EXPANDING ESL CLASSROOM HORIZONS WITH WEBLOGS:
EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In this information age that brings about the telecommunication revolution, education is also constantly shifting – new technologies have redefined educational emphasis from content to learners and their learning processes. Based on The Development of Education National Report Malaysia (2004), the use of technology has become one of the objectives and principal characteristics of forthcoming educational reforms. However, not many studies have been conducted to determine students’ perceptions of one of the revolutionary Web 2.0 applications – weblog as a language learning tool in spite of its immense potentials in educational context. Owing to the substantial benefits of blogging and to reach ICT-enhanced teaching and learning, the main objectives of this study are: (1) to describe the overt instructions of creating a weblog with Blogger (a free blogging service); (2) to provide a preliminary report about the implementation of weblogs in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom; and (3) to suggest the techniques for educators to use weblogs in classroom. By using convenient sampling method, the study involves 58 diploma students from one of the universities in Malaysia. Before conducting a survey, students were given a language task that required them to create individual weblog. After one week of completing the task, a questionnaire survey was administered among the students to find out their perceptions of weblog as a language learning tool. Based on the results of the study, all students felt that weblog is an easy and useful tool for writing. The study demonstrates the significance of students’ perceptions of weblogs and educator’s roles to ensure the successfulness of weblog implementation in ESL classroom. The findings have further implied that students need to be more exposed to blogging with systematic guidance from the educators.

Keywords: Weblog, Blogging, Students’ Perception, Language Learning Tool, English as a Second Language (ESL) Classroom

1. INTRODUCTION

Blog is a coined word of Weblog or Web log, which serves as a noun and a verb. Blog was declared as the word of the year in 2004 by Merriam-Webster before it became the buzzword for 2004 (Lindroth, 2006). At present, weblog becomes well-accepted globally and some new words in English language like blog, blogging, bloggers, and the blogosphere have been generated. Due to its usefulness, easy-to-use (Mah & Liaw, 2008; Mah & Er, 2009; Mah, 2009), fast-growing, and globally well-accepted, weblogs in popular media are being called as “the next killer application” and “a replacement for email” (Krause, n.d.; Martindale & Wiley, 2005). Generally, a weblog consists of two components: the software that runs on a web server and generates the weblog pages; and the posting tool that how the comments are published on the software.

1.1 Problem Statement

The current curriculum and lessons conducted in schools and higher learning institutions are still using the traditional “chalk-and-talk” or “marker-and-talk” classroom activities. Since the literature and the empirical study show that blogging activities are indeed useful and easy-to-use (Mah & Liaw, 2008; Mah
& Er, 2009; Mah, 2009), it seems that most educators are not keen in exploiting new methods of teaching. Development of Education National Report Malaysia (n.d., p. 50) states that “educator attitude is another constraint to effective curriculum implementation.” When educators are requested to teach in a computer setting, there is much fear that technical knowledge will become more primary than rhetorical knowledge. One common expression that may arise is that they will not know how to help students with computer glitches, and may experience anxiety about “losing face” in front of students (Palmquist, Kiefer, Hartvigsen, & Goodlew, 1998). Besides, although the potential benefits of weblogs in pedagogical instruction have been recognised, Martin & Madigan (2005) found that many school weblogs seem intensely teacher-centred and do not show clear evidence of genuine student investment in online communication. Instead of merely using paper-and-pen for the tedious tasks of handwriting, educators can implement weblogs as part of their lessons by demonstrating how weblogs could be used to write journals.

1.3 Objectives

The main objectives of this study are listed as follows:
(1) To describe the overt instructions of creating a weblog with Blogger (a free blogging service);
(2) To provide a preliminary report about the implementation of weblogs in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom; and
(3) To suggest the techniques for educators to use weblogs in classrooms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Why Blogger?

There were no recognised weblogs before the millennium. In fact, weblogs existed since the early days of the Internet (Jensen, 2003). In July 1999, Andrew Smales, a programmer in Toronto launched Pitas.com. With the corporation of GrokSoup and Pyra in 1999, the first online weblog-publishing tools were released to help people to build weblogs. The name “Blogger” (www.blogger.com) was born in August 1999 founded by Evan Williams, Paul Bausch, and Meg Hourihan. Since the launching of Blogger in the midst of dot-com boom from Pyra Labs, San Francisco, CA, the rapid growth of weblogs had been fostered. Over hundreds thousands of weblogs were hosted by Blogger which less than one minute, a new weblog is created. This easy publish-to-the-web phenomenon becomes as common as today’s home page (Lever-Duffy, McDonald, & Mizell, 2005). At last, Blogger was acquired by Google in early 2003.

Because of the simplicity of creating and maintaining the weblogs, Blogger has been undergoing the incredible growth. Blogger has its individualized servers which registered users are allowed to keep their weblogs with personalised weblog addresses, like http://yourname.blogspot.com. This easy-to-remember site address is different from other blogging tools, which the weblog address starts at the remote server. Furthermore, users are also given total control of their weblogs from top to the bottom. Blogger let the user posts contents through a web-based form, so updating the site can easily be done from any computer with Internet access. However, the drawback is that the web forms are less equipped with the editing features compared with the ordinary word processing software. Below is one of the educational or tutor weblogs hosted by Blogger with the title “Mah Boon Yih’s Blog” and its address “http://mahboonyih.blogspot.com”.
2.2 Instructions of creating a weblog with Blogger

Creating a weblog is free with Blogger. It is easy and only takes minutes depending on the network condition. First of all, type http://www.blogger.com in any web browser, such as Internet Explorer or Firefox. Then, click the mouse on the box named “CREATE A BLOG”. This step will require the user to create a Google account. For the existing Google account holders, they can sign in directly without undergoing this step. For the new users, they need to type their existing email addresses that are still valid and active. This email address will become the username of the Google account whenever the user signs in the Blogger. Retype the same email address and enter a password and retype it. Then, the users need to identify their Display names and key-in the “Word Verification” based on the depicted characters carefully. Click the mouse on “I accept the Terms of Service” before continue to the following step by clicking on the button “CONTINUE”.

Secondly, type the “Blog title” and “Blog address (URL)” then click the link “Check Availability”. Repeat the same process until reaching the available address. Type the “Word Verification” before clicking on the button “CONTINUE” to enter the next step. At the following stage, the user need to choose and click on one of the templates based on personal preference. Next, click again the button “CONTINUE” and finally a brand-new weblog has been created. At this stage, user can begin to blog by clicking on the button “START POSTING”. A post can be published effortlessly by entering the title and content of the post then click on the button “PUBLISH”. Before publishing the post, user can always preview it using the link “Preview”. Click on the link “View Blog” or “in a new window” to view the post.
published in the weblog. Besides, users can click on the link “Edit post” if they want to edit their posts or click on the link “Create a new post” if they want to create another post. Lastly, a weblog may have a different look according to blogger’s choice of template which can be modified at anytime.

3. METHODOLOGY

A group of 58 diploma students in one of the Malaysian universities were provided a writing task, which they needed to create a weblog with Blogger by referring to simple blogging instructions. For students who already had a Google account, they were required to create another account for completing this writing task. In the process of creating the weblogs, they could refer to the explanation given next to the blanks when they key-in their information online. They might create any title for their weblogs. After setting up their weblogs, they were required to write at least one post or a text related to the topic “About Me”. Besides, they were also required to use Standard English language for this task.

During blogging, they might write more than one post with different titles based on the same topic, for example, “My Favourite Subject”, “My University Life”, and so on. There was no limitation of words for each post. Finally, students were given one week to complete the task and no guidance about blogging was provided in order to prevent prescriptive instruction and restriction of use. A form would be distributed to register students’ name, weblog title, weblog address, and published date in the classroom next week. On the last day when the students had finished the writing task, the questionnaires were administered. One of the sample tasks accomplished by the students is depicted as below.

![Figure 2: A Sample Task Accomplished by one of the Subjects in the Study](Image)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A total of 58 questionnaires were distributed and 100% return rate was achieved. Among the 58 diploma students, 58.6% (n=34) of them were females and 41.4% (n=24) were males. The respondents’ ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old. 77.6% (n=45) of the sample were 19 years old while 1.7% (n=1) were 18 years old. With regard to the English SPM results, 15.5% (n=9) of the respondents scored Grade 1 while 24.1% (n=14) scored Grade 2. This suggests that the overall respondents possessed high English language proficiency. More than half of the respondents (n=41, 70.7%) were not keeping journals or diaries. However, majority of them (n=37, 63.8%) knew about weblogs. Among those who knew about
weblogs, 26.5% (n = 9) of them had their own weblogs before doing the writing task. From these results, it can be concluded that weblogs have gradually gained its popularity among the diploma students. Nevertheless, of the 37 diploma students who responded to this questionnaire and knew about weblogs, 73.5% (n=25) had not become part of the blogger community yet.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Description of Items in the Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Easy learning to use</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Easy to do</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Do not face problems</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Flexible to interact</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Easy to become skilful</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Improve performance</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Easier to do</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Increase productivity</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Improve quality</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Use whenever it has a feature to help</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Use in as many occasions as possible</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Plan to use in future</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Intend to continue using in the future</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Expect to continue using in the future</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
All items used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree)

Table 1 presents the results obtained from the questionnaire. A closer look at the mean of the different scale items in the questionnaire shows that “Easy learning to use” has a mean of 5.34 (SD=0.95). It indicates that the respondents agreed learning to use weblogs was easy. Furthermore, the mean for “Easy to do” is 5.36 (SD=0.95) showing that the respondents agreed weblogs were easy to use to do what they wanted. “Do not face problems” shows a mean of 5.19 (SD=0.95), which can be interpreted that the respondents agreed they did not face problems interacting with weblogs to write journals. In addition, the mean for “Flexible to interact” is 5.12 (SD=1.16) suggesting that the respondents agreed weblogs were flexible enough to be interacted with. Lastly, “Easy to become skilful” shows a mean of 5.29 (SD=1.03) denoting that the respondents agreed using weblogs was easy for them to become skilful.

The mean of “Improve performance” is 5.45 (SD=1.01), which indicates that the respondents agreed using weblogs could improve journal writing performance. Furthermore, “Easier to do” shows a mean of 5.50 (SD=1.01) suggesting that the respondents agreed weblogs could make journal writing to be easier. “Increase productivity” shows a mean of 5.38 (SD=1.01) denoting that the respondents agreed their productivity could be enhanced. The mean for “Improve quality” is 5.50 (SD=1.10) indicating that the respondents agreed the quality of journal writing could be improved by using weblogs. Finally, “Useful” with a mean of 5.53 (SD=1.05) shows that the respondents agreed weblogs were considered to be useful in journal writing.

The mean of “Use whenever it has a feature to help” is 5.21 (SD=1.06), which can be inferred that the respondents disagreed they would always try to use weblogs to do writing task whenever it had a helping feature. Besides, “Use in as many occasions as possible” has a mean of 5.12 (SD=1.23), showing that the respondents agreed weblogs would always be used in as many occasions as possible. The mean for “Plan to use in future” is 5.43 (SD=1.09) indicating that the respondents agreed they planned to use weblogs for journal writing in the future. Furthermore, a mean of 5.31 (SD=1.08) for “Intend to continue using in the future” implied that the respondents agreed they intended to continue using weblogs for journal writing in
the future. Lastly, the mean of “Expect to continue using in the future” is 5.40 (SD=1.02) which suggested that the respondents agreed they possessed expectations of using weblogs for journal writing in the future. To this point, it has been found that in general the respondents considered writing weblogs was easy and useful.

5. SUGGESTED TECHNIQUES FOR EDUCATORS TO USE WEBLOGS IN CLASSROOMS

5.1 Educators need to verify students’ attitude about the blogging with the course objectives and learning process

According to Campbell (2003b), one of the major difficulties of using weblogs in EFL is the lack of participation from readers outside the classroom. Therefore, when introducing weblogs, it is important to educators to verify students’ expectations about the technology with the course objectives and learning process (Divitini, Haugalokken, & Morken, 2005). With well-planned and integrated instructional design endeavour, weblogs can be assimilated into the current curriculum and lessons to substitute the traditional “chalk-and-talk” classroom activities since the literature and the empirical study show that blogging activities are indeed useful and easy-to-use. Moreover, according to Mah (2009), perceived usefulness had a significant effect on students’ intention to use weblogs for journal writing. Instead of merely using paper-and-pen for writing, educators should implement weblogs as part of their lessons by demonstrating how weblogs could be used to write journals.

5.2 Students need to be aware of the helpfulness of weblogs in facilitating their thinking and learning

To prevent the use of weblogs only to meet class requirements, students need to be told how weblogs could be helpful in facilitating their thinking and learning. Thus, to enhance the undergraduate students’ perception of weblogs’ usefulness, educators should stress the importance of Internet usage to meet the increasing demands of an ever-changing technological environment (Wells, 2006). Furthermore, students’ attention should be drawn 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). According to the findings of Ali & Yunus (2004), the majority of the subjects welcomed supportive learning environments. For example, written comments both from 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. Therefore, educators need to shift their roles to become more facilitative with delicate skills to deal with non-contributors and dominant members, and keeping groups on target, maintaining a friendly, supportive environment, as well as creating tasks that engage students (Weller, 2002).

5.3 Educators need to make weblogs easy to use by exploiting the overall features of weblog during application

Educators who intend to bring new ICT tools into conventional classrooms should know how to exploit all the features available during the application. Some technology elements need to be identified before teaching via blogging. Lynch (2002) revealed that some of these elements are the configuration of hardware and software selection (server and client); distribution and communication method (server and client); institution/department/curricula/course interface design, security, and technical support. In order to make it easy to use, a great deal of training at least one semester to give ample exposure and to explain the process are required (Blogs move student learning beyond the classroom: An interview with Alex Halavais, 2004; Stacy & Sally, 1999) to pursue a lucid purpose and context in completing a task (Edbauer, 2004). Through cultivating the blogging habit to do journal writing, students will spend more time on blogging and less time on the tedious tasks of handwriting. Gradually, students will regard blogging as being easy compared to using note books to write journals.
5.4 Educators need to remember the objective of ICT implementation is to teach writing, not blogging

Using weblogs in the classrooms is meant for teaching writing skills instead of turning the class into an exploration of technology. When educators move into wired writing instruction, either as novices or experienced personnel, 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 or stress too much the use of weblogs application, which leads to distraction and reduces the focus the language input and learning outcome. In the end, weblogs used in the classroom will turn out to be just another technology toy (Martin & Madigan, 2005). According to Palmquist et al. (1998), educators should be aware that weblogs support instruction instead of dominating or dictating it. In addition, weblogs play the supporting roles for the interactions of educators and students as the integral elements at the centre of instruction. Moreover, educators need to be aware of the language used in cyberspace – weblish, netlingo, e-talk, tech-speak, wired-style, geek-speak, and netspeak, which make potential problematic assumptions about language generally and how language is evolving on the Internet (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). In order not to let the new technologies affect or destroy “proper” language, educators should stress on the use of Standard English in the language tasks incorporated with weblogs applications.

6. CONCLUSION

Writing is a communication of thoughts, emotions, and experiences that engages numerous dimensions in terms of its process and product. It is one of the most complicated processes of all language arts, which develops into a demanding skill in higher learning education for undergraduate students to do well in content courses. Since the importance of ICT in education has been emphasised in the Development of Education National Report Malaysia (n.d.), one of the ways to teach writing typically in higher learning institutions is using weblogs for journal writing. There is much more to creative and critical writing if the educator is able to apply weblogs with proper technique and inspiration. Blog is an exceptionally flexible instructional tool nowadays that is useful across the entire curriculum. Many potential benefits can be found through blogging in ESL classroom. In order to stimulate creative and critical thinking through writing, educators can incorporate weblogs construction with students’ assignments by employing the free blogging service provider, such as Blogger, that comes with the bundles of astounding benefits. With the ultimate aim of empowering student to be capable in writing, educational innovation needs to be well-planned to bring about improvement in classroom practice.

REFERENCES


