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## The Effect of Blog-Supported Writing Instruction on Writing Performance of Iranian EFL Learners

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**Vahideh Akbari**

Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University  
Iran

**Fatemeh Mondanipoor**

South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University  
Iran

### ABSTRACT

As an attempt to shed more light on the impact of blog as a Web 2.0 technology in Second Language (L2) learning, the purpose of this study was set to investigate the effect of blog-supported writing instruction on writing performance of Iranian English-as-a-Foreign Language (EFL) learners. To this end, a number of 43 EFL students from two intact classes in an Iranian private language center took part in this research. These two classes were randomly assigned to an experimental group (N = 21) and a control group (N = 22). As for the study intervention, the students of the experimental group received blog-supported writing instruction whereas those in the control group underwent the conventional writing instruction. Two timed-writing essays were administered before and after the treatment as the pre-test and the post-test, respectively. The results obtained from ANCOVA analysis revealed that although both groups experienced gains in writing performance scores, the participants of the experimental group surpassed those of control group in EFL writing performance, highlighting that the blog-supported writing instruction was significantly effective in improving the writing performance of the EFL learners. These findings provide significant implications for EFL writing pedagogy.

**Keywords:** *Blogs, Web 2.0, Writing Performance, EFL, Iranian Learners*

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### 1. Introduction

Writing in a second language (L2), a major productive language skill, plays a very influential role in communication and interaction in the world community (Hyland, 2007). Writing can serve as an effective tool for reinforcing vocabulary knowledge as well as grammatical structures, and learning idioms since it provides learners with opportunities to further practice what they have learned and to enhance global language skills and competencies by helping learners to verbalize and produce their ideas in the L2 (Elola, 2010; Raimes, 1983). Writing is considered to be of greater significance in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings in which learners are less likely to have exposure and use the L2 outside the class or to have communication with others in the target language (Reichelt, 2001). As L2 writing pedagogy is of much importance, numerous theorizers and practitioners have sought for the more effective ways for writing instruction (Tribble, 1996). The accumulated body of research on writing

instruction has revealed that conventional techniques to writing instruction failed to meet the various needs of learners and practitioners (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). In the meantime, the emergence of new technology devices, the Internet, and various web instruments have offered potentially more effective venues for L2 writing teaching and learning.

With the ever-increasing development of technology devices and especially with the advent of Web 2.0 devices, second language (L2) learners have been granted the opportunity to have interaction and exposure to the target language, improve their learning perception and interest, gain further confidence, and sustain communication in several ways, particularly in written mode (Chen, 2016; Sun, 2010). Considered as an indispensable part of people's lives, Web 2.0 technology devices, such as Facebook, Moodle, blogs, and wikis, are now extensively employed by the vast majority of individuals for various purposes of interaction, collaboration, and

entertainment (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). In contrast with Web 1.0 technologies, Web 2.0 devices allow its users to monitor, self-publish, produce and exchange knowledge with others (Fathi & Torabi, 2019; Lomicka & Lord, 2009). Parallel with this radical change in technological development, numerous researchers and practitioners in L2 education have paid attention to the potential effectiveness of Web 2.0 technology in affecting L2 pedagogy (Du & Wagner, 2007; Sturm, Kennell, McBride, & Kelly, 2009).

One of the very appealing Web 2.0 technology devices, blog provides a useful medium for sharing the knowledge and can satisfy numerous particular needs in particular learning contexts (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005). Blogs have received particular attention because of some of their unique features like quick and easy publishing, archiving of posts in chronological order, and the bilateral interaction potential which provides other users to have interaction with the writer. As far as L2 education is concerned, blogs have enjoyed much research attention by numerous scholars and practitioners (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Aydin, 2014; Bakar & Ismail, 2009; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Zhang, 2009). With regard to L2 writing, some researchers have emphasized the effectiveness of blogs in improving writing skills (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Campbell, 2003; Fathi & Nourzadeh, 2019; Sun, 2010; among others). From this perspective, it is argued that blogs can allow for accessing links to other online resources, help to have further writing practice, create a real audience for the written texts, trigger cooperative learning and create a sense of community among learners, encourage a sense of autonomy and ownership, promote giving and receiving feedback, foster further learner participation, and improve instructor–learner discussion and peer interaction (Aydin, 2014; Campbell, 2003, 2005; Chen, 2016; Dippold, 2009; Fellner & Apple, 2006).

In spite of the discussed advantages associated with blogs in L2 writing pedagogy, the research into the effectiveness of blogs for EFL writing courses has remained relatively under-researched. Although some empirical studies have investigated the usefulness of blogs in L2 writing contexts (e.g., Arslan, & Şahin-Kızıllı, 2010; Campbell, 2005; Chen, 2016; Fathi & Nourzadeh, 2019; Lin, 2014), further empirical studies are needed in order

to get sure about the positive effects of blogs in EFL classrooms. In addition, because of the complex nature of writing, conducting replication studies are much warranted in L2 research. According to Porte and Richards (2012), writing in a foreign language is argued to “present an increasingly diverse nature of scope and topics, which can easily result in conflicting, fragmented, and consequently confusing research outcomes. Replication can help bring some order to this situation by focusing on the “why” of previous findings” (p. 291). Furthermore, as far as Iranian EFL context is concerned, writing instructors still follow conventional teaching procedures and “incorporating formative assessment tools, collaborative tasks, portfolio writing, and other process- and genre-based strategies were among activities absent from the majority of writing classes” (Naghdi-pour, 2016, p. 85). Therefore, as an attempt to shed more light on the usefulness of blogs in EFL writing, the objective of the present study was set to examine the effect of a blog-supported writing instruction on the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners.

## 2. Literature Review

As the usefulness of Web 2.0 technology devices in L2 learning has been highly emphasized (Wang & Vásquez, 2012), the investigation of weblogs in EFL writing contexts has received extensive research attention (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Bloch, 2007, 2008; Chen, 2016; Fathi & Nourzadeh, 2019; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Sun, 2010). Using a mixed methods research design, Fathi and Nourzadeh (2019) examined the impacts of the use of weblog in a writing course on EFL students’ writing performance and anxiety. To this end, they selected forty-six Iranian EFL students from two intact classes in a university as the participants who were randomly assigned to the control group (N = 21) and the experimental group (N = 25). As for the treatment, the students in the control group received traditional writing instruction whereas those in the experimental group received blog-based writing instruction. The results of the data analysis revealed that the use of weblog in writing significantly contributed to improving the writing performance of the participants. Also, blog-based writing instruction substantially reduced the writing anxiety of the participants. The results of the qualitative data also revealed that the participants generally held positive attitudes towards blog-based writing instruction. Employing



the same dataset, Fathi, Ahmadnejad, and Yousofi (2019) found that blog-based writing instruction positively influenced writing motivation and writing self-regulation of the participants. Nevertheless, the use of blogs in the writing course reduced the writing self-efficacy of the EFL participants. The qualitative phase of their research revealed that the participants held generally positive perceptions of blog-mediated L2 writing. It was also found that further involvement, sense of agency accompanied by self-assessment practices due to fast teacher- and peer-feedback were the probable reasons of the better outcomes of the participants. In addition, Nezakatgoo and Fathi (2019) found that the blog-based writing instruction significantly enhanced autonomous learning of the participants. More precisely, they revealed that the participants who received blog-based writing instruction demonstrated enhancement in metacognitive and cognitive elements of learner autonomy.

In another study, Armstrong and Retterer (2008) examined the effects of blogging on L2 writing performance, self-confidence, and perceptions with a number of college students. For the data analysis, blog entries were examined and interviews were carried out with the participants. The results revealed that the blog-based instruction increased the length of the blogs written by the students. In addition, it was found that all the participants showed more positive attitudes towards writing after experiencing blogging. Likewise, Lee (2010) examined the impacts of employing blogs as out-of-class activities for writing performance and motivation. The participants were 17 advance L2 learners of English who were asked to post entries and read, give feedback, and answer each other's entries over a period of 14 weeks of instruction. The teacher also provided students with feedback on their posted blogs. The findings of the study indicated that blog-based instruction improved the participants' writing fluency and writing motivation. In addition, it was found that the students had positive perceptions towards the feedback they had received from their peers and teachers. In general, the results of Lee (2010) confirmed that blog-supported instruction contributed to improving the writing performance as well as confidence and motivation of L2 writers.

In another study, Chen (2016) investigated the effects of the use of blogs

on learners' metalinguistic and affective performance. In so doing, 26 non-English major students were randomly assigned to the control group and received a traditional English writing instruction, whereas 18 learners were assigned to the experimental group who received a blog-integrated English writing instruction. The findings of the comparison of the two groups demonstrated no significant differences between the two groups in terms of metalinguistic strategy use but significant differences were found in metalinguistic awareness. It was hypothesized that further input of the target language materials, more interaction and collaboration among peers, the help of the reverse-chronological order of blogs, and the incorporation of blogs in the writing class substantially improved learners' metalinguistic awareness. Concerning affective performance, no significant differences were found between the two groups with regard to writing motivation and writing anxiety. However, the control significantly outperformed the experimental group with regard to writing self-efficacy. Similarly, Sun (2010) investigated the use of blogging in extensive writing in foreign-language classrooms. The findings of this study revealed that the use of blogging in writing was effective in enhancing students' global writing performance, improved their writing autonomy, and created further positive perceptions toward L2 writing. The researcher finally concluded that blogging approach in writing could be an effective approach to be used in L2 writing classrooms.

In another study, Sulisty, Mukminatien, Cahyono, and Saukah (2019) explored the effect of Blog-Assisted Language Learning (BALL) on EFL tertiary students' writing performance as operationally defined as three elements of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Employing a Collaborative Classroom Action Research, the researchers tried to improve the writing instruction using BALL. The participants were 30 EFL learners of a university who had enrolled in an advanced essay writing class in this research. Interview, open-ended questionnaire and a writing test were used to collect the data. The results revealed that the use of blogs made EFL students enhance their writing performance and become more active in online classes. Carrying out an action research, Pinkman (2005) also explored the

effectiveness of the incorporation of blogs into a foreign language class in a Japanese university. The data were collected through administering questionnaires and interviews at the end of the semester. The findings revealed that the participants felt some advantages for employing blogs such as further interest in learning English because of interaction with, and feedback from, peers and instructors. The results also showed that the blog project contributed to improving reading and writing abilities of the L2 learners.

However, Lin (2014) investigated the effects of classroom blogging on the writing performance of L2 learners. Two groups of L2 undergraduates were selected as the experimental group and the control group. The students of the experimental group received blog-supported writing instruction, while the control group received the traditional writing instruction. The dependent variables under investigation in this study were writing performance, motivation, and self-efficacy that were assessed by using two batteries of pretests and posttests through writing tasks and a questionnaire. The findings of the study indicated that there was no difference between the groups. According to these results, Lin (2014) argued that blogging could neither enhance L2 students' writing competencies. Nor could it improve their L2 writing motivation and self-efficacy. As the justifications of these results, Lin (2014) stated 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).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

To attain the goals of this study, a total number of 43 male Iranian EFL learners took part in the present research as the participants. In fact, these students were selected from approximately 66 intermediate students in a relatively large private language institute in Tehran, Iran. To select homogeneous sample of participants, a global language proficiency test (TOEFL, 2006) was given to all the participants. Afterwards, the students whose scores fell one standard deviation above and below the mean were chose as the ultimate participants of the research. The age of the students ranged from 20 to 25 with the mean age of 20.65. These two classes were then randomly assigned to an experimental group (N = 21) who received blog-supported

writing instruction and a control group (N = 22) who received the traditional writing instruction. The students reported that they previously had not used blogs as educational tools. The purpose of this writing program was to enhance the essential writing competencies for the intermediate learners of English as a foreign language.

#### **3.2 Instruments**

##### **3.2.1 Language Proficiency Test**

To guarantee the homogeneity of the participants prior to initiating the treatment, a previously available version of TOEFL (2006) was given to the students. This version of TOEFL consisted of items measuring Structure as well as Written Expressions and Reading Comprehension sections, every part including 30 multiple choice items. The reliability coefficient of TOEFL test was estimated using Cronbach Alpha analysis and it was revealed that the test showed an acceptable internal consistency index ( $r = .78$ ).

##### **3.2.2 Timed-Writing Essays**

To measure the writing performance of the students before and after the writing program, two 45-minute writing essays were administered to the students of the experimental group and the control group. To this end, two topics were provided for pre-test (Topic 1) and post-test (Topic 2).

**Topic 1:** When people move to another country, some of them decide to follow the customs of the new country. Others prefer to keep their own customs. Compare these two choices. Which one do you prefer? Support your answer with specific details.

**Topic 2:** Some people believe that a college or university education should be available to all students. Others believe that higher education should be available only to good students. Discuss these views. Which view do you agree with? Explain why.

#### **3.3 Data Collection Procedure**

Before beginning the treatment, a time-writing essay (Topic 1) was given to the students as the pre-test. The students were required to write at least 250 words on the topic during 45 minutes. The purpose was to determine their writing ability prior to the intervention. Over the period of three months, the control group and the experimental group were taught by the same instructor who used the same materials. The purpose of this writing course was to make students become familiar with how to write different types of paragraph such as descriptive and process paragraphs, opinion paragraphs, comparison & contrast paragraphs, and problem/solution



paragraphs. The instructor taught each type of paragraph by explaining guideline the paragraph and providing some sample paragraphs. The students were also required to write a sample paragraph for each paragraph type.

As for the treatment of the study, the participants were provided with the necessary instructions to launch their own blogs and post their writing tasks on the blogs through <https://www.edublogs.org>. Through their weblog, the participants could have access to other websites which included further sample paragraphs and necessary words and grammatical structures. During the semester, the students posted their writing tasks on the blogs and shared ideas with the instructor and peers through blogging. The students also received regular feedback on their drafts from both instructor and their classmates. They students could have also interaction about their written tasks posted on the blogs. More particularly, the participants could discuss their own written assignments with the instructor and peers. Due to the asynchronous nature of the blog as a Web 2.0 technology, the EFL students could have the opportunity to revise and edit their own essays and give feedback on those of others outside the classroom in their convenient time.

Concerning the control group, the same materials as well as all the written tasks and assignments were also used for the participants in the control group. The control group students went through the main steps of writing, such as drafting, feedback, and revision, during the semester. The only difference between the two groups was the fact that the participants in the control group did not receive blog-based instruction and they did not employ weblogs or other Internet applications for writing assignments. In other words, the students in the control group were required to retain all the drafts and writing assignments, written in a paper-and-pencil format. When the treatment sessions were completed, another timed writing essay (Topic 2) was given to the students of both groups as the post-tests of the research.

#### **4. Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the collected data, the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS, Version 22) was employed. As for the analyses, descriptive as well as inferential statistics were utilized. Concerning the descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviations for the writing

performance scores obtained from timed-writing essays were investigated. With regard to the inferential statistics, paired-samples t-test and one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were performed in order to compare the effect of blog-supported writing instruction with that of conventional instruction on the L2 writing performance of the EFL participants of this study.

Furthermore, for rating essays of the students, Jacobs et al.'s (1981) writing scale was used. This rubric is an analytical scoring scale. According to this rubric, an essay must be corrected against a number of five criteria or components including content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Jacobs et al.'s (1981) writing rubric includes a 100-point scheme in which 30 points are given to the content, 25 points to language use, 20 points to organization, 20 points to vocabulary use, and 5 points to mechanics. To ensure the inter-rater reliability of the given scores to the essays, approximately 30 percent of the essays for both topics in the pre-test and the post-test were rated by an independent rater trained with this scoring rubric. The scores of the rater and those of the researchers were assessed using Cohen's Kappa's inter-rater reliability test. The computed internal consistency coefficient turned out to be 0.79.

#### **5. Results**

Concerning the data analysis of this research, paired samples *t*-tests were initially performed so as to examine the change in the scores of the writing performance of the participants in both experimental group and control group from the pre-test to the post-test. As revealed by the results of paired samples *t*-tests, a statistically significant increase was found in the mean scores of the writing performance for the EFL learners of both groups from pre-test to post-test. As Table 1 indicates, the increase in the mean scores of writing performance for the experimental group appeared to be statistically significant ( $t(20) = -12.89, p < 0.01$ ). In a similar vein, there was a statistically significant increase in the writing performance mean scores of the control group ( $t(21) = -3.10, p < 0.01$ ). More particularly, the results of descriptive statistics analyses also demonstrated that the mean score of writing performance for the experimental group was 55.19 (SD = 12.78) in the pre-test and this mean score increased to 77.23 (SD = 12.78) in the post-test,

highlighting that the increase was statistically significant. Likewise, mean score of the writing performance in the pre-test for the control group was raised from 58.86 (SD = 13.97) to 69.13 (SD = 14.65) on the post-test, verifying a statistically significant change.

*Table 1: Paired samples t-test for writing performance scores*

Groups	Pre-test		Post-test		t	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Experimental	55.19	12.78	77.23	12.78	-12.89	0.00
Control	58.86	13.97	69.13	14.65	-3.108	0.00

As the inferential statistics analysis, to precisely examine the impact of blog-supported writing instruction on writing performance of the participants in both groups, a one-way ANCOVA was performed. In this ANCOVA analysis, students' writing performance scores in the post-test were considered as the dependent variable, writing performance scores in the pre-test served as the covariate, and the group (control vs. experimental) was regarded as the independent variable of this study. As the pre-requisite of ANCOVA, some assumptions including checking the normality of writing score distribution, equality of variance, and the lack of a significant interaction between the covariate (writing performance scores in the pretest) and the independent variable (group/type of treatment) were checked. Also, the normality of writing performance scores, examined by Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, confirmed the normality of the scores for both experimental ( $F = .46, p = .47$ ) and control ( $F = .19, p = .27$ ) groups. In addition, the Levene's test for homogeneity of variance indicated the equality of variances in a sense that no significant difference was observed between the variance of the two groups, ( $F = 4.82, p = .386$ ). In addition, it was revealed that the interaction between the covariate (pre-test scores of writing) and independent variable (type of instruction) was insignificant ( $F = 33.54, p = .412$ ).

*Table 2: The results of ANCOVA for writing performance*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Covariate (pre-test)	7.271	1	7.271	.126	.725	.003
Between-subjects	650.946	1	650.946	11.276	.002	.220
Within-subjects	2309.130	40	57.728			

After making sure that the assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and reliable measurement

of the covariate were all met, ANCOVA was carried out. As seen in Table 2, a statistically significant difference was found between the two groups on post-test scores of writing performance,  $F(1, 40) = 11.276, p = 0.002$ , partial eta squared = 0.22), highlighting that the participants of the experimental group surpassed the students of control group on the post-test of writing performance. These results indicate that blog-supported writing instruction was significantly effective in enhancing writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was set to explore the impact of the use of blogs in writing instruction on the writing performance of EFL learners. The results obtained from the ANCOVA analysis showed that blog-supported writing instruction significantly contributed to improving writing performance of the EFL learners. This finding is in line with the findings of a number of previous studies (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010; Chen, 2016; Fathi & Nourzadeh, 2019; Lee, 2010, 2017; Sulistyo et al., 2019; Sun, 2010). This finding is also at variance with the finding of Lin (2014) who found no positive effect for the use of blogs in L2 classes. The effectiveness of blog-supported writing instruction in enhancing writing competencies can be attributed to several reasons. It can be argued that the use of blogs provided the participants with further language and writing input since the learners had access to other online materials (Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl, 2010). Due to the use of blogging in writing drafts, the participants of the experimental group were provided with further writing and language input in a sense that they could see the others' written assignments posted on the blog and be aware of the written knowledge of their peers. The advantage of blogs in providing further input has been previously verified in the literature (e.g., Chen, 2016; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Simsek, 2009; Zhang, 2009).

In addition, the collaborative nature of blogs provided the participants with further interaction and increased opportunity to receive and give feedback on written tasks, thereby increasing the quality of essays (Li, 2018). This finding can be justified in the light of the influential role of collaborative learning in general (Vygotsky, 1978) and computer-mediated language learning in particular (Bloch, 2008; Bruce & Rubin, 1993; Pennington, 2003). Via posting



their writing on the blogs, the students in the experimental group created a learning community for sharing knowledge and ideas on how to produce better quality drafts. According to Fathi and Nourzadeh (2019), “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” (p. 82). Compared with those of the control group, the participants of the experimental group received further feedback by the instructor and their peers via blogging. As a result, they might have benefited from these comments and feedback in improving their writing ability in writing essays. The positive effect of peer-assessment and peer-feedback on developing writing competencies of EFL learners has been empirically verified in the literature (e.g., Fathi & Khodabakhsh, 2019, 2020; Fathi, Mohebiniya, & Nourzadeh, 2019; Fathi & Shirazizadeh, 2019). Furthermore, as the participants of the experimental group knew that their writings on blogs could be read and evaluated by others, they exerted further attention and care while writing their drafts. In other words, expectation of other-evaluation helped students of the experimental group to enhance their writing performance. Also, the improved writing performance of the blog-supported group can be justified in the light of socio-cultural theory by stressing the beneficial role of receiving feedback from others (i.e., other-regulation) in enhancing cognitive functioning (Lantolf & Aljaafreh, 1995). According to socio-cultural theory, learning a foreign language can be fostered and sustained via other regulation materialized through cooperation as well as social interaction and then internalized via self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978).

As far as pedagogical implications are concerned, the findings of the present study are likely to suggest that if weblogs are employed and integrated into EFL writing instruction, the EFL learners may have the opportunity to improve their L2 writing abilities more effectively. Given the importance of writing as a key skill in L2 learning, it may be suggested that blogging be more widely incorporated into the EFL language education. In usual writing classes, the teachers are usually under much time pressure and much of the class time is devoted to evaluating and giving feedback to the students’ drafts and essays. Therefore,

the use of blogs in writing courses can provide teachers with further in-class instructional time since they would take the advantage of blogs in giving the students with outside-class feedback and assessment. In the same vein, the EFL learners would be given further opportunity to receive much feedback from their peers via blogs. However, as far as successful implementation of technology devices is concerned, teachers and their perceptions play a very key role (Fathi & Ebadi, 2020; Fathi & Yousefifard, 2019). As a result, EFL teacher education programs should take serious actions in order to prepare pre-service and prospective EFL teachers not only to adopt technology more effectively in their own EFL classes but also to get disentangled from traditional principles of language teaching (Fathi & Derakhshan, 2019; Khatib & Fathi, 2015).

Finally, the findings of the present study might lack generalizability due to some limitations. First, the differential effects of technology anxiety as an intervening variable was not taken into considerations as it is claimed that technology anxiety might create some construct-irrelevant variance in measuring the dependent variables in technology-mediated L2 research (Lewis & Atzert, 2000). Moreover, considering the fact that conducting replication studies in L2 writing research are legitimate (Porte, & Richards, 2012), more empirical research on the use of blogs in writing courses are called for. As a result, future researchers are recommended to replicate similar studies with larger samples of EFL learners with different language proficiency levels in different contexts. Finally, it is worth noting that the present research was purely quantitative in nature and did not employ qualitative data to explore how blog-supported writing instruction could aid participants in enhancing their EFL writing performance. Therefore, next researchers are suggested to utilize qualitative or mixed-methods research designs so as to gain more in-depth insight of the potential effects of blogging on improving writing performance of EFL learners.

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