

The Impact of Electronic Teaching Via a Weblog on Developing English Creative Essay Writing Skills of Secondary Stage Students

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Introduction

Writing is a critical skill for student in school, college, and lifelong according to the recent report published by the National Commission on Writing (2006). Although developing fluency in the writing process has always been a fundamental goal of schools, the most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2002) indicate that two thirds of the nation's students performed below certain proficiency level in writing.

It is almost true that teaching composition at any level of proficiency has its difficulties especially when dealing with learners at the secondary school in Egypt where students have neither the vocabulary nor the grammatical structures to write more than a few isolated sentences. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writers, however, achieving sentence-level accuracy is doubly challenging because English is not their native language.

This general agreement on the importance of writing in language skills has led educators and researchers to find ways for effective writing instruction. Two conditions have dominated the research related to teaching writing effectively in language education (White, 1993; Brien, 2004). One of these conditions is the emergence of the process approach which focuses on the

writer as an independent individual and lays particular stress on a cycle of writing activities which move learners from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the publication of a finished text (Tribble, 1996).

The other condition is the spread of computers, internet and the advent of the different applications of the internet in the language learning. One of the newest and most promising internet applications with regard to the effective writing instruction is weblogs, also known as blog, which are defined simply as " online diaries; logs of thoughts, reflections; a space for individuals to write whatever they choose with an option for readers to comment on what they have read " (Eastment, 2005, p. 358).

On the other hand, creative writing plays an important role for learners at the personal and professional levels. Through creative writing, students can express themselves, their feelings, ideas, and plans. It is a tool which can turn imagination and inspiration into visible words.

Thus, the current study comes as an attempt to treat the low level of secondary stage students in English creative essay writing skills and this is through investigating the impact of electronic teaching, via a weblog, on developing English creative essay writing skills of secondary stage students.

· **Creative Writing:**

Dawid (2004), Fenza (2009), and Daniels (2012) define creative writing as that kind of writing through which individuals express their feelings, opinions, reactions, and

ideas to the reader in a distinguished literary style. This kind of writing includes several genres such as writing stories, poems, plays, essays, and description.

Raimes (1991) considers writing as "a creative activity and a journey of self-discovery", pointing out that writing offers a way for students to express themselves, not to repeat learned responses. In the same concern, Sheir and Alodwan (2010, p.53) state that "All pupils have creative abilities and their creativity takes a wide variety of forms. Each individual has a wide range of ideas, perceive things in a personal way and, at times, shows insight and inventiveness..... Some pupils may not be creative in one particular area but show creativity in a range of contexts across the curriculum. Where staff organized opportunities for creativity across the curriculum, pupils were more likely to find and develop their creative talents in particular areas".

As shown above and according to various studies, to describe writing as more creative than others, these certainly should reflect aspects of creative product such as fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration. That's why Ramet (2007, p.13) defines creative writing as "having the power to create an imaginative, original literary production or composition." this can be applied to a very broad spectrum of writing genres. In this respect, Fodrey (2014,p.23) stresses "the need for teachers to focus on writing for discovery, writing to discover self and voice , and development of power and authority of one's own writing ." while "also focusing on.... positioning the self within the world and writing for change."

In the present study, a creative piece of writing is that kind of writing through which students can express their thoughts, ideas, feelings, reactions, opinions, solutions, etc.... in an attractive literary style, taking into account the content, organization, vocabulary, language use, mechanics of writing and originality of the topic.

· **Importance of Creative Writing**

Creative writing plays an important role for learners at the personal and professional levels. For example, Colantone (1998) states that creative writing helps to make students have confidence and be able to become flexible writers. They will not be inhibited when writing for themselves or the teacher. It is through creative writing that students reveal and find their inner selves, their talents, ideas, hopes, and goals. Therefore, creative writing is very important to students because it helps them enter the creative life. It helps them think and communicate their ideas to others through the written medium. It helps pupils represent and shape their experiences.

In support of this claim, Bearden (2006) states that creative writing brings the following values to the classroom: creative writing deepens the experience of other content area, strengthens other writing done in the classroom and teaches conventions, stimulates creative problem solving, cultivates imagination, encourages reading, encourages development of self, creates community that supports learning beyond the creative writing focus, and creates meaning in a child's life. That's why the present research tries to investigate the impact of electronic teaching, via a weblog, based on the process

writing approach on developing English creative essay writing skills of secondary stage students.

- **Characteristics of essay writing:**

Writing is considered the most demanding skill because it requires the writer's presence of mind to simultaneously think, organize and write. A piece of writing indicates much about the intelligence and ability of the writer. A good writer is, therefore, one who is able to synthesize all the major activities involved in effective writing. The written piece is the ambassador of the writer, who will not be present when his work is being read. He must therefore write what he means without leaving unanswerable questions in the minds of his readers. That is why he must be the first reader of his writing.

An essay is a group of paragraphs written to communicate one main point. Kane (2000, p.45) defines the essay as "a relatively short composition It also means a short prose piece ". Whereas Gabbitas, (2015, p.1) defines the essay as" a written response to a given problem or question. It calls upon you to organize information to support a structured argument and to communicate the argument clearly and concisely". It can also be a long, systematic discourse. Moreover, an essay can also be defined as a group of paragraphs written about a single topic and a central main idea. It must have at least three paragraphs, but a five-paragraph essay is a common length for academic writing. Essays could be classified, according to Baker and Brizee (2007), into four types: the expository essay, the descriptive essay, the argumentative essay, and the narrative essay.

In some way an essay is like a paragraph, only on a larger scale. A paragraph has a main idea expressed in a topic sentence; an essay has a main point presented in a thesis statement. A paragraph is made up of information that supports the main idea; an essay has a number of body paragraphs that present information to support the main point. Because an essay is larger, however, it contains a few special parts of its own" a title, an introduction, and a conclusion. In this concern, Carroll (2014, p.7) states that coherent essay writing has four parts: a title, an introduction with a thesis statement, two or more body paragraphs and a conclusion.

- **The major skills of creative essay writing:**

Having reviewed the related literature on developing students' creative essay writing skills, the researcher can specify these skills in terms of the skills related to content and organization, vocabulary and language use, mechanics of writing and the skills related to creative thinking skills (fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration).

- **Content and organization**

The major related skills of content and organization are: the clarity of the main idea, relevant supporting ideas, dividing the essay into introduction, body and conclusion, well-organized paragraphs, logically-sequenced ideas, and moving smoothly from introduction to body to conclusion (Cheryl & Margaret, 2002; Arthur, 2003; Ibnian, 2009).

- **Vocabulary and language use:**

The related skills of vocabulary and language use in essay writing are: the appropriate choice of words and

idioms, accurate use of words and idioms, and the accurate use of the structure of sentences (Arthur, 2003; Dawid, 2004).

- **Mechanics of writing:**

The related skills of mechanics of writing in essay writing are: spelling, punctuation and capitalization (Kane, 2000; Arthur, 2003).

- **Creative thinking skills:**

The researcher briefly tackles the most common creative thinking skills. These skills are: fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration.

Concerning fluency, Porter et al. (1991) state that fluency is the ability to express thoughts in flowing, effortless style. Whereas, Kaufman (2009) defines fluency simply as how many different things one can name, regardless of their repetitiveness or practicality. On the other hand, Kaufman (2009) states that flexibility looks at how many different categories one can name or how many different types of ideas one may have. Flexibility is the ability to see things from different points of view, to use many different approaches or strategies. Hence, flexibility allows individual to change directions easily and give themselves permission to experience new people, places, ideas and things with open minds.

As for originality, Porter et al. (1991) state that originality is the ability to express new, different and unusual ideas. It involves synthesis or putting information about a topic together in a new and creative way. Originality is when everybody starts off with the same task but ends up with all kinds of different solutions for their final answer.

Concerning elaboration, Baer (1997) defines it as the ability to generate many details to expand and enrich one's ideas and added that elaboration is the ability to make an idea better or clearer by building upon it.

- **Educational Approaches of teaching writing:**

Several educational approaches to writing emerged at different times since the 1960s and continue to have an impact on writing pedagogy today. Each approach represents a particular focus in the teaching of writing to language learner's product, process, and genres.

However, the most two popular methods of teaching writing to non-native speakers are: The product approach and the process approach. The product approach focuses on the result of writing. The emphasis is on sentence structure, grammar, and the mechanics of writing such as spelling and punctuation. On the other hand, the process approach to writing enables teachers to focus on the various parts of the writing process and gives more freedom for students to experiment with their language. In addition, such orientation can help students develop confidence and establish fluency before they are concerned with a finished product. The writing process goes through several steps/stages. These steps/stages are pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing (Pennington, 1996, in Jones, 2006, p.39).

Consequently, the present research study is more concerned with the product approach and the process approach in an attempt to investigate the impact of electronic teaching, via a weblog, based on the process writing approach on developing English creative essay writing skills of secondary stage students.

- **Technology and Writing:**

Foreign/second language teachers continuously search for new and better ways to help their students learn a new language. One area that has provided much excitement in recent years is the use of advanced technology that supports both synchronous and asynchronous communication.

Some researchers found the use of various technologies (e.g., word processing, telecommunication technology, e-mail, a project using a personal computer in the classroom to teach the writing process, computer writing systems, computer-assisted writing software) increased the quantity and quality of student writing more than with traditional instructional methods; additionally, students' attitudes toward writing on the computer improved (Braine, 1997, 2001; Gousseva – Goodwin, 2000; Liou, 1997; Pennington, 1993; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Wang & Wen, 2002). Further, some research also found that ESL/EFL writing skills improved significantly by those students who used word processing, a computer-mediated networked environment, and Web-based materials (Al-Jarf, 2004; Braine, 1997; 2001; Liou, 1997; Pennington, 1993; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996).

Consequently, advanced technologies offer students the opportunity to reflect their ideas, receive feedback from distant audiences, rehearse their responses, and work at their own pace. It also allows students from vastly different backgrounds and cultures to teach each other, read and write through engaged practice for real audiences, and find communities with whom they can discuss issues and learn communication conventions and styles. Another point,

advanced technologies also provide a forum for social interaction, collaboration, negotiation of meaning, and dissension (Harrington, Rickly, & Day, 2000a; Swaffar, 1998; Swaffar, Romano, Markley & Arens, 1998).

- **Emergence of Blogging**

The following section presents blogs as a promising tool in the development of writing skills. The researcher begins by defining blogs and blogging. This is followed by the use of blogs in education and especially in writing pedagogy and creative writing.

- **Blogs and Blogging Definitions**

An emerging technological tool that has been identified as useful for writing is a "Web log". A weblog is commonly known as a "blog" because it is a writing log on the web. Web-logging, or blogging, is "the act of adding articles or updates to such a site at regular intervals" (Stauffer, 2002, p.4). Blog software is an asynchronous interactive computer-mediated-communication (CMC) tool. It is similar to a web site except that where web pages are static, blogs are dynamic. Blogs differ from listservs, chat rooms, and discussion boards, although they are somewhat related. The entries are updated in a linear, time-based way, similar to a personal journal or diary. Additionally, the contents are meant specifically for the public and are presented in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2002; Stauffer, 2002), with more recent postings on the top and older information pushed to the bottom. A blog post frequently consists of a title, link, comment, data and time of the post, and archival information (Blood, 2002; Stauffer, 2002). The blog structure allows a reader to see immediately how recently the blog has been

updated, and it allows them to search the archives by keyword, by date, or by category (Holinka, 2004).

As described above, blogs are a web-based technology that allows text and other media to be deployed immediately to the web. Frequently updated content is a hallmark of blogs, which results in more conversational or interactive experiences, as compared to other types of media on the web. Basic blogging can be done with little or no computer programming experience whatsoever (Richardson, 2006).

- **Using Weblogs (Blogs) for Foreign Language Learning and Creative Writing:**

A number of educators have been using blogs in their classes, and they have written about how blogging is grounded in current learning theory as well as written theory and pedagogy. Educators who use blogs have suggested possible classroom applications, such as the following: (a) learning journal, (b) learning logs or thinking journals, (c) reflective journals, (d) audio learning logs, (e) reflective or writing journals, (f) visual learning logs, (g) group discussion and collaborative writing spaces, (h) knowledge management, (i) dialogue for group work, and (j) e-portfolios (Barrios, 2003a; Campbell, 2003b; Downes, 2003; Johnson, 2002; Kennedy, 2003, 2004a; Ly, 2004).

Based on the proposed possibilities for classroom application, one might expect blogs to offer many reading and writing incentives for L2/FL learning and writing because blogging places emphasis on content, the possibility of speedy feedback, the option of working with both words and images, and the ability to link one post to another.

Scholars who use blogs also say that because students know they are going to have an audience by publishing their writing on the web, they often produce higher quality work than students who write only for the teacher or for others in the class.

From the foregoing, the relation between creativity and technology is clear. In this concern, Florida (2004) states that creativity is linked to creative individuals and results from interaction among them. According to Florida (2005), the key to creativity lies in a formula that includes the three T's: Technology, Talent and Tolerance. If this assumption is correct, then the educational institutions are supposed to foster this relation between creativity and technology since they supply at least two (i.e. Talent and Tolerance) if not all three of the T's.

Some of the techniques used to improve creativity include brainstorming, mind mapping, various forms of meditation, and guided imagery. E-tools like blogs and forum, as stated by Williams & Jacobs (2004) and Ganley (2004) provide more freedom-which is a key element to develop creativity and increase the power of participation and relationship among the learners. Moreover, in their research, Robertson & Whiting (2006) found out that reflective, creative and critical thinking skills of their learners improved widely when they knew about the access of all people who were connected to internet to their subjects.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that e-learning, especially blogs, has a lot of advantages that can foster creativity and guarantee a better learning environment.

- **Definition of Terms:**

- **Weblogs (Blogs):** Eastment, (2005, p. 358) defines weblogs as "online diaries; logs of thoughts, reflections; a space for individuals to write whatever they choose with an option for readers to comment on what they have read".

The researcher adopts Eastment's (2005) definition of weblogs to develop the students' English creative essay writing skills.

- **Essay writing :**

Gabbitas, (2015, p.1) defines the essay as" a written response to a given problem or question. It calls upon you to organize information to support a structured argument and to communicate the argument clearly and concisely".

The researcher adopts Gabbitas' (2015) definition of the essay writing and makes use of the process writing steps in the classroom practices that students follow in composing their creative essays. These steps are pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing.

- **Statement of the Problem:**

The problem of the study can be stated in the low level of secondary stage students, in Egypt, in English creative essay writing skills. Consequently, the present research attempts to answer the following main question:

What is the impact of electronic teaching via a weblog on developing English creative essay writing skills of secondary stage students?

· **Purpose of the Study:**

The main aim of the present research is to develop the English creative essay writing skills of secondary stage students through the electronic teaching, via a weblog, based on the process writing approach.

· **Hypotheses of the study:**

To answer the above question, the following hypotheses were formulated to be tested:

- 1- There is statistically significant difference among the mean scores of the experimental group (electronic teaching), and the control group in the overall English creative essay writing skills Post-test in favour of the experimental group.
- 2- There is statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the pre-test and post-test in the overall English creative essay writing skills in favour of their post-test scores.

· **Delimitations of the study:**

- 1- **Approaches:** The educational approaches were limited to the process writing approach when it is used electronically and the traditional approach.
- 2- **Topic:** The study was limited to developing the English creative essay writing.
- 3- **Place:** The study was limited to first year secondary school students at El- kadima Secondary School for Girls in kafr El-Sheikh.
- 4- **Time:** The experimental treatment was implemented in a whole term of one academic year.

Method:**Participants:**

The participants of the research was sixty students, chosen at random, from first year secondary school students at El-kadima Secondary School for Girls in Kafr El-Sheikh in the school year 2013-2014. Students were randomly assigned to two groups. 30 students represented the experimental group (the electronic teaching based on the process writing approach). The other 30 students represented the control group (the traditional teaching based on the product approach).

Instruments:

The researcher used the following instruments:

- 1- A checklist to identify the English creative essay writing skills needed for first year secondary school students (Prepared by the researcher).
- 2- A pre-post English creative essay writing test (Prepared by the researcher).
- 3- A scoring scale for scoring the English creative essay writing test (Prepared by the researcher).

The English Creative Essay Writing Skills Checklist

The checklist aimed at identifying the creative essay writing skills necessary for first year secondary stage students in essay writing and is based on the English syllabus of the Ministry of Education for first year secondary stage, and on previous studies focusing on developing English creative essay writing skills. This checklist included 13 skills classified under four categories: Content and Organization, Vocabulary and Language use,

Mechanics of Writing, and originality. A three-point rating scale ranging from highly required to not required is included in the checklist.

Procedures:

The following procedures were followed in executing the experiment:

- 1- Administering the English creative essay writing skills pre-test to the whole sample (the control group and the experimental group), sixty students of first year secondary school students.
- 2- Teaching the experimental group by the researcher using the electronic teaching based on the process writing approach via a weblog, through the use of a ready-made educational website. The control group was taught by the school teacher using the usual way.
- 3- Administering the creative essay writing skills post-test to the whole sample (the control group and the experimental group) after the treatment.
- 4- Scoring the students' creative essay writing skills test using the scoring scale developed by the researcher.
- 5- Collecting data of pre-and-post treatment raw scores.
- 6- Tabulation and analysis of data.

• **Results of the Statistical Analysis:**

-The First Hypothesis:

"There is statistically significant difference among the mean scores of the experimental group (electronic teaching), and the control group in the overall English creative essay writing skills Post-test in favour of the experimental group."

To test this hypothesis, the researcher used the t-test for independent groups to measure the differences between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the post-test of the English creative essay writing skills test. The obtained results of this hypothesis are shown in table (1) as follows:

Table (1) Results of T-Test for the Experimental Group and the Control Group in Total Scores of English creative essay writing skills in post test

E.C.W.S.	Groups	N	Mean	Df	SD	T - value		Level of significance	η^2
						Calculated	Tabulated		
overall	Experimental	30	55.63	58	3.2719	11.733	2.00	0.05	0.651
	Control	30	35.00		3.2169				

Table (1) shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the post-test in the overall English creative writing test in favour of the experimental group (electronic teaching). The obtained (calculated) T-value is higher than T-tabulated (2.00) at (0.05) level of significance and (58) degrees of freedom, in favour of the experimental group (the higher mean score). Table (1) also shows that the effect size of the independent variable of the electronic teaching based on the process writing approach was high (0.651) on the total score of the English creative essay writing skills test.

Based on the above table, it could be concluded that the experimental group (electronic teaching, via a weblog, based on the process writing approach) had a positive effect on developing the overall English creative essay writing skills of secondary stage students.

- The Second Hypothesis

"There is statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the pre-test and post-test in the overall English creative essay writing skills in favour of their post-test scores."

To test this hypothesis, the researcher used the t-test for paired groups to measure the difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the pre-test and post-test in the overall English creative essay writing skills pre-posttest. The obtained results of this hypothesis are shown in table (2) as follows:

Table (2) Results of T-Test for the Experimental Group and the Control Group on the pre-test and post-test in the overall English creative essay writing skills test.

E.C.W .S.	Groups	N	Mean	SD	Df	T – value		Level of significance	η ²
						Calculated	Tabulated		
overall	Experimental pre.	30	30.53	4.5542	29	27.25	2.09	0.01	0.98
	Experimental post	30	55.63	4.6555					
overall	control pre.	30	30.20	2.2404	29	10.76	2.09	0.01	0.92
	control post	30	35.00	2.2169					

Table (2) shows that there is statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group on the pre-test and post-test in the overall English creative essay writing skills in favour of their post-test scores. The obtained (calculated) t-value is higher than t-tabulated (2.09) at (0.01) and (2.00) at (0.05) level of significance with (29) degrees of freedom.

- **Discussion:**

Results of this research showed that using the electronic teaching, via a weblog, based on the process writing approach proved to be effective on developing English creative essay writing skills of secondary stage students.

This result could be attributed to the techniques of the website (weblog), its links and the process writing approach, for the experimental group. As the weblog served as an appropriate vehicle for the writing process approach. The aspects of blogging aided the students in many ways such as easy word processing for writing, editing, and revising; tools such as commenting as a source for creative thinking through suggestion for content and editing, and the access of blogs for a broader audience and reader interaction; a platform to create a discourse community and a creative product.

The result of this research concerning the experimental group (electronic teaching based on the process writing approach) is consistent with some of the related studies results which indicated the potential of computer technologies in education such as (Campbell,2003a,2003b; Nelson and Fernheimer,2003; Campbell, 2005a; White, 2006; Schrum et. al., 2007; Kelley, 2008) and a number of researchers studying the integration of computer technologies into classroom practice (Farmer, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Aly, 2008; Ozgur, 2009; Salem, 2012), who reported that the computer technology, especially the internet, can be very constructive learning environment in

supporting and facilitating student-centered, interactive, and collaborative learning for a creative product.

• **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

Results of this study showed that using the electronic teaching based on the process writing approach via a weblog proved to be effective on developing English creative essay writing skills of secondary stage students.

The study findings indicated that the electronic teaching, using the techniques of the web site, its links and the process writing approach, challenged the traditional method in developing students' creative essay writing. The electronic teaching helped the experimental group students develop their English creative essay writing skills in terms of content and organization, vocabulary and language use, mechanics of writing, and originality.

In the light of the findings of the present research, the following recommendations seem pertinent:

- 1- Finding showed that electronic teaching based on the process writing approach via a weblog proved to be effective in developing the students' performance in essay writing, so it is recommended that teachers use this method in teaching creative essay writing.
- 2- Formal and substantial supports from the Ministry of Education, are equally important for teachers who attempt to implement new pedagogical technology, such as teacher training programs, computer facilities, instructional guide and design menu of appropriate learning activities and so on.
- 3- More research and experimental instruction are needed to prove that the electronic teaching environment is a

constructive environment to develop students' creative writing, not only in essay writing but also in all genres of creative writing.

- 4- There's a need to establish an EFL Instructional Web Site, where curriculum designs are stored for free access, and where teachers can ask for help if they want to design their own homepage as a medium to deliver their EFL instruction as well as a personal database of personal instructional resources.
- 5- There's a need to establish an EFL discussion forum for teachers to exchange ideas and experience about implementing the internet-integrated learning mode in real classroom instruction.

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