

JOINT BOOK READING: HOW DO BLOGS FOSTER COLLABORATIVE COMPREHENSION?

By

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ABSTRACT

A blog is an innovative web tool which has an immense potential to enhance language abilities. As one of the ways to enhance foreign language learning is collaboration and interaction, the present study is an attempt to find out if blogs can be used to foster language learners' comprehension through collaborative book reading. To this end, 62 Iranian EFL students studying at the university were selected as the participants. After they were indicated to be homogeneous regarding their reading comprehension, they were divided into two groups. Both groups were instructed for three months. The control group read story books as their supplementary reading activity individually, but the experimental group used the teacher's blog to read the same short stories assigned to the control group but with collaboration of their peers in a virtual environment. The participants' performances in the reading comprehension post-test revealed that joint reading through blogs can foster language learners' comprehension. Besides, it was concluded that using blogs, females had more improvement in their reading comprehension than male students.

Keywords: Blogs, Collaboration, Joint Reading, Foreign Language Instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has been an indispensable part of language instruction since the last decade. According to Carman (2002), the application of the Internet in teaching, known as Web-Based Instruction (WBI), enjoys remarkable features as live-events, self-paced activities, collaborative tasks, and performance-supporting materials. This makes the WBI a potentially helpful way to teach a foreign language. The key theoretical perspective behind WBI is constructivism. It focuses on learning based on collaboration. According to this view, individual development happens through sharing knowledge with others (Dougiamas & Peter, 2002). Considering the capabilities of the web in both communication and education, the use of the web is divided into three eras: web 1.0, web 2.0 and web3.0. Generally, the Internet involves many tools such as email, discussion forums, weblogs, wikis, and social networks which are used by language teachers and learners. The common characteristic of all Internet tools, specially web 2.0 tools such as wikis, weblogs and social networks like Facebook and Plus-Google is that they give the Internet users the opportunity to interact with each other. This makes the second generation of the Internet, web 2.0, totally

different from web 1.0, during which the web masters were the sole authorities of websites and users were only the consumers of the Internet materials fed to them through different sites. Among all web 2.0 tools, weblogs, or simply blogs, are the best choice for their being user-friendly and simplicity.

Weblogs are very interactive and they provide students with real-world tasks in a learner-centered environment. Through using blogs, learners enjoy interaction and, at the same time, autonomy to foster their language abilities. Weblogs are user-friendly and allow users with little or no computer background to create, design and maintain the content (Pinkman, 2005). Blogs work as an online journal and users can update the content at any time as long as they can access the Internet (Tseng, 2008). According to Leverett (2010), the outstanding feature of a blog to be used as a supplement teaching tool is in its forming collaborative relationship for the students with their peers. This helps the affective filters to be lowered. Orienting out-of-class activities towards interaction and collaboration through joint work compared to an individualistic self-study leaves a profound effect on the students' learning potential. Teacher's and peers' being on an individual side for out-of-

class activities helps the students to lower their affective filter in the learning process. Negative feelings are removed and instead one can observe a friendly atmosphere in the learning process.

The use of group work and interaction is a common practice in language classes. Studies have shown that learners working in collaboration with others are exposed to a greater variety of viewpoints, and thus can co-construct new ways of understanding and develop greater critical thinking skills (Adams & Hamm, 1996; Slavin, 1990). Interaction provides learners with more opportunities to practice their language skills. Storch (2002) did an analysis of the students' interaction together in doing a task and compared it with a task students completed individually in the subsequent week and he suggested that interaction helps the transfer of knowledge from one peer to another and it, in turn, helps the facilitation of language skills. Kneser and Ploetzner (2001) stated that collaboration means mutual engagement in solving problems together. The process of collaboration can influence both teaching and learning. According to Hsieh et al. (2007) teachers can evaluate whether the reading strategies implemented in a group discussion are appropriate and determine whether the students' reading comprehension abilities are enhanced in a collaborative environment or not.

One of the major language skills is reading comprehension. Block and Presseey (2002) pointed out that reading comprehension is a process of constructing meaning that is reasonable, and accurately connecting what has been read to what the reader already knows and thinking about all of this information until it is understood. It is the final goal of reading. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), reading comprehension can be viewed as an interactive process between a reader and text. A related concept to both collaboration and reading comprehension is shared reading. It refers to an interactive reading experience that occurs when students join in reading a book guided by a teacher. Through shared reading learners can feel learning and perceive themselves as readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Reading is not simply remembering a set of events, but it is the ability of selecting the most important information through

understanding. Helping the learners to use authentic reading tasks is very effective in this regard. Simply speaking, authentic reading experience refers to involving the learners in the same kind of activities and reading processes that one experiences when reading in his first language. Discussion and interaction while reading are the key authentic reading tasks everyone can be involved in when reading in his first language.

Proficient readers consistently use a number of strategies in order to comprehend a text. They include activating prior knowledge, making inferences, using the knowledge of sentence structures, visualizing, asking and answering questions, and retelling and summarizing through discussion (Mills, 2010). The techniques of shared reading help students to use language in a community of language learners through interaction. The main objective of shared reading is to activate participation in the comprehension process. Based on an empirical research done by Rashtchi and Moazezi Fardi Moghadam (2011), it was found out that applying shared reading techniques could enhance the learners' reading and writing abilities.

There are many ways based on which interaction and collaboration can be encouraged in a language class. Yet, the most common one is the application of the Internet as by nature, it is a network of connections based on which one can be connected to others. The Internet consists of a set of tools which can be used for different purposes. Weblog is the product of Web 2.0 which has been defined as a web site that allows individuals to create personal webpages of text, pictures, graphics, videos, and other multimedia with the same ease as creating a word processing document (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008).

Petrovsky (1985) stated that collaboration enhances common understanding. Renandya and Jacobs (2002) proposed a set of tasks for pre and post reading activities, which included both individualistic and collaborative tasks. Donato (2004) advocated team work and collaboration in both education and developmental psychology. Brigham, Berkley, Simpkins, and Brigham (2007) advocated teachers' having an interactive style for instruction, through which they can develop comprehension by participation in team

work.

As for the use of technology in education and communication, Motteram (2009) maintained that technology enabled traditional classes to be connected to the real world. For Warschauer (2006) stated that language learning is reinforced by engaging with others, either face-to-face or via digital tools. Majhi and Maharana (2010) stated that web 2.0 tools such as wikis, weblogs, social bookmarking, podcasting, and vodcasting are suitable for educational lifelong learning purposes because the world has been built to a large degree on digital environments, and educational practices must foster a creative and collaborative engagement of learners with this digital environment in the learning process. Among all web tools available in web 2.0, blogs are defined as frequently online updated online personal Journal (Blackstone, Spiri, & Namaruma, 2009). Pinkman (2005) defined blogs as websites that are easy to create and easy to maintain. There are some advantages for using a blog for language teaching purposes. The first one is simplicity. It is the most appealing aspect of using a blog. Users do not need to know how the blog is designed or programmed. The user-friendly design attracts users to post information or maintain it on a constant basis (Holmes, 2005). According to Tseng (2008), another advantage of a blog is discussion. It is the space to post questions or discussions before or after class, and teachers can foster class discussion and interaction if they can work online with the students simultaneously.

Baretlett-Bragg (2003) pointed out that blogging can be used positively to strengthen foreign language teaching and learning. Chen and Zhang (2003) also discovered that encouraging blogging can allow teachers and learners to share information and they can help others to read their postings and leave comments for them. Fredig and Trammell (2004) maintained that blogging facilitates social interactions and reading and expressing ideas through blogs helps scaffolding and the meaning which is attached to words and sentences on the blog. Mullen and Wedwick (2008) stated that blogs are highly effective communication tools as they create a variety of authentic reading and writing experiences for students and teachers.

Weblogs have now come into their own as an educational tool (Downes, 2004). Bauer and O'Brien (2005) pointed out that digital communication tools especially blogs hold great promise for second language learners. MacBride and Luehmann (2008) discussed blogging as a way to "capitalize on emerging technologies" and student interest (p. 190). They commented that increased exposure time with the content and increased inter-student communication is the basic feature of blogs beneficial to overall language learning.

Concerning reading comprehension, Hsieh, Shouse and Chen (2007) stated that learners' reading comprehension can be enhanced as teachers provide appropriate reading tasks which need certain strategies that match students' learning styles. He added that if teachers understand that the main purpose of reading is an interaction between the students and the text, on one hand, and that of the students with each other, on the other hand, they can develop better activities to foster students' comprehension. Kol and Schcolnik (2008) investigated previous studies on reading from the printed materials and screen, and compared the usefulness of both modes. They concluded that participants who used online materials to scan and skim an on-the-screen text can perform better in answering comprehension questions compared to those who used printed materials. Asking the students about their attitudes on reading from the screen, they simply answered they preferred them because they are more joyful and faster. Additionally, they said that they favored reading on the screen as in this condition not only the text can be manipulated and adjusted but also they have access to more related materials on the net. Based on an empirical research, Smith (2009) considered blogs as the best way to help language learners become a better writer and reader as it gives the chance to the learners to read and write more. She concluded that inviting students to use blogs will increase their willingness to do so; therefore, teachers should definitely take advantage of this.

Considering the potential of a weblog as an interactive tool on one hand, and the role of interaction in fostering reading comprehension on the other hand, the purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of weblogs to

enhance Iranian EFL male and female students' comprehension by providing a collaborative environment for joint reading. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

(i) Can weblogs enhance Iranian EFL students' comprehension through providing a collaborative environment for joint reading?

(ii) Is there any significant difference in reading performances of the male and female students who use blogs and those who do not?

Based on these research questions, two null hypotheses were formed.

H₀: Weblogs cannot enhance Iranian EFL students' comprehension through providing a collaborative environment for joint reading.

H₀: There is not any significant difference in reading performances of male and female students who use blogs and those who do not.

To reject or retain the null hypotheses, the following methodology was adopted.

Method

Participants

In order to answer the research questions, 62 (13 males and 49 females) students were selected as the participants based on availability non-random sampling. All the participants had passed their Reading Comprehension (I) at the university, so they were assumed to enjoy the same level of comprehension. They were all majoring in English, either translation or teaching, and studying at Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch. They were all at the age range of 21 to 25 years old.

Instrumentation

In order to collect data for the present research, a sample of Longman TOEFL Test (2004), Reading Comprehension section with 30 questions was used. The test consisted of five reading passages each followed by four to six questions. The questions were answered based on what was stated or implied in the passages. Topics of the reading passages were varied, but they were often informational subjects on art, history, literature, geography and culture. The administration of the test took 30 minutes.

For the content validity of the test, it was given to two language professors to examine the passages. They, then, approved that the test enjoy content validity. For the reliability purposes, the test was piloted twice. Using test-retest reliability formula, it was concluded that the test was highly reliable ($r = 0.8$). Therefore, it was used both for the pre- and post-test of reading comprehension.

Procedures

To check the homogeneity of the participants, Longman TOEFL reading comprehension test, version 2004, was administered before the instruction. The results revealed that all the participants performed not significantly different from each other, so the students' scores were saved as the data for the pre-test of the study.

The participants were then informed of the purpose of the research and were asked to take part in the study. A total number of 62 students, from whom 13 students were male and 49 students were female were considered as the participants. They were then divided into two groups: a control and an experimental one. They all attended a reading comprehension class for about three months. The students in both groups were required to study five short stories during the instruction as outside reading assignments.

Though the content of the reading passage given to both control and experimental groups was similar, the difference between what the students in the control group received with that of the experimental group was in the form of presentation for the outside reading texts. While the control group bought the short stories hard copies from the market and read them at home, the participants in the experimental group had access to the related e-books which could be easily downloaded from the teacher's blog. They read the books either online or offline but were required to be in interaction with peers in understanding different parts of the texts. Their interactions were posted on the blog in a special section entitled "leave comments". The teacher had previously asked them to be online at a certain time out-of-the-classroom and explained that their comments would positively affect her evaluation of the students' final grades at the end of the course. This way, she could make sure that they would take part in their peers'

discussions on the materials they read. Students could discuss the main idea of each part of the story, challenge each other's opinions and leave comments related to what they had read on the blog. Each assigned short story book for the students' outside reading activities was required to be read by the students in both groups; then, they were required to take part in a test related to the book the students had just read.

The treatment took about three months, two sessions a week, and one and a half hour each. The in-class reading instruction was the same for both the control and experimental group. And the difference was only in the supplementary reading assignments students in the control and experimental group had for their outside readings. The control group had printed materials to be read individually and the experimental group read on the screen and could check their understanding of the text in collaboration of others. After the treatment, the participants in both groups participated in the same reading comprehension test they took before as the post-test. The students' reading raw scores in the pre- and post-tests were considered as the data for the study. They were analyzed and interpreted to answer the research questions.

Results

In order to see if the selected participants were at the same level as far as their reading comprehension was concerned, first an F-test was run for the homogeneity of variances. The results are shown in the following table:

As Table 1 indicates, the value of F ($F=.988$) does not exceed the significance level ($\text{sig.} = .126$). This implies that the variance of the dependent variable, i. e. the reading pretest scores, is equal across groups. Then, a one-way ANOVA was run on the students' performances of the TOEFL reading test administered at the beginning of the instruction. The results are as follows:

According to Table 2, the significance level ($\text{sig.} = .483$) is not much lower than the value of F ($F = .829$). Therefore, it can be implied that regarding reading comprehension, the performances of all male and female students in the

	F	Df1	Df2	Sig.
pretest	.088	3	58	.126

Table 1. Levene's Test for the Equality of Variances

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	15.770	3	5.257	.829	.483
Within groups	367.714	58	6.340		
Total	383.484	61			

Table 2. The Participants' Performances in the Reading Pre-Test

control and experimental groups were the same, and they were homogeneous. Therefore, they were considered as the participants of the study. Table 2 indicates the results of a Scheffe test for the mean score of the participants in the male and females' performances in the control and experimental groups.

As the Table 3 indicates, the mean scores for the females in the control and experimental groups were 12 and 12.6 respectively. On the other hand, male students in the experimental and control group had the mean scores of 13 and 13.5 respectively. As it can be observed, the mean scores were not significantly different from each other.

After the treatment, the male and female participants in the control and experimental groups took the same reading comprehension test they had taken for the pre-test. The participants' gain scores were computed, and a one-way ANOVA was run to see if the differences in the reading comprehension gain scores or not. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 4 indicates that the value of F ($F=48.742$) is much higher than the significance level ($\text{sig.} = .000$), which means that the participants' gain scores, the difference between the participants' performances in the pre- and post-test of reading comprehension, were significantly different from each other. Therefore, the first research null hypothesis

Codes	N	Subset for alpha=0.05
		1
Female, control	24	12.0000
Female, experimental	25	12.6000
Male, experimental	6	13.0000
Male, control	7	13.5714
Sig.		.578

Table 3. Scheffe Test for the Participants' Mean Scores

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	92.861	3	30.954	48.742	
Within groups	36.833	58	.635		
Total	129.694	61			

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA on the Participants Gain Scores after the Post-Test

stating that there is no significant difference in the reading comprehension of students who read story books and those who use blogs for joint reading and have interaction is rejected here. To see were exactly the area of difference was, a scheffe test was run. Table 5 presents the results.

Based on Table 5, the highest mean difference was observed between male students in the control group and female students in the experimental group (mean difference = 2.86857). The second highest mean difference was between the male students' gain scores in the control group and male students in the experimental group (mean difference = 2.42857). However, the mean difference between the male and female students in the control group was not significantly different as the significance level was .599.

Moreover, the table also shows that male and female students in the experimental group did not perform significantly different as the significance level was .689. The mean score for the participants' gain scores in different groups are as follows:

According to Table 6, the highest gain score belonged to the female students who were in the experimental group (gain = 4.4400); the gain score for male students in the experimental group was ranked the second. The lowest gain scores belonged to the male and female students who were in the control group (1.5714 and 2.0417

respectively). Therefore, the second research hypothesis stating that male and female students do not perform significantly different from each other in the control and experimental group is rejected here.

Discussion

The main objective of the present research was to find out whether joint book reading could help the Iranian EFL students improve their reading comprehension or not. To provide the scene for joint reading, a weblog was designed, and the e-copy of the reading materials including several short stories were posted on the blog where students could easily read online. To make their reading activities collaborative, the students were required to discuss and share ideas on the topic and what goes on in the story with their peers. The students in the control group, however, read the hard copy of the same stories individually. Additionally, the reading performances of the male and female students were taken into considerations.

Based on the tables and analysis of the statistical operations on the raw scores, the results of the present research indicated that joint book reading can significantly help the Iranian EFL students improve in their reading comprehension. Moreover, it was found out that having joint book reading and interaction, female students outperform in their reading comprehension than the male students. The findings of the present study are in line with hen and Zhang (2003) who argued that blogging has noticeable positive effects in a reading comprehension classroom if collaboration and persistence is encouraged. The results also supported Tan, Wo, Tan (2006), Peauroi (2006), and Zare-ee, Shekarey, and Fathi (2009), who all confirmed the positive role of blogs in the improvement of language skills due to its being interactive. The results are also in line with Iwashita (2001), Kim (2009), Watanabe and Swain (2007), and Zeng and Takatsuka (2009), who are were in favor of using interaction and collaboration in language classes to foster students' language skills.

The present paper supports the results of a number of related studies done in Iran. Salimzadeh and Mohammadi (2009) did an empirical research and found that cooperative on-line reading activities such as group paraphrasing to understand a text enhances Iranian

Code 1	code 2	95% confidence interval				
		Mean difference	Std. error	Sig.	Lower bound	Upper bound
Male, cntrl	male, exp	-2.42857	.44335	.000	-3.7051	-1.1520
	female, cntrl	-.47024	.34232	.599	-1.4559	.5154
	female, exp	-2.86857	.34077	.000	-3.8498	-1.8874
Male, exp	male, cntrl	2.42857	.44335	.000	1.1520	3.7051
	female, cntrl	1.95833	.36373	.000	.9110	3.0056
	female, exp	-.44000	.36227	.689	1.4831	.6031

Table 5. Scheffe Test for the Participants' Reading Gain Scores

codes	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
Male, control	7	1.5714	
Female, control	24	2.0417	
Male, experimental	6		4.0000
Female, experimental	25		4.4400
Sig.		.622	.671

Table 6. Mean for the Participants' Gain Scores

Intermediate EFL students' reading comprehension. Through a comprehensive study on reading comprehension, Poorahmadi (2010) also concluded that teachers should focus on online tasks and activities which assist students to work cooperatively on task completion. The results of Rahimi and Behjat's (2010) study on reading comprehension revealed that online reading the texts by which learners are in interaction with other texts through hypertext links will help EFL learners' comprehension of written texts much better than isolated printed texts. So, it can be concluded that reading comprehension, in general, is enhanced through collaboration and interaction.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present research was to find out if focusing on join reading, weblogs could be used as the tools to enhance reading comprehension through collaboration or not. This study supported the findings of Tse, Yuen, Loh, Lam, and Wai (2010) who confirmed that the use of blogs is very effective on Hong Kong primary students' reading skills and that there are major gender differences in the use of blogs to improve the comprehension of written texts. Szimanska and Kaczmarek's (2011) study also confirm the findings of the present study by pointing out that the Internet can make the process of reading and learning more attractive, motivating and valuable. They found that the additional advantage of reading on the net is that using the net as a rich multimedia, students can collaborate and interact to enhance each others' learning. The results of the study supported the interactive nature of blogs, on one hand, and that story book reading can lead to a better comprehension if there is collaboration involved. According to Kavaliauskiene (n.d), the implications of using weblogs for comprehension activities are numerous as it can raise language awareness and learner development. Additionally, it enhances the students' motivation due to the novelty and diversity of possible learning activities. Teachers can find blogs easy to adopt to be used in different language classes with students' varied levels of comprehension. They contribute to a classroom enriched with collaboration and meaningful purposive interactions. Above all, orienting learners toward interactive activities

and collaboration by using blogs can prepare students for a more successful communication in the networked world.

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