

# Examining the Effects of Writing Instruction through Blogging on Second Language Writing Performance and Anxiety

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated the effects of blog-mediated instruction on learners' writing performance and anxiety as learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). In addition, it aimed to probe into the EFL learners' attitudes towards blog-mediated writing instruction. The participants of the study included 46 Iranian EFL learners from two intact university classes, who were randomly assigned to the control group (N = 21) and the experimental group (N = 25). Over a 16-week university semester, the control group was taught using traditional writing instruction while the experimental group was taught using a blog-mediated writing course. The data were collected through two timed writing tasks, Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (Cheng, 2004), and semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that although both groups benefited from their writing sessions, there was a significant difference in the positive effects of blog-mediated and traditional writing instruction on L2 writing performance, showing that the experimental group had a better performance on the posttest writing performance task than the control group. The results also revealed that the blog-mediated course reduced the participants' L2 writing anxiety in the experimental group while traditional instruction did not have positive effects on reducing L2 writing anxiety in the control group. The data from semi-structures interviews indicated that the interviewees from the experimental group were generally positive about the blog-mediated writing course, with little skepticism and negativism echoed about the course. The findings offer significant implications for theory and practice on L2 writing instruction.

**Keywords:** Blogs, second language writing performance, anxiety, attitudes, English as a foreign language, Iran

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Due to its potential effects on learning and performance, anxiety has attracted much attention among both practitioners and theoreticians in education and psychology. Spielberger (1983) defined anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p. 3). Although the definition may seem straightforward, it is simplistic to assume that it can shed light on the whole picture. For instance, the terms in the definition connote negative influences; however, anxiety is exemplary of U-shaped behaviors as “when anxiety is low, performance is also low. When anxiety is optimal, performance is high, but beyond an optimal level of anxiety, performance deteriorates” (Walker, 1997, p. 17). In addition, researchers are unanimous that anxiety is not a unitary construct in that it would adopt different shapes and functions based on the participants, context, and task of learning and behavior. This is why some researchers (e.g., MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) contend that we should talk about ‘anxieties’, instead of ‘anxiety’, because the concept is task-specific. One type of task-specific anxieties is foreign language anxiety (FLA), considered as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specially associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and writing” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 284). Language learners usually feel great concerns about their own abilities to learn the L2 or handle L2 communication (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986) and these concerns are most often detrimental to their L2 achievements (Bekleyen, 2009). The early-bird researchers (e.g., Foss & Reitzel, 1988; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Horwitz et al., 1986) provided convincing evidence that FLA and general anxiety are two distinct dimensions of human anxiety. Since then, FLA has proved itself as one of the most important variables affecting the process of L2 acquisition and use (see Dörnyei, 2005).

To make it more complicated, FLA is not a unidimensional concept in the sense that it would surface differentially according to the language learning skill in hand. In fact, researchers have not only talked about this possibility, they have also provided evidence that reading, writing, listening, and speaking anxieties are independent, though related, facets of FLA (see

Dörnyei, 2005 for review). For example, some studies have focused on L2 writing anxiety as a facet of FLA (e.g., Cheng, 2002, 2004; Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999; Latif, 2007; Rankin-Brown, 2006), which is also distinct from first language writing anxiety (Cheng, 2002). Writing anxiety is usually considered as “a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing” (Hassan, 2001, p. 4). Such avoidance would provoke “fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write” (Thompson, 1980, p. 121).

Different researchers have tried to disentangle the dimensions of L2 writing anxiety. For example, Rankin-Brown (2006) pointed out that writing anxiety emanates from (1) frustrations due to self-evaluation and self-expectations on how well one should write; (2) fear of teacher evaluation; (3) fear of peer-evaluation; and (4) fear of losing one’s identity. Cheng (2004) proposed a three-dimensional conceptualization of L2 writing anxiety. Building on physiological, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of L2 writing anxiety and the effects of these aspects on L2 writing performance, Cheng (2004) hypothesized that L2 writing anxiety is rooted in (1) *somatic anxiety*, defined as one’s perception of the physiological effects of an anxiety experience, which results in an increase in unpleasant feelings (e.g., nervousness and tension), (2) *cognitive anxiety*, defined as the mental aspect of the anxiety experience, which is shaped by negative expectations, preoccupation with performance, and concerns about others’ expectations and (3) *avoidance behavior*, which is manifested through procrastination, withdrawal, or avoidance to perform a particular behavior. Other researchers have referred to other factors that may provoke anxiety experiences in language learners, including linguistic knowledge, L2 writing self-confidence, perceived L2 writing performance, L2 writing self-efficacy, context of writing (Cheng, 2002; Cheng et al., 1999; Latif, 2007), among others.

On the other hand, research on L2 individual differences (IDs) (e.g., anxiety, motivation and attitudes, self-efficacy, willingness to communicate,

etc.) has far moved from its obsession with relational and correlational research questions and has come to show interest in whether these learner differences can be intervened through pedagogical options to benefit L2 learners. Therefore, it is not surprising that we see a huge number of studies examining the effects of different pedagogical strategies on L2 IDs (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Jamalifar & Salehi, 2017; Lee, Schallert, & Kim, 2015; to name a few). Coincidentally, the emergence of the Web 2.0 era, which aims at transforming Internet users from consumers of information into creators of information, has had influential impacts in different fields of education. In the realm of L2 education, Web 2.0 and other Internet applications have provided learners with opportunities to have more L2 exposure, hold positive attitudes and motivation for L2, reduce their language learning anxiety, and boost their L2 self-confidence (Steel & Levy, 2013; Sun, 2010; Wang & Vásquez, 2012). For instance, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), such as email, online chat rooms, online discussion forums, and other text types on the Internet, can help L2 learners engage in more meaningful L2 communication, which paves the way for effective language learning. Of the diverse range of written CMC tools, blogging has been the focus of much investigation by L2 researchers in the Web 2.0 era (see Wang & Vásquez, 2012) as blogs have significantly changed the way individuals interact on the Internet (Du & Wagner, 2007). The problem is that IDs have been less studied in relation to the applications of Web 2.0 technologies in L2 writing classrooms. Although some researchers have begun to pay attention to the issue (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Azari, 2017; Lee, 2010; Lin, 2014), there is still a wide range of IDs that have gone unnoticed, for example, anxiety. Thus, the present study was undertaken to fill this gap in the EFL context in Iran where the use of technologies in language classrooms is ever increasing, and as a result, it is of significance to evaluate its effectiveness for developing L2 writing skills and intervening IDs related to such skills.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of researchers have investigated the contributions of blogs to developing writing skills and intervening individual differences in L2 writing. In an attempt in this line of research, Lin (2014) carried out an interventional experiment by recruiting two groups of L2 undergraduates. The experimental group was instructed how to write in L2 English using blogs, whereas the control group was taught via a traditional approach. The dependent variables in Lin's (2014) study included L2 writing performance, motivation, and self-efficacy which were measured by employing two sets of pretests and posttests via writing tasks and a questionnaire. The results of the study revealed that both groups made significant improvements in all the dependent measures and that there was no difference between the groups in the posttests with respect to the measures. Based on these results, Lin (2014) claimed that blogging would neither improve L2 learners' writing abilities nor it would enhance their L2 writing motivation and self-efficacy. To explain the contrast between these findings and those of earlier studies, Lin (2014) went to argue that the "earlier claims for the effects of blogging on ESL student writers may have been made on premature evidence resulting from a flawed research design" (p. 587). However, it is mistaken that the findings of all these earlier studies be tarred with the same brush without mature evidence! In fact, evidence in support of blogging as an effective CMC technique for improving L2 writing abilities and intervening L2-writing-related IDs has been mostly positive.

Lee (2010) examined the benefits of using interactive blogs as out-of-class assignments for L2 writing performance and motivation. Lee (2010) collected data from seventeen students at the advanced level of the L2 English who "were responsible for posting one or two entries" and "were asked to read, comment on and respond to each other's entries" over a period of fourteen weeks (p. 216). The participants' also received feedback on their blogs from the instructor. The data were collected by means of blog pages, post surveys and final interviews. The results of the study indicated that having the participants create blog entries on a regular basis had benefits for

their L2 writing fluency and enhanced their L2 writing motivation. In addition, the participants valued the feedback they had received from their classmates and instructors, especially those directed to the language and form of their blogs. Besides that, the researchers traced improvements in the critical and synthesizing L2 writing skills of the participants during the course of the treatment. At the end of the course, the participants felt more confident about their abilities to write blog entries and were more willing to share their entries with larger groups of audience. These findings were also confirmed by Armstrong and Retterer (2008) who conducted a study on the benefits of blogging (community blogging and personal blogging) on L2 writing performance, self-confidence, and attitudes with 16 college-level students of L2 Spanish. The data in the study were collected through the analysis of blog entries and interviews with the participants in the course. The results of the study indicated that the length of the blogs written by the participants increased over the course of instruction through blogging. Furthermore, all the participants reported that, at the end of the semester, they felt more comfortable with L2 writing in general and with their abilities to manipulate Spanish verb forms. These findings were also supported by a detailed analysis of the participants' performance on the classroom writing exams.

Recently, Azari (2017) investigated the effect of the use of blogs in a process-based writing course on Iranian EFL learners' L2 writing performance and autonomy. The researcher collected the required data from 43 Iranian EFL learners who were assigned as an experimental group (blog-mediated writing instruction) and a control group (traditional writing instruction). Azari (2017) collected data on the participants' L2 writing performance through two writing tasks and he assessed the participants' sense of autonomy through Learner Autonomy Profile (Confessore & Park, 2004). Both instruments were administered as the pretest and posttest to investigate the effects of the blog-mediated versus traditional instruction on the dependent variables. The results of the study indicated that blog-mediated writing instruction was more effective in boosting L2 writing performance in the experimental group. Azari (2017) conducted follow-up statistical analysis

to determine what components of L2 writing performance had benefited most from blog-mediated instruction. The components examined included content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and writing mechanics. The results of the follow-up analysis indicated that the content benefited most from blog-mediated instruction and organization ranked second as far as the positive effects of the instruction were concerned. Blogging, however, did not have statistically significant effects on vocabulary, language use, and writing mechanics. On the other hand, the results also indicated that blogging fostered the sense of autonomy for the participants in the experimental group. The traditional instruction, however, failed to boost the sense in the control group.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

As an attempt to shed more light on the use of blogs in L2 writing classes, the present study was set to investigate the effects of an EFL blog-mediated writing course on the students' writing performance and writing anxiety. The study is in part a reexamination of Chen's (2016) research question of whether blogging would affect L2 writing anxiety. Chen (2016) examined the question on Chinese EFL learners' L2 writing anxiety. The findings indicated no significant differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of L2 writing anxiety at the end of the treatment sessions. Chen's (2016) finding should be interpreted with caution, however. Chen (2016) had the experimental group write three short essays (each around 300 words) in their blogs. It would be possible that such short instruction would not let the positive intervening effects of blogging on L2 writing IDs emerge surface. This is why most studies of blog-mediated L2 writing instruction had employed semester-long courses to teach L2 writing via blogs. Thus, in our opinion, L2 writing anxiety is still an area in need of research. In addition, the study goes one step forward to delve into the attitudes that EFL learners would hold towards blog-mediated writing instruction once they had

experience in such instruction. Consequently, three research questions guided the study as the following.

1. Does blog-mediated writing instruction improve Iranian EFL learners' L2 writing performance?
2. Does blog-mediated writing instruction reduce Iranian EFL learners' L2 writing anxiety?
3. What attitudes do Iranian EFL learners hold towards blog-mediated writing instruction?

## METHOD

The present study was a part of a larger project in which the effects of a blog-mediated EFL writing course on several relevant, dependent variables were taken into account (Fathi, Ahmadnejad, & Yousofi, 2019). This paper reports the details related to the purpose of the current study with writing performance and writing anxiety as the two dependent variables. This research employed a mixed methods approach combining the quantitative results of administered tests and the qualitative results of semi-structured interviews.

### Participants

The researchers selected 46 Iranian EFL students from two intact university classes as the participants of the study. The participants were BA students of English Language and Literature at the Islamic Azad University (the North Branch) in Tehran, Iran. At the time of data collection, the participants were taking their Advanced Writing Course, a two-credit compulsory course offered to the students completing their BA program. The writing course lasted for a semester of 16 weeks. The participants included 17 males and 29 females and their ages ranged from 21 to 25 years old ( $M = 22.6$ ). Of the intact classes, one was randomly assigned as the control group ( $N = 21$ ) and the other was assigned as the experimental group ( $N = 25$ ). Both groups were



taught by the same instructor who had years of experience in teaching EFL and practicing computer-assisted language teaching in different universities in Iran. To ensure that the two groups had been homogeneous at the onset of the treatment sessions, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (Allan, 2004) was administered to both groups. An independent samples t-test was run to examine the difference between the groups in the OPT mean scores. The results indicated that the groups were not significantly different in terms of language proficiency before the experiment.

## **Instrumentation**

The following instruments were employed in the present study to collect the data required to answer the research questions.

### ***Oxford Placement Test***

To control the role of English language proficiency as the moderator variable, Allan's (2004) Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to the participants. The OPT comprises 200 items, measuring listening, grammar, vocabulary and reading skills in English. In the present study, the participants were given 80 minutes to complete the test. As estimated via Cronbach's alpha, the reliability index for the whole test was 0.89 and the reliability indices for its subsections ranged from 0.81 to 0.86.

### ***Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory***

Cheng (2004) developed and validated her Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) for the purpose of measuring the level of anxiety learners would experience while writing in L2 English. The SLWAI consists of 22 items under three dimensions: Somatic anxiety (as reflected in negative feelings such as tension) with seven items (items 2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, and 19), cognitive anxiety (as reflected in negative expectations, preoccupation with performance) with eight items (items 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, and 21), and avoidance behavior (as reflected in procrastination and avoidance in writing)

with seven items (items 4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, and 22). The SLWAI is scored over a 5-point Likert scale. The anchors of the scale are *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (5), with *disagree* (2), *undecided* (3), and *agree* (4) in between. Since the participants were students of the English major and thus, they were proficient enough in English, the original English version of the SLWAI was submitted to them. As estimated via Cronbach's alpha, the reliability index for the whole SLWAI was 0.91 and the reliability indices for its three dimensions ranged from 0.85 to 0.89.

### ***Timed Writing Tasks***

Two 50-minute writing tasks were employed as the pretest and posttest of the current study. The tasks comprised two topics that did not require the students to have any particular background knowledge about the topics. The topics were as the following:

**Topic 1:** Every generation of people is different in important ways. How is your generation different from your parents' generation? Use specific reasons and examples to explain your answer.

**Topic 2:** Would you prefer to live in a traditional house or in a modern apartment building? Use specific reasons and details to support your choice.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

In the first session of the semester, the pretests including a timed writing task and the SLWAI were administered to the participants in both the Experimental Group and the Control Group. Regarding the writing pretest, the participants were required to write an essay in English in 50 minutes in order to measure their current L2 writing performance. After the writing task, the SLWAI was administered to both groups in order to measure the participants' levels of L2 writing anxiety before the commencement of the treatment sessions.

Over a regular 16-week course on advanced writing in English, the two groups were taught the same materials according to one syllabus by the same

instructor. Following the specifications in the syllabus, the instructor taught both groups about different types of paragraphs in English including description, process, comparison, and contrast, among others. The instructor introduced each paragraph type by providing guideline information about the paragraph type and presenting some samples of the paragraph type. Then the students were assigned to write a sample of the paragraph type. They began by writing the first draft of their assignment, then redrafting it upon receiving feedback, and, finally, producing the final draft. In the drafting stage, the participants chose a topic to write about. In this stage, they were engaged in pre-writing activities (e.g., brainstorming, outlining, diagramming, storyboarding, clustering and free-writing) in order to create the first draft of their writing assignment. In addition, the necessary vocabulary and structures for writing the target paragraph were also discussed by the instructor. In the feedback stage, the participants received feedback on their first drafts from the instructor and classmates. Finally, the participants were asked to revise and edit their drafts in order to produce the final draft of the assignment.

To accomplish the purpose of the study, a component of blog-mediated writing instruction was integrated into the sessions held for the experimental group. Via <https://www.edublogs.org>, the participants in this group were given the necessary guidelines on how to create their own blogs and publish blog materials. Through the aforementioned blogging website, the participants were also directed to websites including more model paragraphs and related vocabulary and structures. During the drafting stage, the participants published their drafts in their blogs and exchanged ideas with the instructor and classmates through blogging. In the feedback stage, they received feedback on their first drafts from the instructor, classmates, and other individuals through blogging interaction. In the revision and editing stage, they were also able to discuss their own drafts with the instructor and classmates since their drafts were more easily accessible through their blog pages. Finally, the participants in the experimental group published the final drafts of their assignment on their blog pages. Because of the asynchronous

nature of the blogging technology used, the participants in the experimental group were informed that they would have the opportunity to revise their own essays and comment on those of others outside the classroom without time constraint.

The treatment sessions for the participants in the control group were rather similar. The three main stages of writing instruction (i.e., drafting, feedback, and revision) were also undertaken for the control group. In addition, all the activities and assignments were replicated for the participants in the control group who underwent the same amount and type of L2 writing instruction as those in the experimental group did. The only difference between the experimental group and the control group was that the participants in the latter group were not exposed to any L2 materials through computers, nor did they use blogging websites and other Internet applications to write their assignments or publish them. Instead, the participants in the control group were asked to keep all the drafts and final versions of their writing assignments, which were written in a paper-and-pencil format, in a folder and hand them to the researcher at the end of the semester so that they could be graded and analyzed for the purposes of this research.

Once the treatment sessions were over, another timed writing task and the SLWAI were administered to both groups as the posttests of the study. Besides these posttests, in a follow-up stage, six participants from the experimental group were asked if they were willing to volunteer for interview. The interviews conducted were semi-structured in nature in that the interviewer began with a number of prepared questions (see Appendix) while asking new questions based on the dynamics of the interview process. The purpose was to have the interviewees present a retrospective reflection of their experience with the blog-mediated writing course and express their attitudes towards the course. To let the interviewees express their ideas and attitudes towards the course more eloquently, the interviews were conducted in their L1 (i.e. Persian). All the interview sessions were held in the Persian language in order to let the interviewees discuss their attitudes towards the blogging instruction more deeply and eloquently.

## **Data Analysis**

This study is categorized as an explanatory sequential design (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) in which the quantitative data were collected first followed by qualitative data collection. The purpose of the subsequent qualitative data collection was to further explain and shed more light on the results of the quantitative data. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis approaches were used to analyze the collected data. To analyze the quantitative data, descriptive statistics, paired-samples t-test, and ANCOVA were utilized. For the qualitative data analysis, the transcripts were thematically coded using the principles of content analysis proposed by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003).

To score the participants' writing tasks, Jacobs et al.'s (1981) rubric for scoring writing was employed, which followed an analytical scoring procedure. This rubric comprises a 100-point scheme. In the scheme, 30 points are allocated to the content of writing, 25 points to language use (mainly syntax), 20 points to writing organization, 20 points to vocabulary use, and 5 points to writing mechanics. All in all, 50% of the score is allotted to the global aspects of a writing piece (i.e., content and organization) and the other 50% is allotted to the formal aspects of the writing piece (i.e., vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics). In the present study, all the pretest and posttest written essays were scored by two independent raters who were trained on the scoring rubric. To guarantee the inter-rater reliability of the scores assigned to the essays, two other independent trained raters also scored 30% of the essays. The assigned scores from the two sets of the raters and were subjected to Cohen's Kappa's inter-rater reliability test. The reliability index obtained was 0.88 which pointed to an acceptable inter-reliability between the raters.

## **RESULTS**

**Research Question 1: Does blog-mediated writing instruction improve Iranian EFL learners' L2 writing performance?**

Paired-samples *t*-test was run to analyze the mean scores in order to trace the change in L2 writing performance of both groups from the pretest to posttest writing task. The purpose was to examine the effects of the blog-mediated writing course and traditional in-class writing instruction on the participants' L2 writing performance. The results presented in Table 1 reveal that the change in the mean scores from the pretest to posttest writing task was statistically significant for both the experimental group ( $t(24) = -12.33, p < 0.05$ ) and the control group ( $t(20) = -5.61, p < 0.05$ ). For the experimental group, the writing mean score increased from 11.44 on the pretest to 14.20 on the posttest and, for the control group, the writing mean score increased from 10.92 on the pretest to 12.69 on the posttest.

**Table 1:** Paired samples *t*-test for writing scores in each group

Groups	Pretest		Posttest		<i>T</i>	Sig.
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Control	10.92	2.18	12.69	2.06	-5.61	0.00
Experimental	11.44	2.31	14.20	2.27	-12.33	0.00

Moreover, a one-way between-groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare the effectiveness of the blogging instruction and the traditional method for improving L2 writing performance. The independent variable was the modality of intervention (i.e. blog-mediated versus traditional), and the dependent variable was the participants' scores on the posttest writing task. In the ANCOVA analysis conducted, the participants' scores on the pretest writing task were considered as the covariate. Preliminary checks were carried out to ensure that there was no violation of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and reliable measurement of the covariate. The results of the ANCOVA analysis are given in Table 2. It shows that, after adjusting for the scores on the pretest writing task, there was a statistically significant

difference between the two groups in the mean scores on the posttest task;  $F(1, 43) = 9.20, p = 0.004$ , partial eta squared = 0.17).

**Table 2:** ANCOVA results for writing performance scores

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	172.047 <sup>a</sup>	2	86.023	58.531	.000
Intercept	33.267	1	33.267	22.635	.000
Prewriting Group	146.040	1	146.040	99.366	.000
Error	13.527	1	13.527	9.204	.004
Total	63.198	43	1.470		
Corrected Total	8632.250	46			
	235.245	45			

***Research Question 2: Does blog-mediated writing instruction reduce Iranian EFL learners' L2 writing anxiety?***

Another paired-samples *t*-test was also run to compare the mean scores in order to trace the change in L2 writing anxiety of both groups from the pretest to posttest SLWAI. The purpose was to examine the effects of the blog-mediated writing course and traditional writing instruction on the participants' L2 writing anxiety. The results of the paired-samples *t*-test conducted are presented in Table 3. The results indicate that the change in the mean score from the pretest to posttest SLWAI was statistically significant for the experimental group ( $t(24) = 7.71, p < 0.05$ ) whereas the change was not statistically significant for the control group ( $t(20) = 1.70, p > 0.05$ ). For the experimental group, the SLWAI mean score decreased from 72.80 (SD = 8.15) on the pretest to 64.36 (SD = 7.33) on the posttest. On the other hand, for the control group, the SLWAI mean score decreased only from 70.42 (SD = 8.26) on the pretest to 69.47 (SD = 7.01) on the posttest. These results indicate that the blog-mediated writing course undertaken in the present study had a significant effect on reducing Iranian EFL learners' L2 writing anxiety.

**Table 3:** Paired samples *t*-test for writing anxiety scores in each group

Groups	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	Sig.
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Control	70.42	8.26	69.47	7.01	1.70	0.10
Experimental	72.80	8.15	64.36	7.33	7.71	0.00

***Research Question 3: What attitudes do Iranian EFL learners hold towards blog-mediated writing instruction?***

As mentioned earlier, at the end of the treatment, six participants from the experimental group volunteered to attend a semi-structured interview with the researchers about their experience with the blogging instruction. They were told that their identities would not be disclosed, and that no third parties would have access to the interview data. The interviewees (their first names *Elaheh*, *Hassan*, *Mahsa*, *Reza*, *Shima*, and *Sara*) presented a retrospective reflection of their experience with the blog-mediated writing course, which helped the researchers examine their attitudes towards the course. Once the interviews were held and recorded, the collected data were transcribed in a word-by-word fashion, and then, the transcripts were coded by using the technique of elaborative coding (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) in order to group similar propositions together. The purpose was to reach themes that could classify the interviewees' attitudes towards the blogging instruction as expressed during the interview sessions.

In general, all six interviewees asserted that the course changed their attitudes towards writing in L2 English and, interestingly, little skepticism was echoed by the interviewees towards the blog-mediated writing course. They stated that they had gained more positive attitudes towards L2 writing during the newly-experienced blog-mediated course. Reza and Elaheh said:

I really enjoyed writing in the blog. It was so much fun and enjoyable and, for me, it was something long expected. I have always asked myself why our language teachers insist in writing on a paper, which is Amish, while computers and cellphones are everywhere. (Reza)



In the past, I had not practiced writing that much and I didn't have a positive attitude towards my writing ability... [blogs] gave me further practice with writing and I learned how to write. I like it. (Elaheh)

More related to their L2 writing performance, the interviewees unanimously maintained that they did more planning, monitoring and evaluation of their own writing during the course of the blog-mediated instruction because they came to know that their essays would be read by their instructor and classmates. Mahsa and Hassan said:

I really tried hard to write better and to check everything before posting my drafts on the blog. (Mahsa)

I have had the experience of a classmate reading and revising my writing project in the pair work. However, having all the classmates read my essays in the blog, and not just for one session, was bigger than I thought and pushed me to be more careful about what I write and how I write it. (Hassan)

This may explain why the interviewees believed that their instructor's and classmates' feedback in the online blogging environment had helped them improve their L2 writing performance. Of the six interviewees, one interviewee told that he did not feel like excelling in L2 writing performance and that any improvement happening could happen in normal writing classes; however, the remaining five interviewees mentioned that they did their best to produce writing drafts of higher quality, and they attributed this to the interactive nature of the blog-mediated instruction. Reza said:

I really learned a lot from the blog discussions and interactions which helped me in the editing and revision of my drafts.... his (teacher's) feedbacks and those of my peers really improved the quality of my writings.

Three of the interviewees stated that they felt more comfortable, prepared, and self-confident and less time-pressured than they usually did in other writing classrooms. One interviewee even told that she used to consider L2 writing as an anxiety-provoking responsibility while, at the end of the semester, she saw it as an entertaining activity. As time pressure was concerned, two interviewees mentioned it as one source of anxiety present in regular writing classes. They affirmed that blog-mediated writing course helped them get rid of this source. Shima and Elaheh pointed out:

I did not believe that I am capable and prepared enough to write on a topic in the classroom, I used to suffer from a blank, anxious mind at that moment, but at home, I felt more comfortable to think about the topic and to have more planning. (Shima)

In the other writing classes that I had already taken, my major problem was always time limitation which always caused anxiety in me..... but the new experience [with blogs] was more comfortable ... (Elaheh)

Concerning L2 writing anxiety, the interviewees' anxiety levels oscillated during the course of instruction. At the beginning of the course, the interviewees experienced high levels of L2 writing anxiety, which were in part attributed to the extra burden imposed by the interactive nature of blogging technology. Four of the interviewees acknowledged that posting their essays on the blog and waiting for evaluation and feedback from the instructor and classmates caused much stress in the very first few sessions. The anxiety level fluctuated during the course as well; however, once they got used to the instructor's and classmates' feedback and they themselves had the opportunity to comment on their classmates' essays, their anxiety experiences were alleviated. Sara and Reza said:

“The first few sessions were very stressful for me when I knew that my writings are going to be read and evaluated by my classmates and the teacher, but I gradually got used to the feedback and evaluation..... knowing that they (feedback and evaluation) will improve my drafts.....

Surprisingly, I was eagerly waiting for their feedback during the last sessions. (Sara)

It was very hectic at the beginning and caused a lot of anxiety in me. I even felt resisted as I thought I could not get along with my friends in the class. But, I no longer have the resistance to writing. (Reza)

Finally, all the interviewees maintained that blogging gave them the opportunity to work in a group. This helped them feel a sense of belonging to the group. The interviewees mentioned that they perceived the discussions in the blogging forum as non-threatening which could fine-tune their essays. Sara and Mahsa said:

I used to consider writing as an individual activity, then after working in groups for a while through blogs, I gained a sense of solidarity to my group and peers... this sense of belonging to group helped me to write openly and more comfortably. (Sara)

I really enjoyed writing in the blog. I saw that my blog friends were supportive and that we were working for the benefits of each other. I really appreciate this kind of collaboration. (Mahsa)

## DISCUSSION

The present study was set with the purpose of examining the effects of blog-mediated L2 writing instruction on EFL learners' writing performance and anxiety. The results revealed that blogging proved effective in improving L2 writing performance. This finding in the present study is consonant with those findings obtained by Armstrong and Retterer (2008), Azari (2017), and Lee (2010), and it is in contrast with those findings obtained by Lin (2014). The positive effect of blogging on L2 writing performance can be ascribed to several reasons. First, it is argued that blog-mediated instruction provides learners with "the chance to be exposed to more language and writing input"

(Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010, p. 188) as it gives them access to other online resources and materials (Yeo & Lee, 2014). This advantage of blogging over traditional approaches to L2 writing instruction has been also suggested by a number of other researchers in the field (e.g., Bloch, 2007). Second, the collaborative nature of interactive technologies (e.g., blogs) means that learners would have increased access to feedback information by their instructor and classmates. A large number of researchers (see Li, 2018 for review) have talked about influential role of interaction and collaboration in technology-mediated L2 writing instruction.

On the other hand, the collaborative nature of blogs makes them appropriate as a peer-assessment platform. These two aspects reinforce each other when it comes to L2 writing instruction via blogging (Shih, 2011). As Thoms (2011) argues, “one mechanism to elicit greater blogging interaction, while also helping to foster a community of active participants, is through a peer ratings system” (p. 344). Thus, the opportunity to give and receive feedback and evaluation generated patterns of interaction that contributed to the improvement of L2 writing skills and performance from the pretest to the posttest. In other words, the peer-assessment mechanism offered by blogging helped the participants in the experimental group create a learning community to interact and share ideas on how to write. Finally, it is argued that since the participants in the experimental group were aware that their instructor and classmates would read and evaluate their essays, they worked harder to produce L2 writing drafts of higher quality. In other words, this awareness of the interactive nature of blogging played a motivational function for these participants.

The results of the study also revealed that the use of blogs decreased L2 writing anxiety in the case of the participants in the experimental group. The participants in the control group, however, did not show decrease in their levels of L2 writing anxiety from the pretest to the posttest of SLWAI. The finding supports Hayes’ (2000) argument that “[v]ariations in the composing medium often lead to changes in the ease of accessing some of the processes that support writing” (p. 14). As it was observed in the present study on blog-

mediated L2 writing instruction, these changes in accessing the cognitive processes related to writing would lower negative feelings that the writer would experience while writing. On the other hand, time pressure is documented as a source of writing performance (Kean, Gylmn & Britton, 1987).

It is argued that the blog-mediated instruction in this study reduced L2 writing anxiety because the asynchronous nature of the blogging platform let the participants in the experimental group draft, redraft, and finalize their essays under less pressure time as they were allowed to do so both inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, this let these participants access the required grammar and vocabulary knowledge available online. This is an advantage over traditional L2 writing instruction, which can compensate for L2 writers limited linguistic resources as another source of L2 writing anxiety. The content analysis of the semi-structured interviews substantiated the positive effects of blogging on reducing L2 writing anxiety. The analysis also showed that the interviewees held positive attitudes towards L2 writing instruction via blogging and that they had in fact experienced joy, comfort, and eagerness during and at the end of the instruction. This can be interpreted as showing that blogging created positive attitudes among the participants in the experimental group by providing them with an exciting mode of expression, which may reduce the negative emotions often associated with the drudgery of writing tasks in the traditional classroom (Asoodar, Atai & Vaezi, 2016). These positive attitudes and emotions have been also qualitatively reported in other studies on blog-mediated L2 writing instruction (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer; 2008; Asoodar et al., 2016; Lee, 2010). The significant point is that, though fears of giving and receiving feedback and evaluation to/from the instructor and classmates may provoke negative feelings at the early sessions of instruction, learners will overcome these negative feelings when they grow accustomed to the instructional procedure for blogging and come to realize that the procedure is in fact non-threatening.

The results of the present study indicated that these positive changes in emotions and attitudes were accompanied by better L2 writing performance, as experimentally documented in the posttest writing task and consciously perceived by the interviewees during the interviews. The implication is that, though teachers may be reluctant to employ technology in L2 writing instruction as a result of unwelcome reactions and attitudes from their students, they are suggested to experiment with the blogging option as the positive effects of the option on L2 writing performance and affection will soon surface and the negative reactions and attitudes will turn into positive ones.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

As an attempt to shed more light on the effectiveness of a blended writing course, implemented via blogging, in L2 writing instruction, this study examined the effects of a blog-mediated writing course on writing performance and anxiety. Quantitative data analysis indicated that both the experimental group and the control group had better L2 writing performance in the posttest compared to the pretest, meaning that they both benefited from their respective instruction. However, follow-up analysis showed that, statistically speaking, the extent of the improvement was larger for the experimental group than for the control group. In addition, L2 writing anxiety was reduced in the former group from the pretest to the posttest while similar effects were not observed in the latter group. Qualitative data analysis, on the other hand, provided evidence on the interviewees' positive attitudes towards L2 writing instruction via blogging. Overall, it can be claimed that the use of blogging in L2 writing classrooms would contribute to enhancing writing performance and reducing writing anxiety of Iranian EFL learners.

As far as pedagogical implications are concerned, L2 teachers may be recommended to take the initiatives to consider use of blended learning and especially blogs in their classrooms particularly in writing instruction. Since some time of L2 writing instructors is normally devoted to the evaluation of

the students' assignments and providing them with feedback, blog-mediated instruction can save more in-class instructional time for teachers as they would be able to provide the students with outside-class feedbacks and evaluations. In addition, the students will have the opportunity to receive peer-feedbacks on their written tasks and assignments of students through blogs.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that implementation of blog-mediated instruction or other types of blended learning will not ensure effective learning outcomes unless the practitioners themselves are both willing and skilled to implement blended learning in their own classes (Donnelly, 2010). Furthermore, the practitioners should motivate their students to become more actively engaged in learning environments supported by different technologies so that they can bring about further social interaction and cooperative learning among learners, thereby increasing their learning outcomes (Liu, 2010).

There are limitations to the findings of the study. First, the present study could not control for the intervening effects of computer anxiety on the results of the study. It is argued that computer anxiety may introduce construct-irrelevant variance into the measurement of the dependent variables in research on technology-mediated L2 acquisition and use (Lewis & Atzert, 2000). However, informal talk with the participants in the Experimental Group before the commencement of the study let the researchers know that the participants had enough experience in writing via interactive blogs. In addition, although it was tried to provide the Experimental Group and the Control Group with parallel instruction, the Experimental Group had more opportunity to review their own written essays, view archives of their classmates' essays, and exchange comments beyond the walls of the classroom. This situation makes the writing instruction for the two groups unparallelled. This was so because the asynchronous nature of the blogging platform used let the participants in the Experimental Group extend their attempts in L2 writing to the outside of the classroom. However, this

limitation is alleviated by the fact that, though the participants in the Control Group did not probably do as much L2 writing practice as their counterparts in the Experimental Group did outside the classroom, the former group was not discouraged to undertake such practice. There are also some recommendations for further research on blog-mediated L2 writing instruction. First, with an increasing emphasis on replication studies in education (Makel & Plucker, 2014) and L2 writing research (Porte, & Richards, 2012), it is recommended that the present study be replicated with different types of EFL learners from different educational contexts with various types of blogging technologies. Second, the present study treated L2 writing anxiety as a unitary concept; however, in the review of the related literature, it was pointed out that L2 writing anxiety is multidimensional in nature (Cheng, 2004; Rankin-Brown, 2006). Thus, it is recommended that researchers examine what elements of L2 writing anxiety are subject to change resulting from blog-mediated instruction. Finally, there is good evidence that technology-mediated L2 instruction may be more or less appropriate for learners with different learning styles (Lee, Yeung, & Ip, 2016; Plass et al., 1998). Thus, it is recommended that future studies take L2 writers' preferences for different types of input processing techniques and instruction in order to examine whether these preferences affect the extent to which L2 learners can benefit from blog-mediated L2 writing instruction.

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### **Appendix: The predetermined questions asked in the semi-structured interviews**

In the interviews, the first question was always asked first. The order of the remaining questions differed according to the dynamics of each interview.

1. Did you enjoy the writing instruction course through blogging? If yes, would you please talk about your feelings about the writing course?
2. What effects do you think the course had on your English writing during the course?
3. Did the course help you experience less of negative feelings such as anxiety, lack of self confidence, fear of evaluation, etc. during English writing?
4. Do you feel that your English writing abilities have improved as a result of attending the blog-mediated course?
5. Do you think that the course should be included in normal English writing classrooms? Please elaborate your answer.
6. How different was the blogging course different from other L2 writing courses you had experienced in other classrooms?

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