



# Adult Learners' Perceptions of a Blog-based Assessment in an English as a Second Language Course

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**Abstract—** This study was conducted in order to gather adult learners' perceptions on the use of blogs for assessing their English writing skills in terms of the perceived benefits, drawbacks, and technical constraints. Being a case study, the research involved a group of adult ESL learners following an English proficiency course at the undergraduate level in a state university in Sri Lanka. It was conducted by using a survey-type questionnaire shared with the purposive sample of year one arts undergraduates who were in the second semester of study. Descriptive statistics were used for data tabulation and percentages were generated to decipher the sample's reaction to a blog-based assessment given to them during the first semester of study. The findings from the data analysis indicate that these students perceived blogs as a valid, acceptable, and beneficial form of assessment that can also improve and motivate them to write in the second language. However, they also admitted that challenges remain when authoring blogs, such as poor bandwidth and lack of connectivity, difficulty in understanding instructions on creating blog accounts, having their content plagiarized, and technical constraints. From the findings, there is a suggestion to first promote the use of blog entries to assess students' writing skills as a continued practice and second to formulate strategies to counteract the challenges. To sum up, the main findings reveal that in spite of some difficulties, these ESL learners had a highly positive attitude towards the use of blog-based assessments for testing their English writing skills.

**Keywords—** blog-based assessments, computer-assisted language learning, testing writing skills, writing proficiency

## I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 viral pandemic took the world by storm due to its unprecedented impact on all communities and all spheres of life. Consequently, due to the rapid spread of the virus, the requirement for social distancing imposed a challenge to the education sector that heavily depended on face-to-face interaction between teachers and students. In such a context, in keeping with the global shift in educational trends, the Sri Lankan education sector also attempted to continue educating students mainly through the adoption of emergency remote teaching and learning practices. The primary mode for such distance learning practices was the use of the World Wide Web which provides opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous learning to take place in a virtual space.

With the emergence of various innovations in teaching pedagogies, there was a parallel increase in the development

of sophisticated yet user-friendly technologies to facilitate the education process. This included the use of Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, podcasts, blogs, and other social networking sites. Since the focus of this study is the use of blogs in education, a succinct explanation of what a blog is, and its uses in education is required. According to the Oxford Learners Dictionary (online), a blog is defined as "a website where an individual person, or people representing an organization, write regularly about recent events or topics that interest them, usually with photos and links to other websites that they find interesting" [1]. What is more, the entries that are authored by the blogger (the person engaged in authoring blog entries) are shareable and blog entries can be commented on by individuals who read the posts. According to the literature review, blogs became a popular social networking method in the 1990s and their popularity has grown exponentially mainly due to their ease of use, shareability function, comments option, and the fact that apart from the textual content, audio, visual and video content can also be included into the posts.

In relation to the use of blogs for pedagogical intent, many studies have revealed their benefits when used during learning and assessment. It is agreed that as a result of the rapid infiltration of information communication technologies, the younger generation of digital natives is largely computer literate. With regard to the Sri Lankan context, referring to the latest statistics presented by the Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka in 2022, 74% of the students who complete their advanced levels studies are computer literate [2]. This report substantiates the claim that Sri Lankan educators can capitalize on the ICT skills of their students in both teaching and assessment in order to adapt to the shifting paradigms of the educational scene. According to Ahluwalia et al, blogs have been well received in education due to their multimedia features, simple web publishing function, interactivity, and ability to provide cooperative and autonomous learning" [3].

Similarly, in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), a majority of the studies from the available pool of literature reveal that the use of blogs encourages students to use the second language, i.e. English, more freely, effectively, and creatively, especially when it comes to written expressions. Research also has found that the use of this technology is positively received by adult learners who respond favorably to such opportunities that empower them as autonomous individuals in the second language (L2) learning process.



Regarding the use of blogs as a means of assessment, only a few studies have taken place and based on these, once again the findings indicate that the learners are positively inclined to this type of evaluation in spite of technical challenges and related issues. Using these types of student-centric assessment methods appears to transgress the limitations of traditional assessment methods that are often rigid and restricted due to the pressure imposed on students in a test environment that has time restrictions and a high presence of the affective filter, which according to Krashen [4], brings high anxiety levels. This can reduce the capacity to demonstrate the real potential of learners when their mental states are ridden with anxiety and fear.

Student-centered assessment methods manage to consider the personal differences of students during student evaluation. As such, one way of doing this is to use blogs for assessment purposes in ESL (English as a Second Language) courses to test the learners writing skills instead of the use of the traditional pen and paper-based writing assignments to decipher students' improvement in written proficiency in a meaningful and student-friendly manner.

The present study was conducted following the introduction of a course-based written assessment completed through the development of blog entries rather than as a written submission. It examined the participants' perception of the experience of completing an assessment afforded by blogs as a means of being evaluated in their English writing skills.

## II. OBJECTIVES

Although in recent times, there have been several notable studies conducted on the effect of blogs on education, the effect of their usage for purposes of evaluation is still not covered adequately. In fact, their effect as an assessment in second language development courses has been studied even less. A review of the literature reveals that no such study on blogs has taken place in Sri Lanka. There does not appear to be much refereed published material on the use of blogs for educational purposes, let alone research that focuses specifically on blogs as assessments. Hence, the researcher attempted to address this lacuna.

This study aimed to obtain an understanding of the perceptions of students on being assessed for their English writing skills through their blog entries. It also aimed to find out the technical constraints and availability of infrastructure facilities during this process. By doing so, it expected to determine the benefits of blogs in ESL assessment as a more effective substitute to traditional pen and paper-based writing tasks in addition to identifying the challenges faced by students engaging in this type of assessment so as to generate awareness and rectify them prior to reimplementation.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This small-scale case study was conducted using the quantitative approach. The main focus of this research was to explore a group of adult learners' perceptions of the use of blog entries for assessing their writing skills. The exploration led to finding answers to the research questions posed prior to the commencement of the study:

1. What are the perceptions of students regarding the use of blog entries as an assessment for testing their L2 writing skills?
2. What challenges do they face during this process?

The quantitative method of inquiry was used because the use of statistical data to find answers to the research questions managed to save time and resources and also facilitated the inclusion of a large proportion of the study group into the inquiry [5]. As such, this approach was selected as more suitable for gathering findings that are reflective of a wider population [6].

### A. Study context and participants

The study was conducted at a state university in Sri Lanka. The sample consisted of a group of low proficient ESL learners who were following a beginner's level English proficiency development course that uses the integrated skills approach to teaching ESL in which the four macro skills: speaking, reading, writing, and listening are taught in the form of well-synthesized thematically evolving lesson modules. The link to a google form was shared with the students and they were able to access it through their faculty's Learning Management System (LMS). Participation was voluntary as they had the choice of either completing the online survey or not. The purposive sampling technique was used since the researcher could easily access the sample and also gather data from a larger population of students. A total of 174 respondents belonging mostly to the age range of 21 to 23 years of age completed and submitted the form.

The data were gathered regarding a blog-based writing assessment carrying a total of 10 marks. This formative assessment was given to them in the first semester of the year one English course module. Students received clear instructions and guidelines on creating blog accounts using the site: [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) and they were requested to write at least 30 blog entries based on personal reflections within a period of 12 weeks. Grading rubrics were also shared and the blog entries shared by each student were evaluated using the marking criteria in the rubric. Students were requested to share their blog entries with the rest of their batch mates and each one had to provide peer feedback to at least 15 other individuals' entries. In addition, the teachers were informed to provide feedback for the blog entries throughout this period.

### B. Research procedures

Based on the literature review and the study context, a survey-type questionnaire was designed and fed into a google form which could be shared among the target population. The survey consisted of a set of statements to which the respondents had to express their levels of agreement or disagreement by selecting the appropriate level on a 5-point Likert scale in which one stood for "strongly disagree" and five equated to "strongly agree". The data were downloaded and mechanically tabulated as percentages expressing the total level of agreement for each statement. Following the demographic information section, the rest of the statements were aimed at determining the respondents' attitudes toward the use of blog entries as an assessment method, the usefulness of blogs to develop L2 writing skills, and the issues that arose during this task engagement.



#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following details the key findings of the study along with a discussion of the tabulated data.

##### A. Learner attitude toward the use of blog entries as a written assessment

Considering the findings regarding the respondents' attitude in relation to using their blog entries as a formative assessment in a beginner's level ESL course, it is evident that they embrace their use with a notably significant overall agreement level of 94.7 percent for the statement capturing their preference for the use of written blog entries for grading purposes instead of paper-based written submissions.

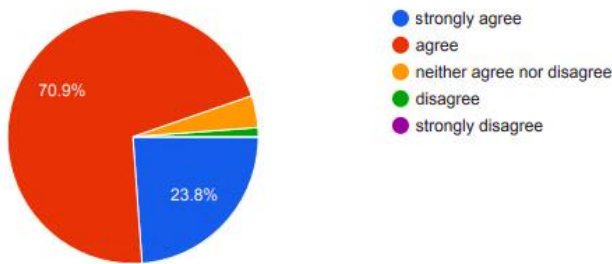


Fig. 1 Student's preference for using blogs as an assessment over paper-based assessments

Evidently, students appear to welcome this type of technology-oriented assessment mode which provides them with the tools to present their textual content in a more attractive format that can include images as well as audio and video content to present their reflections during the process of compiling these blog entries.

This finding is further substantiated by the equally notable level of agreement presented by the respondents to the claim "I think using blogs is a good way of testing my English writing skills" whereby 36.2 % strongly agreed to this claim followed by 62.6% who agreed to it. Given the total agreement level of 98.8%, it can be noted that almost all the respondents thoroughly acknowledged the use of blogging technology for testing their second language writing skills.

Since the whole point of assessing students in an ESL context is to obtain empirical evidence with regard to whether they have enhanced their L2 writing skills, students were asked whether they felt that blogging helped improve their language skills. Ninety-eight percent of the sample asserted that they had improved their English writing skills and 97% noted that their grammar and vocabulary have also improved as a result of writing blog entries. The teachers who assessed the entries also noted the progressive improvement of the students' writing skills and this was evident when looking at the gradual increase in the allocated mark for each progressive piece of writing.

Despite the markedly high levels of agreement to statements that capture the learners' attitude to the use of blogs for testing their L2 writing skills, one drawback appears to be the fact that there is a potential that their blog entries may be plagiarized by others doing the same assessment. In fact, 58.8% felt that their content could easily be copied when shared as blog entries. Given this concern, which is a valid one, the teachers will have to devise a mechanism to minimize

plagiarism such as by informing the students that a software tool will be used to check for plagiarized content taken from the internet and also that if there are close resemblances among the entries, they will be excluded from grading or that marks will be deducted. Such measures can minimize copying and also encourage students to share their content openly without them having to be concerned about their work being used by others. Moreover, to discourage outsourcing of blog entries, two strategies were adopted. Firstly, the teachers explained ethical and practical reasons why getting someone else to write the blogs should not be done. Also, these students had to do an in-class writing task that included a randomly selected topic from their blogs so that one can easily check if the two pieces of writing are of the same standard or not.

Another positive aspect of blogging, as felt by the respondents, is its capacity to reduce the high levels of anxiety that they experience during traditional testing environments. As argued by Krashen [4] high anxiety levels increase the affective filter which in turn hinders the process of second language acquisition. By virtue of writing blog entries that are not bound by spatial and temporal restrictions, it was noted that the respondents feel less stressed (with 92.5% in agreement) and less shy and anxious (with 71.6% in agreement) when doing this assessment as opposed to a pen-and-paper writing task. However, one should note that when it comes to how anxious they were when sharing their blogs for grading, 16.2% stated that they felt shy and anxious when sharing their blogs. This has to be given serious attention since there needs to be some level of reassurance needed by the students when engaging in this activity which is done in a virtual space. Also, further studies need to be conducted in order to identify what factors cause them anxiety during task engagement. A vital reason might be the fact that students often indicate that they feel embarrassed to make mistakes in English and this would obviously increase their anxiety levels when sharing their posts in such a public virtual space as a blog.

Nonetheless, the vast majority still do not appear to have any inhibitions when it comes to sharing their blog posts. Asked about the potential of them being able to reach a global audience, their acceptance of it was as much as 95.3%. This is not a surprising finding as we live in a world where social networking has become one of the trendiest and the most common means of spending time engaging in social interactions. Out of a total of 21.5 million (in approximation) people in Sri Lanka, there are 11.34 million internet users, and the number of social media users is equivalent to 38.1% of the total population in January 2022 [7]. The use of social networking sites is most prevalent among the younger generation and since these undergraduates fall under this category, it is invariable that they are more receptive to assessments that allow them to use a technology they extensively use for entertainment purposes for pedagogical intent. This claim is validated with 96.5 percent agreeing with the claim: "I like developing blog posts because I can integrate multimedia such as images, audio clips, and video content into them".

Considering the above findings, the study sample demonstrates a positive attitude toward the use of blog entries as a written assessment. This corroborates with the findings of similar studies conducted by Olofsson et al [8], Wu and Wu [9] and Dippold [10] whereby they present a positive





argument in relation to the pedagogical use of blogging in L2 assessment.

### B. Benefits of blogging in L2 acquisition

The assessments introduced in a course are often a reflection of the type of pedagogical approach used in it. The inclusion of blog entries, in this case in the form of reflective journals, is compatible with the type of evaluation that happens in a student-centric course as it empowers the learners to firstly, decide what content to share and secondly, free them from learning within the boundaries of a classroom environment. This is why the statement "I feel more in control of my learning when I write blog posts" has received an 89.6% agreement level. Interestingly, 5.6% of the respondents did not feel empowered during this activity. This could be due to the fact that the Sri Lankan school system still promotes rote learning and as such some students prefer to be spoon-fed by the teachers rather than engage in autonomous learning practices.

Nonetheless, these adult learners display the need to be autonomous even during the evaluation process. Ninety-six percent agree that they feel freer to express themselves when developing blog entries rather than when writing answers in a conventional paper-based examination setting. They are also enthusiastic about their blogs being able to reach a worldwide audience due to their shareability feature which can allow them to share them with anyone (95.3%). As such, technologically enhanced assessment practices such as blogging can be an important addition to developing student engagement during the learning process. This is important since not only does blogging encourage students to develop their own voices as part of the writing process, but it also supports our understanding of the role of students' investment in the learning process [11].

Based on the study findings, blogging is largely favored as a means of assessment by the students; moreover, they also consider it as being a positive intervention that has improved their English writing skills. That is why high levels of agreement are present for the statements indicating that engaging in blogging motivates the L2 learners to write more (95.9%) and that developing blog posts have increased their writing proficiency with almost half the sample indicating a strong agreement to this claim (total agreement as high as 97.7%). Campbell [12] validates the notion that blogs promote writing practice. Moreover, according to Zhang [13] blogs enable learners to have a purpose when writing. These assertions are in line with the findings of this study.

### C. Challenges of using blog technology for assessment purposes

The main reasons for students to find this method of evaluation problematic is due to technical difficulties and lack of infrastructure facilities. Although 90.6% of the respondents stated that they have internet facilities that enable them to work on their blog accounts, 62.9 percent are of the view that they have low bandwidth when it comes to uploading content. This might have posed a challenge to them when they are sharing content and impacted negatively when completing the assessment.

Yet another striking finding is that 60.2 % did not have their own computer or mobile device which is a mandatory requirement to sustain a blog since these entries are typed and

shared using the internet. During informal discussions, students have often stated that they are compelled to share the devices available among their family members. Hence, the fact that computer or mobile devices are not easily available to them might be a serious factor that would have to be considered if this type of assessment is to be included in the curriculum.

Also, since half of the respondents stated that they did not understand the instructions given on creating and using a blog, teachers need to make sure that students are given adequate instruction and training prior to implementing this type of evaluation. As Ferdig and Trammell [15] assert, students should be given explicit instructions on what is not appropriate on a blog and be made aware of the set of rules for blogging etiquette which should be shared with them prior to introducing them to the task.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, it can be stated that the participants of this study had a significantly positive attitude toward the use of blogs as a writing assessment. They seem to be positively inclined and highly motivated to write blog posts due to its shareability feature, capacity for inserting multimedia to make the posts attractive, feature for obtaining feedback; and flexibility of composing them without spatial and temporal restrictions.

Whatever the case, educators need to make informed decisions concerning the extent to which blogs can be integrated into the evaluation scheme of ESL courses. Just as with any other type of assessment introduced, it is important that the assessment is well-aligned with each course's learning outcomes.

Moreover, before introducing this type of assessment that involves the use of computer technology, students need to be trained so as to reduce anxiety and other technical constraints, especially among those students who have never used blogs before. Teachers ought to clearly communicate the assessment plan and expectations and also provide explicit guidelines and rubrics so that students have a clear idea of what is expected of them [15].

It is evident that students are receptive to this form of assessment and that it is indeed productive as well. Researchers can further explore what strategies can be adopted to counteract the challenges in authoring blogs and to sustain the level of motivation students hold. These strategies would provide guidelines for the continuity of using blog-based assessments to test ESL writing skills.

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