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Exploiting Blogs in the ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of public and private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia are offering courses using the blended approach, where knowledge delivery is done via face-to-face classes and online modes to enable students to complete assignments and projects. The Internet and online learning tools facilitate to incorporate courses, syllabi, and teaching materials to make knowledge delivery and information sharing more challenging, meaningful and interesting. This paper discusses how blogs have been utilized as a platform for interactions in the language classroom. The study investigated how students used the blog to practise their communication and writing skills, and in what way blogging have benefited them. Attempts were made to answer these questions through reviewing students' responses about commencing and sharing knowledge via blogs. The paper also presents some creative steps shared by students in exploiting their blogs during their language course.

Keywords: Blended approach, blogs, blogging, L2 learners, knowledge sharing

INTRODUCTION

When blog or weblog was first introduced in Web 2.0 in early 2000, many Internet users exploited it as personal journals in which they shared their personal daily events, expressed their opinions about current issues, and showcased their personal photos.

Later, blogs were used to publicise business products, and now educationists begin to exploit blogs in their courses. The Internet and online learning tools facilitate the management of courses, syllabi and teaching materials, and enhance information sharing and knowledge delivery in the classrooms. With Web 2.0 applications and numerous educational tools available for teaching and learning, enthusiastic language instructors have begun their journey of integrating this digital technology in their instruction. This paper discusses how blogs have been

utilized as a platform for interaction and self-directed learning in an undergraduate English language classroom in a Malaysian public university. It also captures the perceptions of students on blogging and language learning and how they benefit from it.

In relation to this, Kern and Warschauer (2000) argued that network-based language teaching (NBLT) does not represent a particular technique, method or approach. NBLT may include not only the Internet or wide area network but also local area network that is limited within a building or a campus. However, the concept of NBLT can now be extended to mobile communication as mobile learning is gradually being introduced in education. It is a constellation in which students communicate via these digital networks and interpret, as well as construct online texts and multimedia documents - all as parts of a process of steadily increasing engagement of new discourse. Today, interactive platforms such as blog and social networking sites (SNSs) help develop multi-literacy skills and underpin critical nodes in this constellation. There are many current forms of Internet applications which are seen to present Web2.0 qualities that allow users to share their visual content, as well as provide feedback or comments. For example, text, photographs and video clips can now be shared with feedback or comments at many sites such as Facebook, Flickr, You Tube, and blog. Much focus has also been given to online dissemination of self-produced content and discussion through blog.

All these Web innovations reflect a trend whereby the world is becoming more "informal" in how it communicates. Instead of body language and face-to-face conversations, communication has shifted towards endless words on a screen. In the educational context, however, blogs can be seen as a relatively new phenomenon, in which their uses are still being explored and developed by educators. For example, blogs have become a popular and constructive learning tool in the English language classroom (Seitzinger, 2006). Such an innovation has also allowed for more education research on designing learning environments that optimize learning. Coutinho (2007) has identified these learning environments as being learner-centred, knowledge-centred, assessment-centred, and community-centred. The question we need to ask then is whether educators at institutions of higher learning are utilizing these innovations to promote knowledge-centred, assessment-centred, and community-centred learning or not. Harwood's (2010) study involving university students discovered blogging as supporting learner autonomy, improving language skills and increasing motivation. He concludes that blogs are adaptable learning tools that promote student-centred learning.

Although not originally intended for use in English language classes, blogs have immense potential for the teaching of languages. Blog is a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. Most contemporary blogs are hybrids of

journal/diary-style entries and annotated hyperlinks or some other kinds of musings, reflections, anecdotes, recounts and so forth, with or without embedded hyperlinks to related websites (Adams & Brindley, 2007, p.114).

Blogs were created as a tool for people to create online journals without the need of any programming experience or knowledge. By utilizing free blogging sites on the Internet, teachers are able to create and store online supplementary materials for students, post class notes for student review and give general feedback to the class as a whole and individually.

The blogs play a vital role as an avenue to generate constructive discussions that provide opportunities for meaningful learning. For this to happen, learners must have the desired computing skills to enable them to participate effectively in asynchronous learning environments (Ranjit Kaur & Gurnam Kaur, 2010). At the same time, educators and administrators must ensure that support is provided to learners for Internet-based courses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of blogs has much potential in the teaching of ESL and EFL in Malaysia, especially in written communication skills. In Malaysia, Izham Shah (2008) studied the use of blogs among 25 pre-service teachers who enrolled in an undergraduate Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) programme at Universiti Teknologi MARA. He concluded that blogs provide a platform for students to participate equally in the learning process and new topics can emerge outside the classroom, especially when time constraint of the classroom limits the scope and participation in discussions. Nazdrah Abu Bakar and Kemboja Ismail (2009) has shown the usefulness of blogs in relation to developing students' writing in the ESL context. Students have also perceived blogs as a motivating and interesting device to help them interact and develop critical thinking skills. Nadzrah Abu Bakar and Hafizah Latif (2010), in an action research, found blogs to have promoted collaborative learning activities and contributed towards new knowledge. They also found students to apply various L2 skills, build confidence and thinking skills. In another study on the use of blog in an ESL teacher training course, Muhammad Abdullah (2010) found that the virtual discussion held in the blog has been able to reduce writing apprehension among students, and increase writing productivity.

Blogs have immense potential as a valuable tool for the teaching of the English language. The use of blogs allows both teachers and students to participate in a constructive and collaborative learning process that provides opportunities for meaningful learning. Warschauer (1997) argues that the potential of collaborative learning through computer-mediated communication is related to the Social Constructivist theory. Social Constructivism emphasises the role of social interaction in the development of cognition and knowledge construction. Vygotsky's (1978) work on knowledge construction through social interactions in situated

and meaningful socio-cultural contexts is especially relevant to building learning communities in which participants engage in critical thinking under the scaffolding provided through peer interactions and from the instructor (Vygotsky, 1978; Bonk *et al*., 1998). The Constructivist approach to learning emphasizes authentic, challenging projects that include students, teachers and experts in the learning community. When learners work collaboratively in an authentic activity, they bring their own framework and perspectives to the activity. They can see a problem from different perspectives and are able to negotiate and generate meanings and solutions through shared understanding.

Pramela *et al*. (2012), in their study on using blogs to enhance the teaching and learning of Science in Malaysian Smart Schools, argued that blogs could be adopted as an extra tool for Science teachers to engage in computer-supported communication that resulted in better teaching and learning. Nonetheless, institutional support and provision must first be provided to help them acquire the knowledge, skill and disposition towards such innovation in teaching and learning. By using blogs, teachers can provide course information, announcements and class notes, and run quizzes, as well as create a class forum for students to discuss the learning content and assignments. By doing so, students can have a greater and quicker access to course materials and more opportunities to interact with their teachers and coursemates to make the learning process becomes more dynamic and interesting. Weiler (2003, p.73) states

that "there is no doubt that blog has a great potential for educational use, both on their own and as an extension of the traditional classroom". He listed the functions for using blogs in the classroom, as follows: as a personal journal, bulletin boards, and electronic portfolios of written work.

There have been several studies that indicate the helpfulness and usefulness of blogs in ESL and EFL classrooms. For example, studies by Campbell (2003), Weiler (2003), Ferdig and Trammel (2004), Ward (2004), Huffaker (2005) and Jones (2006) reveal that blogs assist the ESL/EFL instructors to incorporate new, authentic, and reliable pedagogical techniques in their teaching in the e-learning environment. Blogs also provide authentic writing practice (Brooks, Nichols, & Priebe, 2004), an opportunity to recycle language learned in class, as well as an alternative way of communicating with teachers and peers.

In an earlier study Vethamani (2006) highlights that teachers teaching literature-based courses perceive the blog forum as a new pedagogical imperative that multiplies the opportunity for learners to verbalize their thoughts and creates an interesting learning atmosphere. The virtual environment has increased the opportunities for more interaction between teachers and learners and among learners regardless of time and space (Masputeriah, 2006; Pramela, 2006; Supyan Hussin, 2007; Pramela & Wong, 2009). These studies have also shown that computer-enhanced teaching and learning can create a natural context for learner independence and as a means of extending

opportunities for interaction. This is seen as important in major theories of Second Language Acquisition. Johnson (2004) lists several advantages of using blogs in writing lessons. He believes that by using blogs students have the options of previewing and reviewing the class material before and after class. As the students are connected to the Internet, they have access to online English dictionaries, where they can easily look up words they do not understand. What is more interesting is that students can read comments for the class as a whole and comments directed at them individually. This maximizes feedback and contact with the teacher or the instructor. It also aids students to observe how their writing changes over a period of time.

Although previous studies have shown the benefits and the potential of using blogs among L2 learners to some extent, qualitative inquiry to find out more about this Web 2.0 tool as an interactive platform for L2 learners language learning is necessary. Hence, this study is aimed at having a better understanding on how students at the tertiary level felt about using blogs, and how and what efforts were put in to exploit their blogs during the course.

METHODOLOGY

Context of the study: Blogging as a course requirement

The year-one students who participated in this study were in the English Language Programme and the course offered to them was ICT and Language, a compulsory course in the second semester. The course

aims to create a more explicit awareness of the growing importance of ICT in society, and its applications in language learning analysis. In order to meet the objectives of the course, the students were introduced to computer-based interactions to help them develop skills and enable them to analyze basic language structures. They were also exposed to computer-mediated communication, web-based learning and research pertaining to language and ICT. One of the course requirements was to create a blog. Therefore, the students were guided to http://www.blogger.com (Fig.1) and coached step-by-step on how to start a blog. Although the Blogger website layout can appear confusing at first glance to these students who had no exposure to blogging, it can be quite simple to navigate and use. It is also important to tell students in advance that when adding or editing a post, it will not be saved until the 'publish post' button is clicked. All the students must be taught the importance of this step or they will lose their entries or postings.

Data Collection

The source of data for the current study is an online archive which consists of students' blogs that they produced as part of their course requirement. Unedited excerpts were extracted from the blogs for the discussion on student experiences on blogging. Five guided questions on ICT and language were posted by the instructor at different stages of the course for students to discuss their respective blogs throughout the semester, in which specific deadlines were given for

them to respond and comment. Students were also informed that this research-based task carries 20 percent of their overall assessment. This, to some extent, promotes enthusiasm among the students to participate actively in the task.

Data Analysis

To capture the diverse experiences of these undergraduate students on blogging, this study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry framework to examine the data extracted from selected students' blogs. The data are interpretive and tell the individuality and the complexity of students' views and thoughts on blogging through narrative processes carried out in contexts without the intervention and pressure from the instructor and their peers. Data taken from students' postings on their blogging experiences were analyzed qualitatively, while emerging common themes were identified for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data from the students' blogs provide an insight for educators or language instructors on their blogging experience which could be explored further to examine the use of blogs in the Malaysian ESL classroom. To examine it, this section discusses the data to capture the perceptions of Malaysian undergraduate students on blogging and language learning, and how do they benefit from it.

Generally, almost all the participants felt that the attempt to use blogs in an ELS classroom is innovative. Students felt the excitement of being given the freedom in terms of creativity and flexibility in choosing templates and decorating their blogs with different colours combined with the use of glitter, pictures, photographs and animations, while engaging in writing, reflecting and information sharing with their peers via the blogs. This resonates with the notion of innovative literacy as defined by Gregory and Kuzmich (2005), a literacy that encompasses reading, writing, speaking,

Fig.1: Creating a blog using Blogger at www.blogger.com

and listening to do a complex task, solve a complex problem, invent a unique product or process, or create something new or influential. This is the key to thrive amid the rapid change and expansion of knowledge in the 21st century (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2005, p.161).

Promoting Autonomous Learning through Blogging

The use of blogs as a learning strategy is considered as an alternative to the traditional model of education. For the digital natives, blogging provides a conducive virtual environment to accommodate their technology-enriched learning styles. For students who may feel intimidated by the realities of schools and classrooms, the use of blog may assist them to discover their preferred learning styles and strategies which could enhance their learning process. S1 and S2 expressed this in their blogs, pointing out that blogging helped them to express themselves better as compared to the conventional classroom environment:

S1

*To me, having a blog was simply to submit the assignments required for this course. I never blogged before this. I am more of a diary-hidden-somewhere sort of a person. What I think and feel is better kept inside than told to the rest of the world. Yet, I find myself becoming more and **more comfortable blogging and expressing myself**.*

S2

*I cannot deny that blogging has in a way helped me. **I have become brave in expressing myself rather than expressing myself only in the pages of my diary**. It is more exciting to see what I have written online as I can add more pictures and colours rather than the usual white piece of paper and blue pen I use. Clearly, it is a fun activity and very beneficial as long as it is not misused.*

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that meaning making develops through the social process of learning language over time. The effect of this process is noticeable when students in this study are starting to produce, share and publish their ideas on their personal blogs. As compared to traditional face-to-face classroom environment, the learning process via blog is personalized and many of them expressed that they have benefited from it when the learning process takes place in a social context. In particular, Web 2.0 is chosen to facilitate the learning and reflective processes in the current study. By publishing, learning, and sharing ideas, students deepen their thinking and receive direct feedback from peers, experts, and other teachers. Relevant and current feedback is a powerful learning tool (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1990).

Increased Interactivity through Sharing and Collaborative Learning

Students expressed that blogging has allowed them to be engaged in sharing and collaboration with coursemates, the lecturer and peers for interesting facts and information which come from their own readings. The students also experienced some form of self-directed learning throughout the blogging-learning process, where they were given the opportunities to practice self-editing, peer editing, or responding to blog postings.

Most of the students talked about the opportunities to interact with their virtual audience and peers on interesting topics and discussion through blogging. S7 commented that he has benefitted from the interaction with his friends and there is no barrier for any posting or comment in blogs. This increased interactivity between students-writers with their virtual audience/ peers and online texts would continuously create new discourse communities with members who share the same interest on topics posted on the blogs.

S7

I can interact with my friends who visit my blog and there's no barrier to entry. Besides viewing my blog, they can also give their comments regarding my posts. So, I can improve my posting like my grammar and the other features.

Clearly, the use of blogs in the research context of the current study has established a learning environment with the characteristics of an ideal classroom that Coutinho (2007) discusses. The learning space created by the blogging process has encouraged students to explore their curiosity and expand their knowledge, not only through the traditional approach, but also through the use of Web 2.0 that enables them to grow, share and learn with the global community and audience.

Improving Language Skills through Blogging

Lankshear and Knobel (2003, p.19) argue that blogging "could potentially become potent pedagogical approaches to writing". They point out that "a blog that records links, commentaries, and informed analysis, and that is open to being read by and commented upon by interested others, can become an objective artefact of collegial activity: one that is mediated by experts and learners in mutually beneficial ways" (Lankshear & Knobel 2003, p.18). This might be true for some students who have gone from linking and clicking to creating and sharing through their blogs and have become members of some virtual affinity groups. Student S9 commented that "blogs connect people beyond boundaries to share feelings and ideas without any obstacles…" and it "connect us to other webs and make our thinking more different and broader." This may help them to build authentic and tangible audience as compared to school-based writing classes (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

The use of blogs as "a base of authentic purposefulness" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p.15) in an ESL classroom can enhance student's level of understanding and comprehension. Through the engagement in the blogging activity, especially writing and sharing, students in this study have started to demonstrate their interest in reading especially when they started interpreting and constructing online texts and multimedia documents. Students shared reading materials by providing the hyperlinks of the original source of the materials on their blogs.S2 expressed that she has to be "more self-conscious" in the use of language as there are many people who may have access to her reading materials and writing on her blog. S6, S7, S9 and S10 experienced a natural 'training' and improvement of their language skills as a result of becoming more literate in blogging and increased interaction with their peers in the virtual space. There was improvement in students' writing skills especially in terms of choice of words, grammar and spelling as illustrated in the excerpts below:

S2

*Our literacy skills are put to the test and we **can improve our use of language online** because knowing that many people will have access to reading our material, it makes us more self-conscious about writing correctly.*

S6

*Actually, I can improve or help me in writing skill. It is because, I can write whatever without any problem. Furthermore, I can **improve my English language.** I can speak English fluently because I feel shy if my friend will laugh at me. But, if I wrote something, they did not know and never laugh at me. So that, I'm agreeing that from blogging, **it can help me in my writing skill**. **I also can give my opinion without any obstacles**. Besides, writing blog is a good way for me **to express my thought and feelings** and give me many opportunities. I also feel thrilled to see my writing in the web. This sounds funny but, it is true!*

*I feel happy and glad if other person read my blog. It is because; **they can comment it and I've to improve my weaknesses**. I can learn many things when doing blog. I can learn how to write blog effectively. Besides**,** I learn how to edit pictures, sounds, logo and something to make my blog interesting. I also learn how to customize my blog. From that, I can learn many things and now I can use my knowledge to help my friends and it is do useful when I already graduate or working. I'm very happy and enjoy!!*

S7

*I can interact with my friends who visit my blog and there's no barrier to entry. Besides viewing my blog, they can also give their comments regarding my posts. **So, I can improve my posting like my grammar and the other features**.*

S9

*Blogs **connect people beyond boundaries to share feelings and ideas** without any obstacles. **It also helps us to improve our language and how do we manage to apply it.** Blog can connect us to other webs n make our thinking more different and broader. This soon will help us to find journals and articles for our project papers. This online diary will be actively on until we graduate.*

S10

*Reaction by my coursemates and my lecturer to my blog has **helped me to improve my writings** and i feel thrilled to see my article viewed by others. **This blogging activity has taught me a lot writing skills**. It has been a very interesting experience.*

Improving Level of Confidence through Blogging

Students generally felt their level of self-esteem towards the course and their language skills has improved since blogging was incorporated into the course assessment. They felt that blogging allows them to practise trial and error method which has helped to build up and improve their content knowledge, socio-cultural sensitivity (S8), and the presentation of ideas in their blogs (S5) over a period of time. Furthermore, some of them commented that blogging has helped them to enhance their ICT skills as they were given the space and flexibility to engage in a learning process without peer pressure or intrusion from the lecturer.

S5

*At first I only signed up for my own account then after two weeks I needed to post my first assignment. While doing my assignment I learn how to make my blog more fancy and creative. Due to this I learn to customize my blog. **I also became more knowledgeable and could make decisions in certain aspects**. This is a good beginning for beginners like us. It also helps us to improve our language.*

*After creating a blog, my typing skills improved and my grammar too got better. In my first posting there might be some spelling errors **but my later postings might show the changes and improvements.***

S8

Everyone will know many things about us. We should understand

*what to reveal and what not too. This is where the privacy issue must be practiced. Moreover, there are also guidelines in blogging. **We cannot write anything that we like without realizing about the others sensitivity like religion, politics and race that always become controversial issues***.

A study by Poling (2005) has pointed out that "blogging as a classroom application allows for enhanced comprehension and communication among students as well as the ability to build deeper understanding across the curriculum…" (p.12, as cited in Solomon & Schrum, 2007, p.161). In regard to this, the researchers have observed that some students begin to form deeper reflection about issues or topics they raise in their blogs. S8 for instance has commented that bloggers/learners should be more sensitive in their postings or comments about certain issues which might be controversial to the readers.

Continuity

The use of blogs may also help students to extend the relationship between their lecturer/ instructor and the students beyond the classroom. While learning is no longer confined within the four walls, students may embark on the journey in designing relevant experiences with purpose and meaning beyond an alphanumeric grade through blogging. Most of the student participants expressed their desire to continue blogging even when the course

has ended. They perceived blogging as an ideal and convenient platform to store their reading and share information among their peers. This is reflected in the comment posted by S3:

S3

*The **introduction of blogging has made this course worth looking forward to**. It's exciting to post assignments online and we get marks to up out with blogs. Could anything possibly get better than this? I **really enjoy blogging** now and if I can actually have the time and (god-willing) a strong internet access, **I'll definitely continue this blogging experience outside of this course requirement!***

A closer look at the blog postings revealed that students viewed the activity in a positive light. Although this blogging experience was something new to this group of students, they found it challenging and even expressed interest in similar activities in future courses which they need to register. Many of them claimed to have gained confidence in their language skills especially in writing. In fact, these students were more than happy to allow their friends to read their work on blogs. This shows that blogging has helped students to gain more confidence and develop audience awareness. Besides, blogging has promoted a collaborative class environment where students felt happy to be consulted to improve their blogs. Blogs allowed a voice for the participants.

This is because they were able to put their thoughts in writing to receive comments and feedback. Reading their coursemates' blogs and commenting allowed them to be more confident in writing beyond the classroom. These students also learned how to incorporate multimedia elements such as pictures, sounds and graphics to customize their blogs.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the participants in this study have exhibited a highly positive experience towards the integration of blog in their learning process. The process of developing and managing a blog has encouraged further utilization and increased confidence among the students. The findings might shed some lights for English language teaching and learning in higher education. Increasing student learning through blogging allows the instructors to establish a positive rapport with and among students to achieve specific language learning goals. As language educators, we need to recognize and exploit the potential benefits of technology-enhanced learning in order to take a stand on which uses of technology will likely serve our goals and which will not. Creating blogs in language classes should not be thought of as "simply happening". In fact, educators in a media literate world need to rethink and redefine best practices for using this tool to help students improve their English language. This again emphasizes the important role that the instructor has to play especially in giving useful feedback and comments in order to enable students to continue the knowledge construction.

Given the fast development of ICT, we can expect that ICT will bring positive aspects to improve our teaching practices, and we must also understand that language learning is no more centred on textbooks and the traditional classroom approach of teaching. Innovations have come and teachers need to grasp them in creative ways to make language learning more meaningful and more enjoyable. Hence, we also need more empirical studies focusing on students' satisfaction and achievement in language learning using such technologies to allow us to come up with best practises.

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