

To Post or Not to Post: Exploring Students' Writing Strategies in a COVID-stricken Classroom

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Abstract

This study explores the affordances of microblogging as a strategy in improving the writing proficiency of students. A total of 125 college freshman students from a state university in the Philippines served as the respondents of the study. Four writing prompts were used for microblogging and personal essay writing. UAM Corpus Tool was used to describe the linguistic characteristics of the writing compositions produced by the respondents, while paired t-test and Mann-Whitney U test were used to statistically analyze the data. A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was also employed to generate qualitative information to deepen the interpretation of the findings. To validate the ratings given by the researcher, an inter-rater who is also an English professor was invited to rate the data. Holistically, there is no statistical difference between the mean ratings obtained by the respondents in the two writing conditions. Analytically, there is a highly significant difference in sentence structure and a significant difference in terms of language use. Moreover, micro-blogging and personal writing have shown no significant difference in content, organization, and mechanics as revealed by the statistical results. Conclusions and recommendations were forwarded. Pedagogical implications were articulated based on the results of the investigation.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted not only the economic, political, and health-care system but also the academic set-up around the globe. The lockdown in response to the virus has forced educational institutions worldwide to adopt

learning modalities that they deemed most appropriate and realistic for their learners given their available resources. As the new mode of teaching seems challenging to the teachers, its benefits to students are also being questioned. On the one hand, teachers had to adapt to the new pedagogical concepts and teaching mode delivery for which they may not have been trained. On the other hand, students, especially those in the marginalized groups, who do not have access to the digital learning resources or lack of resilience and engagement to learn on their own, are at risk of falling behind (Schleicher, 2020).

In the Philippines, higher educational institutions (HEIs) had to replace face-to-face lectures with online and modular learning along with other modalities which they deemed necessary and appropriate for their contexts to ensure the safety of both teachers and students. While shifting to the new normal of teaching and learning poses great challenges to various stakeholders especially to the teachers and students, it creates an opportunity to explore new possibilities in pedagogy and research. This study, therefore, investigates how students perform academically in the digitalized learning environment particularly in their writing assignments.

In the context of English as Second Language (ESL) teaching, writing is the most difficult English skill (Richards & Renandya, 2002) and the most difficult communicative macro skill to teach and master (Mabuan, 2018; Tillema, 2012). Perhaps, it has become more challenging using an unexplored web platforms.

Google Classroom (GCR) is one of the platforms that is being used by WPU for its online learning, but its functionality has not yet to be

explored from the lens of language research. GCR is a website which also enables teachers to create and manage the online classroom as if it were a conventional one where they can share learning materials, post assignments, prepare quizzes, and give instructions to their learners. Students, on the other hand, can access these materials and complete the task as long as they have Internet connectivity. Thus, this study takes advantage of the possibility that students' writing outputs published in the Stream Section of the GCR, coined in this paper as microblogging, is an effective strategy that could have impact on students' writing skill. This research study problematizes whether microblogging and personalized essay writing where students write and submit their compositions directly to their teachers has significant impact on the quality of students' output.

1.1 Research Questions

This study sought to address the following questions:

1. What are the lexical features of students' essays?
2. What is the impact of micro-blogging and personalized essay writing to students' writing ability?
3. What are the affordances of micro-blogging to students' writing ability?

2 Method

2.1 Participants

This study involved four sections of 125 freshman students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science and Social Work (BSSW) program of Western Philippines University-Puerto Princesa Campus in Palawan, the Philippines during the first semester of school-year 2020-2021 in the Purposive Communication Course, one of the general education courses under the new curriculum that is being handled by the researcher.

2.2 Procedure

2.2.1 Topic Validation

For topic validation, the four writing prompts used in the study were presented to a colleague who is also an English faculty and to another English instructor from other institution who also served as an interrater of the data.

2.2.2 Administration of the Writing Tasks

Under the COVID-19 pandemic, instructional modules were developed by the researcher and her colleagues as the main resource uploaded to the Google Classroom bi-monthly. For each module, the researcher included a writing task which is related to a lesson discussed in the learning packet that will be submitted by the students within the two-week period specified in their course outline. The first writing prompt follows (Please refer to Appendix A for the complete list).

2.2.2.1 For microblogging

Write a minimum of 500 and maximum of 1000 word-essay on the topic "Are you the same person of social media as you are in real life?" Make sure to provide appropriate details in the introduction, body, and conclusion sections of your essay. After you submit your essay to the file I created for this assignment, post it to the stream section of our Google Classroom for the whole class to read your work. Please make sure to also provide feedback on the work of your classmates.

2.2.2.2 For traditional essay submission

Write a minimum of 500 and maximum of 1000 word-essay on the topic "Are you the same person of social media as you are in real life?" Make sure to provide appropriate details in the introduction, body, and conclusion sections of your essay. Submit your essay to the file I created for this assignment.

All essays were holistically rated by the researcher and the inter-rater using Gustilo's (2011) rubric. Gustilo used the said rubric in a study where she assessed 150 essays from five universities in the Philippines, and in another that examines the writing performance of engineering students in a prestigious tertiary institution in the Philippines (Gustilo, 2011, 2013). Only those essays that were submitted on time and have negligible traces of

plagiarism were analyzed, the rest were discarded.

2.2.3 Reflective Survey

After completing the four writing tasks, the students were given an opportunity to reflect on whether or not microblogging affects the quality of their output. They were asked to accomplish a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) requiring them to answer reflective questions (Please see Appendix D for some DCT student responses).

2.2.4 Analysis

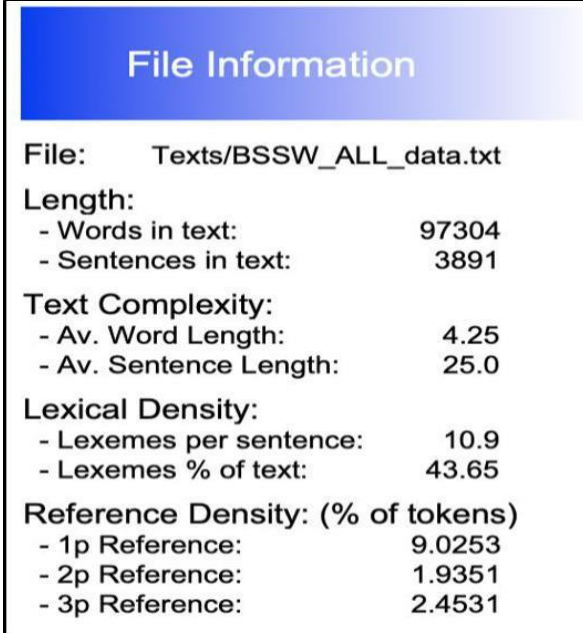
1. The UAM Corpus Tool, a software used for linguistic tagging was used to provide the characteristics of the data.
2. Surveys were conducted via Google forms hence replies were automatically tallied in terms of frequencies.
3. Essay scores from the two raters were averaged if there is a one-point discrepancy.
4. Qualitative replies were analyzed and used as reference whenever necessary to deepen the interpretation of the quantitative data.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Lexical Features

Figure 1 presents the characteristics of students' essays in terms of length, text complexity, lexical and reference densities.

Figure 1
Data Characteristics



File Information	
File:	Texts/BSSW_ALL_data.txt
Length:	
- Words in text:	97304
- Sentences in text:	3891
Text Complexity:	
- Av. Word Length:	4.25
- Av. Sentence Length:	25.0
Lexical Density:	
- Lexemes per sentence:	10.9
- Lexemes % of text:	43.65
Reference Density: (% of tokens)	
- 1p Reference:	9.0253
- 2p Reference:	1.9351
- 3p Reference:	2.4531

The figure shows that the data consists of 3,891 sentences with a total of 97,304 word-tokens. As can be seen, the data has the average word length of 4.25 letters and the average sentence length of 25 words. Figure 1 likewise shows that the average lexemes per sentence is 10.9, while the entire text contains 43.65 per cent of lexemes. In terms of reference density, first-person pronouns were generally used by the respondents, which is given since two of the writings prompts were about the students' reflections and experiences amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is compelling in the findings is the tendency of the students to write longer sentences with somewhat shorter words. As shown in Figure 1, the average sentence length of the data is 25 words and the average word length of 4.25 letters. In (1), the sentence has 25 words, (2) has 34 and (3) contains 50 words.

- (1) Hey it's been months since the pandemic started, a pandemic that affect not only the people in cities and provinces but also in our island.
- (2) To: My Family & friends I hope at this time You are okay and your health is good and far

from disaster especially with the ongoing disaster that is spreading all over the world.

me, it is very different from my real life as it reflects my personality.

- (3) My personality is not the same as what you can see on my social media, because for me social media is just a consolation where I can share posts even if it is not really about

3.2 Students' Writing Proficiency

The writing proficiency of the respondents is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Writing Proficiency of the Respondents

Sections	Micro-blogging (Posted) Mean	Adjectival Rating	Traditional (Not posted) Mean	Adjectival Rating
A	3.87	Developing Proficiency	4.06	Adequate Proficiency
B	4.12	Adequate Proficiency	4.1	Adequate Proficiency
C	4.29	Adequate Proficiency	4.29	Adequate Proficiency
D	4.3	Adequate Proficiency	4.20	Adequate Proficiency
Grand Mean	4.05	Adequate Proficiency	4.16	Adequate Proficiency

Legend: 1 = Very Little Proficiency 2 = Little Proficiency 3 = Developing Proficiency
4 = Adequate Proficiency 5 = Advanced Proficiency 6 = Highly Advanced Proficiency

The table shows that the writing proficiency of the respondents both for the microblogging and traditional essay writing can be generally described as having adequate proficiency. In the TOEFL Test of English Scoring Guide (ETS, 2019), an essay with a rating of 4 is adequately organized, addresses the writing topic adequately but may slight parts of the task, uses some details to support a thesis or illustrate ideas, uses adequate but undistinguished or inconsistent facility with syntax and usage may contain some serious errors that occasionally obscure meaning. This means that the writer in this category demonstrates minimal competence on both the rhetorical and syntactic levels.

3.3 Microblogging versus Traditional Writing

Answers to the question on whether microblogging and traditional essay writing employed as strategies of the teacher in the

writing classes are presented in Tables 2 to Table 6.

3.4 On Content

Content refers to sound information, adequate and appropriate details provided by the respondents in their essays. Table 2 presents that there is no significant difference between microblogging and the traditional essay writing in terms of content. This finding is expected since the respondents whether they micro-blog or submitted their essay to their teacher wrote about the same topics. Given that the respondents share a similar demographic profiles, it is more likely that they also have similar concepts and ideas on the topics assigned to them by their teacher.

Table 2
Mann-Whitney Tabular Results on Content

Mann-Whitney test Tabular results		A
		Data Set-A
		Y
1	Table Analyzed	content
2		
3	Column B	Not posted
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Posted
6		
7	Mann Whitney test	
8	P value	0.4625
9	Exact or approximate P value?	Approximate
10	P value summary	ns
11	Significantly different? (P < 0.05)	No
12	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
13	Sum of ranks in column A,B	17742 , 21879
14	Mann-Whitney U	9357
15		
16	Difference between medians	
17	Median of column A	4.000
18	Median of column B	4.000
19	Difference: Actual	0.0
20	Difference: Hodges-Lehmann	0.0

3.5 On Organization

Respondents are expected to have skillfully arranged their ideas in the introduction, body, and conclusion parts of their essay. The Mann-Whitney results on organization shows no significant difference between the essays produced in microblogging and in

traditional essay writing as can be gleaned from Table 3. According to Nordquist (2020), organization in speech or composition is the arrangement of ideas, incidents, evidence, or details in a perceptible order in a paragraph, essay or speech. In classical rhetoric, organization is also known as the elements' arrangement or *dispositio* (Nordquist, 2020).

Table 3*Mann-Whitney Tabular Results on Organization*

Mann-Whitney test Tabular results		A
		Data Set-A
		Y
1	Table Analyzed	Org
2		
3	Column B	Not posted
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Posted
6		
7	Mann Whitney test	
8	P value	0.0629
9	Exact or approximate P value?	Approximate
10	P value summary	ns
11	Significantly different? (P < 0.05)	No
12	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
13	Sum of ranks in column A,B	20894 , 24257
14	Mann-Whitney U	10016
15		
16	Difference between medians	
17	Median of column A	4.000
18	Median of column B	4.000
19	Difference: Actual	0.0
20	Difference: Hodges-Lehmann	0.0

3.6 On Punctuation and Mechanics

Like content and organization, usage of punctuations and mechanics show no significant difference between the compositions written under the two writing conditions. Two interpretations could be deduced from the findings. One, the respondents failed to master

the rules punctuation usage along with capitalizations, indentions, spelling, and grammar. Two, some of these errors manifested in the compositions are not due to lack of knowledge of rules but is simply caused by carelessness thus resorted to mistakes but not necessarily errors, as echoed in the study of Mohammadi and Mustafa (2020).

Table 4
Mann-Whitney Tabular Results on Mechanics

Mann-Whitney test Tabular results		A
		Data Set-A
		Y
1	Table Analyzed	Punc and Mech
2		
3	Column B	Not posted
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Posted
6		
7	Mann Whitney test	
8	P value	0.0768
9	Exact or approximate P value?	Approximate
10	P value summary	ns
11	Significantly different? (P < 0.05)	No
12	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
13	Sum of ranks in column A,B	20840 , 24010
14	Mann-Whitney U	9962
15		
16	Difference between medians	
17	Median of column A	4.000
18	Median of column B	4.000
19	Difference: Actual	0.0
20	Difference: Hodges-Lehmann	0.0

3.7 On Language Use

Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference on language use in the compositions produced by the respondents in microblogging and in traditional essay writing. This finding implies that students used more precise words and exerted extra effort when they post their compositions as compared with when they submit their essays directly to their teachers. In an interview with one of the respondents, she stated that she spent longer time writing and revising her work because she is afraid that she would be undermined by her classmates if they would find errors in her essays when they are published online. This finding corroborates with the findings of Muslem et al. (2022) highlighting the

positive effect of blogging on ESL students' writing skills, although it is important to note Ozdemir and Aydin's (2015) observation that blogging does not guarantee better writing achievement among EFL writers., and writing instructors should employ effective approaches such as process-based writing to support student blogging activities. In addition, an in-depth analysis of student corpora is needed in order that student vocabulary use is examined, whether they demonstrate what Scarcella (2003) called as major categories of academic vocabulary (i.e., general words used across academic disciplines and in everyday situations; academic words that are common across different disciplines; and technical words found in specific academic fields).

Table 5
Mann-Whitney Tabular Results on Language Use

Mann-Whitney test Tabular results		A
		Data Set-A
		Y
1	Table Analyzed	langu
2		
3	Column B	Not posted
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Posted
6		
7	Mann Whitney test	
8	P value	0.0102
9	Exact or approximate P value?	Approximate
10	P value summary	*
11	Significantly different? (P < 0.05)	Yes
12	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
13	Sum of ranks in column A,B	20156 , 24097
14	Mann-Whitney U	9425
15		
16	Difference between medians	
17	Median of column A	4.000
18	Median of column B	4.000
19	Difference: Actual	0.0
20	Difference: Hodges-Lehmann	0.0

3.8 On Sentence Structure

Table 6 shows that there is a highly significant difference as regard sentence structure in the compositions produced by students in microblogging than in traditional essay writing. However, while this finding favors blogging over traditional essay writing, there is a need to analyze student corpora in detail, particularly focusing on the syntactic features of student writing, as the grammatical features of academic

writing tend to be highly specialized (Biber et al., 2011). In addition, student written outputs in blogging and essay writing require analysis in terms of specific syntactic features which may include embedded phrases (e.g., participial and absolute phrases, and apposition embedded within sentences), complex phrasal structures (e.g., noun and prepositional phrases), and hierarchical structure (e.g., phrase and clause subordination) (Biber et al, 2011).

Table 6
Mann-Whitney Tabular Results on Sentence Structure

Mann-Whitney test Tabular results		A
		Data Set-A
		Y
1	Table Analyzed	syntax
2		
3	Column B	Not posted
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Posted
6		
7	Mann Whitney test	
8	P value	0.0099
9	Exact or approximate P value?	Approximate
10	P value summary	**
11	Significantly different? (P < 0.05)	Yes
12	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
13	Sum of ranks in column A,B	20454 , 24397
14	Mann-Whitney U	9576
15		
16	Difference between medians	
17	Median of column A	4.000
18	Median of column B	4.000
19	Difference: Actual	0.0
20	Difference: Hodges-Lehmann	0.0

Among the six areas that were examined in the data, only the sentence structure is found to have a highly significant difference, while language use is found to be significantly different. Other aspect such as content, organization, and mechanics have shown no significant difference on the two writing strategies employed.

4 Conclusion

The main objective of the study is to examine whether micro-blogging is an effective teaching strategy over the traditional essay writing. Microblogging is when students' essays are posted on the stream section of the Google Classroom where all students in the class could read the written outputs. Traditional essay writing is when students write essays for their teachers to read and mark.

This study suggests that microblogging may be an effective strategy that could be used in ESL writing classes, as students tend to exert more effort to make their compositions better having a wider audience in consideration. This warrants further exploration investigating the possible of impact of audience awareness to the quality of student written outputs, which implicates choice of educators between traditional writing pedagogy or computer-assisted language teaching.

For the study research locale, it is recommended to review the General Education Curriculum and look for possibility where an English course could be offered. In the new curriculum, there is no specific course designed for enhancing the writing or the communication skills of the students; hence, an intensive English course is proposed as an intervention program. It

is particularly necessary since English proficiency is seen as a contributing factor in the low performance of university's graduates in various licensure examinations.

This study only delved on microblogging or class blogging but has already shown significant impact on students' writing, albeit on a limited scale. It is therefore recommended that teachers should further explore this strategy as well as the real web blogging as a tool for teaching, where students use online platforms to publish their work. There are several cases of plagiarism in the study. Hence, teachers should be vigilant of this illicit activity as this will defeat the purpose of the teaching and learning process. The University may also review its policy on students' conduct and should not tolerate this kind of practice.

The emergence of online writing in virtual spaces presents opportunities for English language learners to practice their writing skills, as online learning environments afford them to write on-the-go, anytime and anywhere. Such trend opens possibilities for language learning experiences, and our schools should harness this kind of technology and integrate it into our writing classes effectively. As blogging is only a technological tool, teaching EFL/ESL writing should still be informed by time-tested pedagogies and approaches, and executed by teachers with nuanced understanding of the role of technology in the classroom vis-à-vis teaching-learning processes.

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