

Weblog-Based Collaborative Learning: Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Skill and Motivation

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of weblog-based collaborative learning on young Iranian EFL learners' writing skill and motivation. To this end, the participants were selected from a language institute and divided into two groups of experimental and control each with 40 female students in the age range of 18 to 25. They were classified as low, intermediate, and high according to their level of language proficiency. While the control group attended classes, the students in the experimental group were simply asked to put their writing assignments on the weblog. They were asked to read each others' writings and make comments and corrections. A pre-test measured the participants' initial behavior in writing. A parallel test was conducted at the end of the study to check the effect of the treatment on the students' final behavior in writing. Their writing was scored by using the scoring rubric adapted from Rog (2007). A questionnaire was also used to check the blogger's motivation. The analysis of the data revealed that the blogging integrated collaborative learning instruction was more effective than in-class language learning instruction. The results of the study indicate that blogs as a tool for language learning provide a platform for language

learners to use the language actively. Finally, learners were motivated to use language and build their autonomy in learning language.

Keywords: Blogging, Collaborative writing, Weblog, Language learning, Motivation

1. Introduction

The development of technology in recent years has offered new solutions to the limitations of the traditional methods. The weblog-based collaborative learning facilitates interaction and communication, enhances discussion and helps learners organize concepts and achieve meaningful activity and learning.

Weblogs or blogs have gained a noticeable place in the online community and gradually have been applied for educational goals as an aid for language learning and teaching (Campbell, 2003; Johnson, 2004); however, this new way of learning has been used in few EFL classrooms. Blogs have not been initiated for language learning, but they have potential values to use as a tool for EFL teaching.

Using blogs in educational settings has become a new learning variation from a sociological viewpoint (Montes-Alcalá, 2007). Because of their multimedia features and interactivity, blogs are used not only for exchanging information and expanding communication but also for providing possibilities for teachers and learners to enhance their daily language learning practice. According to Huffaker (2005), “in the classroom, students can have a personal space to read and write alongside a communal one, where ideas are shared, questions are asked and answered and social cohesion is developed” (p. 94). In language learning, blogs can be used as a tool to develop writing skills and to provide a practicing environment that enables students to think, reflect, and create language slowly with their peers (Pinkman, 2005).

It is believed that blogging can support the writing process, enhance critical thinking, improve interaction, and facilitate collaborative knowledge development (Bernstein, 2004; Carlson, 2003; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Oravec, 2003; Wang, Fix, & Bock, 2004), and provide the extended learning community outside the classroom (Farmer, 2006; Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; Lowe & Williams, 2004).

Writing is not considered as an activity of expressing oneself or exchanging information individually, but it consists of interactional and communicative activities with partners. According to Kennedy (2003), blogs have the potential to enhance writing and literacy skills. Using weblogs is a useful way to join technology and education inside the classroom and outside the school walls. Because blogs are both individualistic and collaborative, they are capable of providing an arena to encourage self-expression, creativity, and community building. They can be used in different academic contexts and settings for practicing reading and writing because of their multidisciplinary format (Huffaker, 2005).

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants were young Iranian learners of English in a private language institute. 80 students participated in the study. 40 were assigned to the control group and the other 40 to the experimental group. The coursebook taught at the institute was *Top Notch*. According to the students' performance on the *Top Notch* Placement Test they were divided into through

language proficiency levels: 14 students at the low proficiency level, 14 at the mid level, and 12 at the high level in each group.

The participants were all female in the age range of 18 to 25. The students in the control group attended classes for 1:45 hours twice a week, 22 sessions altogether. The students in experimental group did not participate in classes, but they were very eager to learn English, and they were interested in surfing the internet. Up to this point in their studies the students had mainly received instruction in the traditional face-to-face format. The students had never had the chance of using the language in authentic environments. In order to frame an authentic context, the researcher designed a weblog which could be a medium to effectively facilitate the successful formation of a community of inquiry. All the tasks and assignments were slightly adapted from the students' course book and transferred to the weblog.

2.2 Procedure

At the outset of the project the experimental group received a two- session instruction. The first session was specified to familiarize the students with general skills to use the computer and to help them understand and use the weblog. In the second session, this group received introductory training in which they were given guidelines on collaborative work, blog interaction and formal writing. The concept of peer assessment and interaction was explained. The collaborative learning was discussed. The students were instructed to be attentive to comments of each member of the group and be ready to consider their assessment and opinions.

Students worked in groups of four. The size of the group is important to reach appropriate performance and involvement. According to Pérez-Sabater, Montero-Fleta, and Rising (2009), in small groups there is a better interaction, intimacy, and trust. These students were supposed to post their comments to the weblog. The teacher played an important role by providing guidance to students to ensure their active and rich engagement in the activity. Students were required to share roles in the group. They were asked to be responsible for solving their peers' problems and helping them to develop their language proficiency.

The students were given a specific topic based on the topic of each unit of their book, each student then submitted her assignment to an online peer assessment system. Each writing assignment was assessed by two peers, and thus each student also assessed two peers' writing.

To apply a rigid program, and also foster bloggers' commitment, a time table including time and hours of their participation was presented to them, which included 1:45 hours twice a week interaction through weblog. The bloggers were expected to post their writing drafts in a specified time, and be attentive to the deadlines.

After being assessed by their peers, the students revised their own writing according to their peers' comments and suggestions (with the process including initial submission, first peer assessment, revision submission, second peer assessment, second revision submission, teacher assessment, and final draft). Such an online peer assessment system was used in some

previous studies (e.g., Chen & Tsai, 2009; Tseng & Tsai, 2007; Wen & Tsai, 2008). Each of the participants performed the roles of both author and editor simultaneously.

The teacher made sure that the students followed the weekly schedule. The final draft was published on the weblog. The objective of the course was to develop fluency, accuracy, quality and correctness in writing. Appendix A shows a sample of comments posted to the weblog by their peers. It expresses how the students collaboratively participated in the assessment of their peers' writing assignments.

3. Results

3.1 The Result of the Students' Writing Performance

The writing performance consisted of a pre-test and a post-test in which the participants were asked to do a writing task. The students' task performance in writing was measured using the Rubric (see Appendix B), which was used by both the instructor and the other rater in order to check the intrarater reliability. A t-test was used to analyze the difference between the writing performance of the participants on the pre-test and the post-test. The results showed a significant difference between the performance of the experimental and control groups at all three levels.

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, and standard error of mean of the low-level participants in the control and experimental groups in the post-test. As it is observed, for both the experimental and the control groups the mean score increased. To see whether the difference was significant the t-test was run.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the low-level experimental and control groups in the Pre and Post-Test

Code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest	14	39.1429	3.36187	0.79737
Control	14	40.9286	2.98347	0.89850
experimental				
posttest	14	44.1429	4.57177	1.22186
Control	14	55.000	6.73681	1.80049
experimental				

Table 2 illustrates the results of the t-test. It indicates that the observed t for the low-level experimental and control groups in the pre-test is 1.486 (obs. $t = 1.486$) while the critical t (df = 26 and $\alpha = 0.05$) is 1.706 (crit. $t = 1.706$), which is higher than the observed t (obs. $t < \text{crit. } t$); so, this represents that in the pre-test, the experimental and control groups were not significantly different. But after implementing the treatment, it was revealed that the observed t for the experimental and control groups in the post-test was 4.990 (obs. $t = 4.990$) while the

critical t ($df = 26$ and $\alpha = 0.05$) is 1.706 (crit. $t = 1.706$), which is not higher than the observed t ; so there is a statistically significant difference between the low-level experimental and control groups.

Table 2 . The Results of the t-test for the Low-Level Experimental and Control Groups in the Pre-test and Post-test

	Levene's test for equality of variance		T-Test for Equality of Mean						
	f	sig.	t	df	sig	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	%95 Confidence	
								Lower	Upper
Pretest for low-level 1	.270	.608	1.486	26	.149	1.78571	1.20129	-4.25500	.68357
Posttest for low-level 1	2.246	.149	4.499	26	.000	10.8571	217594	-15.3294	-6.38444

Table 3 presents the mean, standard deviation, and standard error of mean for the mid-level participants in the writing post-test for both control and experimental groups. As it is observed, the mean of the experimental group in the writing post-test for the mid-level participants is higher than that of control group.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Mid-Level Experimental and Control Groups in the Pre-Test and Post-Test

Code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest Control	14	68.7143	8.53435	2.28090
experimental	14	72.1429	7.94071	2.12225
posttest Control	14	74.7851	8.51405	2.27548
experimental	14	84.3571	7.16409	1.91468

Table 4 illustrates the results of the t-test. It indicates that the observed t for the mid-level experimental and control groups in the pre-test is 1.100 (obs. $t = 1.100$) while the critical t ($df = 26$ and $\alpha = 0.05$) is 1.706 (crit. $t = 1.706$), which is higher than the observed t (obs. $t < \text{crit. } t$); so, this represents that in the pre-test, the experimental and control groups were not significantly different. But after implementing the treatment, it was revealed that the observed t for the experimental and control groups in the post-test was 3.219 (obs. $t = 3.219$) while the critical t ($df = 26$ and $\alpha = 0.05$) is 1.706 (crit. $t = 1.706$), which is not higher than the observed

t; therefore, there is a statistically significant difference between the mid-level experimental group and the control group.

Table 4. The Result of the t-test for the Mid-Level Experimental and Control Groups in the Pre-Test and Post-Test

	Levene's test for equality of variance		T-Test for Equality of Mean						
	f	sig.	t	df	sig	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	%95 Confidence	
								Lower	Upper
Pretest for mid-level	0.092	.756	1.100	26	.281	3.42857	3.11552	-9.83261	2.97346
Posttest for mid-level	.0317	.578	3.219	26	.003	9.37143	2.97385	-15.6842	-3.45859

Table 5 presents the mean, standard deviation, and standard error of mean of the high-level participants of the control and experimental groups in the post-test. As it is observed, the mean of the experimental group in the post-test is higher than the one for the control group.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for the High-Level Experimental and Control Groups in the Pre-Test and Post-Test

Code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest	Control	88.1667	2.65718	.76706
	experimental	89.9167	2.46644	.71200
posttest	Control	92.7500	3.13702	.90558
	experimental	98.00	1.53741	.44381

Table 6 illustrates the results of the t-test. It indicates that the observed t for the high-level experimental and control groups in the pre-test is 1.672 (obs. t = 1.672) while the critical t (df = 22 and $\alpha=0.05$) is 1.717 (crit. t = 1.717), which is higher than the observed t (obs. t < crit. t); so, this represents that in the pre-test, the experimental and control groups were not significantly different. But after implementing the treatment, it was revealed that the observed t for the experimental and control groups in the post-test was 5.206 (obs. t = 5.206) while the critical t (df = 22 and $\alpha=0.05$) is 1.717 (crit. t = 1.717), which is not higher than the observed

t; as a result, there is a statistically significant difference between the high-level experimental group and the control group.

Table 6. The Results of the t-test for the High-Level Participants of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pre and Post-Test

	Levene's test for equality of variance		T-Test for Equality of Mean						
	f	sig.	t	df	sig	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	%95 Confidence	
								Lower	Upper
Pretest for high-level	.238	.630	1.672	22	.109	1.75000	1.04638	-3.92046	.42046
Posttest for high-level	7.002	.015	5.206	22	.000	5.25000	1.00849	-7.34147	-3.15853

All in all, the results indicate that experimental group at all three levels significantly outperformed the control group, which means weblog-based collaborative learning had a highly positive effect on young Iranian EFL learners' writing skill.

3.2 The Result of the Students' Responses to Motivation and Perception Questionnaire

A questionnaire was adapted from Nadzrah, Latif, and Ya'acob (2010). Some items were added by the researcher for the purpose of this study (see Appendix C). The questionnaire examined the students' perceptions of using blogs as a platform for writing in order to develop their writing skills in English. A four-point Likert Scale format was used in the questionnaire, and responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency analysis and percentages. The results are as follows (see Figure 1):

A high percentage of the students (95%) chose "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" for using blog as a platform to practice writing in English (Q1). The second item was about the students' opinion on why they thought blog could be useful to practice writing in English. 80 percent agreed strongly on the item that they learnt to write better in English (Q2), 90% agreed that they were able to express their ideas freely (Q3), and 70% strongly agreed that they were more creative in expressing their ideas (Q4). 90% agreed that they were more motivated and interested in writing (Q5), and 70% agreed with the item (Q6) that they can write longer pieces in English which indicates that they benefited from blogging in practicing their writing skills. 85% agreed that blogging helped them to improve their L2 grammar (Q7).

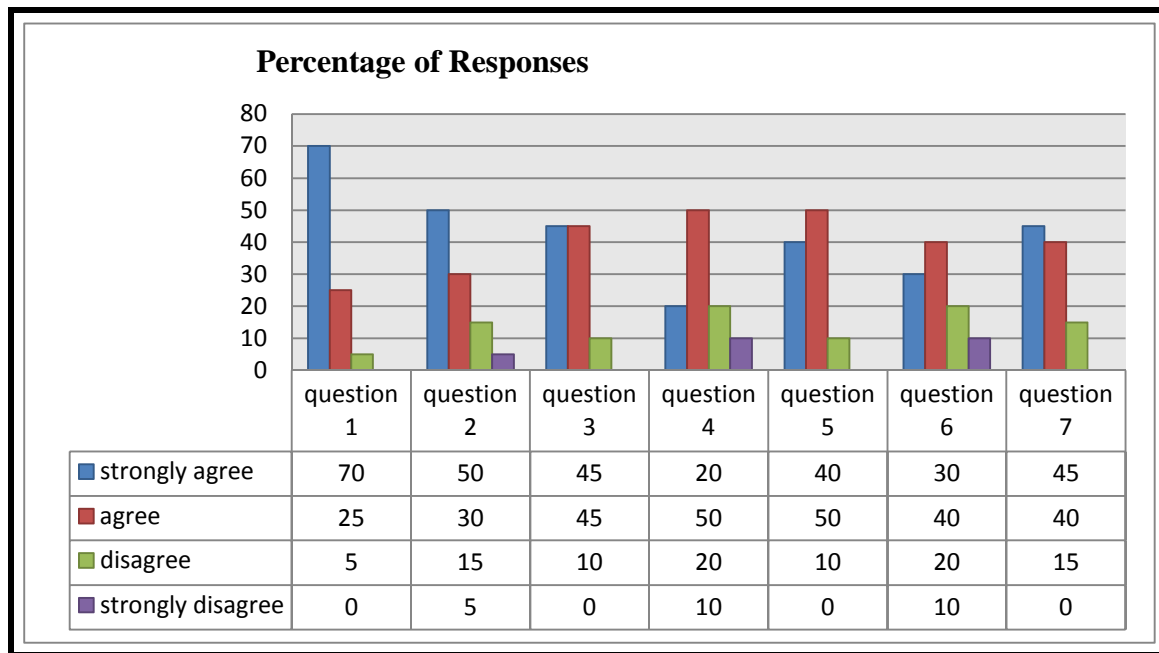


Figure 1. Percentage of the Students' Responses to Writing

4. Discussion

The analysis of the data obtained through writing performance on the pre and post tests revealed that the students' writing performances in both control and experimental groups improved, but after comparing the differences in the post-test results, it was found that blogging collaborative writing was more effective than class writing instruction. According to Jones (2003), language teachers believe that students benefit from the extra writing in online discussion forums and use it to communicate meaningfully in real contexts.

The writing performance of the experimental group was affected using blogging collaboration and it also had a positive effect on the structure and content of their writings. One possible explanation for the effectiveness of blogging in students' writing performance could be the language and writing materials provided to the experimental students. Because of the limited exposure to the language for the control group, the writing samples and relevant exercises were restricted. In other words, they were given less exercises on structures and forms of paragraph writing.

The experimental group had the chance of more exposure to language and writing input and materials. They found the opportunity of practicing many samples of sentence structures and paragraph writing than the control group. They were able to access lots of interactive exercises and to choose based on their own needs. Therefore, because the experimental group had more chances to receive the necessary materials there appeared to be a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the post-test results.

The positive effect of blogging on students' writing was demonstrated in their writing in the form of improved sentence length, sentence structure, and creativity in writing. Moreover, using blogs as a writing platform also increased the learners' interest in writing. This finding

confirms that blogging promotes learner interaction which encourages students to read and write for communicative purposes. This is consistent with previous research (Ward, 2004; Pinkman, 2005; Zhang, 2009) in which EFL students were positive towards weblog use in enhancing their writing skills.

According to the findings of this study, the writing performance of the low-level students comparing with the high-level students noticeably improved. This is consistent with a study conducted by Nadzrah (2007), in which he found that blogging helps low proficiency level students to produce constructive writing which was further supported by Nadzrah and Kemboja (2009) who conducted a study on a group of students who were taking general English proficiency course. Their findings proved that blogs reduced barriers of writing and learners felt more confident to write when they knew that other members could read and give feedbacks on blog. Writing on blogs provided an opportunity for students' self-improvement and they had the chance to learn the language on their own and to monitor their learning progress.

5. Conclusion

Blogs as an online learning and teaching tool can be considered as a facilitator for learners' collaborative learning and writing. By creating a new interactive opportunity with peers via blogging, students are more confident to express their ideas. Blogging is useful in the way that the students writing assignment is shaped by using an interactive process and they will be motivated to improve their writing skills. Blogging also offers an innovative learning environment that gives the students a chance to have active participation in the learning community. Students also can practice different language skills in a real learning environment and overcome their writing barriers. Students often learn much more from communicating and

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Scoring rubrics for writing

	Maximum score	Actual score
Format-5 points		
There is a title.	1	-
The title is centered.	1	-
The first line is indented.	1	-
There are margins on both sides.	1	-
The paragraph is double spaced.	1	-
Total	5	
Punctuation and Mechanics-5 points		
There is a period after every sentence.	1	-
Capital letters are used correctly.	1	-
The spelling is correct.	1	-
Commas are used correctly.	2	-
	5	

Total		
Content-20 points		
The paragraph fits the assignment.	5	-
The paragraph is interesting to read.	5	-
The paragraph shows that the writer used care and thought.	10	-
Total	20	
Organization-35 points		
The paragraph begins with a topic sentence that has both a topic and a controlling idea.	10	-
The paragraph contains several specific and factual supporting sentences that explain or prove the topic sentence, including at least one example.	20	-
The paragraph ends with an appropriate concluding sentence.	5	-
Total	35	
Grammar and Sentence Structure-35 points		
Estimate a grammar and sentence structure score.	35	-
Grand total	100	

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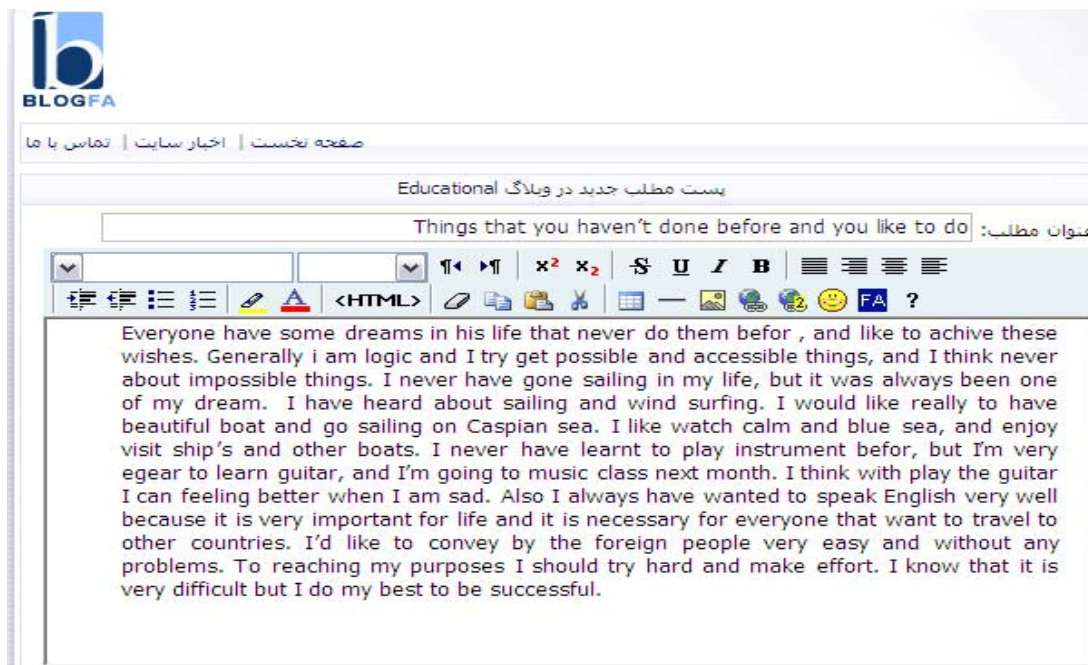
Appendix 2

In this section a sample was presented to see how learners collaboratively contributed to the correction of each others' writing. The topic of the writing is: *Write about the things that you have not done before and you like to do.*

The teacher encouraged learners to participate by finding certain mistakes such as spelling, punctuation or word order. In this way, students not only develop their reading skills but also improve their writing skills.

First Draft:

The following is the first draft of writing.

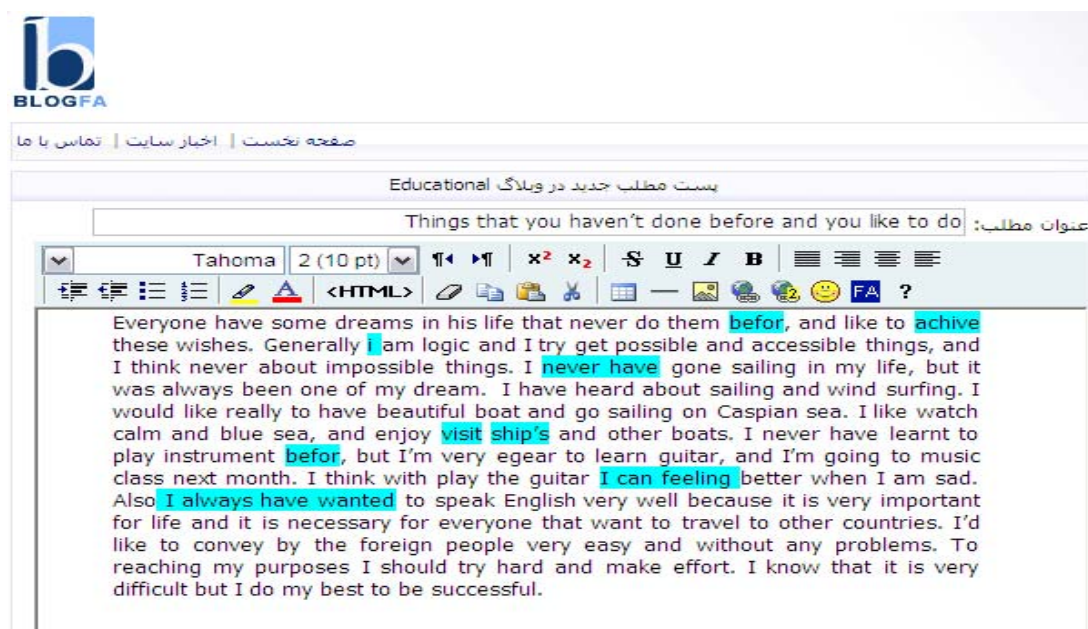


The screenshot shows a Blogger interface with the following text in the main content area:

Everyone have some dreams in his life that never do them befor , and like to achive these wishes. Generally i am logic and I try get possible and accessible things, and I think never about impossible things. I never have gone sailing in my life, but it was always been one of my dream. I have heard about sailing and wind surfing. I would like really to have beautiful boat and go sailing on Caspian sea. I like watch calm and blue sea, and enjoy visit ship's and other boats. I never have learnt to play instrument befor, but I'm very egear to learn guitar, and I'm going to music class next month. I think with play the guitar I can feeling better when I am sad. Also I always have wanted to speak English very well because it is very important for life and it is necessary for everyone that want to travel to other countries. I'd like to convey by the foreign people very easy and without any problems. To reaching my purposes I should try hard and make effort. I know that it is very difficult but I do my best to be successful.

First Peer Assessment:

The following is an “improved” version of the learner’s writing in which some mistakes were highlighted.



The screenshot shows the same Blogger interface as above, but with several words highlighted in yellow in the main content area:

Everyone have some dreams in his life that never do them **befor**, and like to **achive** these wishes. Generally **i** am logic and I try get possible and accessible things, and I think never about impossible things. I **never have** gone sailing in my life, but it was always been one of my dream. I have heard about sailing and wind surfing. I would like really to have beautiful boat and go sailing on Caspian sea. I like watch calm and blue sea, and enjoy **visit ship's** and other boats. I never have learnt to play instrument **befor**, but I'm very egear to learn guitar, and I'm going to music class next month. I think with play the guitar **I can feeling** better when I am sad. Also **I always have wanted** to speak English very well because it is very important for life and it is necessary for everyone that want to travel to other countries. I'd like to convey by the foreign people very easy and without any problems. To reaching my purposes I should try hard and make effort. I know that it is very difficult but I do my best to be successful.

Second Draft:

In this sample, the mistakes were corrected and put on the weblog.

The screenshot shows a weblog editor interface. At the top left is the 'BLOGFA' logo. Below it is a navigation bar with Persian text: 'صفحه نخست | اخبار سایت | تماس با ما'. The main editor area has a title bar 'بست مطلب جدید در وبلاگ Educational' and a title input field containing 'Things that you haven't done before and you like to do'. Below the title is a rich text editor toolbar with options for font (Tahoma, 2 (10 pt)), bold, italic, underline, and various icons. The text area contains the following paragraph:

Everyone have some dreams in his life that never do them before, and like to achieve these wishes. Generally I am logic and I try get possible and accessible things, and I think never about impossible things. I have never gone sailing in my life, but it was always been one of my dream. I have heard about sailing and wind surfing. I would really like to have beautiful boat and go sailing on Caspian sea. I like watch calm and blue sea, and enjoy visiting ships and other boats. I never have learnt to play instrument before, but I'm very egear to learn guitar, and I'm going to music class next month. I think with play the guitar I can feel better when I am sad. Also I have always wanted to speak English very well because it is very important for life and it is necessary for everyone that want to travel to other countries. I'd like to convey by the foreign people very easy and without any problems. To reaching my purposes I should try hard and make effort. I know that it is very difficult but I do my best to be successful.

Second Peer Assessment:

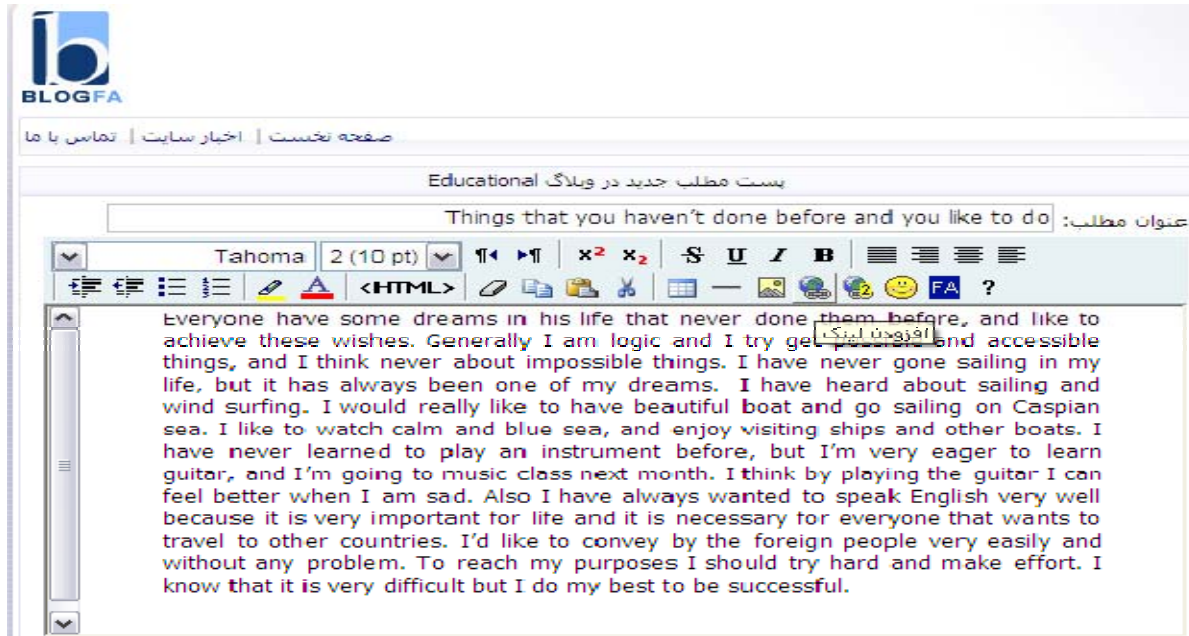
This time, the second student was engaged in the writing process.

This screenshot shows the same weblog editor as above, but with several words in the text highlighted in pink to indicate corrections. The corrected text is as follows:

Everyone have some dreams in his life that never **do** them before, and like to achieve these wishes. Generally I am logic and I try get possible and accessible things, and I think never about impossible things. I have never gone sailing in my life, but **it was** always been one of my **dream**. I have heard about sailing and wind surfing. I would really like to have beautiful boat and go sailing on Caspian sea. I like **watch** calm and blue sea, and enjoy visiting ships and other boats. I **never have learnt** to play **instrument** before, but I'm very **egear** to learn guitar, and I'm going to music class next month. I think **with play** the guitar I can feel better when I am sad. Also I have always wanted to speak English very well because it is very important for life and it is necessary for everyone that **want** to travel to other countries. I'd like to convey by the foreign people very **easy** and without **any problems**. **To reaching** my purposes I should try hard and make effort. I know that it is very difficult but I do my best to be successful.

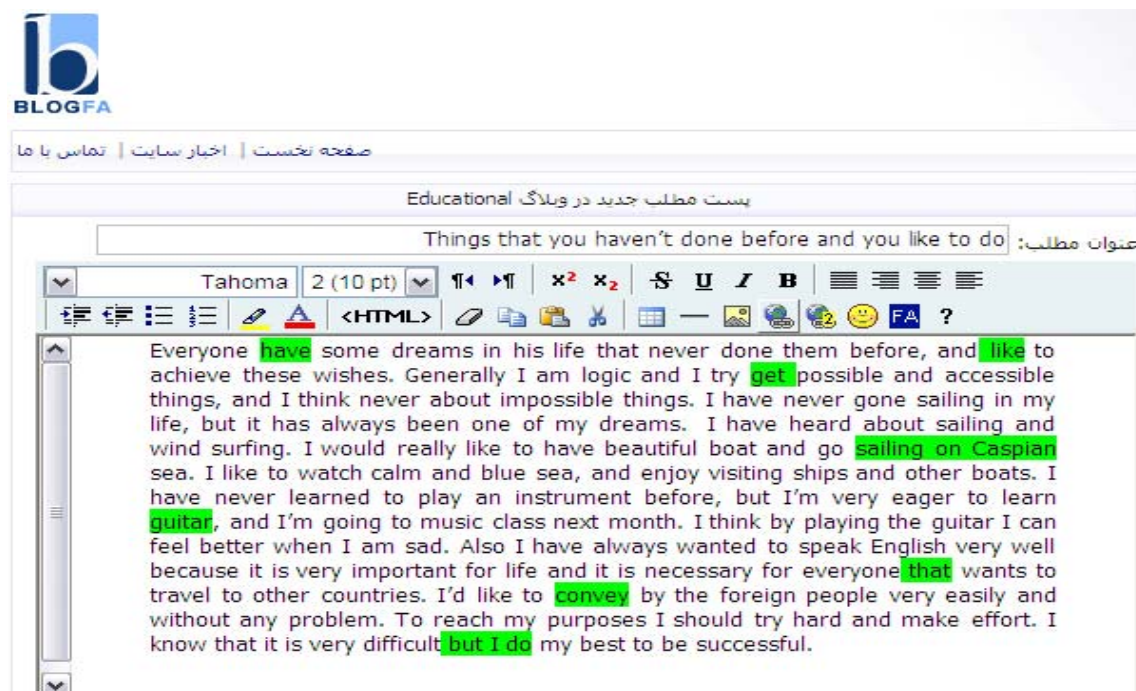
Third Draft:

In this sample some mistakes that were highlighted by the second peer were corrected.



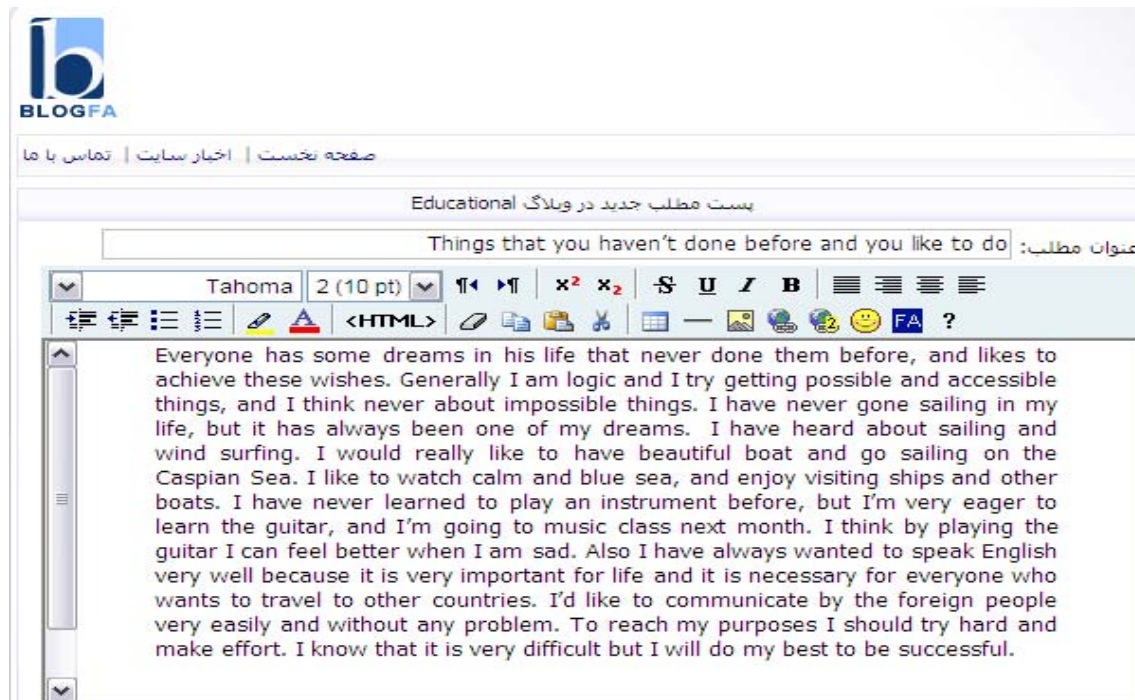
Teacher Assessment:

The following sample presents mistakes were highlighted by the teacher.



Final Draft:

At last, the original writer was invited to rewrite her text with a critical eye for paragraphing.



Appendix 3. Motivation and Perception Questionnaire, adopted from Abu Bakar, Latif, and Ya'acob (2010)

1. I think it is a good idea to use blogs to practice writing skills in English.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree
- d. Strongly Disagree

2. Blogging helps me how to write better in English.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree
- d. Strongly Disagree

3. I can express my ideas freely through blogging

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree
- d. Strongly Disagree

4. By active participation in blogging I can be more creative in expressing my ideas.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree
- d. Strongly Disagree

5. Blogging helps me to be more motivated and interested in writing.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree
- d. Strongly Disagree

6. I can write longer in English using weblog.

- a. Strongly agree
d. Strongly Disagree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree

7. I think my English grammar has improved by weblog-based collaborative writing

- a. Strongly agree
d. Strongly Disagree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree