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ESL LEARNERS 'USE OF BLOG TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract:

The usage of computers and the internet is widespread in this contemporary period. The social networks are among the most popular online services. Social networking sites are now employed in the realm of education as well as for socialising. The perception of ESL students towards the usage of blogs in writing classes will be examined in this paper. In this experimental class, 23 tertiary students taking a reading and writing module are asked to start their own blogs. The students completed their classwork and assignments on the blog. The learners are given a questionnaire to complete at the end of the module regarding the usage of blogs in general and the use of blogs to improve their writing abilities. A few students are also chosen at random and interviewed to learn more about how they feel about using blogs in writing classes.

Keywords:

Social Network, Blog, ESL Writing

Introduction

There are four skills to learn when learning a language, and writing is one of the hardest. This is due to the fact that writing calls for the readers to understand and interpret what has been stated. According to Langan (1987) and Gunning (1998), writing is more intricate and abstract than speaking. Parker (1993), who claimed that writing is a torture for pupils, backed up this point of view. Moreover, writing is "hard work," according to Pearsall, Cunningham, and Emmons (1988, 2003).

In light of what has been discussed thus far, it is evident that students may struggle with writing assignments. For students to become proficient and successful writers, writing requires a lot of conventions and skills, including writing readiness and grammatical standards. Writing is more than just putting pen to paper or recording thoughts; it is also about how those thoughts are properly communicated or presented.

Students encounter a variety of situations in school and in life that call for language proficiency. Because of this, exposure to a variety of reading, writing, and speaking tasks in the classroom can aid students in developing the abilities they need to succeed. For instance, they must practise many forms of writing. While teachers may give fundamental rules for all writing, particular forms of writing, like poetry and essays, could call for particular instruction. Practice in writing about the findings of their own research and in expressing their own emotions and experiences can be helpful for students.

In school and in life, students face a diversity of circumstances that require language skills. For this reason, experience with a variety of reading, writing and speaking activities in school can help learners acquire the skills they need to be successful. They need, for example, to practise varied kinds of writing. Teachers may present general guidelines for all writing, but specific types of writing, such as poems and essays, may require specific lessons. Students can benefit from practice at writing as well as expressing their own feelings and experiences. The writing techniques involved in each form typically call for clear instruction, regular practise, and communication with the students regarding their development. Teachers have a tough time teaching these norms and skills because students may find them complicated and difficult to grasp. Teachers are crucial in helping students learn how to create an effective English essay. They must be aware that encouraging students to participate more actively in the educational community is the key to conscientious writing among students.

The use of technology as a teaching and learning tool has aided in the teaching of English as a Second Language in Malaysian schools. This is due to the fact that English is the language of the technological world. The English language is used extensively in the realm of technology for resources, instructions, and many other purposes. As a result, there is much that can be done to teach and learn English using technology. Students and teachers employ a variety of digital tools, like as blogs and social networks, all over the world (Anderson, 2007). According to Palloff and Pratt (2001), the information technology-learning environment is thought to offer students a variety of teaching methodologies, such as self-learning and peer teaching, to support their learning.

A tool called blog has been around since 1998. Subsequently, the blog expanded from its basic use as an online diary to include many professional fields including journalism and business (Blood, 2002). The validity of the lecture can therefore be improved by using this instrument in the classroom by the teacher. Students have a place to write, discuss ideas, and communicate via blogs, which are flexible in terms of time (Alied, Alkubaidi, & Bahanshal, 2022).

Research on the effects of blogging on learner autonomy, improving writing fluency, providing a space for completing writing assignments, uploading course materials (Ward, 2004; Wu, 2005), and facilitating engagement with bloggers outside the classroom (Pinkman, 2005) are among the studies that have been published. Via blogs, students have the chance to read the writings of other students, leave comments, or add content to the already written pieces.

Students are driven to learn thanks to this contact, which also fosters learning competition with other students (Mohammed Abdul Galeil Ibraheim Alnagar, 2017)

Statement of Problem

In 2009, the British Council had conducted a market research on “how the Internet has affected the preferred learning styles of young people wanting to learn English around the world.” The conclusion of the research suggested that, “...if teachers are to remain relevant and effective, then they need to use 'learning technologies' to help students reach the world outside the classroom... 69% of learners around the world said that they learned most effectively when socialising informally ”

As summarised by Adam Dalton in the Teaching English BBC website, “This result suggests that a lot of students learn best from their friends and family. Perhaps that isn’t too surprising. The things we learn from our loved ones are often more immediately relevant to our lives than what we learn from a teacher in a classroom...” (para. 3).

E-learning has been included into teaching and learning at University Malaysia Sabah, which has taken up the task. E-learning complements traditional face-to-face instruction, according to UMS's E-learning policy. The recommended ratio of face-to-face instruction to online instruction is 30:70. (Dasar E-Learning Universiti Malaysia Sabah). This strategy has promoted lifelong learning both inside and outside of the classroom and has attracted students from various nations. This is so that students can also work from home.

According to Ackerman (2006) students are motivated to use technology to write. With this notion in mind, teachers can assimilate students’ contextual knowledge in gagging them to express their ideas via personal websites or blogs. Therefore teachers need to give students writing motivation by assigning assignments differently by giving them “real’ audience as a preparation for their future writing as university students as well as professionals (Ackerman, 2006).

Therefore, the focus of this paper is to look at how blog can assist the teaching of Reading and Writing in English in relation to the module UB00302 offered by the Centre of Promotional of Knowledge and Language Learning, UMS. This module is offered to all students who have sat for Module 1 and 2; i.e. Communicative English Grammar and Oral Communication in English. The module basically focuses on the process and procedures of writing a piece of essay. Among the expected learning outcomes of the module are as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Expected Learning Outcomes for Writing Skills

Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Apply the strategies in the writing process, namely prewriting, writing and revising and editing
2. Apply the prewriting methods such as brainstorming and clustering before the actual write up of the essay;
3. Recognize the patterns of organization of a different types of genre
4. Organize essays logically in accordance with the types of genre;
5. State the focus or main ideas of the essay in a clear thesis statement;
6. Provide background information for the main ideas stated in the thesis statement;
7. State the focus or topic of the paragraph;
8. State the purpose of the essay clearly;
9. Present ideas clearly according to the different types of genre; and
10. Apply the editing skills such as punctuation, capitalization, sentence fragments, agreement of subjects and verbs.

Source: MQF Doc 3: UB00302 (Reading and Writing Module)

Research Objectives

This research hopes to answer the following questions:

- i) What are the implications of teaching and learning writing using Blogs?
- ii) What are the students' perceptions on the use of Blog to learn writing?

Methodology

This study uses descriptive research as its technique of inquiry and includes tertiary students who are enrolled in a reading and writing module. This study was carried out at Universiti Malaysia Sabah in Kota Kinabalu.

This study falls under the experimental category because it was the first time a Reading and Writing module class was encouraged to use blogs for teaching and learning. The module's 23 tertiary students were instructed to start their own blogs. The participants in this study were second-year medical students pursuing a Bachelor of Medicine degree. There were 16 female pupils and 7 male students in the class.

The blog was used for the learners to either do their class work or assignments. Besides creating a Blog, the learners were also given questionnaires to answer in relation to the use of blog in general and also the use of blog to develop their writing skill. A few learners are also randomly interviewed to further understand their perception towards the use of Blog in a Writing class.

The respondents were given a set of questionnaire twice which was during the first week of the lesson. The rationale was to get feedback and background knowledge on what were the students' perceptions then before they started to use blog in their lesson. The same set of questionnaire was again distributed to the students at the end of the 14th week of their study to get their feedback after they have used and been exposed to the use of blog in their course of study.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts which were their demographic background and their perception of using blog in the classroom. This questionnaire is an adaptation of the questionnaire used by Wu (2005).

Result and Discussion

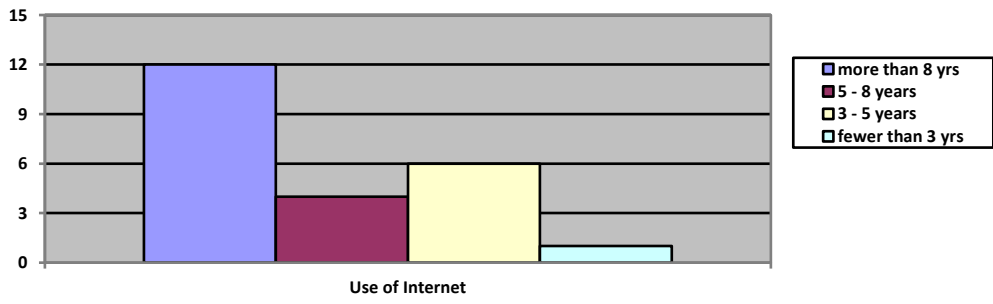


Figure 1: Use of Internet

From the figure above, it could be seen that 16 students have between 5 to more than 8 years of experience in using the internet which means that they have been exposed to the digital era since they were young. However, only 1 student has less exposure in using the internet. This is because he lives in a remote area where the internet connection is not so good.

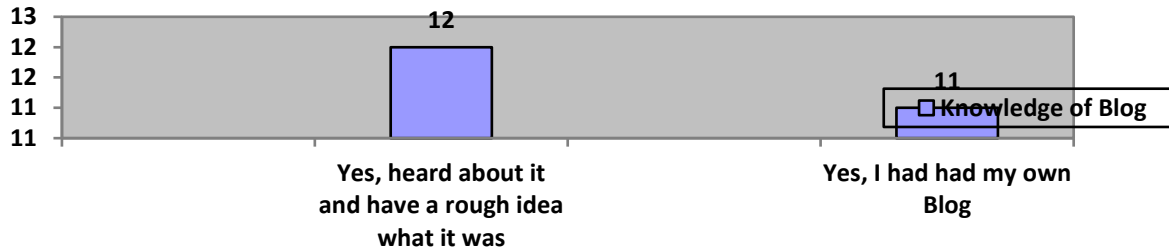


Figure 2 : Knowledge on Blog

It could be seen from the figure above that majority of the students have their own blog and do have a rough idea on what a blog is all about. This result coincides with the data of the number of experience that they have in using the internet. The figure above also proves that Blog is a well known internet application with 100% of the students who know or own a blog. However, more than 50% said that they know what is Blog but do not own one.



Figure 3: Level of Difficulty to Create Own Blog

Majority of the students find that it is quiet easy in creating and managing their own blog. This data is again parallel with the data gathered in figure 1 and 2 where students do have experience in using the internet as well having a rough idea what a blog is all about.

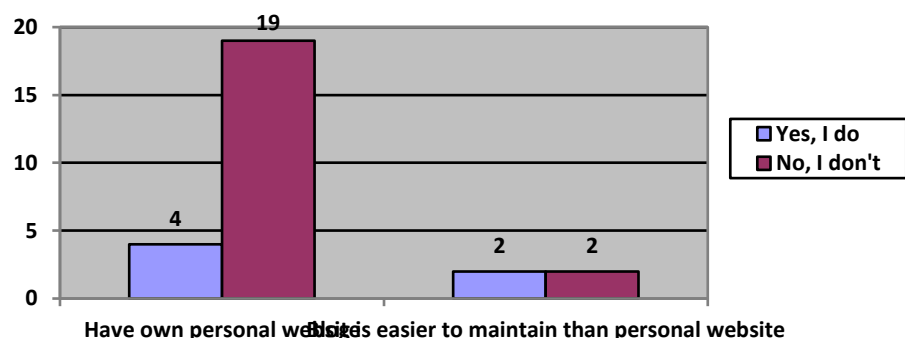


Figure 4: Blog vs Own Website

In Figure 4, out of 23 students only 4 of them have their own website whereas the rest do not. This is probably because they perceived that blog is easier to maintain compared to having a website.

This finding is supported by Campbell (2004) as he emphasizes that “simple customization of templates can help students build “a sense of ownership and unique online identity”. If students do not have their own personal websites, a blog is a good start for them to interact with users of the cyberspace community as blog is easy to set up and maintain by just a few clicks away.

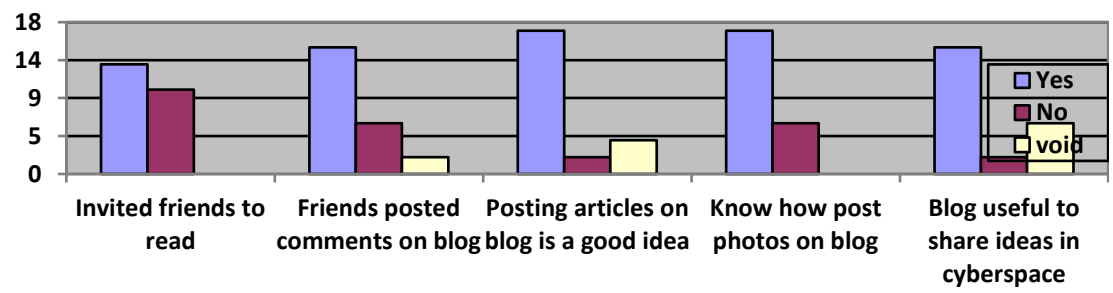


Figure 5: Blog: Comments and Content

From the figure, above it could be seen that majority of the students find that having a blog is useful to them.

They do invite their friends to read their post that they have posted in their blog due to the reasons stated below;

1. Can share information
2. Can help check language use (grammar)
3. Friends can comment on writing and also content

However, 10 of the respondents did not invite friends to read their blog for the reasons stated below;

1. Shy
- This is probably because they are aware of their proficiency in English and have low self esteem in sharing the content of their blog with other people apart from their teacher.

2. Friends do not like blog
This is probably because they may have the assumption that their friends do not like to waste their time in reading other peoples 'blog.
3. Do not want to force
This is probably because they prefer their friends to visit their blog base on their own free will instead of being forced to do so either by them or by the teacher.

Table 2: Number of time friends comment

Number of times friends comment	No of Respondent
2-3 times	1
3 times	2
More than 5 times	1
5 – 10 times	1
More than 10	3
Few times	2
No Number (blank)	5

- Reasons given by the respondents on why they say posting articles on blog are a good idea are:
1. Environmental friendly because do not use paper.
 2. Free to write and share ideas – anytime, anywhere and anything
 3. Easy to comment and access.

However, there are two respondents who said that they do not like to use blogs to post articles. The reason given by the respondents was not because they did not like the use of computer or internet but because they prefer to use other websites. The respondents further elaborated that there are other sites such as Facebook which is very popular among the younger generation today that can be used to post articles.

This finding supports the research conducted by Dieu (2004) where she finds that teachers can easily use the blog as a medium for students to peer edit each others 'postings. Students should be encouraged to comment their partner's postings, which can also be shared by other classmates. In other words by practising this activity students may eventually be able improve their writing skills as they get feedback from their peers as well as their teacher. Besides feedback that can help students improve in their writing, constant reading and writing will also help. This is mentioned by Hedge (1990) who said that exposure and constant reading help in acquiring writing skills.

The emphasis on content, the potential for quick feedback, the capacity to work with both words and images, and the opportunity to link posts together make blogging an attractive learning and writing tool for English, according to the suggested classroom application scenarios. Researchers who use blogs also claim that because students are aware that their writing will be seen by people online when they publish it, they frequently create better work than those who write exclusively for the teacher or other students in the class. Several academics have discussed how they utilise blogs to supplement their classroom learning and

discovered that blogs provide many opportunities for reading and writing (Mohammed Abdul Galeil Ibraheim Alnagar, 2017 and Zhang, 2009).

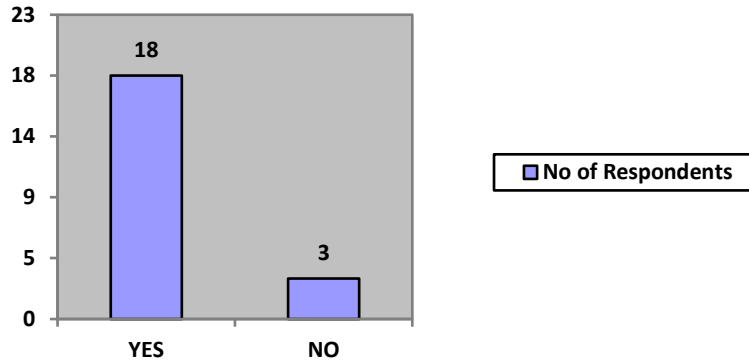


Figure 6: Use of Blog in English Writing Class is good

Majority of the respondents in the study perceived that using blog in the English writing class is good because of the reasons stated below:

Table 3: Using Blog in the English Writing Class

Reasons for Yes	Reasons for No
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Form of new knowledge (1) 2. Expose to Blogging (1) 3. Easy, convenient, fun (3) 4. Helpful to students and teachers (4) 5. Wider content and free topic (1) 6. Increase confidence in writing and receiving comments (3) 7. Share ideas and also comments (3) 8. Fun way to communicate (4) 9. Learn new vocabulary (1) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prefer to use paper 2. Prefer other ways 3. Spelling auto correct

A number of studies have demonstrated the value of blogs in helping students improve they're writing abilities, including those by Foroutan, Noordin, and Hamzah (2013); Sun (2010); Sun & Chang (2012); and Zainuddin & Ghaleb (2012). Thus, this justifies the long list of reasons for 'yes to the question of the good of using Blog in an English writing class.

Writing is a skill that must be practiced and learned through experience. When it is learned, students can use it for many purposes. However, it takes time to be proficient writers. Because of this, writing teachers should prepare students and give them time and opportunities to practise writing. Raimes (1996) suggests that writing teachers should be concerned with process rather than product. She also states that students 'assignment should allow students to revise and rewrite. It is very important to allocate time for students to work on a paper (content, organisation, language), either alone or with peers. From the use of Blogs, where students can

write at their free time and get feedbacks from friends and teachers at any time, the idea suggested by Raimes (1996) can be achieved (refer to reason number 5, 6, 7).

However, only a minority of them still prefer the traditional way of learning writing in class. They prefer using papers which is probably because they could get feedback in writing from their teacher. They also prefer other ways of learning writing in class instead of using blog in the classroom. Other ways may be consultation with the teacher in the classroom or use of email.

Conclusion

In conclusion students do perceive that using blog is indeed a useful tool in learning to write in English in the classroom. It is found that blog increases students' interest and ownership in learning. They are able to gain new information as they get feedback from others. The use of blogs gives students chances to improve their proficiency in English as they are aware that there are other people who are reading their post in the blog. In a way this provides them motivation to improve themselves and have a better command of English.

This research is limited to one group of students taking course offered in a Malaysian public university. Thus, the finding is limited to this group of students. For future research, it would be interesting to use a wider group of respondents to discover if Blog and social media are really beneficial to English Language students. This research would benefit educators and syllabus designers in the teaching of English language and writing in specific.

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