

Can weblogs reduce writing anxiety and facilitate improvement in writing skills?

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Abstract

Previous studies lack findings on how an instructional setting that utilizes CMC may both aid in the development of writing proficiency and reduce anxiety associated with the demands of writing. This pilot study attempts to fill this gap by investigating the effects of online portfolio through weblogs (blogging) on students' writing anxiety and writing skills. Seventeen (17) respondents enrolled in an English Communication course of a private university in the Philippines participated in the study. Data were gathered using Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), Discourse Completion Task (DCT), focus group discussion (FGD), and content analysis of students' blog comments. Results of the questionnaire revealed that students with low, average, and high writing anxiety reported common causes of their writing anxiety such as limited vocabulary, difficulty in organizing their thoughts when asked to write under time pressure, and fear of students' and teacher's evaluations. Based on their DCT and FGD replies, blogging has improved their writing skills and has lessened their writing anxiety.

Keywords: Blogging, weblogs, writing anxiety, writing skills

1. Introduction

In their effort to respond to the 21st century literacy needs of learners, many educators now are using technology that combines computers and telecommunication (more popularly known as Computer-Mediated

Communication or CMC) in the classroom. CMC has been defined as “synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode in text messages that are relayed from senders’ computers to receivers” (Walther, 1992 as cited in Lane, 1994, para 3). It can be utilized in the classroom in three ways: “conferencing, informatics, and computer-assisted instruction (Santoro, 1995 as cited in Berge, 1995, para 1). Computer conferencing includes email, online messaging, and small- and large-group discussions. Informatics refers to the repositories of network of organized information that include a library’s OPAC system and archives of pictures, sounds, texts, and movies (Berge, 1995). Computer-assisted instruction (CAI), on the other hand, pertains to classroom practices that “use the computer as the platform for interactive and personalized learning environments” (Elizabeth, 2003, para 1). From CMC, there emerged various social networking sites (SNSs) with multiple applications. Among these features, blogging or weblogs became a very popular medium in teaching academic writing.

Since the invention of blogger in 1999 (Weblog applications, 2005), blogs or weblogs have been the focus of various research. Several studies (Anderson, 2010; Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Fageeh, 2011; Jones, 2006; Kelley, 2008; Lee, 2010; Roth, 2007; Sun & Chang, 2012) have established the importance of weblogs in developing students’ writing skills.

While various studies confirm that weblogs indeed can help develop writing skills, this pilot study investigated not only the positive effects of blogging on developing writing proficiency but also its usefulness in reducing writing anxiety often associated with a pen-and-paper writing under time pressure. Research on this area appears scant. The only paper the researchers found to be relevant to the present study is Murnahan’s (2010) study, which experimented on whether or not stress and anxiety could be reduced among students in four learning conditions such as diaries, journals, e-mail, and weblogs. However, her findings reveal that none of these four learning conditions, including weblogs, could reduce students’ anxiety. This present study seeks to either corroborate or challenge this previous finding by investigating whether students’ positive experiences in blogging can help develop writing proficiency and reduce writing anxiety.

Effects of blogging on the development of writing skills

Blogging “is short for web logging” (Jones, 2003, p.1). It is the act of keeping a diary or journal online with dated entries linked to other sites on the web, usually other blogs, thus, creating a virtual community (Jones, 2003). Blogs are “online public writing environments in which postings (individual writing segments, often containing hyperlinks to other online sources) are listed in reversed chronological order” (Blood, 2002 as cited in Elison & Yu, 2008, p. 105).

Blogging, by its very nature, is a public online journal that allows a wide range of readers to post comments or reactions about the blog entry. Utilizing blogging as a learning tool can promote social and peer interaction and supports community-centered instruction (Vygotsky, 1978 as cited in Glogoff, 2005) that hones students’ writing craft through virtual exchanges. Aside from social exchanges online, blogging can also be utilized “to encourage guided discovery and knowledge construction” (Glogoff, 2005, p. 126). As applied in this research, weblogs served as a platform for social interaction where students were made to reconstruct their knowledge of topics developed in essays and reflect on their writing skills based on comments by peers and virtual visitors.

Weblog or blogging has evolved from a simple online diary for self-expression to a complicated educational tool for academic writing. Weblog is viewed as a means of developing students’ (1) writing proficiency (Jones, 2006; Kelley, 2008; Roth, 2007), (2) attitudes toward writing (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Fageeh, 2011; Jones, 2006; Lee, 2010), and (3) ability to critique others’ writing (Jones, 2006). In addition, Anderson (2010) found that students’ involvement in blogging improved their skills in academic writing in terms of content and voice. However, blogging alone may not suffice to help students improve their writing skills. Peers’ and mentors’ feedback on essays are essential to help them become aware of their writing problems. Ware (2008) found that language learners are appreciative of their partner’s individualized feedback in their blog posts, with some even correcting their grammar errors. However, transcripts show little percentage of corrections on form. This finding indicates that students only provide grammar corrections unless given explicit directions (Ware, 2008).

Brescia and Miller (2005) described the seven characteristics of blogging or weblog that uniquely enhanced college-level writing instruction. Blogging (1) provides the greatest instructional potential for those who

maintain weblog throughout their college careers both as a source of knowledge and as a personal management content system; (2) provides opportunities to share in public (via virtual society) what is learned in the classroom; (3) leverages teaching to outside school hours; (4) allows students to express freely what they feel; (5) provides opportunity for free writing; (6) encourages students to do more formal writing; and (7) promotes interactivity in which the students can post comments and ask questions.

Furthermore, Sun and Chang (2012) claimed that weblog “not only encourages students to actively and reflectively engage in knowledge sharing, knowledge generation, and the development of numerous strategies to cope with difficulties encountered in the learning process” (p. 43) but also provides them with a sense of authorship that allows them to reflect on the requirements of academic writing, the purposes of writing, and their authority as writers.

Writing anxiety and its sources

Because of the cognitive demands of writing, learners experience apprehension or anxiety while writing. Anxiety is an overwhelming emotion of fear or apprehension that manifests physiological signs such as sweating, increased pulse rate, and tension. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) define anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p. 125). Anxiety in the context of language learning can be described as fear or apprehension characterized by self-doubt in one’s capacity to cope with learning a new language. Writing anxiety is associated with “writers who are intellectually capable of the task at hand, but who nevertheless have difficulty with it” (McLeao, 1987 as cited in Rankin-Brown, 2006, p.2). Hence, writing apprehension or writing anxiety refers to negative, anxious feelings about oneself as a writer, one’s writing context, or one’s writing task that affects the writer as he or she scribbles down his or her ideas on paper.

Rankin-Brown (2006) stated that writing anxiety comes from (1) “frustrations stemming from self-evaluation and self-expectations on how well one should write; (2) fear of how the teacher will evaluate the writing; (3) fear of how their peers will evaluate their writing; and (4) fear of losing one’s identity when using rhetorical styles and patterns to write” (p. 3). Other sources of writing anxiety include instructional practices of English writing, past writing experiences (Atay & Kurt, 2006; Latif, 2007), linguistic knowledge, perceived writing performance, English writing self-efficacy,

(Latif, 2007), fear of criticism or of others' evaluation of written outputs, Foreign Language competence self-esteem (Clark, 2002; Latif, 2007), and perception of writing (Clark, 2002).

Previous studies have documented the relationship between writing anxiety and performance along with other variables. Pajares and Johnson (1994) reported that writing apprehension was not predictive of writing performance. However, Daud, Daud, and Abu Kassim (2005) found that learners with high scores in their essays are less anxious and more confident in writing in English than those with low scores. Similarly, Argaman and Abu-Rabia (2002) found significant relationships between language anxiety and both reading and writing skills. In addition, Cheng (2008) posited that perceived L2 writing competence is a strong predictor of L2 writing anxiety. This means that students who write well exhibit lower writing anxiety compared with those who do not. Furthermore, Gardner (1985), Dornyei (1998), and Deci and Ryan (1985) posit that favorable attitudes toward the English language, in this case academic writing in English, help reduce anxiety. DeDeyn (2011), on the other hand, stressed culture as a factor in reducing writing anxiety. He stated that students who get acculturated in their L2 context have the tendency to have reduced writing anxiety that may result in improved writing performance.

Effects of portfolio keeping on writing anxiety

Literature documenting the effects of portfolio keeping on writing anxiety is still very scant. Ozturk and Cecen (2007) investigated the effects of portfolio keeping on the writing anxiety of 15 EFL Turkish prospective teachers of English. Data were gathered by means of Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI), a background questionnaire, and two reflective sessions. Students were asked to write (1) a personal essay, (2) a problem-solution essay, (3) an argument/persuasive essay, (4) a travel narrative, and (5) an analytical essay. The students shared their drafts from first to third revision, with small- and large-group workshops. In the small-group workshops held twice a week, two students commented on each other's works; whereas in the large-group workshops held once a week, students' writings were shared with the entire class. Results of reflective sessions (interview with the respondents) revealed that portfolio keeping helped students improve their writing skills and overcome their writing anxiety as well. In the study of Ozturk and Cecen, part of the writing workshops is peer

feedback, which may have also been a factor in reducing students' writing anxiety. Atay and Kurt (2007), in their study of Turkish prospective teachers, confirmed Ozturk and Cecen's finding that peer feedback can lower students' writing anxiety compared with that of teacher feedback.

The present study is similar to Ozturk and Cecen's (2007) because it replicated the idea of portfolio keeping, but it is different in many respects, especially because it uses an online portfolio through weblogs. The study is also similar in some respects to Atay and Kurt's (2007) in providing students the opportunity to give feedback through peer discussion. The present investigation utilized both online and face-to-face feedback.

While previous studies on blogging and anxiety have established the facilitative effects of technology on the development of writing skills and in identifying the sources of anxiety and their relationship to language performance, these studies lack findings on how an instructional setting that utilizes CMC may both aid in the development of writing proficiency and reduce anxiety associated with the demands of writing. The present study aims at filling this gap in research.

This pilot study investigated whether electronic portfolio via weblogs would be effective in reducing writing anxiety and in developing students' writing skills. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following queries:

1. How do students with different anxiety levels differ in their perception of their writing anxiety?
2. What are the perceived difficulties and situations that trigger students' writing anxiety?
3. Does online portfolio through blogging help reduce the students' writing anxiety?
4. What are the perceptions of the students on the impact of online portfolio in developing their writing skills?

2. Method

This pilot study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. It endeavored to determine the perceived effects of online interactive blogging on freshman college students' writing anxiety and writing performance by utilizing perception data (through survey and focus group discussion).

2.1 Participants

This pilot study involved one class of 17 freshman college students majoring in computer studies. Sixteen of them are Filipinos, and only one is Chinese. Their ages range from 16-21 years old. The class was composed of 20 students; however, three students were not able to participate in the survey.

The goal of English instruction in the basic education in the Philippines is to develop students' proficiency in the four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Upon reaching tertiary education, students are expected to have acquired a certain level of competence in English. The participants in the present study were freshman college students who were enrolled in an English Communication (ENGLCOM) course at the time of data collection.

The ENGLCOM course aims to hone students' writing skills, develop their critical thinking through writing essays, foster civic and social consciousness through their choice of topics for essays, and promote a research culture essential for developing lifelong learners.

To achieve the course objectives, ENGLCOM is divided into two components: (1) the Language component (LC) and (2) the Reading and Writing component (RWC). These two components are taught by two language teachers. The LC and the RWC complement each other. The LC emphasizes grammar lessons anchored on specific writing skills that students need to be able to write paragraphs and essays in the RWC. For instance, one lesson in the RWC is writing a descriptive paragraph. The LC, then, focuses on the different types of modifiers and their use in meaningful contexts. While the LC's coverage is focused on English grammar, the RWC's scope includes the different types of rhetorical patterns with sample model paragraphs and essays; stages of the writing process; various styles of writing good introduction, body and conclusion; and writing activities using the process approach to writing.

2.2 Procedure

The participants were given an orientation about the online interactive portfolio through weblogs (blogging) on the first day of classes. They were informed that as a part of their requirements for the course, they would keep their own weblogs (blogs) where they would post their essays. They were made to write short paragraphs and two major essays, which are definition

and argumentative essays following the process approach. The students were instructed to make an outline prior to writing the first draft. Next, they were made to write the second draft in class based on peers' comments. The second draft was then submitted to their English teacher through email. The soft copies of papers with teacher's comments were returned to students through email for final revision. Lastly, the final drafts of the essays were posted in their individual blogs for their teacher and peers to read and comment on. They were also given instructions to improve the quality of their outputs based on their teacher's and peers' comments posted on the blogs. This procedure reflected Mezirow's (1997 as cited in Cooper, 2009) Transformative Learning and Aggarwal's (2000) Type 1 learning environment – a combination of web-mediated and face-to-face classroom.

To assess the students' level of anxiety, Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was administered to the respondents at the start of the term. This scale adapted from Cheng (2004) was used to measure the degree to which an individual feels anxious when writing in an L2. The instrument has a five-point Likert response format (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = no strong feelings; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree). The SLWAI has adequate validity and high internal consistency reliability with a reported Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.91 (Ozturk & Cecen, 2007). For the purpose of this study, only 17 items from the original 22 items of Cheng's (2004) SLWAI were taken, and words, such as 'compositions,' were changed to 'essays' to match it with the term commonly used in the classroom. The SLWAI was examined following Atay and Kurt's (2006) analysis "by summing the subjects' ratings of the 17-items. When statements of the SLWAI were negatively worded, responses were reversed and recorded, so that in all instances, a high score represented high anxiety" (para 2).

To determine the triggers of students' anxiety and the effects of weblogs on their writing performance and writing anxiety, Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and focus group discussion (FGD) were conducted after 12 weeks of students' exposure to online interactive blogging. DCT consists of open-ended questions pertaining to students' (1) sources of difficulty and anxiety in writing, (2) their perceptions as to whether or not blogging has reduced their writing anxiety, and (3) perceptions as to whether or not blogging has developed their writing skills. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the term. To triangulate the results of the DCT, an FGD was also conducted. A group of nine students had a discussion with the researchers regarding the

usefulness of blogging during their entire term in ENGLCOM. The students' responses to the DCT questions were coded, analyzed, and interpreted using percentage. The SLWAI results were computed using weighted mean. Finally, students' comments (feedback on peers' blog essays) were coded to enrich the qualitative data collected through FGD and DCT.

3. Results and Discussion

Participants' level of anxiety

Based on Ozturk and Cecen's (2007) study, the students were grouped into three anxiety levels according to their SLWAI scores. The low-anxious students are those whose scores are one or more standard deviations below the mean, i.e., equal to or smaller than 41 (23%). The high-anxious students are those whose mean scores are one or more standard deviations above the mean, i.e., equal to or higher than 64 (18%). The rest is grouped as having average writing anxiety (59%). Table 1 shows that a majority of the students had an average writing anxiety.

Table 1

Frequency and percentage distributions of students in three anxiety levels

Anxiety Level	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
High Anxiety	1	1	2	18
Average Anxiety	8	3	10	59
Low Anxiety	3	1	4	23

Participants' perception of their writing anxiety

Table 2 shows that the high-anxious students selected the 'strongly agree' choice in nine out of 17 items in the questionnaire, indicating the intensity of their emotion or reaction regarding specific writing situations. They strongly agree about the physical symptoms of anxiety they experience such as increasing heartbeat, freezing, trembling, and perspiring when they write an essay. In addition, they strongly agree about having experienced jumbled thoughts when they write under time pressure, being worried about the thought of others evaluating their essays, and having no confidence while writing their two major essays. Unless they have a choice, they would not use English in writing their essays. Furthermore, they agree on the following: avoiding English writing situations, being afraid that students would ridicule their English essays, and being afraid that their papers would be chosen as sample essays.

Likewise, the average-anxious students agree that they experience physical symptoms of anxiety when writing an essay. They are anxious when their essays are read or evaluated by others. These results confirm Latif's (2007) and Clark's (2002) findings that fear of others' evaluation contributes to writing anxiety. However, despite their writing anxiety, these average-anxious students do not avoid English writing.

On the other hand, a pattern for low-anxious students can be seen. For the greatest part, they disagree on the items in the questionnaire (nine out of 17), which indicates that they mostly deny having experienced physical symptoms of anxiety such as freezing, perspiring, trembling, and the like. Instead, they report having full confidence in writing their essays. They are not worried that their essays would be evaluated nor do they avoid English writing situations. They do not experience having jumbled thoughts when writing under time pressure. These results confirm the findings of Daud, Daud, and Abu Kassim (2005) that students who are confident in their writing abilities are less anxious.

Table 2***Weighted mean of SWLAI results of students with low, average, and high writing anxiety***

Indicator		Low Anxious		Average Anxious		High Anxious	
1.	While writing in English, I am not nervous at all.	4.5	SA	3.2	NSF	2.5	NSF
2.	I feel my heart pounding when I write English essays under time constraint.	2.0	D	3.6	A	4.5	SA
3.	While writing English essays, I feel worried and uneasy if I know they will be evaluated.	1.8	D	3.7	A	4.5	SA
4.	I usually do my best to avoid writing English essays.	1.5	D	2.7	NSF	3.5	A
5.	My mind often goes blank when I start to work on an English essay.	2.3	D	3.2	NSF	4.5	SA
6.	I tremble or perspire when I write English essays under time pressure.	2.0	D	2.8	NSF	5	SA
7.	If my English essay is to be evaluated, I would worry about getting a very poor grade.	2.5	NSF	3.7	A	5	SA
8.	I do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.	1.8	D	3.0	D	4	A
9.	My thoughts become jumbled when I write English essays under time constraint.	3.3	NSF	3.4	NSF	5	SA
10.	Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write essays.	2.8	NSF	3.2	NSF	5	SA
11.	I am afraid that the other students would deride my English essay if they read it.	1.8	D	3.5	A	3.5	A
12.	I freeze up when unexpectedly asked to write English essays.	1.8	D	2.7	NSF	4.5	SA
13.	I don't worry at all about what other people would think of my English essays.	2.3	A	3.3	NSF	3.5	D
14.	I am afraid if my English essay is being chosen as a sample for discussion in class.	3.0	NSF	3.2	NSF	4.0	A
15.	When I was writing my two major essays, I was not worried at all.	3.8	A	2.8	NSF	1.5	D
16.	I am confident writing my two major essays because I have good writing skills learned in high school.	2.8	NSF	2.8	NSF	1.5	D
17.	I am not confident writing my two major essays because I am not exposed to a lot of writing situations inside and outside the class.	2.0	D	2.9	NSF	4.5	SA

*SA – Strongly agree A – Agree NSF – No strong feelings D – Disagree SD – Strongly disagree

Perceived writing difficulties that trigger anxiety

Replies in the DCT revealed that the top three difficulties of students that make them feel anxious when writing their English essays had to do with limited vocabulary (13%), organization of thoughts (12%), and grammar usage (10%). Some students also attested to their difficulty in generating (7%) and translating ideas (7%).

In comparing the replies of students across anxiety levels, a marked difference can be seen: the low-anxious students have less difficulties. One student has only one difficulty, two of them have two, and the other has three. These difficulties have to do with vocabulary, grammar, and organization. The average- and high-anxious students identified all the choices in the survey: vocabulary, grammar, lack of ideas, translation, and organization.

Perceived situations that trigger anxiety

DCT results show that the most common situation that triggers anxiety among the students under investigation is peer evaluation/opinion (26%). Students revealed that their peers have been a source of their embarrassment when the latter taunt them for their grammatical lapses, ‘funny’ information, and ineffective organization. Three of them said:

“I used to have a classmate who embarrassed me with my wrong grammar usage.”

“My block mates in English sometimes laugh at my ideas.”

“My friends criticized me for the way I structure my essay. But they also give suggestions.”

Ranked second among the anxiety triggers reported by the students is teacher’s evaluation (22%). This result runs counter to Atay and Kurt ‘s (2007) finding that the teacher is the biggest anxiety factor of students. Students have the notion that college life is more difficult as compared with high school and that college professors may not be as gracious in giving evaluation marks as compared with their high-school teachers. These perceptions are exemplified in the following responses:

“My teacher, I know that college professors have very high standards when it comes to grading.”

“I am anxious when teachers are expecting something excellent from us; I fear that I cannot live up to their standards.”

Time pressure is another source of students' anxiety (22%). Some students with self-restrictions and limitations often worry that they cannot finish their essays within the specified time. One student said, *“I am anxious due to limited time. I cannot think of ideas to write.”*

The other triggers are family expectations, self-limitations, such as lack of proficiency and computer literacy, and lack of motivation. Of the eight triggers, teacher's evaluation and lack of motivation are listed by low-anxious students as their anxiety factors. The average-anxious group listed time pressure, peer and teacher's evaluation, family expectations, lack of proficiency, and lack of ideas as anxiety-causing factors. The high-anxious students claim that they are intimidated by teachers and peers. The participants of the present study identified eight anxiety factors, whereas those of Atay and Kurt's (2007) listed only seven.

Usefulness of blogging experiences in reducing anxiety

On the question as to whether their experiences in using online portfolio through blogging have helped lessen their writing anxiety, DCT responses reveal that 74% of the students claimed that it did lessen their anxiety, and only 26% reported that blogging did not help reduce their anxiety. One of the four low-anxious students reported that blogging had no effect on him because he considered himself as having no anxiety at all. On the other hand, a majority of the average-anxious students believed that it did lessen their anxiety, and one high-anxious student claimed that blogging activities helped lower his anxiety level. This finding runs counter to Murnahan's (2010), which claimed that weblogs could not help reduce students' anxiety.

Students' direct avowals testify that blogging reduced their writing anxiety because of the following reasons: (1) It addresses one of the situations that they fear most: time pressure. One student said that *“...online portfolio through blogging helped reduce my anxiety because it gives me more time to improve on my essays. There is no time pressure.”* (2) Blogging has provided another mode of self-expression and engagement. One student claimed that *“I do it in the comfort of home, and it feels good to express my thoughts*

and feelings regarding what I read.” Another student revealed that “...it is engaging. You won't feel that you are doing an assignment.” and (3) Such a web-based activity provided another mode of instructional delivery, learning, and interaction. A majority of the students reported that they benefited from the additional inputs of their peers and their teacher in improving their essays.

It can be gleaned from the students' responses that their positive experiences and perceived usefulness of blogging activities in developing their writing skills made them affirm the indirect impact of blogging on lowering writing anxiety. One of the situations that trigger anxiety which the students reported is time pressure. With blogging, fear of writing under time pressure inside the classroom may have decreased because the students were provided enough time to revise their written outputs in response to blog comments at home or in any place where they could have internet access. Furthermore, the other anxiety trigger reported by students had to do with their limited English writing proficiency. Through the online portfolio activities, fear stemming from their perception that they might produce low-quality outputs may have decreased because they were given instructions that they could revise their outputs as they get ideas from teachers and peers in improving the content, style, organization, and accuracy of their essays.

Perceived usefulness of reading and commenting on peers' essays in developing writing skills

In addition to the question as to whether or not online portfolio through blogging has helped reduce their anxiety, the students were also asked as to whether or not web-based activities have helped develop their writing skills. It is interesting to note that the results in this part of the DCT are inextricably related to the third reason as to why blogging has helped lower the students' anxiety level: they benefit from the input they receive. Five categories were obtained in their DCT replies (see Table 3).

Table 3***Students' perception on how reading and commenting in blogs improve writing skills***

Responses as to how reading and commenting in blogs improve writing skills	Low Anxious	Average Anxious	High Anxious	Total
	%	%	%	%
See errors and analyze other works	5	18	5	28
Provide ideas to be included in the content	0	18	9	27
Notice writing styles of others	9	9	0	18
Observe grammar use	5	5	0	10
Learn new words	5	14	0	19

Many students pointed out that blogging enabled them to get ideas that could be included in their own texts, introduced them to varied writing styles, and helped them see the errors of others, which made them reflect on their own errors and gave them content ideas. One student said, *“Blogging introduced me to a new writing style and enabled me to see the common weaknesses and strengths in writing.”* Another student claimed that *“... by reading and analyzing their blogs, I can generate new ideas and share my knowledge on their posts.”* To a certain extent, blogging has helped the students learn grammar and vocabulary. Two of them wrote: *“... reading my peers' outputs enabled me to discover new words”*; *“I learned new words and became conscious of my grammar usage.”*

Based on FGD and DCT responses, the students reported that their writing skills improved in the areas of writing style, organization, and grammar and vocabulary usage because of their peers' comments. To enrich these findings, students' comments on their blogs were coded. Three themes emerged: appreciation of peers' writing style and content, reaction to the topic, and recommendations. The following are sample comments from the students' blogs according to themes:

Theme	Sample Comments
Appreciation of writing style and content (praise/compliment)	<p><i>“I can feel the fun while reading your post! Looks like you enjoyed a lot. Descriptive work!”</i></p> <p><i>“Very informative, Rem. Thanks for sharing your knowledge about CARS.”</i></p> <p><i>“Reading your work made me remember the time we went there.”</i></p> <p><i>“I have never been to Boracay and from reading your blog, I now have to go there to check it out myself. Great work!”</i></p> <p><i>“Anyway Rem, this is a nice topic and you explained your claim clearly. :))) let’s wait for more scientific studies about this before we try it.”</i></p>
Reaction to information included in the text	<p><i>“High School is better; it may not give you options in choosing your schedule, but it is where you’ll meet your true friends.”</i></p> <p><i>“Distance is not a hindrance to Success.”</i></p>
Recommendations for improvement	<p><i>“You should also add the PSP Go and the PS Vita as well!”</i></p> <p><i>“I agree how love and infatuation can be easily mistaken with one another. So be careful! By the way, cite your sources.”</i></p>

Based on students' statements, it can be deduced that they have not really focused on form in providing feedback, which affirms Ware's (2008) findings that students rarely focused on corrections of form unless given explicit instructions. This may be attributed to the Asian culture of being very discreet when providing feedback so as not to offend the writer. Students' comments on blogs, as well as the responses on FGD and DCT, all attest to the usefulness of blogging experiences in developing writing skills.

4. Conclusion

The use of ICT has indeed revolutionized students' learning. This pilot study, which focused on online portfolio through weblogs, has three major findings.

First, the interactive online portfolio through blogging is a useful medium that facilitated the improvement of students' writing skills as they benefited from one another's feedback in revising their outputs (Ozturk & Cecen, 2007; Ware, 2008). The integration of web-based activities in the traditional face-to-face instruction has spurred the students to improve their essays. Since they are aware that their peers and the rest of the world will read their outputs, they work harder in producing what they believe is their best output. In addition, blogging (weblogs) has created a positive emotion among students, providing an exciting mode of expression and replacing or reducing negative emotions oftentimes associated with the drudgery of writing tasks confined in the four walls of the traditional classroom. Considering that one of the causes of students' writing anxiety is writing under time pressure, providing students an opportunity to critique each other's written works and revise them at home without time limit using the platform that brings the excitement of the outside world both contributed to the development of students' writing skills and created a positive emotion among students. As technology is now a reality in educational institutions and has changed the way teachers teach and students learn, language teachers need to continually pave the way to allowing students to 'process' their own learning, to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, to collaborate with their peers, and eventually to become independent lifelong learners (Mezirow, 1997). This may be difficult for many teachers, but they have to face the fact that their roles have changed in the classroom: they are guides or managers of learning and not sages or dispensers of information (King, 1993).

Second, the findings of the study indicate that the students' limited linguistic resources (e.g., grammar and vocabulary knowledge), lack of

content knowledge (e.g., ideas to include in the text), and lack of composing strategies (difficulty in organizing) are the perennial problems of writers. These language difficulties trigger students' writing anxiety. Hence, it is necessary for writing instruction to include activities that scaffold students' acquisition of linguistic knowledge and composing strategies. Students will gain confidence in their writing when they know that they are equipped with words and skills needed in writing various text types using appropriate rhetorical patterns. Making students master academic writing skills, as what Gardner (1985), Dornyei (1998), and Deci and Ryan (1985) posit, requires their favorable attitude toward the English language, in this case academic writing in English, because it will help them lessen anxiety, which is a barrier to a good writing performance. DeDeyn (2011), however, stressed culture as a factor in reducing writing anxiety. He stated that students who get acculturated in their L2 context have the tendency to have reduced writing anxiety that may result in improved writing performance.

Third, peers' and teachers' evaluations are dreaded by students. English programs in writing classes can benefit from computer-mediated activities in which creative ways to collaborate, minus the negative connotation of evaluation, can be made. Once students get used to receiving feedback online from either their peers or their teacher, the negative feeling of anxiety will be replaced with pleasant anticipation, being cognizant of the fact that their peers' and their teacher's evaluations are aids to their development.

To make students benefit from feedback, instructions or guidelines on reviewing peer's essay should be set to make the feedback more focused. Also, the students have to be trained through writing workshops so that they are well-prepared for the task. In that way, peer feedback will be more efficient and more productive. Ware (2008) stressed that students have to be guided and trained prior to peer evaluation so that their task is well-directed for optimum learning. Students in the 21st century, being digital natives, will more likely learn and acquire writing skills if more engaging computer-mediated activities like blogging or podcasting are utilized to make learning more enjoyable for them.

Aware of the restrictions imposed upon the present data because of the small sample size, this study cannot make generalizations regarding the effects of online portfolio through blogging on reducing anxiety. The authors believe, however, that the present study was able to establish that positive experiences in computer-mediated writing activities help develop writing proficiency and reduce writing anxiety. In addition, it provided interesting

findings that point to directions for future research. A follow-up study (quasi-experiment) can be conducted comparing the web-mediated instruction via weblogs and the conventional method of ESL writing involving large sample size and other variables such as language proficiency, writing motivation, topical knowledge, and metacognitive strategies.

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