BRINGING BLOGS INTO ESL WRITING CLASSROOM

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Abstract. In recent years, the use of web logs or blogs in education is on the rise. Even though it has immense potential as an extremely valuable tool in higher education learning, writing blogs in Malaysia is still in its infancy. Therefore, the objective of this study is to introduce a new ICT and CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) application – blogs, and investigate undergraduate students’ perceptions of using blogs as a tool for journal writing. This study employed the Davis’ Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (1989) and its questionnaire-based measurement instrument to evaluate and justify users’ attitudes and behaviour. TAM posits two determinants—Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU) to determine an individual’s Behavioural Intention (BI) as a mediator of actual technology use. To explore the relationships among PEOU, PU, and BI of blog users to accomplish a writing task, questionnaire was administered on 78 undergraduate students as the target sample. Based on the objectives of the study, three hypotheses were formulated. The results from the pilot test had confirmed the reliability of the modified TAM-based questionnaire. The undergraduate students’ intention to use blogs for journal writing had a more significant effect on usefulness rather than on ease of use. Additionally, the findings revealed that TAM can be applied in the English Language Teaching (ELT) context to diagnose and interpret the attitude and behaviour of users of blogs. However, most importantly PEOU, PU, and BI were positively correlated at a significant level. These results depicted that the three proposed hypotheses in the study had failed to be rejected. The implication is blogs are more useful than easy to use for journal writing and the intention to use a newly-implemented ICT tool in the learning process can be attained provided that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use can be obtained from the users.

1.0 Introduction

Journal writing has been proven as an eminent and supportive teaching tool across the grades and the curriculum (Hopkins, 2003). It is also a common pedagogical technique in writing courses (Krause, 2005). Nowadays, the writing of e-journals or blogs is becoming progressively more popular as it is one of the easiest ways – almost as easy as sending an email – to publish student writing on the Internet (Stanley, 2005). Given the nature and characteristics of blogs, educators have the opportunities to employ this innovative tool in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, particularly to enhance journal writing with their students. In addition, if blogs have the potential for application in English Language Teaching (ELT), an investigation should be conducted to study this new educational innovation.

1.1 Statement of problem

According to Roblyer (2003), even though technology advocates have long predicted the fall of the traditional book, language arts teachers generally have not contented with that prediction nor worked to make it come true. Tan (2003) stated that great challenges need to be faced to produce good designs with sound principles behind them though Internet and web technologies support both pedagogical innovations and improvements in educational management. This is further supported by Landry, Griffith, & Hartman (2006) who claim that the impact of technological advances upon the classroom setting has been known as one of the least recognised aspects of the revolution in technology, which Malaysian educators are now experiencing. In order to face the momentous challenge of becoming an industrialised country in the 21st century, the Development of Education National Report Malaysia (n.d.) has stressed the magnitude of technology to be insistently promoted in the education system to harness interest among students. Thus, the study seeks the opportunity to transfer the teaching and learning activities from the chalk-and-talk classroom to the computer-supported classroom by adopting the cutting-edge ICT – blogs, one of the latest forms of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) applications.

Very little research has been conducted on the application of computers in writing blogs (Hartley, 1992). Since blogs are relatively new, very little of research is found in this field currently (Littrell, 2005). According to Johnson (2004), the use of blogs appears to be still in its infancy despite its immense potential as an extremely valuable tool for the teaching of second language writing. This view is supported by Martin & Madigan (2005), who found that only a tiny fraction of teachers have begun to incorporate blogs as a tool for language and literacy education. In addition, Cole (2004) claims that a search of the literature yielded very little concerning the use of blogs in public
schools and none of which was empirical research. The parameters and consequences of blog usage within higher education too are still unexplored (Xie, Sharma, & Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 2005). According to Richardson (2004), it is believed that educators are slower to adopt blogs due to the access, privacy, and security issues.

Until the early of 2007, none of the theses or research papers regarding the use of blogs for educational purposes was found in the Malaysian Thesis Online (2007) search result. Thus, blogging is yet a reasonably new phenomenon in Malaysia (Vethamani, 2006) and it is believed that not many English educators have applied or even know about the pedagogical potential of blogs. Moreover, except the recent Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) employed in context of online community weblogs systems (Li & Kishore, 2006), the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has not been tested as a model for explaining blogs use in ELT. More empirical research is needed to clarify the appropriateness of TAM utilization in educational context.

1.2 Purpose

The objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To identify whether there is a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU) of using blogs for journal writing;
2. To identify whether there is a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing; and
3. To identify whether there is a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing.

1.3 Research questions

The three research questions addressed in the study are as follows:

RQ1. Is there a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU) of using blogs for journal writing?
RQ2. Is there a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing?
RQ3. Is there a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing?

2. Literature review

Blogs have become powerful interactive writing tools since they provide primarily one-way communication together with highly interactive features. Blogs provide individuals with their own virtual online web spaces which enable bloggers to post their personal views or commentaries on any topic. Others may respond to these ideas by using the links and comments, either in comments to the posting or in other blogs with a link back to the original posting (Lever-Duffy, McDonald, & Mizell, 2005). Besides, links can be added in their own commentaries to connect to other web resources or backtrack to other blogs. Bloggers also can post commentaries about other blogs on their own blogs (Lever-Duffy et al., 2005). Browsing a set of blogs over time can allow the students to get a better sense of what the Internet has to offer. Thus, besides reinforcing critical thinking skills, blogging is used to acquaint students with the basics of Internet content development (Oravec, 2002).

The students should be encouraged to write their own blogs since blogs can empower students to become more analytical and critical (Oravec, 2002; Oravec, 2003; Xie et al., 2005). Krause (n.d.) discovered that students needed the direction of a “teacherly” assignment to write and they were not going to “just want to write” in a blog space because they were given the opportunity. This shows the importance of explicit language tasks and overt instructions on how to set up personal blogs with a free blogging service online. Blogs are “individualistic” rather than “collaborative” (Krause, n.d.). Since the essence of the blog is found in individuals, the essence of the blogging tool is the entry field dated (Downes, 2004). According to Campbell (2003a), student blogs may be best suited for writing classes and it is probably the most rewarding (Stanley, 2005) and generates the most significant enthusiasm for blogging among subjects (Educational blogging, 2007).

TAM was originally proposed by Fred Davis in 1989 as one of the most influential extensions of Ajzen and Fishbein’s Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (see Figure 1). TAM developed by Fred Davis and Richard Bagozzi (Davis, 1989) models how users come to accept and use a technology. Below shows the original TAM proposed by Fred Davis.
The goal of this model is to provide an explanation of the determinants of technology acceptance. TAM replaces many of TRA’s attitude measures with the two technology acceptance determinants – Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU). It assumes that an individual’s information systems acceptance is determined by these two major variables. Davis defined PEOU as “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort” (Davis, 1989, p. 320). PU was defined by Fred Davis as “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance” (Davis, 1989, p. 320). Behavioural intention is a measure of the strength of one’s intention to perform a specified behaviour (Gardner & Amoroso, 2004). The conceptual framework of the study is formed and depicted in Figure 2 as follows.

BI is determined by PEOU and PU (BI = PEOU + PU) (Venkatesh, 1999). Attitude is not an important determinant of intention and usage; To keep the model as simple as possible, the variable “attitude toward using” is not employed in the conceptual framework. According to Lee, Kozar, & Larsen (2003), the four major variables of TAM are PEOU, PU, Behavioural Intention (BI), and Behaviour (B). As noted by Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw (1989) and Taylor & Todd (1995b), BI is the major determinant of actual system use postulated by TAM. B is a direct function of BI (Taylor & Todd, 1995a) and BI is said to have a direct effect on user acceptance (Wagner & Flannery, 2004). Horton, Buck, Waterson, & Clegg (2001) also stated that TAM may not be useful for explaining actual system usage. Since literature has consistently shown that BI is the strongest predictor of actual system use, “actual system use” is excluded in the framework.

Based on the conceptual framework used in the study, three hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H1. There is a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU) of blogs for journal writing;

H2. There is a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing; and

H3. There is a positive and significant relationship between students’ Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing.
3. Methodology

The study was based on quantitative research method—correlational research, which aimed to examine students’ perception about blog writing. Correlational research is useful to examine the strength and direction of relationships among three variables – PEOU, PU, and BI (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Data examining respondents’ attitudes was collected using the modified version of the TAM-based questionnaire adapted from Gardner & Amoroso (2004), Laitenberger and Dreyer (1998), and Malhotra & Galletta (1999). The robustness and validity of Davis’s TAM questionnaire has been confirmed by Adams, Nelson, & Todd (1992) and Hendrickson, Massey, & Cronan (1993). Pearson product moment coefficient correlation was used to investigate the extent to which the three TAM variables (PEOU, PU, and BI) are related without manipulation (Ary et al., 2002).

A 17-item questionnaire was piloted one week prior to the administration of the actual study to the target samples from the same faculty and taking the same course in one of Malaysian universities. The study employed cluster sampling method—a common application used with intact classrooms as clusters, where all members from the selected clusters or groups are involved in the study (Ary et al., 2002; Parmjit, Chan, & Gurnam, 2006). A classical measure of reliability, Cronbach’s alpha (α), was used to measure the internal consistency reliability for the items within each variable. A corrected questionnaire was produced and administered in the actual study after items modification had been done. All the items used a 7-point Likert scale that is widely used to measure the strength of an attitude or an opinion (Ary et al. 2002; Parmjit et al., 2006).

In the first lesson during the one-week of study, respondents were informed of the objectives and procedures of the study. Then, a Consent Form adapted from Melbourne Research Office–Human Ethics, The University of Melbourne (2006) was given to each student to be signed in order to fulfil the ethical requirements of the study. Later, respondents were provided the Writing Task following with a simple and brief explanation. They were provided almost no guidance about blogging so as to allow them to figure it out on their own in order to prevent prescriptive instruction and restriction of use. They were given one week to complete the task.

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to respond to each item in terms of their own degree of agreement or disagreement. They needed to circle one of the seven numbers arranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A score was assigned to each response and the scores belonging to a particular variable are summed up, so that respondents with the most favourable perception will have the highest score while the lowest score will belong to the respondents with the least favourable perception. Lastly, they were given a form to register their names, blog titles, blog addresses, and dates of their published work to ensure that they had completed the tasks.

4. Findings

The motive of the study is to introduce a new technology system of writing the journal instead of using the traditional way of paper and pen. In order to find out whether this educational innovation can be in favour among the students who may use this technology in future, according to Davis’s theory of Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), two user beliefs – perceived ease of use (PEOU) and perceived usefulness (PU) are the primary and secondary determinants that will constitute the user’s behavioural intention (BI) of using this new technology. Therefore, the relationships between PEOU, PU, and BI become the core study of this paper. The correlation coefficients between PEOU, PU, and BI in the questionnaires are depicted in Table 1 as below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Correlation coefficient (r)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a positive and significant relationship between Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU) of using blogs for journal writing.</td>
<td>.733**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a positive and significant relationship between Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing.</td>
<td>.555**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a positive and significant relationship between Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) before to use blogs for journal writing.</td>
<td>.337**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.05, ** p<.01 (1-tailed)

H1. There is a positive and significant relationship between Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU) of using blogs for journal writing.
H2. There is a positive and significant relationship between Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing.

H3. There is a positive and significant relationship between Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Behavioural Intention (BI) to use blogs for journal writing.

In the questionnaire, the relationship between PEOU and PU was explored using Pearson product moment correlation. There was a high positive correlation between PEOU and PU ($r=0.733$, $p<.01$) at significant level of one per cent. Thus, the result indicates that subjects found out that blogs were easy to use which enhanced the influence of PEOU on PU. As shown in Table 1, there was a moderate positive association between PU and BI ($r=0.555$, $p<.01$) at significant level of one per cent. The result denotes that the subjects discovered the usefulness of blogs which directly increased their intention to use. Lastly, PU is positively correlated with BI ($r=0.337$, $p<.01$) at significant level of one per cent. The moderate association between PEOU and BI suggests that blogs for journal writing had been found easy to use that the genuine relationship between PEOU and BI was strengthened.

5. Discussion

Figure 3 displays the results of hypothesis testing regarding correlation between PEOU, PU, and BI in the study. According to Holmes et al. (2005), the relationship between PEOU and PU is considered high. This is further supported by Creswell (2005) that correlation in this range would be considered very good and good prediction can result from one variable to the other. As pointed by Lee et al. (2003), PEOU is a significant antecedent of PU where PU is predicted by PEOU. From the TAM theoretical perspective, PEOU influences PU but it does not hold for the converse relationship (PU influence PEOU) (Dillon & Morris, 1996). For example, Blogger.com was claimed to be extremely easy to use (Krause, n.d.) and free (Kajder & Bull, 2003; Richardson, 2004) because setting up a blog is only less than five minutes (Kajder & Bull, 2003). According to Oravec, it has described itself as "Push-Button Publishing for the People" and declares "Blogger offers you instant communication power by letting you post your thoughts to the web whenever the urge strikes" (2002, p. 2). Thus, it is the best known as one of the most reliable and useful blogging tools with students (Stanley, 2005) and many educators and students are in favour of having their blogs hosted there (Oravec, 2002). Since the positive and significant relationship exists between PEOU and PU, the first hypothesis is fail to be rejected – There is a positive and significant relationship between Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) and Perceived Usefulness (PU) of using blogs for journal writing.

Figure 3 also depicts the moderate positive relationship between PU and BI based on Table 1. PU is treated both as a dependant and independent variable because it is predicted by PEOU and predicts BI at the same time. If compared to the relationship between PEOU and BI, the association between PU and BI is stronger. This shows that PU was the stronger predictor of behavioural intention to use a newly implemented technology for inexperienced and experienced users, which is supported by Eagly and Chaiken (1993); Fazio and Zanna (1978); Regan and Fazio (1977), as cited in Taylor and Todd (1995a). Usefulness was more strongly linked to behavioural intention rather than ease of use. The result corresponds with the claims by Lee et al. (2003) that PU was a stronger
Blogs can be introduced into the current curriculum and lessons to substitute the traditional “chalk-and-talk” instead of traditional way of journal writing. With well-planned and integrated instructional design endeavour, relationship found between PEOU and BI, the third hypothesis is fail to be rejected – indicates that PU and PEOU had roughly equivalent influence on BI. Hence, based on the positive and significant determining a user’s technology acceptance behaviour. However, the result obtained by Agarwal & Prasad (1999) by Wolski & Jackson (1999) as well as Hackbarth et al. (2003), PEOU played a critical role in predicting and overall in determining use or behaviour but PEOU might influence the initial decision to adopt a system. Supported that PEOU is an unstable measure in predicting BI. Adams et al. (1992) also claimed PEOU was less important than the face-to-face teaching. Since perceived usefulness had significant effect on students’ intention to use blogs for journal writing, educators should implement blogs as part of their lessons by demonstrating how blogs could be used to write journals instead merely using paper-and-pen. To prevent blogging only for meeting the class requirement, students need to be explained on how blogs could be helpful in facilitating their thinking and learning. Additionally, to enhance undergraduate students’ perception of blogs’ usefulness, educators should stress the importance of Internet usage to meet the increasing demands of an ever-changing technological environment (Well, 2006). Furthermore, students’ attention should be brought to the advantages of web-publishing in addition to being media literate rather than just print literate. This is vital for undergraduate students to be able to live and work in a world that increasingly operates in a variety of media (Roblyer, 2003).

Besides, educators must take into account that students have a diversity of blogs’ perceptions for ease of use and usefulness to the purpose of writing journals. Since the findings show ease of use was sufficiently served as the determiner of usefulness, educators who intend to bring new ICT tools into conventional classrooms should know how to exploit all the features available during the application. In order to make students perceived easy to use, a great deal of training and time to give ample exposure, at least one semester, to explain the process are required (Blogs move student learning beyond the classroom: An interview with Alex Halavais, 2004) to pursue a lucid exploration of technology rather than an exploration of writing. When educators move into the wired writing instruction, whether novice or experienced, they must question the balance of technology and rhetoric (Palmquist et al., 1998). As noted by Worley (2000), “medium is not the message”; that is, the Internet component is not an aim in itself but rather a helpful teaching aid (Krajka, 2000). Educators should not overuse and stress too much on the use of blogs application, which leads to distraction and reduces the focus on the language input and learning outcome. By the end, blogs used in the classroom will turn out to be just another technology toy (Martin & Madigan, 2005). Palmquist et al. (1998), listed out the essential premises that educators should be aware of when taking advantage of blogs. They are as follows:

6. Recommendations

This study provided a preliminary report on how far undergraduate students are in favour of using online method instead of traditional way of journal writing. With well-planned and integrated instructional design endeavour, blogs can be introduced into the current curriculum and lessons to substitute the traditional “chalk-and-talk” classroom activities as blogging activities are indeed useful and easy-to-use. According to Campbell (2003b), one of the major difficulties of using blogs in EFL is lack of participation from readers outside the classroom. Therefore, when introducing a new technology, it is important to verify students’ expectation about the technology with the course objective and learning process (Divitini, Haugalokken, & Morken, 2005). By utilising the prevailing TAM, more wide-ranging studies can be conducted to predict or evaluate the use of blogs as a medium for different language skills input and output.

Moreover, findings from the study are particularly useful to educators who are hunting for an alternative method other than the face-to-face teaching. Since perceived usefulness had significant effect on students’ intention to use blogs for journal writing, educators should implement blogs as part of their lessons by demonstrating how blogs could be used to write journals instead merely using paper-and-pen. To prevent blogging only for meeting the class requirement, students need to be explained on how blogs could be helpful in facilitating their thinking and learning. Additionally, to enhance undergraduate students’ perception of blogs’ usefulness, educators should stress the importance of Internet usage to meet the increasing demands of an ever-changing technological environment (Well, 2006). Furthermore, students’ attention should be brought to the advantages of web-publishing in addition to being media literate rather than just print literate. This is vital for undergraduate students to be able to live and work in a world that increasingly operates in a variety of media (Roblyer, 2003).

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1. Blogs support instruction instead of dominate or dictate it;
2. Blogs play the supporting roles for the interactions of educators and students as the integral elements at the centre of instruction; and
3. Blogs are useful tools to advance what educators and students could do in alternative ways.

For further research in technology acceptance via TAM for ICT and CMC applications in ELT, such as blogs for journal writing, more attention has to be driven on the adaptation and development of TAM-based questionnaire items. More explicit and clear-cut statements have to be defined to obtain more precise and accurate responses. As TAM can be used as a predictor or evaluator of technology acceptance for particular purpose, the administration of the TAM-based questionnaires has to be extremely deliberately conducted to obtain the self-predicted or self-reported results according to different situational context. An extension version of TAM can be developed by involving more external variables like training, motivation, gender, and language proficiency to measure the acceptance for specific ICT application from different perspectives to further explore and analyse precisely about human attitude and behaviour. Besides, studies on the quality of writing and feedback features of blogs can be conducted since blogs were accepted as a tool for journal writing among the undergraduate students. Supporting the findings of Ali & Yunus (2004), majority of the subjects welcomed supportive learning environment. For example, written comments from both the teachers and other students indicating good and weak points in students’ writing are welcomed. This shows that students may want to be more active and interactive in classroom activities.

7. Conclusion

As disclosed by Dillon & Morris (1996), the study has attested the process involved in user acceptance of ICT for pedagogical purposes can be modelled and predicted. Based on the subjects’ responses in the study, blogs were perceived to be more useful rather than easy to use for journal writing, which enable the educators to elucidate the reasons behind the blogs acceptance as a tool for journal writing. Sustained by previous empirical studies, the TAM-based questionnaire was a reliable measurement tool which discriminated the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness as two key factors to behaviour acceptance. Furthermore, the study also further suggests that TAM can be used to predict ICT acceptance and diagnose design problems prior and subsequent to users having any hands-on experience with the technology for particular purpose.

Based on the results, the study was strongly proposed to the practice of using blogs as a means of journal writing. Blogs were strongly promoted for journal writing in the study since according to Stauffer (2002), blog is not only a website similar to a personal journal or diary designed to be updated with items in a linear and time-based fashion, but also the contents are meant specifically for public consumption. Besides, support by Williams & Jacobs (2004) which students were mostly supportive of the continued use of blogs as an effective aid to teaching and learning. Besides, Lin, Marchal, & Wathen (2004) together with Wang & Fang (2005) also found that blogs proved to be an effective tool to facilitate students’ learning in an e-learning environment.

The implication from the findings is: TAM is appropriate to be adopted in academic setting, which had been authorized as useful measurement tool for students’ behavioural intention to use a newly implemented ICT tool for pedagogical purpose. With the understanding of users’ technology acceptance, it can also assist to develop better approaches for designing, evaluating, and predicting the manner in which users will react to new technology. As Davis (1993, as cited in Dillon & Morris, 1996) said, user acceptance has been viewed as the pivotal factor in determining the success or failure of any information system project. Supported by the blogs acceptance for journal writing examined in the study, this can be a crucial starting point to advocate a variety of ICT and CMC applications in ELT.

Moreover, the study notably found that undergraduate students’ perceived usefulness had direct and significant effects on their intention to use blogs for journal writing. It showed that undergraduate students’ perceived ease of use was fully mediated by their perceived usefulness, which had indirect considerable effects on their intention to use blogs. These results were in line with the claims made by Davis (1989), whereby PEOU and PU were theorized to be the elementary determinants that should not be ignored by those attempting to design or implement successful systems. Therefore, the study extended the consideration of these variables and their relationships, which enable the educators to avoid unnecessary complications when introducing new technology to their intended students.

References


