Abu Bakar, Latif & Ya'acob (2010) contend, blogs offer positive support in terms of collaborative learning goals, new knowledge experiences, improved language skills, increased self-confidence and the creation of a new atmosphere in learning. Therefore, this blog activity is certainly one of the innovative tools that can support learning in writing.

Overall, the ten topics posted by our students provided numerous examples of collaborative activities in sharing knowledge, negotiation, (Brown, 2001), support, (Williams and Jacobs, 2004), consultation (Hedge, 2000) and appreciation (Yau, et al, 2003). Students showed evidence of participation and seemed content to be involved in the class blog community. Any doubts about whether the postings were made by the students themselves were resolved during face-to-face meetings with the students.

Apart from blog, direct classroom activities were also conducted, so students and teachers did not only meet in the virtual environment, but also in the real world. The implementation of a class blog resulted in a more vibrant learning environment compared to our previous classes with conclusive direct teacher-student mode of learning. During every class meeting, the discussion on the post of the week which was conducted digitally then became face-to-face discussions. Issues which were not resolved or clarified in the blog became the concentration of direct

discussion in the classroom. In one instance, the teacher could not fully explain why “By” was needed to be changed to “From” (see Figure 2) as that would take up much space. Consequently, during the class meeting, this was further clarified to students who were still confused about the matter. Discussion on how to write appropriate references and citations were also further dealt with in the classroom.

Discussion and conclusion

The class blog was found to promote collaborative writing activities in our class. From our data, the students not only shared knowledge, but negotiated, supported each other, consulted with the teachers and each other and showed appreciation to others. The use of the blog also switched the mode of learning from teacher-centred to student-centred, and complemented our direct teaching methods in the classroom. The students’ individual grades for the beginning, midterm and final writing examinations increased over time throughout the course. This indicated that their participation in collaborative writing probably assisted them in being more aware of their writing skills and motivated them to improve. The interviews conducted with the students further suggest that the majority of them were positive about on the implementation of the class blog. For teachers, when students post their work online, where their posts and comments were digital rather than on a hard copy, it was also easier for teachers to test for plagiarism, for example using Google Search.

Our study has shown that the use of class blog brought positive effects towards students’ writing skills through collaborative tasks. However, this study also has limitations. Among them are the participants of the study which only consisted of students in one particular class. It is expected that future research can conduct an experiment which involve two classes (one as the control group, and the other as the experimental group) to study the difference between the two. A study of the students’ writing scores at different points of the course is also suggested to track the level of improvement in their writing skills.

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