Enhancing Writing Skills of EFL Learners through Blogging

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ABSTRACT

In such a rapidly developing world, it has been inevitable to integrate some modern assessment approaches and tools into English teaching. Hence, several up to date Formative Assessment Tools have been used by teachers during the learning process to modify teaching and learning activities by means of acquiring qualitative feedback. Blogs or Blogging is one of these formative assessment tools which are on focus. The aim of this exploratory case study is to find out whether or not writing blogs does have an effect on high school students' writing skills. The findings suggest that the blog is an effective tool for students to improve their English writing skills. Besides it was observed that blogging enhanced the students' eagerness to write and fostered the autonomous writing. This study also implies that writing blogs is of a great value for English learners, language instructors, material developers and curriculum designers as well as having the potential for further research.
Key Words: English language teaching/learning, writing skill, formative assessment, blogging.

INTRODUCTION

Technology has virtually been involved in every area in today's world. Hence we wouldn't be exaggerating if we affirmed that technology reigns in world of today. In such circumstance, English teaching couldn't have remained intact from the effect of technology. Computers and internet have been a very crucial part of our lives and teaching activities in many aspects (Carrier, 1997; Dudeney, 2000; Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Zorko, 2009). Therefore, it has been inevitable to blend traditional methods and approaches with technology. However, technology contributing the lesson plans is expected to promote interaction and motivation of teachers and students during lessons (Ozkan, 2011). For this reason, researchers have focused on a contextual use of situational features and verbal instructional dynamics associated with the technology (Garner & Gillingham, 1996; Kumpulainen, 1996; Lankshear & Snyder, 2000; Meskill, Mossop & Bates, 1999; Wegerif & Mercer, 1996). In today's classrooms, Web 2.0 technologies are embedded into instruction in order to provide learners with a social constructivist atmosphere in all kinds of academic institutions (Cochrane & Bateman, 2008).

Weblogs (aka *blogs*), considered as one of the most common Web 2.0 tools among language learners, are used with an increasing number by those in almost every age group. Godwin (2003) describes a blog as a web-based area in which people can write, edit information

and publish it instantly for public via a web browser. In other saying, a blog is more like an online journal which is often updated by its user (Ozkan, 2011). The term *weblog* hadn't been known by the time the blogger, Jorn Barger (1997) put the term forward. People used different forms of online tools such as *Usenet* and *Internet Forum* until the modern blogs took their present form evolving from the online diary.

Blogs can be used for different purposes from personal interests to commercial affairs. *A personal blog,* for example, is probably the most common and preferred type of blog. People use it for various areas of interest and write on it whatever appeals to them about nearly everything. *A business blog*, on the other hand, is kept for commercial purposes and is used to advertise a business online.

Now that blog use has become increasingly widespread in recent years, teachers and instructors have started to use it as a tool for teaching and learning activities (Zhang, 2009). This situation led to some other blog types related to language teaching. Campbell (2003) defined three sorts of blogs which are the *tutor blog,* the *learner blog* and the *class blog.* The *tutor blog* is administrated by the tutor to give reading practice to the students, inform the students about syllabus and other activities, and provide links of websites useful for self-study. The *learner blog* is most appropriate for reading and writing contexts. Ozkan (2011) describes this type as the *students' own personal online space.* The *class blog* consists of the entire work of the whole class. Students can use it to publish images and give useful links related to English. *Class blogs* can be utilized as a cyber environment for an international classroom language exchange as well (Campbell, 2003).

Ward (2004) implemented a blog project in his own class at tertiary level and gained a good many positive results. More than half of his students reported that the project was beneficial for their language learning. The reason why blogs have so quickly been embraced by the educational staff and learners may simply become owing to their interactive media features, simplicity and potential to foster autonomy. There are also some studies revealing the effect of blogging on learner autonomy by boosting fluency in writing when given as complementary writing assignments (Ward, 2004; Wu, 2005). Little (2003) argues that learner autonomy requires decision making, critical thinking and social interaction. Autonomous learners take the responsibility of their own learning and become involved in the mechanism through goal setting, planning and assessing their improvement (Dam, 1995; Little 1996).

Worldwide blog viewers allow students to interact with others outside their classrooms and see their work (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Pinkman, 2005; Warlick, 2005). Especially among higher education students, blogs are preferred as a communication tool used to share documents or other tools quickly and without the anxiety to reach everyone at the same time, which might contribute to the learners' sense of responsibility. This may also indicate that blogs can prove to be strengthening the connection between learners in the same class. Besides, students who write blogs feel more comfortable with sharing their ideas and supporting their arguments than they do in classroom environment (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006; Bloch, 2004). Such a facility is most likely to reduce the load of the teacher who already deals with many other classroom issues.

Even though a weblog can be seen as a tool to support a learner's writing and reading skills more, it can also be used to help language learners develop speaking and listening skills. It depends on how and with what content it is formed. However, it can be observed that most blogs are used as *online journals* by the students; and language teachers encourage their students to write blogs mainly to support their writing skills. In light of the proposed potential outcomes for classroom application, it is believed that blogging offers reading and writing incentives for English learning and writing on the grounds that it puts the emphasis on content, the likelihood of rapid input, the choice of working with both words and pictures, and the capacity to connect one post to another (Zhang, 2009). Researchers who also write blogs

likewise say that since students know they will have a group of people following their written work on the web, they regularly create higher quality work than those who compose just for the instructor or for other class members. A number of researchers have given an account of how they use blogs to promote their classroom teaching and to offer plenty of reading and writing incentives.

"Do weblogs improve writing?" question was once asked by Bernstein (2004) on one of his blogs and he reached some answers such as "Frequent writing improves writing." and "Writing for audience improves writing." and some others. In a recent study conducted by MM Yunus et al. (2013), it was investigated how using blogs might be integrated into classroom activities to promote students' writing skills. It was observed that blogs could help seal the connection between the lecturer and the students who stated that blogs helped gain free interaction and there were no barriers while writing blogs. In another case study conducted by Okan and Taraf (2013), the findings revealed the students' positive perceptions of blogs catering to their needs and expectations; and this helps them improve their Information Communication Technology (ICT) skills. Another study conducted by Awada and Ghaith (2014) indicated that the blogging provided an excellent opportunity for teachers with supplementary activities and materials enriching the ELT content.

It is undoubtedly not possible to have such a claim as blogging certainly fosters students' writing skills, and more studies should be conducted to find the evidence that blogging promotes the learners' writing skills. Thus, with this study it was aimed to find out if blogging has a potential to enhance students' writing skills. The answers to the following questions were searched for:

1- Does writing blogs affect high school learners' writing skills? If so, in what ways?
2- What are the positive and negative effects of blogging on the participants if there are any?
3- How do the participants perceive blogging in their writing course experience?
4- What are their views regarding the positive and negative aspects of blogging experience?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study was conducted in a ninth grade classroom of a state school. Firstly, a written task was given to the whole class in order to collect data about writing levels of all the students. Informal Assessment of Paragraph (Welch & Link, 1992) and Diagnostic Assessment of Writing (Knoch, 2009) have been used as assessment criteria. These papers regarding the specific task were all kept for the assessment procedure. Then the students were informed about the research and were motivated to take part in the process. Ethical considerations were specified according to the principles of ethical considerations of Bryman and Bell (2007). The participants were chosen according the convenience sampling based on the volunteerism principle. Thus, the students volunteering to write blogs were made to fill consent forms and open blog accounts. They were expected to post their blogs on that day's class content until they were able to find authentic issues to write about. They were free to write whatever appealed to them but mostly class related texts in the beginning. During the process, which lasted a semester, qualitative data was collected through blog post, observation and interview. Finally, the data was analyzed and coded using an open thematic analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Participants

The research involved a ninth grade class in an Anatolian High School in Adana, in a southern metropolitan city in Turkey. The school is in the center of the city, and it accepts students according to the results of a central examination Transition from Primary to Secondary Education (TPSE). 14 out of 34 students volunteered to take part in this study. The ages of the participants were between 14 and 15. They had taken English classes for 5 years until then but nearly all of them were at A1 level according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Most of the participants belonged to the middle-class. They were all familiar with technology thanks to their smart phones and tablets but none of them had used blogs earlier. Even most of them (n: 9) hadn't been given any writing tasks during their primary and secondary education. So their background knowledge of English wasn't sufficient and they lacked writing skills according to the results of a Language Placement Test, prepared in accordance with A1 and A2 levels of CEFR, by the commission of a professional publisher in Turkey.

Data collection tools

In this research, qualitative data was obtained to assess whether or not writing blogs affected high school language learners' writing skills. The data was collected via observations, blog posts and individual face-to-face interviews.

Blog posts. Each participant in the study posted two blogs each week in 2016-2017 Fall Term. 336 blog posts were analyzed thematically.

Blog observations. The students' blogs were observed at weekly periods and the mistakes they made were instantly and explicitly corrected via text messages (see sample below). Additionally, the whole class was given writing tasks monthly so as to monitor whether the blog-users were making any progress in writing. Informal Assessment of Paragraph (Welch & Link, 1992) and Diagnostic Assessment of Writing (Knoch, 2009) were used to assess the writing tasks. When the study was over, the whole class was given a final writing task and was assessed to see whether blog users made any progress compared to the non-blog users.
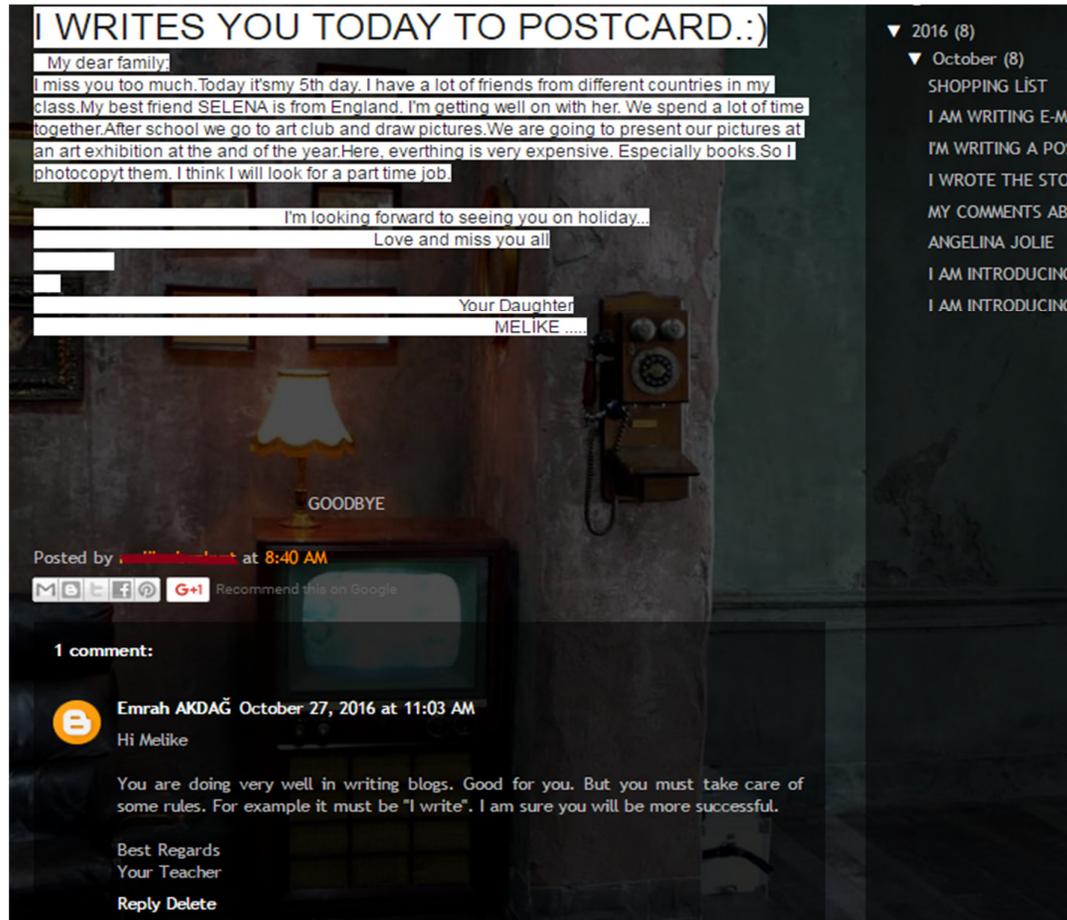
Figure 1. A Demonstration of an Instant Amendment

Individual interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted every two weeks. The interviews were held with 14 participants in two groups of seven students and all of their names were changed to protect participant confidentiality. The interviews were also audio-taped and transcribed. Qualitative data collected from the interviews was compiled and analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes drawn out from the analysis were also examined by a board of experts in the field to provide inter-rater reliability. As a result, data credibility was checked through a review of the themes by the participants as member checking and they confirmed the summaries reflected their views and feelings.

During the interviews:

• One question was asked at a time.
• The interviewer verified unclear responses.
• Students were asked open-ended questions (see Appendix) such as:

What do you think of blogging?
What has changed since you started writing blogs?
What do you feel while you are writing blogs?

• The interviews were held in L1 and the transcriptions were translated into English by a board of translators.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Blog Observations

The students' blog posts were periodically and systematically observed in weekly periods. It was observed that the early blogs of the students were rather simple and there was no complexity in content. Below can be seen a sample from the students' blo□s. The participants' names were protected due to ethical concerns.

Figure 2. A Sample from the First Blog Posts, October 4, 2016

However, in final blog posts we observed that the students mostly reflected on progress in creating complex compound type of sentences and lexical variety. Therefore, it can be concluded that the blog writing students have added more to their schematic knowledge through blogging. The findings obtained out of observation phase were accordingly supported by the results of the final writing task, in which students were observed to have used more complex sentences, appropriate linking words, rich content and lexical richness in their work. A final blog post and the progress can be seen below:
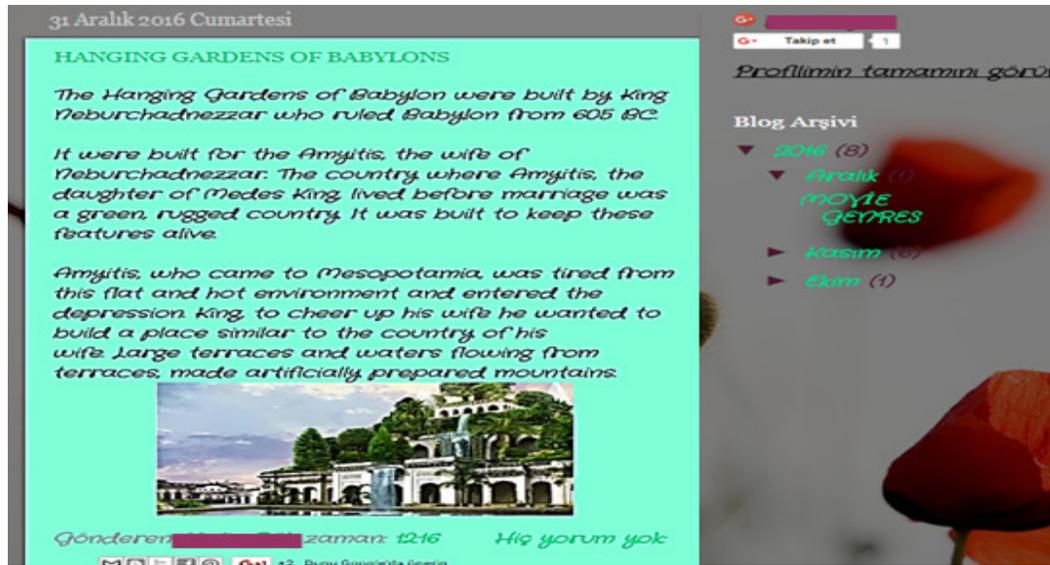
Figure 3. Student's final blog post, December 31, 2016

Individual Interviews

In the interview thematic analysis, 14 positive and seven negative themes emerged (see Tables 1 & 2). Examining the positive themes derived from the participants' statements, *vocabulary development* (n: 9) seems the most remarkable one with the highest number. For most of the students, blogging plays a significant role in enhancing vocabulary. A similar finding was reached by Fellner and Apple (2006) and Rahmany et al. (2013), and they claimed the blogging enhanced vocabulary learning significantly. We can see the statements of the students in verbatim sentences below:

> *Student A: I think blogging is beneficial. Because it helps me improve my vocabulary knowledge…*

> *Student D: Thanks to blogging, our vocabulary knowledge and writing skills improve.*

> *Student E: Blogging is beneficial since it enhances my vocabulary knowledge and….*

> *Student G: Blogging also helps me improve my vocabulary knowledge.*

> *Student H: Since I started writing blogs, I have learned a good number of new words.*

Table 1: Positive Aspects of Blogging

Positive Themes	n
Vocabulary development	9
Incentive for writing	6
Fun activity	6
Improving writing skill	5
Syntactic accuracy	4
Improving reading comprehension	3
Sense of responsibility	2

Contribution to language curriculum	2
Facing a new learning space	1
Interesting activity	1
Improving computing skills	1
Efficient use of time	1
Triggering for research	1
Overcoming barriers in writing	1

Incentive for writing (n: 6) stands out as another very significant theme. Students supporting this idea think blogging has a triggering effect on their desire to write. A resembling result can be observed in the studies by Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010), Blau et al. (2013), Halic et al. (2010), Nguyen (2012), Taki and Fardafshari (2012), Trajtemberg and Yiakoumetti (2011) and Vurdien (2013). In these studies, it was suggested that the use of blogs could augment student interactions via written language, enhance their learning motivation towards writing, and ultimately improve their writing performance. This might be an indicator of the fact that students embraced blogging as a motive which led them to write individually. Following excerpts show what they remarked on this subject:

Student A: I think blogging encourages me to write.

Student C: …Besides I feel I must write something to my blog.

Student D: …but later, a desire to write appeared in me, and I kept on writing blogs.

Student H: I think blogging has benefits because it gives me incentives for writing…

Fun activity (n: 6) is another theme that draws attention among the others seeing that precisely half of the students consider blogging as an entertaining activity while others regard it as a task activity. From this aspect, it might occur to us that learning by having fun concept should be taken into consideration again in the blogging content. A similar result was reached by Pehkonen and Niemi (2016) and the researchers concluded that blogging might be an activity through which students could learn by enjoying themselves. Following citations from the interviews can serve as examples to this theme:

Student B: At first it was boring. But I feel happier now that I have been used to it...

Student C: I think blogging is nice and I have fun while writing blogs…

Student D: I think blogging is entertaining and the best way to improve our English…

Student E: I feel entertained if there are lots of things to write on my blog.

Despite the fact that it was supposed to have the highest score according to the findings of a great many studies, the theme *improving writing skill* (n: 5) was referred by less than half of the students. This may be related to the age range of our students and their point of view of blogging. What factor caused this might be the subject of another research and its implications will always be a matter of debate. Yet, the fact that blogging is an activity enhancing the writing skill was emphasized by the researchers such as Dizon (2016), Ozkan (2011), Shahreza and

Fardafshari (2012), Vurdien (2013) and Yunus et al. (2013). Following are the statements of the students concerning this theme:

Student A: I think it helps me improve my writing.

Student D: Blogging contributes to my writing.

Student E: I have been able to eliminate some deficiencies in writing.

Some of the students pointed out that after they started writing blogs, they were able to get a *syntactic accuracy* (n: 4) in making sentences. In this context, it can be claimed that less than half of the students made a progress in making correct sentences. In a research conducted by Rahmany et al. (2013), it was clearly stated that blogging is a great tool to enhance accuracy for writing. This result is also in agreement with that of Montero-Fleta and Perez-Sabater (2010). The verbatim sentences demonstrating how the students benefited from the blogging experience in terms of making proper sentences are below:

Student D: I have learnt to make proper sentences and…

Student G: In the past, I couldn't make sentences according to proper sentence order, but I can now...

Student H: I also have improved my ability of making sentences a bit.

Irrelevant as it might seem, a couple of students stated that blogging experience fostered their reading comprehension skills, which made the theme *improving reading comprehension* (n: 3) remarkable indeed. When asked in what ways blogging contributed to their reading comprehension skills, the participants proclaimed that they needed to read more than write before posting blogs. Yet, we shouldn't ignore the fact that only autonomous learners would exhibit such an attitude. Izquierdo and Reyes (2009) and Vanepps (2012) reached the conclusion that blogging within reading instruction could be beneficial in supporting students' reading comprehension. Using blogs to support reading comprehension proved to be an effective means of learning for students. Below are the excerpts of those students:

Student E: I have realized that I can understand some phrases while reading foreign newspapers.

Student F: Furthermore, I feel I can understand more easily what I read now.

Student H: I think blogging enables me a better comprehension.

During interviews, two students firmly stated that blogging activity brought them a s*ense of responsibility* someway. Henri Holec (1981) explained autonomy as learners' capacity to take responsibility for their own learning. Although mentioned by only a few students in this study, relation between blogging and autonomy has been put forward by a few researchers so far. Having conducted studies, Foroutan et al. (2013) and Lee (2011) found out that blogging fostered learner autonomy especially in terms of writing context. Blogging and learner autonomy concepts seem to become the subject of further studies in future. Following are the excerpts from the students' remarks:

Student F: I like blogging and I am happy I am doing my responsibility.

Student G: I feel responsible for writing blogs.

The students were asked to write brief summaries of the classes at school on their blogs when they could not find anything to write prior to keeping blogs, until they became ready to write authentically. It was observed that some of the students wrote on the blogs what they learned in class sessions. This may suggest *contribution to language curriculum (n: 2)*, which is consistent with the results of the study conducted by Ahluwalia et al. (2011). They concluded that the blogging methods and activities presented did provide a motivating curricular addition for those students with internet access to having meaningful interactions outside the classroom. Yet, this cannot be sufficient for a generalization and more research is required. Below are the verbatim sentences from the interviews:

Student F: Additionally, it helps me revise the classroom subjects and…

Student H: I feel blogging is going to contribute to my English lesson.

Facing a new learning space (n: 1)*, interesting activity* (n: 1)*, efficient use of time* (n: 1)*, improving computing skills* (n: 1)*, triggering for research* (n: 1) and *overcoming barriers in writing* (n: 1) themes were each mentioned by only one student. However, everyone's idea should be worth being taken into consideration. One participant stated s/he has got a new online space where some learning activities can be carried out individually and with a sense of freedom. While a student considered blogging as an interesting activity since it does not look like the conventional class materials, another emphasized its benefits in terms of using the time efficiently. Another student said the blogging activity led her/him to do research in order to find authentic subjects to write on. Here do we encounter the effects of writing blogs on learners' autonomy. Foroutan et al. (2013) and Lee (2011) conducted studies to find out the relation between blogging and learners' autonomy. According to their findings, blogging promoted learner autonomy through self-regulation and self-management. The last theme, *overcoming barriers* (n:1) is related to blogging activity's potential to help the high school learners cope with reluctance and anxiety to write in English. It seems that each of these major and minor themes is very significant in that all of them represent the potential benefits of blogging on the high school learners' writing performance in the target language.

This study has naturally given a number of negative themes as well. Among the negative themes (see Table 2), *difficulty in grammatical accuracy* (n: 5) catches our eyes first. The students emphasizing this negativity stated that they had difficulty in constructing regular sentences especially in the very beginning, which adversely affected their motivation to write blogs. They expressed their ideas as following:

Table 2: Negative Aspects of Blogging

Negative Themes	n
Difficulty in grammatical accuracy	5
Difficulty in posting blogs	4
Consuming time	2
Feeling bored	2
Responsibility burden	2
Feeling anxious due to audience	1

Student A: Especially, I have difficulty in making sentences in English.

Student E: Unfortunately I try to translate long Turkish sentences into English and it is very difficult.

Student F: I sometimes cannot make the right sentences to express my ideas.

Another equally important theme emerged as *difficulty in posting blogs* (n: 4) by the students. They reported that blogging could be a challenging task now that it might not always become easy to find authentic subjects to write about. They said they were hardly able to keep themselves on the track. Below are the excerpts from the interviews:

Student F: ….and I cannot find anything to write on my blog.

Student G: I occasionally can find nothing to write actually.

Student H: ….because sometimes I do not know what to write.

The students also complained that blogging consumed too much time and therefore they felt bored greatly, which caused *consuming time* (n: 2) and *feeling bored* (n: 2) themes to appear. For us, these two factors should never be underestimated since the age group we have been working on is already quite prone to any kind of distraction. Two of them remarked that writing blogs were dull and boring in the beginning. This issue may look like a challenge for us because it might lead the procedure of blogging to failure from the beginning by discouraging the bloggers. The students may as well have flexibility to a certain extent when they are assigned with blogging tasks. Their remarks on this issue are as follows:

Student A: Writing blogs takes time since it is a little hard to write in English..

Student E: Blogging mostly requires doing research and it takes time.

Student B: Although I thought it was boring in the beginning…

Student D: At first, it was boring and I wasn't writing blogs regularly.

Responsibility burden (n: 2) is another theme which has specific importance inasmuch as it also emerged as a positive theme from the interviews. While two students considered the responsibility as a positive and beneficial concept, the other two took it as a burden.

At this point, we can more clearly perceive the difference in perception levels of high school students. In this context, we once again see the significance of raising autonomous learners who never hesitate to take responsibility for their own learning. Following verbatim sentences demonstrate the difference:

Student B: I think blogging has disadvantages because it has brought responsibility.

Student D: For me its only disadvantage is that it brings responsibility.

The themes *Feeling anxious due to audience* (n: 1) and *connection problems* (n: 1) has the smallest number, but similar results can be found in several studies in literature. Palfreyman (2005b) and Ward (2004) stated that now that blogs are highly accessible by the public, they can create audience awareness in the students writing blogs. We can conclude that anxiety can turn into awareness as long as the learners are encouraged and given sufficient motivation by their teachers.

CONCLUSION

Here with this study, we aimed to find out if blogging activity would have an effect on writing skills of high school language learners. The findings revealed some positive aspects of blogging as well as negative ones. Though the positive effects of the blogging activity are apparently a lot more than the negative ones, it should not necessarily mean that we can neglect the negative aspects.

Through blog posts, interviews and systematic observation, it was observed that blogging experience contributed to the students' writing skills particularly in terms of vocabulary enhancement. Thus we can clearly remark that blogging experience promoted the bloggers' vocabulary knowledge, which is also the theme with the highest number. The process, additionally, gave the participants incentives to write freely as well as having fun in their self-directed virtual world. According to what the participants stated, blog writing enhanced their writing skills especially contributing to their syntactic accuracy. This result might be the most crucial one in this study on the grounds that development in writing skills was the most expected result beforehand. This study has also made it clear that blogging can improve the students' reading comprehension by means of leading them to read more so as to find authentic things to write on blogs. We should not ignore the fact that blog writing has a positive effect on learners' autonomy since it highly requires individual study and sense of responsibility. Other minor positive aspects of blogging can be taken into consideration for further studies.

As to the negative aspects of the study, none of them seems impossible to cope with indeed. With a diligent work, students will be able to reach the grammatical accuracy and find original ideas to write about. Raising our students in accordance with the requirements of the digital age like internet-based technology and providing them with the relevant skills are probably the most significant parts of language teaching.

Therefore, language teachers should make an effort to introduce blogging as an alternative way to improve high school language learners' writing skills. This was a small scale exploratory case study with 14 blogging and 20 non-blogging participants, which stands out as a major limitation. However, our study can propose some implications for further research in the field.

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APPENDIX: Interview questions

- What do you think of blogging?
- What has changed since you started writing blogs?
- Do you think blogging contributes to your writing skill?
- What do you feel while you are writing blogs?
- Do you sometimes have difficulty in writing blogs?
- Do you think blogging has benefits? If yes, what are they?
- Do you think blogging has disadvantages? If yes, what are they?
- Do you recommend that your peers write blogs? Why or why not?
- Please fill in the blank: I feel the benefit of writing blogs in terms of …………