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Blogs as a Pedagogical Alternative to Language Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This action research explores how a weblog project can be incorporated into an English language classroom. This project was aimed at motivating students to take advantage of authentic environments outside the classroom in order to practice language skills when they communicate with others through a non-face to face medium: weblogs. Therefore this study seeks to determine the benefits of using weblogs in the English language classrooms. The samples in the study were asked to reflect on their blogging experience and how it had aided them to improve their English language proficiency. Descriptive statistics shows that samples have a positive perception on blogs which can help them to learn English better. However further studies need to be conducted on matters related to how best blogs can be incorporated in the teaching and learning of English.

Introduction

In the institutions of higher learning we cannot run away from incorporating information and communications technology (ICT) and knowledge management (KM) in classrooms to obtain the optimum results in our teaching and learning process. In UiTM this call is made through the incorporation of *blended learning*. Blended learning has been defined in many ways, but in general, it is the combination of multiple approaches to learning, combining several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, web-based courses or computer communication practices and traditional face-to-face instructions (Mortera-Gutierrez 2005). In the UiTM system, blended learning is increasingly recognized as a viable and student-friendly approach that can complement, or even replace the more traditional chalk and talk method. With this in mind, the researchers decided to promote some educational reforms in the language classroom by introducing weblogs (blogs). In this paper, the researchers share the experience on the use of

weblogs as a form of alternative form of teaching and learning of English at the Academy of Language Studies (APB), UiTM Sabah.

Background Information

To produce students with good English language proficiency, teachers today must be concerned not only with teaching in the classroom, but also with preparing learners to take responsibility for their own learning outside the classroom. Once learners take responsibility for their learning, they will be more able to make the most of on learning environments both in and out of the classroom and become better learners. One of the many tools available for teaching English language outside the classroom is weblogs. In the case of students at UiTM Sabah they have limited opportunities to practise English outside the classroom because they are more comfortable to either use their mother-tongue or Malay language. Therefore, blogging was intended as a supplementary activity to aid in fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and improve language proficiency in general.

A weblog or blogs are easy-to-create and easy-to-maintain websites (Pinkerman, 2005). It is an online journal that allows an individual to update his/her personal thoughts and ideas (Miller & Shepherd, 2005). Blog responses are deemed to be thought out and planned and blog entries also reflect the personalities and voices of the participants who blog (Bausch et al., 2002). Blogs are interactive as participants can respond to any blog entry with their personal comments as well as get comments from other bloggers. When a blog is updated, new items go on top and older item move down the page. Over time, the accumulation of responses and other contents create a record of interaction which shows how text can create immersive experience for those involved (Hendrick & Örnberg, 2004). According to Pinkerman (2005), blogs can be an effective tool to enhance learning because they are innovative in that they require learners to interact with one another, not just the computer. Therefore, for blog users, or bloggers, the computer is simply the medium for communication.

In a study conducted by Pinkerman (2005) using qualitative-quantitative data analytical procedures such as content analysis, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, blogs were found to be able to encourage students' out-of-class interaction through authentic language mediums. It was also found that blogs improve the samples' communication skills and encourage interaction and exchange of ideas and notes, thus making the out-of-class learning more communicative. In another study conducted by Ngah (2007) on how blogs could be used as journal entries among ESL sample in Malaysian schools, the researcher found that blogs could enhance participants' writing skills. The participants reported that they found blogs to be an interesting form of journal writing as compared to writing in log books.

In another study, Jones (2006) examined the significance of blogs in the process writing approach. The study examined ESL samples' and teachers' perceptions regarding the use of blogs in the ESL writing class. Using the qualitative research and case study methods, data was collected from five participants. The study found that blogging can be an effective tool for process writing approach in the teaching of writing skills. The study found that blogging facilitated the samples' critical thinking skills whilst also improving the quality of samples' writing. The study further indicates that blog entries served as writing models for samples to read and learn from. The study also revealed that blogging motivated the samples' to write as they can publish their thoughts for an authentic audience. The study also found that blogging helped to solve some critical issues that were related to the samples' trust and confidence in peer editing and revising. In that regard, blogging was found to facilitate meaningful learning and purpose for writing among sample.

Methodology

The participants in the study consisted of 29 undergraduate students who were taking BEL260 - Preparatory Course for MUET during the second semester of 2008 academic year. The teaching and learning method used in the study was in accordance to what Driscoll (2002) defined as part of blended learning; a combination of virtual components and formats with traditional face-to-face learning. The study was carried out for duration of twelve weeks. As part of the study, a blog was registered at www.blogspot.com. The samples were encouraged to log on to the blog using nicknames. To get the ball rolling, the lecturers posted issues on which the samples gave their comments, later on they were encouraged to comment on each other's views. Issues were picked out from newspapers such as "Gay Marriages", "House Husbands", "Teenage Pregnancies", "Plagiarism at Institutions of Higher Learning" etc. The topics were handpicked because these issues were controversial, thought provoking and participants could relate to them.

On the final week of their blogging exercise they were asked to complete a simple questionnaire containing 10 Likert-type items, where participants graded their experience based on a 1 to 5 scale with the five points, ranging from '1 - Strongly Disagree' to '5 - Strongly Agree' and an open-ended question to comment on any area of their blogging experience which they would like to highlight or felt had not been covered in the Likert-scale items. The questionnaire was to gauge their experience of blogging and how it has helped them to improve (or otherwise) their English language proficiency. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data from the questionnaire. Frequency distribution and percentage were mainly employed

with the Likert scale. Open-ended responses were grouped into what the participants thought about their blogging experience.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows samples' perception on the participants blogging experience. The majority of the participants either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their overall blogging experience has yielded positive experience except for Question 7: 'Blogging has helped to improve my writing skills'. About half of the participants (48.4%) felt that blogging exercise did not help them to become better writers. However a vast majority of the participants (82.8%) pointed out that blogging increased their motivation to learn English language (Question 4).

Table 1: Samples' Perception on Blogging Experience.

	Questions	Strongly disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly agree 5
1	I feel comfortable blogging.	0%	6.9%	6.9%	75.9%	10.3%
2	Blogging helped to encourage collaborative learning with my classmates.	0%	0%	3.4%	93.1%	3.4%
3	My course mates are sharing knowledge during the blogging process.	0%	13.8%	10.3%	72.4%	3.4%
4	Interacting with other members in blogging increase my motivation to learn English	3.4%	13.8%	0%	72.5%	10.3%
5	Blogging has helped me improve my spelling.	0%	31.0%	10.3%	48.3%	10.3%
6	Blogging has helped me improve my grammar	0%	20.7%	3.4%	69%	6.9%
7	Blogging has helped to improve my writing skills.	0%	48.4%	3.4%	37.9%	10.3%
8	Blogging has helped me build up my vocabulary	0%	6.9%	3.4%	55.2%	34.5%

9	Blogging promoted creativity.	0%	10.3%	13.8%	75.9%	0%
10	I have benefitted from blogging with my course mates.	0%	6.9%	6.9%	69.0%	17.2%

N=29

Question 11 of the questionnaire was an open-ended question which asked for participants' comment on any area of their blogging experience which they would like to highlight or felt had not been covered in the Likert-scale items. Most of the comments were of positive in nature such as:

- "It is interesting and thought provoking."
- "I wish I could continue blogging because it gives me ideas to look at things from the perspective of other people: males and females, Muslims and non-Muslims etc".
- "Blogging has become an eye-opener for me; blogging has forced me to look further into subjects, dig for the facts and view a subject from all angles, and then come to my conclusion."
- "Blogging has given me confidence to give my ideas. So I can perform better during my speaking test."
- "Now I have got into the habit of checking the spelling and meaning of words from the dictionaries because I don't want to make mistakes and embarrass myself."
- "I found submitting writing assignments on-line fun because the lecturer will pick a few good essays, point out the error and publish it for all to see."

A few negative views cited by the samples are as follows;

- "Blogging is a not very interesting. I enjoy it when the lecturer brings in songs or other activities that can be done in classroom not outside classrooms."
- "I don't like blogging; it's a waste of time for me as I don't have a laptop. I like pair work and other group activities in classrooms better."

The researchers noticed that the samples enjoyed sharing their thoughts and notes on the different blog postings. One of the reasons why blogging was a success in the class was because it allowed lecturers (whose role has now been changed to a facilitator) as well as participants to move beyond routine information-acquisition and receptive learning that occurs in the classroom. This was in line with Vygotsky's theory about supporting meaningful learning, participants should not passively

receive information – instead, they should connect with other knowledge-makers to construct, negotiate, and develop their understandings (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004).

Therefore, by allowing weblogs into the learning (and teaching) process, the door was opened up for the participants to present their opinions without undue duress or influence from others who disagree or monopolise discussion in the real classrooms. Blogging also encourages reflective writing whereby, when participants read the texts of their peers (as well as observing their own texts and experience); they are engaging in an act of reflection. Participants were able to reflect upon the shared knowledge and draw personal relevance and meaning to bring learning to a new level according to their context and pace. Therefore, blogging helps individuals and groups to construct meaning through social feedback (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004).

However, in the initial stages, the number of blog posting was not encouraging due to participant's apprehension and partly due to the fact they were not fully aware of the benefits of blogging. Some participants complained that they had no wireless internet service in their hostels. So it was arranged for these participants to have access to computers at the library twice a week to blog. Next, there was the problem of participants' reluctance and apprehension; they were afraid that since their views were published and it's out there for the entire world to see, others might laugh at the poor English command. This was overcome with a lot of encouragement from their classmates and lecturers during the blogging session. The use of nicknames helped a lot to ease samples' initial apprehension. Another thing worth pointing out about blogging was the rampant use of code switching (English – Malay and vice versa), and the use of short forms ('u' instead of 'you'). The instructors encouraged participants to refrain from doing these since the objective of blogging here was to promote English language proficiency by learning to write using the proper mechanics of writing. Hence slowly the participants grew out of these habits when other bloggers pointed out their mistakes and gave alternative ways to put their thoughts into words.

Another way in which the instructors encouraged participants to blog was to spend some time each week in class correcting the gross grammar mistakes that we found in the blog postings; no names were mentioned during these learning sessions. It was found that since the participants were blogging using nicknames, there were no apprehension or embarrassment caused during the sessions. In fact they were full of questions.

The instructors also found bringing blogs into classroom had its boons and banes as well. It was a little taxing and demanding to maintain a consistent flow of write-ups (issues) for the samples to comment on. This was time-consuming and challenging. The instructors had to constantly come up with new blog postings and read the

participants postings, monitor and comment on them where necessary. The instructors also took some of the class time to point out blatant mistake in grammar, spelling and sentence structure found among the participants' postings in the classroom. This exercise sometimes took up time planned for classroom teaching. However the best part of bringing blogs into classroom was that it allowed the participants to learn at their own pace and in their own context. This encouraged them to address their individual practical learning needs through facilitated discussion with others.

In a nutshell, by bringing in blogging into the classroom as part of blended learning the researchers managed to increase the level of active learning, peer-to-peer learning and promoted student-centred strategies (Graham 2006) instead of teacher-centred strategies. This will definitely go a long way at APB in producing better performance and results in the English language classrooms. Therefore, with careful planning, blogs in classrooms along with the traditional face-to-face instruction techniques can move APB at UiTM towards producing graduates who could perform in English both inside and outside the classrooms. This is definitely achievable because according to Andreatos (2007), information and knowledge gathered in virtual communities is superior to that available through traditional, even academic, sources such as books, in terms of practicality and in-depth and up-to-date coverage.

Conclusion

Further research needs to be done in this area to determine how to successfully introduce blogs in, and out, of the classroom in order to make better use of this interactive, interesting and authentic computer-based resource. In UiTM, further research needs to be carried out on a bigger scale to find out whether students can indeed benefit from the blogging activity and in which BEL codes (English language proficiency courses run at UiTM) this project could be most suitable. Due to the small scale of setting for this project the findings are difficult to generalize in relation to other settings. Nonetheless, the findings do reveal some significant relevance for English language teachers interested in considering the use of blog projects to encourage out-of-class learning.

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