Second Language Writing Through Blogs: An Investigation of Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

Employing an explanatory sequential design, the present study investigated the effect of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) blog-mediated writing instruction on the students' learner autonomy. A number of 46 learners who were the students of two intact classes were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. Over a 16-week semester, the control group students (n=21) were taught based on regular in-class writing instruction and the students in the experimental group (n=25) made use of blogs in addition to the traditional in-class writing instruction. The data were collected through administering a learner autonomy instrument, consisting of metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective components, and conducting semi-structured interviews. The results of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the blog-mediated writing instruction contributed to enhancing learner autonomy of the participants. More specifically, the students who experienced blog-mediated writing activities showed improvement in metacognitive and cognitive components of learner autonomy. The findings offer significant implications for EFL teachers.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Blogs, EFL Writing, Metacognitive, Cognitive

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy, mainly conceptualized as the learner's capability of taking control of one's learning, has been widely recognized as an aspired destination for the second language (L2) learning (Benson, 2003, 2006, 2013). Therefore, learner autonomy (LA) has been addressed by numerous L2 researchers and has been defined from different perspectives with various underlying elements (e.g., Alibakhshi, 2015; Alibakhshi, Keikha, & Nezakatgoo, 2015; Barfield & Brown, 2007; Benson, 2013; Everhard & Murphy, 2015; Holec, 1981; Lee, 2011; Little, 2003, 2007; Littlewood, 1996; Oxford, 2015; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). LA has been investigated from psychological, technical, political, and sociocultural perspectives, each of which subscribes to a particular theoretical foundation (Benson, 2013). One recently revisited perspective has been proposed by Oxford (2015) who broke down the psychological dimension into seven underlying components (e.g., psychologically self-regulated learner, emotionally intelligent learner). Oxford's (2015) sociocultural perspective on LA also consisted of six components (e.g., mediated learner, cognitively apprenticed learner).

In line with the social constructivist justification of LA, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) also subscribes to the constructivist view of language learning, emphasizing the collective and social construction of knowledge rather than individual cognitive processing of information (Lee, 2011). From this perspective, CALL technologies can play a key role by encouraging the language learners to become actively involved in social interaction with others, reflect critically on the content, and receive scaffolding from others (Benson, 2001; Lee, 2011). Such scaffolded and cooperative learning provided by CALL is claimed to enhance learners' self-regulation and autonomous learning (Lee, 2008; Murphy, 2006). This claim has received

further theoretical and empirical support as Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and wikis introduced new horizons for CALL researchers and practitioners (Lee, 2011). In line with the shift of orientation from a cognitive perspective to a social perspective in applied linguistics (Firth & Wagner, 1997), many scholars in the field of L2 education have addressed the potential effects of Web 2.0 technologies on L2 learning and instruction (e.g., Sturm, Kennell, McBride, & Kelly, 2009). Unlike Web 1.0 in which people just could read and retrieve information, Web 2.0 provides its users with the opportunity to self-publish, generate, and broadcast information (Lomicka & Lord, 2009).

As one popular and user-friendly Web 2.0 device, blogs are likely to provide the learners with heightened interactive and cooperative learning, as a result of which the learners become more autonomous and self-regulated as they take the responsibility of their own learning and are assigned the freedom to express themselves by publishing their works (Lee, 2011). The use of blogs in L2 teaching and learning has been the focus of the investigation by numerous scholars (e.g., Godwin-Jones, 2003, Lee, 2011; Pinkman, 2005). From this perspective, some studies have emphasized the benefits of employing blogs in L2 classrooms to improve writing competencies (e.g., Bloch, 2007; Campbell, 2003). A text-based online environment that allows for embedding links to other online resources, blogs have been claimed to provide a real audience to write for, provide further writing practice to students, create a sense of community among students, enhance a sense of ownership, facilitate feedback on the writing process, stimulate out-of-class discussion, encourage more student participation, and encourage teacher-student interaction and peer communication (Aydin, 2014; Campbell, 2003, 2005, Lee, 2011).

2. Literature Review

A recently burgeoning body of literature on the role of technology in L2 language learning has documented significant findings verifying the beneficial role of technological devices in enhancing learner autonomy (Benson, 2004; Lee, 2014; Murphy, 2006; Murray, 1999; Pinkman, 2005; Smith & Craig, 2013; Schwienhorst, 2002; Snodin, 2013; Wachman, 1999; Yeh & Lan, 2018). It has been acknowledged that technology is likely to foster individualized and self-tuned learning (Benson, 2013). It also encourages the learners to have more control over their learning and to self-direct their own learning (Benson, 2001). CALL is claimed to create an authentic environment for autonomous learning in which learners are empowered and motivated (Murray, Ní hOurigan, Jeanneau, & Chappell, 2005; Snodin, 2013). Schwienhorst (2002) pointed out that CALL draws upon the underlying theories of autonomous learning and that a meticulous analysis of CALL and its underlying tenets reveals that learner autonomy can be ideally fostered through CALL since technological devices can be employed not only to support interaction and collaboration with peers and with native speakers but also to provide a learner-centered learning environment.

From the learner autonomy point of view, CALL has the potentiality to provide learner control. Schwienhorst (2003) maintains that in case teachers are willing that their learners take charge of their learning process, their learners must be assigned control over their learning. Schwienhorst (2003) states that providing a motivating and authentic learning environment for the learners is important but not sufficient to foster autonomous learning. Reflective, social-interactive, and experimental-participatory learner behavior should be enhanced by proper manipulation of the learning context (Schwienhorst, 2003, p. 441). The main advantage of online learning is the fact

that it creates a friendly and non-threatening learning environment which allows the participation of all the students rather than just a few ones (e.g., Kern, 2014) and it also fosters affective support among peers to enhance the motivation of students towards foreign language learning (e.g., Lee, 2004). Collaborative and interactive learning as fostered by technology is claimed to promote learner autonomy (Dlaska, 2002). Technology-mediated language learning, which offers further flexibility and freedom in the choice of materials and topics, fosters autonomous learning if technology possibilities are developed in line with suitable educational considerations and if technology has the capacity to assign new roles to both learner and teacher in an increasing collaborative learning scenario (Murray, 1999).

As an attempt to investigate the effect of new technologies such as a 3D virtual learning platform on student autonomy in English learning, Yeh and Lan (2018) carried out a quasi-experimental design in which a sample of 29 fifth graders underwent an experimental intervention for a period of 4 months. The required data were collected through administering a scale of LA, carrying out the four-month non-participant classroom observation, and analyzing the student-created videos. The qualitative and quantitative data analyses revealed that a 3D virtual world could have the potentials for enhancing students' autonomous learning.

Also, Lee (2011) carried out a study to investigate the effectiveness of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) through blogs in enhancing learner autonomy and intercultural competence. The participants of the study were 16 American undergraduate students who used blogs to promote their intercultural competence within the period of one-semester study abroad. The findings of the study revealed that blogs provided the students with the opportunity to become more independent and reflective. The

role of teacher's guidance and feedback was emphasized in fostering students' critical reflection. It was also revealed that task type enhanced autonomy in different ways. Finally, it was concluded that well-designed tasks, effective metacognitive and cognitive competencies, and the availability of the Internet played a key role in increasing the potentials of blogs for learner autonomy and intercultural communication.

Similarly, Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) investigated the interplay between autonomous learning and Blog Assisted Language Learning (BALL) reporting on a month-long social networking project that was carried out with the MA (ELT) students in India. As a requirement of their instruction, the students were required to create their own blogs. A qualitative analysis of the reflective reports of the students revealed that blogging made the students become more autonomous as they had to create and revised their own blogs to make them more attractive for others to visit. The findings revealed that the blog-supported program enhanced LA by developing learners' language and cognitive skills and assisting them in making more informed choices about their decisions. Conducting a small scale action research, Pinkman (2005) investigated how a blog project can be incorporated into a foreign language class in a Japanese university. The purpose of this out-of-class study was to examine the effectiveness of using blogs in the foreign language classroom and to help foreign language teachers interested in increasing learner autonomy among their own learners. Data collected from the participants through questionnaires and interviews carried out at the end of the term indicated that learners perceived some benefits for using blogs including enhanced interest and motivation to use English due to interaction with, and feedback from, peers and teachers. The findings also revealed that the blog project helped to

develop reading and writing skills and the learners who participated in the blog project were interested in continuing to blog even after the semester finished.

In spite of the aforementioned benefits of blogs in L2 writing instruction, and also with regard to the heightened interest in LA in foreign language learning and teaching, it appears that few studies have addressed the effectiveness of blog-mediated language instruction in influencing LA. Moreover, from the research point of view, empirical evidence concerning the use of blogs in L2 writing classes especially in the EFL contexts remains inconclusive. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the effect of a blog-mediated writing course on the students' level of learner autonomy among a sample of Iranian EFL learners. In line with the objectives, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Does a blog-mediated writing course significantly affect the students' level of learner autonomy?
   a. Does blog-mediated writing course significantly affect the students' metacognitive component of learner autonomy
   b. Does a blog-mediated writing course significantly affect the students' cognitive component of learner autonomy?
   c. Does a blog-mediated writing course significantly affect the students' affective component of learner autonomy?
2. How do the language learners perceive the effects of a blog-mediated writing course?

3. Method

The present study was a part of a larger project in which the effect of an EFL blog-mediated writing course on several relevant, dependent variables was

taken into account. Nevertheless, this paper just reports the details pertaining to the purpose of the current study with LA as the only dependent variable. The current study employed an explanatory sequential design (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) in which the quantitative data collection preceded qualitative data collection. The purpose was to employ the qualitative results to further explain and interpret the findings from the quantitative data. The results of the LA scale with quantitative data were necessary for the overall baseline information on learners' level of autonomy. Then, to provide a clearer, more comprehensive picture of the research findings, qualitative data as obtained from semi-structured interviews were also included in the study.

3.1. Participants

To accomplish the purpose of the current study, a sample of 46 Iranian EFL students were recruited. The recruited participants were BA (Bachelor of Arts) students of English literature at an Islamic Azad University in Tehran, Iran. The participants included 17 males and 29 females and their ages ranged from 21 to 25 years old (M=22.6). The students were taking their 'advanced writing' course which is a two-credit compulsory course offered to the students doing their bachelor's program. The writing course lasted for a period of one semester (16 weeks). The participants of the study were students of two intact classes which were randomly assigned to the control group (n=21) and experimental group (n=25). The two classes were taught by the same teacher who was familiar with and interested in CALL. To ensure the homogeneity of the two groups, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (Allan, 2004) was administered to all the students of the two groups prior to the initiation of the treatment. In order to compare the mean scores on OPT, an independent samples T-test was run to examine the existing difference between groups. The

result of the independent samples T-test indicated that the groups were not significantly different in terms of language proficiency before the experiment.

3.2. LA instrument

To measure LA, the scale developed and used by Lee (2011) was adapted and employed. In Lee's (2011) study, LA is operationalized as a four-dimension construct constituting four components of metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective as its underlying dimensions. This scale includes 12 items with each component having three items. The scale items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Some minor modifications were made in the instrument to make it more relevant to the context of the present study. The modified scale was piloted with a 25 number of Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, it was verified by two domain experts in terms of appropriateness of its content and wordings of items. The calculated Cronbach's alpha value of the scale in the present study was 0.79 at pretest and 0.82 at the posttest.

3.3. Procedure

A week before the commencement of the semester, the two intact classes were randomly assigned to the control group and experimental group. Then, to ensure the homogeneity of the participants in terms of general English proficiency, the OPT was administered to the students of both experimental and control groups. The result of an independent-samples t-test indicated that the experimental and control classes were not significantly different in language proficiency. In the first session of the semester, the LA scale serving as the pretest was administered to the students of both groups of the participants. During

the semester, the two groups were taught the same materials according to the same curriculum by the same instructor. Nevertheless, the experimental group students were provided with more opportunities for further practice through the use of blogs.

To accomplish the purpose of the study, a blog-mediated writing instruction intervention was integrated in a regular 16-week advanced writing course in the experimental group, whereas the control group received the regular in-class writing instruction. During the course, the students of both groups became familiar with different types of paragraphs such as descriptive, process, compare, and contrast. First, the instructor introduced each paragraph type by providing both theoretical information about paragraph types and some samples of each paragraph type accompanied by practice. Then the students were assigned to write a sample of each type by first writing the first draft of each assignment, then redrafting each written task upon receiving feedback and, finally, producing the final draft. The experimental group students were given the necessary instruction and guidelines on how to create their own blogs via www.edublogs and they were also instructed on how to publish materials on the blog. During the intervention, first, the experimental group students were given the basic and theoretical principles of the paragraph type and some model paragraphs were examined in the classroom. By the use of the blog, the students were also directed to websites including more model paragraphs. Afterward, the necessary vocabularies and structures for writing the target paragraph were discussed and practiced. To provide the students with more similar vocabulary and structure input, tutor blogs were used to direct the students with related websites. As the first step to produce written drafts, students were taught how to write a paragraph through teacher modelling. The students chose a topic to write about and the teacher modelled a sample

paragraph on related model. Next, the students were engaged in pre-writing activities consisting of brainstorming, outlining, diagramming, storyboarding, clustering and free-writing. Then, during the drafting stage, the students published their drafts in their blogs and exchanged ideas with the teacher and peers through blogging. In the feedback stage, the students received feedback on their first drafts from the teacher, peers and other individuals through blogging. In the revision and editing stage, the students were able to discuss their own drafts with the teacher and the peers since their drafts were more easily accessible through their blog pages. Afterwards, the students published the final draft of their paragraphs on their blog pages. And finally in the follow-up stage, the students were assigned to write a reflection to self-evaluate their learning process and to publish their reflections through the blog software.

All the main stages of the writing process for the experimental group discussed above were also undertaken for the control group. All the activities and assignments were also carried out for the control group. The students in the control group received the same amount and the same type of instruction. The only difference between the experimental group and the control group was that the learners in the control group did not make use of blogs to publish their writing assignments or drafts. They did not use the Internet or other websites used by the students in the experimental group.

After the completion of the intervention, the LA scale was re-administered as the post-test of the study. In the meantime, six student volunteers from the experimental group took part in a series of semi-structured interviews in which they expressed their opinions regarding the blogging project in the writing course. These data were then analyzed to find out possible interfaces between LA and blogging.

3.4. Data Analysis

This study used an explanatory sequential design (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) in which first the quantitative data was collected and then qualitative data was added. The purpose was to use the qualitative results to shed more light on the findings obtained from the quantitative phase. As far as data analysis was concerned, both quantitative and qualitative data analysis approaches were drawn upon to analyze the collected data. To analyze the quantitative data, descriptive statistics and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used. For the analysis of the qualitative data, the transcripts were thematically analyzed drawing on the principles of content analysis as proposed by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003).

4. Results

4.1 Research Question One

In order to investigate the effects of the blog-supported writing course on the learners' autonomous learning, a set of one-way between-groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out to compare the effects of the two types of interventions used for EFL writing courses in the control group and the experimental groups on the total LA and the four dimensions of LA instrument (i.e., metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective) used in this investigation. According to Pallant (2013), ANCOVA can be used when we have a pre-test/post-test design (e.g., comparing the effect of two different treatments, taking before and after measures for each group). The pre-test scores are considered covariates to 'control' for pre-existing differences between the groups. For each ANCOVA analysis, the independent variable was the type of intervention (i.e., blog-supported or traditional), and the dependent variable

was the scores on the total LA and its four subscales (i.e., metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective) administered after the conduction of the intervention. Participants' scores on the pre-tests of each variable were considered as the covariate in this analysis. For all the conducted ANCOVAs, 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.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for pre- and Posttests Scores*

		Pre-test		Post-test	
Groups	Scales	M	SD	M	SD
Experimental	Metacognitive	6.37	2.11	7.96	2.41
	Cognitive	6.50	2.35	8.14	2.80
	Affective	5.47	2.82	5.53	2.68
	Total LA	6.49	1.86	6.37	1.87
Control	Metacognitive	24.84	5.04	25.85	5.34
	Cognitive	6.68	2.24	6.76	2.06
	Affective	7.24	2.61	7.13	2.25
	Total LA	5.54	2.81	5.62	2.84

With regard to total LA, as descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicates, the mean score for total LA of the experimental group was 24.84 on the pre-test and this value was raised to 25.85 on the post-test. However, the total LA mean score as measured in the pre-test for the control group slightly decreased from 25.85 to 25.45 on the post-test. After adjusting for the pre-test scores of total LA, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups on post-test scores of total LA, $F(1, 43)=21.07$, $p=0.000$, partial eta squared$= 0.329$) (see Table 2). This finding revealed that the learners in the blog group improved their LA significantly more than the learners in the control group,

suggesting that the blog-supported writing course significantly contributed to improving the autonomous learning of the students.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Covariate (pre-test)	169.051	1	169.051	32.361	.000	.429
Between-subjects	110.081	1	110.081	21.073	.000	.329
Within-subjects	224.626	43	5.224			

Table 2. *The Results of ANCOVA for Total LA*

Moreover, as discussed above, to shed more light on the effects of writing through blogs on LA, the underlying components of the LA instruments were also taken into considerations. As far as the metacognitive component was concerned, the descriptive statistics data (see Table 1) demonstrated that the control group had a mean score of 6.68 on the pre-test and this value slightly increased to 6.76 on the post-test. Also, the metacognitive mean score for the experimental group was 6.37 on the pre-test and this value was raised to 7.96 on the post-test. After adjusting for the pre-test scores of the metacognitive sub-scale, the results of ANCOVA (see Table 3) demonstrated that the difference between the two groups on post-test scores of the metacognitive component was statistically significant, $F(1, 43)=28.093$, $p=0.000$, partial eta squared= 0.395). This finding shows that the writing course has significantly increased the metacognitive component of LA among the participants of the experimental group.

Table 3. *The Results of ANCOVA for Metacognitive Component*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Covariate (pre-test)	32.221	1	32.221	36.086	.000	.456
Between-subjects	25.083	1	25.083	28.093	.000	.395
Within-subjects	38.394	43	.893			

Concerning the cognitive component of LA, the descriptive statistics in Table 1 demonstrates that there was an increase in the mean score of the experimental group from 6.50 on the pre-test to 8.14 on the post-test. Nevertheless, the mean score of the control group was slightly reduced from 7.24 on the pre-test to 7.13 on the post-test. The results of ANCOVA (see Table 4) revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups on post-test scores of cognitive component, $F(1, 43)=16.72$, $p=0.000$, partial eta squared$=0.28$). This finding also reveals that the learners in the experimental group improved their cognitive component significantly more than the learners in the control group.

Table 4. *The Results of ANCOVA for Cognitive Component*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Covariate (pre-test)	16.648	1	16.648	8.519	.006	.165
Between-subjects	32.685	1	32.685	16.725	.000	.280
Within-subjects	84.032	43	1.954			

Regarding the social component of LA, the descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that the mean score of the experimental group slightly increased from 5.47 on the pre-test to 5.53 on the post-test. Likewise, the mean score of the control group was raised from 5.54 to 5.62. However, the results of ANCOVA

(see Table 5) revealed that the difference between the two groups on post-test scores of the social component was not significant, $F(1, 43)=0.128$, $p=0.723$, partial eta squared=0.003), suggesting that the blog-mediated writing course failed to increase the social component of LA among the participants.

Table 5. *The Results of ANCOVA for Social Component*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Covariate (pre-test)	131.187	1	131.187	1116.664	.000	.963
Between-subjects	.015	1	.015	.128	.723	.003
Within-subjects	5.052	43	.117			

As the final component of LA, the descriptive statistics for the affective component in Table 1 shows that the mean score of the experimental group reduced from 6.49 on the pre-test to 6.37 on the post-test. However, the mean score for the control group had a little increase from 6.38 on the pre-test to 6.49 on the post-test. Nevertheless. The results of ANCOVA (see Table 6) demonstrated that the difference between the two groups on post-test scores of the social component was not statistically significant, $F(1, 43)=0.120$, $p=0.731$, partial eta squared=0.003), suggesting that the blog-mediated writing course did not increase the affective component of LA.

Table 6. *The Results of ANCOVA for Affective Component*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Covariate (pre-test)	.367	1	.367	.413	.524	.010
Between-subjects	.107	1	.107	.120	.731	.003
Within-subjects	38.274	43	.890			

4.2. Research Question Two

These quantitative findings were substantiated by the semi-structured interviews conducted with six students from the experimental group after the completion of the blog-mediated writing course. All of the six students asserted that blog-mediated writing had changed their attitude towards writing and doing writing tasks. More specifically, the qualitative data revealed that the participants of the experimental group significantly improved in terms of metacognitive and cognitive components of the LA after experiencing the blog-mediated intervention. For instance, one of the participants argued

> *"my previous experience of the writing classes was a problem of lack of time and being under much time constraints to do the written assignments during the class. But my experience of blogging gave me a sense of more independence and having more control on my learning. " Sara also mentioned: "Since I knew that my writings would be visible for the teacher, my classmates and even others, I did a lot more thinking and reflection before writing."*

Another participant reported:

> *" I used to attend to just the organization of my essays, but this course made me meticulous in every aspect…….I really paid more attention to the content, vocabulary, grammar, and organization at the same time."*

Concerning monitoring and checking the written assignments, the students believed that as the blog-mediated course provided them with outside-class assignments, they had enough time for more monitoring. For instance, one of the students mentioned:

> *In this new blog-based writing course, I had more time for monitoring both the content and language……contrary to traditional writing*

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courses, (in the blog-mediated course) we had enough time for monitoring the assignments and drafts which were mainly supposed to be written at home."

The students also considered the teacher- and peer-feedbacks as an important factor for their increased monitoring and self-assessment. The following quotations exemplify the theme,

"I *learned to monitor my drafts and revise my posted blogs according to received feedbacks by the peers or the teacher (Sara)*

"*With no time constraint, this writing course provided me with adequate opportunity and time to do much planning of content, organization, and language." (Mahsa)*

The students also referred to the provision of extra necessary online materials and directions to helpful websites through the tutor blogs as another reason for more monitoring. For example, Shima said:

"*whenever I wrote the assignments and drafts to be posted on blog, If I got stuck with one idea or if I had difficulty finding appropriate words and structures, I would make use of related websites and online resources provided by tutor blogs."*

As for the cognitive component of LA, the students stated that due to fast feedback received from peers and the teacher, they had more opportunities to learn how to evaluate their own essays and to reflect on their written drafts more effectively. One of the students argued:

"*once I used to just evaluate my essays very quickly, focusing on just correct usage of words and grammar and ignoring other aspects, but after frequent feedback of the others through the blogging, I got more self-aware of other aspects of a written task.*

With regard to the feedback of the peers, another student stated:

"Due *to the feedback of my classmates, I learned to self-evaluate not only my spelling and grammatical mistakes but also my development of the idea….. I tried to put myself in the shoes of the reader to see whether I have provided adequate examples or facts to clarify and present my points."*

The participants also mentioned that further practice in writing provided by blogs improved their understanding and analysis of writing organization and content. For instance, one of the students stated "by posting regularly on blogs, I gained more competence in understanding and analyzing the mechanics of writing and I learned how to develop my ideas via posting on blogs."

5. Discussion

The findings of the present mixed-methods study supported the effectiveness of blogging in fostering learner autonomy among EFL learners. The findings are consonant with those of Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010), Lee (2011), and Pinkman (2005), suggesting that the use of blogs is conducive to enhancing the autonomous learning of L2 learners. The experimental students of the present study were required to share their writings with their classmates via their blogs. They were also encouraged to comment on their peers' essays and knew that their own essays and written tasks would be evaluated by peers, teachers, and others. Therefore, they are very likely to have gained a more sense of responsibility and ownership towards their own assignments. In other words, the students created a community which encouraged one another to produce a better quality written drafts by receiving quick feedback from each other, and by maintaining interaction and collaboration in revising the drafts.

The students could also self-regulate and self-direct their own learning by having enough time to do the tasks and by being provided with extra links to

different online writing resources and websites that they could use according to their own needs. The individualized feedback would give students an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses which is an integral feature of autonomous learners (Benson, 2013). Learner autonomy is enhanced when the learners are encouraged to self-initiate, self-regulate, solve problems independently, and receive autonomy-supportive feedback. According to Alm (2006, p. 33) "to become autonomous, the learners need to be encouraged to be self-initiating, to solve problems independently and receive feedback that supports autonomy. " Students who used blogs had the opportunity to receive the type of feedback which was not prescriptive and restrictive in nature. This type of feedback did not impose control or authority on students and resulted in a non-threatening learning environment that enhanced their autonomous learning.

Further analysis of the results revealed that the blog-mediated writing instruction resulted in the enhancement of metacognitive and cognitive elements of learner autonomy. Experiencing the blog-mediated writing course, the students gained a sense of more confidence and autonomy in their learning because they learned how to learn on their own outside the class, in addition to being instructed by their teacher inside the class. This is because of the fact that blog-mediated learning provided an opportunity for the learners to play roles different from those in traditional face-to-face writing classrooms. Taking charge of their learning, the learners had to make independent decisions regarding their own learning and improved in terms of planning, monitoring, and evaluating a writing task. As revealed by the qualitative data, for instance, the students of the experimental group got more engaged in not only content planning but they also paid more attention to grammar and vocabulary which they would use in their writing. Moreover, the learners self-evaluated their

pieces of writing by providing more examples, facts, and cohesive devices in their drafts.

Concerning the qualitative data analysis, the thematic analyses of the semi-structured interviews not only reinforced the results of quantitative data as obtained from the administered LA scale but also provided insights into the underlying reasons justifying the increase in LA level of experimental students. In short, public visibility, feedback of others, and adequate time were the main causes of more engagement of experimental students in planning, monitoring, and reflection.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of L2 writing through blogs on cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective components of autonomous learning. Overall, the findings obtained from this mixed-methods study revealed that the blog-mediated writing course significantly contributed to enhancing the learners' LA and the participants also found that blogging encouraged self-directed learning, as they got involved in the individual and social construction of knowledge and L2 writing skills. Data analysis indicated that the significant increase in the mean scores of the experimental students from pre-test to post-test was due to improvements in the metacognitive and cognitive aspects of LA. Moreover, the enhanced ability of the experimental students in planning, monitoring, and reflecting on writing tasks was corroborated by the thematic analyses of the semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data also revealed that blog-mediated writing enhanced autonomous learning through assigning learners more freedom and a sense of responsibility to self-regulate and self-manage their learning process.

Therefore, it might be concluded that blog-mediated writing instruction helped students to take charge of their own learning and gain a sense of responsibility and ownership for their own learning. Blogging used by the experimental group allowed for asynchronous computer-mediated communication which helped the students to take control of their own learning and develop their L2 writing more autonomously through social interaction. It not only increased the leaners' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses but also fostered more reflection, monitoring and evaluation competencies. From a pedagogical point of view, the findings may suggest that if the blogging approach is integrated into regular EFL writing courses, the students will gain a more sense of autonomous learning and they, consequently, develop their L2 writing competencies more effectively. Given the significance of self-regulation and the findings in this study, it is recommended that blogs be more extensively integrated into the ELT curriculum.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the findings of the present study are limited by the fact that although attempts were made by the instructor to provide the two groups with equal instruction, the experimental group students had further opportunity to review their own written tasks, view archives of their peers, and exchange comments beyond the walls of the classroom. Such relatively unparalleled instruction is attributed to the asynchronous nature of the educational blogging which provides its users with extramural instruction. Nevertheless, this limitation was mitigated by the fact that, although the participants of the control group did not probably have as much L2 writing practice as their counterparts in the experimental group did outside the classroom, the former group students were not discouraged to undertake such practice.

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